

# **A BUSH EDUCATION**

**by**

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Lola studied her reflection carefully in the powder room mirror. She felt confident and happy. Tonight she had applied her makeup a little more carefully than usual, and made an extra special effort with her hair. Dark and lustrous, it still seemed to go its unruly way. Sighing, she fished around for her brush, the compact one that fitted so nicely in her sleek silver evening purse, and made a perfunctory attempt to tidy the thick chaotic tangle around her face. She gave up. But the shoulder length style suited her, and with her olive complexion and innate poise, she knew she attracted her fair share of attention. She was glad she could finally fit into that red jersey dress she'd bought two seasons ago. Who would have thought losing a mere six kilos could make her look and feel so much better?

With a final flourish of lip gloss and an extra deep breath, she pushed open the door and walked the short distance to the 'Starlight Room'. How she had let herself be talked into a singles cocktail party she really had no idea. She tried not to think of Nick. That relationship had well and truly bitten the dust, thought Andrea. Pushing all thoughts of him to the back of her mind, Lola searched the room for her housemate Andrea. There she was. Slim, blonde and vivacious, Andrea had no trouble justifying being at a singles party. A born party-animal, thought Lola, smiling briefly. Continuing her gaze around the room, her heart sank. No matter how hard she tried, she simply could not envisage any of these men as a future partner, or even a short term dinner date for that matter.

'Hi, care for a drink?' Lola spun around to find a tall, slightly balding but well dressed man gazing at her with obvious interest.

'Oh, er, well yes, I suppose so. Thank you. She had no idea what people did in these situations.

'Lachlan. Pleased to meet you.'

'Lola. Likewise.'

'Champagne?'

'That'd be lovely'.

'Been to one of these things before?'

'No, first time', and the last, she thought. She tried to look interested but she'd never felt so lonely or out of place in her life. If it hadn't been for her sweet and well meaning circle of friends constantly badgering her, Lola simply wouldn't have bothered with all this. They were so disappointed when she told them the engagement with Nick was off. But the relationship

was doomed. She felt tears pricking her eyes. She wasn't the only single woman who wouldn't settle for second best. She didn't need to. She knew some people (including Nick), thought her decision to switch careers and become a teacher at her age was a little odd, but Lola wasn't concerned. She'd worked hard for this new opportunity, and she knew it was the right decision. It was for this very reason she'd decided to accept a teaching job at Russell Creek, a seven hour drive North West.

'Work in the city?' Lachlan's question brought her back to the present with a jolt.

'Sorry? Oh, er, no, well, I used to. In marketing. But I decided to retrain. I'm now a fully fledged business studies teacher. It's probably not as profitable but I think I'll enjoy the job a lot more. I'm looking forward to it.'

'A teacher?' Lola couldn't tell if he sounded slightly dismayed or intrigued. Perhaps he'd been expecting her to be a stockbroker or lawyer, much like the rest of the smart professional crowd surrounding them.

'And you?' she asked with feigned interest.

'A Management Consultant. I specialise in change management. Help companies restructure their businesses and become more competitive, that kind of thing'.

'Oh.' That sounded a little too much like Lola's old life. Clearly there wasn't a meeting of professional interests here. Searching desperately around the room, she caught sight of Andrea, head back, laughing uproariously at something. She was wedged between a burly, nuggetty kind of chap and some fake palms near the dance floor.

'Well, got to go. Nice to meet you Lachlan.' These city types are all the same, Lola thought disparagingly. All style and no substance. She scurried off as fast as her silver stilettos would allow.

Packing her shiny four wheel drive for Russell Creek had taken longer than she thought. She wondered what she would need in Russell Creek. 'If I can fit it in the boot, I'll take it', Lola finally thought, wedging her omelette maker into an available space. Her prized brown leather luggage sat side by side with the boxes of kitchen appliances, linen, and of course her finest English bone china and Irish crystal. Just the thing for all those dinner parties I'll be throwing for the local farming set, she thought.

They'd given her a boisterous farewell party at Precision Marketing, the firm she'd worked for part time while completing her studies. She felt a momentary regret for knocking back her

boss's offer to stay on full time. 'I'm off to the fresh open countryside of Russell Creek, and a brand new career', she told everyone.

They nodded their understanding and approval. Russell Creek was a bustling country town, located in wheat and cotton country. Business Studies teachers were in high demand up there, and a year long contract was the perfect chance to sample country life.

Getting out of the city seemed to take forever. Finally on the Great Northern Highway, past the last of the used car lots and market gardens, the surrounding countryside opened up to reveal flat, wide open plains, interspersed by the odd township here and there. A shop, pub and post office seemed the three essential village services, she thought. She wondered if she could manage with just a corner shop, pub and post office. Probably not, she thought realistically. But driving on, a sense of exhilaration and adventure filled her as the green and brown fields sped by. She inserted a CD into the car stereo. The soothing sounds filled the car and intensified her euphoric mood.

'Better fill up on petrol at the next service station', she thought. A diet soda wouldn't go astray either she realised, as the hot sun glinted off the bitumen. Just up ahead, the familiar green and gold sign beckoned to her and she slowed down. She pulled into the service station and looked for the 'premium lead free' petrol bowser. A tall figure strode ahead of her and climbed into a dark, dust covered Land Rover. Wearing moleskins and a well worn felt hat, he slammed shut his door and crawled to the edge of the highway. Merging unobtrusively into the flow of traffic heading north, he was gone. He seemed vaguely familiar, but the irritated honking of the driver behind her quickly propelled her forward and back to the present.

Russell Creek was smaller than she had imagined. Turning down the volume on her car stereo, she slowly drove down the main street and looked around. Where was the shopping strip? The cafes and bistros? The place seemed closed. Driving on, her small map finally led her to Bligh Street. The clerk at the Education Office assured her she would be more than adequately accommodated, and as an extra advantage the rent was minimal. She turned the final corner on the edge of town and there it was. The small row of fibro cottages sat at the end of an unsealed and pot holed road. So this is 'teacher housing', Lola thought with dismay. Perhaps it was still too early to make a judgement. She searched out number nine. Ah, there it was. She scampered across the weedy and rocky front yard and rang the bell. Eventually a tall woman with a short dark bob opened the door. She was casually dressed in faded jeans and an oversized man's shirt. Small wire rimmed spectacles perched on the edge of her nose.

'Yes?'

'Hi, I'm Lola. Um, am I at the right address?'

'Oh, you're our new Business Studies teacher! We certainly are in jolly need of one. I've been waiting for you. Welcome to Russell Creek! I'm Hillary. Come in'.

Lola tentatively followed her new housemate into the small front room.

'Well, welcome to my rather humble abode Lola. I've made the best of it, but the house is pretty dreary I know. I don't think 'Home and Hearth' magazine is going to come knocking any time soon. Still, we're only here temporarily I suppose. Coffee?'

'I'd love one'.

Milk and sugar?'

'White with one thanks.'

Lola took the opportunity to look around her. Hillary had indeed made the best of a fairly bland and uninspiring space. A cream sofa in one corner had a vibrant red and brown rug in a tribal pattern thrown casually over it, and she liked the sisal rugs over the floorboards. There was some interesting art on the walls, and the way the sun shone in through the bamboo blind highlighted the pale yellow bush roses on the rustic chest which posed as a coffee table. Photos in simple wooden frames sat on the distressed timber sideboard among some Eastern artefacts. A chubby and serene Buddha smiled at her. The whole effect was slightly bohemian, eclectic and cosy. Lola decided she liked it. It was nothing like her own apartment in the city, she thought, with a pang of homesickness. Inhabited solely by Andrea now, (and her various beaus, Lola supposed, with a wry smile) it was essentially white, minimal and modern. And a little cold and stark, Lola had to admit. But it had seemed so appropriate back there.

Eventually Hillary returned carrying a tray with a coffee pot, two mugs and a small plate of blueberry muffins.

'I'll show you your room first, then after your coffee I'll help you with your bags and stuff'.

'Great', added Lola, feeling suddenly lost and alone, and not totally sure what to make of her new surroundings, even though she decided she liked her new housemate very much.

It took most of the day to unpack but finally everything was in its place. Lola's stainless steel coffee maker sat on the kitchen bench opposite the shiny new juicer Nick had given her, ready for service. She tried not to show her disappointment at her small bedroom. It was on the southern side of the house, dark and pokey. But she'd made up the bed with her best set of

white cotton bed linen, and plumped up her European pillows. She allowed herself a display of small photos in silver frames on her bedside table, even though the one of her and Nick at Andrea's birthday party was relegated to the bedside drawer, face down. A white roman blind on the small window afforded some privacy, while still letting in scant sunlight. It will have to do, thought Lola, trying hard to stay optimistic.

Lola awoke on Sunday morning as the sun streamed through the small window. But instead of the sound of traffic and activity, only birds and the gentle wind rustling through the tall trees outside could be heard. The silence the night before as she went to bed early had been downright eerie. This peacefulness is going to take some getting used to, she thought, springing out of bed and opening her small blind.

Lola thought of her usual Sunday morning. She'd be meeting her friends right now at her local beachside café for breakfast, latte and conversation, she thought a little pensively. Ever a creature of habit, she quickly showered, dressed and hopped into her car ready to head down to town to have a look. There had to be a nice café somewhere where she could read the morning papers. Hillary had gone to down to the city for the weekend so she was on her own. Probably all the better for exploring a new place anyway, Lola thought. Parking down a nearby side street, she briskly walked the short distance to the wide main boulevard. There weren't many people around. The nearby park had a few families with babies in pushers, and some elderly couples were strolling in the morning sunshine. Well, that's not too different from home, she thought. Some tables and chairs on the pavement ahead caught her eye. 'Mrs Mac's Country Kitchen', said the sign above the wide sliding glass doors. Spotting a corner table in the sun, Lola sat down and spread out the paper she'd bought.

'Hello love, ready to order?'

A short, rotund woman with red hair and a friendly smile had approached. She stood expectantly.

'Just a flat white and a croissant thanks'.

'Not hungry this morning? Said the redheaded woman. "Moving house is exhausting I know. Moved myself last year. How are you liking it up here so far?'

'Umm, excuse me?' Lola was visibly flustered. 'How do you know I've just moved up here?'

The woman chuckled. 'The whole town knows who you are love. There are no secrets here. We know all about you. Welcome to Russell Creek.'

Lola finished her coffee in silence. Always a private person, she contemplated the experience of being known to people, and lots of them it seemed, who she hadn't actually met. It was unnerving. Finishing her croissant, she picked up her car keys and bolted for her car.

She sat in silence in Hillary's jeep on Monday morning as they drove the short distance to the school. Hillary smiled encouragingly. She'd dressed in her best silk and wool two piece suit, and her matching black court shoes were newly polished. Her pearls, the ones from Broome, graced her pale neck. A black patent leather briefcase held her teaching notes. They pulled into the gravel drive and Hillary found a park. Hillary, she'd noticed, still had on blue jeans and boots. They entered the school staff room through a side door.

'Excuse me everyone, may I have your attention, this is Lola. Our new Business Studies teacher'.

Hillary's crisp announcement caused the twenty or so people in the room to turn. As they did so, Lola noticed they were all dressed in simple cotton and lightweight casual clothing. In 30 degree plus heat, it made sense. The overhead fans whirred rhythmically. She felt silly, as she had at a friend's birthday party as a child, when her mother had dressed her in the pink taffeta dress she'd painstakingly sewed for her, with matching white high socks with pink lace around the edges. The feeling was eerily similar. Too late to go home and change now, Lola realised. She felt the stares of these, her new workmates, with a degree of apprehension. Her sudden lack of self assurance was unusual for her. As she stood there, a stockily built man approached her with his arm outstretched. His friendly round face beamed at her.

'Hello Lola! Welcome to Russell Creek Area School. I'm Kelvin Penbury, the School Principal. We hope you'll be very happy here. Let me show you around the school.

'Yes, thank you', replied Lola, ministering a show of confidence which did not at all match her inner mood.

The days and weeks seemed to pass quickly. Her previous marketing career was a great help with her Business Studies classes, as she had the experience and real life examples to highlight relevant concepts in the curriculum. But she knew there was still a long road ahead. They said the first year of teaching was the hardest. And adapting to the country way of life was no picnic either, she thought, grimacing. After the first day Lola decided she'd try to fit in with the casual ambience. Cotton beige cropped pants, brown sandals and a white linen shirt felt comfortable but still professional, and she brought her trusty navy jacket in case it got cold. She imagined the hurtful sniggers from some of the staff had subsided somewhat, but she

knew she was still regarded as the 'new girl' at Russell Creek. Thank god for trusty and supportive Hillary.

"How are you enjoying it up here so far?" said Hillary one night over a coffee as they sat watching the late news. Lola thought carefully before responding.

'Umm, to tell you the honest truth, it's not quite what I expected Hil', replied Lola, unsure of how blunt she should be. Some country folk didn't like you criticising their way of life, she'd found out, even though she didn't really think of Hillary as one of the locals.

'I feel a bit like a fish out of water in some ways. It's so different from the ways things were back in the city. The things that mattered down there don't seem to matter up here I've noticed'.

'Like designer clothes and so on?' Hillary allowed herself a tiny smirk.

'Yes...well, yes that's one thing I suppose. I guess my wardrobe was a bit inappropriate for this heat and the lifestyle.'

'Don't worry. You're doing really well at school and the kids up here seem to have taken to you, and that's what's important. And you do have some lovely outfits, and there's nothing wrong with that', Hillary added brightly.

No, there wasn't, thought Lola. But none of it seemed as important as before. She felt as if all the things she'd been so sure of all her life were being turned on their head. It was disorienting, like being upside down in one of those spinning capsule rides at the fun park.

'Tell you what', blurted Hillary, breaking her train of thought. 'My brother's having a barbeque this weekend. Want to come along?

'Your brother, does he live around here?'

Lola had assumed Hillary was from the city, like herself.

'We both grew up on a vineyard about an hour's drive south from here, down towards the valley. My brother still lives there and manages the place, as well as attempting to make wine that's actually fit for human consumption. I'm sure he'd love to meet you. We can stay the weekend and come back on Sunday night.'

Lola thought about it. The weekend sounded like the perfect break from Russell Creek.

'That sounds great Hillary. I'd love to go'.

The weekend arrived and after some effort, Lola found an old pair of jeans. She hadn't worn them in years. They still fitted her, she thought with satisfaction, as she pulled a simple cotton t-shirt over her head. She'd tied her hair back into a ponytail, and smoothed some creamy moisturiser over her bare face. A straw hat added the necessary sun protection. As beads of

perspiration formed on her forehead and trickled down her neck, she realised with a sense of excitement how much she was looking forward to the weekend. The prospect of an hour's drive in searing heat a few months ago wouldn't have inspired this enthusiasm, she thought. Hillary's old jeep expertly navigated the winding road south, and Lola realised she loved the green landscape and the sense of freedom and space that went with it. It was hard to feel this kind of serenity or peace in the city, realised Lola. She thought of her first day at Russell Creek School, dressed in her best corporate garb. She had to laugh. The boxes and boxes of things she'd brought with her now seemed so superfluous. Her obsession with fashion and designer labels had been had been cultivated over a lifetime, or so it seemed. Her need for everything to be just right and in its place seemed to be sliding away. That night at the singles club with Andrea the week before she left seemed a world away. With a pang of painful self awareness, she recognised herself as one of those 'city types' she had so despised. But none of it mattered now, as she gazed out of the car window at the lilac hills in the distance and the gnarly old eucalypts with their creamy, peeling trunks.

'Well, here we are'.

Hillary's comment brought her to the present. Up ahead was a beautiful old house, solid and graceful. As they entered through the gate and drove up the winding gravel drive, Lola noticed white bush roses and lilac and green hydrangeas lining the edge of the driveway. Stately old maple and jacaranda trees could be seen behind the house. It was amazing that such a luxuriant garden had survived what must have been years of drought and dry conditions, thought Lola.

'There's a bore on the property. It's what's helped to keep the garden and vineyards so lush.' said Hillary, as if reading her thoughts.

'My brother can take all the credit for maintaining this place.' She continued. "My mother planned the garden many years ago and he's meticulous about preserving it according to her original vision.'

They had driven around to the side of the house where a large sandstone garage and loft stood. Behind the building Lola noticed rows of neatly pruned grapevines, in orderly rows. She gazed past them into the distance.

'It's beautiful Hillary. What an amazing place to grow up. And is that actually an airstrip over there?'

A small plane stood at the end of a small, sandy runway about 200 metres from the house, silhouetted against the blue sky.

'Oh yes, that's my brother's. He does some consulting work in the city and occasionally needs to visit clients. So he flies down. It's a lot quicker than driving obviously. But he loves it here and doesn't like to be away for too long. Oh, here he is now!'

Hillary jumped out of the car and ran up the steps to the wide front verandah. A tall, slightly balding man dressed in moleskins and a checked shirt stepped out from behind the screen door. Hillary flung her arms around him.

'Lola. I'd like you to meet my brother'.

The intoxicating scent of jasmine hung in the still morning air.

'Hi Lola, I'm Lachlan. Pleased to meet you.'

A slow smile spread across his suntanned face.

Lola shuddered with the shock of recognition. It couldn't be.

'Lola. Umm.... likewise'.

'Care for a drink? Champagne perhaps? His soft brown eyes twinkled.

'That'd be lovely'.

'Been up this way before?'

'No, first time'. But maybe not the last, she thought.

Hillary looked perplexed, as her brother and housemate stood grinning at each other.

I'll never quite understand these city types, she thought, including her brother in that assessment. They're acting as if they already know each other. And champagne indeed! At this hour!

'Let's go inside shall we? I'll put the kettle on', she added crisply.

**THE END**