

An aerial photograph of a person in a small wooden boat on a river. The person is wearing a white shirt and is seen from behind, rowing the boat. The river is surrounded by dense, green forest. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds, and the overall lighting is warm and golden, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The text 'THE ART OF DETACHMENT' is overlaid in a bold, orange, serif font across the upper half of the image.

THE ART OF DETACHMENT

A.J. MURPHY

PART ONE

From Script to Novel: An Exploration of Reverse Adaptation

A PhD in Creative Writing

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis asks the question of whether traditional book to screen adaptation can be successfully reversed. Is it possible to produce a stand-alone literary novel of high quality whose progenitor artefact is a feature film script – the reverse of traditional book to film adaptation? This practice-led research interrogates the process of the reverse adaptation of my own unproduced feature film script, *Reasons to be Cheerful*, into the novel, *The Art of Detachment*. In doing so it provokes questions regarding creative and professional differences experienced by the writer when writing for the screen and the novel. This thesis also presents synthesised primary interviews with two screenwriters who have undertaken their own script to novel adaptations; one of which resulted in an international best-seller. It also defines and contextualises reverse adaptation in relationship to its closest literary cousin, the commercial novelization, and within our transmedia environment. The research presented in this thesis represents a humble first attempt at establishing a body of knowledge on the reverse adaptation, which, the author believes, will become more frequent into the future.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed.....

Date.....

ETHICS APPROVAL NUMBER: SBREC Project 5073

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Most importantly, though, to my family, extended and otherwise, mother, sisters, nieces et al, for feeding and housing Dylan and me during the final 'write-up' phase of this thesis, without which I would probably never have finished, nor put on those extra kilos. Thanks to Aunty Paula in particular for providing all that loving childcare. Also to my friends, who have had to endure my whinging when braving the question 'How's the thesis going?' Thanks to you all for your interest and encouragement.

I dedicate the bit of this work where I end up being called 'Doctor' to my Dad, who would have both laughed at the silly hat and been tickled pink... but most of all to my beloved Dylan and Monica who both have been and are, a source of inspiration, love and major distraction to me.

PROLOGUE

Screen adaptation, like Eddington's 'Arrow of Time'¹, has traditionally been thought to move in one direction, from past to present and from book to screen. But what about the reverse? Can Eddington's arrow be turned on its head? Can a script be successfully adapted into a novel? Until recently it was automatically assumed that film adaptation implied book to screen. In recent days, however, with the explosion of reboots, remakes and sequels on our big screens and daily evidence of transmedia adaptation on our personal smart screens, gaming consoles and televisions, the concept of screen 'adaptation' must be seen through a wider angle lens.

This thesis interrogates the rarely seen phenomenon of 'reverse' adaptation; that is, adaptation from film script to novel. While the wider fields of adaptation (text to screen) and film/literature studies have witnessed significant activity

¹ Harvard Astrophysicist, Bob Doyle, tells us "In 1927, Arthur Stanley Eddington coined the term "Arrow of Time" in his book *The Nature of the Physical World*. He connected "Time's Arrow" to the one-way direction of increasing entropy required by the second law of thermodynamics. This is now known as the "thermodynamic arrow" (Doyle n.d.: 3).

since at least as far back as the appearance of Bluestone's seminal *Novel into Film* (1957), scholarship focussing on the reverse, that is film into novel adaptation, is much rarer. Indeed, the few scholars engaging with novelization, the most widely recognised form of film to book adaptation, can generally not do so without commenting upon the lack of professional and scholarly interest in "this paradoxical return of writing" (Baetens 2005: 44). Even scarcer is literature relating specifically to reverse adaptation.

This research focuses specifically on the 'reverse' adaptation of an *unproduced* screenplay to the novel format. The creative artefact that has enabled and embodied this practice-led investigation is entitled, *The Art of Detachment*, and is a novel adapted from my original, unproduced feature film screenplay, *Reasons to be Cheerful*. The work of this thesis is, thus, not only to produce a stand-alone, high quality work of writing, but also to interrogate, contextualise and offer for discussion to the field, observations and challenges arising from the uncharted journey of a writer undertaking a reverse adaptation. As Nigel Krauth tells us, "There are many sites in the creative writing doctorate where experimentation can occur" (2011: 59). This thesis attempts this in several ways, the

primary experimentation being in the novelty of the creative form itself. To my knowledge, the process of reverse adaptation has not been previously documented and examined within a scholarly context. Thus the first method of investigation is through discussion and analysis of my own practice-led research, which takes at its core, the experiences of a professional *screenwriter* accustomed to working within the rigid stylistic constraints and structural discourse of screenwriting dogma. It interrogates the joys and challenges of adapting from script to prose, including discussion relating to particular craft elements, such as voice, person, point of view, character-action description and tense.

The second method of investigation is through primary interviews with two other screenwriters who have recently undertaken reverse adaptation themselves. Most notable of these is Graeme Simsion, the 'poster boy' for reverse adaptation, whose reverse adapted novel *The Rosie Project* (2014) became a global best seller that has been distributed to thirty eight countries and named by Bill Gates as one of his Top 6 books for 2014. These interviews with Simsion and Tilney Cotton (*Big Curse, Little Chef* 2014), along with discussion of my own process and observations, represent, as

far as I can discover, the first small contributions towards collecting and synthesising scholarly data on the topic of reverse adaptation.

The other method through which this thesis interrogates the topic is via scholarly analysis of existing literature and discourse in the field. However, as I shall further discuss in Chapter 1, in the absence of any literature directly relating to my specific topic I have had to, as Harper and Kroll advise, "develop a high degree of adaptability" (2008: 8) and excavate around the topic from proximate areas such as book to screen adaptation studies, transmedia adaptation and convergence culture, contemporary professional discourse as illuminated, for example, via prominent industry websites, and other sources, such as 'how to' texts, in particular Robert McKee's seminal *Story* (1997).

For the purposes of this research, I differentiate what I am calling 'reverse' adaptation from the better-known commercial novelisation by means of *intent*. Baetens tells us that "novelizations are blatant examples of commercial literature, that is, literature not written on the initiative of an individual author eager to give a personal form to certain ideas or feelings but ordered by a publisher to fulfil certain

commercial needs” (Baetens 2010: 51). In the *Journal of Screenwriting*, on the other hand, Murphy tells us that reverse adaptation is “motivated for creative reasons by the author, with the intention of being a ‘stand-alone’ artistic work, not dependent upon its mother artefact for its success” (Murphy 2016: 85).

While in the past, reverse adaptation has been a largely unexplored and unpractised mode of creative writing, I believe, and my research in Part 2 of this thesis will suggest, that it is likely to become more widely practiced in the future. Indeed, even during the short duration of my candidature the phenomenon of reverse adaptation has gone from unknown to at least existent. But why? As Simsion observes, it is “all wrapped up in the idea of ‘How do I get my story out there?’” (Simsion interview 2014: 15). Writers want to get their stories in front of an audience and economic realities mean that it is “still easier” to get a book published than to have a film script produced: “It’s just a question of numbers. I mean, how many books are published every year and how many films are made?” (Simsion interview 2014: 15). This is exacerbated by a current unprecedented resistance on behalf of film producers to invest in *original* screenplays, as exemplified by the

explosion of reboots, sequels and remakes currently on offer.² Screenwriters frustrated by what writer, Ian McEwan, calls “the disappointments that seem to gather around film projects” (Morrow 2010: 41), are beginning to turn their interest towards the publishing industry.

And so it was with me. As a screenwriter and director of two decades’ experience, my script *Reasons to be Cheerful* had attracted two rounds of script development funding from the Australian Film Commission (precursor to Screen Australia). However, with the knowledge that it would likely cost in the vicinity of three million dollars to bring it to the screen (even as a low budget film), I had to recognise that the chances of it attracting sufficient investment funding were remote, especially in the current cash strapped environment. But I was still in love with the characters, the world and story and I wanted them to be given a chance in front of an

² My primary research indicates that in the five years between 1981 and 1986, 63% of US top ten grossing films were derived from original screenplays. Between 2007 and 2011 this had dropped to 16%. I use a five-year average here to eliminate the possibility of one anomalous year. These figures come from analysing 30 years of US box office top ten titles (Box Office Mojo website statistics), and breaking them down into adaptations, remakes and sequels - As per work begun by a January 2012 article on *Short of the Week* website (Allen 2012).

audience. How could this be done? My writing life had begun with prose, in the form of a degree in journalism and youthful attempts at short story writing: Perhaps it would be possible for me to adapt the screenplay into a novel?

I immediately and enthusiastically leapt at this task, revelling in the comparative ‘orgy of words’ gifted to the author through prose writing. It wasn’t long before it occurred to me, however, that there was more to this journey of reverse adaptation than meets the eye, and that my creative observations might be of interest to other writers thinking of attempting a reverse adaptation. Or perhaps there may be literature on the topic I could use to inform myself about the process? *Surely* other screenwriters had attempted such an adaptation? I quickly discovered, however, that there was little to nothing to be found on the topic, neither in the scholarly nor professional arenas. As a screenwriter who also worked in academia, I realised how relevant and ‘novel’ this topic might prove, and thus my adapted novel, *The Art of Detachment*, and my PhD candidature was born.

What follows in Part 1 is the creative artefact of this thesis, *The Art of Detachment*. Part 2 contains the critical commentary of this thesis in which I will be “contextualising

and commentating” (Krauth 2007: 13) on observations arising from the work of Part 1.

An aerial photograph of a person in a small wooden boat on a river. The river flows through a landscape with a large dam visible in the background. The sky is filled with dramatic, golden-hued clouds. The text 'THE ART OF DETACHMENT' is overlaid in a bold, orange, serif font.

THE ART OF DETACHMENT

A.J. MURPHY

CHAPTER ONE

You could tell it was February because I was wearing my new school uniform. It was simple math.

February + New School = New Uniform

This uniform was a sort of Hogwarts meets, I don't know, Japanese schoolgirl porn kind of thing, depending on the attitude you take to it I suppose. Last year's uniform was lemon checks with a 'rust' blazer. This one was sky blue checks with a 'moss' green blazer. Wow. So different. The inevitable school crest, you know, on the pocket, was an eagle and a like, a lizard wearing a red beanie. Maybe it was a dragon... and a crown?

I care.

A lot of girls would've freaked out about having to start over as often as I had, but the nomad thing didn't get to me. No. The secret was actually pretty simple. First you've got to understand that everything in life is transitory. That's the one hundred percent undeniable truth. And it all goes from there. The bottom line is everything changes, and the more you're attached to something, the

more you notice when it's gone. I've had some serious practice now and I suppose you could say I'm at a higher level than most girls my age. Buddhists call it learning the *Art of Detachment*. Me? I call it the *Art of Not Giving a Shit*.

I could see the black iron gates of Greystones Ladies College through the tinted windows of Mum's Lexus. Oh, sorry, don't get the impression that Sandra was driving. She didn't take me to school that day. But I'm sure it must have happened sometime. There'd be photos. I watched the girls streaming through the gates into the school grounds, like blue-green ants. Some ants screaming like maniacs at seeing their friends again after the summer holidays. Some just trudging in through the gates with that 'oh well' kind of look on their faces.

I think the look on my face would have been more like 'bugger off'. That is if anyone was (a) interested and (b) could have seen me. I prefer to be invisible. And anyway, why would I advertise the fact that I was driving when I was only seventeen. It being, you know, illegal. Better just to watch through the tinted glass and observe. It was like, totally Film Noir.

Don't get the wrong impression. I'm not a *femme fatale*. I'm more like one of the gangsters. Who knows what I look like anyway. Not anything really. Last time I cut my hair it'd ended up in this cropped, black, messy... *thing*. Like one of those old style rock

chicks. And I always, always wear eyeliner, black and smudged. It's just a principle with me.

I drove the car around the corner and pulled up outside the side gate. I'd done a drive-by earlier in the week so I was down with the layout. That's one thing you'll learn about me. I like to be prepared. I carry a credit card at all times, that sort of thing. I got out of the car and headed towards the gate, not forgetting to zap the lock on Lexi.

Walking across the schoolyard through the sea of girls, I had this feeling of being like, above. Like I was a different, more advanced species or something. I was just visiting, and soon I'd be gone. I didn't know where the senior home classes were but I headed up the carved wooden stairs for the top floor of the largest building. In my experience, senior homerooms are always on the top floor.

Right again.

I hadn't been through five high schools for nothing.

I walked along the wood paneled corridor to a room labeled 12C and looked in the door. It was dotted with girls in uniforms like mine. I crossed the room and took a seat at the far edge of the classroom and dropped the cone of invisibility around me.

My whole plan for this year was to fly under the radar. To keep my head down, do my work, get decent grades and finish

school... *for... all... time*. If I could get through the year without having to have a conversation with anyone, that would be the A plan. I knew this was aiming for the stars. But you've gotta have a dream, right? And then, after the exams... I'd be *freeeeeee*... and never have to start school, any school, again. I touched wood. Stupid I know, but it's my superstition and I'm sticking to it.

At that moment three girls walked towards my row of desks. They didn't even see me. They were so busy talking. One red head girl with irritatingly perfect straight hair and a French manicure was blabbing on.

"And no more getting up at four o'clock for training. Thank God!" she said. She rolled her eyes skywards, meaning *I'm so relieved*.

The pretty, athletic-looking-blond-girl next to her looked horrified.

"No way."

"Yes way."

"Laura. You can't be, I mean you can't be serious. It's meant to be the four of us. You, me, Gracie and Christine. We're like, the fab four!" My ears pricked up at this, for reasons I'll get to. But, the red-haired-girl called Laura was unmoved.

"Dad promised to buy me a JEEP if I get into Law," she shrugged. "What are you gonna do?"

The blonde girl was speechless.

“And besides, look at these eyes,” Laura went on. “If I’m not careful, I’ll need work before I’m twenty.” Then added, “Caucasian skin ages ten years before other skin types you know.”

“I’ll get my Dad to give you a discount if you like,” the third girl said. She thought this was funny, and laughed. She was Asian and I knew her name was Grace by the gold necklace she wore. It spelled G-R-A-C-E. I’m clever like that.

Laura went on. “And besides *Ann*, some of us don’t get ‘A’s just by being alive. Some of us have to work to even pass.”

“I work,” Blondie protested.

“Yeah, if you call listening in class and breathing work.”

So the pretty blonde’s name was Ann, and she was a brain-box. I tuned out. I’d heard enough. That’s the handy thing about my spiritual practice. Most of what I get to experience is pretty easy not to give a shit about.

The bell rang and at the same time a cheaply suited Indian man walked into the room. I assumed, pretty safely, that he was my new homeroom teacher, Mr Chopra.

“Okay. Okay. Quieten down.”

And everyone kept talking.

“That will do. Quiet please.”

You’re sooo dreaming, I thought.

All of a sudden, there was an unnatural hush in the room and I looked up to see why. A mature-looking girl was standing at the door. Her face was tinged with self-conscious pink but she held her head up high at the same time. She walked to her desk amidst stares and whispers from the girls in the class.

“Look. It’s Nikki,” whispered Grace.

“Poor bitch,” said Laura.

“Careless bitch,” said Grace.

Ann-the-brain-box just looked lost.

“What?” she demanded. She was obviously out of the loop. Mr Chopra was so puffed up by the sudden silence that he hadn’t noticed anything going on.

“Okay, girls. Thank you,” he began.

Ann, who had sat at the desk next to mine, was prodding Grace for more details. “Tell me,” she whispered, as Mr Chopra began his speech.

“Okay, housekeeping... The chem lab is still being finished off, so Mr Leidig’s class will meet in the first year science lab for the time being. Ah, the extracurricular activities board is out in the Year 12 corridor and Mrs Noonan said that she wants people to sign up today so she can settle numbers. So if you can please do that...”

Meanwhile, Grace pulled out some paper and was scribbling madly. The blonde-athlete-come-brain-box-called-Ann, must have suddenly felt my presence because she turned sharply and looked straight at me for the first time. I mean she really *looked* at me. She scanned me, X-rayed me, and in one second, I was assessed and dismissed. She smiled, very nicely, very politely.

“Hi,” she said.

I nodded, not bothering to smile, then something hit me in the face.

It was Grace’s note. It bounced off my left temple and fell to the floor at my feet. Brain-box and I both looked down at the crumpled scrap of paper. Reluctantly, I bent to the floor to pick it up, when I heard the words...

“And now, where is Georgia Symons? Georgia?”

I felt all eyes turn to me. Or rather, to the air above my chair where I was meant to be. I flushed. It *had* to be one of those schools that put the new girl on display, didn’t it... OMG. I hadn’t prepared for this. The worst. I grabbed the note and sat upright, begging the Earth to swallow me up right there and then.

Unfortunately, Mr Chopra had had a clear view of the note grab and began creeping towards me, like tiger stalking fawn. I could see the thrill of the hunt spread across his face as he wound around desks in my direction.

“Girls, this is Georgia Symons. I’m sure you’ll all make her feel welcome,” he smiled, salivating.

I glanced down at the note in my hands and for the first time read its contents. And these were the words... ‘*Nikki had an abortion over summer!!!*’

To put it mildly...

Oh shit.

I glanced at Brain-box. Then at Nikki. Then back to Brain-box. She’d read the note as well and was making wild eyes at me as if to say, *Do Something!*

Mr Chopra arrived at my desk. His eyes shone darkly as he closed in for the kill.

“Welcome,” he smiled. And stretched out his claws.

I looked at Brain-box again. *She* wasn’t volunteering for action. In fact she was making herself a very small prim target.

The Chopra hand made a grab at the note but my duty was clear. I snatched it away, stuck the note into my mouth and began chewing.

Yes, chewing.

A low gasp flew around the classroom. The dark Chopra eyes narrowed sadistically.

“Congratulations, Symons,” he said. “*You* are the first girl in the long and distinguished history of Greystones Ladies College

who's managed to get detention before her first class. Meet me here today after the home bell rings."

And with that he turned around saying, "And for those of you who are taking Mandarin..." The rest is a blur. I took the mashed up note out of my mouth and splattered it on the floor. For better or definitely for worse, I was now on the map of class 12C.

Pulling myself together after the ordeal, I went into the senior corridor and found the extracurricular activities notice board. *Now...* this is important. There's just one activity that I do, no matter what school I'm at. It's my *thang*. I'm a rower, and I'm like *totally* into it. Oh, and did I mention that I'm really, really good? Yeah. Even if I say so myself. So anyway, I'm writing my name down in the rowing column and I hear a voice to the left.

"Are you a rower?"

It was Blondie-locks-the-brain-box, otherwise known as Miss Small Target. I ignored her and turned back to finish writing my name.

"Georgia isn't it?"

She looked me up and down, assessing my physical characteristics. Anyone who knows anything about rowing can see that I'm genetically blessed. Brain-box nodded and stuck out her hand and sent me a *winning* smile. Beautiful teeth, BTW.

"I'm Ann Cavanaugh."

I looked down at her hand as if it were so much shit, but amazingly she held her ground. The hand disappeared and to my horror, she stepped fully into my space, her voice low and confiding.

"Look, sorry about in there. That was really cool what you did. I should have helped. I don't know. Done something." Her pretty blue eyes exuded regret.

I stepped away, exuding what I hoped was *Back off bitch*. But inside, a familiar panic was rising. This chick wasn't taking the hint and it was just what I *didn't* need.

Ann stepped in and put a hand on my shoulder.

"No really. *Thanks*. You saved my arse. And Nikki's. God. Imagine, if Chopra had got that note. Oh my God. I just wanted to..."

I pulled roughly away. Brain-box seemed shaken but went on bravely trying to sound casual,

"Actually I'm Captain of the Rowing Squad this year... So, if you need anything...?"

Now most stuff, like I said, is easy not to give a shit about... but rowing... That's different. I quickly scanned her body. Yep, she was a rower. She was almost as tall as me. Strong arms and shoulders. Strong leg muscles. Not huge, but strong. It was easy to

miss on her though, because your eyes were drawn straight to her perfect face.

“So I guess I’ll be seeing you around,” she said, in a low purr. It was like I’d just been invited to join her club. Honestly, the effect of it threw me, and for a second I just stared stupidly at her.

But I wasn’t here to make friends and be nice to people. I pulled myself together and gave her the Mega-Death-Stare. The M-D-S is my ultimate defensive weapon and never fails. But unbelievably, the Cavanaugh enemy didn’t turn and run. Shaken yes, but holding ground, she looked at me probingly, then tilted her head to one side as though I was a mystery to be unraveled.

“So...” she said cautiously, “What crews do you row? Who were you with?”

I was officially out of defense ammo. There was nothing for it now but fight or flight. But flight *now* only meant fight later. I *knew* this from painful experience. So I took a deep breath, trying to conquer my panic, and threw myself over the breach.

“Is this the f...” I said then stopped. I took a breath and paused, just like I’d been taught.

“Is this the f...”

Come on. I closed my eyes and regrouped. *Attack it.*

“Is this the ssssSpanish f... fucking Inquisition?” I shot out. I opened my arms wide to humiliation and stared down the stunned enemy. *There. Bring it on.*

Ann’s creamy skin flushed red to the roots of her gold hair. But she wasn’t beaten. I could see the cogs in her brain turning like furies. She didn’t look away. She didn’t flinch. She just said,

“Oh.”

She didn’t rush in to speak and compensate like so many people do. She slowly held out her hand to me and said, “Well Georgia Symons. Welcome to the Greystones rowing squad.”

I looked down at the offered hand. Then back at her lovely smiling face.

“P... p... piss off,” I said.

She gasped. Loudly.

I walked away.

W... w... whatever.

Yep. This school was going to really rock.

CHAPTER TWO

I'd love to be able to tell you that the family fortune was built on something cool like the silicone chip or designing a carbon free car, or even something with an actual *use* like peanut butter or tampons. But the sad truth is that the family fortune, or rather *Mum's* fortune, is built on the exploitation of women's insecurities.

Sandra, that's Alexandra Symons, yes, *the* Alexandra Symons, cosmetics mogul, was a beauty queen and model in the Eighties when she stumbled upon her break through formula for papaya flavoured lip-gloss – with sunscreen.

The legend goes that Sandra was doing a photo shoot as 'Miss Tropical Sunrise' when during a touch up to her lips, the lip-gloss, liquefied by the lights, dripped into the cocktail Mother was sipping. At first Sandra was repulsed, but then a little voice inside her head told her to *apply that lip-gloss*. And behold, it carried the scent of papaya.

And it was good.

The rest, as they say, is history. Sandra quickly went from lip-gloss to lipstick, from lipstick to foundation, from foundation to eye shadow, from eye shadow to mascara and so forth, all across the face and then around the body. You get the picture I'm sure.

Being gorgeous didn't hurt Sandra's cause either. She gives good media. She's attractive, in the scientific sense of the word. She attracts. And she's nice. I mean, she really *is* nice in her own way. Sometimes you've got to dig way deep to find it, but it's there. Somewhere. Most of the time. Maybe. It's just a bit hit and miss. That's her main problem. She's intense. She's intensely happy. She's intensely depressed. She's intensely intense. I know that's meant to be my job, being the teenager, but I really think that Sandra can't help it. She *reacts*. And she's a workaholic. She didn't used to be... But let's not go into that now.

In the last five years, since it's been just Sandra and me, we've moved around *a lot*. Every time, Sandra opens a new shop, or a new workshop or even a box of face wipes in another city, we've got to move house to supervise it. We've lived in Sydney, Adelaide, Auckland, Perth, Sydney and now Melbourne. (Have you heard the one about the chicken who collected credit cards and always paid with exact money whenever he used cash? He didn't like change. Ho Ho.)

So getting back to the thread of my narrative as they say in English Lit, you won't be surprised when I tell you that Mum wasn't home when I drove Lexi into the garage on that awesomely successful first day of school.

You've got to see this new house to believe it. White must be the thing this year. Every wall is white. All the furniture is white. Every bedroom is white, and there are five of them for the two of us. Even the floor of both garages is white. Seriously. This house is so try hard, it tries hard to be try hard.

I threw my bag down onto the white leather couch, went across the white shagpile carpet to the white tiled kitchen and headed straight for the fridge. It was packed as usual with sports drinks, energy bars and so forth. No. Not by Sandra. By Rebecca, our 'help'.

Every day, Rebecca leaves our dinner on the top shelf of the fridge, beautifully laid out on individual plates and labelled. Or I'm pretty much guessing that it's her. No one ever sees her. She's like gravity or the wind or something. You can't see it but you know it's there by what it does. Food in the fridge. Clean clothes. Ironing done. Bathroom cleaned and so on. It always makes me think of that story about the shoemaker and the elf. This elf makes all the shoes at night but is never ever seen. He just leaves his handy-work on the table to be found at dawn by the shoemaker who gets all the credit. Dud deal for the elf I always thought. Rebecca's like that.

Looking over to the bench, I could see the video message machine light flashing, so I pushed the button as I tucked into some left over cold chicken from the fridge. While I was waiting for it to

come on, I heard the cat flap at the back door and groaned. Great. Sandra's drop-kick animal. God knows why she called him 'Angel'. Never was an animal so poorly named.

A filthy, balding, three hundred year old cat ran into the room meowing psychotically. He rubbed his mangy body up and down my leg and looked up at me with his slitty green eyes, purring like a lunatic. Like, eeewww. I threw a chicken wing at him. I mean, the sooner he chokes on a bone the better, right.

Mum's image appeared on the little video screen. She was sitting at her desk behind a random collection of cosmetics and boxes. Just so you've got the picture, Sandra is petite, pretty, she's got a blond bob and she always wears these like, sharp, one-colour skirt suits. Think Hilary Clinton meets, maybe, Gigi Hadid. Her walk-in robe is like one gigantic suit-rainbow, arranged in order of colour. I keep expecting to find little stockbroking unicorns leaping out of it. Today's suit was burnt orange, which Sandra wore with a white tie-at-the-neck blouse. She looked harassed. As always.

"Hi baby. Listen," she said, looking straight at the web-cam. "I'm running a bit late. Oh hang on..."

Someone muttered something off screen. Sandra looked up to them and said, "No, the Jasmine Starlight Frost with the Berry-Bluebell luscious lip-lather. For God's sake. It's a bonus botanic nature pack."

Tragically, I totally spoke this language fluently. Sandra sighed and turned back to the screen.

“Sorry baby. Look, I won’t be home for dinner. So ah... Oh listen, would you mind putting seven hundred and seventy dollars in an envelope and leaving it out for Rebecca. If I forget to pay her one more time she’ll give us the sack. Thanks. Bye.”

She leaned forward and clicked off.

Sandra always leaves these messages on the machine where it’s safe. She’s afraid that if she calls my phone I might actually answer. Or that’s my theory.

A second message kicked in. Cut back to Sandra at same desk. She was standing, half out of frame, and I could hear muffled talking, then she leaned down to look straight into the lens.

“Oh and sorry sweetie. I hope your first day went well. Don’t wait up. I might be late. Love you.”

The screen went black.

Now, the thing I usually like to do after I get home from school is blow off a little steam. I’m not exactly saying that I *am* an exercise junkie, but I’m not exactly saying that I’m not. Most girls, when they move house like to take stuff with them, like furniture or pictures. Clothes. A dog. I take my gym. It’s my corner of the house. The rowing machines, the StairMaster, treadmill, weights table and

so forth. Today was very definitely a day for letting off steam so I threw off my school uniform, chucked on some trackies and went for it, starting with a warm-up on the StairMaster. I clicked a remote control at the entertainment unit and Suzi Quatro’s retro bass riffs thumped on. *Doof Doof Doof... Down at Devil Gate Drive. Man. She’s awesome... Come ALIVE!... Yeh... Come ALIVE!... Yeh... Down in Devil Gate Drive...*

I think it’s acceptable to play air guitar, as long as no one’s looking. And as long as it’s not in front of a mirror. And if anyone accidentally sees you... They must die. That’s the rule.

The next morning was one I so wasn’t looking forward to. ‘Hell Day’ was the worst day of the year. It was the price you paid for moving schools so often. Like I had any choice in that. But I just had to get it over with. Who was it that said, if you can’t go around it, you have to go through it? That describes Hell Day and me.

I woke up really early and chucked on my new rowing kit. This year it was black Lycra shorts and a moss green singlet top with two pale blue stripes across the chest. Actually, it was pretty cool. I’d had worse. I threw my matching school trackies on over my rowing kit. Yes, I know it was summer, but when you’ve done as many 5am starts as I have, you know better than to wear just your rowing kit first thing in the morning. I left Lexi in the garage and took a taxi. It

would be tempting fate to take her without knowing the lay of the land.

Greystones was the proud owner of a one hundred year old boathouse facing on to the Yarra River. It was double-story, painted white and trimmed ‘jauntily’ in the school colours. That’s a funky little word I picked up from *The Great Gatsby*. Nick describes Jordan as ‘jaunty’. It might be useful in your exams so FYI:

jaun·ty (jônt ee, jän-)

adj. **jaun·ti·er, jaun·ti·est**

1. Having a buoyant or self-confident air; brisk.
2. Crisp and dapper in appearance; natty.

Anyway, the boathouse was trimmed in moss green and sky blue like our uniforms. It was a bit beaten up around the edges, damaged weatherboards here and there, but I thought it was awesome. There was a little strip of these boathouses, belonging to private schools and clubs, next to the Princes Bridge, right in the heart of the city. It was an insanely privileged location and spoke volumes about the power of old money.

When the taxi pulled up at the back of the boathouse, I could see a convoy of SUVs dropping off underdressed girls. Some

mothers too, heading down to the riverbank with the younger girls, all shivering. I slowly made my way down to the water, dreading what was to come.

On the riverbank in front of the boathouse, the girls formed into a noisy huddle, steam from their combined breath rising up above them. I stood at the edge and initiated my cone of invisibility. Everyone was banging on about the early morning cold. *Get over it.* All serious rowers train at dawn. If you want to sleep in, take up ice-skating or better yet, artistic gymnastics. They always compete at night because they get marks for being pretty. It’s not easy to be pretty at six o’clock in the morning.

The coach, or ‘Thomo’ as everyone was calling him, rocked up and made his way through the girls to the centre of the group. He was like maybe forty and I was surprised to see that he walked with a limp. I deduced that the limp wasn’t from a recent injury but that it was permanent, because he used a walking stick and not a crutch. Sometimes I’m so clever I scare even myself. Anyway, the girls all shut up as he began to talk.

“Well done. Well done. Five thirty. Eight degrees. Second day of school. Welcome to rowing.” Everyone laughed. I don’t like to be hasty about these things, but he had an air of ‘nice’.

“Okay. For those of you who don’t know me, and most of you do, my name is Darcy Thompson and I’m your coach.” Darcy

Thompson. I knew who he was. He used to be an Olympic rower. Maybe 'Thomo' could actually coach. Not that it made that much difference to me. The rowing calendar was over so fast once the school year started that I was used to sorting things out by myself. I looked at Thomo and realised I'd tuned out. He went on.

"...for each and every one of you to give 110% your best and I can't ask anymore of you. Right? And this year, we're going to damn well WIN, okay. Right!" Some nodding. "Two years as bridesmaid to Rosevale... Girls, it's not good for my heart. So this is the year. I can feel it! Yes?!"

About half the girls cheered.

"YES?" Thomo insisted.

"YES!"

"Or I'm gonna need that bypass." Thomo clutched his heart and gave a pathetic look, then smiled. He glanced around him. "Ann?... Ann?"

I followed his eyeline. Ann, aka, Blondie-locks made her way into the middle of the circle to Thomo's side.

"And can we all congratulate Ann on being made team captain this year." I gagged. All around me cheers broke out. Blondie pulled her face into a shy smile that most people would have called humble. I didn't buy it.

"Yes. Yes. Thank you. Ta. Shhh..." She raised a hand for silence. "Thanks. Yeah, so if you can't find Coach Thompson, you get to bug me with stuff. Lucky me," she smiled.

"But really, we're an awesome team and I am here for you if you need me. And believe me when I tell you, I'm going to do every single thing I possibly can to make this team number one this year. And I really hope you will too." It sounded sincere, and you might be convinced by this speech, if you didn't already know that she was a cowardly skag rat.

"And welcome to all our newcomers," Thomo chuckled. "We promise not to start you off too hard." I couldn't stand for laughing.

A little bit later I was kneeling at the dock rigging up a single scull boat. This was the bit I liked. Just me and the river. And I was nearly there. Teams of girls were passing me in every direction carrying boats made for two, four and eight rowers. Just FYI, so there's no confusion, a team of two rowers is called a 'pair' or a 'double', depending if they use one or two oars each. Using two oars each is called 'sculling'. If each rower is using one oar they are a 'pair'. If they're using two oars, then they are a 'double', as in 'double scull'. The same applies to 'fours' and 'quads', as in quad sculls. Eights only ever use one oar. I'm a sculler and I only ever do singles. You keeping up? You'll be tested on this later.

Anyway, I was about to get into the boat when a shadow fell over me. And not metaphorically.

“Georgina, isn’t it?”

I looked up at the silhouette of Thomo standing above me.

‘*Georgia*’ *actually*. I wanted to say.

But call me ‘George’. I wanted to say.

But of course I didn’t. Every stutterer knows that your own name is the worst word of every single word in the language. It’s 100% guaranteed stutters-ville. So instead I just nodded.

“Have you done this before?” he said. Leaving me no time to answer, he went on, “Look, the single takes a bit of getting used to. Might be smart to see how you go with a four first. Okay? See those girls over there, if you just go and...” He pointed to a group of shivering baby Year Nines standing by the dock.

Oh my God... Okay. You have to just do it, I told myself. I took a deep breath. Paused. I shot out the words like I was taught.

“I know what I’m d... doing,” I said. “I’m a sc... sc...” I paused. This was always a horrible word for me and there was no substituting it. “I’m a sc...” I looked down and took a breath. *Come on...* “I’m a sculler,” I shot out. “And I don’t do teams.”

I stared up at Thomo defiantly. Never show weakness. He looked mortified. There seriously should be classes on how to talk to people with a stutter. But then, to be fair, I’m not exactly Miss

Congeniality. At that moment, Captain Ann Cavanaugh appeared next to Thomo. She smiled ever so *sweetly* down at me. I ignored her and kept rigging.

“So you’re a sculler are you, *Gloria*?”

Thomo recovered himself.

“Look, I’m not doubting you Georgie...”

I groaned inwardly. Did it have to be this hard?

“But Australia is the second most litigious country in the world and our insurance problems... so don’t get me started. I don’t want to put you off on your first day, but no see you row in a supervised team, no go out alone in sculler. Oookay?” I knew there was no point arguing, but I just couldn’t help myself. Steam came from my ears as I stood up.

“I... I know what I’m d... d...” I said.

Thomo turned to Ann, cutting me off.

“Ann,” he said, “Why don’t you take Joyce here out in a double for a few minutes and we’ll take it from there. Okay? You go stroke.” Blondie wasn’t expecting this. Her evil smile morphed into a look of horror.

“Actually, I was just about to go and help Martina with the fours,” she said.

Yeah. Go girl. Suddenly rowing fours with a bunch of Year Nines seemed like paradise.

“Do this first, then help Martina.” Thomo smiled at us both, having solved the situation to his, and only his, satisfaction. He limped away happily, leaving Blondie and me facing off.

So next thing I knew, I found myself sitting in the back of a double scull, listening to Blondie-locks harp on.

“... just a few basic movements,” she said. “First thing is, if I’m sitting in the front of the boat, I’m called the ‘Stroke’ and I determine the stroke rate. That’s how quickly we make our strokes. The most important thing to remember is, you have to match my pace exactly. If you want to stop the boat moving you can square your oars into the water like this. Or, if you only do it on one side, it will turn the boat.”

She’d obviously given this speech a hundred times before and she was deliberately stretching it out to irritate me. *Wasn’t she?* Surely she couldn’t be *this* annoying without trying.

“You still with me, Gloria?”

I growled something inaudible.

“In between strokes,” she went on, her voice even more patronising, “we want to feather our oars, like this...”

Suddenly, I couldn’t help myself. I had a vision. I was a fighting Ninja and with one giant leap I snap kicked Blondie’s head

clear off the top of her body. It soared through the air and landed in front of a mass of screaming schoolgirls.

It was very satisfying.

“You just turn it flat, parallel to the water and...”

I shivered and came back to earth.

“Look,” I said firmly, shooting out the word like you’re supposed to. Ann spun around to face me. “Sp... spare me the Rowing for d... dummies,” I said. “I won the Royal Sc... sc... Schoolgirls in sss...” I paused. Took a breath. “In Sydney last year and I’m fucking freezing.”

Ann’s eyes widened.

“The open sc... single,” I added.

There was a beat. After a moment Ann spoke carefully.

“I won it down here.”

I gaped at her. ‘Wow,’ was the first blinding thought in my head. I wished my face was showing something more like “Yeah, big deal.” But I doubted it. My second thought was, ‘I wonder what her time was.’

After another moment where we just sort of stared at each other, Blondie slowly turned back around and picked up her oars.

“Fine then,” she enunciated like splintered glass. “Let’s see shall we.”

I picked up my oars and we started to row.

She picked up pace fast. It was easy to see that she was trying to test me. But it was no strain for me and I kept up with her easily. Obviously, that annoyed her, so she ramped up her stroke rate even more. I glanced up at her back. It told me nothing, but the sudden increase in stroke rate told me heaps. She was not happy Jan. Instantly I was on to it. I matched her exactly, stroke for stroke. We were in perfect time. Come on, do your worst. I almost laughed. Too easy. If this was the best she could do... As the boathouse moved away from us, I could see the girls and Thomo stand to watch us disappear down the river.

Ann upped the stroke rate again. I matched it, but now it was starting to test me. Not too much mind you. But I was thinking to myself, yep, she really can row. We tore down the river at almost race pace. The boat lifted out of the water, in the way that it does when the rowers are working perfectly as a team. Reducing friction with the water. This was getting spooky. But still she had more in her and picked the pace up again. I followed, but now straining. I heard her breath as well. She grunted with the exertion. Me too. I was shocked, amazed at how perfectly my stroke matched hers. I wasn't used to team rowing but I had no trouble following her lead. It was as if her natural stroke was the twin of mine. Freaky. Don't think about it. Just row. Don't let her beat you.

Now we were both pulling hard. I'd never felt like this before. We were flying. Like two halves of one machine. She was amazing. She was like me. As good as me. Maybe. Strong. Fast. Accurate. I knew she was straining at the top of her game wanting me to give in but I just wouldn't. I was sweating like a pig and my muscles were starting to fatigue. My chest hurt with every breath. But I could match her. We hurtled down the river. It felt incredible. Like we had been rowing together forever. Then, for a strange moment as stroke followed painful stroke, and we flew down the river, it wasn't like we were competing. It was like, a union.

Ann stopped rowing. Instantly, I feathered my oars. The boat drifted backwards under its own momentum. I was in shock. What just happened? Then I heard a strange choking sound from in front. Was she hurt? I could hear her breath, like mine, was coming in huge gasps as she leaned forward over her oars. Slowly, she twisted around to face me. She was smiling. Then I realised, that sound, it was laughter. We were both breathing hard, unable to speak, but in between breaths she was laughing. Almost like, victoriously. I didn't get it. I felt confused. Out of my depth. Our eyes met. Hers exuberant. Mine reluctant. I looked away. We both knew something magic had just happened.

I didn't want to know.

CHAPTER THREE

The damage was done.

I was for it now. I hadn't meant to show my hand so early, but it had been forced. I knew what came next, and as we stroked silently back to the boathouse I prepared myself for battle. Later, it was reported that, as Thomo watched Ann and I speed down the river, he stood slowly, raised an eye to heaven and blessed himself. Perhaps he had visions of rowing Nirvana. His mistake. This wasn't the first time I'd endured Hell Day.

Sure enough, as soon as I stepped foot in the boatshed, Thomo cornered me and started arranging my rowing future. I was to do double sculls or quads. I cut him off at the first charge.

"I d... don't do teams," I said firmly. Well, as firmly as I could. I tried to move past him, but he kept talking at me.

Across the busy boathouse, I could see Ann's friend G-R-A-C-E peering out the locker room door at me. Another tall, half dressed friend joined her, gawking. They couldn't hear what I was saying but my body language must have been signalling it loud and clear. Thomo was getting more and more red in the face as his every attempt at 'reason' failed. Finally, I made like a clear 'stop-like' gesture at him. Talk to the hand brother.

"I... don't do teams," I said. "I d... do one race. That's why I w..." I took a breath. "Win," I said with finality. *If you don't like it, I can row with another squad*, I added in my mind. *They'd be beating each other with sticks for me.*

I stared him out and he beat a reluctant retreat. First battle over. I headed to the locker room, where I would have bet a million bucks they were talking about me... *Sigh.*

I walked in and stripped off my t-shirt, crossing straight to my locker. Yep. You could've heard a pin drop. I could feel eyes burning into my back as I got stuck into the business of getting the hell out of there. Someone cleared her throat.

"Hey. Great rowing girl."

Arrogant, I know. But I assumed they were talking to me. I nodded slightly and kept dressing.

"Where did you learn to row like that?"

It was the tall girl. Sadly for her, up close, she looked more like a horse than a proper human. But you can't hold that against a person. I was saved from answering by the sound of footsteps entering the room. Ann strode in putting away her phone. She glanced up at Grace and Black Beauty.

"Hey Christine. Gracie. Can you make an extra quads training on Saturday morning? Thomo told me to ask you... Oh." She saw me and casually turned to her locker.

“What time?” asked Christine.

“Eight. You and I’ve got doubles at nine.”

“Okay,” said Christine.

Grace rolled her eyes. “Seriously?” she whinged.

Ann frowned at her. “Gracie, the regatta is in six weeks. Come *on*. After Easter you can sleep in all you want.”

“Oh alright,” Gracie relented. “But if you’re not on our crew anymore we’re probably not going to win anyway.”

I glanced over at Ann. She looked uncomfortable.

“Yeh, well,” Ann said, awkwardly. “Thomo wants me to concentrate on doubles and singles this year. It’s his call.”

My ears pricked up. I stared at Ann with a horrible realisation. Only one girl per squad got to race in the Div 1 single... and that was my race. If Ann really did win last year, she would think that spot was hers.

“And anyway,” Ann went on, “you guys will be great. You’ll smash it.”

“Yeah, right,” said Gracie, not even half convinced. Nor was I. There was trouble coming.

The freaky thing about being a rower and moving school every year is that no matter where you go, the main event of the year, the Royal Schoolgirls Regatta, takes place between the middle

to the end of March. That’s only about seven weeks, give or take, after school starts in the first week of February. So that means if you move school at the start of the year, you have to adjust to a whole new school at the same time as adjusting to a new coach, a new boat, a new river and so on. Not to mention a whole new city and usually, a new climate. This does not put you at a competitive advantage.

That’s part of the reason I don’t do teams. It’s too much trouble. By the time I arrive at a school, the crews are all geared up and have been training together from the year before. And even if I did get a place in a crew (which I would), coming in at that late stage just spells T-R-O-U-B-L-E. Trust me, I know. People get pissed. People get jealous and it all ends in tears. Coaches and crewmates never want you just to row. They want you to bond and be all touchy-feely as well, and as you may have noticed, bonding ain’t my special skill. It retards my spiritual growth.

No, doing teams just basically breaks your concentration. And if you’ve got six weeks to peak and win a race, then you need to be focussed on the main game. That’s *me* winning the Open Single Scull at the Royal Schoolgirls Regatta. Simple. Oh, the other reason I don’t do teams, in case you haven’t guessed, is that no one is as fast as me. Teams just slow me down.

Which brings me to *ergs*.

Ergs you say?

Glad you asked.

In rowing, ergs are *everything*. You live and die by your erg. Grown men have been known to breakdown at the sight of a poor erg after a session on the 'ergometer'.

Here's what Wiki says about ergometer:

Ergometer comes from the [Greek](#) words *ergon* (ἔργον), meaning *work*, and *metron* (μέτρον), meaning *measure*. "Ergometer", therefore, literally means "work measurer".

So an ergometer is just a fancy name for a rowing machine and your *erg* is your work rate as measured by said machine. Among other stuff, an ergometer measures distance over time, known as your 'time split', and therefore, the speed you can hypothetically generate on the water. Or in simple physics (for your enlightenment):

$$\text{Velocity} = \text{Distance} / \text{Time}$$

So basically, in rowing training your erg gives you your best off water indication as to how you and your competition are looking. It will usually, but not always, make or break whether you get a seat in a boat. Coaches worship it. Girls fear it. Tears are shed and reputations won and lost over it. Now, I might be crap at friends, fashion accessories or making nice with people, but my *erg* is awesome.

To be fair, it's only right to admit that I had a head start. As I mentioned, I am genetically advantaged. My Dad was on the national team and, like it or not (I like it), I inherited the right physical build from him. I'm tall and I gat muscles an' I ain't afraid to use 'em. Ha ha. Colon bracket. Also, I started super young... Like Tiger Woods, I like to think... Who, btw, also stuttered as a kid.

Dad took us out rowing from the time I was "knee high to a grasshopper." (My dad's expression.) First just tagging along in the boat, then as soon as I could manage an oar, I was in a double with my brother twice a week with Dad coaching. So you could say I've had the best, built-in training pretty much from birth.

Also, to tell the brutal truth, it doesn't hurt to be rich. Gear-wise, I buy whatever I need. But then, I suppose, in the circles I hang out in, that's not so unusual. I've got two rowing machines in my gym at home. My beautiful new sexy, sleek Concept D and my older but still lovable Concept C. I know I should get rid of the C,

instead of dragging it about stupidly from state to state. I mean, I've had it for years and it's not like I use it much, but I just don't seem to be able to let it go. (Insert spiritual training program here.) I've also got all the other gym stuff I think I've mentioned. The StairMaster, the cross-trainer, the treadmill, weights table and so on. That all helps, I can't deny it. But in my defence, putting in the hard hours is what makes it all *work*. Just looking at your beautiful gym apparatus doesn't win races.

Anyway, most days, rowing training for me means getting on the ergo, whether it's at home or at school, and doing a work out. Which brings me back to my story.

It's Thursday afterschool training and I'm upstairs in the boathouse gym. It's a huge open room, full of equipment, with large, tinted windows overlooking the river, and a wall of mirrors on one side. If I were looking out the window, I'd be able to see all the other school and university teams carrying boats in and out of the water, doing runs and so forth. But I'm definitely, definitely not paying attention to anything but myself.

I'm on an ergo pulling my guts out and working up the original mother of a sweat. Four other girls are next to me lined up on their machines doing just the same. It's a time split trial and I *need* great numbers, the *best* numbers on the squad... so that I can get me that place in the single scull event. Thomo stands next to me

looking at his stopwatch. "One minute to go," he yells over the thunderous noise of the rowing machines.

I pull harder. My focus narrows down to the edges of my body and how I'm moving it. I feel the elements coalesce. I've found the zone. I'm a machine working a machine. Nothing is superfluous. Legs. Arms. Glutes. Torso. Mind. All working to one absolute end... *SPEED*... My breath comes hard. Pull through. Feel the stroke through your whole body. It's near perfect.

"Thirty seconds."

Sprinting now. I dig deep. I draw power from who knows where. My whole body is engaged. Consciousness barely exists. I'm flying... hurting... flying...

Whistle blows.

"Okay. Stop. That's it."

I let it all go. I'm sweating extravagantly and breathing hard. I let the rower bar pull me smoothly forward. Automatically, I look down at the small LED readout at the head of the machine. I nod, satisfied. Them's is good numbers. I dare anyone to get better than that. I'm seriously awesome. I glance up instinctively at Thomo who is staring down greedily at my readout then at me, like he's just struck gold. He smiles at me in a knowing sort of way. I look down. Feeling this good is my own bloody business.

Thomo walks down the line of machines and looks at the readouts of the other girls. He makes notes. One girl is fighting tears between heavy breaths and I can hear her trying to explain, to justify... *been sick, been away, put in more time now...* Thomo puts a hand on her shoulder in a comforting way. Uh oh. The kiss of death. No crew for her.

I drop the rower handle, and slide back on my seat along the centre bar of the machine. I bend forward, elbows on knees, head down, to slow my breath for a moment and enjoy the exhaustion. That was a great split. All things being equal, I *must* be in with that.

There's a movement in front of me and I look up to see Ann standing at the head of my rower, looking down at my readout. Shameless. Bloody shameless. She nods inscrutably, taking the information in, then turns to me. She runs her eyes carefully over the lines of my body, in the same way you'd examine a prize horse for sale. I feel like any minute she might reach over and squeeze a bicep. Or a calf.

"You've got more muscle bulk than I do."

The way she says it, it's a simple matter of fact. I look away, hoping she'll take the hint. But she lowers herself and perches her bum, side-saddle, on the slide bar in front of me. I slide further back to get up but she says,

"Wait."

Obediently, I sit, eyeballing her, readying myself.

"Stay a minute."

I stay.

Jesus. Any minute I'm gonna rollover and beg. What is it about this chick?

"I want you to think about something," she commands, all gentleness. She's got this tone to her voice that's sort of low but compelling at the same time. Like the source of some hidden wisdom. I'm forced to take her seriously. I wipe sweat off my forehead with my training towel. I can see she's tense but trying not to show it. All of a sudden, I'm holding my breath.

"Only one of us can win the open single," she says carefully.

I can't disagree with that. So far so obvious. Ann looks at me, playing it cool, but she's heading somewhere. She pauses then says,

"If we did doubles, you and I, there would be at least one certain win for *both* of us. And a second definite win for Greystones." I turn away. For one traitorous second, I see a flash of Ann and I... streaking down the river... in perfect working sync... boat lifting in the water... hundreds of metres ahead of everyone else.... crowd screaming as we shoot past the finish line...

"We could just jump in a boat and break records." Ann's voice was soft, intimate. "We *would* break records, George."

I knew it was true. I looked back and my eyes snagged on hers. Her irises were, weirdly, an almost purplish blue colour. There's a name for that particular colour...

That *what?* ... *What the hell am I thinking about...*

I got a grip and straightened up. I carefully drew my face into a cynical smile.

"I... insurance?" I say. "Sc... Afraid I'm going to beat you?"

If this pissed Ann off it didn't show. She just shrugged.

"Insurance is good. For both of us. And, it costs nothing." For *you*, I thought. Unexpectedly, she leaned in closer to me and whispered into my ear, "I've heard a scout from Berkeley is coming to the Royal."

Just quietly... *OMG*.

Ann pulled back just enough that I could see her face. She paused to let me feel the full effect of her words but I was weirdly unable to think. She went on.

"I mean, I know it's not a blue ribbon event in itself, at least not at schoolgirl level. God knows *why*... given the Olympics, the World Championship and everything..." She dismissed that line of thought as too obviously stupid to comment further about, then continued with emphasis.

"But for *us*, doubles would be an amazing showcase. I mean, what are the chances of you and I being on the same squad? We'd be streets ahead of the field. I can't imagine how many lengths we'd be in front." She paused, almost breathless. It was right there in front of her. She could see it.

"And I mean..." she said, hesitating, "if you were after a scholarship...?" She gazed cautiously at me, "Like I am..."

She was nervous. Why? I tried to read her, but she quickly changed tone, resuming her normal confidence,

"A scout is going to take note of that," she said. I took a moment before speaking.

"I d... don't d-do doubles," I said.

Ann's eyes went dark with excitement, like she sensed an opening. She leaned in too close to me. I could feel her breath on my ear.

"Were you even *there* when we rowed together the other day?" Our eyes locked. I remembered. It took me an unforgivably long time to speak.

"I d... don't do *teams*," I spat out as angrily as I could. Just to get the words out.

"So don't think of it as a team," she persisted. "Think of it as a race. Just one race on the day. I've checked the prelim schedule and it's possible."

Time to close this conversation down. I pushed my seat back to the end of the slider and began to stand.

“Wait,” Ann said, actually gripping my arm so I couldn’t get up. “One more thing. Your time. Your time in the final.”

I sat slowly back down and smiled. Now *this* I got.

“I googled you,” she said provocatively, “but it doesn’t seem to be listed.” I loved the *I-want-to-beat-you-so-bad-it-hurts* expression that was trying *not* to be written all over her face.

“Six zero three,” I said.

She nodded, impressed.

“You?” I asked.

“Six thirteen.”

This was better than I expected. But in rowing terms, there was less than nothing in it. The wind, the current, the conditions on the day could easily account for more than a few seconds either way. *So there we are*, I thought as our eyes held fast. I felt a little thrill in the pit of my stomach. It looked like we were in for a competition. Too bad we were on the same squad.

At that moment the whole gym was interrupted by loud male laughter at the door. Every girl spun around to see a preppy young man backing in through the door, laughing. He was followed by another slightly taller, equally private-school-looking guy, wearing

glasses. Both wore navy blue and white rowing kit and were in seriously impressive rowing shape.

The first guy turned and scanned the room. He was about nineteen and King-of-all-he-surveyed and not in the least bothered by a boathouse full of hormone-fuelled girls perving on him. The guy behind at least had the grace to look sheepish in an all-girl gym. Guy One spotted Ann across the other side of the room and waved. Ann waved back and the boys headed our way.

Ann quickly turned to me and whispered, “Look George, if we’re going to be on the same team, we may as well make an effort to get along a bit, don’t you think?”

I met her eyes, suspiciously.

“We don’t have to tongue kiss or anything,” she added dryly.

I coughed out a loud shocked laugh. She laughed back, obviously as surprised at my reaction as I was at her joke. She leaned in again.

“Just think about it,” she said. “That’s all.”

I just had time to recover myself before the two guys were upon us. Ann stood up, smiling brilliantly at them. I’d missed my chance to slip away unnoticed, so still seated, I bent down to ‘tie my shoelace’ and activated the cone of invisibility. There was a chance no one would notice me.

“What are you lolling about?” the first guy asked, putting an arm around Ann’s shoulders and kissing her on the lips for a bit too long.

“Oh. Secret girlie business,” Ann joked, moving teasingly away. I threw a sly glance up at him. He made you think of those old photos of young aviators. You know the portraits they took of ‘the boys’ before they went off to war. Chiselled cheekbones, neat side-parted hair, strong jaw.

Guy Number Two rocked up and waved ‘hello’ to Ann.

“Hey Liam,” Ann greeted him.

“Hey.”

‘Liam’ was about the same age. His hair was less controlled and more sandy coloured. He wore glasses and his long fringe parted lazily over his face. He looked like he should be wearing a striped blazer and punting down an Oxbridge river.

“We’re going for dinner after training,” the first guy, presumably Ann’s boyfriend, said to her. “You in?”

“Where?”

“I dunno. Maybe Southbank.”

“Sure. If I can. I’ll have to call Mum.”

I ‘tied’ the other shoelace and got ready to make a move.

“Oh... Liam,” I heard Ann’s voice say. “Ben. This is Georgia.”

Damn! My state upgraded instantly to Panic Level 10. It’s really really terrible, let me tell you, when *you* are your own worst enemy. Give me an enemy outside of myself any day.

“George’s just joined the squad,” Ann continued. “George, this is Ben, and this is Liam.”

I looked up, nodding neutrally. They did the same, displaying no actual interest. *Just hang in there*, I told myself. *You’re outta here in three... two...* I stood up.

All of a sudden Liam looked at me strangely, like he’d had a random thought.

“Were you on the water this morning?” he said. “Training in a single?”

I nodded. Oh God. I was going to have to talk. Okay. Better to get it over with anyway. The longer you put it off the worse it is.

“I saw you,” he went on. “You’ve got a great stroke.”

I opened my mouth to *try* to speak but Ann beat me to it.

“George won the Open Single at the Royal Schoolgirls in Sydney last year.”

Both guys instantly turned and gaped at me. *Shut. Up.* This was just what I *didn’t* need. I could feel my colour rising and was wishing myself dead, or at least in a coma. Ben whistled.

“Wow. Thomo must be wetting himself to get you into the squad, is he?”

I shrugged, staring at my feet. Liam turned to Ann.

“Well midcar. Some competition for you at last,” he said theatrically. Then back at me, he continued in a fake whisper, “Be gentle with her, she’s easily broken.”

“*Not!*” laughed Ben.

“Oi!” Ann said, hitting Ben in mock outrage. “You’re meant to defend me. Go on. Get him. Attack!” She nudged Ben in Liam’s direction. Ben eyed Liam in ‘alarm’.

“But he’s bigger than me!”

“Come on,” Ann said. “Size doesn’t count *remember*. You taught me that.”

They all laughed at that.

Liam’s eyes twinkled at me. “She knows I worship the water she rows on,” he said. I didn’t respond.

Ann glanced between me and Liam... *thinking*.

Liam wasn’t as classically handsome as Ben but he seemed somehow cooler and more interesting. And if one’s arm was twisted and one were *forced* to judge, you’d have to say he was, well, pretty cute. Not that it mattered to me. I was out of there any second as of... *right now*. I picked up my training towel and nodded an awkward ‘bye’.

“Liam and Ben both row for Melbourne Uni,” Ann said abruptly, resting a hand on my shoulder. “They also train with the national squad.”

I stopped moving and looked at them, grudgingly interested. Ann leaned in discreetly and stage whispered,

“And don’t tell anyone, but Liam’s uncle rowed in the Awesome Foursome.” I stared up at Liam now genuinely impressed. That’s actually like... *cool*.

“My one claim to fame,” Liam said, only half joking. “It’s really sad.” He placed his right palm over his heart and nodded solemnly. “I’ve held the medals.”

I watched him carefully. There was something kind of vulnerable about him actually. Like there was a difference between what he showed and what he felt. Maybe underneath it all, he was a bit shy. Not like Ben. He just seemed like your basic over privileged dickhead.

My eyes darted towards Ann. She was looking at me watching Liam... and those brain cogs of hers were spinning like crazy. I’d really have to watch that. She didn’t miss a thing.

“Wow,” I heard Ben say softly. I glanced at him and saw he’d made his way to the head of my rower and was looking at my readout. I mean *honestly*... Mine. Hello. *Mine*.

“This yours?” he said to me doubtfully, looking to Ann for confirmation. She nodded. Ben raised his eyebrows, impressed. “Not bad for a girl,” he said, ‘joking’ with me... The patronising little shit.

Liam stepped over and looked too. *Hey why not. Next time I do a split I’ll send out invitations.* His eyes expertly absorbed the information on the little screen and he looked at me, clearly surprised. Ann glanced between the three of us, then her eyes lit up as though she’d just had a great idea.

“Hey. George. Come out for dinner,” Ann said. She turned to Ben and Liam, “How about Stalactites?”

Like to a cave?

“Excellent,” said Ben.

“Great idea,” said Liam. “I could kill a Yiros.”

They were all staring expectantly at me. I looked at my feet and shook my head.

“Well, just come for coffee then,” Ann said. “Come on. Seriously. It’s not far.”

I could feel my doom charging towards me like a fire breathing bull. Just do the drill... Take control.

“N... n... n...” I closed my eyes. “N... n...” I took a long breath. “No thanks,” I spat out.

I was looking at my feet so I couldn’t see the expressions on Ben and Liam’s faces, but I knew what was there. Pity. Embarrassment. There was a painful pause, then I heard Liam’s voice.

“Come on, why don’t you,” he said. I glanced up at him, my face burning. He smiled kindly at me and said behind his hand. “*Please...* They’re really boring.” He shot his eyes ‘secretly’ towards Ann and Ben, mouthing the word ‘*HELP!*’

I shook my head and left.

One of the basic precepts of mastering the Art of Detachment is that spontaneity is to be avoided at all costs. That is, unless it’s perfectly planned.

Spontaneity can throw you into situations out of your control and then you’re defenseless. Spiritually speaking. It’s hard to remain equanimus. That’s a Buddhist word meaning like, emotionally even. And not being equanimus leads to feeling unstable and out of your depth. It’s hard to be detached and in control when you’re not equanimus. I’ve found anyway.

Don’t get me wrong. Not being spontaneous doesn’t mean the end to fun as we know it. And it doesn’t mean that you can’t do cool things. No way. Like me driving Sandra’s Lexus without a

license. That's definitely fun. Some people might call that thoughtless. Even reckless.

Wrong.

I've thought it through and I've got it totally worked out. Basically, it gets down to a cost benefit analysis. Like everything in life, right. Is there more gain than pain?

You've got to ask yourself, what's the worst thing that can happen?... Okay, so I get caught by the cops, right, and I go to court. Am I going to wind up in Girl-Prison-H-Block, being hit on by some pedophilic screw? Not a chance. I'm from a 'good home'. Rich mother. Nice private school. Expensive lawyer. "So sorry, your honour. I don't know what came over me. I'm having teen problems. I won't do it again. Boo hoo." It would be a case of 'Three hundred dollars fine and no conviction.' *Listen...* Is that the sound of my wrists being slapped? And anyway it's Sandra's car, so it's not like actual stealing. Honestly, it probably wouldn't even get to court... Hey, there's got to be some advantages to having a legend-in-her-own-lunchbox-Mother. No judge is going to ruin my precious shining future because of one stupid kid act. Not when I'm so obviously remorseful. Again. Boo hoo.

On the up side of the equation, I get to drive Sandra's very cool car around *right now*. No one gets hurt. No one loses out on anything. I get freedom. And I *love* driving. I realise that this plan

only works for the first time you get caught. There's no second 'Get out of Jail Free' card. And of course no alcohol behind the wheel, because that's a whole different set of equations. So, at worst, I get caught once and I have to stop driving until I'm legal. And I'm eighteen in a few months. So seriously, someone tell me what I'm risking here.

So anyway, back to the story... that night after meeting Ben and Liam in the gym I'm sitting in Lexi, it's dusk, and I'm parked on Lonsdale Street, looking across the busy traffic at Stalactites restaurant. Ann, Ben, Liam and Christine and Grace are sitting around an outside table laughing and eating. The café's on a corner and there's 'real' looking stalactites hanging down from the top of the verandah all around the café. I mean, we're talking tacky. There's even green fluoro lights. The waiter's flirting with Grace, or probably the other way around. Ben's got his arm around the back of Ann's chair, and Liam's telling stories, like he's the life of the party. Everybody's laughing. Ben throws a calamari ring at Liam. Liam catches it in his mouth and demands applause from everyone. They all laugh. Mostly Ann's just sitting back and watching, smiling, not saying much, but I can see that they all turn and look at her a lot, like she's the one whose opinion counts. Even Liam.

They look like they're having a great time under that green light. But that doesn't mean that I wish I were there with them

instead of here in the car, in the dark, watching them through tinted glass, like I'm some kind of pervert. Which I'm not. Thank you. I'm just looking after my spiritual interests.

You might call this spying. I call it reconnaissance. Information is power. Who was it said that? I'm also looking at my phone, scrolling through Ann's Facebook photos. I'd rather eat rancid frogs' eyes than be on Facebook myself, but it's really useful for exactly this sort of research... which is *why* I won't go on Facebook.

All Ann's photos are neatly arranged into albums. I'm scrolling through the 'Rowing' album. It's got the predictable pictures of her and the crews she's rowed with, lined up in front of the river, arms around each other. There's one with Ann, Christine, Laura and Grace in front of a quad in Greystones kit and another one in front of a double with a tall, handsome girl I haven't seen before. With a little shock, I come across a set of pictures of Ann holding up a gold medal and beaming at the camera. She's alone on the central podium, standing between two other girls in front of a river, so I know instantly it's the medals presentation of the single scull, from last year probably. It's a bit of a jolt, actually, to see it all laid out like this. I mean, she really *did* win the open single down here. Here's proof. I look across the road at her sitting at the café and watch her, sitting there under the green light.

Continuing with the album, there's lots of selfies at training and at 'play' with various squad members. A recent photo of her with her 'Squad Captain' medal. There's also plenty of shots with Ben and some with Liam as well. One with her and Ben in a double. Maybe those guys help her train? Ann looks great in every shot, and every shot is 'perfect'. Not a pout in sight. No one's drunk, showing their butt crack or giving the camera the finger.

Same with the 'Out with Friends' album. There she is looking gorgeous and in control in every shot. Nicely dressed. Smiling engagingly. There's not a single one of those high angle, looking up at the camera with a sexy expression type shots. No cleavage. No twerking. There's just lots of her and Ben and other friends at dinner, at Christmas drinks, on a picnic, on a yacht, playing volley ball. Barbie also rides horses and skies. It's like an advertisement for the perfect life.

On the way home, it wasn't that late so I did a little bit of a tour around Melbourne en route to Toorak. Weird name for a posh suburb, I know. I love cruising around by myself in Lexi, especially in the countryside when you don't have to stop and start all the time, and you don't have to pay attention to what's going on around you. I love how the world just passes you by and you get into this kind of mental cloud and your thoughts recede into the back of your head.

It's a bit like being in 'the zone' before a race and also like the opposite of it. When I'm in the zone before a race I'm totally focused. The world around me doesn't exist, except for the starter's gun, the river, the boat, the oars, my body. My heart is pounding but I'm perfectly physically still. Perfectly ready. When I'm driving through the country in Lexi, it's like the outside world doesn't exist either, but it's the opposite of focused. It's like letting your mind just drift. That'd be why they call it day dreaming, right. No pounding heart. No adrenalin. But still this sort of dreamy detachment from the world.

It's weird. If I met you, if we were having a coffee and talking, like in my 'other life' scenario, in a world where I actually could talk, I would never tell you this shit. But it's different when I'm writing. Things just come out and I don't stop them like I would in real life. Probably I don't actually believe that anyone will ever read anything I write, so it's okay. Now, this is going to make me sound like a wanker, but the only thing I can think of wanting to do after I leave school, apart from winning the single scull at the Olympics, obviously, is being a writer. But I don't tell people that of course. So... if I don't make it as an Olympic rower or as a writer, you know I will have gone to Plan C. Long haul truck driver. That'd be cool.

Anyway, driving home that night wasn't like what I've just been talking about. I was just driving around the city and some of the main suburban streets getting to know the place. Actually, it wasn't all that interesting, and I was on my way home when I saw the flashing lights.

Now, I don't want to be overly dramatic, but there's one other thing I love doing when I'm in Lexi, and that's racing trains. Well, racing train-crossing boom gates actually. When the red crossing lights start flashing and the bells begin to clang, you've got about four seconds before the boom gates start to go down. Then you've got about another three seconds to get under the gates before they drop and you're sliced in half. That's about seven seconds in total. If I'm lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time I've been known to race boom gates. It gives me a humongous rush.

On this night, I was cruising down a dark suburban street not far from home, and up ahead of me the red crossing lights start flashing and the bells begin. Instantly, I look in the rear vision mirror.

No cops.

Six seconds.

No one in front of me. I jam down my foot and I'm racing.

Five seconds. I'm tearing down the dark narrow road. The boom gates begin to drop. It's going to be tight. I've got about *three...* The boom gates are half down. *Two...* Lexi hits ninety five. I floor it and streak under the gate with a foot to spare... Beautiful. I'm so H-O-T.

One breath out and I'm across the tracks and heading down the dark road, laughing my head off. Brilliant!

Spontaneity is so fine when you're all alone.

When I pull into the drive, the house is predictably dark. No lights. No Sandra. I knew it would be like this, that's why I can take Lexi out so often without worrying. I stride through the house pulling off my clothes as I go. All that white looks much better in the dark. I hear the clicking of the cat flap at the back door. Great. In my room, I chuck my trackies and my sweaty rowing kit into the dirty clothesbasket. Dobby, I mean, Rebecca the House Elf will see to them tomorrow. Then there's meowing at my feet and I feel Son-of-Satan brushing up and down against my bare legs.

"What do *you* want," I say to the foul beast. He looks up at me with his evil green eyes and purrs maniacally.

"You're disgusting," I tell him, bending down to pat his head. He jumps up onto my bed to be even closer to me and pushes his head against my thigh, desperate for attention.

"Yes," I say to him, like I'm talking to a baby, "You are a revolting animal and should be put down, shouldn't you? Yes. You should." He purrs like a demented Ferrari, pushing his face against my hand. "*You* are the perfect argument for euthanasia. Yes you are, you putrid excuse for an animal," I say. Angel purrs with desperate happiness now he's got someone, anyone, touching him. It's pathetic, in the real sense of the word.

I sit down and pat him gently. I mean, he is foul and revolting beyond all permission, but he doesn't deserve this. No one does. Not even the Spawn of Satan.

"Why don't you hurry up and die," I say to him gently, running a hand along his back. "Stick a paw in a light socket. Eat a bait." He looks up at me and purrs furiously like I'm his saviour.

I hope for Angel's sake that Rebecca likes cats because Sandra is never here, and I can't stand him, and while I know that cats aren't supposed to need much affection, I'm not sure that Angel knows he's a cat.

CHAPTER FOUR

That next Saturday started with a gentle half hour on the rowing machine, a few reps at the weight table and some work on the quads and thighs with the StairMaster. Then it was time for breakfast.

Rebecca doesn't cook breakfast for us, so it's strictly self-help, especially on Saturday mornings when you've got the time to think about actually cooking something. And maybe even making a juice. Yum. I like to eat well. I really do. That morning I was thinking big. Thinking protein... starting with bacon and eggs, baked beans, ending with hash browns and everything in between. Tomatoes. Spinach. Mushrooms. I was half way through step one, frying the free-range bacon, when I heard a faint creak at the door.

"I thought I heard my baby elephant's fairy footsteps down the corridor."

Sandra leaned against the doorframe looking at me. Seemingly, one of them needed help standing. She looked like hell. Well as hellish as Sandra is capable of looking. I have to admit, even if she is my mother, that all her bits hang together pretty well for someone really old, like nearly fifty. A lot of men with either bad taste or brain damage still find her attractive. She has got 'it'. Whatever 'it' is. I prefer not to think about it. Anyway, she shuffles

over to me, arms outstretched zombie style, in her white fluffy dressing gown and throws her arms around my waist from behind. She bear hugs me like I'm about six years old, even if the top of her head only comes up to my shoulders.

"That smells absolutely vile, darling," she says. She stretches up and tries to kiss me on the cheek, but without her heels on, that's not going to happen any time soon. I wriggle away. She stands in the middle of the kitchen like a cranky lost child.

"Where's the Berocca!" she pouts, looking around at the endless, identical white cupboards. I don't even bother to shrug. Sandra heads for a cupboard, any cupboard, and starts emptying the contents.

"Why can't we just have a cupboard for the Berocca. The same in every house. Like the one to the left of the fridge or something." She looks at me like it's my fault. "I mean that would make sense. Wouldn't it? I can never find a bloody thing." She opens another couple of cupboard doors. "I mean for God's sake. What's this!" She throws a can of something on to the tiled floor.

"Do you want c... coffee?" I spit out. Some lucky people don't stutter at home with their family. Not me. Sandra looks at me so gratefully it's pathetic.

"Oh pleeeeeeze," she begs. "Just black."

No kidding... I look at her. She must be mistaking me for that other daughter. The one who hasn't made coffee for her a thousand-million times.

"No kidding," I say out loud, but let it drop. "You l... look like shit."

"Thank you, darling," she replies. "John and I were up late going over the books." She turns to me then with a look of sheer outrage. "I mean, you pay I don't know how many thousands for bookkeeping software, and do you think you can get the same fucking result twice? Or even one that makes anything like sense!" She turns back to the cupboard and wails, "Oh thank Christ!" as she pulls out the Barocca.

Delicately, Sandra stands and tries to take the lid off, fingernails and all. I can't bear it and go over and unseal the packet for her. She smiles wan thanks at me. I put a glass of water in front of her and drop in a tablet. It bursts into a noisy orange sizzle and I leave her to it. She rubs her forehead. I cross to the fridge and take out a carton.

"I'm d... doing eggs and b... bacon. Want some?" She makes a face at me, like I've suggested stewed monkey's brains.

"I'll get something on the way in," she says. It takes her a minute, before she realises that I've gone silent. Which I have. I

don't know why these things still take me by surprise. It's ridiculous. Sandra looks at me guiltily.

"It's just for a few hours."

Hey, what do I care? Just because you're a workaholic.

"We've got a few issues we have to get to the bottom of. The new Sparkle range isn't..." She trails off tragically. "We'll sort it out. Don't worry."

I so wasn't. I'd seen it all before a million times. Sandra's work crises are an excuse to have to work more. I'm already back to thinking eggs. Hmmm. *Scrambled or poached?*

"You're mad at me."

"I'm n... not mad."

"You are."

"F... fine."

"Maybe we can do something tomorrow."

"Sandra!"

"Why can't you call me Mum, like other people's children?"

Scrambled. I'll cut some tomato into it. I wonder if Rebecca bought basil this week?

"How was your first week at school? What's it like? Nice?"

I really, really can't be bothered answering.

"So now I can't even ask about your school. Is that right? I'm not even allowed to ask about your school?"

You can. You don't. But you can.

"It's f... fine," I say. "Same as th... the others."

"Have you made any nice friends?"

Oh dear God.

"G... go to work," I shoot out.

Sandra looks wounded. I get a pang of guilt. Then I realise what has just happened. Like two seconds ago, I was mad at her, now *she's* the injured party. She's a freakin' genius.

See, that's the thing about Sandra, it always has to be about *her*. If you sprain an ankle, get a D minus, if your pet gets run over or if you get your period for the first time, she gets so upset/excited/depressed/angry/happy/outraged and so forth, about it, that it *always* ends up being about her. So in the end, you basically just shut up about everything, right. You know what I mean.

Actually... now this is the hard bit... there was something in particular that I'd been putting off talking to her about. Something we both avoided bringing up, ever. You know how they talk about the 'elephant in the room'. It means like, the gigantic thing hanging about that everyone is totally aware of and no one is talking about. Even if it's there *all* the time and *always* on your mind. Nathan is our elephant. I don't even want to talk about it now to you, but it's

too important to leave out. *Verum et Honorum* and all that. That was on the blazer pocket of one of my old uniforms. Babblefish it.

Anyway, I definitely didn't want to bring it up that morning, but if I didn't, another year would pass without talking about him. And that was not an option. I took a deep breath and my voice came out even more pathetic than usual.

"I... it's the f... fourth soon," I said.

Sandra froze. She knew exactly what I was talking about.

"W... what do you th..." I stopped and regrouped. The stutter just made this so much worse, and vice versa. "What do you th... think we should do?"

Sandra said nothing. She stared down at the violent orange bubbling in her glass, as if it was going to somehow save her from this conversation. I steeled myself. Honestly, the bravest thing I do each year is bring up Nathan's birthday.

"M... maybe we c... could plant a... tree," I said. Nathan liked climbing trees. Sandra didn't move. She just stood there and watched the orange bubbles. I snuck a glance at her from the corner of my eye. It took her ages to speak.

"Sure," she said, then took the glass and walked out of the room.

Well... done... Mum.

After Nathan died, I saw a shrink for a long time, and I'm pretty sure that walking out of the room like that was not mature behaviour. Especially for a parent. I know it must be beyond horrendous to lose a child but I mean, I lost my only brother. At least she still had one child left. Not that you'd notice. And not that it's a competition.

Nathan was my best friend. He was one year younger than me and we were more like twins really. We even looked like twins. Dark hair, deep blue eyes. Mini versions of Dad actually. The XY genes were obviously dominant in our family. Nathan was tall like Dad and me. Taller than me when he died and he was only eleven. He would have been a great rower. He would have rowed for Australia for sure, like Dad did. He was my partner. We did doubles together. Not that we actually raced of course, but we trained all the time.

Dad used to take us out rowing every weekend before Nathan got sick. We had to 'Get up Dawn's crack', Dad used to say to make us laugh when it was cold and we didn't want to get out of bed. Nathan never wanted to get out of bed. He was a night owl like Mum. I'm like Dad, I'm always up Dawn's crack. As kids we used to have all kinds of jokes about poor Dawn and her crack. When we

actually met someone called Dawn, Nathan and I couldn't stop giggling.

Nathan had leukaemia. Acute Lymphoblastic Leukaemia they call it. It's like the clichés say. They did everything they could. His type of cancer usually has a great survival rate but Nathan's just wouldn't respond. Nothing worked. Every time we got news on his progress it was bad news. Every time a test came back, it was a bad result. It still kills me even to think about it. He so didn't want to die, but at the end, he knew he was going to. He was so weak. So thin. He barely looked like himself. Except when he smiled. Then he was all Nathan again. It was hard to even be in the same room with him, and unbearable to be anywhere else.

We all kept it together more or less I think, while Nathan was sick. While he was alive we had something to rally for. We couldn't let him see us fall apart. We had to keep going for his sake. But once he died everything changed. Actually, everything stopped. No one talked. No one made an effort. No one fought. No one ate. It was like we all died right along with him. It shows just how special Nathan really was. None of us could recover from losing him.

Dad left and never came back. He went overseas 'temporarily' for work and just stayed there. Mum changed completely. It was like her old sunny personality walked out the door with Nathan and Dad. She threw herself into her work like

there was no tomorrow. She obviously couldn't face being at home. Alone. With me. I guess Nathan was the family glue and when he died we fell to pieces.

Which brings me back to why I needed to talk to Sandra about Nathan. When I was seeing my shrink after Nathan died, she suggested that we 'celebrate Nathan's life' each year on his birthday. March fourth. I thought it was pretty stupid at the time, I mean, what was the point, it wasn't going to bring him back... and honestly, I still think it's pretty lame. But what's the alternative. Never to mention him again? There is a part of me, a big part of me, that can't bear to let a year go past without acknowledging Nathan's existence. I mean, he walked amongst us, and he should still be walking amongst us. I can't stand for him not to be thought of, out loud, at least once a year. It's just... wrong. And if Mum and I don't think of him, who else on the planet will?

I heard footsteps down the hall.

Sandra strode into the kitchen a changed woman. Her hair was bunched up in a top-knot and she'd applied a startling green facemask. I instantly recognised her very own Soothing Bergamot and Avocado Day Mask.

Sandra's puffy black and red eyes stared out defiantly from their round green frames.

"You're right."

I'm... er... what?

"Let's do something nice today."

I look at her.

"It's too nice a day to be working. Let's do something..."

I wince. I can feel it coming...

"... Together."

BRACE. BRACE. BRACE...

"Let's go shopping!"

OMG. Retail therapy.

Visualise this...

A pair of very cool, very loved brown leather Blundstone boots stride along the footpath. Next to them, struggling to keep up, is a pair of canary yellow, four inch Manolo peep-toe stilettos, the resident toes being perfectly manicured in 'Sunrise Whisper'. The try hard Manolos are continually distracted and every few strides, stop to look at something. The faithful Blunies try in vain to stride on. Finally, the evil power of the Manolos is too great and the Blunies are forced through a red shop door. Their doom is sealed.

We're on Chapel Street. No prizes for guessing that. Where else would Alexandra Symons take her teenage daughter to blow some serious dough. I'm here under protest, and solely in the cause of intergenerational relations. I hate shopping. No. I really do. I hate the looking and deciding. I hate the money smiles of the chicks behind the counters, especially when they recognise Sandra and fall over each other to suck up to her. I hate what the whole act of 'going shopping' stands for. I mean, there are people around the world actually, I mean, literally, starving to death because they didn't eat for weeks and Sandra's buying nineteen hundred dollar shoes.

Bad luck for me, and for the planet, but shopping is Sandra's one recreational pastime and the only way in living memory that she has 'done bonding' with her daughter. Don't worry, it's not like it leads to an uncontrollable love fest or anything. It only happens two or three times a year, and only ever follows bad behaviour. Hers, not mine. So I don't have to endure it every weekend.

I know. It's really perverse. Most chicks would kill to be in my shoes. Here I am with a mother with an LV full of limit-free credit cards and, not so much a desire as, a *desperation* to spend it on me. And here's me whinging about it. It's pathetic actually. A smart person would just shut up and let Sandra throw her guilt money around.

And so it was today. Sandra dragging me up and down the ritziest shops in town, forcing me to try on fifteen hundred dollar cocktail frocks, that I would *actually* stick pins in my eyes before wearing, and me, trying to get her to buy me a couple of pairs of decent quality sports socks. Come to think of it, I wouldn't have said 'No' to a pair of jeans either, but... What is it with these shops? The more expensive the jeans, the less arse they have in them. And I ain't showing my butt crack to no one.

But the fact is, the odds were stacked against me. I might be hot on the river, but Sandra is in a league of her own on the strip. I just hadn't put in the hours. Every piece of clothing I dared suggest, had something *obviously* wrong with it. It cut the line of my torso. It was spring tones and I was winter. *Someone, please, tell me what that even means.* The neckline was too high. It would add three kilos. It makes my muscly thighs stick out. *Yeah, and?* ... I earned those the hard way. It flattened the bust line. It was too old. It was too young. It was too black.

On the other hand, everything Sandra picked out was gold dust. Look how that line gives you the illusion of a waist. *Yeah. Thanks for that Mum.* That colour makes the blue of your eyes electric. Take the one in velvet, it will take off two kilos around the hips. Now, here's a colour for you. You see how it complements your

complexion? Anything Sandra uttered was greeted with shrieks of agreement by the Noddy-Dog shop girls.

I did get a bit of my own back though. I found a little charity Op-shop a few steps away from Chapel Street and dragged the unsuspecting Manolos into it. While I spent half an hour rummaging around musty boxes on the floor, Sandra perched by the door holding the shopping bags in one hand and a Versace scarf over her nose with the other, sneezing and complaining loudly of her asthma (which she doesn't have) and looking tragically in my direction. It was worth the grief though because at the bottom of one box I found this amazing genuine 80's studded leather belt and paid only three dollars for it.

On the way back to the car, while Mum was leaning against a shop window getting a stone out of the Manolos and dying of lung collapse, I spotted this feral-junkie-chick busking on the street pretending to be playing the bongos, but actually, just begging. Clocking this as a golden opportunity, I threw the things Sandra had bought 'for me' into the Versace bag and shoved them at the junkie chick. Her reactions were so hilariously slow, poor thing, that I was half way down the street before she even noticed the bag was there. On her side of the reality divide it must have materialised out of thin air. Like, "Okay Scottie. Beam down the Versace... *now*."

I just kept the sports socks and a pair of charcoal leather pants I didn't totally hate, but probably wouldn't ever wear. They could go to charity later. I'm betting that the beggar chick would've been totally clueless about the small fortune the clothes were actually worth, but hey, for a week, she'd look like a millionaire. Albeit with crappy taste. And there was no fear that Mum would notice the stuff missing. In her mind they were already forgotten. Mine too.

So in the end, the score was three to eight, in Sandra's favour. Which for me was a personal best. Let's face it, I was nowhere near competition ready. But I did get one or two things I actually wanted, and Mum got to think that she was bonding. And we *both* got to write off a little guilt. So it could have been worse.

CHAPTER FIVE

In the weeks leading up to the Royal Schoolgirls, school boathouses are open 24/7. Okay that's an exaggeration but before school, after school, on Saturday and Sunday, dawn to dusk, and beyond, someone is training. It's the pointy end of the rowing year. That little strip of boathouses near Princes Bridge is crazy with people carrying boats in and out of the boatsheds, with crews training up and down the river, with the sound of coaches barking out orders through megaphones.

For me, this year at Greystones had been progressing mostly as expected. At school, I was getting used to my new teachers and their ways of doing things... *Again...* Like in English for example, you learn from experience that basically, if you want to get good marks, you have to give a teacher the answers *they* want, in the form they want it. You learn to adjust your style and even your content to suit *their* opinions. I know it's not fair. It's not even good education, but they're the ones marking you, right. I don't argue with shit like that. I've learned to just adapt and get on with it. Remember, everything in life is transitory.

After that first unspeakable day at school, it wasn't so hard to fly back under the radar. I just became that invisible girl with, oh yeah, a stutter. No one bothered me much. Barely anyone

remembered that I was even there. That's the way I liked it and it suited other people too. I mean, who needs the hassle.

At home, it was life as usual. I'd barely seen Sandra since the shopping extravaganza. Sometimes she would wander into my room late at night and say something about work and how much trouble they were having. Angel would purr and dribble on her shoulder then follow her into bed. Invisible Rebecca kept up her side of the deal with the housework. I trained, ate, did homework and slept. Played air guitar and listened to Suzi.

So it was all was going on more or less as expected. It was really only at rowing that things were a bit more, shall we say, interesting, this year.

Which brings me naturally to Ann Cavanaugh...

I mean, what was it with this chick?

She'd started being *nice* to me. The reasons for that were obvious but it was still über irritating. But then, to be fair, it wasn't just me... She was nice to everyone. She knew everyone's name. Knew everyone's business. She had a smile for everyone, even the skankiest little first years, who all had crushes on her and would crowd around her, trying to get a slice of her precious attention.

I couldn't figure out why she irritated me so much. Usually, I could be neutral about these things. I mean, what the fuck did it matter? It wasn't that she was particularly up herself, because she

was funny with the mouth and fast to laugh at herself or anything else. She wasn't a 'princess'. She ate chips and swore. She had short sensible nails. And it wasn't that she was repulsive, physically speaking, because, like I said, she was totally what every eighteen year old girl wanted to look like. Tall. Blond. Pretty. Straight teeth. Basically... Hot.

No. It wasn't anything she *wasn't*. Ann just *was* a freak. She was good at like, everything. Sport. Friends. Schoolwork. Fashion accessories. Making nice with the teachers. Making nice with guys. She even had a heroine's name.

Ann.

Ann of Green Gables.

Ann Frank.

Ann Boleyn.

Ann Bloody Elliot.

Ann in the Famous Five... whatever her last name was.

It was like Ann was the golden point of light in the centre of the circle. The circle we all wanted to fit inside. Or at least, everyone *else* wanted to. If Galileo had known Ann, he would have put her at

the centre of the universe with the rest of us orbiting around her like little star struck satellites.

And I know what you're thinking.

You think I was jealous. Or threatened by her, or something. But really, it was *not* that she was a great rower. Honestly. The only thing I *liked* about her was that she was so blatantly competitive. I respect that. For the first time it gave me something to rise up to and, besides, it would just make my victory more of a triumph, and probably push down my race time as well. So it was hard to understand why she shat me off so totally much. She was just so... so... so annoyingly... *perfect*.

Yes.

So, to continue on with my story, on Saturday the fourth of March it was predicted to be 39°C in the shade. Or more poetically, 102° Fahrenheit. (It just sounds better in Fahrenheit, don't you think?) Somehow, between long awkward silences, pained looks and lots of pausing, breathing and stammering, Sandra and I had come to an arrangement for today. Plant a tree in our front yard, at three o'clock, in memory of Nathan... Okay. Good. That seemed reasonably bullet proof. It wasn't easy but we got there in the end.

I can't tell you how much I hate the fourth of March. Well maybe not 'hate' exactly, because I like to remember Nathan. It's more that I feel like I've been turned inside out and my exposed nerves are sitting right there on the surface. I don't have defences. There's nothing between my feelings and the naked memory of him, dying and living. His face, his laugh. The great times we had. How much I still miss him. How much better my life would've been if he'd still been around to hang out with. I know it's stupid that one day of the year should be different from another when it comes to something as permanent as dying, but somehow it just is.

I got up super early that day and got down to the boathouse well before dawn. Saturday mornings were like, peak time there. Any later and it would be a bunfight for boats and the river would be full, and I just wasn't up for that. What I needed was a long solitary row along the river before the world woke up. Working out on the erg is one way to let off steam, but it's not the river, is it? The river is my real home. There's still nowhere I feel more comfortable.

That morning was warm and breathless. The lights of the tall city towers across the river were shining and to the east, behind the far stretch of the river, the promise of sunlight was just outlining the horizon. The river was empty and billions of coloured lights danced over its dark face. A lone tour boat was setting up for the day. A single determined jogger made his way along the river path.

I'd pre-arranged with Thomo to get early access to the boatshed. He wouldn't be there until five-thirty himself and I wanted to be all rigged and ready to go the instant he arrived. I had to wait until he got there to actually get onto the water of course... *B-or-ing*... It wasn't about me drowning or anything like that... because, *as if*. It was just about the legal cost to the school in case I did drown. That's one of the downsides of rowing as a sport. You *have* to row with a team. There's no such thing as competing as an individual. If I were smarter I would've taken up tennis.

Actually, I think it would have solved some major problems for Thomo if I *did* drown. He was in a really hard place about the Division 1 single scull. Who to put into it? Ann or me? Obviously he *wanted* to put his favourite Captain Ann in, but my erg was better than hers. So what was he going to do? Both of us were way too good to go down to Div 2, even though that would have been better for the school, because that would mean two sure wins for the squad. There was no way I was racing in Div 2. That just wasn't going to happen. And I'd bet a million bucks that Ann felt the same.

I was lost in these thoughts, sitting at the edge of the dock in the half dark when something moved right behind me. I spun around, adrenalin pumping, ready for anything.

"Stop! It's just me!" It was Liam, laughing, and making 'relax' type hand gestures. "Down! It's me. Liam. Remember?"

“Shit!” I spat out, feeling a wave of relief that I wasn’t about to be attacked. At the same time, that other kind of panic seized me because I was going to have to talk. Sometimes, I’m so over being me I can’t even tell you. Liam squatted down next to me.

“Sorry about that,” he smiled. He glanced at my fully rigged boat, sitting in the water next to the little wooden dock. “Going for an early session?”

I nodded and turned back toward the river, heart pounding. Maybe he would just go away? I secretly touched the wood of the oar next to me. There was a long pause as we both stared out at the shimmering river lights.

“Me too,” he said. “It’s beautiful at this time of day, isn’t it? Before it all gets totally nuts.”

I nodded and made an ‘mmm’ sound of agreement. I heard him sigh.

“You’re allowed to talk you know,” he said half smiling. I shot him a startled look. “It doesn’t matter. It’s not like you’ll be charged by the letter, or by the pause, or anything.” He looked self-conscious then and said, “And anyway, if you’re going to be the new star of Greystones’ squad you’re gonna have to quit with the monosyllablism, right.”

I frowned, torn between being embarrassed and intrigued by him.

“W... why,” I said.

“That,” said Liam theatrically, “is a monosyllable.”

“So,” I replied.

He smiled. It was a nice, engaged smile. I decided to just, well... *launch*... and fuck the consequences.

In the dark, no one can see you blush.

“All the b... big words are m... m... monosyllables,” I got out.

“Not,” said Liam simply. I smiled at him. I know it’s against my religion. But I did.

“L... life,” I said. “D... death. War.”

“Peace,” he continued. “Love. Hate. Yeah I see what you mean.”

“G... good,” I said smiling.

“Bad... Ha!” He laughed. “Right. Wrong... God!” He was getting into it.

“Rrrr...” I paused. Breathed. “Race.”

“Win,” he said, then added with a question, “Lose?”

“N... no,” I said with emphasis. He smiled cryptically.

“Hope?” he asked.

“F... f... fact,” I said.

He looked at me intrigued, then added, “And of course... row.”

I nodded. I would have added ‘scull’, but it just wasn’t worth it.

“You’re right,” Liam said, genuinely getting into it. “They *are* all monosyllables.” He stared off into the middle distance, thinking.

“Day. Night... Week. Month... Year... *Time*.” Amazed, he went on, “Sun. Moon. Food. Eat. Drink. Sleep...” He smiled evilly, then added, “And another related s-word I can think of... It’s like, primal or something. I wonder if it’s the same in other languages.”

Yes. I thought, intrigued. *Me too*. Liam paused, staring *into* me for a moment then said, “What a clever girl you are.”

I looked away. *Yeah, well, when you’ve got trouble talking*, I wanted to say, *you’ve got more time for thinking*. But instead, there was another long awkward silence.

“How long have you been rowing?” Liam said finally.

“F... f...” I stopped and sighed heavily in frustration. Liam smiled kind of sympathetically at me. I took a breath.

“Forever,” I said strongly.

“Me too,” said Liam. “Your family rows?”

“My d... Dad.”

“Both my parents row,” said Liam. “I was a ‘club baby’.” I nodded knowingly. So were Nathan and I. Not that Sandra ever

rowed. God, just the image scarred my eyelids. But we hung out at the rowing club all the time. And... *Yep... there it was...* that familiar pain stabbing through my guts... *Move on*.

“You r... row with the national team?” I asked.

“Yep,” he nodded.

“Cool.”

“You will too,” he said.

I nodded. Strangely, I didn’t feel much doubt about it.

“W... what’s it like?” I asked.

“It’s at totally another level,” he said simply.

There was a bang behind us at the boathouse. Liam and I both spun around to see Thomo bolting open one of the shed doors. At that moment, the top of the sun peeped over the horizon, and the row of boathouses took on a pale amber glow. All of a sudden, Liam and I were in daylight.

“Hey there,” Thomo cried out, looking at the strange sight of me and Liam together. “You all set?” he asked me. “Hi Liam. How’s it going?”

“Yeah, good,” said Liam standing and politely shaking hands with Thomo. “How’s it looking this year?”

“Excellent,” said Thomo with enthusiasm. “I think we might actually do it this year.” He cast a glance in my direction.

I stood too, eager to get on the water now. I'd had my conversation for the year, *and* it had been better than average. You wouldn't want to be greedy, now would you? I looked at Thomo, and pointed to the water.

"C... can I g..."

He cut me off mid sentence. "Yes. Off you go. While it's still quiet." Then he added, "Be careful. Upstream first."

Duuuuh.

Thomo slapped Liam on the back in a blokey way and headed back into the boatshed. I half nodded a 'goodbye' at Liam and turned towards my scull. To my surprise, Liam leaned down and held it against the dock for me while I got on. Not that I needed it. Now that reality had literally dawned, it was all a bit awkward. I took up the oars and stepped onto the narrow boat, balancing myself easily and sat down onto the seat. I slid forward and rested my feet on the foot stretcher, bringing me physically closer to Liam.

"Hey, um," Liam mumbled, holding the shell and looking uncomfortable. "We're going to Ben's place tonight. Nothing much, just drinks."

I leaned forward and secured the foot straps, deliberately not looking at him.

"Actually it's just the three of us. Ann, Ben and I," he said. "So, if you wanted to come..." I automatically shook my head. I liked Liam but...

There was a cheery "Hellooo!" from behind us. We both turned our heads to see Ann rounding the corner of the boathouse towards us. She looked as glowing as always, her hair in a perfect, bouncing ponytail. Ann's eyes darted between Liam and I, obviously trying to figure out what was going on, without looking, well, like she was trying to figure out what was going on.

"You guys are up early," she said, brightly. "I thought I was going to be the early bird today." *See*, this is why I wanted to get on the river early. As soon as the sun is up, so is everyone else.

"Ann," Liam said to her in all seriousness, as Ann stopped next to us. "Ann. Tell this girl to come with us to Ben's house tonight."

I mean, Ann is Queen of the Universe, right?

Ann looked between Liam and I, the cogs in her brain ticking furiously. She looked severely down at me.

"Come with us to Ben's house tonight," Ann demanded dutifully. She smiled then said, "Seriously, do. Come on. Why not? It'd be great." She was dangerous like that, was Ann, she seemed as though she really meant it.

“Yes,” said Liam, an exaggerated expression on his face. “Save me from another night with just me and them. Pleeeeeeese...” He whispered theatrically behind his hand, “They’re so booooring.”

Ann laughed.

“I can pick you up. No problems,” said Liam. “Where do you live?”

I grimaced. God, imagine Liam meeting Sandra. Just... *No*. I looked up and saw that Ann was observing me keenly. Too keenly.

“N... no,” I said. I took up my oars, automatically testing the height of the handles against my chest.

“Well,” Ann said quickly, sounding ‘casual’, almost like she was trying to helpfully change the subject. “You could just meet us here if you like. After dinner, say, I don’t know, eight-ish?” She looked at Liam for confirmation. He nodded.

“Sure... Great,” he said turning to me.

I gently pushed my boat away from the dock.

“Well, anyway, we’ll be here about eight,” Ann said calling across the thin stretch of water.

I didn’t say anything else. Which was weak on my part and a very poor example of training for the Art of Detachment. I should have just said a firm “No way José” so it was all perfectly clear. See, this is *exactly* where you end up if you get caught off guard and let yourself maybe have that one good conversation. Your form slips

backwards. In that way, it’s no different from rowing training. Discipline and consistency are everything. The road to enlightenment is so full of bumps and blind corners, you need like, a remote sensing video display unit just to get around. I think Buddha said that.

Never mind. I’d do better next time.

Sandra wasn’t there when I got home. No prizes for guessing that, but there was also no message and it looked like her bed hadn’t been slept in. Either she’d gotten up and gone to work extra early *and* made her own bed (which would happen the same day hell freezes over) or she’d spent the night at work. I’ll take option B please. It was March fourth.

So *my* job for the day was to get everything ready. The tree had been delivered the day before and was sitting in a large pot next to the front porch, looking happy and expectant. I arranged all that of course. I’d tried to talk with Sandra about logistics and what kind of tree to plant and so on, but the room was so filled with invisible elephants by then that it was practically a stampede. So I let it drop and just went for my own favourite tree. A jacaranda.

In the house that we grew up in (before Sandra and I started moving around all the time), there was a massive old jacaranda that Nathan and I used to climb and hang about in. It was especially

awesome in summer, when all the purple flowers were in bloom. I mean, they literally covered the tree. If you sat in the shade, in the middle of the branch maze and looked out, the lavender coloured flowers would be brilliantly backlit by the sun, and they'd glow this like blue purple haze all around you. At the time we just took it for granted, like it was nothing special. I mean, you do, right. It's like, when you're a kid everything's going to last forever. You don't think about it. Then when the flowers eventually fell off, they'd form this like, thick, purple circle on the green grass all around the tree.

The world needs more jacarandas.

Anyway, I took a trip in Lexi, braving the scorching heat, down to the local nursery and got spades, trowels, compost and some slow release fertiliser. Not having planted anything before in my life, I googled *PLANT JACARANDA TREE* and got all the info I needed. I'd watered the pot, dug the hole, which nearly killed me btw, and by 2.40pm I was sitting under the shade of the front porch, staring down the tree lined driveway, waiting for Sandra to appear.

I was way early. That's cool. I'm early for everything. I had a gardening magazine in one hand and a framed photo of Nathan beside me. I also had a rowing photo of me and Nathan, with us in a two seater boat on the river. It's one of my favourite photos. No, correction, it *is* my favourite photo. Both of us in rowing gear, smiling like maniacs at the end of a good hard session on the river,

arms in the air like we'd just had a victory. I totally remember the day Dad took it. It's hard wired into my circuits. The hot blue of the sky. The glitter on the water. We went for tacos right after that photo. Actually, it was taken just before Nathan's 11th birthday. So that was five mega years ago. Our faces are so happy and confident, you can see we're stupidly unaware of the carnage a few more months would bring. Or that life could even be so random.

So there I was at 3 o'clock, sitting on the front step, sweating like a pig and reading about espaliering fruit trees and becoming an expert on mouldy rot. By 4pm, between glancing down the driveway and flipping pages, I had learned more than I ever wanted to know about fungi in subtropical frangipani and by five the gardening magazine had been thrown against the front door. At 5.15 I was stood over the hole looking down into it, spade in hand.

The bitch hadn't shown.

Now, I don't expect much of Sandra. I'd mastered that weakness in my character years ago, but this... this was... *low*. In my mind I couldn't decide who was more fucked up. Me for forgetting not to trust Sandra, or Sandra for being totally un-fucking-trustworthy in the first place. And for being a useless, pathetic, self-centred... Anyway, *whatever*. Back on the horse, as they say. Onwards and upwards. Chin up. Pip Pip and all that. Lucky for me, it's all good material for my spiritual development. Doing stuff alone

is so much easier. Really, it's just more efficient. How did I forget that?

I stood tall and took the spade and emptied some fresh mushroom compost into the hole (which FYI was dug twice as wide and twice deep as the pot). Then, as per Gardener Google, I chucked some long-term fertiliser beads into the hole. The tree was the next thing. I'd already watered it, like the nice man told me to, so now I only had to lift it out of the pot... hmmm... lift it out of the pot... lift it, okaaay... One foot against the rim of the pot and both hands on the trunk, I finally budged it out. And of course, true to the script, as it jerked out, I stumbled backwards onto my arse and at the same time there was a roar from down the street and Sandra's baby pink Merc Sports, top down, rumbled into the drive. *Way* over-revved. It, came to a rude stop, made a gurgling noise, and then cut out completely.

I slowly stood, righted the pot-less tree, and turned to look at Sandra. She was opening the car door on the side away from me. She walked around the front of the car wearing a crisp, pink skirt-suit and wobbling on her heels. She came towards me unsteadily. Her blond hair, usually perfect, was wind-blown and all over the place, her face was blotched with heat and black smudges ringed her puffy eyes.

Been crying.

I decided to ignore it and move on.

"Y... you're late," I said.

"No need to state the bloody obvious," she snapped. Sandra lurched forward on her heels as she stepped off the driveway and onto the grass. She just managed to keep herself upright.

Been drinking.

Oh no.

My heart took a dive. Fucking Bitch. I mean, couldn't she... just this once...

"I've d... dug the hole," I said, as matter of factly as I could, forcing down my anger. Where was the abort button? I just wanted to cancel the whole thing now. *When would I learn?*

By now we were both standing on opposite sides of the hole, melting under the searing sun and staring down into it. After a moment of trying not to sink into the grass, Sandra waved an impatient hand.

"Get on with it."

I mustered my self-control, stepped over to the tree and picked it up. It was super heavy but I managed to struggle the root end into the large hole. We both looked at the tree standing proud and straight. Even from within the hole, its top leaves were higher than either of us. I crossed to the porch and got a small plastic tub.

“We need to sp... sprinkle some of this in, around the r... roots.” I carefully kept my voice neutral, not acknowledging the fact that Sandra was standing there, late and drunk and volcanic. I sprinkled lots of the whitish powder over the ends of the tree’s roots and all around the hole.

I offered Sandra the open tub. She looked down at it blankly, then up at me. Numbly, she took a handful of the root powder and tossed it into the grave... I mean... hole.

There was a pile of dirt next to one side of the hole and I knelt down to push some in, then got the shovel and started to fill the hole properly. Sandra just stood there fighting with the grass over her stilettos.

“You j... just going to ssss... stand there?” I snapped.

I thrust a trowel at Sandra. She looked at it, then down at the pile of dirt. Unsteadily, she inched herself down into a shaky squatting position, knees neatly together, then with the tip of the trowel she swished a little loose dirt into the hole, as though she was afraid of getting her precious hands dirty. It was too much. I grabbed the trowel and tossed it away.

“J... just go and get the picture of Nathan,” I said, stutter starting to disappear, as it can when I’m angry. I pointed to the front porch then turned back to the hole, redoubling my efforts to get the bloody thing filled. This just needed to be *over*.

Never *ever ever* again.

Mum wobbled across to the house looking fully ridiculous in her heels and pink business skirt, now riding up around her thighs. She picked up the photo frame and stared down at it, transfixed, like she couldn’t comprehend what she was seeing. She stayed like that for a long time while I filled the hole. Eventually, she walked back, not taking her eyes off the photo, her \$1000 heels skewering the grass with every step. I patted down the earth around the tree and started to feel like the light might just be peeping through at the end of the tunnel.

“Put it down here.” I pointed to the fresh mound of dirt under the tree. “Put it here under the t... tree.” Sandra dragged her eyes away from the photo and looked at me. She was trembling now, with outrage.

“I know what he looks like you know. Do you think I need a fucking picture to remember what he looks like?”

She was fully shaking now, her eyes welling. Slowly, with unsteady hands, she squatted down and placed the photo underneath the tree. Standing and staggering back, she stared down at the photo and at Nathan’s beautiful, way too young face. Her eyes overflowed with tears. She moaned out a sob.

I stood next to her looking down at Nathan. For a long moment there was silence, except for Sandra’s choked sobs. Then I

crossed to the porch and got the other rowing photo of Nathan and me. Carefully, I placed it under the tree, next to the photo of him. My heart was black with pain, but there was also the beginning of relief.

At... last...

Mission accomplished...

I took a step back and looked at both photos and the newly planted tree. I wiped away the sweat dripping from my forehead...

Happy Birthday Nathan. Happy Birthday baby bro.

Then it came.

A voice so vicious, it was like being knifed in the chest.

"You're not bloody dead."

Sandra lurched forward and kicked the photo of me and Nathan, sending it flying across the grass.

I gasped. Sprang after it. I picked it up and checked it over. The glass was shattered but hopefully, yes, hopefully, the picture looked intact. I turned and stared at Sandra in stunned horror.

Sandra was struck dumb, like she could barely understand what just happened. It was like the whole world was crumbling around her. She stretched a trembling, pathetic hand towards me. Begging me for... something. Tears dropped like rain from her cheeks. She tried to make words but nothing came out except primal

sounds of despair. With a last desperate look at me she turned away and walked, stumbling, into the house.

CHAPTER SIX

I don't know why more isn't made of water. I'll rephrase that. I'm not talking chemistry here. What I mean is... People write odes to a summer's day, fleas and daffodils. They bang on about the moon and the stars and paint landscapes of deserts and subway overpasses. They paint 'still lives', whatever that means, of bowls of apples and vases of irises, and lots of other things way too boring to even talk about. Whatever floats your boat I guess, but... surely... *water* is out there on its own when you're thinking about beautiful, worthwhile, things on this planet.

I've often thought that if aliens came down from space and had a good look around them, say from the Andromeda Galaxy or somewhere like that, the thing that would really take their breath away, (you know, if they breathed), the thing that really distinguishes this planet, is water. The oceans, rivers, clouds, even a humble rain shower. It's an embarrassment of riches. Everything comes from water.

I have this memory from when we were littler. We were in Fiji for a family holiday. It was the end of a long day and I was swimming alone, not really that far from shore I suppose, but it felt like miles out. Mum and Dad were watching from somewhere probably, from inside one of the bungalows obscured by palm trees

lining the narrow beach. But it *felt* like I was the only human on the planet. Sunsets come fast in the tropics and as the sun met the edge of the sea and sunk behind it, the sky erupted into a blaze of pink, amber and turquoise, until colour streaked every inch of the sky.

It was a lagoon and so the water was flat and glassy. Its surface a mirror to the sky. Looking up, looking down, looking in every direction were iridescent shades of hot, breathless pink. The water was right up to my chin and as I tiptoed slowly around to take in the whole magical panorama, I had this freaky, unnerving sense of this being a three dimensional sunset, of being *inside* the dome of the sunset. And I was just this *head* sticking out of the water.

I looked down at the water, which was just the same as looking up. The sky was above and the sky was below me. The fiery sky pinkness was to every side of me. The surface of the water was opaque and shimmery and it felt, weirdly, like nothing of my body existed below the neck. The sky mirror deleted it. Slowly, to make sure I was still there, I lifted up the tips of my fingers through the surface of the water. Four detached little finger tips jutted up through a pink sky. I wiggled them very slightly, making gentle waves on the opalescent surface. The sky rippled below me.

The colours of your planet, earthling, are magnificent.

On Saturday March fourth, at about 7.30pm, I sat on the south bank of the Yarra, looking down at my legs swaying slowly in the cool clay coloured water. It was too early for sunset but the colours around me were on their way towards that disturbing vividness which comes with dawn and dusk. That's what made me think about my 'wrap-around' Fiji sunset and about water. No matter where you are, if there's light and water, especially light reflecting on water, it's spectacular.

I was near Princes Bridge, only a hundred metres or so along the bank from the row of boathouses. And not that I was that interested, but if I looked to my right I could make out Ann, Ben and Liam in front of the boathouse rigging up a couple of boat shells. It was all quite picturesque actually. The cool colours of the line of boathouses, set a few metres back from the riverbank, were framed by a towering backdrop of massive old elms.

People with happy lives strolled the narrow path along the edge of the Yarra River, past the boathouses, basking in the hot air of the evening. Families with small children. Lovers. Friends. The occasional party boat cruised down the river, sending waves of raucous conversation and music echoing across the water. On the other side of the river from where I sat, was the cracked eggshell facade of Federation Square, and all around and behind, there were the lights of the many tall buildings of the city, slowly blinking on. It

was a nice place to just sit and be invisible for a while. As good as anywhere, anyway.

To go or not to go? That was the question. Whether it was nobler in the mind to suffer the strict path of my spiritual quest, or whether I should shrug my shoulders and say 'what the fuck', like Tom Cruise in *Risky Business*, and go and have a drink with Liam... And Ann and Ben, of course.

That was the question.

Really, it didn't feel important either way. Ridiculous to make a fuss about it. Just toss a coin. If you thought about it, nothing mattered that much actually. Making a big deal of your life, and especially of stupid little decisions like this, was just another way of making yourself feel important. Of propping up your poor little human ego. When really, we're *all* like totally insignificant. I mean, even the most important people that ever lived, Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth, Alexander the Great, Suzi Q and so on... the people we think will never be forgotten... even they are nothing in the bigger scheme of things. Barely a blip on the cosmic radar. The memory of people like that just take longer to be erased, that's all.

The fact is, no matter what I decided to do that night, whatever did or didn't happen, wherever I did or didn't go, what I did or didn't wear, the world would keep turning and who would care? Seriously. *Everything* is transient, remember. No matter

what, the arrow of time just keeps moving forward. Like a swarm of army ants marching through the rain forest, devouring everything in its path. But more than that even... Left, right, forward, back, up, down, sideways, good, bad. It doesn't make any difference. Whatever tomorrow brings, the day after will bring something else, and the day after, something else, and so on and so on, through infinity and into nothing.

As I approached the boathouse, they were squatting around the boats fiddling with the rigging. Ben was the first to look up.

"Hooray!" he cried, somehow implying that I was late. I resented that. How I could be late when I hadn't even said I was coming? Ann and Liam looked up at me too.

"I would have texted you but I don't have your number." Ann smiled, seemingly delighted. "But I hoped you'd come."

I glanced at Liam, who had this look on his face like he was really pleased to see me. It made me feel sorry that I wasn't nicer. I stepped towards the edge of the water where they were working on the boat's rigging. I didn't speak.

Ann was in high spirits.

"Ben's house is only a few K down the river. It's a beautiful night..." She indicated the clear sky, then smiled at me. "He has a boathouse."

"We can all row," added Liam.

"Mater and Pater are in Prague," said Ben.

"Sounds like a plan, don't you think?" smiled Ann.

I looked at the boats and then back at them.

Sure.

Whatever.

So that's how that night, I ended up in a double scull with Ann, cruising down the river towards Ben's house. It was brilliant being on the water at that time of evening. The larger stars were visible overhead now and, on the banks to both sides of us, buildings, lights, bridges were all becoming further apart. There was less and less traffic on the water, until soon there was no one on the river but us and the boys, who, judging by the glow of their red stern light, were at least a hundred metres upstream. As the night darkened, it felt like just Ann and me, quietly stealing our way along the river. Stroke after stroke after quiet stroke.

Ann was in the 'front' seat. Of course. And just like the first time we rowed together, the perfect synchronicity of our strokes was only too obvious. It took no time for me to adjust to Ann's lead. Following her rhythm was almost as natural as rowing on my own... only together we were like lightning across the water. It was, well,

exciting. I tried to ignore the exciting part. But it gets inside you, and that great feeling, the feeling of being in the *flow*, of cruising along cleanly, slicing down the river. It takes you over, whether you're alone or in a double. Rowing like this was just what I needed.

We'd come further than my training rows had ever taken me before, and I didn't exactly know where I was. I knew it was generally *east* somewhere, but just by looking you might imagine you were in the country, instead of in the middle of a city of five million people. Once out of the city centre the banks were dark and bushy. On a different day this might have freaked me out. The not knowing where I was, that is. But it wasn't a different day and it was like, *way* too amazing on the river, in the middle of that gorgeous hot night to worry about irrelevant stuff like that, or really, anything much.

And anyway, as Bear Grylls says, when you're lost in the wilderness, like in Alaska or Outer Mongolia, the secret of getting yourself out again is to find flowing water, like a river or a creek, and follow it downstream. It's the best way to orientate yourself. That works for me because, I'm never so found as when I'm on a river. So there you are. Today's handy tip for the next time you're lost in the Steppes.

We must have been rowing for twenty minutes or more along the gently winding river, just keeping up a light steady pace,

when Ann feathered her oars. I immediately feathered mine as well. She let out a sigh as the momentum of the boat kept us drifting backwards. I could make out Ann's silhouette by the red glow of our stern light, which was basically a bike-light attached to the boat in front of Ann. There was also a white bow light behind me. Ann stretched her head back and looked up at the stars. I did the same. The moon hadn't yet risen and the stars were out in force, handfuls of scattered glitter on a deep blue dome. The Milky Way, easily visible, was a creamy ladder across the sky.

"Beautiful," Ann sighed, as we continued to slide gently backwards. It was. It was vast and awesome. We were both puffing a little bit and I could feel some exertion in my muscles, but God it felt *good*. The night, the stars, the stillness was perfect. It was just what I needed.

Ann turned around and smiled at me. Her face was dimly lit by the glow of the bow light. She looked exhilarated.

"You going okay?" she asked.

"F... fine."

"It's amazing rowing with you," she blurted, with sudden earnestness. My stomach lurched.

"It's like having an engine in the back. Like flying," she said. I continued to stare at her. In the middle of all that darkness, the

soft lights edging her face made her look, seriously, like a movie star.

“Miss Silent,” she smiled provocatively.

I mean, what was there to say? There was no point denying that it was amazing rowing together. But I also wasn't going down that path. No way. I looked down and ran the fingers of one hand along the surface of the black river water. I could 'feel' Ann shaking her head.

“Well... It's not much further,” she finally said. “You need a rest?”

Now, I did several K at least three times a week on the erg. We'd probably done half that so far. Admittedly, it was more demanding being on the water, but this was *not* a stretch for me.

“No, I'm f... fine,” I said. “It's g... good. Easy.”

She nodded. I wasn't sure this was what she wanted to hear.

“You want to pick it up for the last bit then?” she asked, with a glint in her eye.

“Sure.”

“It's pretty straight from here,” she said. “Just stick to this side of the river. There's one left turn up early. Not sharp.”

“Okay,” I said glancing around behind me to check the river.

Generally in doubles, it was the bow seat's job to steer the boat. And tonight, that would be *petite moi*. I also had to make sure

we weren't going to hit any traffic. But as the river was totally empty there wasn't much chance of that tonight.

“Anyway,” Ann said, turning around and getting into position. “We'd better get a move on or they'll think we've drowned. Are you ready?”

“...kay,” I said, raising my oars.

Ann began to pull. And we were off. Instantly I fell into line, timing my cadence to hers. It took us maybe three or four strokes and then we were solid. But this wasn't like before. Ann was accelerating the stroke rate and pulling through on the drive with much more intention. This was serious. She was testing me again. Before we knew it, we were powering through the dark water and again, I was floored by how natural it was for me to match her stroke, even at such a high rate. It was the twin of mine. Her catch, drive and release took the same classical shape and in almost exact proportions to my own natural stroke. In my mind I saw the image of our stroke graphs superimposed on top of one another and fitting together almost exactly, with Ann's maybe a tiny bit shorter on the time axis, but there was basically nothing in it. People trained for this all their lives. But with Ann, it felt as if her stroke was *designed* for me to follow.

We tore down the river in the dark. It was thrilling. Dangerous. I glanced behind. Nothing but clear water. We started

veering left, following the curve of the river. Far up ahead, as we rounded the bend, there were some lights on the bank, but nothing on the water in the direction we were travelling.

“Clear,” I called to Ann.

Ann put her back into it. I felt the power and met her effort. My breathing began to come hard. The boat lifted in the water and I could feel the flow. That fabulous flow. I focussed down on our bodies. Our two bodies sliding forward and backwards, forward and backwards, in perfect sync. Almost without realising it I let go of my conscious mind and zoned totally into *us*. In the darkness, with nothing to distract you, with no poor technique to correct, it became all about the rhythms of the boat and the rhythms of the body. Muscles expanding and contracting, oars moving forward and backward in perfect unison, propelling us quietly through the night. In the still air, the matched sliding of our seats sounded like the heartbeat of one beast. The splash of our oars its pulse. Our breath, its breath. We were one organism in perfect working harmony.

Stroke after stroke after stroke after stroke cutting down the dark river.

A-mazing.

Just a few short exhilarating minutes of this brought us to a straight stretch of the river, dotted sparingly on both sides by large, impressive houses. Ann dropped the rate and we slowed to a gentle pace. We were both heaving deep breaths. Sweating like pigs. Ann feathered her oars. I followed. Exhilarated. She turned around to me and smiled between ragged breaths, her chest heaving.

“Not bad... for beginners.”

I would never get used to this. This undeniable, unwanted, feeling of connection that happened when we rowed. I’d only ever felt it once before.

“It’s along... this stretch,” Ann puffed, indicating behind her at the houses along the river. “Over there.”

I followed her eye-line to a small, illuminated jetty a few hundred metres up stream. We slowly rowed ‘backwards’ towards it.

Approaching the dock, we could see that Ben and Liam had already lifted their boat up onto the grass at the end of the little private pier. It was at the bottom of a grassy hill, that rose up sharply from the water. Above us, right at the top of the rise, was this seriously impressive Victorian house. Really, you’d have to call it a mansion. Turrets and all. It must have had the most awesome views of the river and way beyond. It looked eternal... like it had

been up there, on top of the hill, looking down on the rest of us plebs forever.

Back down on the bank, at the foot of the wooden jetty, was an ornate boathouse. It was from about the same era as the main house, but it was made of wooden weatherboards, not brick. Old boathouses are always built out of wood for some reason, not sure why. The new ones are concrete and U-G-L-Y. Ben's family boathouse was painted the colour of fresh avocado, with lots of curvy white wooden trim. I don't get jealous of 'things' much but I had to think that it would be beyond cool to actually own a family home with a boathouse that was on the river like this. And maybe even not move out of it after a year.

Behind the boathouse, were steps leading up a steep, zigzagging path to the main house. I could see an ornamental gazebo, and even a tennis court cut into a terraced section of the hill. It felt privileged and secret. Right there, that's the benefit of money, folks.

Ben was opening up the boathouse, while Liam waited on the pier for us to arrive. As we pulled up to the dock he called out, "You took your time."

He leaned down and dragged our scull up to the side of the dock. Ann slid back, then carefully stood up.

"We're female, we're still at school, we don't train with the national team, and you've got twenty kilos on us," she said, stepping onto the jetty. "Apart from that, I can't imagine why."

"Always excuses," Liam laughed. I stood up and stepped off the boat as well. Liam's eyes followed me as I brushed past him.

"Nice row?" he asked, taking the oars out of my oarlocks.

"G... gorgeous," I said.

"It was absolutely amazing," Ann said, getting her oars onto the pier as well. "Perfect conditions. No one on the water. Not even a breeze." She glanced over at the boathouse, where a glow was now coming out of the wide shed door. She noticed me admiring it.

"Not bad is it," she smiled, throwing a glance up at the main house as well. I shook my head in amazement at the whole set up.

"Ben's great, great, great..." she hesitated.

"Great," added Liam. "It's four 'greats'."

"Great... Grandfather built it," Ann said.

Just imagine a family being in one place for that long, I thought. Ann looked at me as though secretly saying 'I know, *right*.' I nodded back a silent agreement.

"Ben's inside setting up," Liam said to Ann. He made her a small bow. "He awaits your command." Ann looked at Liam, and pointed to our scull.

“Fix this then, will you,” she said majestically, then winked at me before disappeared inside.

“Why yes’em missa,” Liam called after her. He turned back to me and smiled. There was a long silence, mostly filled by me staring at my feet. Now that we were out of the water, this whole thing was feeling less like a good idea.

“How did you go rowing with Ann?” Liam eventually said. I glanced at up him.

“F... fine. She’s good.” Might not sound like it, but that was high praise from me.

“You should see her compete,” Liam said.

I raised my eyebrows, interested.

“Tough as.”

Yeah. Somehow this didn’t surprise me. But... *good to know*. Liam frowned.

“What’s Thomo decided about the single? Has he said?”

I shook my head.

“Hard call,” he said.

“My erg is b... better,” I said. Liam nodded.

“Yes, but Thomo has been training Ann for this for years. And he’s seen, he knows, what a strong on the day competitor she is.”

I nodded again. If I were Thomo, I’d want to put Ann into the single as well. I mean, that *was* what Liam was suggesting, right. But there’s no way I would let that happen. The single was my race. Ann could win the doubles with horse face.

“Why don’t you do doubles with her?” Liam said seriously. “You’d be a shoo-in for gold.”

I stared sharply at him. Was this why I was here? So Ann could get Liam to convince me to do doubles with her? Liam looked suddenly ‘terrified’.

“Don’t bite my head off!” he laughed. “My God! It’s just that... it’s the obvious thing.” Then he added. “And it’s just... I mean, why? I don’t get it.”

OMG. I should have a placard made.

“I d... don’t do teams,” I said.

“But why?” he went on. “Is it against your religion or something.”

“Yes,” I said smiling. He looked down at me like I was a complete mystery. Then sighed a kind of ‘*Oh well*’.

I looked down, but I could *feel* him still looking at me. *Now*, I told myself, would be a good time to move, but my feet didn’t obey. Liam reached across and arranged a wayward strand of hair off my forehead. I felt his fingertips brush through my hair and come to rest on the side of my cheek. My breathing seemed to be instantly

shallow and my heart pounded stupidly. I could feel he wanted me to look up at him.

I grabbed his hand with mine and let it drop, then walked away towards the light.

Inside, the boathouse was even more awesome than outside. I stood at the doorway and marvelled. It was all natural wood and ancient furniture. Ben was busy lighting candles that were set up around the place ready to go. In the middle of the room, there was a humongous, tattered Persian rug sitting on the floor, as though it'd been waiting there since before some war or other. A faded nana-couch with flowers on it and a couple of 70s vinyl armchairs were grouped together on the rug. On one side of the room, three boat shells of various vintages hung on racks on the wall. The overall effect made you feel like a player in a Sunday night BBC TV drama.

Liam came in and got down to the business of opening some beers. Someone had thought ahead and put some drinks on ice before we arrived, because there they were, all lined up in the Esky ready to go. No doubt Ben's family had a Rebecca or probably a Jeeves of their very own. Ann crossed to the back of the boathouse and started fiddling with a cream leather box, which turned out to be a portable 70s record player. There was a whole stack of records next to the turnstile. Liam crossed over to supervise Ann's selection

and while they were laughing and fighting over records, I had this surreal moment of wondering how the *hell* I'd gotten here.

Much later, after a couple of beers, we were all sitting on the floor on the rug, using the chairs as back rests and playing...

"SNAP!"

"Owww!" Ann yelled, clutching her hand, and staring daggers at Ben.

It was hot inside the boathouse, even though the double doors were propped wide open to the river, which was flowing in the moonlight just beyond the doorway.

"It's your own fault," pronounced Ben, "for getting under my hand." He picked up the pile of cards and began to straighten them.

"You don't have to hit so hard." Ann pouted, massaging her hand. "That bloody hurt." She appealed to Liam and me for support. Liam leaned across the circle and took her hand in his.

"Let's see," he said, assuming a doctorly tone and using his fingers to 'examine' the hand. "Hm... Ya. Zis iz seriouz. I zink, yaaa," Liam continued, peering over the top of his glasses at Ann, "Zat zair maybe an blockage of zee phloem vessels, here unt here!"

"I'm... a plant..." Ann smiled.

"Yah..." stated Liam. "Unt do not get me ztarted on your Xylem."

Ben threw down a card, starting a new discard pile. “Come on play!” he ordered. “Seven.” He was holding a fat pile of cards and could taste his win. I’d already lost all my cards. Liam too. It was just Ann and Ben left.

“If I were you,” Ann said sweetly to Ben, “I’d think twice about mashing your girlfriend’s hand.”

“All’s fair,” he grinned. “Play. Come on.”

Ann threw a card onto the pack. She stretched out her right hand as though studying it. Ben threw down another card.

“Queen. Come on.”

“Yes. I suppose you’re right,” Ann said, still looking at her hand. “It’s not really that useful for anything, is it?”

She rippled her fingers in a cat-like motion and arched an evil eyebrow at Ben. Liam laughed. Ben ‘clicked’ and looked at Ann aghast. He threw away his cards, grabbed her hand and started kissing it all over. Liam laughed again and smiled at me, but I was busy being obsessed with the hem of my singlet top.

“What was I thinking! Your beautiful hand. Baby...” Ben leaned forward and kissed Ann full on the mouth and she kissed back. Awk-ward. I started to collect Ben’s cards into a pile. Busy was good. Ann pulled away from Ben, smiling like she’d just won a victory. Ben leant back against the couch and positively *leered* at Ann. I mean like, get a room.

It was Liam who broke the silence.

“Did you know...” he began.

“No!” cried Ann.

“Noooo!” Ben screamed. He put his fingers in his ears and went “la la la la.” Liam went on unfazed.

“Did you know that, it wasn’t until the year 547 that women got souls?” Ann laughed. Ben looked pityingly at him.

“At the council of Macon,” Liam said. “The Pope and his esteemed Cardinals, naturally all men, locked themselves away and debated, literally for months, about whether women had souls or not.”

He smiled in a tolerant sort of way, ‘down’ at we women.

“Obviously men already had them,” he clarified. “There was no question about that.” Ann gazed at him, shaking her head.

“Where... do you get this stuff?”

“History of Law 101,” Liam continued. “Anyway, if I may...”

“D... didn’t one of the popes have a wife?” I said. I was on my way through my third (and last) beer and I was feeling more relaxed than usual. I already knew that drinking worked for a stutter, but seeing as I hardly ever drank alcohol, it had always been more theoretical than applied knowledge.

“Yes, clever girl,” Liam said. “Lots of the popes were married. In the early days, it wasn’t even forbidden. In fact, one of the popes was actually a woman.”

“Why are we talking about popes?” Ben said, appealing to whoever would listen.

“Pope Joan,” Liam went on. “Now that *was* forbidden. Anyway, if you’ll let me get to my point. The men of the council decided in the end that there were three levels of soul. Women had the two lowest sorts, but only men could have the highest, most divine form of soul.”

“You *are* made in God’s image,” suggested Ann.

“I so am,” agreed Liam. Ben smiled.

“That’s totally f... fucked up,” I said seriously.

“Don’t worry. I think you may have been promoted since then,” Liam said, patting my hand. I pulled it gently away.

“Sounds like something straight out of Horrible Histories,” Ben said.

“All I can say...” said Ann, “is that men mustn’t have had much to do with their time in the sixth century.”

“Yes. We use our time so much better now,” said Liam. Ann frowned.

“People who make decisions in ivory towers... *Men*,” she said with emphasis, “should be shot. Like the Pope ‘deciding’ that God

doesn’t want his people to use condoms.” She shook her head in disgust. “All those poor women in Africa and other places catching AIDS, infecting their children.” She sighed. “Fucking genius.”

Couldn’t have said it better myself.

“Well I’m with *him*,” Ben said decisively. He crossed his first two fingers. “Me and the Pope. We’re like that. If the Pope says we shouldn’t use condoms... ” He smiled at Ann. “Who are we but to obey?”

“He also doesn’t believe in sex outside marriage,” Ann said. “Not ever.”

Ben uncrossed his fingers. “Yeeeah...” he said. “Maybe I’m not *that* religious actually.” We all laughed. Ben added hopefully, “What do Jews think about that? I could convert already.”

There was more laughter, followed by a long silence. The atmosphere was changing. I could feel looks being exchanged, but not by me. I was still fascinated by the hem of my top. Now normally, this would be my exit point, I’d make an excuse and just leave. But, in this case, short of making a humongous fuss, I was actually trapped. Not great planning on my part.

“Anyone for another beer?” Liam asked, standing up and stretching his long, well muscled limbs. Frankly... he was impressive. He had one of those calendar perfect male bodies, six

pack and all. Like he could be a stripper, or a beachwear model or something. Serious rowing training does that to you.

Liam... Mr September.

Liam looked at me and lifted his empty beer bottle, enquiring.

“I’m okay,” I said. Three was enough. I didn’t want to get out of control. He looked at Ann.

“I’m still going, thanks,” she said as she neatly packed the cards back into their box. So, that part of the night was done then.

“I need a slash,” said Ben abruptly. He leaned back against the couch and finished off his bottle of beer, tossing it aside when it was empty. He let out a loud, self-satisfied belch. Seriously, if Ben didn’t give the impression of being Charles and Di’s missing son, the word ‘Bogan’ might have come to mind.

Ann rolled her eyes in disgust. She stood up and stretched. Now there was another calendar perfect body. Ann somehow managed to have great muscle tone, and still look curvy.

Ann Cavanaugh... Miss June.

“Anyone hungry?” she asked, looking around. Her eyes darted between Liam and I. Those brain cogs were whirring again.

“I’m starving,” she said. She turned to Ben. “Hey. Let’s go up to the house and see if we can find something to eat.”

The record that had been playing suddenly ended and there was total silence, except for that scratching sound of the record player needle going around and around the middle of the record.

“Music!” cried Ben. “George. Your turn.”

I didn’t tell him to fuck off. Now the atmosphere had changed, I was more than happy to have something to do. I went to the back wall, where the record player was, and started going through the stack of old records next to it; beginning with Neil Diamond’s ‘Hot August Night’, followed by Floyd ‘A Brick in the Wall’ and the ‘White Album’ by the Beatles.

I heard Ann’s voice. “Come on Ben. Up!” Ben groaned and made his way, first vertically then horizontally, across the room to Ann. I turned in time to see him put his arms around her waist and snuggle his lips into her throat.

“You hungry are you?” he said just loud enough that we could all hear. Ann manoeuvred him back, but you’d have to say, in an eye poppingly ‘come hither’ way. If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have believed it. Our *nice* Ann. Her body language was all S-E-X. From that moment right there, Ben was her slave. Practically drooling. I had this image of Ben kind of sleepwalking behind Ann up to the house like Peppy LePew, arms outstretched, drifting on a cloud of lust dust.

But then on the other hand, the poor guy, you couldn't completely blame him. Ann had quite an effect on people and as girlfriends go, she was the ideal package. She was smart, pretty, funny, had an athlete's body. She was independent, capable, and had stuff to say that was even worth listening to. Ann was always 'appropriately' dressed like a nice GF should be, but at the same time was patently H-O-T. But in a way that made you think of beaches, skiing and sunshine rather than anything seedy. Ann had that thing the 'shiny' people have. The A-list people, the Barack Obamas, the Charles Mansons and so forth. Charisma. When they've got you in their sights, there's no one else on the planet. Just being in their orbit makes you feel special.

So, that's a bit of an Ann tangent I didn't mean to go on. At the time of course, this chain of thoughts took maybe a second to think. Or at least, to 'think' the impression of. You know what I mean... how you 'think' faster than words? I call it 'the speed of thought.' Anyway, I wasn't thinking about Ann in any depth at the time, I had other more pressing things on my mind, but I suppose it does give you a bit of context for later.

So while Ann was bewitching Ben, Liam was searching out beers from the Esky, and I was going through records and pretending that I didn't want to slink back into the river and

disappear into the night. We weren't just having 'fun' anymore. Ann put an arm around Ben's waist and turned to me.

"George, we're going up to the house for a minute."

"Or maybe more," winked Ben.

"To see if we can find some food." Ann kept her voice light. "Okay?" She looked 'casually' between Liam and me. "There's plenty of drinks to keep you going. Won't be long."

"Yeah. Don't count on it," smiled Ben. He hurried Ann towards the door in playful anticipation. Ann was pushed along 'helplessly' in mock resistance.

Liam cracked his beer. "Don't worry about us," he said and smiled in my direction. I turned back to the records.

Help!

See... *This* is why I stay home and attend to my spiritual practice. Strictly. This is why it's called a spiritual *path*... because you *DO NOT LEAVE IT*. Ask the girl in the red hood.

I heard Ann and Ben exit the boathouse and make their way up the hill. Footsteps and giggling receded into the night. I focussed on the records, or at least *tried* to. I had, not so much butterflies, as some kind of flesh eating barracudas, swimming around in my stomach. I heard Liam's footsteps come towards me and felt him stop just behind me. He looked over my shoulder at the record I was holding, Michael Jackson's *BAD*.

“Gee, I wish I could make my hair go like that,” Liam laughed, as he leaned around me and took the album out of my hand. I looked down at the next record in the pile.

“Awesome!” I almost yelled in excitement. OMG. It was ‘Can the Can’. An original vinyl. 1973. The one with the black and white cover of Suzi, wearing all leather and being the last word in Rock Chick. Not try hard *Bad*, like Michael. Suzi was the real deal.

“That’s awesome!” I said. “Oh my G... God. I’m like *in love* with her.”

Liam was smiling at me like I was probably charming or something. It made me hot in the face, and confused. I turned my attention back to the record, taking it out of its cover and putting it on the turnstyle. When I tried to drop the needle into the groove, my hand was shaking so much I had to rest it on the edge of the player to stop it.

The scratching sound started. I pumped up the volume. Then the fast, raw, high-energy bass riff started. *Doof. Doof. Doof...* My head started nodding on autopilot to the music. I pumped up the volume some more. It made me feel stronger.

Suzi’s voice cut in, screaming... like she’s on the edge...

Weeeeeeeell... You got the hands of a man and the face of a little boy blue-oo-oo...

I started singing along.

“And when you stand you’re so grand there’s a case for just looking at you-oo-oo...”

Liam took a swig of his beer, smiling.

“You’re so young...”

I laughed.

“You could have been the devil’s son.”

Liam *looked* at me then... he put his beer down, stepped forward and kissed me. He slid his hand to the back of my head and held me against him, gentle but controlling. It was nice and didn’t freak me out half as much as I thought it might. Suzi and the three beers made me braver. I hadn’t kissed more than a couple of guys, none at all lately, and never anyone as tall as Liam. I had to stretch up and tilt my head back. I ran my fingers up to his neck and kissed him back. The kiss was soft and slow. The music was pumping. Cool combo. Liam made a little sound and pulled me closer into him. After a while, he stopped kissing and rested his forehead against mine.

“Oh thank God,” he breathed. “I’ve been wanting to do that all night.” He ran his fingertips lightly up and down my back, pressing me into his body. He pulled his head back a little and I could see him smiling. He had a killer smile, especially *that* smile, which I hadn’t ever seen before and I probably would have liked a

lot, if I wasn't feeling so not-quite-equanimous. I stepped away from him, Suzi pumping through us both.

48 Crash. 48 Crash. Come like a lightning flash. A lightning flash.

Liam picked up his beer and emptied the bottle. He was looking at me, running his eyes over my face and down over my body and back to my face. He wiped his lips.

"Fuck, you're gorgeous," he said, stepping towards me and dropping the bottle. His took me in his arms and pulled me into another kiss, this time more heated. I kissed back. I'd never imagined kissing anyone to Suzi before but it was well, hot. Holding me tight, Liam took a step forward, forcing me to take a step back. He smiled and kissed me again, looking evil. He took another step and I took another backwards. I looked behind me and saw we were heading for the couch. Liam was laughing, saying something about one small step for man and between kissing, laughing and walking, in a second I found the backs of my calves pressed against the couch and one second later, sort of falling onto it, my back against the couch arm with Liam kneeling over me.

It was ridiculous, and Liam was laughing and so was I, but I was also kind of overwhelmed. Liam knelt up over me, with one knee on either side, and looked down at me in this like, greedy way

that made me feel *way* exposed. I pulled down the bottom of my singlet top a bit, where my stomach was showing.

"Don't," he said seriously. "You've got an awesome body."

He ran one hand slowly over my stomach and then up my torso. His eyes followed his hand wherever it went. Honest to God, I kind of just lay there hypnotised by the intense look in his eyes. I didn't really know *what* I was feeling, except that whatever it was, I was feeling *a lot* of it. Maybe it was fear? Excitement maybe? Turned on? I just kind of lay there, staring up at him like a time bomb. Waiting.

Liam's hand went to my breast and he began to touch me there. He leaned down and kissed the side of my throat murmuring, "Jesus you're hot." I could sense him getting a bit more enthusiastic and I pushed him back a bit.

"Liam..." I said hesitantly. But he wasn't listening. He pressed his body further into mine and *really* kissed me, sliding me down with him so that I was lying on my back now looking up at him. I kissed him back but, well, this was getting maybe a bit... too...

Liam's hand found its way under my singlet and his hand slid over my skin. Then with the other hand he lifted the front of my top up over my bra and ran his lips over my chest. I squirmed.

"Don't... wait..." I said, but it sounded feeble even to me. I tried to sit up but Liam's weight and strength held me down. In the

meantime I could feel him heating up. His movements were getting more insistent and he clearly wasn't listening to me much. One hand slipped around to my back where he started to fiddle with the hook of my bra. The other slipped inside my bra at the front, feeling me. He kissed me again.

"Jesus! Liam!" I said suddenly with real purpose. I used all my strength to force myself up, throwing Liam back into a sitting position.

"Fucking chill..." I blurted and pushed him away.

He seemed startled. I could still feel his hand tugging at my bra hooks.

"Liam!" I urged, my face hot.

"It's stuck," he said, awkwardly trying to pull his hand away. I moved back to get away from him and took him with me.

"Stop! Stop! I'm attached!" He was giggling now. Obviously one of us found this funny.

"My watch is caught," he explained, trying not to laugh. I was caught in the circle of his one arm and I could feel the tugging on my bra strap as he struggled to get his hand free. I put my hands behind my back and felt around trying to sort things out, but this just pushed my boobs out further, and into him. Liam put his other arm around me as well, trying to release himself but all this just pressed us even closer into each other. And me, with my top pushed

way up over my bra. I could have died. Liam, red faced, tried not to laugh, but the more pissed off I got, the more he seemed to find the whole thing funny.

"Sorry," he said. "Sorry. Keep still." He fiddled behind my back some more. "Just let me..." He pressed even more forward to make room for his hand, squishing our chests totally together in the process.

"Liam!" I groaned.

"Sorry," he said, trying not to laugh.

"Jesus!" I said, starting to giggle. I mean, it was stupid, like a scene from an old movie. The more Liam struggled with his watch and my bra strap, the more we pressed and rubbed together and the more we both laughed with embarrassment. Finally his hand broke free.

"You did that on purpose," I said, blushing furiously and pulling my top down. There was no point trying not to smile.

"Believe me, I'm not that clever," he laughed. "I wish I was." He checked his watchband for damage. "Bloody sports bras."

"You should be used to them by now, shouldn't you," I said. With an exaggerated 'decorum', Liam straightened up my singlet top, but stopped half way and looked at me stunned.

"What did you say?"

“I said I would have thought you’d be u... used to them by now.”

“Where did the...” he waved a hand towards my mouth, “stutter go?”

I flushed. Looked down.

“Alcohol,” I said, making it sound more simple than it really was. There were times when I didn’t stutter at all, but you couldn’t predict them. Sometimes when I was angry or even super upset. Always when I sang. Often when I put on an accent. Sometimes when I was really focussed on doing something else. Always when I spoke to stupid old mangy cats.

“Alcohol helps a bit,” I said.

Liam finished pulling my top down and leaned back and *looked* at me. Like he was trying to understand me. It made me feel transparent.

I knew that I should leave and just find a way home, but strangely, I didn’t really want to. Even after what had just happened. It was confusing. I mean, Liam was out of my league cute, and it was flattering that, for whatever nutty reason of his own he seemed to like me. Even if that meant he *was* demented and should totally have his head examined. And... I liked him. I really did. But I didn’t want to have sex with him. At least, not right now.

He was hot and all that, but, I don’t know. I hadn’t had much practice at this sort of thing and really, it was just too fast.

Liam must have felt the tension too, because there was a long and uncharacteristic silence from him.

“What is it about you?” he said, actually thinking about it.

“When I was watching you out on the water the other day,” he kept looking at me like he was trying to figure it out. “I couldn’t take my eyes off you. There’s something...” He frowned again. “Isn’t there a song?... *In the way you move...*” He laughed and hummed the tune, sort of embarrassed. He leaned back against the sofa, and took a long breath, slowly exhaling and putting a little more space between us. He looked at me thoughtfully.

“Are your hammies tight?”

I looked at him like I didn’t hear him right.

“Your hammies. Ham-strings,” he pronounced, as though speaking to the deaf. “Are... they... tight?”

“Yes,” I said, confused. “H... how do you know?” *And why are we talking about this?* It’s true though, my hammies are always a challenge for me.

“It was just a thought I had when I was watching you row. I mean your stroke is great, don’t get me wrong, but it looked like maybe you weren’t quite getting full compression at the catch. Made me think your hammies might be tight.” I nodded.

“Do you c... coach.”

“No.” He smiled. “Why? Do you want to be my little lab rat?”

He walked two fingers up my shin and then grabbed my foot and extended my leg towards him. He held my knee down then proceeded to push up on the ball of my foot. The classic hamstring stretch.

“Ow.” I cried. “Oooooow!” I urgently kicked my foot out of his hand. “Alright, I know. I know... Jesus!”

“Your heel is probably lifting in the catch position. What you want is for your heel to be making contact as early in the drive as possible.”

“I know,” I said.

“You’d probably get more power in the drive if you loosened these up a bit,” he said, running a finger along back of my thighs.

I nodded.

There was this long silence that made me aware of how physically close we actually were. Then Liam pulled my leg towards him again, this time bending my knee up over his thigh. He ran his fingers upwards, along the skin of my calf and began to massage the muscle. It felt so good I almost shivered and said “Oooo”. I didn’t, of course. Well, okay, I might have shivered, but I definitely did not say “Oooo”.

He massaged my calf for a long time, totally focussed on what he was doing, feeling the muscle, isolating the knots and working his thumbs into them. I watched him, fascinated. He pushed his thumbs deeply into the muscle and ran them up the length of my calf and back again. It felt a-mazing.

“Did you know...” Liam said, gently running his fingers up my leg. “That a cat has thirty-two muscles in each ear?”

I bit my lip, restraining a laugh.

“C... can’t say I did,” I smiled. He continued to massage me.

“A dog has eighteen.”

“And Pandas?” I asked.

Liam smiled broadly.

“I’ll have to get back to you on that.”

“Very d... disappointing,” I frowned. “What about humans?”

Liam held up three fingers and gave a victory smile. I mean, *honestly*. What are you going to do with a guy like that?

We looked into each other, smiling quietly. After a long moment, his hands returned to their work with my calf. I watched them for a second, then looked back at Liam.

“Did you know that st... stewardesses,” I just got it out, “is the longest word that is typed only with the l... left hand?”

Liam threw his head back and laughed. It made me laugh too. We laughed at each other laughing. Liam eventually straightened up, trying to be serious.

“Did you know,” he said, pausing for effect. I prepared myself. “That the 1.3 billion people in China would fit into a cube only five hundred metres square, if you lay them down on top of each other?”

I broke out into laughter. No way I was going to better that. We giggled uncontrollably for a minute, I mean, I was literally clutching my sides. Liam’s eyes were filled with tears. He wiped them away smiling and trying to stop laughing. But every time he went to say something, he’d burst out laughing again. And so would I... and so on. It physically hurt. Good ab workout though. I really couldn’t remember the last time I’d laughed like that. But it would have been with Nathan.

Still laughing, Liam leaned forward and kissed me. Have you ever tried kissing someone when you’re laughing? It’s not easy. He ran his hand down my face and along the side of my body. Slowly the laughter subsided and the kissing took over. He pressed his lips deep into mine, tilting me backward as he held me close. I softened my lips and let him kiss me, wrapping one arm around his strong shoulders to keep myself from falling back on the couch. After a moment, he broke the kiss and smiled against my mouth.

“Stewardesses,” he chuckled. He pulled his face back a little, straightening us both up and looked at me. He ran his fingertips down the side of my face, over my shoulder, then he kissed me again.

This was really nice and it went on for a long time, just slow kissing, getting to know his lips, beginning to feel more confident. Feeling more relaxed. Then gradually, his body started to move against mine, slowly pressing me backwards, until I was almost horizontal again.

Liam’s mouth left my lips and roamed down my body. I could hear his breath getting raspy and the word ‘gorgeous’ coming out of his mouth. I didn’t know what to do, I just kind of lay there, fascinated and paralysed with, whatever it was I was feeling. This was way out of my area of expertise. I mean, could I kiss him like this, let him touch me, and not have to have sex with him? Or was that wrong? I didn’t know the rules and why did I suddenly give a fuck? I felt a little panic rising.

By now I was flat on my back and Liam was on top of me, kissing me, pressing his body into mine and kind of gently grinding against me. I could feel him getting more and more excited. Somehow my singlet was up over my breasts. His fingers roamed over my chest, slid down my stomach and moved down to my crotch...

“No. Stop!” I cried, trying to sit up. “I don’t want to.”

Liam stopped.

“Oh God!” he moaned under his breath. But after a moment he sat up, allowing me to do the same. He stretched back against the couch, groaned, and ran his hands over his face and through his hair, obviously in frustration. He looked down at his crotch and then at me, smiling lamely. “I think I’m turning into Pinocchio here,” he said.

“I d... don’t want to,” I said definitely, looking away. I could feel my face turning scarlet, but I meant what I said.

“Okay. Yeah... Okay,” Liam said, taking control of himself. “It’s fine. Really.” He let out a long breath. There was an extended and awkward silence, then he took my hand and held it in both of his, caressing it. I felt a *stupid* amount of relief at this. Even, weirdly, a little gratitude. I smiled shyly at him. Liam leaned forward and kissed me again, then rested his cheek against mine. I could *feel* the tension in him. Hear his breath.

“But can you just touch me,” he said softly into my ear. I felt one of his hands leave mine and then I heard the sound of a zipper. I pulled back from him, instinctively glancing down at his now open fly.

“I’m bursting out of my jocks here,” he said as he guided my hand towards his crotch.

I think I kind of yelped, or at least I gasped, and pulled my hand and *myself* away so vigorously, I totally fell off the couch. I ended up on my arse on the floor, looking up at him in disbelief.

“You can fuck right off,” I spat.

Liam looked instantly mortified. He opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out.

But I was outta there. I jumped up and ran. Fuck him. Fuck the lot of them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I couldn't have been more pissed off with myself as I sprinted up the fifty or so steps, through Ben's garden, to the top of the hill. I couldn't get out of there by river now, so the only way was up. In the distance, and getting distanter, I could hear Liam calling me, searching, apologising, but *whatever*... I took those uneven steps by twos or threes until I was at the top, and creeping breathlessly down the driveway of Ben's huge bloody mansion towards the dark, tree-lined road ahead.

I fucking *knew* better than this. Jesus! Like I said, spontaneity only leads to disaster. Making friends only leads to disaster. Team sports only lead to disaster. And though I'd had almost no experience of 'romance' or 'sex' or whatever you want to call it, it was pretty easy to calculate that that would lead to disaster as well. *Duuuh*. I knew it. I already knew it *all*. But here I was, alone in the woods, somewhere, miles away from the path, without my hood, and not even on my way to Grannie's house... Totally effing stupid.

What.

Was.

I.

Thinking?

The street was dark and quiet, with massive old trees arching over the narrow road and only one old style street light. It felt more like Narnia than Melbourne.

I wasn't scared. Being out alone at night doesn't worry me at all. I've done it plenty. Alone is good. But it would have been handy to have Lexi. *Idiot*. I should have found out Ben's address and parked it around the corner. Just in case. For exactly this sort of thing. I wished Lexi would suddenly turn into one of those TV cars where you push a special button or whistle or something, and she comes racing up to you and asks for a destination in some reassuring robotic voice. "*Where would you like to go, George?*" she would ask, mixing me a Virgin Mary.

I had no idea where I was. Not the name of the street. Not even the suburb. But *this* I could do. If I didn't have to deal with other people, I could manage most things. I just needed to think it through. If I just followed the street around a bit, it would come to another street, which would lead to another street, which would lead to somewhere. I just needed to keep walking until I found an intersection with two street signs, you know, the corner of blagh and blagh, and then I could call a cab. Piece of piss.

No hurry now though. I had escaped the wolf and it was a stunning night. Hot and deathly still. I followed the end of the road around a corner and turned into another, wider street. This street

was more residential, more *normal*, with houses on both sides, and average size blocks. Must have been because it didn't back onto the river anymore. Yeah, that would be it. I'm a genius.

I stopped and looked up at the sky, taking a long deep breath to calm myself down. Southern Cross. Pointers. Orion. All my summer sky friends, just where they should be. Well, at least now I could figure out which way was south. I looked around for somewhere to sit and collect myself, and right next door, there was a stone fence of hip height. Perfect.

I jumped up onto the fence and sat looking up at the stars. I took a long breath, and another one, trying to get back in control of myself. I easily found the pointers. So that was generally south. The brightest pointer, FYI, is Alpha Centauri, the closest visible star to Earth. I followed the direction of the pointers to the Southern Cross. Impossible to miss it. Then I drew a mental line across the sky following the long axis of the cross, four and a half times as long as the cross itself. Where that ended, I drew a mental line down to the horizon. That was due south. Okay. That didn't really help anything, but at least I was calmer. And I knew which way I was facing. My sky friends never let me down.

All would be well. I looked at my feet, watching them swing forward and back, hitting gently against the bricks... Bump, Bump, Bump... Okay, I tried something new tonight and it ended up bad,

but I'd survive. Jesus. Worse things have happened. Seriously. This was so like, *nothing*. Okay, I knew better. But we all fuck up sometimes. I wasn't going to kick myself over it any more. Just move on... Bump, Bump, Bump... This was one of those blind corners. I just needed to get back to the 'A' Plan and *stick* to it. Fly under the radar. Win the open scull... Bump. Bump. Bump... Stay on the path and pick up my 'Get out of School Free' card. Just this one year to go. Even less. Eight months. I was almost there. I mean, Liam was alright. Even if he was a bit of a selfish prick, like all of them. I didn't really blame him. Much. This sort of thing just doesn't work for me. This just proves it. I blamed Sandra more. Sandra was a total fucking fuck up... Bump, Bump, Bump... But Sandra could go and...

"George?"

I looked up with a start. It was Captain Ann Cavanaugh. Obviously stealth mode was amongst her super powers. I hadn't heard a thing, but there she was, standing right in front of me.

"Are you okay?"

I stared her out.

"Fuck off."

She frowned, trying to 'read' me.

"Seriously. Are you okay?"

Her hand touched my forearm. I looked daggers at the hand then at her.

“I’m f... fine.” I said. “Now can you fuck off.”

Ann took away her hand. There was a long silence. I wasn’t about to break it.

“I thought you liked Liam,” Ann said.

“You totally set me up,” I snapped. She seemed lost for words.

“Yeah. I thought... I thought it was okay.”

“F... for who?”

“... You... Liam. He’s really into you,” she said bluntly.

I scoffed.

“He is. I’ve never seen him like this about anyone before.”

She tried for a lighter tone. “Even I’m a bit jealous.”

“Knock yourself out,” I said. Ann frowned.

“What did he do?” she said. “George? What happened?”

I could feel her eyes boring into my face. She sounded like she actually cared. It threw me.

“Nothing. I don’t know. He’s alright.” I jumped off the fence and stood up. What was her game? For a long moment, Ann looked at me steadily.

“Are you gay?”

My mouth dropped open... *Wha...*

“... I mean, it would be fine.”

“Of course it would be fucking fine,” I snapped. “Just because I don’t want to fuck Liam f... f... five minutes after meeting him, I’m gay.” I shook my head. “That’s fucking genius.”

“Alright. Sorry.”

“Jesus.”

“I was just asking.”

I turned on her harshly. “The whole w... world isn’t yours to command you know. Some things are just not your f... fucking business.”

“Okay. Jesus. *Sorry* alright?”

She stood before me, staring at the ground. What’s the way to describe it? Chastened. Vulnerable. She looked smaller than usual. It was hard to look away from her like that. It was amazing how she could just stand there so *exposed*. Not even trying to hide it. I expected her to just like, get out of view. It’s what I would have done. But she put her hands in her pockets and stuck it out, standing there like the girl with the curl, awkward and unsure.

“Do you know the n... name of this street?” I said, when I couldn’t stand it anymore. It came out louder than intended. “Or b... b... Ben’s street. I need a taxi.” There was a pause. Ann looked at me.

“George... I... really did think I was doing the right thing. With you and Liam I mean. I thought... you liked each other.”

My turn to feel confused. “Look, *whatever*,” I said harshly, wanting this conversation to be over. “I just want to get out of here, okay.” Ann’s colour rose.

“Why are you like this!”

It was almost a shout. She relented, reaching for control of herself, “I mean, why are you sooo...” She waved her arms at me, “...like *you are*.”

“What the fuck d... does it matter to you how I am?” I blurted. We just stood there looking at each other, stuck. Ann forced herself to be calm.

“Look,” she finally said. She took a breath and exhaled it, seemingly resigned to her fate. “I’ll walk you to the tram stop. It’s not that far. It’s a mainish road. There might be a cab.” She turned to lead the way.

“Just this way a couple of blocks,” she said. I was about to ditch her and go off on my own, when she stopped, looking like a light bulb had gone supernova in her head.

“Or...” she said. “Ooor...” She looked at me with eyes widening. “Why don’t we just sneak back down the river right now and jump in the scull and row back. The boys will be up in the house

by now. They won’t even see us. *And* it would save having to take the boat back in the morning.”

The thought of rowing at that moment, along the dark river, made my heart lift. It would be beautiful, totally beautiful. And I could *really* use the workout.

If only I could do it *alone*.

I was silent. I didn’t want to agree with her, didn’t want to be with her, but actually, I could see immediately it was the easiest thing to do.

“What about the boat?” I said, stalling. “What would we do with it when we get there?”

Ann patted her pocket, smugly. “Captain of the squad, remember... Key.” She smiled.

“Won’t Ben be expecting you back?” I said, weakening.

“I’ll text them and say we’re having a chicks’ night out,” Ann said, pulling out her phone. “They’ll be fine.” She raised her eyebrows at me, meaning ‘What do you think?’ I couldn’t think of any other objections. I felt a pang of impending doom.

It was just minutes before we were back at the little jetty carrying the boat down to the water. There had been no sign of life in the house as we crept along the drive and down the uneven steps to the river. No one in the boathouse. We moved quickly and quietly

to rig up the oars, then got onto the boat. The sweet, familiar coolness of the river rose up to meet us. The moon was high, the water was a fathomless black and a bazillion stars dusted the sky. Strangely, I felt nervous.

We silently backed the boat out into the middle of the river. No lights on. Ann was in stroke. Of course. She just got in the front. But that was fine by me, I was happy to follow her lead home and not think too much. Or at all, if I could help it. I could see the shadowy shape of her, just an arm's length in front of me, making some minor alteration to her foot stretcher. I told myself off for feeling nervous. Half an hour of rowing and we'd be back. And then I'd go home and go to sleep and tomorrow I'd forget this horrible, horrible day had ever happened.

Ann stopped fiddling and turned around to face me.

"Okay?" she asked. I nodded.

She picked up her oars, and without any more fuss, we started to row.

The water was flat and our long, smooth strokes soon became regular. Slicing down the river, just the two of us, through the warm dark night, it was impossible to *avoid* a feeling of connection. It's the unwritten contract of team rowing. Everyone in the boat has to subdue her ego to the girl in the stroke seat. Ann was controlling my body, and I was letting her. In team rowing, there's

no other way to move forward. Literally. It's a contract to merge. And frankly, whenever that happened with Ann, it felt awesome.

After twenty or so minutes of steady 'stealth' rowing, we turned a last major bend in the river and the city came into view. Ann feathered her oars and I followed. We paused for a second to turn and look at its full splendour. The river was alive with dancing lights of every colour. We were a K or so away from the boathouse now and the last ten minutes had brought a gradual increase in lights on the banks, bridges, car noise and pleasure boat traffic. Further down the river near the boathouses, an army of tall buildings stood like shining Titans along the banks.

I turned back from the view and Ann's eyes caught mine. She was glowing with the exertion of the row. It was easy to make out her features now in all the reflected light. I wondered if I looked the same and realised I was smiling. We were both sweating and puffing, and I was feeling *way* better than when we left Ben's place. Gotta love those endorphins. My drug of choice. The effect of rowing doubles was still connecting us. It was there in Ann's eyes.

That meant... it was time to move. I picked up my oars and Ann took the hint.

"We'll have to be super careful from here," she said, taking up her oars. "Stick close to the right."

Suddenly, the random sound of a duck quacking rang through the air. And then again... a rhythmic 'quack quack... quack quack'. Ann turned and we stared, bewildered, at each other for a second. Then Ann laughed.

"My phone," she said, reaching forward to behind the footboard where she'd stowed her little bag. A horrible thought shot through me. OMG. *O-M-G. My wallet?* I started replaying the evening in my mind. *Where's my wallet?*

I definitely took it out of the boat and took it into the boathouse.

"Hi," Ann said into the phone. Her expression changed as she listened. "Really? Oh sorry. Sorry." There was talking on the other end and then she said. "I lost track of time, sorry. I was at Ben's and..."

I think I put it on the little table by the door.

"No. I'm in town..." Ann said. "No. It just ended up like that." She turned back and grimaced an 'I'm in trouble' face at me.

I saw myself falling off the couch and backing out of the boathouse away from Liam.

"No, you stay in bed. It's fine..." She went on. "You don't need to come in. I didn't realise it was that late. I'll get a cab home... Hang on, I'll check," she said. She pulled some notes from her little bag and started counting.

I saw myself charging out of the boathouse and up the hill...

"Oh *fuck!*" I said out loud. Ann put her thumb over the mouthpiece. Obviously her parents didn't swear. She looked at my stricken face. "What is it?"

"I've lost my wallet," I said. "I think I left it in the boathouse." *When I escaped*, I added mentally.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll call Ben in the morning. It will be there."

"I've got no money," I said, sounding truly pathetic, but Ann was already back to counting notes. That was alright for her, but how the fuck was *I* going to get home? There was *no way* I was calling Sandra to come and get me. *As if...* I'd rather sleep on a bench at the train station. I felt out of control. I mean, how did this happen? This kind of stuff *never* happens to me.

"Hi? Actually Mum," Ann continued. "I think I've got enough... No, I'm not alone. I'm with a friend... No. You don't know her." She looked up at me and smiled. "Actually, she's coming to sleep over." I gaped at her.

Say whaaat...?

"... No, don't worry about it, I'll do it when we get there... Okay, see you soon." She hung up and smiled at me like she was a very, very clever girl.

“Can’t have teammates sleeping on the streets,” she said.
“And besides, it’s safer to travel together at this time of night.” She
picked up her oars and got into position. It was all too much. I was
unable to speak.

“Okay...” she said, as though it were all settled.

And then we were rowing.

CHAPTER EIGHT

We eventually found a taxi among the Saturday night city rabble, and were on our way to Ann's house. Alright, so this was another blind corner. But it was fine. *Breathe*. Fine. I'll just sleep there and get up in the morning and go. All good. Not a problem. May as well get *all* of these little tangents over in one night and tomorrow we can *GO BACK TO THE PATH*.

I had no idea where we were going. And believe me, I wasn't feeling 'chatty'. I was here only because I was out of options. After we turned off Punt Road, the main road that I *did* know, we were soon cruising through some pretty uninspired suburbs. 1950s or '60's brick houses lining the streets. One house exactly like the next. Low brick fences, little front gardens lined with shrubs. It didn't seem right. It occurred to me that we might be taking a short cut to where ever it was we *were* going. But I was pretty sure we were miles away from Greystones.

"Pull over here, after the roundabout," Ann told the cab driver, leaning forward. "It's the second brick fence on the left. Yeah. Thanks."

I turned my head, looking for the house. This couldn't be right. This was just... not right... The taxi pulled over.

"Thanks," Ann said, handing him money.

I stared out the car window. *No*. Surely... There must be some mistake. I glanced at Ann. But she was busy paying. I looked back at the tiny red brick house... lawn neatly kept, geraniums, daisies and so on. The front light was on, illuminating nothing interesting. Just a bit of curved brick paving leading from the drive to the porch. It was so... banal. For a minute I had a brain freeze. It didn't make sense. Then it hit me... *Of course...* OMG. Of course... *Ann was on a scholarship*. You fucking idiot. How did that take you so long to figure out? *That's* why she was such a brain-box academically as well as a top athlete. I mean, *could* she be any more perfect?

Suddenly the pieces fit.

Honestly. Just shoot me.

Inside the house, in a narrow little hallway, all was dark except for a dim stained glass frog lamp on the 'antique' hall table. As she closed the front door, Ann put her fingers to her lips. I stood obediently still. She quietly opened the first door on the left of the hall and whispered to the unseen occupants,

"Hi. I'm home."

There were sleepy murmurings from within.

"Okay. Night night," Ann whispered as she quietly pulled the door shut. She gave me a nervous, over-bright smile, and led me

away, tip-toeing over the floorboards. She turned the frog off on route. Habitual. Turning left at the end of the hall, we walked into an ‘open plan’ lounge and kitchen. It was functional and tidy enough. What you might call ‘lived in’. Framed photos of kids and family everywhere. The furniture looked at least ten years old. And not in a good way.

Ann led me past the kitchen to a door at the back of the house. She opened it, turning around as she said self-consciously,

“My room.”

For a moment I stood at the doorway waiting to be taken to *my* room. Then Ann stepped back from the door so I could go in and I realised that...

:o :o :U !!!!

This was *IT*. No room of my own. Oh God. It didn’t even cross my mind that we’d have to share a room. I mean *everyone* has guest rooms, don’t they? It’s like... *required*. If I’d thought of this, I would have crawled all the way to my place from the city. Over broken glass.

I might even have called Sandra.

No. Not that.

I took a breath. Okay. Here we were. Just. *Deal*. My learning curve tonight *had* been extreme, it was true. But this is where years of spiritual training pays off. Not only did I keep my outward composure, but I got my inner shit together as well. It was just a few hours before morning. How bad could it be? Sleep. Then. *RUN*. Bravely, I took a couple of steps into the pitch darkness, followed closely by Ann.

“Oh, watch out for the...” Ann warned, just as I stumbled into something large and metallic. I grabbed at the object to stop myself falling. “Are you alright,” Ann said, taking hold of my waist to steady me.

“Fine,” I said, sharply pulling out of her grip. I took another step back from her. I glanced down at the guilty object, but I knew even before looking, that I’d walked into a rowing machine. I even knew what sort.

“Sorry,” Ann said, clicking on a bedside lamp, lighting up the small room with a soft pinkish glow. “I should have warned you.” She looked down at the rower and said with a half laughing, self-conscious flourish of the arms... “The gym!... *Dah dah!*”

I glanced down at the rower. Concept C. A few years ago it was top of the range, but since then there’d been the D and the E. I’ve got the D as well as the C, as I think I’ve told you. These days

you could pick up a decent C for less than a thousand bucks on eBay.

I looked around the room. It was neat, almost military in its tidiness. And *tiny*. I mean, how did people live like this? Maybe this was normal. I didn't know. The walls were a faded bluish colour, the furniture was functional, white, and probably IKEA circa 2000s. A single bed, a desk piled neatly with books and a laptop, plus two wall shelves with perfectly arranged files. A wardrobe, a set of tall drawers and over by the window, there was one of those old style wooden mirrors on a stand that tilts up at you. You know the ones. And that was it. Except for the rower, which was squeezed in between the bed and the wardrobe and looked absolutely humongous in the room. It took up almost all of the, what *would* have been, empty space in the room. The whole thing (minus the rower) made me think of an officer's cabin on a navy boat or something. Neat. Functional. Everything to a purpose. Everything in its place. Not that I'd ever seen an officer's cabin. It suddenly occurred to me that maybe Ann was a ship's captain in a past life. Yeah, that worked for me... Ha! That *really* worked.

I looked around... So this was how Ann Cavanaugh lived.

Wow.

I looked back at Ann. She wasn't happy Jan. She could see what I was thinking. I could see it as plain as anything on her face. She felt exposed. I totally got that. She didn't like me looking into her room. Into *her*. Fair enough.

Once I saw a documentary on TV where this girl was talking about confronting someone who had abused her when she was a child. She said that when she went to confront the guy, she was such a mess that she was standing there just shaking and crying, trying to get the words out. But she stood her ground and she did what she needed to do anyway. I often think about that. That girl on the doco. She said that's what courage *was*... to stand there shaking and crying, but to do it anyway. Maybe that's true. I'm no expert. Anyway, for some reason at that moment, Ann made me think of that.

"C... c... Concept C," I said, looking down at the ergo. Making people feel better wasn't a skill I'd practised but, weirdly, I wanted to help. "I've got a ... the same at home," I said, truthfully.

This seemed to do something. Ann relaxed. I sat down onto the seat of the rower and grabbed the rowing bar, getting a feel for the machine.

"Yeah," Ann said, stepping closer. "They're still good. The mechanism is virtually the same as the D or E. It just doesn't have some of the readouts. Fine for strength building. Muscle tone... " I

nodded in agreement and started pulling. Ah, the predictable, smooth feel of a good rower. I pulled a few trial strokes, filling the room with noise, before Ann grabbed the rowing bar and made me stop. She looked towards the door. “You’d better not,” she said, apologetically. “The little kids will wake up.”

“Oh,” I said feeling really stupid, then added, “Only child.”

Ann looked at me as though to say ‘here is another piece of information I’m filing away about you’.

“You’re sitting on a whole summer’s worth of waitressing and swimming instruction,” she smiled. It seemed like she was waiting for me to say something back. But I had nothin’. I’d never worked, like actual *paid* work. I’d helped Sandra out with her various work crises occasionally. But that wasn’t real work. That was child slavery. Ann looked a bit awkward then, and hastily added. “Oh I don’t work during the year. Just over summer.”

I said nothing.

“So!” Ann said slightly desperately. “Are you hungry? I’m starving to death!”

A little while after that we were sitting on Ann’s bed, eating and drinking. I hadn’t realised how starving I actually was until I smelled the Vegemite toast. It’s a truth universally acknowledged, surely, that nothing’s better as a midnight snack than Vegemite

toast. With masses of butter. While Ann was making the toast, she also decided that we’d ‘earned a drink’, so she accidentally borrowed a bottle of wine from her parents’ pantry. I couldn’t disagree with that as an idea either. Speaking as a pretty-much-non-drinker... a drink or two was exactly what I needed to get me through the rest of this totally fucked up night. That, or a small injection of cyanide.

After Vegemite toast and a few big skols from the wine bottle I was feeling way more comfortable, and in the words of a song my Dad used to sing to us, ‘The drunker I long there, the sitter I got.’ Ann was leaning back against the wall at the head of the bed and I was sitting in the middle, with my legs crossed, holding the bottle. Somehow, Ann had got on to doing a totally hopeless impersonation of Mr Chopra. It was one of the funniest things I’d ever seen. More at Ann’s expense than Mr Chopra’s. At least there was one thing she wasn’t gifted at.

I jumped in with my best Indian accent.

“No. It is more like if ‘i’ is the square route of minus one then minus ‘i’ equals the square route of one.” I did silly head movements like a caricature of an Indian man. Ann laughed.

It was totally rubbish, but it was like, way better than *hers*.

“And if I do not see your wurkin through,” I continued in my Indian accent, “then I will be giving you a very great big zero out of ten for that particular equation.” Ann laughed again.

“The square route of one is one,” she smiled.

“This is n... not about the maths,” I said in my normal voice, taking another swig and passing the bottle to Ann. “Anyway, what are they even for?” I switched back to the Indian accent. “Imaginary numbers give me the very much shits.”

Ann laughed again and said, “They speak well of you.” I grinned. Ann took a swig and looked *into* me in that penetrating ‘Ann’ sort of way.

“Accents help you talk,” she observed.

“Yes,” I said, still looking at her. She was *thinking* again. There was a long moment before she spoke.

“What do you think you’ll do next year?”

Okay. That was a big wind change. I frowned at her, not hurrying to answer. I mean, *anything* could happen between now and a year away. I didn’t see much point in long term planning. Ann passed me back the bottle.

“I don’t know,” I finally said. “What are you going to do?”

“Law. At Melbourne.” It was a *fait accompli*. “If I get in that is,” she added, way too late to think she had any actual doubt. I smiled quietly to myself.

“You’ll get in,” I said.

“Yeah,” she agreed, as though she was already thinking about something else. “You know,” she said, with a quick glance at

me. “Have you thought about...” She paused, carefully choosing her words. “The sports scholarships... for the American universities. That would be my first choice, even over Law at Melbourne. Not the Ivy League ones. They don’t do sports scholarships, so that’s a bummer, but there’s Stanford, Berkeley, UCLA, they’re all still excellent. You could...” She made her voice ‘light’. “... You know, look into it too. And some of them are means tested.” She looked strangely at me, like she was sending a message I wasn’t receiving. I frowned.

“Sandra, M... Mum, wants me to do business...” I said. “Seems pretty fucking meaningless.”

“Yeah, but you’ve got to do Eco or Law or something like that first, just in case.”

“Of what!” I snapped. “You sound just like Sandra. What’s wrong with t... travelling or just getting a j... job or...”

“Come on,” said Ann, sitting up straight. “You have to do *something* practical. Not all of us get to inherit great, great, great... *great*... Gran-Daddy’s mansion.” It sounded bitter. There must have been a *look* on my face, because Ann quickly changed tack and laughed charmingly.

“Ha! Who was it said that pragmatism is the curse of the middle classes?” She leaned back against the wall, smiling.

“Some d... dead white male?” I suggested.

“With a private income,” she concluded. We smiled at each other for a long moment. I took a swig from the bottle and handed it back to her.

“I suppose I should make up the bed,” she sighed, with a look at the bed covers. She gazed vacantly at the bottle for a moment.

“You know,” Ann finally said, looking at me. “You’re only the second person I’ve had to sleepover since I started at Greystones.”

“No way,” I said, really not believing it.

“Yes way. Oh...” she clocked my expression. “I mean, I’ve done a million sleepovers. But at their houses. My room’s really small you know, and...” she tailed off. I got it alright.

“You’re a snob,” I said.

“Yeah, right,” she said, indicating her surroundings. “Like I *get* to be.”

“You’re a sss-snob,” I smiled. Ann arced up.

“Oh come on, George. I saw the way you reacted the other day, when you stopped Liam from coming to your house to pick you up. You don’t have to hide it. Everyone knows you’re on a scholarship.”

I looked down, blood rushing to my cheeks.

“Helloooo...” she waved a hand. “In case you haven’t noticed... I am too.”

Oh shit. Oh shit. Ooooh... *shit!!* I could feel my heart start to race.

“We’re in the same boat,” she said, then laughed at her pun. “Literally.”

I kept looking down. I didn’t know what to do. I should tell her, but... Oh bloody, bloody... *shit!!* There was no good way out of this. Not here, at her house. I mean, how did she even *get* that idea? I didn’t *do* anything... did I? I know I *look* pretty... scummy. But... *why*... Suddenly the dots joined. *Oh fuck... Of course.* She’s thinking *sports* scholarship. That’s why I’m here. She thinks I’m like her.

I stole a glance up at her, my face burning. Ann put the bottle aside, then leant forward and put a comforting hand on my thigh.

“George, it’s fine,” she said seriously. “Being on a scholarship can work for you. It doesn’t stop you from getting where you want to go.” She leant closer. “It just gives you less room for error.”

The intensity in her voice forced me to raise my eyes and look at her. She was so close I could feel her breath on my face. See the black of her pupils. Suddenly, my heart was pounding.

Slowly, Ann pulled back, and with perfect, lynx-like control, she leaned against the wall staring at me. It looked almost, well... it looked *provocative*. I could hardly breathe. She took her own sweet time before speaking.

“I can understand why Liam likes you,” she said.

My eyes were riveted to her.

“I think you *are* gay,” she said simply.

My brain went ‘tilt’, like it did this back flip. I seemed to have lost the power to move. Slowly, Ann leaned into me again, even closer than before. We were almost touching. This time I could smell her. I could almost *feel* her across the inch of air between our lips. My breathing stopped.

Then Ann closed the inch.

It wasn’t much of a kiss, as kisses go. It was a soft invitation of a kiss but... oh my God...

Ann pulled back a little, carefully studying me. Her colour was up too, and her normally blue eyes were black.

“You freaked out?” she whispered.

“No... Yes.”

She pulled back a little further. “Have you ever done this before?” she asked. I looked suddenly at her, a thought entering my head.

“Have *you*?”

She held my gaze for a moment, then shook her head.

“Me neither,” I said.

Ann smiled, a little. Her 24/7 brain was still functioning. My own was experiencing instant onset dementia. After a moment she leaned into me again and ran her fingers through my hair.

“Freaked out, but okay?” she whispered. She let her fingernails scratch lightly down the back of my neck and up again. It’s not decent to tell you what effect that had on me. But ‘Okay’ didn’t really cover it. I drew in a breath then slowly let it out. I nodded very slightly. She slowly leaned forward and let her soft lips fit back into mine.

It was like nothing I can describe. It was like... melting... *into* her. Kissing Ann just felt... *right*. Like coming home. I kissed her back this time and had the satisfaction of hearing her make a little gasping sound. That made me want to kiss her harder and so I did, pushing her back a bit towards the wall. Then her tongue was licking against mine and then it was flicking my top lip and suddenly it was me that let out a moan. Oh God! I pulled back, breathing like I’d just done half an hour’s star jumps.

I looked down at her. She was sort of lying half on the pillows, half against the wall. She was breathing roughly and her pupils looked massive. I could hardly look at her, she was so stupefyingly gorgeous. Lying there. Who the fuck *was* I? It was like, from one second to the next, a spell had been cast over me and I

didn't have any choice. That was me, the helpless little rebel fighter being tractor beamed into Ann's Death Star. Captured.

Looking up at me, Ann took my hand and led it to her breast. I watched my hand, almost as though nothing I could see belonged to me. Then I was touching her. I could feel her nipple underneath her t-shirt, through her bra. Words fail me here and I'm not going to even try to tell you how amazing that felt and what it did to me. I leaned forward and kissed her again, and again until I lost myself.

CHAPTER NINE

I woke up in Ann's arms.

I lay there listening to the birds, my back warmed by Ann's naked body, her arms surrounding me. The dawn light drifted in through the lace curtains making everything look golden and other worldly. With a start, I realised we'd forgotten to close the blinds. Ouch. My mind flashed back to some of the things we had been doing, and I *really* hoped no one had been out there. But then I remembered that Ann's window looked onto the backyard, so it was probably cool. The agapanthus wouldn't mind too much.

I pushed my body back fractionally into Ann's, and squidged around the tiniest little bit. Just to feel her skin... all of it... against mine. Oh my God. I rubbed my cheek against her inner arm, which was stretched out under my chin. It was sooo smooth. I was like, cocooned in her warmth and softness. It's impossible to describe how I felt at that moment, because I wasn't sure it was actually *me* feeling it. In that translucent morning light, I felt like a character in a book or in a film. It was like being someone *else*. Someone who actually *did* stuff like this.

Ann's top arm tightened around my waist, pulling me back into her. I felt her press into me from behind and snuggle her cheek into my neck. She let out this little hum of contentment.

"Good morning," she purred.

I turned my body over onto my back to look at her. Yep. Still gorgeous. Actually, extra gorgeous, with that blonde bed hair, mascara under the eyes, messed up morning look. I seriously never wanted to get vertical again.

"We f... forgot to close the blinds," I said. Ann didn't move. She just raised her eyes to look sleepily at the window, uncomprehending. Evidently, her cogs needed time to warm up. I'd never seen her so... *dreamy*. It was delicious.

"We forgot the blinds," she repeated slowly.

Suddenly, in a dirty underhanded attack, Ann grabbed both my hands and dragged them up to my shoulders, pinning me down. Laughing, she threw her naked weight on top of me. I pushed back against her hands, enough to test her strength but not seriously trying to escape. Let her dream.

"We forgot the blinds. Is that all you've got to say?" She smiled wickedly.

"I h... hope your neighbours k... keep early hours," I said.

"Fuck the neighbours," she said, as she lowered her mouth to the corner of my throat and started making play with her lips and teeth. I threw my head back and gasped. Right there was a reason to not try too hard to get away.

“Better still,” she smiled smoothly, blatantly enjoying the control. “Why waste energy on the neighbours.” Then keeping eye contact until the last moment, she leaned down and lightly nipped at my nipple, following on with her tongue. Jesus Christ. It was like having an on button.

So let’s just say that a couple of very fun hours later, I was sitting at the Cavanaugh breakfast table looking indecently happy, with Ann, her parents, her sister and little brothers, eating French toast with bacon and maple syrup. This was the Sunday morning Cavanaugh thing to do. The light, open-plan family room felt like it was literally bursting with people, kids and noise. I mean, how was it possible that so many people could live together in this one little space. Six of them, plus one ridiculously happy mutt called ‘Charlie’.

The house wasn’t squalid, exactly. I mean, it was clean, sort of. (They clearly didn’t have a Rebecca.) But it was tight and cluttered and just well, small. I totally ‘got’ why Ann didn’t bring friends home for sleepovers. People like Grace and Laura probably had their own ‘wing’... Like I did.

The boys, who were about nine or ten, were fighting about who was having too much maple syrup on how many pieces of French toast, and appealing loudly to a higher jurisdiction. This was either Ann or their mother, Lynette, depending on whose attention

they could get. I noticed that Ann had almost as much authority as Lynette. The age gap and Ann’s natural born tendency to rule the universe explained that, I supposed. I also noticed that the maple syrup was ‘flavoured’ and not from an actual Canadian tree. I hoped the eggs were free range.

Ann’s sister, Janine, who looked about 15, just scowled at the French toast, wasn’t going to eat anything, and was still whinging about not being allowed to go to the party last night. Everyone was ‘liking’ it this morning. It was so unfair. Despite the pierced eyebrow, the blue streaks in her hair and the pout, Janine was pretty enough too, but too try hard alternative to take seriously. I got the impression that not all the girls in the Cavanaugh family were scholarship material.

Ann’s Mum, Lynette, looked disturbingly like Ann, but with more wrinkles. Lynette’s hair was darker though, which made me wonder if Ann’s hair was dyed, or bleached or whatever the right word is. Streaked? Anyway, Lynette was decent looking for someone so old. She wasn’t ‘stunning’ like Sandra, but she was what you might call ‘well fit’, if you actually said that sort of thing. From the way she handled the boys, Lynette seemed like someone who didn’t raise her voice much, but who was in charge anyway. Apparently she worked part-time somewhere in admin at a hospital.

At one point, Ann's Dad said something about 'my class', so I guessed he was a teacher. He had stacked on the kilos and was bald on top. It often goes like that, doesn't it? The woman keeps herself 'nice'. The man goes to seed. Ann's Dad came across as a bit, well... pathetic. But maybe that was just in comparison to the dynamic double act of Ann and her mother. I found myself wondering (at the speed of thought) what my Dad looked like now. Did he still row? Had he lost any hair? How old would he be? Forty-six? He was always a couple of years younger than Sandra. But my Dad had never felt weak. He was a literal tower of strength. At least, until Nathan died.

Lynette must have thought it was twenty questions time, because she was interrogating Ann about the night before like you wouldn't believe. Why were we so late? It was lucky we were together or it could have been dangerous. Who was at Ben's house? Why didn't Ben and Liam bring us home? Surely they didn't want 'you girls' wandering around at night by yourselves. Maybe they weren't to be trusted. If she *ever* (pointed look of frustration at Ann here) got to see Ben again she'd talk to him about it.

Ann defended 'the boys', sticking to the truth as much as possible, but embellishing creatively around the edges to make things sound more reassuring. She was scarily good at it. Even I believed her. Ann's Dad, who seemed genuinely horrified that his

daughter was wandering the streets at night, said that the sooner she got her licence the better. Then she could take the car and none of this would be an issue. It crossed my mind just then, that Ann wasn't getting her license on purpose, even though she was eighteen, exactly so that she *wouldn't* be forced to take her Mum's old car out with her at night. I bet if she'd had Lexi to drive around in, she would've got her license two seconds after turning 18.

It was hard for me to even imagine what it would have been like to grow up here. To have been in this one tiny house for years. To have other people watching your movements all the time. Asking questions. Interfering in your business. I do realise it's normally a parent's job, but it would drive me homicidal. Matricidal actually. I could see that Lynette wanted to know all about me, but was too polite to give me the third degree, at least to my face. Obviously she didn't have much chance to grill, that is, er, get to know Ann's 'friends'. I wasn't very forthcoming. Yes, I was settling in at school. Yes, I was a rower... Ann must have seen my expression, because she turned the conversation away from me and soon we were leaving the table.

While Ann was having a shower, I sat on her bed waiting. My body still tingled with the memory of touch, like the beginnings of an addiction. Everything about the last twenty-four hours felt surreal. I stood up, needing to move, and looked around the tidy,

little room. I went over to the desk and unstacked the books there, looking at the titles. School books only. *The Great Gatsby*. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Books we were studying in English. Other text books as well. Ann's files were all lined up neatly on the wall shelves. Thankfully, *not* alphabetised.

Next to it, above the desk was a cork noticeboard, with various notes and other things pinned to it. My eyes were drawn to a handmade 'chart', I guess you'd call it, with ruled up boxes that had been handwritten in blue pen. The first column was labelled 'event',

WHAT	WHEN	CLOTHES	WHO
Dinner at Max's	Nov 4	Blue vest, CR skirt, boots, cloche hat	Charlotte, Joy, Chrissie, Grace, Max Michaels, John/Cheryl
Cup day		Beige spotted outfit, straw hat, black sandals, (hair in plait)	Everyone! Jinny Lawler. Marg.
Ben's Xmas Party	Dec 16	Red satin top, pin striped pants, etc	Ben's family, <u>Mrs Tanner</u> , Stacie Tanner. Liam's family, <u>Mr Ruckston</u>
NYE - Stable party	NYE	Floral dress, white boots, pearls	Ben's family, Charlotte & Gary, Tony, Beth, etc. Marilyn, etc. Cricket group.
Dinner at Grace's	Feb- 7 th ?	Jeans, white HW top, blue vest, boots, gold owl necklace.	Grace family, etc, Liam, Chrissie, Paula, Joshua & Bec etc.

the second 'date', the third 'clothes' and the fourth 'who'. Intrigued, I leaned in closer to read it. Actually, it will be easier to explain if I draw it. It looked something like this:

And so on. You get the picture, I'm sure. At first, I couldn't quite comprehend what I was seeing. Then I hit me. Like OMG. She was even more... *What?... Snobbish? Shallow? Strategic? Organised? Brilliant?...* than I had imagined. I wasn't sure whether to ridicule or to admire her for it. I ran my finger further down the list. It was all there. What she wore to each party, or dinner or whatever, and who was there. Seriously... wow.

It was then that I got a pang of guilt about looking at the chart. I mean, this was like, way private. If things were reversed, I'd die if anyone saw a list like this of mine. *If* I'd made one, which *would be never*, but that wasn't the point. This was Secret Ann Business. Even if it was OMG... *bizarre*.

The door opened and I spun around. Ann came in, caught the expression on my face and stopped. Her eyes went straight to the noticeboard next to my head then back to me, as she instantly clocked what I had been doing. She flushed. I could see the red blotches creeping up over her pale chest, from where the white and mint striped towel was wrapped around her. Me, I just stood there

impersonating a goldfish, sort of opening and closing my mouth with nothing coming out but probably bubbles.

Ann's expression changed. With the flush still over her face, she closed the door, put on a playful smile and crossed to the desk towards me.

"It's not as bad as it looks."

Ann straightened a pin in one corner of the chart, then looked at me with impeccable composure.

"Finite resources. Tidy mind," she smiled. "It's what the royals do apparently."

She was going to tough it out. I shook my head slowly... *No*, I thought... It was definitely admiration.

"Y... you would have made *awesome* royalty," I said, meaning every syllable.

She laughed, with real eye crinkle. *Phew*. This was going to be okay.

"I still may," she said.

When I drifted back to my place later that morning, it was on a cloud of excitement bubbles, like snap, crackle and pop going off all around me. I felt alive, high, like I was floating in space.

As I walked into the huge white living area (that made Ann's place look like a set from 'The Borrowers'), I saw Sandra at the

dining table with her colleague, John. They were hunched together over a handful of laptops and several piles of paper, looking miserable.

Sandra glanced up. When she registered it was me, a worried expression spread across her face, and suddenly I remembered what had happened last time I saw her. Like, *yesterday*. In that other life.

Sandra looked fragile and exhausted. Her huge startled eyes stared at me anticipating... She sat up straight, clearing her throat.

"Ah, John, this is Georgia. My um..." Sandra's eyes widened as I continued my drift across the room towards them. I'd actually met John like fifteen times, but Sandra forgot every time. I gave John a kiss on the cheek. Sandra's jaw fell open.

"... daughter..." Sandra finished, staring at me. I gave her a kiss on the cheek too, then floated off towards the kitchen door and towards my wing of the house. I needed to get to my gym and burn off some of, whatever *this* was, so I could get back to myself. It was like one of those movies where you wake up and you're in someone else's body.

I was too happy to be me.

CHAPTER TEN

A week went by. Life was filled with the usual things. School. Rowing. Homework. Mum getting in late. The year was going on like most years do...

Oh... *COME ON*. Who am I kidding. I promised you I'd be honest. It was more like this...

School. Rowing. *Ann*.

Mum coming home late. *Ann*.

Mr Chopra. *Ann*.

Eating. *Ann*.

Sleeping. *Ann*.

Breathing and walking down the street. *Ann*.

Just breathing. *Ann. Ann. Ann.*

Not that I was obsessed, right. And not like Ann actually *helped* at all with that. I'd be like, walking along the senior corridor minding my own business and I'd get a text from her saying "How's your life?" Then I'd turn the corner and see her waiting for me with this evil smile on her face. Or in maths, Miss 'Butter-Wouldn't-Melt' would scribble in the corner of her book, *If imaginary numbers are not doing it for you...* I'd look at her perplexed and she'd finish the

note saying, *First floor toilets. Last cubicle when the bell goes*. I mean, you can see the problem, right. Obviously, it was all hush hush. There was like, no outward sign of anything going on. And luckily we were both experts at keeping a straight face. No pun intended. But now *I* was Secret Ann Business. And she was mine. And that felt, well, awesome.

The stuff with Mum-being-a-total-loser-about-Nathan's-birthday had blown over, or to be more accurate, it had been put away with all the other blown over 'Stuff with Mum', in the 'Don't ask. Don't tell.' file of unsaid, unforgotten incidents. As much as I hate to admit it (because at the time I went kicking and screaming), it was probably a good thing that I'd done all that counselling. The number of words Mum and I have ever said to each other about Nathan after he died could be counted on fingers and toes. See, that's another advantage of being rich. You get to outsource.

And there was still that other tiny little thing. The Royal Schoolgirls was fast approaching and I was still training my butt off to demolish Ann. And I knew Ann was doing exactly the same thing. (Actually the more I train the bigger my butt gets, but let's not be too technical about this.) Ann was right about what she said. Only one of us could win the open single, and I thought it was going to be me. When it came down to those last five hundred metres, I reckoned I'd have the edge, if for no other reason than my height

and strength advantage giving me greater coverage across the water. I also knew my own endurance. Mind you, she was accustomed to a higher stroke rate, and her technique was faultless... *Nah...* I had reason to be confident. When I was in the zone, I was unbeatable. But it was weird. As much as I was determined to win, it was also sort of creeping up on me that it was going to be tough on Ann. I mean, she wanted to win as much as me, probably. She trained hard too. She had a lot to lose. She was going to feel like shit. And now, it felt like that was *my problem* as well.

Anyway, that Thursday after school, I was at the river, in the boathouse shed, for a session of on-water training. I was staring blankly at my unrigged shell, hanging on its rack, and vaguely contemplating all this. Unless you're a rower, you're probably not aware of this, but there's a fair bit of rigging involved in rowing. You've got to fit up the shell (that's the name for the unfitted boat) to suit you; the oarlocks, seat slides, footboards, front and back stops and so on, all have to be adjusted to your stroke and body.

Some people, some rowers that is, hate the business of rigging up the boat. Me? I dig it. I love getting the fittings just right, getting the distances perfect, making sure that the boat will fit you like a glove. And you already know I love boathouses. It must be from like, being around them since day dot. I love the coolness. The smell of dampness, bodies and water. I love standing inside the boathouse

and looking out through the bleached square of the open doors, past the stacks of boats, to the wide river beyond. Born to row, me.

I was lifting my boat down from the rack when I felt its weight suddenly lighten. I turned, knowing someone had picked up one end of the boat.

Liam.

He stood still, looking cautiously at me in the shadowy light of the boatshed. I held his gaze for just a moment, then turned away, willing myself not to redden. To be honest, I'd sort of forgotten about him.

"How's the hammies?" Liam asked. His tone was aiming for 'casual' but he only made it as far as 'lame'.

We turned the boat over and lowered it to the floor. I snuck a glance at him. He looked way uncomfortable. I knelt down and began to fiddle with the footboard, totally pretending he wasn't there.

"Look," I heard his voice falter, as he squatted on the other side of the boat across from me. "Sorry about the other night," he said. I didn't look at him.

"I was a complete fuck-head."

Yep. True.

“I... I just wanted to apologise. In person, yeah?”

I looked up at him. His face was scarlet with mortification.

“Not that I could find you,” he went bravely on. “You’re like the original mystery woman. No one knows where you are, where you live. Couldn’t find you on Facebook... I don’t suppose you’re like Cat Woman or something, with a secret identity.” He tried to smile, but it was pitiful, like a dog that shits on your lounge room carpet. You know, head down, ears flat, tail wagging the tiniest little bit in pathetic hope... Okay, he didn’t take it that far, but that’s what sprang to mind. I must be a real alpha bitch though, because I didn’t relent.

“Seriously,” Liam said, mustering courage. “I’m... I want you to know that, I’m not usually like that. I’m really... *ridiculously* embarrassed.”

I stared into him. Okay, yes, he did genuinely *look* ridiculously embarrassed. I frowned, beginning to soften.

“And sorry,” he added. “*Really.*” He grasped his hands together in a kind of mock plea and adopted a cockney accent.

“Ave pitti on me Guvnor. It was me ‘ormones what got out o’ control like. That’s what did dunnit,” he said. “I didn’t mean no ‘arm like. I just got all come over like... Innit.”

“That’s ... pathetic,” I said harshly.

“I know,” he said in all seriousness. “I know.” Then he added, “I’ll grovel.”

“G... g... go on then.”

Liam burst into a smile, and I almost did as well, but I looked away. Seriously, the guy was hard to resist when he smiled like that. And, like I said before, I really did like him... *usually*. It was all a bit confusing really.

“Forgive me?”

I held his hopeful gaze for a long moment. Alright, maybe he’d suffered enough. To err was human, to forgive... And anyway, I was simply too happy to hold a grudge for long.

“On one c... con... d... dition...” I said.

“That I help you train?” Liam offered hopefully, tail wagging, ears up. I shook my head.

“Th... that you never, ever... t...” I paused. He looked worried, “... never tell anyone about m... my secret identity.”

He laughed. *Relief*. It was stamped all over his face. He beamed gratefully at me. I looked away. We wouldn’t be starting all that again thanks.

“Help me with the sc... boat,” I said, not looking at him. Together we carried it out front of the boathouse.

That weekend, Thomo scheduled a special session with Ann and me on the water. Presumably (but not actually stated), to ‘help him decide’ who to put into the Div 1 single. Like I said, ergs are vital to seat selection, but not absolutely everything. And in the end, it’s the coach’s call. End of story. Maybe Thomo wanted to see us on the water together to get more information, or maybe... and I thought this was more likely... Thomo wanted to give himself a reason for putting Ann into the single over me. I bet you a million bucks, if her erg was better than mine, we wouldn’t be doing any on-water ‘try outs’.

Now, if I were all muscle, great erg readout and no on-water technique, I’d have reason to be worried. But I’m not. My technique is great. So with a stronger erg and similar on-water style, that place in the single scull *must* be mine. Short of a baseball bat to the kneecaps, that is.

To be honest, I was dying to test myself against Ann on the water. And I bet the reverse was true as well. I was only guessing though because Ann and I didn’t talk about the single anymore. It had turned into one of those invisible elephants and joined the herd. Maybe Ann believed that she had as much reason as I did, to be confident about getting into the Div 1 final. I didn’t know.

Anyway, there we were, lined up side by side on the river, rigged up and ready to go. The sun was just up and there was a little

light traffic on the river, but not so much that it would stop us racing a few hundred metres upstream. Thomo was on the bank astride a bicycle, megaphone in hand. Ann looked across at me and smiled. She looked pumped.

“Okay girls. Get ready,” Thomo called through the megaphone. He spoke inaudibly into a walkie-talkie. Further up the river along the bank, another Greystones’ girl waved an arm at Thomo, signalling the all clear. I saw Ann turn and focus inward, preparing herself.

“Okay, get ready...” Thomo cried. “In position... Set... GO!”

Ann was out quicker than me and stroking hard. But I could keep up quite easily. From next to her, it was easy to get a good look at her. Her stroke was smooth and powerful. No effort going to waste. You could write books about her style. It was so clean. So efficient. And naturally, Ann herself looked immaculate (gorgeous actually) on the water. Strong, accurate, focussed...

Suddenly it occurred to me, as my neck had to turn further back, that all this thinking was getting me behind and that Ann had got in front by almost two metres while I had been observing her. I put my back into it and picked up my pace. Quickly, I gained water on her and by about four hundred we were less than a metre apart.

“Alright, fifty metres then stop,” cried Thomo, from the bank.

Ann glanced over at me. I pulled harder to catch up. I was gaining on her. She really dug in and lifted her speed. I followed. We were neck and neck.

“Okay. That will do. Bring it down,” Thomo called out.

I looked across at the bank and could see Thomo about ten metres behind me on the bike path. I started to slow. This little exercise hadn’t really told him, me or anyone much. I mean you can’t *really* race on a city river. I glanced at Ann and caught her just turning back from looking behind her. She had an evil smile on her face. She looked at Thomo then at me.

“Ten bucks first to the bridge,” she called across to me, glancing up stream.

I glanced behind. The bridge was about five hundred metres up the river and the river was totally clear of traffic. All good. I looked back to her. I heard Thomo’s amplified voice.

“Ann. George. Bring it in. Stop...”

I smiled at Ann and nodded. And then we were *really* racing.

Excitement surged through my body as I crunched my muscles into action. Brilliant! Ann was all focus, forcing her oars through the water at an alarming rate. I picked up my cadence and drew my attention into my body. Head down and PULL... PULL... Distantly I heard Thomo’s voice saying,

“Symons. Ann... *Ann!*... STOP. Now... ”

I glanced up and caught sight of Thomo, just in time to see him run his bike into a tree, seriously like something out of *Dumb and Dumber*. I saved laughing for later and dug deep into my strokes. Ann and I were was still level but now I *needed* to get ahead of her. Stroke. Stroke... She glanced at me and pulled even harder. God, I loved how competitive she was. It was written over every inch of her body. She made that stroke work for her, forcing every inch out of each stroke. I ramped it up. My breathing became fierce and my muscles started to burn.

Now we were in full sprint. I glanced around to find the bridge, still about two hundred away. Earnest now, I pulled with all my strength. My stroke lifted and I was slowly making ground. Ann pulled harder. Sweating and puffing like a lady shouldn’t. She was catching up. She is amazing.

Focus.

Just look at her though.

Focus will you.

I narrowed my attention to my arms and legs and guts. Pull... Pull... Pull... Work those legs. That’s it.

I glanced quickly back again to locate the bridge. It was less than one hundred metres away and rushing towards us. I began to turn back when I caught the shape of a small dark motorboat tearing out from under the arch of the bridge, *way* faster than it

should have been going. It was bearing down directly on Ann. I screamed,

“Boat!... Behind! Traffic!”

Ann spun around. She saw the boat and instantly pulled hard on her right oar, bringing her in my direction. I glimpsed the occupants of the boat, laughing, drinking blokes in their twenties. I yelled and waved wildly. The driver looked up, clocking Ann’s boat. Twenty metres. Shit. Too fast. Going to hit. The motorboat arced sharply away. Ten metres. Oh God. Nothing I can do. Ann throws herself over the side of her boat and goes under. I flatten my oars out to stabilise my boat and brace. A second later the motorboat slices past, cutting Ann’s right oar in half as it arcs away, violently upheaving her scull. There’s a crack. Pieces of oar go flying. I rock heavily in the bow wave of the boat, which is now tearing away down the river. One guy turns. Laughs. Gives me the finger. Arsehole.

No time to think about that. My heart is pumping. Where’s Ann? I scan the water. Shout her name. The water visibility is zero. She *must* be between our boats. I jump in. *FUCK*. It’s freezing! I can’t see anything, just clay coloured water as I slip deeper. I’m doing this by feel. I can barely see my hands on the end of my arms. I dive deeper guessing where she might be. It gets darker. Now I really can’t see a thing. I’m surrounded by mucky brownness even

though my eyes are open. I feel around with hands and feet. Nothing and more nothing. Panic rises. The current pulls me along and I fight against it trying to stay where I think Ann will be. I swim around in circles, straining to feel anything. I look up. Nothing but a gradient of light beams leading to the surface. My lungs ache for breath. I search around again. I must breathe.

I surface closer to the bridge than I thought. Disorientated, I look wildly around. Ann is maybe ten metres from me, near the bridge. She’s calling my name.

“Ann!” I yell. She turns and sees me. Huge relief all round. I swim over to her.

“Are you alright?” I call to her.

“I’m fine,” she calls back. I reach her and look closely at her. She looks pale, shaken.

“Did you hit your head?”

“No nothing. I’m fine.”

I drag her towards a pillar of the bridge. Ann grabs the pillar footing and holds on. I tread water and look at her face.

“Do you feel dizzy?”

“No.”

“You didn’t black out or hit your head?”

“No. And my memory’s fine too. You just asked me that,” she smiles trembling despite her ‘brave’ face.

“Fucking arseholes. They missed you by like, a metre,” I say.
“Arsesholes. They were laughing. He went right through your oar.”

Ann grimaces. She hadn’t realised just how close it was.

“I jumped in and went down deep, in case he went over the top of me. I stayed down as long as I could. Just in case.” I nod.

“Yeah...”

Good thinking, girl.

Ann turned towards our boats. I turned too. Ann’s boat looked okay, just overturned. Touch wood. My boat was fine. They were both floating, like unclaimed wreckage, gently downstream towards the boathouse. She shook her head, shifting gears.

“We’re so in for it.”

I nodded.

“I do one dumb thing...” she groaned. You could *see* her crunch back into problem solving mode, even though she was still trembling.

“It’ll be okay. I’ll straighten it out with Thomo,” she said, thinking out loud. She looked at me. “Don’t mention the motorboat. He’ll freak. I just lost my oar... somehow.”

“L... like he’ll believe that. How do you j... just lose an oar?”

“You come up with something better,” she said.

We were both up to our necks in it. Literally. The water was lapping around us. Sunlight bounced off its surface, throwing shards of light against the dark arches of the bridge.

“It would be you and me,” Ann said. “If it were anyone else they would just pay for the new oar. Problem solved.” This caught me off guard, but it didn’t matter because she was instantly strategising again.

“Anyway, Thomo *needs* us on the team,” she said.

“We’d better get those b... boats before someone else runs over them,” I said, wanting to turn the conversation.

“Absolutely,” Ann said, moving her body into my space and putting her arms around me. Just for comfort, I think. I held her back.

Some minutes later we were on the riverbank with three oars, two wet boats and one ballistic rowing coach. Ann was magnificent. She had obviously decided that the best strategy was abject apology, and as she was telling the story (and I do mean *story*) of what had happened, she was holding back tears and looking fragile. She honestly still may have been in shock for all I knew, but it was an Oscar winner of a performance. I hung my head in ‘shame’. I mean, if Ann could produce tears, I could at least look remorseful. I put my head down and tried to summon what remorse might look like.

Ann was really, really, *really* sorry. (Choke.) She didn't know what she was thinking. She was a bad example to the others. She'd replace the oar. Maybe she should resign as Captain... And so on... But most impressive of all to *me* was the...

"Don't blame George. It's not her fault. It was my idea. I mean, we haven't had the chance to properly try out on the water. I just wanted to see... It's my fault. I should have known better."

I glanced sideways at her. I was... well... touched. I mean, I actually was touched. I couldn't remember the last time someone had leapt to my defence like that. Or if it had *ever* happened. I was overcome with a wave of some powerful emotion I couldn't identify... Gratitude? Guilt? No... something less cerebral...

But that was Ann, right? The hero. It was in her DNA to be noble. And whatever Ann's motivation, or the consequences, I could see Thomo totally admired her for it. She was the Captain. The one who takes it on the chin for the team. People respect that. Thomo began to soften towards us, or towards Ann at least, and me by association. In the end, though, he frowned and said it couldn't just blow over and that 'there would have to be serious consequences.' But at least it didn't look like we were getting thrown out of the team.

Ann and I limped the sculls back to the boathouse and checked them over. They were fine, thank God. So was Ann. But the oar would have to be replaced. This seemed to upset Ann more than anything else. There was 'no way' she could tell her parents or ask them for money... and she wasn't working at the moment. I told her that I had some money saved and that I could pay for it, or at least lend her some money to pay for her 'half' of the oar, until she could pay me back. She seemed genuinely grateful, and relieved at that, but added thoughtfully that *first*, she would see what she could do about getting Thomo to write the cost off. He might do it, given a bit of time. The club could afford it more easily than either of us. It occurred to me then, for the three millionth time, that I was going to have to fess-up soon about this being rich thing... but this wasn't that time, right.

There was a major buzz going on as we walked into the upstairs gym. Everyone was talking and crowding around the far wall. Some girls walking away in tears. Some looking exultant. Everyone was focussed on a piece of paper, pinned on the noticeboard there.

Ann halted. She knew what it was. So did I. The prelim seat list had gone up.

Nerves grabbed at my stomach. I glanced involuntarily at Ann.

This was it.

The sea of girls seemed to split as Ann made her way through the crowd to the noticeboard. There were subdued glances and whisperings in her direction. I followed in her wake, also receiving hushed sideways looks from the younger girls. Ann got to the noticeboard. It took her fully one second to process what was there. Then she strode fiercely away without looking back at me or anyone.

I went up to the noticeboard after her. I'll cut to the chase...

The Division 1 Single 1500 metres was still blank. All other seats for the regatta had been provisionally listed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Okay.

So there we were.

I walked away from the board, my own brain cogs turning hard. What did this mean? Surely Thomo wasn't going to put someone other than Ann or me into the single. That would be suicide. Wouldn't it? Could he be that dumb? *That* pissed off... *Really?* Was this the 'serious consequences' he talked about? Or did he just want to make us suffer for a while longer? Keep us on our toes. Maybe play us off against each other? I didn't know. I didn't know him that well. Ann did though. And she seemed pretty upset.

When I walked into the locker room looking for her, Ann was getting undressed by her locker. She looked gutted. I went right up to her and said in a low voice,

"W... what do you think this means?"

She kept getting undressed, not acknowledging that I had spoken.

"Ann?"

She looked at me. Her eyes were brimming with tears.

"What do *you* think it means," she said harshly.

"I... don't know."

"It means he's going to put *you* into the single," she snapped. She was straining not to cry. My treacherous heart gave a little leap of hope.

"W... why do you think that?" I asked.

"If he was going to put me in the single, he would have done it by now. He would have told me," she said, then added, "This is my punishment."

"B... but I did it too," I said. Ann turned fiercely on me.

"Yes, but I'm the Captain, aren't I."

"M... maybe he wants to p... put someone else into the single?" I suggested. "Not one of us."

She frowned while her brain processed this for a millisecond, then rejected it outright.

"He's not that stupid," she said. Ann ripped off her T-shirt and chucked it into her locker. Hard.

"He's decided that *you're* the best bet to win the single, but he's too gutless to tell me," she said. Her emotions overtook her. "Maybe he's using this morning as an *excuse* to put you in the race. Maybe he's a fucking coward and this is what he was wanting to do all along." Her voice choked. "Probably," she added.

Ann grabbed her towel and headed swiftly for a shower cubicle. On instinct, I strode after her. Before she could lock the

cubicle behind her, I squeezed through the door and closed it. She stared angrily at me.

“You can still win the doubles,” I said pathetically.

Ann scoffed. “With Christine?” she said.

“With m... me,” I said.

It was out before I knew what I was saying. Ann stood still, looking at me. Measuring. There was a long pause.

“Don’t fuck with me,” she said carefully. I looked steadily back at her.

“I’m not,” I said. All of a sudden, I was *sure* that this was the right thing to do. Ann was gauging me carefully. I could see she wasn’t convinced.

“It only seems... f... fair,” I said. “If I’m going to d... do the single.” I stepped towards her. Ann looked down, unsure.

“It’s j... just... right,” I repeated.

Not since Nathan, had I wanted to make anyone feel better, as much as I wanted to make *her* feel better right then... I put a tentative arm around her shoulder and drew her towards me. She let herself be pulled in, resisting just a little, then finally rested her head into my shoulder. We stayed like that for a long time.

I felt an urge to say something reassuring about the single... but that would’ve been totally fake. So I didn’t say anything. I thought Ann was right, about what she’d said about Thomo

choosing me over her. It made sense. And I was *glad* he did. I wouldn’t have given that seat up for anything, not even for Ann. The open single was *my* event.

But at the same time, I wanted to help her... And I *could*. By winning her the double. We’d obliterate the record together and she’d still get noticed by the scouts. She’d still get her precious scholarship.

Actually, when I thought about it, it made more and more sense. Now Thomo could put Ann into the Div 2 single and she’d win that for the squad. Another gold for the medal tally. He must’ve realised there was no way *I* was going down to Div 2. I’d quit first. But Captain Ann would. If she had to. He was smarter than I thought... *Kudos Thomo*.

I stroked my hand down Ann’s hair, trying to comfort her... Like who would’ve thought I’d be capable of *that* two weeks ago? Ann lifted her head and looked up at me with those penetrating blue eyes. She was still hurting, but she was calmer at least. I didn’t know what to say. Neither did she. There didn’t really seem much to be said.

So I kissed her instead.

I ended up back at Ann's place again that night. It somehow seemed the natural thing to do. I texted Sandra to let her know and got back this reply.

K

She must have had a minute to spare later, because in about a half an hour she texted again,

“Have fun sweetie.”

Okay Mum... If you *insist*... Insert blushing winking emoji here.

So, I'd never given it any thought to this point, why would I have? But it occurred to me as I was lying with Ann in her bed that night, that it was much, much easier having a girlfriend than a boyfriend, if only from a logistical point of view. I mean, I know I'm an exception because I can do whatever I want without Sandra caring, but imagine if say, Ann, to take a random person, wanted to have a guy stay for a 'sleepover'. There would be frowning parental faces all round and at the very least, excruciating conversations about birth control and safe sex. And OMG... I mean, you'd rather die, right? I know I would. But here I was, with zero fuss involved, sleeping over at Ann's place in her tiny single bed, getting up to 'all

kinds of things', and everybody thought it was just lovely. It was the ultimate in flying under the radar.

So, anyway, I was lying on my side with my cheek resting in the hollow of Ann's shoulder, you know the bit I mean, between the shoulder bone and the throat there, and she was lying on her back with her arms around me, her fingers running up and down the curve of my back. Our bodies moulded and fit together in a way that made it obvious to me that we were *specifically* tailored for each other, like we were the new argument for intelligent design. I knew the laws of physics prevented my getting any physically closer to her, but I squished my body into hers anyway, because it felt so good to try. If I were Angel, I would have been purring my head off.

“Have you always stuttered?” Ann said, out of the blue.

I tensed. I mean... give a girl some warning. Ann sensed my reaction and looked at me, a little surprised.

“Sorry, I didn't mean... It doesn't matter. To me, that is...”

I didn't say anything.

“Are you sensitive about it? Sorry.” She leaned up on her elbow and looked into my eyes in her candid way. “I mean, like, it couldn't have been easy, right... as a kid...?” She left the question hanging in the air.

I was at a loss as to how to go on here. This was heading into dangerous territory. I'd only ever talked about it with my shrink,

and the various speech therapists of course. I'd never tried to talk to a *real* person about it. I didn't know if I *could*. I sat up and stared at my hands. Ann sat up next to me. I was aware of her looking at me.

"You don't have to tell me," she said eventually. "It's fine. Honestly."

"I w... w... was twelve," I said, amazed at myself for saying anything. Ann nodded.

"I thought it was usually like, little kids?" she said. "Isn't that unusual, to start stuttering at twelve?" I nodded.

"It's rrr-rare," I said, my pulse racing.

"Did something bring it on then?"

As usual, Ann was so sharp you could cut yourself on her. I felt my whole body clench and tried not to look as though I was free falling. This could only lead to one place. Was I really about to tell her about Nathan? Ann took my hand.

"Seriously, if it's a big deal, don't talk about it if you don't want to. It's cool," she said reassuringly. She brushed the hair away from my face with the other hand. "I think it's cute... It's *you*."

My heart was pounding. It was actually, genuinely, terrifying, the thought of talking about Nathan. Like I was about to leap out of a plane.

"M... my brother died," I said, throwing myself over the edge.

I was looking down, at her hand, holding my hand. Like I was having an out of body experience.

"... Oh God," I finally heard. "That's..."

There was another massive silence.

"That's awful, that's just... God... horrible..." Ann took both my hands in hers.

"Older? Younger?" I heard her say.

"A year... younger," I said, literally 'speaking to the hands'. Ann squeezed both my hands tightly. It slowed the free fall, anchoring me to her.

"You poor thing," she said.

"It's okay," I said, lying. "It was f... five years ago."

"Yeah, but..." she said, pulling back to see my face. "It's not the sort of thing you get over... I imagine. I mean... *God*. Your poor parents. How do you get over that?"

You don't, I thought. Nobody does. Sandra definitely hasn't. I haven't. Who even knows what happened to Dad. There was another prolonged pause.

"And the stutter..." Ann said, carefully, "... started after he... passed?" I nodded.

"Traumatic onset," she murmured. I glanced at her. That was the thing about Ann, you never had to explain anything to her. Her mind was just so fast.

“That’s w... what they say,” I said.

“I presume you’ve done therapy and all that?” she asked, cutting to the chase. I nodded.

“U... up to here,” I said ironically, marking a line across my forehead. Ann smiled gently, pausing for a moment before saying,

“And if you don’t mind me asking... What happened? To your brother.”

“L... leukaemia,” I said. She sighed and shook her head.

“God, that must have been just... horrible.”

I nodded, flashing back to just *how* horrible it was. Nathan’s face. Nathan’s dead face. The empty bed. I shook my head to clear away the images.

“What’s his name?”

I glanced sharply at her. Took a controlling breath.

“Nathan,” I said. Tears prickled through to the surface at that point, but luckily I’m not a crier anymore. I let out a sharp exhale, getting myself back under control.

God must have needed him in Heaven. You’ll meet him again up there, they all said. Like that wouldn’t mean that God was an arsehole. If God was good and kind, like they said, he would have left Nathan here where he belonged.

I wished I *could* believe in a God, any God, even if he *was* an arsehole. At least then there would be some meaning to it all.

“How did your Mum cope?” Ann said, snapping me back to the place in time and space where we actually were.

“Mum doesn’t c... cope. She works,” I said.

That must have sounded harsh because Ann looked at me curiously. She went on, treading carefully.

“What work does she do?”

I looked at Ann for a long time. *This* would be the time to come clean. The perfect opening...

“Retail,” I said. “Sselling... cosmetics.”

“Oh really? Where?” Ann went on, trying to seem less interested than she was.

“All... all over the place,” I said dismissively, closing the topic. I just couldn’t do it. Not now... but soon.

Ann took the hint and didn’t pursue it. Instead, she put both her arms around me and hugged me tight. I hugged her back. It felt safe. There was nowhere in the whole world, honestly, that I would have rather been at that moment. Nowhere. That’s really saying something, isn’t it?

That next Saturday morning, Liam turned up at the boathouse for my on-water training session. He also turned up on Monday for

erg training and for weights on Wednesday. Neither of us said anything about it but it wasn't long before it became pretty obvious that I had my own personal coach. Thomo seemed happy enough to have Liam 'assist' him with my training. I mean, coming so late into the squad, I wasn't really *his*, was I? And frankly, it was one less thing for Thomo to have to think about.

In real life, having someone observe me as closely as Liam did when we were training, would make me want to initiate the cone of invisibility. But this was rowing, right, and for the first time ever, I could feel how working consistently with someone like Liam might actually improve your performance. It made me realise I'd been doing it the hard way. I mean, there are some things you just can't see about your own limitations. You need someone *vested*. Someone who *cares* about your progress to observe and give you feedback.

During our training sessions, Liam hadn't shown any more actual signs of, you know, *liking* me. Which was a relief and also helped the world to make more sense. I mean, it's not like I'm irresistible. No, seriously. I'm not. Not like *some* people I can think of. That night at Ben's place, Liam must have been on heat or something.

As I spent more time with Liam, I was getting to understand him better. The World According to Liam was a fine place to be. Skies were mostly blue, the sun always shone and, knowing that, in

Liam-land you could just like, take things as they presented themselves. He didn't burn up energy being on guard against catastrophe, or looking for hidden agendas. In Liam-land, things just worked out. That was the guiding principle. In Liam-land, you trusted life and you trusted people as a default setting, until otherwise proven. Bad things didn't happen. Or if they did, it wasn't the end of the world. Bad things could always be fixed. People like me *knew* this was total fantasy, but there was something I really admired about his ability to believe it. It felt, pure, or something.

Anyway, that next Thursday morning when we met at the boathouse gym, Liam decided he wanted me to do a time split for him. The gym was full of girls and the vacuum-cleaner-meets-jet-engine-noise of rowing machines.

"Just do what you would normally do," Liam said, above the thrumming of the other ergs. "I just want to see where you're at. Okay?" I nodded.

I sat down onto the sliding seat and let myself be still. For a trial like this you wanted to get yourself into the zone. It wasn't going to be easy though, because I could feel Liam's eyes on me. I took a few deep breaths, then purposefully slid forward and grabbed the rowing bar. I put my feet into the brackets, tightened the foot straps and leaned forward. Another breath, then I pushed back with my legs and began to pull slowly, working up to a medium pace. The

steady, repetitive rhythm of working out on an erg is always soothing to me. The sports equivalent of comfort eating, I suppose.

After a couple of minutes, I heard Liam's voice,

"Okay... You ready?" he said.

I nodded.

"Go!"

I ground into the next stroke, pumping with my legs and crunching through on the next drive with every muscle in my body; arms, legs, torso, back. Making it *work*. My body knew exactly what to do. I could let my mind go and get into the rhythm. Feel the power... Stroke... Stroke... Stroke... I got up to speed quickly, increasing my rating, maximising the power generated by each stroke, right through to the finish. I could feel my body doing just what it should be doing, just what I'd trained all these years to do.

"Three hundred," said Liam.

In a real race, I'd be out in front by now, cruising half a length in front of the others, gradually increasing my lead. I would have studied the other girls, known what I was up against, and I'd *know* by now that, short of a disaster, I'd be home in first place. That made me flash to an image of Ann. *If I were racing her... Would she be keeping pace with me at this point in a race?*

I realised I'd lost concentration and refocussed inward, increasing my stroke rate. I became acutely aware of Liam just

behind me, studying the LED screen and my numbers, timing my progress, watching my body... This was so not being in the zone.

"Five hundred," he said.

I kept it steady at this point, as I would at the halfway point in a race. I didn't need to do anything fancy to win. I would just keep on increasing my lead. And I *would* increase my lead, because with every stroke I produced, I cleared just a little more water than any of my opponents.

"Six hundred."

I heard a door bang and raised voices. Not breaking my rhythm, I glanced up. Across the room in front of me, I saw Thomo, Ann and Christine standing by the door. Christine was gesticulating, pointing a finger angrily at Ann, then making gestures of appeal to Thomo. She looked between Ann and Thomo, obviously looking for a response.

I kept rowing. Kept watching.

Ann shook her head and said something to Christine. She placed a hand on Christine's arm. Christine slapped it off. Ann's body language appealed to Christine, then Ann turned in frustration to Thomo, appealing to him and indicating Christine. Thomo, remaining calm, spoke gravely to Christine, who was now wiping away tears. She looked up at him then at Ann. She shook her head. Angry. Resigned. Angry. Ann took a small conciliatory step towards

her, then embraced Christine into a tentative hug. Christine hesitated, then hugged back momentarily before pulling away. She ran out of the room without looking back, wiping her tears. Ann turned and looked at Thomo. He put his hand on Ann's shoulder reassuringly. Ann nodded and looked at the floor.

"George?"

My eyes darted up at Liam. I'd forgotten he was there.

"Two hundred to go."

Pulling hard, I looked back at Ann in time to see her exiting the room. I glanced at Liam, pulled myself together, then knuckled down to some serious stroke making for the 'sprint'.

"Right. Got it," I replied.

The numbers weren't awesome that day, but they were still better than anyone else in the room could have produced, barring Liam of course. Anyway, he seemed pretty stoked with the result.

"You've got a great split. Really. Well, you know that... But it's like I said. You're still not getting full compression at the catch and you're relying too much on your quad and glute strength to compensate."

I nodded, breathing furiously after the exertion.

Liam sat down onto the central bar of the rower in front of me and picked up my right leg. I knew what was coming and grimaced.

He held my leg straight then pushed the top of my foot towards my body.

"Owwww!" I complained, wanting, but not trying to escape.

"When you've developed the kind of muscle mass that you have, or I have, it reduces the ability of the hamstring to stretch. That's why you've *gotta* do the hammie stretches. Five minutes a day, three times a day. At least," he said.

"Ooow. Ow!" I said.

"There's not long before the regatta, but if you actually *do* the stretches you'll be amazed at how quickly they can loosen up."

"Yes. Yes," I snapped impatiently, just wanting the pain to be over.

"Then why don't you do them?"

"Because it's fucking torture!" I said between gritted teeth.

Liam smiled and released the pressure on my hammie. I let out a groan and bent my leg a couple of times. God that hurt.

"Anyway, I *am* d... doing them," I said, petulantly.

Liam's hands ran up my shin and began to massage the calf muscle there. His clever fingers worked into the tight muscles on the back of my legs. It felt amazing. I looked at my leg then at him, not quite sure...

"May I?" he smiled slightly.

Oh what the... It felt insanely good and in the gym, it wasn't leading anywhere. I closed my eyes and tried not to actually moan in pleasure.

I'd arranged to meet up with Ann later that day after rowing. I stood under the granite arches of Princes Bridge, in the cool of the shade there, watching watery reflections dance across the curves above me. It was a busy time of night and along the path, between me and the water, workers were jogging and cycling their way home from work. I didn't have long to wait. Ann was always punctual, but as we know, I'm always early. It's a habit developed from years of spiritual discipline and training.

Anyway, Ann looked pumped as she charged around the corner of the bridge in my direction. Her face lit up when she spotted me. She ran directly to me, a little breathless. She'd been running to be on time and her perfect skin was rosy with exercise. I'm about two inches taller than Ann, so her eyes looked up into mine, making them even bigger and more show-stopping than usual.

I looked from her eyes to her lips and back again. Okay... So, she was gorgeous. And I really wanted to kiss her, but neither of us was about to do *that* in public, two hundred metres from the boathouse.

"I've got a present for you," Ann whispered, excited. She ripped off her backpack, pulled out a black shopping bag and handed it to me, her eyes gobbling up my face. I stared down at the bag like an idiot.

"Open it!" she ordered. "Go on."

I pulled out a cream and navy-blue striped singlet top, made in vintage Oxbridge style. Wide shoulders, wide stripes, black trim. You know the thing.

"It's perfect, isn't it!" Ann cried, looking to me for approval. "Do you like it?" She pulled out another identical top and stretched it against her own chest.

"Crew vests," she beamed.

I looked at her stunned. Struggling. Ann had purposely gone out shopping to find something for us to wear while training together. She'd made an actual effort, for *me... for us...*

"You don't like it." Ann's eyes scanned my face.

"No. No..." I said. "It's..."

"You don't like the colours," she interrupted. "I know they're a bit..."

"No... The colours are f... fine." I tried to sound reassuring.

"What then?"

I took a breath. Or two... maybe three...

"I'm not used to p... p..." I paused. "Presents," I said.

Ann looked at me with that frown she makes when she's trying to figure something out. She took the top and stretched it out across my chest, then leaned back and looked at me.

"Well you should be," she said. It was too much. I dropped my eyes. When I looked back up, she was still staring hotly at me. Any other two people in the history of the universe would have kissed each other right at that moment, but Ann and I both knew what it was to be disciplined.

"I'm going to buy you lots of presents," she said in a quiet steely voice.

My heart was going to beat right out of my chest. I felt my face flaming. I looked away, fumbling with folding the singlet top and shoving it back into the bag.

"Let's walk," I said, needing to move. My heart still thudding, I headed down the river towards the Southbank cafes. Ann threw on her backpack and chased after me, linking one arm through mine.

We walked on together for a long time, the wide brown river on our right and the granite ramparts of Southbank to our left. When I was with her like this, just one on one, Ann had this fantastic way of making me feel, well, not so... adrift. Especially when I was physically touching her, I'd noticed. It was weird. Like we somehow anchored each other. Ann squeezed my arm and smiled at me.

"I've been thinking," she said, eventually breaking the silence. "You know those American scholarships we talked about..." I looked at her and she went on. "That guy I said, that's coming from Berkeley, he's... They do have scholarships, merit based and means tested." She stopped walking. People passed us by on either side of the footpath.

"Imagine if we *both* got a scholarship," she said. "Imagine if we could go to America together. As a doubles crew." She grabbed my arms. "Imagine winning the double over there," she said. "It's possible... It's *possible*." Ann could already see it. It was right there, writ large across the sky... *Aussie Girls Kick U.S. Arse. Record Smashed.*

I smiled at her, totally awed. Ann Cavanaugh for President. Ann mustn't have liked the way I was smiling though, because smoke was drifting out of her nostrils.

"I'm serious George. It could happen."

"Okay," I replied. "S... Sounds good. Where do I sign?"

"I'm serious," she repeated, then added thoughtfully. "I mean it would be great to go to Harvard or Yale or... but this is really... this is really achievable." She added as an afterthought, "Harvard can wait 'til Post Grad."

I was dazzled by her audacity and self-belief. I mean, maybe it *was* all true. Maybe it could happen. We were an amazing rowing

double, no doubt about that. But what would we be like internationally? Were we *that* good? My eyes held hers. She went on,

“We’d have to break the record in the doubles. Seriously smash it. I don’t know if they’ve ever taken a team before, you know, for a scholarship, but...” She thought some more. “The guy doesn’t arrive apparently until just before the regatta so I can’t get to him before then. I’m not sure, but maybe I could get Thomo to email him? Put the idea into his head.” Those cogs in Ann’s head were out of control. She looked back at me. “Then on the day, we’d have to perform, of course. But that’s, you know...”

I did know.

As the days counted down towards the regatta, you could feel the tension in the squad rising. Girls’ splits were tested and compared. There were tears and triumphs as seat places were finalised. Thomo was on edge, constantly on the move. There was the whiff of victory in the air and he was chasing it.

At home, or rather, at the house we shared, Sandra seemed to be even more work obsessed than usual. She came home after I was in bed most nights and I could hear her working late in the lounge room. I inherited my muscles, my height and the colour of my eyes

from Dad but I reckon I must have got my work ethic from Sandra. It could’ve been worse. Could have been the other way round.

That Wednesday before the regatta, and Ann and I were doing an ‘extraordinary’ on-water doubles session after school with Liam. Honestly, I really didn’t give a shit about the doubles. My main game was, and always will be, the single. I was only doing it for Ann, which as you know is totally out of character for me. What was weird though, was once we got into it, I realised I was also doing it for the pure *pleasure* of rowing with her. I loved being in the boat with Ann, wearing our new crew tops, slicing along the river. She was a natural in the stroke seat, and I totally got into feeling her lead, following her cadence, minutely adjusting my own stroke to perfectly blend with hers. It gave me a massive buzz.

Anyway, on this day, there wasn’t much chatter on the water. Preparations for the Royal were at the pointy end, and Liam, Ann and I were all super focussed. Liam had been out on the river with us in a single to ‘get a closer look at what was happening in the boat’, or so he said. I think he just wanted to show off a bit of muscle and let us see his form on the river. Who could blame him? He looked awesome on the water. Powerful and controlled with long, neat, perfect strokes. But let’s not go there.

Anyway, after the session Liam, Ann and I were in front of the boathouse, warming down with some stretches. Liam glanced

briefly at Ann then turned to me. He looked awkward. There was something about his hesitation that put me on alert.

“Hey, um,” he said pausing. “This Saturday, it’s um, my *birthday!*” He made an ‘excited’ face. “And some friends are coming for drinks, on our boat. I thought maybe you’d, wanna come?”

I looked at him in surprise. What did this mean? This weekend was the regatta. I glanced at Ann. She looked away.

“It’s nothing full on,” Liam went on. “We’re just staying in the marina. We won’t be sailing the oceans blue or anything,” he smiled, surprisingly nervously. “Bad timing, I know.”

I looked again at Ann, but she was a study in minding her own business.

“That’s r... right in the m-m-middle of the regatta,” I said, in disbelief.

“True,” he said, knowing this was not a winning point, “but as your personal coach and sometime cheerleader, I promise you it will be early to bed.”

I blinked. Liam looked alarmed.

“No! I didn’t mean... I meant...” He smiled broadly, hopelessly giving up any pretence to charm, which was in itself endearing. “Just come for a drink. Non alcoholic and preferably containing no performance enhancing substances.”

“But... but the c... course is an hour away,” I said, glancing at Ann again, who was still not looking at me. Liam followed my eye line towards Ann.

“Oh, Ann’s coming,” Liam said, “...with Ben. Aren’t you, Ann? Thomo’s let her off for the night. As long as she’s a good girl.”

SHOCK.

My wide-open eyes stapled themselves to Ann’s face. I could see the flush creeping up her neck and the fight for composure fly across her features.

“Sure, for a quick drink,” she said, like it didn’t matter one tiny bit. Her eyes grazed *meaningfully* past mine as she turned back to stretching. Liam, totally oblivious, smiled at me.

“See... No excuse. Even your doubles partner will be there,” he said. “She’s even organised for Ben and me to come to the regatta on Saturday and pick you guys up. Not that I would have missed it,” he added. He stopped, then added awkwardly, “If... if you want to come that is.”

My eyes found it impossible to tear themselves away from Ann, even though I knew Liam was staring at me, waiting for a reply. My face burning, I forced my eyes towards to the ground, trying to hide my inner chaos.

“I can’t,” I said.

“Really, there’ll be heaps of people you know. It’ll be...”

“Leave me the fuck alone,” I said, as I stormed into the boathouse.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I strode into the change room, ripping the bitch's training top off as I went. I threw it on the floor and slammed open my locker. My mind was too chaotic to form thoughts. Concepts jumbled in on top of each other. But I think I might have said a few swear words out loud.

On the other side of the room I heard a little sound and, with a shock, realised I wasn't alone. A couple of younger girls were whispering together at their lockers, looking at me... Godzilla across the room.

I tried to rein myself in. Deliberately calming my breath and slowing my actions. I put one palm against the locker, bowed my head, to steady myself.

Calm down.

I took in a level breath. And another.

The door snapped open and I heard footsteps. It was Ann. Her eyes met mine as I turned for a second to the door. She glanced down to the crew vest on the floor, then back to meet my eyes. She was trying to assess the damage. Well fuck her. I turned my back on her, fumbling around in my locker in a purposeful way, forcing myself to be in control. I hadn't done all those years of spiritual fucking training for nothing. I heard her cross to her own locker and

open the door. The little girls first whispered, then shut up completely; the minions falling silent in the presence of Titans.

I took my training towel from my locker and, as I always do, I began to wipe my neck, chest and back. I made myself move slowly. I could feel Ann's eyes burning into my back as the towel ran along the planes of my skin. I nearly glanced in her direction but stopped myself just in time. I heard sounds of activity from Ann's locker. Clothes being changed. Hair brushing. I leaned down, took off my training shoes and socks, and stole a glance at her. She had her back to me, bare to the waist, brushing her hair up into a golden ponytail. A few lockers over, the two little girls were scrambling to finish getting dressed. One glanced nervously at me. Ann turned her head and caught my eye, she glanced at the girls, expressionless, then carefully back at me. I turned away.

I put my shoes and socks neatly in their usual place. I heard Ann spray on deodorant, fumble with clothes. I heard hurried footsteps, then the click of the locker room door. I looked around.

We were alone.

Nerves ignited like flares in my stomach. I glanced over at Ann. She was organising her clothes, as though nothing had happened. I turned away, clenching my jaw. Bitch. Fucking bitch. I had to get out of there. I hung my jeans over my locker door and stripped off my Lycra training shorts, down to undies and sports

bra. I couldn't help but glance self-consciously over at Ann across the empty room. She was watching me now, intentionally, not bothering to look away, her eyes running up, then down, my body. I turned my back to her, threw my shorts into my locker and pulled on my jeans.

Footsteps. They stopped behind me. My hand froze on my locker door. My breath halted. I felt her hand touch my shoulder then drift down the exposed skin of my back. My eyes fell shut at the touch, then... A caught breath. I spun around and slapped her hand away.

"Don't!"

She took a half step back, looking at me steadily.

"Talk to me, George," she said in a low voice. "It's not what you think."

"Then w... what is it?"

Her eyes never left my face. Something about her, in that moment, made me think of an animal trainer in a circus. Assessing. Strategic.

"You want me to break up with Ben," she said flatly.

I physically started, eyes widening in shock.

"Haven't you?"

Her gaze faltered. She took a quiet breath, clocking my reaction.

"Things aren't always black and white, George. Some things take more... "

"Things? What *things*?" I actually shouted. She paused, the edges of her neat composure starting to fray.

"... Ben... Us..." She was floundering. Losing her words. "You and me..." She glanced around at the door, then back. "I don't see why..." She stopped, unsure.

"Sleeping with me is n... not nothing," I said. It was her turn to look shocked.

"No... no..." She look a step forward, raising one hand but stopping short of touching me. "No. Being with you is the most amazing..."

She stepped away like she needed to pull herself together. I could hear her irregular breathing. See her fight for control of herself. Her hands clenched and unclenched. Finally, in a low voice she said,

"Being with you is the most amazing thing that's ever happened to me."

When her eyes met mine, I swear to God, they literally stole my breath. They were glistening with tears, wide and hurting. As she looked at me, two fat drops welled gracefully over the waterfall of her dark eyelashes and slid down her cheeks.

“I just don’t see why...” Her voice fought for strength. “Why anyone needs to know. Surely, it’s our business, how we feel about each other. It’s just between *us*... Isn’t it?”

I couldn’t speak.

“I mean... It just doesn’t feel that wrong to me. What we do, how we feel... It’s for us... Why does everything have to change? Just because we’re together. Why *does* it?” She moved closer. “It’s just our business. Isn’t it?” Her gaze pleaded with me.

“I... if I were a guy and you slept with me, would you t... tell Ben? Would you b-b-break up with Ben?”

“If you were a guy, I wouldn’t have slept with you,” Ann replied with deadly assurance. “And anyway,” she continued, trying to be ‘jocular’. “He’d get a kick out of it.” She indicated herself then me. “Us.”

“So tell him,” I spat.

This was all wrong. It wasn’t meant to be like this. My brain wouldn’t work. I dragged my hands over my face, pushing my hair back.

“You’ve b... been sleeping with him, while we’ve been...” My eyes drilled into hers. Ann shook her head desperately.

“No... I’ve seen him a couple of times, but... no... we haven’t been...” I stepped away, groaning, not knowing where to put myself.

“Not like that. No, I... I...” Ann pleaded. “How could I tell him? It would be such a *mess*. Especially before the regatta.”

But I couldn’t do this. No way. Not like this. Ann looked at my face and froze. I could see, *she* could see, my resolution. After a long moment, she moved cautiously towards me.

“George...”

I watched her approach. It was like being on a wide windless ocean, unable to move under your own power. A boat was coming towards you but you didn’t know whether it was going to rescue or destroy you.

“I’m sorry... You’re right,” she said, tears welling again, making her eyes impossibly blue. “I’ll talk to Ben. I don’t know what I was thinking. I... I was just trying not to mess things up.”

Ann moved right into my space. She held the tops of my arms. “I’ll stop seeing him. I promise.”

Something in me gave way then. I closed my eyes and let my head fall forward onto hers. Without any instruction from me, my hands went to her waist. We breathed each other’s air. She put one hand to the back of my neck and held me closer.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m an idiot.”

I nodded, moving both our heads up and down by default. She smiled slightly, then tilted her face up.

“It will be just you and me,” she said. “After the regatta.”

I pulled back. *After...?*

"You've got to give me that long," she urged. "It's just a few days, and it would be way too distracting, to do it before. Okay?"

I frowned. It was so hard to think clearly.

"We've got to stay focussed on the main game," she whispered, "Think scholarships. Think America *together*." She smiled conspiratorially. I nodded hesitantly. She made sense. I think.

"Alright," I sighed.

She glanced at the locker room door, then leaned in and kissed me. I kissed her back this time, her soft full mouth pressing into mine. She pulled away, her eyes daring to be playful now. She tapped me on the chest with one finger.

"And no sulking in the meantime."

Ha!

"I d... don't sulk!"

"Yeah right," she smiled. "And I'm not a control freak."

I had to laugh.

The door burst opened and we stepped back from each other. A younger girl ran into the room.

"Ann! Ann! The final seat list is up."

When Ann and I walked into the gym, even though there were forty odd girls in the room, you could have heard a pin drop. Every eye was turned to us. You could hear the sound of our feet on the carpet. I let Ann lead the way, as always. As she crossed the room towards the noticeboard, she was trying to look unhurried, casual even. No one was buying it. I definitely was *not* feeling casual. This was the final draw.

I got to the board a second after Ann did. I heard her say,

"What?... Oh my..."

She turned to me, looking stunned. My eyes ran quickly down the listing. In the space next to the 'Open Single Scull Division 1' was written *two* names.

Ann Cavanaugh

Georgia Symons

I turned to Ann. What did this mean? Or was it a mistake? Yes. Thomo must have written the seats for the double in the wrong place. I ran a finger down the list looking for the entry for the double scull. It read,

Ann Cavanaugh

Georgia Symons

Ann seemed as lost as I did. What could this mean? A man's voice boomed from across the room.

"Cavanaugh. Symons. Over here."

Thomo was waving us into his little office at one side of the gym. Ann and I glanced at each other and headed towards him. My stomach was fully churning. Why was Ann's name listed first? I'd better not be in 'reserve'. *Jesus*. I braced myself for a fight I really didn't want to have. Really, *really*, more than anything else in the world, didn't want to have.

Ann and I walked into Thomo's office, a tiny windowless space, not made to fit three people. It was filled with messy piles of paperwork and was the place old gym gear went to die.

"Close the door," Thomo said, as I walked in behind Ann. I did so and stood stiffly at attention just in front of it, fists clenching, almost bursting out of my skin. Ann stood at the end of Thomo's desk. Thomo ran his eyes across us both then leaned back against his desk and folded his arms.

"Now," he said, letting out a significant sigh. "I've been watching you two for the last few weeks." No one moved. "Obviously you're both fantastic rowers. You've got speed, excellent on-water technique. Both of you. You're both highly dedicated. Highly competitive. Reliable... I mean, what is to split you? A coach

couldn't ask for more, could he?" He looked between us again. "My cup over-floweth," he said, smiling.

I wasn't finding it even a bit funny. I wanted to shout... *But have you seen my erg for God's sake? Have you seen hers?* But I managed to control myself. He must have read my mind, because he took another breath and went on.

"George has a better split, for sure, but Ann really brings it on the day. I know that. I've seen it with my own eyes over and over. Do *you*, George? I haven't seen you race." My guts clenched. What was this leading to?

"So what should I do?" he said. "I've got the *dream* doubles team. A world class, record breaking, kick-arse doubles team, but how can I split them for the single?" He appealed to us in turn. I couldn't take any more.

"Cut to the chase," I spat out. "Who's in the s... single." Ann's eyes darted to me.

"You're both champions," Thomo went on. "Obviously you *both* deserve to be competing in the Div One Open Single." He paused again.

"And so... you bloody well *shall* be," he said, bursting into a huge smile. Ann gaped at him.

"What do you mean?" she said.

“Exactly what I said,” Thomo replied. “That you’ll *both* be competing in the Div One Open Scull.”

“You didn’t...” Ann said softly.

“I spoke to the powers that be about it. I explained the situation... who each of you were and your times, your records and so forth, and said how embarrassing it would be for one of you to be forced down to Div Two. It’s no disadvantage to other clubs for Greystones to enter two girls in Div One for the single. In fact it’s a *disadvantage* to us.” He looked between me and Ann. “They thought about it and got back to me... And they agreed,” he said. Ann screamed and leapt forward to hug him.

“Genius!” she cried, throwing her arms around his neck.

“I should have my head read,” Thomo laughed, putting an arm around Ann’s back.

“Thank you!” said Ann, still hugging him. She turned to me. I was in shock. A team only ever entered one girl in the Div 1 single. Entering two girls was... well... it just never happened. Thomo must have pulled strings all over the place to make this work... And I knew why... Oh, I knew why alright...

We’d never truly gone head to head, Ann and I. The erg is the closest thing you’ve got to go by, and by that measure, and with equal on-water technique, like even Ann had said, it should be *me* in the single. There was no way for a coach to get around that, unless

they wanted to show blatant bias. But Thomo didn’t want his precious Captain to not race in the single. *She* was his golden girl. Not me. So he’d gone the extra mile, or hundred, to make this happen... *for her*.

But even with all Ann’s powers of persuasion, it was hard to fathom, because strategically, like Thomo said, it worked against Greystones winning the overall medal tally. Now there was relatively little chance of winning the Div 2 single, whereas putting Ann down would have meant certain gold. When my mind came back to the planet I realised Ann was staring at me, concerned. Did she think I would protest? I gazed back at her, taking my time to absorb the situation.

Okay, I thought, glancing over at Thomo, then back at Ann. *Bring it on*. That elephant in the room was officially Hi-vis.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In the frenzy at the boathouse that day, Ann and I were around people continuously. There'd been no time to talk or know what either of us was thinking. The whole day had been a slow burn. There'd been 'looks' across the room and moments of hyper awareness if we were close to each other, but no contact. There was a new tension, like a physical force, between us.

Later that evening, I followed Ann into her bedroom. With a mixture of fear and excitement, I locked the door behind us and waited at the door. Ann crossed the room and stood in front of her desk, her back turned to me. She gave me plenty of time to take in every inch of her superb rower's body. The curves, the long toned legs, the perfect skin. One elegant golden ponytail ran down her back. Honestly, she was perfect.

It was the strangest thing, whenever I tried to look at Ann objectively, to *see* her from a distance, like if she was addressing the squad or something like that, I found I couldn't really *see* her. I mean, I could see that she was *there*, but it was like a glamour of some kind was cast over my eyes – or over her – and I could barely make her out through it. It was seriously weird.

Don't worry. I don't expect you to understand.

At that moment, in the gentle pink light of Ann's little bedroom, you could have cut the air with a knife. Ann turned deliberately around towards me and leaned back against the desk. She raised her head and *looked* at me... Slowly, I tractor beamed across the scorching heat field between us, stopping just as my thighs began to press into hers. I looked down into her avid eyes and for a moment we froze like that, just breathing each other's air.

Ann lifted her hands and ran fingernails up the centre of my back and down again. Then she pulled me forward, jerking me into her, as she wrapped one leg around me. I caught myself with one hand on the desk, letting out a gasp. I ran the fingers of my other hand up Ann's side, along her waist, and across her firm belly, tracing the contours of her lower body. Both of our eyes watched my hand as it moved in the fiery space between us. I ran my fingers up the centre of her torso, up the valley of her solar plexus, then drew long undulating lines across the mounds of her breasts, side to side, side to side. Both our breathing came rough. I crushed my hips closer into her and ran my lips along the top of her shoulder to her throat, not forgetting to bite *that* place behind her ear that always made her...

Ann groaned and brought her hands up to the back of my head and pulled me into an obliterating kiss.

So that's all I'm saying about that then. I'll just say that, *before* Ann and I became open combatants in the single scull I totally believed things couldn't get any hotter between us... but ... well... as you see... Never make assumptions.

Later that evening, we were lying in bed snuggling up in the supreme comfort that always happened when we were horizontal and naked together. I was feeling drowsy and more contented than I could ever have imagined possible, when Ann said,

"George, you need to give Liam a call and tell him you've changed your mind about the party." I gaped at her, all calm gone.

"Come on," she said, clocking my response. "You have no idea how hard it was to convince Thomo to let me off for the afternoon." I frowned. Possibly even pouted.

"It's s... stupid to go out," I said. "Why w... would we?"

"Well, it's Liam's birthday for one thing," Ann said. I frowned some more.

"Oh come on. I've thought it all through," Ann went on. "Seriously, it's bullet proof. Mum will take us back to the regatta in the morning. If we're in bed by nine and asleep by nine thirty, which is totally doable, we still get a full eight hours sleep, even with the travelling. And driving counts as resting, right. So, why not?"

I hesitated. Fuck her 'thinking things through'. Really, I just didn't want to go.

"Please," Ann pleaded again. "I want you to be there. If *I* have to go, it's only fair..."

"You d... don't have to go."

"I've said I would." She paused then said, "And anyway, I've been wanting to see Liam's Dad's yacht for ages. Apparently, it's gorgeous. And you never know who might be there, right? Liam's totally connected," she said. I was unmoved.

"And besides," Ann went on, changing tack, "You were seriously rude to him. You should apologise." Hmmm. *This* was true. I frowned again, saying,

"Well I had g... good reason."

"Yes, but not because of *him*. It wasn't his fault. It was mine."

I looked at her. *This* was what you had to love about her, right. You couldn't argue with the plain truth. But there was something else I'd been suspecting... I sat up, becoming awkward. Ann sat up too, trying to get a good look at my face.

"What?" she said. "What is it?" I hesitated.

"I... I think, maybe," I said, barely daring to say the words, "Liam still l... likes me." I looked at her, unsure. Ann burst out laughing.

"Of course he still likes you," she laughed, as though I had an IQ of three. "Who wouldn't?"

I shook my head. This sort of talk just bewildered me.

“Then, isn’t that l... leading him on?”

Ann rolled her eyes, smiling. “Going to have a drink with Liam for his birthday, with fifty other people, isn’t leading him on. It’s being *nice!*” she said emphatically. This obviously wasn’t my area of expertise.

So of course... I did as I was told and called Liam because, somehow, without me knowing, Ann had turned me into a Stepford Wife. I apologised to him for being a psycho, made a complete mess of it, babbled something about it being alright for me to come to his party for just a quick drink, added some more rubbish about the race the following day and getting enough sleep, and finished the conversation with Liam thinking I was even more insane than before we started it.

The great day finally arrived. Saturday morning of the regatta the whole squad had to meet at school at 5am. Girls on the bus. Families in SUVs. Greystones was seating about sixty rowers so it was an absolute mad house in front of the school gates that morning. I got a cab to school, early as usual. Ann and her parents arrived a bit later in their old Holden Commodore station wagon. I saw Christine and Grace wave at them as they pulled up, then when Ann wasn’t looking, they whispered and giggled together. I could have knifed them.

The regatta was an hour’s drive away, south of the city. When we got there, it was already pumping. Thousands of girls, families, volunteers and officials were finalising arrangements for the day. All schools had their own allocated campsite along the riverfront as a makeshift camp. Most of the tents, like, thirty of them, were set up along one side of the river, next to the finish line. Downstream a hundred metres or so, all the boat shells were stacked upside down on racks in allocated areas. They looked like a miniature, white navy.

The Judges Tent was the epicentre of the regatta and sat on the finish line. Greystones, like some of the other ‘big’ girls’ schools had a large site, and had two tents erected on it. Those elves must have been busy overnight putting them up, because all the work had been done. The long row of multi-coloured tents was set back a few metres from the riverbank, running side to side along it, like some medieval tournament. Already, the narrow strip between river and tents was wall to wall with people.

The course was on a wide, straight stretch of the river, with the final two, maybe three hundred metres lined with tents and spectators. Upstream were the starting lines, not really visible at this distance, unless you were a peregrine falcon or you were using binoculars, which everybody basically was. Using binoculars, that is. The length of the course for senior rowers was 1500 metres. For the

Year 9 and 10 categories, it was 1K. The current was gentle, the wind minimal and it was going to be a warm, blue, March weekend. Perfect. This was a familiar scene to me. I'd been to a lot of regattas. But this, OMG, this was the most humongous schoolgirl regatta I'd ever seen. Ten thousand or so were expected, they reckoned. That's a *ginormous* school regatta.

For Ann and me there wasn't the luxury of time to settle in. The Div 1 heats were up first thing. First were the Open eights, then Doubles. So it was all go. We chucked on our zoot suits, you know, those all in one Lycra singlet/shorts suits they make us wear for competition. *Not* my favourite piece of clothing aesthetically, but they are practical for rowing (but not for other things - like toilet breaks for example). We slathered on the sunscreen, stuck the squad 'baseball' cap on our heads, the sunnies on the nose and headed to the launching place to finish rigging up the shell. We didn't talk much. There was no need. I felt calm. Ann looked the same. We were both quietly getting ourselves into the zone.

As we were getting in the boat, Thomo wanted to talk strategy, for the fiftieth time. Just 'keep it steady' was the plan. There was no need to show off. Just win by a comfortable margin and tomorrow we could do the real damage to the record. There was no point risking injury or fatigue. Ann raised a conspiratorial eyebrow at me.

I wasn't exactly sure what that meant, but I didn't really care. Ann could do what she liked. As far as I was concerned this was Ann's race. Today I would be the first engine. Ann would be captain. In the single scull, I'd be commander of my own boat.

We launched the boat and joined the line of teams rowing gently upstream towards the starting line. When you rowed up to the starting line you stuck close to the bank in a special 'corridor' marked with red spherical buoys. That way, there's no accidents between the coming and the going. Teams had to be in the boat marshalling area above the starting line within five minutes of the start of the race or risk disqualification. At the Aligner's signal, all the teams then manoeuvred into their lane, and lined up across the river. Then we all raced back down the river towards the finish line. The six lanes were marked with white lines of floating buoys that turned red 200 metres before the finish line. Collisions between boats were rare in competition, and were far more likely to happen between the younger uncoxed crews. Year 9 and 10 quad sculls were the most fun to watch for collisions.

Ann and I didn't need to worry much about it. By the time you got to our level you knew instinctively how to stay in your own lane, adjusting to the right or left and turning around intermittently to check the approach of the finish line. Along the riverbank, the course was also marked every five hundred metres by distance

indicators. 500 metre mark... 1000 metre mark and then ground zero... the finish line. You got used to knowing where you were. You could feel it.

By 7.55am twelve teams of double sculls were crowded in the marshalling area, waiting on the water. Ahead of us the Open Eights were lining up for the first heat of the regatta. The Div 1 Open Eight was the event every coach wanted to win. Bad luck for Thomo that Ann and I were both dedicated scullers. But even without us, Greystones stood a good chance.

I studied Ann's back in front of me and thought about why she was actually in this boat and not rowing with the eight. In spite of her carry on about being team spirited and being Captain and rallying the troops and so on... *blah blah blah*... it was a no brainer to me. Ann was just as competitive as a single rower as I was. She just put a nicer face on it. The team was great and all that, but secretly, to her it came second. I mean with Ann's talent, she could choose her event, but look at the races she was *actually* rowing in. The single and double sculls. The two races where individuals get noticed. The only two events where individuals get named in the records. Ann might have fooled the world and even Thomo, but she didn't fool me. I understood exactly what motivated her and I respected it. I dug it.

Ann was different from me though, in as much as she *could* do well either in teams or in singles. She could adapt to whatever was most advantageous for her. You had to admire that. I definitely did not have that gift. An Open Eight race looked spectacular, it really was a thing of beauty. But for me, the thought of actually rowing in an eight made me want to drop a toaster in the bath. All that *cooperation*. (Insert screwed up face here.)

See... but, I could easily imagine Ann fitting into an eight, as long as she was in Seat 8, the stroke seat. And she *could* have been there, but she chose not to. She would have done the math and calculated that being in a boat with me was her best chance at being noticed. If she had thought that the eights were her best chance at glory, I would have been tossed aside in seconds, no matter how she felt about me personally. I smiled at that, then wondered why it didn't bother me. It probably should have, but it didn't. I totally got it. She just wanted to *win*.

I realised then that I was feeling like, way too calm for the start of a race. I slid my seat forward and whispered in Ann's ear, bringing my lips deliberately close to her neck, so that my breath ran over her skin.

"Are you feeling nervous?"

Ann turned to me so that our faces were just about touching.

“Excited,” she smiled. Recently, I’d discovered that, here was yet another thing to love about schoolgirl rowing. Team members were allowed to be physically close to each other like that. In fact it was encouraged. Touching your own crew-mates was practically compulsory. It was a definite bonus that I’d never learned about just doing the single.

“Do you know most of these girls?” I asked, looking at the teams around us. Ann looked at the competition and nodded. The first heat of the eights was nearly aligned along the starting line. It occurred to me then that they had probably all been racing against each other for the last four years, knew each other’s strengths and weaknesses intimately. I’d known it of course, but it had never really struck me before.

“Not that one,” she added thoughtfully. We both turned to a ‘strapping’ young woman, obviously tall even though she was seated, and physically immaculate. I aspired to arms like that. She was in the bow seat of a double for Rosevale Hall. Rosevale, last year’s winner, was the team to beat.

“She looks good,” I said into Ann’s ear. “Maybe you should change partners?” Ann pushed back into me so I could feel her body against mine.

“Too late for this race,” she smiled. “But be on your best.” She raised a wicked eyebrow. I casually wondered if other teams would

be looking around them and asking the same thing, maybe about me. Who’s that, rowing doubles with Ann Cavanaugh, last year’s open singles winner? Who is she? It gave me a little buzz to think of myself as being an unknown quantity, a shadowy figure, like *Zorro of the Regatta*.

ATTENTION!

Eighty heads turned to the Starter. The white flag was up. Suddenly... this felt like a competition. The first six teams were lined up and poised to...

GO!

The red flag went down and the first strokes made. Girls were straining forward, pulling through, trying to get their team out in front, trying to unify those first few messy strokes. The thrill of the regatta hit me. I *love* this. Adrenalin started to pump and an edge of excitement crept in. Eights could really move and by now the teams had found their rhythm. It was just spectacular.

“Go Greystones!!” Ann screamed. “Go!” Other rowers around us called out to support their teams as well. I stayed silent.

There were two more eights heats and then we were being aligned into our lanes across the riverbank for the first heat of the doubles. Ann and I were in lane two, which was okay. Three or four were the best because they were in the middle and it was easier to keep an eye on the competition. Not that we really needed to for this

heat. We just needed to place in the top three to get into the final, which with our times, was a done deal. But the plan was to win. I could feel the thrill of competition build up in me, could sense the same in Ann. The white flag went up, meaning everyone was correctly aligned and ready. Ann turned around and smiled at me as if to say 'Okay partner. Let's do this.' It was exhilarating. We leaned forward into the 'set' position. Then...

GO!

It took us no time to find our rhythm. It was awesome, the efficiency, the speed, the unbelievable synchronicity. Ann set a pretty fast pace and we quickly began to lead our neighbours. We'd get out in front and then cruise. It made it easier to see the field if it was behind you. In one hundred metres we were half a length in front and steadily pulling ahead. It was brilliant, the feel of our bodies working as a team, the lift of the boat, the perfect rhythm of our strokes. Our bodies became one force, feeding the engine of the machine. Stroke. Stroke. Stroke.

In less than a minute, we were already cruising, slicing through the water easily and increasing our lead at a comfortable rate. I glanced backwards just to check our lane alignment. All good. We were at about four hundred metres and approaching the first five hundred metre mark. A quick glance across the field showed our nearest competition was more than a length behind already.

Stroke. Stroke. Stroke. Being that distance out ahead gave you the luxury of being able to focus in on yourself and enjoying feeling your body work.

I looked at Ann's back. She was working neatly and steadily. In spite of what Thomo said, I knew Ann wanted to win convincingly. She wanted any talent scouts who were looking to stand up and take notice. Ann cared about being noticed. I just cared about the final. As we shot past the mid-point mark we were out by an easy two lengths. Ann's pace was strong but steady. I knew she was saving the big push for the last four hundred. It felt *spectacular* being in this boat at this moment with Ann.

Ganger and Watkins, eat your heart out.

The next three hundred or so were pretty much as good as racing gets. Perfect unison, perfect stroke work. Totally in the flow. That fantastic feeling that your body is at the top of its game, your muscles are working solidly but you've got masses in reserve. And absolutely *knowing* that the race is yours, if you just keep doing what you know you've trained years to do. What you know you *can* do.

Perfect.

I felt we were coming to the final five hundred metre mark. Nearly time for the push. Maintaining my stroke rate, I glanced backwards to locate the mark and saw.... and *SAW*... my breath

caught... *No... ?* Over in lane six, at the edge of the course, *ahead* of us... the Rosevale team... *How... ?*

“Ann!!” I screamed. “Lane six!!” Ann glanced around. I could see her face as she searched for and then saw them. It was pure shock. She’d missed them too. They were over a length in front of us. That’s why we missed them. We were looking behind. Only behind. Oh my God!

“Pick it up!” I cried. Without further thought, Ann stretched forwards and with her first stroke I could feel the surge of power. I met it and suddenly we were flying. God it was amazing. We’d become the beast. Unleashed. Legs pumping. Stomachs crunching. Arms pulling through the resistance of the water, then over and over again. We’d never rowed so fast. So powerfully. It was like our lives depended upon it. I glanced over at the Rosevale team. We were tearing through the water, rapidly gaining ground. I saw them pass the five hundred metre mark. The bow girl looked over at us. She called something to her partner. I saw the stroke girl dig in. The bow girl followed.

“They’ve seen us,” I called to Ann. Ann glanced over at them, still rowing furiously, but assessing as she went. I totally knew what she’d be thinking. *We didn’t need to win. We should take it easy today, don’t push too hard. Let them win. Don’t use up our strength. Don’t show them what we’ve got. But then we won’t know*

what they’ve got for tomorrow either. It was tomorrow that counted. But Ann just couldn’t ‘let them win’. It wasn’t in her DNA.

Ann yelled over her shoulder to me.

“We’re going for it.”

I nodded, adrenalin flooding my veins. God, the thrill. She dug in deep. I pulled furiously, in time with her increasing stroke rate. I knew Ann had intended a push in the last few hundred but this was ridiculous. My breath came hard. My muscles burned. We were flying through the water. I could see the muscles in Ann’s back and arms straining, her pitch increasing with effort. I knew what she was doing. Anyone watching the race would have realised that we hadn’t see the Rosevale girls. That was a tactical error. Less than perfect. Ann wanted a display of brilliance, for the scouts.

I obliged, turning my muscles into the engine room of the boat. Stroke. Stroke. Driving harder, faster, to obey Ann’s relentless rhythm. She was naturally used to a faster stroke rate than me and I had to steel myself to keep up. But the speed it produced was awesome. We were flying. Faster than I’d ever gone. The combination of our strength and skill was like some magical equation, exponentially increasing our power as we sliced over the water.

I glanced again at the Rosevale team. We'd reached them. We were equal now and gaining. They were pulling hard, heads down in concentrated effort. They looked good. Smooth and powerful.

But we were stronger.

I almost laughed. I began to hear the screaming of the crowd. I glanced backward to the finish line. Suddenly there were tents to our left, crowds of yelling people.

"Three hundred," I yelled to Ann. With a groan she increased the rating, drawing every last piece of effort out of herself. We were flying to the line now, pulling further away from the Rosevale team with every stroke. My legs and arms screamed out for rest. My lungs burned. It was insane. Amazing. Like nothing I'd ever experienced in a race before.

The Rosevale girls were losing it. The girl in stroke had nothing left. She was losing rhythm now. I knew her muscles would be shaking, her legs growing weak. We'd pushed them out harder than she could take. The bow girl glanced back at us in frustration as we streaked further away in front of them.

"Two hundred," I cried.

Ann maintained the pitiless stroke rate. Now, this was just showing off, but it felt great. The crowd was screaming. People stopping to watch. Half way down the line of tents and we were three lengths in front of the Rosevale girls and at least double that

in front of third place. We'd left them all in our wake. I glanced around, seeing the finish line speed towards us.

"Ninety," I called. I could just hear the loud speaker, the voice sounded excited. I couldn't make out the words but I thought I knew what it was saying. Everyone on the banks were standing and cheering as Ann and I sliced backward towards the finish line. A rush of pure joy exploded through me.

We shot past the Judges Tent to screaming and applause. Ann dropped her oars, put her hands in her face and fell forward. I collapsed forward too, clutching my sides. As we slid backwards through the water, I could hear the screaming of the crowd and over the speaker system could make out the words "best time" and "smashed". Ann sat up and turned to me. Elation was all over her face as her eyes found mine. Gulping in breaths, she slid her seat back, I slid forward and took her in my arms. Her head fell back against my shoulder. We glided backwards, ecstatic and breathing each other's air. I dropped my forehead and held her tight. It was just a heat for God's sake. But, when had it *ever* felt this good? Suddenly Ann let out a scream, sat forward and punched two arms in the air.

VICTORY!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was hard to come down from that. I mean, who wanted to. As soon as we arrived back at Greystones' home base Thomo was on top of us. He pulled Ann up out of the boat first.

“Six seconds! Six seconds!” He hugged Ann then offered me a hand up. He grabbed me by both shoulders. “Six seconds off... and given the conditions...” He waved a hand. “Brilliant!” What he was trying to say was that because there was only a mild current and a light breeze the ‘record’ would be taken seriously. Ann and I smiled at each other, not letting go of the other’s eyes.

“Go and warm down,” Thomo said, unable to contain his delight. “Stretches. Then rest. You need rest.” He got himself together enough to turn to a team of four girls who were standing nearby and looking needy. I looked at Ann and headed towards the change tent, dragging her along with me by the eyes. Inside, I did a quick look around. Unbelievable. There was no one there. Stepping into the tent, Ann saw the same thing. I moved towards her, but she turned and zipped the door of the little tent closed, all the way to the ground. She faced me then, her eyes burning, and then we were kissing. Kissing *into* each other, like we’d been starving.

After way too short a time, we pulled back from each other, breathing roughly. This wasn’t the place or time. Even I knew that.

Backing off an inch from her, I realised I was trembling. Probably it was the adrenalin come down. Ann reached up and brushed my cheek with her thumb. I kissed her palm then leaned in and kissed her again, softly this time, barely touching my lips to hers. I held her face in my unsteady hands, and let our lips slow and soften under the gentle movement. I could feel the quivering in my arms and shoulders as I held them up to her face. I smiled as if to say *Hold that thought*. She smiled back a promise.

We were barely out the tent (and feeling *way* more normal), when Liam bounced up to us yelping a victory cry and punching the air. He threw his arms around us and, impressively, I have to say, lifted us both into the air, at once, laughing. Dropping us, he kissed Ann and then me, looking at us in awe.

“Amazing. Fucking amazing.” We both beamed at him and at each other. “Six seconds off! That is awesome! *And* you got a slow start.” He questioned Ann with a look.

“We didn’t see them,” she replied, looking chastened. “We weren’t checking *ahead* of us.” She shook her head like it was the stupidest thing anyone had ever done since the beginning of time. Then she added, “Any idea who that girl was?” We all knew who she was talking about.

Liam frowned. “Thomo reckons she’s an exchange student. From Norway, he thinks.” He looked a bit concerned. “That’s why no one’s seen her.” We all nodded.

“Do you know if she’s doing singles?” Ann urged. I looked at him too. That bow girl was obviously a better rower than her doubles partner. She could be a force in singles.

“She is,” said Liam, gravely. Ann and I looked at each other.

“Div One of course?” Ann clarified. Liam nodded. So did I. *Right*. This made things interesting. Ann turned to Liam.

“Google her,” she said.

All the single sculls heats were scheduled for first thing after lunch. They went from ‘big’ to ‘small’, that is, from Open category Div 1, working down to Year Nines. The organisers must have clustered the single sculls together to allow individuals to compete in a crew as well. *Nice of them* I thought. Not that I’d ever cared before. But now I knew how it felt, I wouldn’t have missed this morning’s heat for literally anything in the world. But also...

I *really* wanted to race Ann.

Ann and I had never talked ‘race plans’ when it came to the single. We were like, ‘girlfriends’ off the river, crewmates in the

double and mortal enemies in the single. Strangely, none of that affected me. It was simple. I was going to win. I was going to win and Ann was going to come second. I wondered if she felt the same way about it as me. Was she as sure of gold as I was?

Anyway, *my* race plan for the heat, if we had to face off, had always been to let her win. The heat that is, not the final. I would let her get a little in front, then sit half a length behind her and just cruise through the race in that position, trying to look like I was straining more than I really was. I’d even let her blow out a little at the finish line if that was her plan. Knowing Ann, I was sure it would be. She’s more of a show pony than I am. She finds it hard to resist. After due consideration, I figured this plan suited Ann’s psyche as well as my own. I preferred to be the lone wolf tearing out from nowhere into the light. Call me melodramatic. Ann likes to lead. And assuming that I did win the singles final tomorrow, this plan would at least give Ann her moment in the sun. So it was a *Win*. *Win...* Well, almost.

How did I get so nice?

We’d known since yesterday that we were scheduled for the same heat. Heat 2. The Rosevale girl, whose name by the way turned out to be Mette Olafson, was luckily in Heat 1. I say lucky, because only first and second place in the heat went straight through to the final and obviously Ann and I wanted to avoid the

repechage if at all possible. We couldn't be sure of the new girl's form and I was happy not to have to risk it. Or at least, for Ann not to risk it, as *she'd* be in third. If it came down to a chance of being in the repechage or not, I would have *had* to beat Ann in the heat and send *her* through to the rep.

Ann googled Mette but there wasn't much to be found. Just some pretty impressive times at a Junior level. Nothing she could find for the single 1500. Schoolgirl rowing records are so random. She was Norwegian though, we found that out. The whisper from Thomo was that she was good, but as he said, we'd get a look at her in the heats, then we'd know more.

At lunch we ate in silence. Neither of us ate much actually. Not good just before a race. Neither is chatting with the enemy. We didn't sit together. Didn't make eye contact. All around us the business of the regatta rolled on. Boats coming and going up and down the river. Girls jubilant. Girls in tears. Officials running around officially. The periodic roaring of the crowd. Coaches and assistant coaches waving teams of girls off, organising seats on boats. Volunteers carrying shells to and from the river, helping with the rigging. Parents consoling. Parents congratulating. The atmosphere of the regatta was like enriched oxygen, sharpening my senses. It cleared my mind, brought things into focus.

I looked discreetly across at Ann. She was sitting on a crate in the shade of the tent, eyes down, focussed, preparing herself mentally. She looked calm, but I knew she must be feeling it. In a race situation, I was as much an unknown quantity to her, as she was to me. Probably more, as I didn't come with a provenance like Ann did. I was supremely confident that I could make my race plan happen, at the very least in the heat, so why there were little butterflies practicing the Macarena in my stomach, I didn't know. This was *my* race. No matter how amazing the doubles heat had felt this morning, this event was the one that I'd trained for since I was a kid.

Gradually during the morning, Ann and I had somehow just drifted out of each other's zones and into our own. It was strange, but right, how it happened. Like we'd silently agreed on the rules of engagement. This wasn't the doubles where it was all about teams and bonding and touchy feely stuff. This was a head to head contest between champions. Me on my dark horse. Ann in white.

I saw Liam come up to Ann and squat down beside her, putting his hand on her shoulder. She listened as he spoke gently, reassuringly, to her. She nodded and said something. He laughed, glanced at me, looked embarrassed, smiled back at her. Ann leaned forward and hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. Liam pulled her long blond plait, then kissed her forehead, and I saw the

admiration in his eyes. Liam looked up at me and said something to Ann. I turned away, and kept standing where I was.

It was just seconds before he was calling my name and standing behind me. Why was I so... affected? This wasn't helping. I forced myself to turn back to him and stop being ridiculous.

"Good luck, eh?" Liam held out his hand to shake mine. I stared dumbly down at it for a moment before sliding my hand into his. It felt warm and strong. I shook it and looked into his eyes.

"S... so who you b-b-barracking for?" I asked.

"You," he said, without missing a beat. "You're my little lab rat." I glanced at Ann, who was now talking to one of the younger girls.

"Did you say that to Ann too?"

"Of course," Liam grinned. "But with you I mean it." He smiled charmingly, then added dryly, "Not the bit about the lab rat." We held each other's gaze. I looked over his handsome face and thought about his *goodness*. What must it have been like to grow up in Liam-Land? Where it never rained because the clouds were made of fairy floss. I suddenly realised I'd forgotten to take my hand out of his. I looked down at it. He followed my eyes and watched me slowly ease my hand out of his grip. I took a step back.

"It's just a heat," I said, trying to redirect whatever was happening here.

"Do you have a plan?" he asked.

"Just to get through to the f... final without doing the r... rep."

"Sounds fair," he agreed, stepping unconsciously forward, bringing him too close again. "And tomorrow?"

"Well obviously, I intend to w... *win* it," I snapped, way too harshly.

Something fierce lit up in Liam's eyes. And for a second... I thought he was about to kiss me... Then it passed. But we were both left stunned, standing awkwardly, and a little pushed for breath. I looked down, gathering myself together. This wasn't helping anything.

"Go away," I said sharply, then added by way of justification. "I need to f... focus." Liam nodded, recovering.

"Yes, I'm going. I'll come and get you after the heat. Then we can all go together. Ben's going to meet us at the car."

Great, I thought. I needed Ben like I needed an outbreak of herpes.

About forty-five minutes later Ann and I are sitting in our single sculls waiting near the head of the course for the first Div 1 heat to start. Heat 1 is being aligned across the river and I can get a better look at that Norwegian girl. She's in Lane 2 so I can see her quite clearly. She stands out from the crowd alright. She's got the

perfect physique for a rower. Tall and strongly muscled in the arms and legs, powerful shoulders and core. She looks comfortable in the boat too, sitting quietly, focussed. Not like some of the other girls, who are fidgeting and fussing about with their rigging, testing the slide. That's all just an outlet for nerves. In fact, it occurs to me that Mette Olafson doesn't look like a schoolgirl rower at all. She just looks like a rower.

I look across to Ann, who's a couple of boats ahead of me in the cluster of waiting scullers. She's staring at the Rosevale girl too. I can see her brain cogs spinning round and round as clearly as if her skull was made of Perspex. I felt a bit sorry for her actually. Bad break for her, having *two* of us turn up out of the blue this year to steal her thunder. I mean, silver has *some* dignity. Bronze is just humiliating. That is, assuming the Norwegian is as good as she looks. She well may not be. Physique is only part of the deal. Like I said before, you have to see a rower on the water to know what they've really got.

ATTENTION!

And that was about to happen.

The white flag went up. The girls leaned forward into 'set' position.

GO!

The Red Flag went down and they were away. There wouldn't have been a pair of eyes in our cluster of girls that weren't glued to the Norwegian girl as she led out of the starting positions. She was away cleanly and was quickly ahead of the pack. She moved with beautiful, long powerful strokes, clearing serious water with each pull of the oars. My stomach clenched. *Damn she was good.* Was I that good? Was I better? Was Ann? Did I look that good when I was on the water? I could see she wasn't straining. Just pulling through the water strongly and evenly. She'd win this heat easily and go straight into the final.

Next it was our turn. We were in lanes five and three, so just one boat between us. We were all lined up and ready to go. I was feeling good now. Focussed. Ready. That was part of the excitement of racing for me. White flag. Red flag. And we were away with a good clean start. I glanced across to Ann. She was making ground already. I decided to match her for the moment and let the two of us get out in front, clear of the field. I mean that's the thing about race plans. They don't actually have to be followed. Now I had the oars in my hands, anything was possible.

After five hundred metres Ann and I were well ahead of the field, and yes, I double-checked that there were *four* boats behind us. The pace she set was surprisingly fast. Maybe seeing that Rosevale girl freaked her out. Maybe she'd realised she was looking

down the barrel at third in the final. Maybe making a great time in the heats was *'insurance'*. Either way, she was pushing the pace and I was beginning to have to strain to keep up.

Keeping dead level with her made it easy to glance across and observe her. We'd been so much together recently that I'd forgotten how fantastic she looked on the water. Her stroke was a technician's dream. She extracted the most out of each phase of the stroke. From here I could also see, with a start, how much muscle bulk she'd gained in the last six weeks. *How had I not noticed that?* It made my eyes pop. I knew she'd gained condition, but this was a shock. How had that happened? Or had she always been like that? It was like the glamour lifted from my eyes and for the first time I could actually *see* her. An arrow of panic shot through me. Maybe she *wasn't* forcing the pace. Maybe she just *was* faster.

I needed to test it. I wasn't going to let myself panic, but the heat was a good place to take a little risk. We were at about eight hundred metres and at least two lengths in front of third. This is exactly when you'd expect to cruise in a heat. But now I was on a fact-finding mission. Race plan or no race plan, I poured on some speed and gained ground on Ann almost immediately. After a stroke or two, Ann glanced over at me, registering surprise. She shot a look behind her and saw that we were still miles away from the line. She

turned back to me, confused, then she picked up her pace too. I *knew* she would. She'd do whatever it took to stay in front.

Satisfied we had a race, I turned my attention back to myself and settled down to some serious stroke making. I was keenly aware of the amplified power of my strokes through the water. My mind plugged into the strength of my legs and quads, crunching rhythmically into and out of the catch position, propelling me into the drive and sliding me forwards and backwards along the bar. With each stroke, my arms, abs and back felt the increased resistance, as my oars dragged through the water, forcing me backward.

I glanced across and yes, Ann was keeping up. We shot past the 1000 metre mark at a strong race pace. Could she keep it up? Until two minutes ago I would have bet my life that my endurance was better than hers. I bent into my strokes, groaning with the exertion. It wasn't the plan to give everything to this race, but I needed to know. I tried to make a break, to pull away from her, but she stuck with me. In fact... she was gaining, pulling her guts out, but gaining ground. She glanced across at me, red faced and straining, but she kept going, tough and controlled. Determined.

I put my head down and met the challenge. At four hundred we were neck and neck. My breath was rushing in and out in great deep puffs in time with my strokes. My muscles burned. Hers must

be burning too I knew... We were at three fifty now... then three hundred... Stroke. Stroke. Stroke... The noise of the crowd was all around us. There was nothing in it as we streaked down the river towards the finish line. Everyone was screaming, urging us on. If there was going to be a sprint, it needed to start now. I glanced over at Ann. I knew I still had a good sprint in me. How much did she have left to give? She looked good, but... Was this the time to expose my strength? The main game was tomorrow.

I slowed.

Not so much as you'd notice, but enough to let Ann creep ahead. After another fifty she was half a length in front. By the time she crossed the finish line it was a full length. The crowd went wild. It was a great heat for her. As I drifted backwards behind the finish line, I realised Ann had almost stopped her boat. I looked across at her. She was red faced and puffing hard, but she was looking at me intently, as if to say 'What the *fuck* was that about.' We held eye contact across the lanes for a long moment, before I looked away.

Back at Greystones' home base Ann and I didn't talk about the heat. We didn't talk about the Rosevale girl. We didn't talk about anything much. It wasn't hostility, just distance. I mean, you can't instantly be BFFs with someone you've just tried to annihilate.

In the tent we changed into our street clothes. There was a whole team of younger girls surrounding us, so that cut the tension a lot as we were getting dressed. I wasn't sure *what* I'd learned from that heat. That Ann was stronger than I'd realised. Yes. That's she'd developed amazing muscle tone in such a short period of time? That blew me away. How on Earth had she done that? How had I not noticed? But did that equal *endurance* for the sprint? There was no way of knowing. And the Norwegian? Another unknown, but possibly a serious threat. What I *did* know for sure, was that the final wasn't going to be as much of a walk in the park as I had planned.

Liam collected us outside the tent and led us across the fields to the car park. He knew better than to talk about the singles heat with us, so he was making us laugh by educating us with his knowledge of ancient Mayan burial rites. Archaeology 101. Ann suggested he be committed to an institution. He suggested she get a life. Personally, I felt grateful to him. Making us laugh broke what was left of the strain between Ann and I. Knowing Liam, that would have been his plan.

I studied Liam as we walked over the long grass. I mean, he was a seriously cool guy. Maybe if I hadn't been like, 'involved' with Ann, I would have liked to go out with him. I mean the more I knew him, the more I... admired him, I suppose. The more I just liked

being around him too. He was pretty much everything I was not. Open, light, likeable, kind. Funny. It was confusing really. But then, this year had been The Year of Living Confusingly.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ben-the-Prince-of-Annoying was waiting for us at Liam's car, a black Audi convertible. Apparently it was a present from his folks for his 18th last year. I eyed it off jealously and wondered if I could hit Sandra up for one of them for *my* 18th, which was only a couple of months away now. If I worked on the parental guilt thing, there might be a chance. Better than sports socks. It occurred to me then how weird it would be to have 'friends' to celebrate a birthday with. Not that I would tell them probably, but it was an out there thing to think about. The last time I'd had a birthday celebration was before Nathan got sick. I was 11. But it *could* be nice, maybe, to go out and have my first legal drink with Ann and Liam. Ben would be well ditched by then, I thought, mentally assigning him to the recycle bin. I'd think about it.

Ann and I sat together in the back of the car, not really talking, but not feeling awkward either. Ben of course claimed the front passenger seat and sent the 'women' to the back, which, on this occasion, I totally did *not* begrudge. At one point when the guys were talking about party business, Ann moved her hand against mine, and our fingers played gently against each other. She leaned her head against the soft black leather and looked at me. I could almost hear her purring. I know I was.

We got to Ann's house in about an hour. I'm not sure that Liam was very law abiding when it came to speed limits. I'd have to have a word with him about that... The plan was for me to get changed at Ann's house and then we'd go out to the party from there. I *really* did not want to go out. It would have been much better just hanging around with Ann, watching YouTube, resting, doing *anything* but going out to piss about with a bunch of people I didn't know. Especially the night before the final. But Ann was on a mission. And apparently I was essential to the plan.

I'd never actually, in my life, gotten dressed to go out with anyone else. Like, you know, been in the same bathroom to do your hair or watch someone put on their makeup or try on clothes. It was a total revelation. Ann tried on like six million 'outfits' and I had to give an opinion on them all... Was that miniskirt too short (not in my opinion). Maybe a skirt wasn't the thing anyway? Did these jeans make her arse look big or were the other ones better? (Oh come on. Seriously. Your arse would look awesome in Glad Wrap.) Maybe one should wear a dress for a party on a boat? No, definitely pants. What about this 'outfit'? No, she wore that for Ben's birthday and a lot of the same people would be there.

It was impossible to say anything actually sensible about the 'outfits' and anyway, what I said was pretty much irrelevant. I clicked on to the fact pretty quickly that my job was just to sit on the

bed and tell Ann she looked nice in whatever she put on (which wasn't a lie), while *she* decided what she was going to wear. My being there just let her talk out-loud while she made the decision. And I mean like, seriously, who the bloody hell wears 'outfits' anyway.

But it turns out, I really should have made the most of that time, (I mean it was no hardship watching Ann take her clothes on and off), because the worst was yet to come. Once Ann had decided she was gorgeous enough, it was *my* turn. I'd brought jeans and a black T-shirt to wear. It was going to be a warm night so that was enough. Oh and the black eyeliner, which I already had on anyway. So that would do. There was only one person at the party that I cared about whether they liked how I looked or not. And she was already in the room with me.

Ann turned her sharp eyes on to me. She stared at my face for ages. And I don't mean like lovingly into my eyes or anything fuzzy and warm like that, but *at* me. At my surface, like I was one of those 3D puzzles. You know, the ones where if you stare at the pattern on the page long enough something happens to your brain and you can see the secret 3D picture.

"Can I try putting some makeup on you?" she asked. "Pleeeeeeaaasssseee..."

I frowned. "I've *got* make up on," I said.

"No. Like real makeup. Not messy black stuff you've smudged around your eyes."

"You're g... gold for my ego."

Ann laughed. "You've got a pretty face. Really." Oh my God... She'd started channelling Sandra.

"Please... Please, can I try putting some makeup on you?" she begged playfully. "You don't have to wear it out. I just want to mess around."

"W... what's wrong with this," I said, indicating my face. Ann looked at me, pityingly.

"Just let me do a little bit...?"

Ann threw me an exaggeratedly 'charming' smile and crawled on all fours across the bed towards me, in a parody of seduction. She stopped when there was just a body shaped crack of air between us. She ran a fingertip slowly down the ridge of my nose and over my lips. Her tongue ran over her bottom lip.

Oh... come... on!

"Pleeease..." She whispered. Ann turned her mouth towards my ear and puffed hot air over it, lightly licking it with the tip of her tongue. It was too much. I was laughing out loud, falling back on the pillows. Laughing with me, Ann fell on top of me and kissed me.

So... of course I caved. Stepford Wife and all that. Ann 'worked' on me with the kind of determined focus she puts into

anything she does, zoning in on the task at hand. When Ann finally let me look in the mirror, it was a shock. I barely recognised myself. I tried to be impartial about the face before me, *my* face, reflected in the mirror. Definitely, by normal magazine type standards, I looked much ‘prettier’ than I ever had. To be honest, I didn’t even know I could look like that. Ann had done something to my eyes I couldn’t quite figure out. Something with brown eye shadow and mascara and eyeliner that made them seem softer, bigger, deeper... *kinder* even. And it turned out that I had actual serious eyelashes. Who would have thought... She’d also done something clever to my cheekbones, because all of a sudden I *had* some. It was weird. It definitely wasn’t me, it was a mask painted onto the surface of my face, but I could see why someone else might think this mask looked ‘pretty’. If Sandra saw it, she would’ve been doing cartwheels and shooting off fireworks at the feet, like a Catherine Wheel. Must be shit for a mother who owns a cosmetics empire, to have a daughter like me.

Ann was watching me expectantly as I studied my face in the mirror. She kept looking between the reflected face and the face in the real world.

“Well...?” she asked proudly.

I stared at my reflection.

“What do you think!” she demanded.

“L... looks like I’m in d... drag.”

Ann ‘huffed’. (Do people actually ‘huff’? She does.) “You look gorgeous.”

“Nope,” I replied eloquently, shaking my head.

“Honestly, George. Look at yourself. You’ve got a model’s face.” Something about this transformation really had Ann excited. I wasn’t getting it.

“I’m n... not going out like this,” I said.

Ann stayed silent. She knew better than to argue. She got up and crossed to her wardrobe and pulled out a plain, black, V-neck T-shirt. “Here try this on,” she smiled.

And so that’s how I ended up walking along the marina down at Elwood, wearing one of Ann’s black t-shirts that was way tighter than mine ever were, and wearing this new makeup. Sure, the makeup got toned down after I threatened to wash it all off, but it was still Ann-style makeup. Not George-style eyeliner.

Dusk was just beginning to fall. We turned around the corner of a small utilitarian building on the pier and there it was, Liam’s boat, lit up like fairyland with hundreds of white and pale pink lights. It sat alone at the end of one narrow gated dock, like a vision of paradise. There were people all over the yacht and gathering on the pier in front. Party noise drifted to us over the marina, through

the swaying forest of white masts, across the neat rows of crisp white boats with their sails folded into immaculate navy blue covers. It looked otherworldly, especially just now, as the water and sky were beginning to iridess into sunset colours.

“Wow,” Ann said softly. This was a wonder world for her. “Wow,” she repeated, eyes wide. She turned to me, her co-conspirator.

“Imagine,” she said, softly shaking her head. I felt a stab of guilt. I really, really needed to tell her about Sandra’s money.

“M... money doesn’t m... make you happy,” I said totally pathetically. Ann laughed.

“What would you, or I, know about that,” she said. I took a deep breath. *Now*, I thought.

“Well a... actually... My m... mother... Sss...” I began. But Ann wasn’t listening. She was in the glittering cosmos of her imagined future. She gestured a marvelling hand across the breathtaking vision in front of her.

“People own that,” she said. “*People* can actually have that whenever they want.” She looked at me determinedly. “Do you think that doesn’t make a difference?”

Of course it does, I thought. *But not in the way you think.*

I sighed. Not now, after all. Tomorrow after the finals. I popped the secret back into the dark of its box. It would wait. Everything else was.

Ann ran an evaluative eye over me, that is, the product of her work. She seemed satisfied, except for moving a random piece of hair off my forehead. She straightened herself up, pulled her top down and swept back her long, waving golden hair. She was wearing a ‘floaty’ white top and beige linen wide-leg pants that hugged her arse, like, excellently. Overall, the effect was timeless and ‘classy’.

“Am I alright?” she asked.

“W... we shouldn’t even be here,” I sighed.

“You,” she said, tapping my chest with one finger, “promised not to sulk.”

“I’m n... not sulking. I’m just saying.”

“Come on. *Look!*” Ann said turning back to the magical vision. “This is way too good a chance to miss. I’ve heard people say Liam’s Dad could end up on the High Court.”

I shook my head at her, disapproving.

“Seriously, George. *Grow up*,” she snapped, finally losing her patience. “Rowing isn’t going to get you everywhere.” She sighed then, allowing herself to cool down.

“Anyway... I’m going to be in bed and asleep in two and a half hours from now. And so will you be. *Separately*,” she smiled. “Okay? No harm done.”

I sighed and looked down at my feet. She linked her arm through mine and squeezed it.

“So behave.”

I rolled my eyes. “W... one hour. And then I’m going.”

“Ninety minutes,” she said.

As we approached the boat, we could see Liam standing on the dock next to the gangplank, welcoming guests as they arrived. He was laughing and chatting in his easy way, helping girls negotiate their way across the gangplank. I mean, who would wear heels to a boat party. Seriously. They were suicidal enough, surely, when the earth wasn’t moving. We were nearly upon him before Liam looked up.

“Oh!” He looked delighted. “Great.” He smiled between Ann and I, seemingly not knowing who he was happier to see. Then his eyes widened and darted back to my face, doing a classic ‘double take’. *The makeup*, I realised. I looked down, my cheeks burning.

“Happy Birthday,” I heard Ann say. She leaned forward to embrace him. From the corner of my eye I saw her smile *knowingly* at Liam. She may even have winked... Traitor.

“Thanks for coming,” he said to us both. “Very un-good timing for you, I know.”

“Amazing boy toy you’ve got here,” Ann said, indicating the boat. Liam nodded.

“Yes. We’ve always said that if Dad had to do a *Sophie’s Choice* between us kids and the boat, we would’ve been shark bait.”

Ann chuckled. Suddenly a voice cut through the air.

“Ann! Ann!”

It was Laura. She and a posse of girls were standing together on the deck, not far off. Ann waved.

“Look who’s here,” Laura called across the masses, pointing at someone. Ann turned, as did I, and we both saw a tall, dark haired girl smiling at Ann. Well, kind of smiling. The girl gave Ann a small, cynical wave. I felt like I’d seen her somewhere before.

“Oh!” said Ann, smiling broadly at Liam. “Great.” She turned to me.

“I’ll be back in a second.” Then Ann was across the gangplank in two confident steps, leaving Liam and me staring at each other. Well, him staring at me, me staring at the ground. I could *feel* him smiling.

“Shut... up,” I said, glancing up, mortified.

He was grinning, but there was affection in his eyes. He put his fingers under my chin, tilting my face up.

“Sweetie, have you been visiting Mama’s beauty parlour again?” He bit down a laugh. I pushed his hand away.

“Shut up,” I said. “Ann d... did it.”

Liam kept staring at my face.

“You look, sooo...” He stopped.

“Stupid,” I finished for him.

“Not at all,” he said earnestly. He looked me quickly up and down. “Don’t hit me, but, pretty. Sexy. In a weird way. For you I mean.” He closed one eye and braced himself as though for a punch. “I’ll shut up now,” he said flatly.

I turned away, trying not to smile. I looked over to where Ann had gone. She was talking to the dark girl. They obviously knew each other well, but I wasn’t sure about how much they actually liked each other. Well, no... not Ann. It was the other girl who seemed to be a bit, well, hostile would be too strong a word. Ann must have felt me looking at her, because her eyes met mine. She waved me over. The other girl automatically followed her eye line and glanced at me too. At that moment, some preppy looking guy about Liam’s age burst through the crowd on the boat, leapt over the gangplank, and pounced on Liam.

“Hey,” he said. “We’re waiting. You promised to show us below.” He ran his eyes over me, not even pretending to be interested. Liam turned to me.

“Do you want the tour?” he asked. “I’m going to show them below deck. If you’re keen?” I shook my head.

“Nah, I’ll just...” I pointed awkwardly to Ann. “Better go,” I muttered as I climbed up the gangplank and away from being looked at.

I wove through the crowded clusters of people, automatically wiping the lipstick off my face with the back of my hand. Ann, Grace, Laura and some others were standing around in a tight circle.

“Hey George,” said Laura, looking me over. “You look nice.” Then she added, “Amaaazing doubles heat today.” I nodded. Ann linked her arm through mine. She turned to the unknown girl.

“George, this is Cassie. Cassie, George.” I nodded, then Cassie smiled at me, like really giving me the once over. “Cassie was my doubles partner last year,” Ann said.

Oh...

Now she was interesting. I remembered then, seeing a photo of her with Ann. So that was Cassie. She was what you might call a ‘fine’ looking girl, of good height, well built. Naturally athletic. Boyish almost. She had a tattoo, (maybe a rose?), at the top of her left arm. Cassie offered me her hand.

“So you’re the hot new partner I’ve heard so much about.” Her eyes examined me, thoroughly. I held her gaze as we shook hands. “Then only you can know how I suffered,” she said.

Everyone laughed. Ann turned to me with something like a smile on her face.

“Cassie wasn’t as dedicated as we are,” she said calmly, her eyes darting back to Cassie.

“Dedicated!” Cassie smiled back. “You’re a fucking slave driver.”

“Well you’re not much of a slave,” Ann grinned back. “Were you *ever* at practice on time?”

Obviously they were used to this kind of conversation, because neither of them actually seemed upset. Or else maybe, it was all water under the bridge. Pardon the pun.

“You rowing for the team at uni?” asked Ann in a more normal tone.

“Nah. I’ve done my time. Rowing can live without me.”

Ann shook her head, disgusted.

“I’ve joined the water skiing club though,” Cassie said. “Much more fun. And student radio. You should listen to me sometime. I’ll dedicate a song to you.”

Ann nodded, not very interested now.

“*Slave to the Rhythm*,” Cassie laughed, thinking herself brilliant. Everyone roared with laughter, except me of course. I looked between Ann and Cassie, intrigued. Obviously, there was history there.

“Ann’s captain of the squad now,” said Grace, who was also in the group.

“Oh I heard,” said Cassie, her eyes only on Ann. “Of course she is. Congratulations,” she said directly to Ann with a hint of actual sincerity.

“Thanks,” Ann said. “How is uni?”

“Oh you know...” replied Cassie. “Fine. Good.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Better than school. There’s not much I miss from Greystones, that’s for sure. Totally different kinds of people.”

I didn’t have time to wonder if that was an insult or not because, at that moment, Ben rolled up. And when I say rolled... he was swaying more than the boat. He strode right up to the centre of our group, as though we would naturally be overjoyed to see him.

“Laideees!...” he beamed, arms extending in a gesture of welcome to all. Looking around the circle, he saw Cassie first.

“Heeeey Cass!... Coool. Long time no...” His eyes continued their tour of the rest of the ‘laideees’. He smiled at Laura and Gracie, then saw Ann.

“Aww Baby.” He crossed the circle towards her, putting his arms around her, basically pushing me out of the way. He kissed her on the forehead, then on the lips. I clenched my teeth and forced myself to stare down at the deck. *After the race. After the race... Tomorrow.*

“Look!” Ben cried merrily, pointing at Cassie, Laura, Gracie and then Ann. “It’s a reyoonian! Have you ladies got drinks? The bar’s just over there.” He waved somewhere off to his left then he turned to look pointedly, intimately, at Ann. Liking what he saw, he pulled her in close to him, running his hand down the curve of her lower back, to her bum, which he *squeezed*. My eyes shot open, then down again. *Don’t look.*

“Ben...” Ann warned, pulling his hand off her arse.

Ann inched away, casting me a discrete glance. She had good reason. The temperature was rising. I caught Cassie looking at me, but she turned away and watched Ann amused, as she wrestled with Ben. Ben couldn’t have cared less. He was in his element. He looked around at the circle of girls, totally oblivious to anything less subtle than a smack across the head with 4x4. Any minute now he was going to start crowing. Ben pulled Ann into him, so that her back was flush against his front, and encircled her with his arms. He kissed her neck.

One more day. I clenched my jaw and tried to control myself.

Ben looked up again and finally his eyes rested on me. His brain wasn’t working very fast so he gazed at my face for a long time before anything happened.

“George?”

His eyes ran down my body and back to my face, via a good long stare at my chest. It made my skin prickle all over. I felt redness creeping up my face and neck. Right then, I could have, *should* have, punched him.

“George?” he repeated. “What happened? You look hot.”

The teeth clenching escalated to grinding. I caught Ann’s eyes briefly. They were boring meaningfully into mine... *Chill...*

“I n... need a Coke,” I said, walking away. Some things are better just to be avoided.

One more day.

I was half way across the boat, when I felt Ann’s hand grab my arm.

“George...”

I turned to her.

“Just chill, alright.”

“I am chilled.”

“Yeah right.” She stood up taller and straighter, making all seem normal. She let go of my arm. “I have to hang out a bit with Ben, okay. Otherwise it will look weird.”

“Knock yourself out,” I said.

I glanced, through the crowd, back at Ben and the group of girls around him. They were all laughing. I turned back to Ann, she looked unsure of herself. Vulnerable. I repented a little.

“Want a drink?” I said.

“No.”

She looked down, lost. I wanted to put my arms around her then, but obviously I didn't. I just stood there, being sort of, useless. After a moment, she looked up again at me.

“It's not easy for me, either,” she said softly. She leaned in the smallest distance. “But some things just need to be done,” she said almost sadly. Ann looked at me then, intensely, as though she was trying to communicate something I just wasn't getting. Seeing my frown, she sighed, resigned. “Never mind. I'll sort it tomorrow, I promise... It will be just us.”

Her hand touched mine briefly, and she left.

I fucking hate parties.

How did I forget that?

So, cut to... later... I was sitting at the back of the boat, the stern, I should say, looking out at the sea and biding my time. I said I'd stay ninety minutes and we'd been there seventy eight. In twelve minutes I was leaving. I had a race to win tomorrow.

The horizon, what I could see of it past the forest of masts in the marina, was defined now only by a faint glow of carmine light. The sea was charcoal, the sky a deep luminous blue, sparsely dotted with stars. I could see Venus, fat and shiny, above the horizon. The boat rocked gently. The mournful sound of metal masts clinking, rang out a gentle percussion. Really, it was quite beautiful. If I hadn't been at a stupid party, surrounded by stupid people, I would have been enjoying the moment.

I didn't really mind sitting there all by myself, like a loser, talking to no one, at the far edge of the boat. It was better than having to make, or even listen to inane conversation. From where I sat, I had a good view of what was going on with the peeps at the party, and from time to time it was even interesting enough to glance at.

In older days this would have been an excellent opportunity for some spiritual training. Actually, in the old days, in days 'B.A.', that is *Before Ann*, I wouldn't even have been here. Okay, the truth was, I *had* been slacking off. My spiritual practice *had* fallen away just a tinsy bit and detachment did appear to be eluding me just for the moment. I was aware of that. But not to worry. So far, from the little I'd learned, attachment seemed to have its own set of rewards.

I took out my phone and looked at the time. Seven minutes left. I hadn't seen Ann for ages, but I assumed she would appear

punctually when time was up. I checked the weather app on my phone. It really didn't make that much difference to me. But it was something to do, right. Tomorrow was going to be fine and sunny. A top of twenty-six. Perfect.

I looked up from my phone and saw Liam standing in front of me. He was beaming. The party was going well for him.

"Not a party girl then?" Liam said, somewhat redundantly I thought. He sat next to me on the edge of the hull. I raised an eyebrow at him.

"D... do I look like a p...party girl to you?" Liam 'checked me over'.

"Well, maybe..." he stalled comically, apparently unable to decide. OMG. I'd totally forgotten the makeover. My face started to redden and I looked away.

"I m... mean usually."

We looked back towards the middle of the boat, at the crowded, party-lit deck. It was filled with attractive buoyant people laughing, drinking, talking. Straight ahead, was a narrow stairway leading from the deck to below. Not your basic rungs, but actual steps in a steep white stairwell. To my left, I could feel Liam staring at me. I looked at the time on my phone, just to be doing something.

"You don't want to see below?" he asked. I shook my head. Then I remembered my manners and added,

"Th... thanks." Mistress of etiquette, me. There was a tricky silence as we both stared out into the middle distance.

"Y... you know a lot of people," I finally said. Liam gazed at the crowd in front of us.

"What was it Bilbo said?" he frowned. "I don't know half of them half as well as I would like, and I like less than half of them half as well as they deserve." He laughed. I stared at him, really, just in awe. After ages of us just looking at each other, I eventually turned away, rechecking the time on my phone.

"About to turn into a pumpkin, are we?" he asked. I nodded.

"S... somewhere in the world it's m... midnight. Have you seen Ann?"

"Not for a while," he said. I expected him to look at the crowd, like I was doing, but instead his eyes kept boring into my face. I was becoming flustered.

"Don't," I said, sharply.

"What?"

"Trying to f... f... to work me out. Don't bother. I'm n... not that interesting."

"Hey, they say the journey is half the fun...?"

I looked down. I'd let this conversation get a bit too... There was a long silence.

“You ready for tomorrow?” Liam said eventually. I turned to him.

“You t... tell me... *Coach.*”

Liam nodded thoughtfully.

“You’re ready.”

I mirrored his nod. I was as ready as I ever would be.

“Liam,” I said, hesitating. He looked intently at me. “You’ve been w... watching me row. Watching Ann.” I took a breath. “D... do you think I can beat her?” He hesitated.

“I’m barracking for you, remember.”

“I s... said, do you think I can b... *beat* her?”

Liam considered this, frowning... *Hang on...* I thought. What happened to ‘Sure’ and ‘Definitely’... That’s what I expected him to say.

“You could,” he said, turning back to me. “You know you could, and, but... George...” He frowned. “She could beat you too. Have you noticed her form? She’s fitter than I’ve ever seen her. She’s worked her arse off.”

“So have I.”

He nodded in agreement.

“But maybe...” he said. I waited... Liam looked at me very seriously.

“You mustn’t underestimate her. She’s an awesome competitor. I’ve seen her race.” Then he added carefully, “And maybe... maybe she *wants* it more.”

I flushed. I looked out to sea and watched the gentle play of starlight on its surface. *No.* I turned back to Liam.

“She *doesn’t* want it more,” I said hotly, meeting his gaze. Liam’s eyes darkened. He stood up, grabbing my arms and dragging me up too, facing him. His back was turned to the party so that his whole burning attention was on me. I held his gaze for a moment then looked away. I needed to move... *Move?* I could barely breath.

“Y... you’re a really c... cool guy,” I finally said. And I meant it. I glanced up at him. “Y... you know that, right? But...” The heat was draining from his eyes. He slid his hands up my arms, resting them on my shoulders.

“Don’t,” I managed to say. “Don’t.”

As I looked down, my eyes caught on the movement of Ann and Ben coming up the boat’s stairwell. They were laughing and looked flushed... like *sex* flushed. Ben pressed Ann against the wall of the stairwell and kissed her hotly. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him right back.

Without knowing what I did, I threw Liam off and stood totally to attention. Stunned.

“George?”

I glanced at Liam then back at Ann and Ben. She was pushing him away now, but provocatively, teasingly. He leaned in and smothered her mouth with his own.

Then my feet were moving across the deck. They were doing it of their own accord. Across the deck, over the gangplank. Along the dock. Through the gate. Along the heavy boards of the wooden pier.

Away.

When I got to the little building and turned the corner, out of sight of the boat, I couldn't go on. I felt sick. Physically sick.

I supported myself with one hand against the wall waiting to see if I was actually going to throw up. When after a few breaths it didn't come, I leaned against the cool of the wall just staring ahead. *What just happened?*

To my right, I heard footsteps. Running feet. I turned and stumbled in the other direction, keeping one hand on the wall to help me stay upright. The feet followed.

"George! George! Wait."

Ann's voice. Straightening myself up, I kept walking in the opposite direction.

"George please."

She ran in front of me blocking my path, her eyes imploring.

"Wait."

She tried to hold my arm, but I shoved her off. My head spun.

"George..." she pleaded. With a hand gesture I stopped her coming towards me. I leaned against the wall of the building, letting the dizziness in my head dissipate.

Ann was standing in a pocket of amber light under an old iron lamppost. The breeze fluttered her creamy blouse and caressed her hair. She looked like a golden hallucination.

"Did you j... just have sex with Ben?" I said. My voice sounded pathetic. My head still spinning.

"What!... No!" she blurted, her face aghast.

"I saw you kissing him."

Ann frowned, put a hand to her forehead.

"I *had* to kiss him," she said wearily. I looked sharply at her. "Otherwise it would have been weird, wouldn't it?" She sighed, as though sick of explaining herself.

"You weren't suffering," I spat.

Ann groaned and put both hands to her face, trying to wipe away this conversation. She took a deep breath and dropped her arms, fighting for composure.

"Whatever you saw... It's not what it looked like," she said firmly. Definitely.

"It n... never is."

I put a hand to my head trying to make the spinning stop.

“George?” Ann stepped step towards me. “You look pale. Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m g... great.” I blinked at her, bringing her and the world into sharper, stiller focus. “Doesn’t this... Doesn’t this all make you nuts? The lies. The...” I rested my head back against the wall. “So many lies.”

“I’m not lying,” she said emphatically. “I’m *not lying* to you, I promise.”

I had genuinely no idea whether to believe her or not. She looked like she was telling the truth, but then, she always did.

“To me, to Ben, to Liam. Everyone. You just lie.”

“I’m not lying!” Ann shouted, catching my full attention. “I’m not!” She took another step towards me. Her eyes urged me to believe her.

“Well what do you call this,” I said, indicating the two of us.

“We’re not lying to anyone,” she said. “Who are we lying to? Whose business is it to know except ours?”

“Your *boyfriend’s*?” I sneered.

“You know that’s just ‘til after tomorrow.” She looked at me frustrated, desperate to make me *see*. “We’ve talked about that.” She paused. “George... lying is when you say something that’s not true. When you actually *tell* a lie. We’re not telling any lies. Who have we

told lies to? We’re just not making a big song and dance about things. It’s different.”

“You were *kissing* him!”

Ann threw her arms up in frustration. “For God’s sake George, we’ve been through that...”

I stared at her, dazed.

“Some things just have to be done,” Ann said, not really meeting my eye. I shook my head at her.

“How can I, how can anyone trust you?” I said weakly. Ann really lost it then.

“Oh for *FUCK SAKE* George,” she screamed. “Stop trying to make this my fault. I don’t make the rules.”

She started pacing, looking at the ground, then wildly up at me.

“Ben, Liam, Laura... All of them. They can do whatever they like because when it comes down to it, what is it going to matter? They can spend their whole lives having drinks on the yacht and fucking around and feeling ‘a little bit lost’ and oh... I don’t know what to do with myself this year. Maybe I’ll try publishing. Or maybe I’ll go to the house in Portsea for a while and get my shit together. But then, Paris is sooo nice in May. And then when Mummy and Daddy die, it’s Ooohhh... look what I’ve inherited. How nice. I think I’ll go to Tuscany.”

She stared me down, breathless, eyes ablaze, *daring* me to contradict her. I gaped dumbly at her.

“Don’t look at me like that George,” she hissed. “Tell me it’s not true.” She stepped towards me, her expression softening. “But, we’re... the same.” She was pleading now. “You and me, we’re like, on the same side. Aren’t we?” I looked away, my heart beating out of my chest. She stepped closer, her voice a whisper.

“Do you think I would have been made captain? Do you think they would have voted me Head Girl if people even imagined, even had the possibility to imagine, that I was ‘different?’” She did that apostrophe thing with her fingers and stared at me. Defiant. “Well?”

She looked away in disgust. “It’s fucked up enough just being on a scholarship.” I shook my head in something like pity.

“Oh come on George,” she snapped. “How many ugly or fat or gay or disabled or *God knows what* school captains have you seen lately? School Captains look like me or Laura or Ben or Liam.”

“Shut up,” I cried. “Who even cares!”

“Being School Captain gets you your next scholarship. *You* should care.” She tried looking casual. “All the better for me I suppose if you don’t.” But again, she became urgent. She stepped into my space looking imploringly at me.

“And anyway, what we do, you and me, is totally our own business. Just because we like each other doesn’t mean we have to

start wearing rainbow beads or waving flags. We’re not even really properly *gay* anyway. If we just shut up, we get to keep what we’ve got, you and me, without losing anything.”

She came right up to me and slid a hand around my face.

“Please George...” she whispered. “I really want to be with you. You’ve got to trust me. Really. I’m right. *I know...*” Her eyes impelled me to believe in her. To trust her. She was so sure. She was the wise one. The experienced one.

She *knew...*

I just needed to make the leap. To join her cult. To lean forward the tiniest bit and kiss... her ... *Ooh...*

I gasped as a stunning realisation slammed through me. It actually took my breath away.

I *knew*.

I forced a slow breath. And another.

“You said... I was the *second* person to sleepover...” Ann’s eyes widened, darted away and back to mine.

“Who was the first?”

It sounded innocent enough, but I was the truck and she was the rabbit in the headlights.

“Cassie,” I said flatly.

Ann froze. This wasn’t in the plan. She steeled herself then wrought a smile from her lovely, brittle mouth.

“So shoot me,” she said, smiling in a horrible way. “I’m not a virgin.” She tried to shrug her shoulders and raise a playful eyebrow, but it just looked sick.

“You were sleeping with her,” I said to my feet. “Like you’re doing with me.” I looked up at Ann. She was trying to keep it together. To make the falling pieces stick. She stretched out an imploring hand.

“Don’t do this, George,” she said. “*Pleeease*. Don’t wreck everything now.”

“*Me...*”

I could barely raise a sound. It was all just shattering now, it was swallowing me alive. Ann stepped towards me, panic branded across her face.

“I know you won’t believe me,” she pleaded. “But with you... It’s different. We can sort this out. *Please*. Let’s just get through tomorrow. I... I know it looks terrible on paper...” She rubbed her forehead. “It was nothing with Cassie. I promise. Not like it is with

you. Honestly. Really.” She stepped forward again. “Try to *THINK*, George. We’re so close. We’re this far away. Let’s just do...”

“Do the fucking race.” I groaned, as I spun away, my hands clutching my head. “That’s all you care about.” I’d been such an idiot. Such a loser.

“It’s not true,” she pleaded. God, I wanted to *hurt* her.

“You’re a lying fucking, heartless...” Where were words when you couldn’t use a gun?

“... using *slag*,” I said.

Ann gasped. Outrage tore through her. Her eyes ignited.

“Jesus, George,” she spat. “Get *over* it.” She looked at me with disdain. “It’s not like we’re ‘in luuuuurv’ or anything.” She did that thing with her fingers again. My heart was disintegrating, shattering into a thousand tiny sandblasted pieces.

“No,” I said, choking out the words. “Obviously you’re in ‘lurv’ with Ben.”

Ann’s eyes couldn’t hold mine. She looked away.

Beyond the building in the darkness, something caught my eye. A movement? I looked quickly back at Ann. She was so exquisite, so broken and fragile in that golden light. With sudden decision, I entered the light and kissed her.

She gasped and pulled back, searching my eyes. I put my hand to the back of her head and pulled her back into a fierce kiss, searing

her lips with mine. At first hesitant, she quickly softened, kissing me back, opening up to me, pulling me tightly into her. Bleeding into me.

I heard footsteps. Voices.

“What the...”

Holding Ann to me, I turned to see Liam and Ben rounding the corner of the building, coming to a stunned stop at the edge of the light. Eyes wide.

Ann saw them and instantly she pulled away, tearing herself out of my arms. She stared horrified and breathless, between Ben, Liam and me.

I smiled at her.

For a fleeting second, Ann’s eyes bore into mine, as understanding penetrated... Then with terrifying clarity, I saw her transform. She wiped her mouth in disgust, shaking and unsteady.

“Are you fucking mad,” she gasped at me. “What are you *doing?*”

She appealed to Ben then looked back at me in horror. She ran over to Ben, who wrapped a protective arm around her.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Ben spat at me. Liam was next to him, one step back. I tried not to meet his eye.

Ann wiped her mouth again, looking bewildered and pissed. She clung onto Ben and turned back to me.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with you,” she demanded.

I almost laughed. Maybe I did. It was brutal. Priceless. It was impossible to tell at that moment whether her anger was real or if it was faked. Real probably. But not for reasons stated. Ann held my eyes, then with a final splash of vitriol said in a low shaking voice, “Fuck off, freak.”

Liam looked at Ann in shock, then back at me.

Ben cast me a final glare of disgust and, still supporting Ann, turned around. They walked away into the darkness. Liam watched them go, then turned back to me. It wasn’t easy to look at him, but I held his wounded, questioning gaze for a long moment. I wanted to explain, to apologise. Really I did, but words wouldn’t arrange themselves. And anyway, it was all fucked up now. There was no going back.

I backed away, hoping he could see how sorry I was. That’s the thing about Friendly Fire. It kills and maims you just the same... only with a sad look on its face. I looked down and turned into the darkness beyond the building and away from them all.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lesson number one in the Art of Detachment is that, there's no use practising on meaningless things. The fact is, that the painfulness of the thing you're trying to detach from is directly proportional to how much progress you make, spiritually speaking. So basically, there's no point practising being detached on something like, say, a broken fingernail or having no phone credit. You have to jump right in the deep end and practice on things that really matter, like the death of a brother or a parent fucking off out of your life forever. That way, when lesser trials present themselves, you're ready and all that practice can swing right into action.

As I sat in the back of the cab on the way home, I definitely didn't feel detached. I felt... raw. Like I'd been peeled and skewered. Letting my spiritual practice slip had been a serious mistake. I could see that now. I'd been lead along dangerous paths. I couldn't think. Didn't want to. I just wanted to go to bed, get up and get the race over. After that nothing mattered. The rowing season would be done. I would creep back under that radar, pull my head in and get back to normal. My eyes were fixed on a little dangly thing hanging down from the mirror in the front seat. Anything else seemed just too much to take in. Although I'd been staring at it constantly, it took me the whole trip to realise it was like an Animé version of that

Indian Goddess, the blue one with eight arms. Somewhere in my mind I'd thought it was a Smurf.

"Is it this one?" the driver said, shattering my reverie. I looked up and took in my surroundings.

"Pull over after that silver Jag," I said.

I walked in the front door very slowly. The hallway was dark but there was a thin crack of light under the door leading into the lounge. As I clicked the door quietly closed, I leant my forehead against the wood, letting tiny coils of relief unravel inside me. The door was cool against my forehead. It felt solid and upright. Like a door should. I listened to my breathing. It would be alright. It would all be fine. I just needed to go to sleep and get myself back on track. I felt beaten, as in with a stick. There were deep invisible bruises to every part of my body, inside and out. Slowly I hoisted myself off the door. Come on. Bed.

The lounge room was lit up like an interrogator's wet dream. All the lights were on and everything was *WHITE*. I blinked and rubbed my eyes. I heard footsteps storming from the kitchen. Sandra rounded the bend like a Fury, a glass of wine in her hand.

"Where the fuck have you been?" she screamed.

Oh great.

I rubbed my forehead and closed my eyes. *Not now.* Sandra took a couple of wobbly steps towards me. In her bare feet and dressing gown she was about three inches high.

“I’ve been too lenient with you. Far too good to you.” She pointed at me with her glass-holding hand, one finger outstretched. The other hand held a piece of paper, like a bill or something. I closed my eyes and sighed.

“Can we not... can we just not...” I said dully. “You’re dr...”

“Don’t you dare. Don’t you fucking *dare!*” she screamed, beating the air for emphasis and slopping wine in a red arc onto the carpet. I sighed, turning to the door. All I could think about was crawling under the covers. I just wanted to lie down. In my room. With my door closed. Not too much to ask.

Sandra hissed at me like a wild cat. “Don’t you fucking move!”

I stared at her. She was incendiary. Like, beyond rage and into nuclear. I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen her like this. I suddenly wondered if maybe she was on something more than just alcohol.

“You’ll never guess,” she laughed, edging on hysteria. I turned back to really look at her, actually starting to worry. “I’ve been caught speeding,” she trilled. “Only I haven’t driven that car for months.”

Ooh...

She thrust the sheet of paper at me and challenged me with mad eyes.

Oh God. Please not tonight.

Sandra went on.

“So I got the photos printed and... Gee... what did I see? Who was that behind the wheel there,” she glanced at me, daring me to speak. “Driving my Lexus at one hundred and thirty six kilometres per hour, without my permission and without a fucking LICENSE!” This last word was shouted *Molto Forte*, but at least now, I knew what we were dealing with.

I looked down at the photo. It was me alright. Probably listening to some Suzi and burning up the highway. But frankly... so what. It seemed supremely unimportant.

“Geez. I thought at least someone had died,” I sneered. I handed the paper back to Sandra and turned for the door.

“You stay right there young lady.” It was so lame I almost laughed.

“Just pay it,” I muttered, reaching for the door handle.

“*Pay* it!” she screamed.

“Yes PAY IT!” I turned on her. “That’s what your money’s *for*, for God’s sake. To smooth out the bumps.”

Sandra looked at me speechless. “You steal my car! You get me into trouble with the law! You make me look... Jesus Christ!”

What if this got into the papers. You can't think of anyone but yourself." At this, I really did laugh.

"Me!" I stared at her dumbfounded. "Oh give me a break with th... this outraged parent thing. Too little t... too late Mummy *Dearest*."

Sandra took two steps towards me and slapped me on the face. Hard.

I slapped her back.

We stood looking at each other like two air breathing piranhas. Mouths open, but nothing coming out.

Then her eyes filled. Her lips trembled. Her whole face collapsed and she crumbled like a child, into tears. She staggered away, sobbing.

"I'm so sorry baby... Sorry... You don't know..." Her breathing came in great hulking gulps. "You don't realise what I'm going through at the moment."

I stared at her, stunned.

"We're this far from receivership," she said, making the gesture and appealing to me. "Everything's falling down." She turned desperately to me. "I'd kill myself if anything happened to you. I would. You haven't even got a license. *Have* you? You can't even drive." A pause. "I'm so sorry baby... I don't know what to do."

She reached for my hand but I snatched it away. She backed away and walked around, in no certain direction.

"This move to Melbourne has been a fucking disaster. John thinks we should sell all our Australian assets and move HQ to Hong Kong. Taiwan maybe. I mean our manufacturing is based in China and most of our sales are to Asia now. It would be cheaper. It makes sense. Seventy-six percent," she said as though repeating it for the six millionth time. She stopped raving and appealed to me. "I know it's a long way..."

My brain just didn't comprehend. Like in a dream, I watched Sandra move forward towards me.

"You would come with me, wouldn't you?" Her voice seemed distant. She reached out a hand. "You're all I've got."

It was all out of control.

"Georgia? Baby? I'm doing my best."

The world was receding. Sandra was getting smaller, like I was seeing the room through the wrong end of a telescope. I backed away slowly.

"You could have been killed," she said, seeming at a great distance. Her voice was tiny. "I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you."

I grabbed the keys from the table in the hall and went through the front door.

“I love you baby.”

Driving was good. Driving was great. Driving fast. The engine purring underneath me, the walls of the car enclosing me. The lines and circles of the dashboard glowing like little friends in the darkness. Lights, shops, cars, people streaming past me on all sides. Just a blur.

It was a question of efficiency. Of precision timing and sharp, perfectly executed actions. I sped down the city roads, weaving in and out of traffic. Not bothering to indicate, or stop at lights. I didn't know where I was going, I was just getting *out*.

I turned onto the freeway and the world opened up. *Speed*. I floored it, feeling the rush. We were a bullet in the night, Lexi and I, weaving along the freeway, shooting past the mortals, leaving them all behind. The only thing that made sense was to drive. And drive. And drive, into the night, like exiting the atmosphere.

I knew this way out of town like the back of my hand, had driven it many times, didn't need to think. I passed horse country on the edge of town with its big ranch houses and paddocks outlined with stark white fences. I sped through the little valley hamlets, burning along their main streets in seconds, and wound around and over the rolling hills of wine country, tearing along the curving

roads, focussed completely on taking those curves within an inch of their life, or mine.

As I began to ascend, I took a side cut to the right, along a narrow valley road. It was overhung with the twisted limbs of ancient ghost gums. My headlights turned them stark white as I tore through the gnarly archway. Tree after tree rushed past me, mesmerizing and ceaseless. The road wound around the curves of a creek I knew was there somewhere, but couldn't see. Google Earthing myself mentally, I knew that after a while, I'd come out the other end of this valley then, turning left, I'd be through the forest and onto the plains of the back country highway. Actually, if I just stayed on that road I'd be in Sydney in about fifteen hours, less at this speed. Eventually I'd meet the coast road north. Driving along the coast seemed attractive but Sydney meant nothing. Nowhere did. That was just how things were.

I turned left onto the main road and embraced the open country, putting my foot down hard, loving the freedom of this wide, flat dark. This strip of the highway was denuded, nothing to either side of the road but grass and the interstate train line running parallel to the road a few hundred metres to my left. Up ahead in the far distance, shadowy peaks rose up against the horizon. To my right, another low mountain range, but here, where I was driving, it was flat.

I wound down my window. The sudden warm air battered me. I welcomed its savagery against my face and hair. I rolled down all the windows and took in great clean breaths of air, basking in its indifference to me. I tossed my head back, dragged my flapping hair off my face, squeezing it tight into one hand.

I sped on. Glancing out of the window, I instinctively looked up to see the stars. The sky was a riot of white amassed against black. The Pointers. Alpha Centauri. Beta Centauri. The Southern Cross. I checked the road then up again at the sky. There was the Coal Sack, right next to the Southern Cross. That pit of darkness. Just like me.

I turned back to the road just in time to catch a speeding blur to my left. Something ran in front of the car, blooming fatly in headlights. I jammed the brakes, skidding. Two more flying leaps and the animal was gone.

I steered hard left, off the side of the road and stopped dead. Heart beating furiously, I looked around. The kangaroo had disappeared. Reabsorbed into the night, like nothing had happened. I turned off the engine, turned off the lights and threw my head back against the headrest, breathing wildly. I clutched the steering wheel. Closed my eyes.

Maybe it was the adrenalin, but right then, I fell back to earth, back into place, and into time. In my car, in the middle of the bush,

the day before the race. The night of this unspeakable day... Pain soaked through me, like blood into a bandage. I struggled for air, felt overcome, felt ill, felt tears burning my eyes. I could barely think, didn't want to feel. *How stupid had I been?* It wasn't like I didn't know, hadn't understood before. I'd known all along.

I staggered out of the car, into the empty night, and paced along the road. Paced back, clutched my head. I bent over double but nothing made the pain less. I'd been a fucking stupid fucking idiot. It was all my fault. My blind stupid fault. Just stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. It was the only word that made sense. Stupid. Stupid... stupid... stupid... stupid... stupid... stupid... stupid... stupid... All thought was leaving me. Evaporating. Until I was empty... Silent and still. I put one hand on the car roof to steady myself then leaned my forehead down and rested it on the back of my hand. It felt good.

Tears dropped from my eyes, falling straight down, like a fancy film shot to the ground below. But I barely knew I was crying. There was just pain. I lifted my head and *BANGED* it down onto the car roof. Hard. Then again and again and again. Harder each time. Banging over and over. Welcoming the violence, the abuse. Feeling its *rightness*.

I stumbled back from the car clutching my forehead and really, wanting just to disappear from the face of the earth and never to have to be anything ever again. I groaned. Oh God.

Everything hurt. Everything. I couldn't see, then I remembered to wipe the tears from my eyes and the blur cleared.

And here I was. In the middle of the road.

The night was vast, dark and still and in every direction for miles around it was mine. Alone. Black and flat, as far as the eye could see... Was this it?

I sank to my knees, my palms fell against the harsh bitumen.

Was this it?

The air left my lungs. And for a microscopic infinity, time stopped, and I hung there. Disembodied... Was this all there was? Where it all led? To a dark road, on a dark night. To a lost, featureless nowhere. Without place. Without meaning.

Was this it?

I sat gently back on my heels and gazed blankly down the road ahead of me. The broken white line stretched for unseen miles into the darkness... on and on and on and...

I don't know how long I sat there like that. Long enough for my legs to hurt, for the gravel to bite into my shins. Slowly, bit by bit, the haze of my mind receded. I became aware of the night, of

bitumen, of the silence... The pain in my legs... I needed to move. I couldn't sit here on the road forever.

Could I?

Maybe I could.

If I just sat here long enough, everything would eventually sort itself out, one way or another.

My eyes turned to the black landscape ahead. In the faraway darkness, I became aware of something. A flickering point of light. For a long minute, I watched it, mesmerised, as the dot slowly steadied and redefined itself as two pinpricks of light. Headlights, I thought vaguely. *You have to get off the road.*

No. Maybe you don't.

Moving didn't seem very attractive.

I couldn't shift my eyes from the steady little lights. They barely seemed to be moving... then *yes*, they were heading this way but, they were somehow *wrong*. I kept kneeling there on the sharp bitumen, gazing absently at the dots. Maybe the road ahead veered left? In the dark I couldn't make out much detail beyond my immediate environment, just the headlights, growing slightly clearer. I blinked, my empty head trying to fit the pieces together. I *thought* the road was straight in front of me...

But then... *there it was...* just at the edge of my hearing... A familiar thunder rolling towards me over the grassy plain in the still of the night.

Two tiny lights in the darkness. Unstoppable momentum.

My pulse raced. Standing painfully up, my eyes flew to the road ahead. There was a turn off to the left maybe seventy metres away. Tracing that road with my eyes, I thought I could see a rail crossing a few hundred metres further on. Make out the shape of the sign. Country crossing. No boom gates. No lights.

Adrenalin flooded and a feeling of *LIFE!* shot through me. I dived into Lexi, started the engine, crunched into gear, and tore down the highway. I was at the turn off in seconds. I took the corner and belted down the side road towards the intersection, some hundreds of metres ahead. I glanced right as I sped forward. The train was an almost distinguishable *thing* now, with shape and mass. It hurtled through the night towards the crossing.

Looking between the train, the crossing and my distance to it, I automatically 'triangulated' the three objects. The train was too far away. I'd be through the crossing before the train got close. I slowed down, bringing Lexi to a purring standstill about three hundred metres from the crossing. Looking right, I watched the yellowish pool of light in front of the train push through the darkness, a thousand tons of shadowy train driving it forward.

My mind became appallingly clear. Details and objects took on this crisp 3-D clarity I'd never felt before. I was aware of everything. The skin of my palms against the leather steering wheel. The hairs on the backs of my fingers standing rigidly up. The breath ripping in and out of my lungs. My heart beating like some lunatic cartoon heart. Even the air had a physical presence, a density, between me and the train, the train and the road.

I honed my concentration onto the ever-narrowing distance between the train and the crossing, looking from one to the other, gauging...

Okay.

I revved the engine. Ten. Nine... I glanced right. The ghostly patch of light was close enough now to highlight grass, tree trunks and emptiness as it rushed towards me. I pumped the gas again and again, keeping my other foot jammed hard on the brake, making the engine *ROAR*. Wheels spun on the dirt. Tyres burned. Smoke rose. My heart was pumping out of my chest but my mind was terrifyingly, dangerously alive. Five. Four. Three... *wait...*

The train was close now, a thundering, hurtling mass.

Two....

White flag...

One.

Red flag.

I took my foot off the brake, and skidded forward in a cloud of dirt and smoke. Pumped the accelerator. Glanced right. The train was moving fast, faster than expected.

“Move!” I screamed at Lexi. I crunched into low gear. Slammed my foot down. Ground back into drive. Floored it. The speed was insane. A shriek cut the air. Train’s horn. It’s seen me. I clutched the steering wheel and leaned forward, urged the car to go faster. The crossing rushed towards us...

“Come on.”

Faster.

Train brakes screeched against metal tracks but it was unstoppable. The horn screamed. And again. I pumped the accelerator. Nearly there... But so was the train. Look right. Headlights grow huge. White washed tracks in front of me... I jam my foot down and shut my eyes.

I hear myself scream.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Once upon a time, there was a high priestess. She lived on an island in the middle of a secret lake. There was also this guy who lived in a castle. For various strategic reasons, the priestess needed the guy to fall in love with her, basically so she could get him to do what she wanted. Anyway, this priestess wove this like, super powerful, super complicated love spell around the poor guy... Eye of newt, blood of victim, you know the thing. And it worked. The guy fell like, stupidly in love with her, until he was so blinded, so spellbound, that he would have walked over razor blades for her.

But, here's the twist. The priestess discovered the hard way, that the *price* of the charm, was that she had to fall in love with him right back, or the charm didn't have any power. Its strength *came from* the strength of her desire. Cool concept hey. So then when the shit hit the fan for the guy, the priestess was destroyed as well.

Looking back on everything that happened over those last two months at Greystones, from where I am now, there's still lots of things I don't have answers to. Top of the list... *Did Ann ever really give a shit about me?*

There's a lot that can't be signed off on, one way or the other. Like, did Ann ever *really* believe that I was going to be put into the

Div 1 single instead of her? You know, when she cracked it in the locker room. Or was she playing me? Playing on my ego and playing my attachment to her, counting on the hope that this would make pathetic, desperate-to-please little me, leap to her rescue and get on board her plan to row doubles. At the time, it felt like my idea. But, did I walk into that?

Or what about... was Ann secretly in Thomo's ear the whole time, trying to convince him to put her in the single over me? And failing that, did she put him up to entering us both? I mean, just how far *would* Ann have gone to manipulate Thomo? Gross thought, eh. Or what about this... if Ann *already knew* she was in the single, would she still have slept with me, lied to me, just to get me to do the doubles?

And while we're on 'I don't know's', I can't help asking (even though it makes me feel sick)... where did those miraculous new muscles of Ann's come from? Was it just from hard work? Or was there more to it? Let's say... chemically.

And then there was Liam... Why was Ann trying to get Liam and me together? Especially if she liked me herself? That's nuts, right? Was it to draw me into her 'circle' and keep me close? Maybe, in her mind, if I was Liam's GF, Ann could get him to put pressure on me to 'play nice' and do doubles with her. I can see why she

might think that could work. Then when the Liam Plan failed, it was go to Plan B... seduce George yourself. Make her *need* you.

Was it *possible* that was all there was to it? Ann was so cold? So strategic? Sociopathic even? Had Ann simply been acting out her own set of cost benefit analyses? Cost versus outcome. Pain v Gain? Was sleeping with me just the price to be paid to get where she wanted? Surely... *tell me...* some stuff can't be faked, right?

Was this even the correct way to think about it? I mean, did it have to be a binary situation? Black or white. Hot or cold. She loves me, she loves me not. She used me or she didn't. Like some childhood rhyme.

Is it possible that Ann was both manipulating me *and* cared about me at the same time? Did she just habitually play the odds? There was no gain in being my enemy, right, so she tried to be my friend. She would get more out of me if I was in her inner circle, so she tried to match-make Liam and I. Failing that, why not try being my lover? That might lead to useful things, right? Was it just Ann's survival instincts that made her act like that? Is it possible that she wasn't faking *everything*? Maybe the affection, the feelings at least, were not a lie? Even if it wasn't Ann's first reason for us to get together.

You tell me.

In the end, I *will* sign off on this though... No matter what, if your agenda was in opposition to Ann's, at that crucial moment of decision, where things are kept or broken, you had to know that Ann would *always* protect her own interests first. Of this I'm sure.

At about 1pm the next day, the day of the finals, I stood on top of a low hill overlooking the Royal Schoolgirls Regatta and gazed below to the field of battle. I could hear the hubbub rising up at me. There were girls, families, boats, tents and rowers everywhere. Thousands of people lined the riverbanks, cheering on the rowers. Boats were going up and down the river in an orchestrated chaos. I took in the scene. It was a perfect day for the finals. Blue skies, light breeze, a gentle current. *Temperate*. Not a word you would've used to describe me.

I'd woken up that morning not in my right mind. I knew that at the time. Something had happened, but I couldn't remember what. My eyes slowly blinked open. Where was I? Adjusting to the light, I looked around. I was in Lexi, somewhere in the country. The shadows over the paddocks were long. Still early morning... Where was I?

Brakes. Thunder. A scream.

It rushed back at me.

I made it across the tracks a split second before the train smashed into the space I had just left. I flew out the other side of the crossing at top speed, saw the road bending left... couldn't hold... I braked... skidded...

Then... nothing.

I groaned. Every part of my body hurt. My head was throbbing. I could barely lift it. I wasn't going to be able to race today. No way. I didn't even know where I was... *God, what a hopeless bloody mess.* Slowly, painfully, I got out of the car and tried standing. There wasn't a part of my body that didn't ache.

Lexi had somehow come to a stop at the bottom of a rise looking out over a wide stretch of grassland. In the far distance in front of me was a line of low mountains, the highway was in the middle distance, the train tracks just this side of it.

Sweating and breathing roughly, I stared at Lexi. From where I stood she looked untouched. I walked gingerly around the front to the other side and... there it was. The rear, passenger side panel was smashed in, the boot lid crumpled and gaping slightly, like a twisted grin. I struggled down to a squatting position and looked closer. There was panel damage alright, but the wheel seemed okay. Maybe it was just superficial.

I looked around me. How the hell did I get here? I didn't remember driving to this spot, but there was no tree anywhere near

me, nothing to slam into. But I must have hit something. Here was proof. I suddenly felt weak. I slid down the side of the car and sat on the prickly, dry grass. Trembling, I checked my arms and legs, my hands, my fingers... Amazingly, I seemed unbroken.

My thumping head eased back against the car door as I stared out at the landscape. The grassland looked fresh and clear in the benign morning light. The exact opposite of me. I didn't want to remember. The previous day, the previous weeks were too stupid, too painful to credit. What had I been I thinking? *My* weakness led to this. That was the bottom line. I'd let myself get involved. I'd let things matter. *Me...* who knew so much better. What had my life taught me if *not* to be... like that. What an idiot. Seriously.

I closed my eyes. I'd lost sight of the only thing that really mattered. The one thing I *needed* to do. And that was win the race... And now it was too late... My mind ran automatically to Nathan. I'd let him down too. *Sorry Nate...* I lowered my head into my hands. What an idiot. What an unspeakable fool. I would have won too. I knew. I would have beaten her. Now *she* was going to win. And it was too late to change that.

Wasn't it?

I pulled out my phone. 7.48 am. A sliver of hope shot through me. We were meant to be at the river by seven but the singles final didn't happen until mid afternoon. It was the second last race of the regatta. That was plenty of time to get there, as long as Lexi worked okay. I looked around me again. Where was I? I knew it was north of the city. If the sun was rising in front of me then that must be east, then north was to my left. I just needed to... go right. I looked southward down the highway.

I struggled to my feet, groaning. Everything hurt. Okay, that was the other reality. It was one thing getting there, it was another thing racing. If I stood no chance of winning then I wasn't going to race. I could barely move.

First things first. I eased myself into the driver's seat and turned on the ignition. Nothing exploded. So that was a start, right. The engine worked... Great. I reversed a little. Reversed more. So far so good. I crawled tentatively forward, then drove a hundred metres down the road without a hitch. All good. Well, that was something to be getting on with.

I leaned across the seat, wincing in pain, and opened the glove box. Sandra, highly organised fitness freak that she was(n't), had emergency stashes everywhere. Just in case. There just might be... *Score!* I found Panadol. And Nurofen and Berocca. Not to mention three old mascaras, a leaking lip-gloss, some *Peach Blush*

Creme Base, two used face wipes, and a partridge in a pair tree. All Hail the Aging Empress!

Things were lookin' up.

I won't bore you with the hours of driving it took me to get to the Barwon River. The nice lady on Google Maps took me by the hand, led me around the outer edges of the city, and only got me lost twice. Lexi seemed A-OK mechanically, which made me love her even more. The drive was restorative, as driving always is for me when I'm not actually smashing the car. So were the Red Bulls, the 2 x Nurofen, Panadol and Berocca, the drive-through Maccas (healthy choice), the iced coffee and the home made pasty and sauce I got from some country bakery east of town, with the most disgusting toilets you've ever seen. But let's not go there... By the time I was on the Geelong Freeway, I'd climbed back up the evolutionary ladder to, well... 'Nearly Human'.

As I stood on the top of that hill, I'd never been more focussed. I was battle worn, yes. A dark knight, definitely. But a warrior none the less, and I was hungry for battle. I summoned my inner hero, stood tall, thanked the Rowing Goddess for modern analgesics, eradicated doubt and plunged down the hill towards the crowd.

As I passed through the line of tents and stepped onto the riverbank causeway, I was engulfed by the crowd. I could tell by the faces of the girls as I passed, that they could see I was on a mission. I was radiating that *thing*. They cleared a path as I approached, following me with their eyes. I could see the Judges Tent. The footbridge spanning the river overhead.

As I approached the Greystones' site, dozens of girls in zoot suits were milling about in front of the tents. Thomo stood at the edge of the river, a head taller than everyone else, waving his arms about and talking to someone. He looked at his watch. Seemed stressed. And right next to him, there was Ann, phone to her ear pacing up and down the bank. She looked panicked. She touched the phone off and turned to Thomo with a doomed expression on her face. I was close enough now to catch some words as they spoke.

"Switched off or unavailable," she said.

"Jesus!" he scowled. He added something inaudible, possibly obscene. I was almost upon them now and could see them between the gaps in girls. I saw the double scull, rigged up and in the water, ready to go. Ahhh, of course, it must be doubles final time. I'd forgotten. Not my biz.

"She won't answer," Ann said to Thomo with certainty. Then less certainly, "Can't I get Christine?"

"We haven't got time. You know the rules," Thomo spat.

"But if someone doesn't turn up. Then surely... surely..."

"Then surely we're stuffed for the double," Thomo said. He turned to a group of four girls who had just arrived at the river's edge in a quad.

Ann paced away still looking for an impossible answer. I must have stopped walking because I was standing still, watching her, when Ann's eyes landed on me. Our eyes met and I felt *nothing*. The same didn't apply to her though. Ann froze. Her mouth opened in shock as she scanned me. It barely registered with me. Thomo turned back, caught her look and followed her eye line to me.

"Thanks Christ," he yelled. "Where the hell have..." He stopped dead.

"I'm just here for the single," I spat, and strode past them towards the tent.

Inside, our kit bags were stacked up Senior to Junior along one side of the wall. A group of younger girls were fiddling around by their bags near the door. When they saw me they went silent, as though I were a thing of terror. I found my bag against the back wall and opened it. Good. Everything I needed was still in there... *Still?*... It seemed so weird to think that there was a continuous line of cause and effect leading to this moment from the last time I opened this bag. Just yesterday. That life felt like another dimension. Thomo

appeared at the door. He looked at me then gestured to the young girls.

“Out,” he commanded, his eyes never leaving me. The girls scarpere. Thomo frowned at me. He paused then said,

“What the hell... happened to you?”

It occurred to me from his tone and from the way he was looking at me, that he wasn't talking about being late. I glanced down at the bruises dotting my arms, rubbing them.

“I had a little accident,” I said dismissively. “I'm f... fine.”

“A little accident,” he repeated flatly. “You can't race like that.” He waved his hand directly at my face.

I looked sharply up at him. I hadn't given a thought to how I looked, just how I could function. Whether I could win.

“What happened?” he demanded, more softly.

In one corner of the tent was a makeshift changing area, screened by curtains. I crossed and stood in front of the mirror there. Then I understood. My reflection was, well, awful would be wildly complimentary. Ghastly, would come closer. I looked like one of the zombies in PvZ... *after* they'd been blown up by the plants. My forehead was the worst of it. There was a pattern of dark circular bruises from the top of my nose to the hairline. I touched them. Turning my face I saw another bruise between my temple and right cheekbone, a magnificent welt of many colours. How did I not see

that? No wonder my head hurt. My right eye was slightly swollen, turning dark on the lid. My whole appearance was shocking, even to me.

“It l... looks w... worse than it is,” I said, forcing myself to step away and act normal.

“You can't race like that,” he said, shaking his head. “Even if I let you, they won't.”

Ann appeared beside Thomo at the tent door, her eyes burning holes in me. I spun towards Thomo and held my arms out to the side, *showing* him how fine I was.

“It's j... just bruises. I'm fine. L... look at me. Look!” I thumped at the hard surface of my abs. Flexed my biceps. I held in the pain. Thomo frowned. He desperately *wanted* to believe me.

“Have you seen a doctor?” he asked. I lied without pause.

“Yes. I've got a n... note. In the car.” Ann looked narrowly at me. She knew I was lying. There was a long moment as Thomo turned it over in his mind, then something in him softened.

“Talk to me, George.” His voice was gentle. “Tell me what happened. Please.” My eyes darted involuntarily to Ann. She held my gaze for a second, then looked away. *Miss Small Target*, I thought. *Butter wouldn't melt*. I must have smirked because Thomo looked between the two of us and I saw a new idea dawn on him. He

stared curiously at Ann, who couldn't meet his gaze, then turned back to me.

"Something's happened."

The words hung in the air like an accusation. He looked between the two of us trying to decipher the invisible text. He took in a long, considered breath.

"Listen, both of you," he said cautiously, his voice low. "Whatever is going on with you two. Whatever it is. And I don't care." He paused meaningfully, then he added to me specifically, "as long as you're race fit." He glanced at his watch. "There's forty five minutes 'til you need to be at the marshalling area."

"I'm not doing doubles!" I spat, my eyes flaring. Thomo regarded me coldly.

"If you can race," he said evenly, through his teeth, "And that seems unlikely, you'll do both races or believe me, you will not race at all."

He was unmovable. And I knew why. To win the cup, Thomo needed me for the doubles, not for the single. Ann would win the single for him, for the team points. He needed a win in the doubles as well. And that would happen, as long as Ann and I raced. It was all sweet self-interest. I stared him down. Thomo's expression softened.

"Look, just hear me out," he said in a more conciliatory tone. Thomo chose his words with care.

"I've never seen a more certain chance for a record win than the two of you in doubles. Ever. Look at what happened yesterday. After all this work, well, it would be a... a useless, stupid waste of effort and talent. You'd be throwing it away." He dug at the ground thoughtfully with his walking stick. He looked up at us.

"You're young, and you don't realise. You take it for granted." He glanced at his gammy leg. "Life's short. In five, ten years' time, this will all seem ridiculous. You won't even remember... *this*. Whatever *this* is... is about." He paused. "But you'll have the medal. You'll always have the glory. You will have done your best."

He glanced between the two of us. "Just forty-five minutes. Just let it go for forty-five minutes. Can't you? *Win* the bloody race and then you can do whatever you want."

Ann was staring at me, as though her life depended on what I said next. I stared coolly back. I already knew what I was going to say, but let them suffer. It took ages for me to speak.

"I'll d... do it," I said. Ann's eyes widened.

"But only if I can g... go stroke."

The effect was instant. Shock. Confusion. I allowed myself a little V-I-C-T-O-R-Y smile.

“George,” Thomo started carefully. He was trying to manage me. “To swap now...”

“Take it or leave it,” I snapped. Ann’s eyes bore into mine. She could see I meant it. And I did. She was trying to drill into my brain, to figure out what... the...

She tilted her chin up a little. “Alright,” she said coldly. “Let her do it.”

Thomo stared at her. Stared at me...

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

After that, there was zero time to lose. Thomo took my pulse, shone a torch into my eyes, checked my torso and back, made me do sit ups (which nearly killed me), and put me on the erg for five minutes to prove I was 'sound'. The first few strokes were agony, I admit, but I put my head down, clenched my teeth and pulled through the pain. I loosened up quick enough though, thanks to the twin miracles of my new BFFs paracetamol and Nurofen. And anyway, it wasn't a hard sell. Thomo was as desperate as I was to have me race. All I had to do was to *not* collapse or start bleeding from the ears.

If Blind Freddy had *wanted* to see, Blind Freddy could easily have seen that I wasn't race fit. I was a mess, but I rationalised it like this... I was relying on the months and years of training I had behind me. I knew I had exemplary fundamental fitness that I hoped, *felt*, would hold up. My body had never let me down before. Nothing was broken. I wasn't sick. A few bruises, lack of sleep and a bit of muscle stiffness shouldn't, I thought, make that much difference to my speed. Once the Adrenalin got pumping, it would wipe away all the rest. I totally knew it was a deal with the devil. But I'd pay the price tomorrow.

I threw on my zoot suit, but kept on my training jacket, to stay warm. Ann borrowed some makeup 'concealer' from a young girl with bad skin and I smeared it over the worst of the bruising on my face and arms. It felt like putting on war paint. And it made me stronger. By the end of the camouflage process I looked halfway decent. Then with sunglasses and cap on you could hardly see anything. There was no time, or even need for conversation between Ann and myself. She was watching me though. I could feel it. I could feel her eyes on my back, on my body. Always gauging me. So let her. It didn't matter one way or the other. She could look all she liked. We'd just do this, my way, and then get on to the main event.

In fifteen minutes we were at the dock, fine tuning the rigging and preparing to get into the boat. We had to row up to the start line, 1500 metres away. That was good for me. It would function as a warm up. Squatting down in front of the boat at the edge of the river, it felt weird, getting into the stern seat, at the 'front' of the scull, but I embraced it. I shuffled around in the seat, getting centred, testing the forward and backward slide of the seat, adjusting the footstops, until it felt *mine*.

Okay...

I looked up and noticed the mass of girls milling around watching us. I saw Christine staring, whispering to Laura, looking worried. All the younger girls turned and gaped, whispered. Thomo

stepped toward us and with an effort, got down on one knee by the water's edge. He exchanged a concerned glance with Ann, then turned to me.

"Just keep it steady, George," he said. "Just take it at a steady pace. Get out in front by a length or two and hold. No theatrics. Okay? You're not up to it. If you take it out too fast, you'll collapse in the last couple of hundred. All you need to do is win." I took off my jacket and handed it to Thomo.

"Sure," I said, smiling up at him. Somehow he wasn't reassured. He glanced at Ann, behind me. I could imagine her expression was just like his. Fucking worried. He turned back to me, frowning.

"Alright, go," he finally said. We pushed off from the riverbank and settled into our seats for a moment, getting adjusted to the new arrangement. Avoiding Ann's gaze, I quickly checked behind to make sure there was no boat in our way, then I leaned forward and took the first tentative stroke. I could feel Ann immediately follow. I took another. It felt strange not being able to see her, as usual, in front of me. Thomo's eyes followed us for the first few strokes as we headed upstream, then he turned away. I could see the Greystones tents slowly recede from us as we pulled away. A second later, Liam stepped out of the crowd in front of the

tent. He must have been watching us prepare. He stood there motionless, just watching us head up the river.

We rowed upstream, past the tents, past the crowds. I took it easy, there was no hurry. I'd gradually get myself warmed up, take my time, let my muscles find their stretch. Things slowed as we joined the queue of girls heading to the starting line. Even taking it easy, even having swapped seats, we had to wait on the other teams. I had to pull right back to avoid colliding with the boats ahead. But, after a slow thousand metres I was warmed up, and feeling pretty good.

We sat at the fifty-metre mark for a couple of races, watching the lower doubles divisions line up across the river and race. Ann and I said nothing. With her in the back, and not in my line of sight, I was barely aware of her. I wasn't nervous. I wasn't excited. I just wanted to get this done. A vision of us crossing the line in yesterday's heat flashed into my mind. My arms around her. Her head against my shoulder. Drifting backwards. But it was an image trapped in crystal. Cold and small.

And then it was our turn. We were in Lane 4, in the middle of the river. The Rosevale girls, with Mette Olafson in bow, were in Lane 3. Our only other 'competition', if you wanted to call it that, was Excelsior Girls, in Lane 2. They weren't completely useless.

(Who would call a girls' school Excelsior Girls Grammar? Think about it... I mean... E.G.G. *Really?*)

Once we were settled into position and waiting for the rest to be aligned, I looked across at the Norwegian, only a few metres away. Short brown hair, tanned skin, strong cheekbones and a perfect rowing physique. She was sitting calmly in the back seat waiting for the white flag. Judging by her calmness, I reckoned she must be concentrating on the single too. She would know that with her current partner, she had pretty much no hope of winning the double against Ann and I. But in her mind, the single was still unclaimed. She might feel she had a chance there.

The girl must have felt me looking at her because the next moment her eyes were upon me. Her eyes brushed me up and down quickly, not as a challenge but more assessing. She would know who I was. Who Ann was. And then she nodded to me, smiling very slightly. I nodded back, no smile. It struck me then that, if I'd chosen to go to Rosevale this year, instead of Greystones, I may well have been sitting in that boat with her. Then *we* would have been the unbeatable doubles team. I sighed. Toss of a coin really, life.

ATTENTION!

I looked across at the starter, instantly tensing. The white flag went up. I felt a hand on my back. I turned around and met Ann's eyes. I'd almost forgotten about her. She really didn't look good.

"Please..." Ann said. "Don't do anything stupid, George. Think about what this means to both of us."

Too late, I thought, as I turned back and leaned into set position. I'd done nothing *but* stupid things this year.

Why stop now.

GO!

I led out at a steady rate, as requested. Just cruising us through the water, relying on skill not strength. I kept level to the front two boats, Rosevale and Excelsior, but I didn't push the pace.

As we stroked through the first three hundred metres the other teams kept glancing across at us, waiting for the break. Why weren't we setting the pace? Why were we going so slow? I knew Ann would be itching to push past the other teams, to get into the lead. That's what *would* have been happening if Ann were in stroke. But she wasn't... was she. I kept us, kept *her*, in check.

Even though she must have been going out of her mind, Ann followed my lead beautifully. I was impressed. For someone who was used to being in the stroke seat all her life, she was managing to make our unified style smooth and clean. She must have been sensing me, feeling me through the boat, like I had done with her, almost becoming me. Yeah, that was fantastic. I could lift one finger and now, *she* had to jump.

So, how did it feel, bitch?

At around 400 metres out the Rosevale girls got sick of waiting and made a move. They increased the rate and slowly began to pull away from us. Excelsior went with them. I didn't change my rate.

"George!" I heard from behind me. "George!"

There was a single missed beat from the bow seat, but then Ann was back in rhythm. She'd expected me to break with the others, and accelerated her rating in *anticipation*.

Naughty. Naughty. That's not very obedient, now is it?

I could feel Ann panicking. Feel her looking around at the other boats. She was desperate to close the gap, to get back in the lead where we belonged. But I held... and held... and held...

"George! Pick it UP!" she screamed, when she couldn't take it any longer.

I glanced around behind to see where we were. It was about the half way mark now. Both the other boats were out by at least two lengths. We were sitting behind with the rest of the pack, a new experience for Ann, and for me. As I turned back, my eyes trailed across Ann's face. Every line was bent in frustration. She must have been going insane. Trapped. But she *knew* the only way for us to even cross the finish line, was for her to follow my every movement, stroke for stroke, beat for beat, breath for breath. And Ann wanted to win this race far more than I did. She knew *I* knew that.

How did it feel little Annikins?

I kept our pace steady, just sticking with the pack. In my mind's eye I could see Thomo at the campsite watching through his binoculars, tearing his hair out. Serves him right. Everyone would be wondering what we were doing. Why was George in stroke? Why were they going so slow? Liam would be... well it was better not to think of Liam. War involved casualties. Unconsciously I pulled a little harder.

I glanced around again. We were getting close to five hundred from the line. Ann glanced around too. Rosevale were out about almost three lengths now. The red team about two. It was an almost impossible task from here.

"God! George please..." Ann cried. "Pick it up! For God's sake. Pick it up!"

I glanced around at her. "You want me to pick it up?"

"GO!" she cried. "Go now!"

I smiled, turned around, and put my back into the very next drive. The effect on our speed was spectacular. I would love to have seen her face. It took two more strokes for Ann to adjust to the new pace but then we were away, flying, tearing down the river, escaping the pack with every stroke. Every part of me narrowed in focus towards the ruthless pursuit of speed. Stroke. Stroke. Stroke. And Ann followed. It was awesome to feel the power of her strokes

underpinning mine. To feel the rhythm of her body fuelling our speed. She was so strong. I could *feel* her just as if we were connected. But in this boat, her power was *my* power. God, no wonder she liked being in stroke so much, if this was how it felt.

With four hundred metres to go, I could catch the edge of ten thousand people screaming. It was like a hurricane rushing towards us. We were level now with Excelsior, they just didn't have the gas. We stroked past them easily, on our way towards the Rosevale team and the finish line. The Rosevale girls had seen us and were pouring on the speed, fighting to stay ahead. Then suddenly there were tents to our right and a sea of cheering people and noise engulfing us.

I glanced ahead, Rosevale was still one and half lengths in front. They were pulling for their lives. I increased the stroke rate further *knowing* Ann would follow. And she did. Behind me, I heard her groan, felt her strain through the drive.

She'd asked for it.

With a cry of my own, I ground into top speed. We were into full sprint now, in magnificent, glorious sync. The boat lifted. Our legs pumped, our arms drove ruthlessly through each stroke. Stroke. Stroke. The boat ripped down the course. My abs howled for rest. It was primal. All elegance gone. We were just a machine, forcing velocity from exhausted limbs.

At two hundred, the tip of our boat was overlapping Rosevale's stern and we were gaining water with every stroke. They were losing it, becoming erratic. The girl in stroke had zero left. She was just going through the motions, just trying not to stop rowing. For every inch they lost, we gained two. But the physical cost of our late surge had been gigantic, and neither Ann nor I had much to give. At one-fifty we were still half a length behind. The momentum was with us but... time... was... against...

I heard Ann cry out as she pulled through the water with all her force, impossibly raising her game. I felt the boat surge. It was breathtaking. Instinctively I answered her need and pulled through with every ragged scrap of energy I had left. We leapt forward, bolting down the river, outstripping the enemy. The crowd was screaming. I glanced back towards the finish line. It was speeding towards us... *Fifty metres...*

Forty...

Thirty...

We sliced across the line centimetres in front. It would be a photo finish, but I knew we had won. I slumped forward breathing outrageously and clutching my sides. I heard Ann doing the same. Every muscle in my body felt abused. The air ripping in and out of my lungs was like sandpaper. But we'd done it.

As we all drifted backwards, the Norwegian girl, who was also slumped forward, and breathing out of control, turned hard around and stared at me. Even behind the mirror sunnies, it wasn't difficult to tell what she was thinking. It went something like... *You're a fucking mad woman*. Fair enough. Anyone watching that race would have to think I was out of my mind.

Who cares.

It took only a couple of minutes of silent rowing to get back to the base camp. I knew I was in for it, but it didn't matter. I didn't turn around. Didn't make eye contact. Didn't try to talk. All my attention was being refocussed now on the single. As we approached the dock, I glanced back and could see Thomo standing by the river's edge waiting for us.

The second we got to the bank Thomo was pulling me out of the boat, hauling me into a standing position next to him. His eyes were black with fury. The younger girls around us all moved back, away from the line of fire.

"What the bloody effing hell was that!" he yelled. I shrugged.

"Well!" he roared. I took my time to speak.

"We w...won, didn't we?" I said, with all the smugness I could muster. Ann was out of the boat now and standing next to Thomo at the river's edge. She looked feral.

"She's totally fucked me up for the single," she said, turning to Thomo. "Look at this..." She held her right hand out. It was shaking. The left was the same. I barely restrained myself from smiling. Ann fixed her eyes on mine.

"She did it deliberately."

Thomo looked up from Ann's hands and stared at me, but said nothing. It took all my determination to hold his gaze, but I didn't flinch, even as the seconds ticked by and no one spoke. Finally Thomo took a controlled breath. He leaned down slowly and picked up my jacket from the ground.

"Well done, Symons," he said. "You've fucked yourself up too." He threw the jacket roughly at me. "Now stay warm." I caught the jacket and slowly backed away, not breaking eye contact until the last moment. A space magically cleared before me as I headed towards the back of the tents.

Once I got well past the line of tents I let go. There was no one around. I could surely, surely fall apart *here*, just for a little while. That race, this day, had nearly killed me. I put one hand over my face and felt myself, my anger, my determination begin to shatter. It would all be alright. Just a couple more hours. I needed to keep it together... Then I heard a crack behind me. Footsteps. Breathing. I stiffened instantly and turned around. It was Ann.

She looked like I'd never seen her. Outrage and grief were wild on her face. She was holding out something in one hand.

"You dropped something," she said, her voice wavering. I looked down at her hand and saw Lexi's key, with a big shiny Lexus badge attached to the key ring. My insides froze as I stared at it, not knowing what the fuck to do. *Fallen out of my jacket pocket*, I thought blankly. I dared not look at her. Slowly I reached out my hand and took the key-ring.

"Thank you," I said coldly and turned away.

"*Thank you?*" I heard repeated in a stunned voice. I forced my feet to take steps away from her. To get away.

"Thank you?"

I kept moving.

"You're a two faced..." Her voice grew stronger.

"Lying... *cunt*."

I gasped and spun around, stunned. Ann strode towards me. She was going to hit me. I raised my arms defensively, but she shoved me instead. I stumbled back.

"Bitch!" she cried. "You fucking..."

I opened my mouth to retaliate, but she cut me off.

"I trusted you," she said, pain flooding her face. "I took you *home!*"

"You *used* me," I spat back, straightening myself up. "You just wanted what you could get." We stared at each other. "You cheated on me and everyone else," I said. It sounded more sad than angry. There was a moment's silence as we held each other's gaze.

"You lied to me," Ann said pathetically. "I thought you were like me."

Breathing. Pain filled breathing... Hers.

This was incomprehensible. After everything she'd done... She thought *I* was in the wrong. *Me*. How was that even possible? I looked at her evenly.

"I didn't tell you any *actual* lies," I said.

She got it. Ann clenched her fists and looked away.

"What I've done," she said weakly, "has never hurt anyone. I just..."

Oh God! This was so *wrong*. I stepped back, laughing.

"Are you actually hearing yourself?" I said. "You just... what? Wanted... What? A doubles partner? A fuck? A r... record?" I looked at her bewildered. "Some *fun* before you w... went off to live happily ever after with Ben in his big house on the hill?"

"Something you'd know all about!" Ann spat.

"Big fucking deal!" I cried, throwing my hands into the air. "So what! My family's got money. Who fucking cares!"

At this, Ann was rendered dumb. She stood there mouth agape, and shaking her head in disbelief. Again, like it was *me*, like this was all *my* fault.

“Jesus!” I cried, coming back to myself. “I can’t believe I’m standing here listening to *you* lecture *m... me* on honesty.”

We stared at each other unable to continue. The sound of manic cheering made itself heard from outside our bubble. There must have been a final finishing. *Quads*. I filled in automatically. Ann looked shattered. She gripped her hands together in front of her and met my eyes.

“You pretended to be like me,” she said.

“You fucking tore my heart out,” I spat.

Ann gasped. Stared at me. Instantly, I wanted to grab those traitorous words and stuff them back where they came from. But they were free and flapping in the air between us. There was nothing to be done. I stood up straight.

Enough.

I took a deep breath and forced my mask back on, scrapping it down my face over raw, peeling flesh.

Enough.

“You know what,” I said finally. “I haven’t g... got time for this. I’ve got a race to win.” I turned and walked away. I could feel her eyes boring into my back.

“It’s not my fault you’re a fucking dyke,” she said.

I clenched down on my teeth and turned slowly back.

“It’s not my fault you’re a sad fucking social climbing coward,” I said.

Ann’s mouth fell open. Suddenly we heard a little cough from the tent side of the clearing. Both our heads turned sharply towards the sound. A young Greystones girl was standing there, looking absolutely fucking terrified, staring at the two of us.

“Um...” the girl coughed. She looked at Ann. “Thomo is looking for you.” At that, she scrambled away as quickly as she could, her message delivered. Ann looked back at me and held my gaze for a long time. Slowly, and with great dignity, she turned and walked away, leaving me trembling and more fucking determined than I’d ever been in my life.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It was only ninety minutes, but it was the longest ninety minutes in history. Time seemed to stretch like toffee into this endless thing between me and the start of the race. I sat in front of the tent drinking Gatorade, had a Berocca, ate some nuts, topped up on Panadol, backed that up with Nurofen, walked up and down, tried to keep my mind focussed on the task at hand. Around me, the regatta was at fever pitch as final after final was rolled out down the river. Every few minutes the crowd would break into howls of encouragement, filling the air with screams. My boat was rigged, ready and waiting. So was I. It was just time now.

Every fifteen minutes I would jump on the ergo and do a couple of minutes gentle stroking. The last thing I needed was for my body to cool down and for my muscles to start contracting. If that happened, the end would be in sight. My body had done right by me in the doubles. I hadn't even noticed pain during the race. Adrenalin and endorphins had taken over and fortified up the gaps. But there wasn't time to recover again, so the muscle fibres needed to stay warm and stretched. I shot a prayer of thanks to a god I didn't believe in, for the sheer resilience of my body. But as good to me as it was, there was only so far it could be pushed, and that boundary hadn't been found. Not yet.

I sighed, thinking what an *UN*-great way this was to go into the most important race of my life. What an idiot I'd been. Ann just didn't get it. It was like she was missing something in her brain. She really acted like she felt *I* was the one in the wrong. It was unbelievable, even for her. I looked through the hordes of girls, across the busy campsite at her. Thomo was massaging her shoulders, talking into her ear. All pretence of Ann and I being 'equal' in Thomo's eyes was well over. I knew it anyway, so *fine*. I pulled myself up, looked away. This wasn't helping. I was losing focus and it was all bullshit anyway. None of it mattered. Just win the race and get back to the original plan. Ann Cavanaugh was a ruthless, manipulative sociopath, and a using, cheating liar who only cared about herself and what she wanted. That's all there was to it.

I didn't really have a solid race plan for this event. Just get out in front and stay there, I suppose. That's what Ann would be trying to do as well. I'd never started a race in such crappy condition, physically and mentally. And worse, it turned out Ann was stronger than I thought. I had to admit that she was amazing in the double. That last surge she managed to pull out really won it for us.

And how the fuck, I wondered, stealing a look at her, had she got all that muscle in such a short time? Her arms and shoulders were seriously bigger than when I'd first met her only two months

ago. Now... now that I'd seen her unmasked, I put nothing past her. Seriously, were drugs a possibility? Even now though, I could hardly believe that.

But new muscles or not... I was still backing myself on my fundamental endurance versus hers. Even in the state I was in, 1500 metres was really not a tough distance for me. Okay, my body was a bit dented, like Lexi, but I had impeccable inner conditioning. I'd been regularly serviced. I had years, and thousands of kilometres of training under my belt, all underpinning this moment. I had the genetic heritage too. That had to count for something, right? But it was unsettling. For the first time in my life, I wasn't *sure* of the outcome of a race.

I jumped on an erg. It was only minutes now before we'd have to get into the boats and head to the starting line. As I rowed slowly, I closed my eyes and visualised myself, calm and strong, out in front on the river. The finish line was in view. Clear water between it and me. Unbeatable. I pulled through on the bar, feeling the strength of my body, putting my faith in it. Everything was working as it should. I felt good. I opened my eyes and Liam was standing there in front of me, just watching.

I began to flush but I kept rowing. I tried not to look at him, tried to ignore him as I kept up the slow strokes, but it was totally

impossible. Of course. Finally, I dropped the rowing bar and slid back.

"Don't just stand there," I said, practically yelling as I stood up. "If you're g... going to shout at me, just do it and get it over." Liam was taken aback. Well, if he was expecting 'humble', he'd come to the wrong chick. I picked up my jacket from the ground and put it back on.

"I'm not going to shout at you," he said. He seemed sad.

"Why not? Everyone else has."

"Oh stop feeling sorry for yourself," he said harshly, taking a step forward. "It's me that got fucked over here, remember." My eyes shot to his.

"Well n... now we're even," I said. Liam looked shocked. He took a moment before speaking.

"And Ann... You've screwed her chances too."

We both looked across at Ann who was by the edge of the water preparing to get into her boat. Thomo was hovering next to her.

"Yes, p... poor Ann," I said, turning on him. "Poor Saint fucking Ann."

Liam frowned at me curiously, like he didn't understand. I mean, how could he? I wasn't about to enlighten him.

“I’ve got to go,” I said taking a step away and heading to the dock.

“You could have told me, you know,” he said, following me.

“What?” I said, just wanting to focus back on the race.

“That you’re gay.”

Am I? I thought. I stopped walking and looked at him. Does sleeping with one person make you gay?

“Then I wouldn’t have had to make such a dick of myself,” he said. I frowned. If I’d slept with Liam instead of Ann, would that have made me ‘straight’? What if I’d slept with them both? There must be rules for all this. Could you Google them, or would that just be too easy?

“I knew there must’ve been some reason you could resist my charms,” he said. “I *meeean...*” He cocked his head, stretched out his arms and put on his most ‘charming’ face. “You’d *have* to be gay, right.”

“C... cut it out, Liam,” I said, with the hint of a smile. “Just, *don’t.*”

“And depriving me of all those lovely fantasies. Ann and you. You and Ann...” He rubbed his hands together in mock glee.

“Shut up!” I said. “This is n... not... funny.”

I put a hand to my forehead. It was all so confusing. Liam looked at me then, like he knew perfectly well it wasn’t funny. He’d

just been ‘making nice’. He didn’t deserve it. None of this was his fault. I’d fucked everything up. Me, I’d done it. And Ann. She’d done it too. Liam was just collateral damage. I didn’t want to hurt him. I never did. Just then, for an unsettling moment I wanted him to hold me in his big strong arms and tell me it would be alright. I wanted to listen to his heart under my ear, beating slow and steady.

But instead, I rubbed my face and straightened up.

“I gotta go.”

He nodded. I walked towards the river’s edge. After a few steps when I turned back, he was still looking at me.

“I don’t suppose you’re still barracking for me?”

He paused for a moment, then shook his head.

Six single boats were lined up across the river. Ann in three, me in four, Mette Olafson in lane five. We’d finally arrived at the pinnacle of schoolgirl rowing. Even from one and a half Ks away I could sense the waves of expectation rolling off the ten thousand people waiting downstream. Just the Open Eights were to follow to close the regatta. But this was the race of Champions. Final A of the Open Single Scull.

The Aligner was making final adjustments to the boat in Lanes Six, then we’d be off. I glanced to my left at Ann. She was sitting quietly, focussed, getting into the zone. Her hair was tied back in a

plait, cap and dark glasses obscuring her eyes, her hands rested lightly on the oars. She was like an alien to me now. I needed to not even think about her. I turned to my right and cast an eye over the Norwegian girl. She was already looking at me. But there was no smiling now. She was staring me down through her Reflecto sunnies, trying to psych me out. I stared impassively back. That so wasn't going to work.

I turned forward, occupying my own space, tuning out everything non-essential. In seconds the Starter would be calling Attention. I turned my focus deep inward, and summoned that well of strength I *knew* I had in me. I called it out, steadying my breathing. I focussed on the rise and fall of my abdomen as my breath swept in and out of my chest, making sure to pause between breaths. I tried to ignore the body rocking thump thump thump of my heart.

I leaned forward into set position.

ATTENTION!

We were ready. My pulse and breathing rate rose. I glanced across... The white flag was up.

Red flag up... down.

GO!

I pulled out hard, trying to make an early break. I would need to give *everything* to this race. Stroke. Stroke. Stroke. *Everything.*

The three of us were moving out together. I pulled harder, pushed through with my legs. Just let me get out a metre in front, so I can watch them. That was the plan. But Ann and the Norwegian obviously had the same strategy. Everyone wanted to lead. We were out at a ridiculous speed, the three of us travelling almost as a line across the water, flying down the middle of the river. The rating was already at sprint pace. This was insane. It couldn't be maintained. Surely? I tried to lift, but I couldn't make the break. My abs hurt. My arms seemed to have no strength. On both sides I was met with equal determination and speed. I could not pull ahead.

I flashed back to Lexi. The train. The fight. The damage. This is the price, I thought, then ruthlessly deleted it. *No excuses.* There is only *now*.

After two hundred, then three hundred metres it was the same. We were hurling down river at breakneck speed. The Norwegian was marginally ahead if anything. Made sense. She would be fresher. I glanced at her. She was giving it everything. Pulling her guts out to get a lead. I looked back down the course, checking. The rest of the field was already way behind. Yes... One, two, three boats. I put them out of my mind. From now on they didn't exist. There were only three rowers in this race.

While I was checking the field, the Norwegian must have found some speed because she was pulling away fast. I dug in. Glancing to the left I saw Ann had already followed. I was in third.

Third.

The strain was written on Ann's face. The pain and determination. She was a metre ahead now and gaining water. God, she was driven. A moment of panic rushed through my veins. I could actually *lose* this... Fear gripped me. Stop! Not helpful. I lost touch with my stroke and mis-timed my next catch, skimming the water with one blade and sending my rhythm out. Jesus! I *never* do that. Never. I instantly got back into rhythm, but I'd already lost more distance.

We were at about the half way mark now and Ann was over a metre in front of me. The Norwegian about a metre in front of her. I kept stroking, stroking, keeping pace now, but not gaining. Panic was overtaking me, shattering my focus. It had been a fucking horrible year and this was the result. Losing the most important race of my life. My own stupid fault. I glanced backward at Ann. She looked exhausted. Red faced, sweating, puffing hard with each stroke. I looked the same, I knew. She was working beyond her capacity, somehow finding strength from the air around her. I glanced the other way. The Norwegian was still well out, she looked good but... was she losing speed? She'd gone out fast... *Too fast?*

Stroke. Stroke. Stroke.

There was still hope.

I cried out and ripped into my next drive, and the next, and the next, gasping for air. I gained ground immediately. It took me by surprise and a silver dart of hope shot through me. The past was dust. The fate of the next two minutes was not yet written. But soon it would be. Forever. What mattered now was what I did with these next few seconds.

I directed my focus inward. I *knew* I had this in me. Literally. It was there in my DNA. I felt it connect. It was there in a lifetime of faithful training, of early morning starts, of carefully conditioning my body for this very moment. I felt energy welling up inside me. Felt myself grow, actually grow, like I was filling up like a balloon. *Something* had opened inside me. Strength ran into my arms and legs, into my whole body. The world narrowed to right now, right here. My body, my perfect stroke.

It was possible. I could win this race.

I surged forward. Stroke. Stroke. Stroke upon stroke. I'd found the zone. The boat and I were an arrow slicing down the river. Behind me, pushing me along, was the accumulated force of all those years. An invisible, invincible hand, driving me on. It was beyond exhilarating. Stroke. Stroke. Stroke.

At five hundred to go, we could hear the creeping roar of the crowd. I'd nearly closed the gap, no doubt helped by the other two feeling the effect of the punishing speed of this race. I was inches from being level to Ann. I ground into my strokes and picked up my rate. Three inches, two, one... Now we were level and I was moving past her. An inch in front... two... three... moving away now... Ann looked over at me and I saw her panic. Somewhere within the ruin of her body, she found the strength to lift, picking up her speed, stroking fiercely through the water. She was matching my pace. She was amazing. Really. *Amazing*.

I kept up the pace, daring her to follow. Every part of my body was hurting. My breath came out in great heaving grunts with the force of each stroke. Sweat dripped from me. But the path was clear now. I was more focussed than I had ever been.

At four hundred, I could see the tip of the Rosevale boat beginning to level with mine. There were just inches in it. I looked across at the Norwegian. She was giving her all, but she was failing. Those great trembling muscles of hers had no grunt left to give. Seeing me level, she slammed on a burst of speed. But... I was... *better*... I kept inching, inching in front of her. The crowd was screaming. Impossible to tell who for. Then the tents were there on the right and the crowd was all around us on both sides of the bank.

A solid wall of sound engulfed us. I took that sound and turned it into speed.

At two hundred I glanced over at Ann. Impossibly, she had kept pace. We were neck and neck. I could barely believe it. She had nothing left but sheer bloody force of will. I glanced behind. The finish line was close and rushing towards us. I saw Ann glance behind as well. I saw her struggle relentlessly on. I was quaking in the arms and in the thighs, as pain and fatigue claimed their due, but... I... could... do... this.

The Norwegian was now two metres behind and losing ground. At one hundred and fifty to go, it was a race between Ann and I.

The crowd was ballistic. The sound was a tornado swirling and screaming around us. I was straining now, beyond the limits of my endurance. But we were still stroke for stroke. I glanced across at Ann. Her catch was unstable, her drive weakening. She was shaking. Tears and sweat blended down her cheeks. But my God, the tenacity was mind blowing. With every drive I heard her moan, prising speed from her body, no matter the cost.

With about a hundred and twenty to go, it was now or never. I summoned my last tiny scraps of reserve and made a final break. Ann glanced over at me, desperate and stroking wildly. But she

couldn't follow. Her eyes met mine. She was going to lose. We both knew it.

I tore ahead, the thrill of this win igniting me. I was better. I was the best.

I was the *BEST*.

I felt victory surge through me as I gained twenty... forty... eighty centimetres. I glanced backward. The finish line was sprinting towards us. Ann glanced around too. Agony was written across her face, but she kept going. Stoking for her life... and losing...

It was heroic... For all this race meant to her, *for* her, Ann's bright 'orgastic future' lay shattered before her.

And that's when it happened.

Time exploded and everything slowed, as though the world was suddenly in super slow mo'. I saw Ann in minute, intimate detail. The strain, the agony, the hopes, the fear. Her muscles grinding her through the water. Tears and sweat all mixed up and tumbling from her cheeks. And I realised that, through all of this, through all that had happened, she was just... doing what she could.

We both were.

I must have made a decision because suddenly the world snapped back into overdrive thirty metres in front of the finish line. As we rushed towards it, I crabbed my oar deep into the water, throwing my boat sideways and deflecting my boat's momentum. Ann instantly tore past me, a look of shock across her face. She shot across the finish line. *FIRST*. The Norwegian charged past me on my other side. *SECOND*. I limped across for third.

The crowd went *psycho*. People were screaming and jumping up and down, waving their arms about, pointing. The man on the loud speaker was ballistic. I could just 'see' the jubilation on Thomo's face. Imagined he would be crying. Liam would be covering his face, stunned. Happy.

Everyone would be happy.

I drifted backwards, breathing chaotically and letting it all go past me. The crowd. The faces. The screaming. It all felt disconnected. Separate to me. I caught up with Ann. She was staring at me in utter disbelief, gasping for air, bewildered. She didn't take her wide eyes off me as I let my boat drift past her, watching me until her neck might break from twisting. Then she turned back to the front and leaned forward, clutching her sides.

I lay back on my boat and looked up at the sky. I drifted smoothly backwards. Lying there, it was all so clear to me now. Why hadn't I seen it before? Ann wasn't the golden girl in the centre of the circle. From where she stood, *she* was the outsider. Not me. She was the one who would never fit in, no matter what shape she made herself into. The fake. The fraud. She was the person who was *less than*.

My mind moved out wider then. Wider than Ann, wider than myself, wider than the city. Outwards. And I had this sort of... moment.

There was no inner circle. No golden light. There was no centre to home to. I watched a little white cloud make its way across the sky. We were all outsiders. All longing to fit in. We all felt different to the so-called successful people around us.

And then I realised... Life isn't what happens somewhere over there to other people. To better, more beautiful, more worthy people. To people with shiny lives. It's what is happening to you right here and now. While you're reading this book. While you're waiting for the train. While you're picking your nose. While you're doing whatever it is you do... We're all just, doing what we can. With all our insecurities, our imperfections and fears, we're all just getting through any way we can.

The image of Nathan's face came to me then, as clearly as if we were back sitting in the Jacaranda tree. A healthy, joyful Nathan, his child eyes shining warmly at me. Life is short, I agreed. Yeah. I'll see you soon.

And now, I know this didn't really happen, so don't think that I'm suddenly like, off my head, and you've been reading the words of a psycho all this time, but I got the strongest sensation of like... sinking. I shut my eyes and let myself feel it. Water began swelling up around the boat, drawing me down, down, taking me under, into the darkness below. Down, gently down. Then I was under the water and looking up at the watery sun. It was shining through the surface of the river, cutting diagonal rays of light through the gloom. There was no boat now, just me alone, suspended. I sank lower and lower into the clay coloured darkness. The light was closing over, the black wrapping around me as I gently, tenderly disappeared into its arms.

EPILOGUE

Deep, I know.

So, there you have it. My story, as promised. Warts and all... But I suppose now you need the wrap up, do you?

Well, first things first. I survived standing on the *lowest* pedestal of the winner's podium to accept my *bronze* medal in the open single. And it hurt. A lot. That needs to be said. Third's not a place I ever want to be again, like *ever*. Ann and I stood together on the winner's pedestal for the double. She put her arm around me for the photo and smiled a winner's smile. You can check it out on her Facebook page under 'Rowing'. Which as far as I'm concerned tells you pretty much everything you need to know about the truth and untruth of social media.

I spent that night at a hotel. I texted Sandra that I was staying with a friend for a couple of days, just so she wouldn't call the cops, you know. Sandra texted me an apology. So that was that. All done. My home life was back to normal. I lay on the super pillow-top king size bed, watched old movie re-runs, ate room service and slept like a baby. Then I did it all over again the next day.

On the third day I went back to school. I bought some Alexandra Symons *Shade 2 Silky Cover-stick* and some *DayGlow*

Mineral Powder, just because I dug the irony, and I went to work on my facial bruises. It's amazing what a bit of crap on your face will do. Seriously, it makes me want to rob banks or something. At school, I was in a world of my own, wrapped in a nice, soft, bubble-blanket. I didn't talk. Didn't engage with anyone. I sat in on my classes, took notes and kept my head down, just like it was meant to be all along.

It wasn't until the end of that day, that 'things', read Ann, caught up with me. She must have followed me in stealth mode from school. I'd just zapped Lexi and was heading toward her, when Ann's voice cut through the air behind me.

"You put a dent in Mummy's car," the voice said, dryly.

I heard it okay, but it was a struggle to bring myself even to react. It was all so far away now. Ann. Everything. I slowly turned and faced her. And there she was. Still perfect. Still golden and gorgeous.

"Is this it?" Ann went on, stepping towards the banged up Lexus and leaning a hand on it. "Or is there a Ferrari as well? A Rolls maybe?" She stared me defiantly down, much more engaged with this conversation than I was.

"A Mercedes," I said indifferently, "Sports."

It was like throwing petrol onto fire. Ann stepped up to me, struggling under a host of conflicting emotions. I saw outrage.

Bewilderment. Pain. Finally, she just looked devastated. She said pathetically,

“How *could* you?”

That hit its target better than anger ever could have. My heart, traitor that it was, leapt at her pain. But I wrangled it back in line. I stood tall.

“You assumed I didn’t have money all by yourself.”

“I thought you were on a scholarship.”

“I know.”

“Then why did you let me think that?”

I wanted to say *I tried to tell you a hundred times...* But instead I said,

“Why did you lie to me about Cassie?”

Ann floundered. “I... I thought you would misunderstand. It... wasn’t important.”

“Back at ya,” I shot out.

We stared at each other across the void. Emotions high on her side and rising on mine. But I didn’t want to go there. Seriously. What was the point?

“Look,” I said, bringing it back down. “Let’s not do this. Let’s just... let it go. What does it matter?” Ann shook her head, frustrated and bewildered.

“Why did you throw the race?” she asked, wanting to understand. “You would have won.”

Because in spite of everything I still care about you, I thought, realising the truth at the same moment as I thought it.

Damn.

I looked at Ann and sighed at my own hopelessness. All the heat drained from me. I spoke softly,

“You needed it more.”

Ann frowned dumbly at me. To her, I was speaking in a foreign tongue. There was no way Ann was going to understand throwing a race. I took a last long look at her, standing there on the pavement, both hands clutched around the strap of her schoolbag. A child, out of her depth. Her eyes dropped and she lowered her head. How is it possible, I thought, that this little person could be so dangerous? I sighed again, wondering vaguely if there were any way that things might have been different.

Suddenly, Ann raised her eyes to mine as though she’d been hit by lightning.

“It’s gone,” she said. It was my turn to be clueless. Then she pointed at my mouth.

It was then I understood the saying ‘It hit me like a ton of bricks’, because I felt like something bodily slammed into me. I had barely spoken for days. Hadn’t spoken at all today, until now. The

thought of speaking or stuttering hadn't even crossed my mind. I knew it wasn't uncommon to lose your stutter when you were feeling emotional. But, well, I *wasn't* feeling that emotional. I was quite calm. And during that whole conversation, I hadn't blocked once.

"Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious," I said, randomly. And *OMG*, it worked. I clamped down on my rising excitement.

"Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious," I repeated. *Twice*. That was twice... Hope and fear exploded inside me. Usually I could only 'say' that if I were singing. I gaped at Ann in astonishment. She was smiling widely.

"Scull," I whispered nervously. "Scull... Scull," I tried again.

Oh my God.

Then strongly, I said "*FUCK*."

Ann laughed. It must have seemed nuts, but who cares. "Fuck, fuck, fucking fuck," I repeated, almost hysterically.

Ann laughed again.

I braced for the ultimate test. This would be the clincher. The one word I could *never* say. Every stutterer will know what word that is. Then gingerly, I said...

"George."

Oh... my... God...

"... *George?*" I tried again, not convinced.

I did it.

"George. George. Georgia," I said, unable to believe it. "Georgia Lee Symons," I laughed. That hadn't come out of my mouth without a 'g... g... g...' in front of it since the week after Nathan died. I covered my mouth with both my hands, not knowing what this meant. Had the stutter gone? *Really?* It might just be temporary. Could it disappear just like that? As suddenly as it came?

I looked at Ann. She looked as emotional as I felt, her eyes shining with real warmth. We stared at one another for a long time. Now that words were possible, they felt redundant. Then Ann stepped forward.

I stepped back.

It turned out that stuff about Sandra's business being in trouble was true. It really *was* a basket case. Which was a surprise, not to mention slightly disturbing. But the crisis didn't last long. Sandra ended up moving to Hong Kong later that year (yep, just before my final exams), and dragged John along with her, presumably through the force of her personal 'attractiveness'... *Eew...* They sold up all her Australian assets and set up a new, much cheaper Asian head office. It's worked miracles for her. She's

richer than Midas again and living it up in her Earthly Garden of Heavenly Delights, or maybe it's the other way around? Heavenly Garden. Earthly Delights? I care. Sandra's delights, terrestrial or otherwise, are not something I want to think too visually about.

Ann did break up with Ben after the Royal Schoolgirls. But I doubt it had anything to do with me. I suspect it was brought on after seeing Liam's Dad's yacht, because it wasn't long after she dumped Ben that she started going out with Liam. Yep. You heard it here first folks... I had certain feelings about that, you can imagine. But it made sense from Ann's point of view, right? She'd still get the big house in Toorak, but Liam's way cooler, nicer and much more interesting... *And* I've heard his Dad's going to be on the High Court one day.

My feelings about Liam went on being a bit 'confused'. Actually, if I'm being totally honest, they still are, but don't tell him. We never really discussed the singles final, but I'm sure he knew I chucked it, and I reckon he approved. I even got the impression, from how he looked at me afterwards, that he might have been a bit proud of me. Living in Liam-land as he does, he would always put the kindest spin on things.

Thinking about it now, with the benefit of distance, there might have been a chance for me and Liam after that. I do think he went on, you know, liking me a bit. But then of course, Ann decided

she wanted him, and when Ann wants, as the song says... she's *Simply Irresistible*. Anyway, that's the upshot of the Ann, me and Liam saga. At least that's how it panned out that year. There's more to it now, but that's literally another story.

Ann went on being Squad Captain and Head Girl. She got onto the Premier's honours list for her end of year marks and got offered a positive bouquet of international scholarships, as per the plan. She finally accepted one from U.C.L.A. After all that happened that insane weekend, my feelings, hot and cold, for Ann seemed to temper. It was like I could see her from a distance, and I sort of just *got* her. I didn't totally blame her, but I didn't like her that much either.

After a while, we were able to 'hang out', like before, in a group. Not one on one. That would have been way too intense. And anyway, she never showed any more sign of wanting to, so, I guess I'd served my purpose. Sometimes though... rarely... I'd catch her *looking* at me, and I'd remember what it felt like to kiss her and the sensations that flooded back into my body would almost knock me out. Those moments took a little recovering from, but over time you know, even the brightest stars fade.

Ann *was* a sad, fucking social climber. Each word accurate. But she wasn't a coward. All Ann wanted was to feel equal to the beautiful, lucky people around her and to become one of them.

Maybe that's why I didn't hate her. After all, she wasn't bent on world domination. Well, not of the evil kind. She just wanted to belong inside the golden circle. She didn't evaluate her quest. She didn't reflect. She just grabbed at life, with the power of her extraordinary hunger, to make it a reality.

Me? I flew back under the radar. I put my head down, focussed on my schoolwork, got decent grades and left school *forever*. No more school uniforms for me. Thank you very much. I turned 18 and got my driver's license on the first try, *naturally*. And just to make you really spew, Sandra gave me Lexi for my birthday. I'm still rowing of course. Doing the early mornings, the hours in the gym and so on. But I'm wearing different colours now. I'll give you a hint. One's green, the other's gold. The next time you see me, it will be leading the field down the river at the Olympics... Touch wood.

Oh, and I pretty much gave up on practising the Art of Detachment. *Clearly*, it wasn't working for me. Or maybe I was just doing it wrong. Doesn't matter.

So here's where I am now.... This is what I think.

Before you're born you're dead for billions of years, then *somehow* you're alive and on this planet for a nanosecond. Then blink, and you're back to being nothing again. For, literally, *ever*...

This is it. For this one tiny moment, right here, right now. You are a borrower on the shores of life.

Just have a good trip.