

# SCREEN LOOSE

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ALLEN & UNWIN

# NOT COCKIES STYLE

WHAT'S IT LIKE to be drafted into an AFL team when you're seventeen and then break your little finger in the first five minutes of your first match? To find your photo on the front page of the paper on Monday, holding up your broken finger, your girlfriend beside you hiding under your jumper?

Angelo re-read the caption: Schoolboy Angelo Tarano, impressive draft for the AFL's newby team the Hobart Cockatoos, shows off his broken finger while girlfriend Candibelle Brown hides under his Cockies guernsey. Angelo is a Year 11 student at Vistaview Secondary College and one of this year's most sought-after recruits.

He swore softly to himself. She'd called herself Candibelle Brown. As if. He was crazy about her.

His phone twinkled and he checked the screen. It was the assistant manager, Paul Vasilevski, ringing from Hobart.

'Angelo! Paul here. Seen the newspaper?'

'Yes.'

‘We’re not too happy down here, old chum. Not too happy to see you on the front page without our permission. Who’s this Candibelle?’

‘Um, my girlfriend.’

‘I can read. What kind of a name is Candibelle Brown? She’s not a lap dancer, is she?’

He laughed. ‘No!’

‘What’s with the club-guernsey-over-the-head caper?’

‘She’s shy.’

‘Shy?’

Angelo paced his bedroom. He glanced at himself in the mirror, then his eyes returned to the picture spread out on his doona. At least *he* looked pretty good. If the Cockies thing went pear-shaped he could probably become a male model. He smiled at himself in the mirror, the way you do.

‘It’s bloody strange, isn’t it?’ Paul went on. ‘Club guernsey over the head? Makes you look like a bit of an idiot having a girlfriend who does that.’

‘I guess.’ He was starting to feel a bit irritated. This joker was way too pushy. And why wasn’t he asking about the finger?

‘It’s not Cockies style, Angelo.’

Still, he had to stay sweet with them. ‘Yes, sir,’ he said, sounding a bit sarcastic without intending to.

‘You two a major item?’

‘Major. She’s fantastic.’

‘Well, the club isn’t happy, mate. This Candibelle doesn’t fit the image we’re trying to create for you – young schoolboy star. She’s right out of left field, Angelo. We want you young players to have girlfriends, but she’s not family-friendly, if you get my drift. And we like them normal, Angelo. That’s what

life's about. She looks as if she's got kangaroos loose in the top paddock.'

He was angry now. *You want to play AFL, you shut your trap and put up with them taking over your life, that's what his dad and his nonno told him. But Vasilevski taking over his love-life? No way! 'She's just shy!'*

Paul changed his tone. 'Okay buddy, back off... Next time there's a photographer on the loose, just make sure you don't let your girlfriend start this guernsey-over-the-head business again. Okay?'

'Okay.'

Paul hung up abruptly without saying goodbye. Angelo grunted, threw his phone on the bed, and was about to punch the wall when he remembered that good players use their heads not their emotions. This was the pressure they'd warned him about. The club was going to pay him heaps, and he owed them one hundred per cent loyalty, one hundred per cent of his time, one hundred per cent of his life.

Life was going to get tough – they'd all told him that – but one day he would be a Cocky icon, maybe an AFL icon. They were putting him in the New Drafts calendar: *The Boys Come Out To Play*. That was an honour. He thought of all the articles in his parents' scrapbook: *Tarano's Stunning Debut*; *Cookies Snare Tarano in National Draft*; *Angelo's Got the X-factor*; *Cocky Angelo Champs at the Bit*. He'd become famous before he'd even played a game. And extra famous after yesterday's little-finger-five-minutes-into-the-first-game effort. Kind of.

The phone twinkled again. It was Paul.

'Angelo! Forgot to ask. You wearing your boxers at the moment?'

‘Yep!’

He wasn’t.

‘Good. We expect players to wear them at all times. We do surprise checks. If you’re going to be caught with your pants down, particularly in airport security, we want good publicity. And think about what I said with regards to Candibelle. If she’s got her claws into you, mate, the club could find you a new girlfriend, you know. We’ve got spares. You just have to register.’

‘No thanks, Paul.’ He was surprised how firm he sounded.

‘Well, think about it. And another thing – we’ve put you in the players’ review: *Cinderella*. You’re going to be Cinderella.’ He hung up.

Angelo threw the phone on the bed and it bounced against the wall. He began a bit of vicious shadow boxing. He’d love to bop Vasilevski, show him where to get off. He flopped onto the floor for a few push-ups. It was going to be hard flying down to Hobart regularly for training, hard obeying all their little rules, hard to even remember them, but he was starting to see that the hardest thing would be trying to explain his girlfriend to these people. He sighed.

Angelo had no trouble with Zeynep being a Muslim, and it wasn’t her fault that her parents were nuts. He didn’t even mind that she was obsessive-compulsive – hey, he was a bit phobic himself. But now that he was famous, things had changed. If only she was a bit more normal, it would be heaps easier. What if he wanted to take her to the Brownlow at the end of the year? Would she want to wear a headscarf or a veil so her parents didn’t recognise her on national TV? Would she start cleaning the toilets during an ad break? She was the

only kid in the school who did voluntary yard duty, *every day*.

Perhaps he should go back to Georgia. Well, perhaps not. She was Zeynep's best mate, after all. No, he'd stick with the one he really cared about. He was hooked on Zeynep: he thought about her all the time. Why? The eyes, the skin, the hair, the sweet little body, the voice. He was gone for her. Oh, man, no way would he give her up.

Chelsea Dean had told him life gets easier when you're famous. Well, it hadn't. *Dump your girlfriend. Cinderella!* What was that all about? Some sort of punishment? And his broken finger meant he'd probably miss *seven* games. This morning, life had got heaps harder. He decided to ring Joshua. Josh always had the answers – gay guys always did.

# NUTBUSH

CHELSEA DEAN OPENED the front door to her parents' substantial riverside residence and was assaulted by booming reception-centre music. Surely her mother wasn't at home this early? She stood in the hall, her school bag suspended above the marble floor, and listened. The music vibrated through her whole body. Suddenly a man began shouting. It was not her father's voice.

Her bag slapped to the marble as she stepped into the living room. There was her mother, a can of beer in one hand, doing the *Nutbush!* The man wore overalls and sported a greying ponytail. Her mother was dancing with a tradesperson.

As Chelsea stared, her mother and the man simultaneously jumped ninety degrees, legs wide apart, to face her. Three pairs of eyes locked and a stupid grin fell from her mother's face.

'Chelsea!' Her mother quickly tippy-toed over to the Bang and Olufsen and fired the remote.

Silence.

‘Home from school so soon, sweetheart?’

The tradesperson was dabbing his forehead with a dirty handkerchief.

‘What’s this? A wedding reception?’ Chelsea’s voice was as flat and hard as a frozen sea. Her parents were exceptionally difficult people.

‘Darling! I’ve always wanted to learn the *Nutbush*,’ her mother slurred as she slid about the parquet floor in search of her shoes.

‘Mother, you’re drunk in the afternoon!’

‘This is Mr Ryan ... the sauna repairman.’ Her mother waved her hand airily.

Mr Ryan wiped his hand on his overalls and winked at Chelsea.

Chelsea screwed up her eyes and stared back. She wondered if Brenda, their housekeeper, had witnessed this awful behaviour.

‘Mr Ryan fixed the sauna in a flash, so he had time to teach me the *Nutbush*.’ Her mother repeated a few silent *Nutbush* steps and mumbled, ‘... city limits.’

Chelsea clamped her teeth together. Her silly mother had her hands on her hips and was waving her bottom about.

‘Mother, only people who go to McDonald’s in their pyjamas do the *Nutbush*.’

In Year 8, Chelsea had walked into a classroom one lunch-time to find every girl in her homeroom group doing the *Nutbush* – and they hadn’t asked her! She had refused to learn that dreadful dance after that, despite their pleas. And she had vowed never to be seen doing such a ridiculous dance. Ever!

Her mother shrieked with laughter. ‘Don’t be such a snob, Chelsea. I don’t know how you turned out to be so la-di-da. You didn’t get it from me.’ She smiled drunkenly at Mr Ryan and nudged him with her forehead. ‘I love the *Nutbush*.’ She waved her hands in the air again: ‘... city limits.’

‘Don’t like McDonald’s; don’t wear pyjamas!’ Mr Ryan said to her mother, who shrieked again, then staggered towards the sofa and flopped like a slack-stringed puppet into the cushions.

‘Mother!’

What was going on? Surely her mother wasn’t conducting an affair?

‘You’re a mate of my son’s,’ Mr Ryan said. ‘Craig Ryan.’

Chelsea tried not to react. ‘Really? I doubt it.’

*Please no. Not Craig’s father.* This was truly ugly. She had been trying to civilise Craig because, in his own unwashed way, he was very attractive and could be useful. She was, after all, born to rule others, as a teacher had once rather sarcastically snapped at her during a nasty little dispute that had ended in tears (the teacher’s).

Chelsea stomped up the stairs, leaving her mother curled up on the sofa giggling into one of the tapestry cushions. Craig Ryan’s father was facing the window, his shoulders bouncing.

She slammed her bedroom door, hard. Was her mother losing her mind? Her poor darling father was, this very minute, in Sydney working hard for them both. Sure, her parents did fight, but she had never dreamt that her mother would cheat on her father. There was simply too much to lose: the new Mercedes, the Port Douglas apartment, Brenda, the trips to Corfu and Africa. Her mother’s stupid antics were putting their lifestyle at risk.

Chelsea threw herself on her bed and screamed into her pillows. This wasn't happening. She rolled over and swore, then looked up at the happy Barbies arrayed one tier above the other to the ceiling.

The Barbies were her consolation and her investment. Being without siblings she had, quite early in her life, begun seeking their advice. Now, after a decade of serious collecting, she had well over three hundred of them – and the picnic van. And most of them could be relied on to give sensible advice in a crisis. Some people had security blankets; Chelsea had security Barbies.

For instance, they had helped her through her expulsion from Mary Magdalene, and her two-week crush on football hero Angelo Tarano. And they'd known just how to persuade her father to take her to Daydream Island, and just how to get him to install a mirror ball above the spa. However, in the little matter of installing a lift in the house, their strategy – *Just break your legs when you go skiing, and they'll have no choice* – was an example of the Barbies, in this case Surgeon Barbie, offering rather silly advice.

Just two days earlier, Chelsea had discussed with them the man in the living room's son – Craig Ryan. She was having a lot of trouble taming Craig, who'd continued to insist on showing interest in the most thoroughly bizarre creature in the entire school, Matilda Grey. The Barbies had been clear about Matilda – she was a threat to public health. As for Craig, Stewardess Barbie had advised the obvious – fight to get him, and fight dirty.

Chelsea got down Student Teacher Barbie, who was usually very perceptive, and sat her on her pillow beside Rapunzel

Barbie – her current favourite, but a bit of a bitch. She stroked Rapunzel Barbie’s hair and asked them both for help.

Student Teacher Barbie never spoke immediately – she waited until she could hear a pin drop – but she was quick off the mark today. She suggested an action plan.

One of Chelsea’s most impressive characteristics, a characteristic that one day, she was sure, would help her become the CEO of a major company, was that she always went straight for an action solution. No sitting around moping. Student Teacher Barbie had taught her that.

‘If this man, Craig Ryan’s father, is going to endanger your holidays and stop you being dropped off at the school gates each morning in the Merc, then he must be taken out!’ Student Teacher Barbie barked now.

‘Yes, sabotage the brakes on his maintenance van,’ Rapunzel Barbie ordered. Now that she was lying back on her pillow, Chelsea could see the awful van, with its awful slogan, from her window. *Just call Ryan and don’t blame us for trying.* No wonder the son couldn’t speak properly. But she knew nothing about brakes, and the only person she knew who did, Craig Ryan, was hardly likely to sabotage his own father’s car.

‘Cut off that hair!’ shrieked Hairdresser Barbie from the third shelf. ‘Say no to ponytails on men!’

‘Yes! Great idea! I’m not competitive,’ shouted Rapunzel Barbie, ‘but I hate men with ponytails.’

‘So do I!’ Chelsea said aloud.

‘Then take the bastard out!’ screamed Rapunzel Barbie.

‘Get a hit man,’ said Student Teacher Barbie.

‘Khiem Dao,’ Rapunzel Barbie suggested triumphantly,

referring to one of Vistaview Secondary College's major criminals and charity cases.

Chelsea shook her head and put both the overexcited Barbies back. She lay on her waterbed. Her mother was cheating on her father. This was unacceptable, but murder wasn't the answer.

'Attention the lot of you,' Police Chief Barbie called from the top shelf.

The room fell silent.

'Just tell your mother you're pregnant and you don't know how it happened. Mothers always drop everything when they hear that – including their boyfriends.'

Of course. Who needed a school counsellor or a psychiatrist when you had the opinions of three hundred Barbies to choose from? She would tell her mother as soon as the childish creature sobered up. That would bring an end to Mr Ryan.