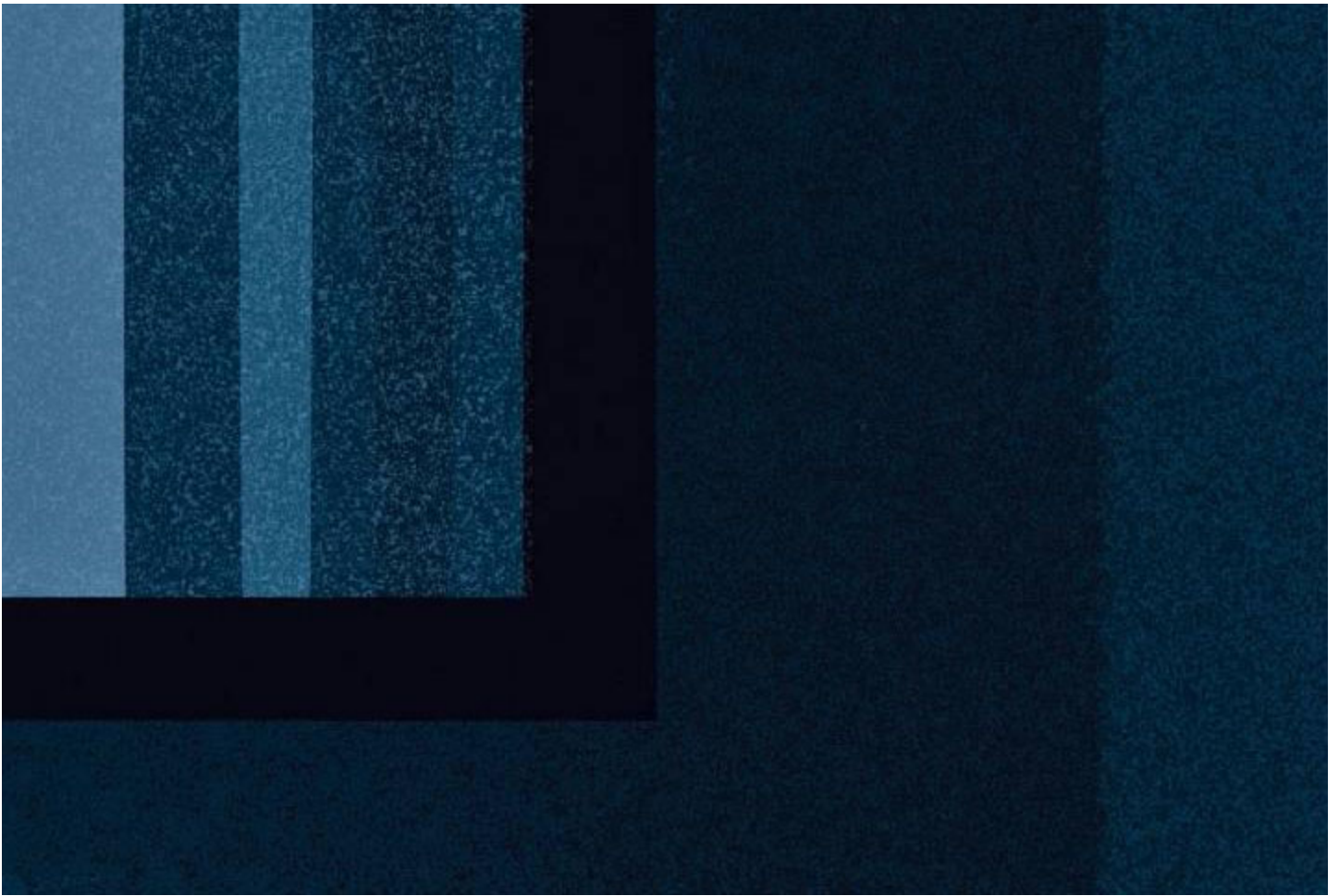


CAUGHT IN A TRAP

MADONNA KING



It's become disturbingly common: online scammers posing as attractive teenagers to groom vulnerable young people into sending nude pictures of themselves, then bribing them with the imagery. It's called "sextortion", it's on the rise – and it's having tragic results. **WARNING: THIS ARTICLE CONTAINS GRAPHIC CONTENT**

"BRIDGET. BRIDGET. Dinner is ready." Bridget's mother raises her voice above the din around the family dinner table. Her 15-year-old is locked in her bedroom, ignoring the plea to join the rest of the family. But what Bridget's mother doesn't know is that, on the other side of that bedroom door, her smart, kind and sassy daughter is naked, tears trickling down her cheeks as she performs sex acts on herself, in full view of her laptop camera.

Her tormentor is online. He is issuing directions. "Do this." "Do that." "You don't want your parents to know about this, or the whole world, do you?" She knows this because he told her last night, and the night before, that if she doesn't acquiesce, use her school ruler in this way and her hand in that way, what she's now doing will be plastered all over the web.

This crime of sextortion, a combination of the words "sex" and "extortion" where a victim is blackmailed to pay their attacker in one of two ways – with

more-detailed sexual content or with money – has reached epidemic proportions, fuelled by both serious sex offenders and organised scammers targeting the most vulnerable. Up to 70 per cent of all new online sexual content police investigators are seeing is victim-produced, and much of it follows the same script. A child produces content for an adult who has tricked them into thinking they are a celebrity or influencer or someone just like them. The adult abuser then “sextorts” or bribes the child for more lewd content, or money delivered as gift cards, cryptocurrency, vouchers or online gaming credits.

In Australia, according to eSafety Commissioner Julie Inman Grant, 75 per cent of those cases where the abuser is after more sexual content will involve tween and teen female victims. In those cases where offenders are chasing money – financial sextortion – teen boys are overwhelmingly being targeted. While most male victims are between 15 and 24 years of age, some are as young as 10. In at least one case, a teen handed over \$10,000 to his tormentors. Across both forms of sextortion, the victims are often vulnerable boys and girls, looking for connection.

Teen victims feel trapped, unable to tell their parents about their initial bad decisions to trust a person masquerading as someone else and to provide that first image. They find themselves doing more and more on the orders of their tormentor. They make more videos, or they send the money demanded – and their persecutors then insist on even more because they know their victim can get it. The victims are everywhere: in small, remote outposts and big cities in Australia, and all over the rest of the world. In many cases, when investigators find the online content, they cannot find the victim; they are not sure where he or she might live.

Australia receives many of its tips about online sex abuse from the Virginia-based National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC). That’s because US laws oblige tech providers to report suspicious online child abuse activities, including sextortion, to the centre. Michelle DeLaune is NCMEC’s president and CEO. She provides this real-life example to highlight the speed with which teens, especially boys, are being trapped. Let’s call this teen boy Tom.

8.07pm: Offender makes initial contact with Tom, who is a teenager.

10.07pm: Tom shares sexually explicit imagery.

10.23pm: Offender sends blackmail message, threatening he will release imagery unless Tom pays money.

Two hours later, Tom “expresses suicidal ideation and stops messaging”. A few hours later, the offender contacts Tom’s girlfriend, shares the images and asks if she knows him. She responds that it’s her boyfriend and asks when the picture was taken. The offender says he will ruin her boyfriend’s life with the picture.

12.03pm: Only 16 hours after the initial contact, the girlfriend responds that her boyfriend has killed himself.

DeLaune says such bribery attempts tend to quickly follow a teen’s decision to provide an image. “And it’s very aggressive,” she says. “It can happen in a matter of minutes, from the moment that a photograph is sent until the blackmail.”

Outside the bedroom doors of so many teens like Bridget and Tom, parents are lost. Why has their happy, gregarious teen become so withdrawn? Why are they refusing to attend school? Why aren’t they eating? Educators, too, are finding more and more of the school day being taken up with what they see as a new, industrialscale crime targeting tweens and teens. A multitude of platforms, including Facebook, Skype, Kik, Tynychat, Omegle, Wattpad and Snapchat, are being used.

And what worries Susan McLean, a former Victorian police officer of 27 years, is that the reported figures are just a microscopic indicator of how big the problem is. She believes less than a quarter of targeted minors alert authorities, an estimate that is widely supported. “The risk is enormous,” she says. “It’s not a matter of if, it’s when your children will be contacted by a paedophile online.” McLean, who now educates parents, teachers and students about cyber safety, says every image will come from a bedroom or a bathroom: “And they are the two places that digital devices and cameras should never, ever be allowed. I see what happens and none of these kids who are being extorted are anywhere other than there.”

Detective Inspector Jon Rouse, who recently announced his retirement from the Queensland police force after three decades of globally recognised work with his Taskforce Argos team, just shakes his head at the rise of

sextortion. “If you’ve seen what I’ve seen, you would not allow your child to take their phone into their bedroom,” he says firmly.

Sextortion is now the number one issue for online child sex crime fighters, and it is close to rivalling online bullying in schools. Indeed, it is now becoming so common that it’s splitting investigative resources dedicated to other serious online child sex abuse. Up to a million “users” or members are believed to have joined clubs hidden deep inside the world wide web to trade and chat about child sex abuse.

SO HOW is someone like Bridget or Tom drawn in to the point where they will remove their clothes and take orders from a stranger who might be in Africa or Europe or the US? The answer is grooming. This is the first step in a child being extorted, and it simply means that the paedophile or scammer makes contact with a child and befriends them. Let’s take the case of a teen girl – because this script is playing out, repeatedly, across Australia today.

Jon Rouse says at first, the perpetrator “might spam 100 kids in the hope that maybe five or 10 or even one or two will engage with them”. They’ll choose those with accessible friends’ lists on any of a dozen or so social media platforms, so they can claim to know other people their target knows, and they will try to befriend several of them in case they need to point to mutual “friends” as part of their fake story.

Most times this is not a difficult task for the perpetrator. A big proportion of tweens and teens have publicly accessible friendship lists, and it is uncommon – in many of their circles, it’s almost improper – to turn down a friend request from someone who says they know someone who knows someone else. In the case of a teen boy, the photograph of an attractive girl might pop up in the same way, and after a vague, “Hi, we know a few of the same people”, they click as online friends. Then, with a connection made, they start talking online. Often, the groomer will talk about popular bands and use language that mirrors that of their prey. They’ll find common interests and build trust.

In real life, the new connection is not Gracie, a 15-year-old from Melbourne, or Bill, who goes to a private school in the same city. It might be a 52-year-old male in the United States with a family in the next room, a convicted paedophile in Europe looking for a new target, or a 45-year-old teacher in Asia with a decadelong criminal secret. What is consistent, though, is that it will be

a fake profile, and almost always, in the online space, the offender will be male – irrespective of whether their targets are teen boys or girls.

The talk will be teen talk. Often, it will touch on body parts and the idea of having sex. It's natural to be curious, especially when tween girls believe they are talking to another tween girl about what sex might be like, or how her breasts are oddly shaped. Boys, often excited that a girl – who is really an adult male predator – has shown interest in him and wants to show him her breasts, will consider reciprocating.

Perpetrator: *Have u ever had sex?*

Girl: *I soo so so wish I could have sex it sound so jucy [sic] but weird.*

With the conversation ongoing and the “grooming” complete, the fake profile then moves to stage two: convincing his prey to send a naked photograph or even a video. Often, he will suggest they talk somewhere else, on another platform – one that, as it happens, also allows videos to be passed back and forth, and where images can be freely swapped. As they chat, the online predator, masquerading as a peer, might send a photo of a young girl's breasts, claiming they belong to him; or a photo of a penis – it all depends on who he is targeting. Once his prey has been groomed and holds no suspicions about their new online friend, he'll ask: “Why don't you send me something. We'll be even then, and no one will ever know.”

A boy might send what is widely known as a “dick pic”, believing it is being received by the cute girl he is now considering meeting; his school formal is next year, so perhaps he could ask her to that, too. Similarly, a girl might think she's chatting with a new peer friend. How refreshing to be able to talk to someone about this stuff, she thinks. “See, mine are smaller than yours,” she might caption a photo, sent from the privacy of her bedroom.

As the chat goes on, she might even provide more intimate content. And this is the point where the disguised predator catches his prey. He might keep the ruse going for a bit longer, to get a close-up, or more detail, or a movie. “I want to see more of you,” he might say, or, “I like your body.” But he doesn't really need anything else. He has a photograph and/or video of a young Australian tween or teen, male or female. And that will be the basis of his blackmail. In some instances, offenders doctor images to make the victim appear to be in an even more compromising position.

AMANDA TODD, a Canadian student, took her own life in 2012, at 15, after being blackmailed to expose her breasts. Her tormentor was sentenced to 13 years' jail in 2022. Before Amanda's death, she posted a heartbreaking video online about the torment she'd suffered. Her mother, Carol, says it has now been viewed 50 million times. "I don't even know if sextortion was a word when it happened to Amanda," she says. Carol, who teaches digital literacy, says we need to confront the issue by first understanding that our own children are not exempt from being caught in a predator's net. "Nobody wants to talk about words that have sex in them."

Carly Ryan, a South Australian 15-year-old, was the first person murdered in Australia by a man with a fake profile. He groomed her before developing an online relationship with her. Carly's mother, Sonya Ryan, says she's watched criminals evolve, along with the technology available to them, since her daughter was killed in 2007. "But what hasn't changed is the vulnerability of youth," she adds. "The need for validation. The need for connection." Sonya says no online safety education existed when Carly was murdered, and that social media platforms have "a lot to answer for in relation to keeping their users safe. Their focus seems to be profit and privacy at the expense of extremely young, vulnerable people." Sonya says she had never heard of grooming before Carly was ensnared by a serial paedophile who called himself Brandon Kane.

Both Carly and Sonya believed he was an 18-year-old musician from Melbourne. He wasn't. He was a 50-year-old predator who would turn to murder. The Carly Ryan Foundation, set up by Sonya, has put enormous effort into educating children and parents, as have other organisations, but most parents still don't believe it could happen to their child. Australian Federal Police research shows 52 per cent of parents and other carers are not having conversations around this topic, unaware it's a concern.

Unfortunately, as Susan McLean points out, children want to be liked, and sex predators know what to say. Shortly before our interview, she counselled one disbelieving mother whose 15-year-old son was being sextorted. The mother told McLean, "He's sensible. He's smart. He's a straight-A student," McLean says. "But good kids make bad choices."

MANY AUSTRALIAN schools are dealing with the fallout of these cases. One Sydney principal says she dealt with three big cases in 2022. She was relieved the students raised the alarm, so the police could be alerted. "But they were

scared of their parents finding out,” she says. “We had to be the ones who broke it to their parents.” She says the parents were shocked, believing it was almost impossible for their child to have been exploited in such a way. “I’ve seen this happen to young people who are bright and intelligent, articulate, and they get sucked in,” the principal says.

And don’t be fooled into thinking that the viewing of children being violated is a lesser offence than the “contact crime” of violating them, and may warrant less attention. There is an alarmingly high correlation between those caught and convicted of the possession of child sexual abuse videos or photos, and those who have assaulted a child.

Jon Rouse won’t show me all of an hour-long video seized as part of an investigation, just parts of it. Afterwards, I feel glad he made that decision. It starts with a teen girl, crying. She’s in her bedroom. And she knows, before her tormentor orders her, what she will be asked to do. I wonder if she can hear her siblings or her parents nearby. She’s forced to insert objects into her vagina, to play with herself, and to perform a list of sordid acts that goes on and on and on.

At the end, before her abuser turns off the camera, he bids her farewell. She knows she will have to do this all over again the following night, because if she doesn’t, that video will be plastered all over the web for everyone to see.

“And that’s a fairly typical case,” Rouse says. Investigators haven’t found her yet. Another teen girl whose future is being stolen by a sextorter, just like Bridget and Tom. n

This is an edited extract from Saving Our Kids (Hachette Australia, \$35), out August 30. Lifeline 13 11 14