



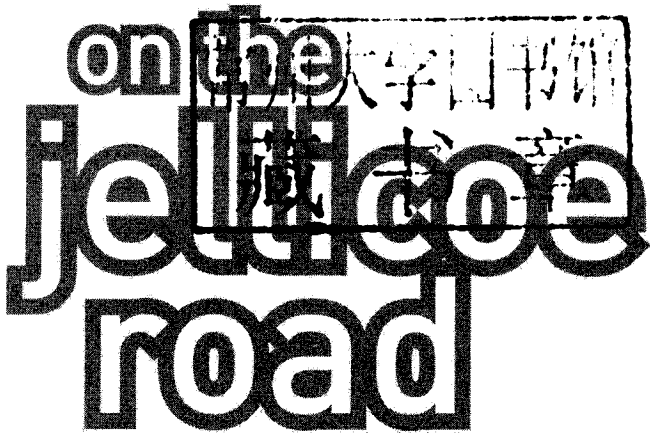
Melina
Marchetta

on the
**jellicoe
road**

From the best-selling author of *Looking for Alibrandi*

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jetticoe
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PENGUIN BOOKS

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For Daniel and for Max

prologue

'My father took one hundred and thirty-two minutes to die.

I counted.

'It happened on the Jellicoe Road. The prettiest road I'd ever seen, where trees made breezy canopies like a tunnel to Shangri-La. We were going to the ocean, hundreds of kilometres away, because I wanted to see the ocean and my father said that it was about time the four of us made that journey. I remember asking, "What's the difference between a trip and a journey?" and my father said, "Narnie, my love, when we get there, you'll understand," and that was the last thing he ever said.

'We heard her almost straight away. In the other car, wedged into ours so deep that you couldn't tell where one began and the other ended. She told us her name was Tate and then she squeezed through the glass and the steel and climbed over her own dead – just to be with Webb and me; to give us her hand so we could clutch it with all our might. And then a kid called Fitz came riding by on a stolen bike and saved our lives.

melina marchetta

'Someone asked us later, "Didn't you wonder why no one came across you sooner?"

'Did I wonder?

'When you see your parents zipped up in black body bags on the Jellicoe Road like they're some kind of garbage, don't you know?

'Wonder dies.'

chapter one

Twenty-two years later.

I'm dreaming of the boy in the tree and at the exact moment I'm about to hear the answer that I've been waiting for, the flashlights yank me out of what could have been one of those perfect moments of clarity people talk about for the rest of their lives. If I was prone to dramatics, I could imagine my sighs would have been heard from the boundaries of the school to the town down below.

The question begs to be asked, 'Why the flashlights?' Turning on the light next to my bed would have been much less conspicuous and dramatic. But if there is something I have learned in the past five years, it's that melodrama plays a special part in the lives of those at the Jelliocoe School. So while the mouths of my seniors move and their hands threaten, I think back to my dream of the boy, because in it I find solace. I like that word. I'm going to make it my word of the year. There is just something about that boy that makes me feel like I belong. *Belong. Long to be.* Weird word, but semantics aside, it is up there with *solace*.

Somewhere in that hazy world of neither here nor there, I'll be hanging off that tree, legs hooked over the branch, hands splayed, grabbing at air that is intoxicating and perfumed with the sweet smell of oak. Next to me, always, is that boy. I don't know his name, and I don't know why he comes calling, but he is there every time, playing the same music on one of those discmans for tapes from the eighties, a song about flame trees and long-time feelings of friends left behind. The boy lets me join in and I sing the same line each time. His eyes are always watery at that point and it stirs a nostalgia in me that I have no reason to own, but it makes me ache all the same. We never quite get to the end of the song and each time I wake, I remind myself to ask him about those last few bars. But somehow I always forget.

I tell him stories. Lots of them. About the Jellicoe School and the Townies and the Cadets from a school in Sydney. I tell him about the war between us for territory. And I tell him about Hannah, who lives in the unfinished house by the river at the edge of the Jellicoe School. Hannah, who is too young to be hiding away from the world and too smart to be merely organising weekend passes for the kids in my House. Hannah, who thinks she has me all worked out. I tell him of the time when I was in year eight, just after the Hermit whispered something in my ear and then shot himself, when I went in search of my mother, but only got halfway there. I tell him that I blame the Cadet for that.

The boy in the tree sobs uncontrollably when I tell him about the Hermit and my mother, yet his eyes light up each time I mention Hannah. And every single time he asks, 'Taylor, what about the Brigadier who came searching for you that day? Whatever became of him?' I try to explain that the Brigadier is of no importance to my

story, but he always shakes his head as if he knows better.

And there are times, like this time, when he leans forward to remind me of what the Hermit had whispered. He leans so far forward that I catch his scent of tea-tree and sandalwood and I strain my ears to listen so I will never forget. I strain my ears, needing to remember because somehow, for reasons I don't know, what he says will answer everything. He leans forward, and in my ear he whispers . . .

'It's time!'

I hesitate for a moment or two, just in case the dream is still floating around and I can slip back into it for that crucial moment. But the flashlights hurt my eyes and when I'm able to push them away I can see the ignorant impatience in the faces of my seniors.

'If you want us to scare you, Taylor Markham, we'll scare you.'

I climb out of bed and pull on my jumper and boots and grab my inhaler. 'You're wearing flannelette,' I remind them flatly. 'How scared should I be?'

They walk me down the corridor, past the senior rooms. I see the other year-eleven girls standing at their door, watching me. Some, like Raffaella, try to catch my eye, but I don't allow it to hold. Raffaella makes me feel sentimental and there is no place in my life for sentimentality. But for just one moment I think of those first nights in the dorm five years ago, when Raffaella and I lay side by side and she listened to a tale that I have no memory of today about my life in the city. But I'll always remember the look of horror on her face. 'Taylor Markham,' she had said, 'I'm going to say a prayer for you.' And although I wanted to mock her and explain I didn't believe in anything or anyone, I realised that no one had ever prayed for me before. So I let her.

I follow the seniors down the two flights of stairs and into the junior dorms.

The window here is supposedly the least conspicuous one in the House. I have actually mastered the climb down from my own window, but have never dared to tell the seniors. It gives me more freedom and means that I don't have to explain my every move to the year-seven spies in the dorm. I started off as one of those. They hand-pick you young out here.

A thorn presses into my foot through the soft fabric of my boot and I let it for a moment, pausing until they push me forward. I walk ahead, allowing them to play out their roles.

The trail that leads to the meeting hut is only distinguishable in the pitch black by the sensation of soft dirt under my feet. In the darkness, one of the seniors stumbles behind me. But I keep on walking, my eyes closed, my mind focused. Ever since they removed me from the dorm in year seven I have been trained to take over, just like the protégés in the other Houses. Five years is a long time waiting, and somehow during that time I got bored. So as we reach the hut and enter and I feel the waves of hostility smack me in the face, I begin to plan my escape from this place. Except that this time I will not be in year eight and there won't be a Cadet who tags along. There will just be me. According to Dickens, the first rule of human nature is self-preservation and when I forgive him for writing a character as pathetic as Oliver Twist, I'll thank him for the advice.

Candles illuminate the canvas-covered dirt floor where the seniors from all the Houses sit with their successors, waiting for the verdict.

'This is officially the passing-on ceremony,' the one-in-charge says. 'You keep it simple. It's not a democracy. Whoever's in charge, rules. They can only be superseded if five of the six House leaders sign

a document deeming him or her incompetent. The one-in-charge has final say in what gets traded with the Cadets and the Townies. He or she, only, has the right to surrender to the enemy.'

Richard of Murrumbidgee House makes a sound as if he's holding back a laugh. I don't know whether it's because he's sure the job is his or because he is laughing at the idea that anyone would ever surrender to the enemy, but the sound grates on me.

'The important thing is to never give anything away,' the one-in-charge continues, 'especially not to teachers or dorm staff. Every time your dorm co-ordinator calls a meeting, just sit there and look like you're taking in every word, but don't let them ever understand what goes on around here after hours.'

'Which is?' Ben Cassidy asks politely.

'I beg your pardon?' says one of his seniors.

'Well, what exactly does go on here after hours?'

'What are you getting at?' his senior persists.

Ben shrugs. 'Everyone's always going on about what goes on after hours but nothing actually seems to go on at all, except maybe meetings like this.'

'Then to begin with,' the one-in-charge says, 'don't discuss these meetings.'

'Well, it's not as if they don't know what's going on,' Ben continues. 'This one time I was with Hannah and we were eating her scones and she was asking me one hundred and one questions, as per usual.' He looks around at the other protégés, as if we're interested. 'She makes them herself. Hmm Hmm. Beautiful. Well, we got to talking and I said, "Hannah, you've lived in this house ever since I've been here and it's got the best bird's-eye view of all the Houses, so what do you think goes on here out of school hours?'"

‘That’s a great question to be asking someone who’s constantly speaking to the principal,’ Richard says. ‘You’re a stupid prick, Cassidy.’

‘We didn’t have much to choose from,’ the leader of Clarence House says, sending Ben a scathing look and whacking him across the back of the head. Ben looks resigned. In year seven he got bashed up at least once a month, mostly by his seniors. He’d go visit Hannah, which I found irritating because he had his own adult looking after his House and the one thing I hated in year seven, after living with Hannah in her unfinished house for the whole year before, was sharing her with the rest of the school. The revelation that she’s a question-asker is even more irritating. Hannah *never* asks me anything.

‘What type of scones?’ I ask him. He looks up at me, but his senior whacks him again.

‘Okay, I’m over this,’ Richard says impatiently. ‘Can we just get to the point?’

Those-in-charge look at each other and then back to us. And then at me.

I hear the curses instantly, the anger, the disbelief, the hiss of venom under the breath of almost everyone in the room, except the seniors. I know what is about to be said but I don’t know how I feel. Just numb like always, I guess.

‘You’re not a popular choice, Taylor Markham,’ the one-in-charge says, cutting through the voices. ‘You’re too erratic, have a bad track record; and running off with one of the enemy, no matter how young you were, was bad judgement on your part. But you know this place inside out and you’ve been here longer than anyone else and that’s the greatest asset anyone can have.’

One of my seniors nudges me hard in the ribs and I guess I'm supposed to stand up.

'From this point on,' the one-in-charge continues, 'we answer no questions and offer no advice, so don't come to find us. We don't exist any more. We go home for study tomorrow and then we'll be gone and our role here is over. So our question is, are you in, or do we give this to our next candidate?'

I didn't expect a question or an option. I would have preferred if they just told me to take over. There is nothing about this role that I desperately want. Yet being under the control of any of the protégés in this room for even the slightest moment is a nauseating prospect and I know that if I'm not in charge I'll be spending many a night on surveillance, freezing my bottom off in the middle of the bush.

When I'm ready, I nod, and the one-in-charge hands me a purple notebook and a thick crisply folded piece of paper, which I suspect is the map, outlining who owns what in the territory wars. Then the year twelves begin to leave and, like all things insignificant, the moment they're gone it is like they never existed.

I sit back down and prepare myself for what I know is coming. Five House leaders ready for a battle. One common enemy. Me.

'You don't want this. You never have.' I think the comment comes from the leader of Murray House, who has never really spoken to me. So the idea that he thinks he knows what I want interests me.

'Step down and five of us will sign you out,' Richard says, looking around at the others. 'You'll be put out of your misery and we'll get on with running the underground.'

'Richard's got some great ideas,' the Hastings House girl explains.

'You don't have the people skills, Taylor.'

‘And you never turn up to meetings.’

‘And not once did you gather intelligence against the Cadets last year.’

‘You spend too much time in trouble with Hannah. If she’s on your back, she’ll be on ours.’

‘You just don’t give a shit about anyone.’

I block them out and try to go back to the boy in the tree . . .

‘Are you even listening to us?’

‘Let’s just take a vote.’

‘Five says she’s out and she’s out.’

. . . back to the tree . . . inhaling the intoxicating perfumed air and listening to a song with no end and to a boy with a story that I need to understand.

‘This is the worst decision I’ve ever known them to make.’

‘Everyone calm down. We just vote and it’ll be over.’

‘She burnt down the bloody laundry when I was in her House. Who can trust her?’

‘They were sultana scones.’

The voice slices through the others and I glance up. Ben Cassidy is looking at me. I don’t know what I see in his eyes, but it brings me back to reality.

‘What are you doing, Ben?’ Richard asks quietly, menacingly.

Ben takes his time, then looks at Richard.

‘The one-in-charge gave it to her, so we should respect that.’

‘We haven’t agreed that she’s the leader.’

‘You need five votes against her,’ Ben reminds them.

‘Murray? Hastings? Darling?’ he says to the others in turn. They refuse to look at me and I realise they’ve rehearsed this. ‘Clarence . . .’

‘Raffaella reckons we need to get the Prayer Tree,’ Ben cuts in before Richard can drag him into it. I can tell they haven’t discussed this with him. He’s considered the weakest link. Except when they need his vote. Big mistake.

‘That’s all we want back from the Townies,’ Ben mutters, not looking at anyone.

Richard glances at Ben (in disgust).

‘And of course the Club House is a priority.’ Ben starts up again, and I can tell he’s enjoying himself.

Silence. Tons of it, and I realise that I have my one vote that will keep me in. For the time being, anyway.

‘Who’s in charge of the Townies this year?’ I ask.

I’m staring at Richard. He realises that I’m here to stay and, despite the look in his eyes that says betrayal, backstabbing, petulance, hatred, revenge and anything else he’s planning to major in, he lets me have my moment.

‘We’ll find out sooner or later,’ he says.

But I like this power.

‘Ben?’ I say, still staring at Richard.

‘Yes?’

‘Who’s in charge of the Townies these days?’

‘Chaz Santangelo.’

‘Moderate or fundamentalist?’

‘Temperamental, so we need to get on his good side.’

‘Townies don’t have a good side,’ Richard says.

I ignore him.

‘Is he going to be difficult?’ I ask Ben.

‘Always. But he’s not a thug,’ Ben says, ‘unlike the leader of the Cadets.’

‘Who?’ Richard barks out.

I see Ben almost duck, as if a hand is going to come out and whack him on the back of his head.

‘First thing’s first. This year we get the Townies on our side,’ I say, ignoring everyone in the room but Ben.

The chorus of disapproval is like those formula songs that seem to hit number one all the time. You know the tune in a minute and it begins to bore you in two.

‘We’ve never done that,’ Richard snaps.

‘And look where it’s got us. In the last few years, we’ve lost a substantial amount of territory. It’s been split up between the Cadets and Townies. We haven’t got much left to lose.’

‘What about the Prayer Tree?’ Ben asks again.

‘The Prayer Tree is not a priority,’ I say, standing up.

‘Raffaella reckons the trade made three years ago was immoral,’ he argues.

I try not to remember that Raffaella, Ben and I spent most of year seven together, hiding out with Hannah. I can’t even remember Ben’s story. Heaps of foster parents, I think. One who put a violin in his hands and changed his life.

‘Do me a favour,’ I say to him, a tad on the dramatic side. ‘Don’t ever bring morality into what we do here.’