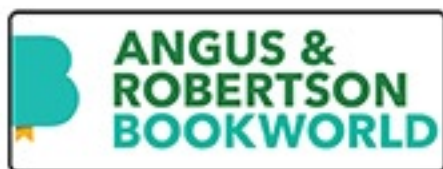


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## CHAPTER 1

# I GO OVER

Jess Gordon reached the third storey of Gallagher Wing and paused for breath on the landing, taking the opportunity to tie the laces on her high tops, pull up her tube socks. She only knew it was Gallagher Wing because a smug gold plaque near the bottom of the stairwell had told her so. It was typical of Knights' pretensions. At Unity, Jess's residential college, they didn't have wings, they had blocks. Knights had been built using bricks and sandstone and something indefinable that suggested learning and Latin mottos, while Unity was constructed from concrete and steel, with the unfortunate appearance of a jail. Unity was co-ed; Knights was all male. Just act like you're meant to be there, Jess had been told—advice that ignored the fact it was technically impossible without a penis.

Jess wondered if Leanne, giver of said sage advice, was having better luck. Then she forgot about it, hit by an upwelling of nausea that made her clamp a hand to her mouth. There, a wooden door with a glass insert—had to be it. She reeled inside, hoping for a bathroom. She was in luck. The place appeared to be empty, thank God, providing sweet relief from Brisbane's

swampy heat, although it smelled faintly of ammonia and the cakes of cleaning stuff in the trough.

Jess made it to the nearest cubicle, slamming the door shut before a series of convulsions squeezed out the contents of her stomach in layers: a gush of water, more water, frothy spit and, finally, teeth-stripping, neon-yellow bile.

‘Okay,’ she breathed to no one in particular, wiping her mouth on her T-shirt. Feeling weak and spent, she leaned back against the cubicle wall, vowing to never drink again—and she meant it this time—absentmindedly patting down the front pockets of her denim cut-offs. But she’d forgotten her Zippo. Damn. Her palm itched for it.

Then someone scuffed their way inside and Jess froze. She turned her head, listening to the footsteps pass the toilet area. Much closer there was a sudden blare of synthesised music that made her jump. Ella Thompson’s voice wailed through the space, echoing off the tiles, and Jess ripped her phone from her back pocket.

It was Brendan. She hit ‘Ignore’, cutting off the ringtone abruptly.

For a moment there was only silence, as though the other person had stopped to listen, then the footsteps resumed. A door swung shut and Jess exhaled, switching her phone to vibrate before the message notification came through. Because she knew Brendan would leave one. She wished she’d stayed calm and let his call ring out instead of cutting it off—Brendan would read all sorts of shit into that. But then she remembered that Brendan and his paranoia were not her problem anymore, and she experienced a brief, floaty feeling of euphoria strong enough to propel her from the cubicle as soon as she heard the splash of a shower starting.

Emboldened, Jess visited the basins before she left, washing her hands and rinsing her mouth out, forcing herself to drink a

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few mouthfuls of water. So thirsty—she hadn't been able to hold anything down all morning. This time she'd try the little-and-often approach. She patted some water on her face and rubbed viciously at the mascara smears beneath her eyes. Normally, she was okay with how she looked. Her face was a little too long and thin perhaps, but a few freckles and her slightly crooked, once-broken nose gave her something like character, while her shiny hazel eyes and smile made people notice her. But right then Jess couldn't find anything redeeming about her appearance. Her eyes were bloodshot; her smile was MIA; she officially looked like shit. On top of that, she smelled like a night club: beer, goon, and *port*, so help her, God, steaming through her pores; her hair a stale, smoky curtain. The only upside was she looked the part for the walk of shame, a plausible enough excuse for being at Knights—if you could call that an upside.

Jess left the bathroom and started down a long, gloomily lit hallway. Each time she came to a door she tried the handle. Locked, all of them locked, which probably meant the rooms were vacant. The returning student body wouldn't arrive until later that afternoon. Right then, the college's only inhabitants were its fresher intake and its student council. Jess was hunting for a room belonging to a member of the council. There were fifteen of them and something like two hundred and eighty rooms in the college, so the odds weren't great. The good news, though, was that for the next hour or so she could safely assume council members were not in residence, preoccupied with hosting a ceremonial lunch.

'Leaving Home' was blasting out of an open door at the far end of the hallway. God, what was it with that song? Did they put explicit instructions in the O-week handbook? *Thou must playest Jebediah at all times*. It had been the same at the beginning of last year, when Jess's peers at Unity had pumped it out

of their rooms day and night; never mind that most of them had been in nappies when the song was first released; never mind that playing it when they had literally just left home was possibly, just maybe, being too literal.

Jess paused long enough to tap out a text to Leanne—*U found one???* *So over this!!!*—then trudged on, trying doors without success. By the time she'd reached the 'Leaving Home' room, she'd decided on a more direct strategy.

'Hi. I was wondering if you could . . .' Jess's voice trailed off as she took in the state of the room, noticing the lump under the sheets on the bed—probably human. The stale smell of morning-after enveloped her: a fug of booze, cigarette smoke, body odour, stinky beer farts and musty mouth-mash. Whoever he was, this guy was in a worse way than her. The thought gave Jess an odd sense of comradeship. Clothes littered the floor and there was a collection of empty beer bottles on the desk, along with an open pizza box displaying a pile of crusts. 'Leaving Home' finished, only to start up again. It was on repeat. The place was hell.

Jess spotted an MP3 player docked on the shelf above the desk, and she killed the song. Then she opened the window in another act of mercy. To do it, she had to step around a couple of traffic cones and a road sign that had become a self-fulfilling prophecy—HAZARD AHEAD—and she wondered why Brisbane City Council never seemed to figure out that roadwork equipment shouldn't be left unattended in the suburbs of St Lucia, Toowong and Indooroopilly. Running shoes and turf boots were clumped in the corner of the room, leaking dirt. Knights College was big on the perfect male specimen; there was a definite preference for athletic types, especially ones proficient in the rah-rah sports: rugby and rowing.

Jess noticed the lump's timetable pinned to the corkboard over the desk and peered at it closely. He was doing some kind

of engineering, and all of the subject numbers started with one, so he was a fresher. He wouldn't have what she needed—at least, not yet.

Her phone started to vibrate. She checked the screen, hoping for a text from Leanne saying she'd scored and they could go home. Instead, it was another call from Brendan. Jess felt her empty stomach hollow further. She let it ring out this time, putting the buzzing phone down on the desk. The phone finally stopped, only to start up again, and just for something different, it was Brendan. Jess gave the screen the double-bird and a silent scream of agony: *Fuck off!*

At that point, a groan startled her. Pocketing her phone, Jess turned to see the lump move. She'd forgotten about him. The sheet was thrown back to reveal red hair and a flushed face, eyes screwed up against the light.

'Zat you, Griggys?' he croaked in a hoarse voice. The guy needed water. A lot of it.

'Yep,' said Jess.

'What time is it?'

'Night time. Go back to sleep.'

The guy snuggled into his pillow, making loud smacking noises with his mouth, and a moment later he started to snore.

'Wait a minute,' Jess said. The snoring caught and then stopped, so presumably she had his attention. 'Do any of the student council guys live on this floor?'

'Mmm . . . tat dowine.'

'Tatooine? It's not *Star Wars*. Hey, I asked you a question.'

With effort, the redhead dragged himself out of sleep, squinting at her. 'Who are you?'

'Not Griggys. Look, I'm trying to find the student council guy. You know, the one in this block.'

'Wing.'

‘What?’

‘Do you mean Jarrod Keith? Because he’s . . . he’s not, um . . .’ The redhead’s voice trailed away and his eyelids flickered closed.

‘Wake up,’ Jess hissed, poking him in the shoulder. ‘Where’s Jarrod Keith’s room?’

The redhead groaned. ‘First floor.’

‘What room number? Come on, help me out here.’

‘Dunno,’ the guy mumbled. He added something unintelligible and toppled back into sleep.

Jess left, closing the door behind her. On the landing, she stopped dead, assaulted by the sudden glare and cicadas that sounded like summer chainsaws. Her phone started vibrating as if in response. As Jess squinted at the screen, she felt the beginnings of a headache, and she wondered which part of her not answering Brendan had trouble processing. She turned the thing off. First floor, Jarrod Keith. If that yielded nothing, she was done, she decided, starting down the stairs.

As she was passing the second floor, Jess became aware of voices below her. She rounded the landing and slowed. Five Knights boys were coming up the steps in a clump, as though relying on each other for body warmth.

‘Did you see Henryk—’

‘Fresher Gobbler.’

A high-pitched giggle. ‘That’s right. Fresher Gobbler.’

‘Spewed all over Tolu’s shirt.’

‘But what about that milkshake thing? That was disgusting, brah.’

Freshers. They sported camouflage paint and towelling headbands, and each and every one of them was wearing their special O-week shirt, which that year featured a pumped-up looking Knight brandishing a big barbed spear, his knees bent with its



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weight, his pelvis thrust forward. Above it, a screaming red font proclaimed: LIVE BY THE LANCE!

Knights and its subtle euphemisms.

The boys spotted Jess and their talk and laughter stopped abruptly. Acting as one, they put their heads down, huddling closer so that they could pass her two abreast. *Relax*, she wanted to tell them. *Haven't you ever seen a female before?*

But what she said was, 'Hope they're taking it easy on you guys,' lowering her voice, because she'd read somewhere the lower the voice, the greater the authority. One of the leaders mustered up enough courage to look at her. 'Where's Jarrod Keith this year?' she asked him.

The question caused them to stop and go into group-think mode.

'Do you mean the—'

'He's president of the—'

'I think he's at that lunch thing.'

'No, I mean, where's his room?' Jess said. 'Isn't he on the first floor here?'

'Not here.'

'He's over at—'

'Turnock Wing. First floor there.'

'Right,' Jess said. 'Thanks.'

They started up the steps again.

'Who was that?' one of them whispered, but none of them dared look back at her. Jess watched them go. They seemed so harmless; you'd never guess what arseholes they were going to become. The backs of their shirts read: ALL KNIGHT LONG. Probably the amount of time spent playing with their lances.

She sighed, about to give up. She had no idea where Turnock Wing might be, and it was too late to ask the fresher group if anyone else from the student council lived in that block . . .

wing . . . whatever. She heard a door swing open on the landing below and she glanced over the railing, catching a glimpse of a tanned forearm and a netting bag full of clothes slung over a shoulder.

The laundry. So simple. Why hadn't she thought of that before?

Jess took the rest of the stairs two at a time. She peeked around the bottom doorway and then followed the guy down a path that stretched along the back of the next building, heading towards the river. He had an easy, relaxed gait, and she admired his wide shoulders, the muscular triangle of his back. His nice arse. It was a shame more Unity guys didn't place the same emphasis on being perfect male specimens. A lot of them had gamer shoulders, and were pale, unfit and grungy. This guy's blond hair was neatly cropped, the sort of cut a Unity guy wouldn't have been seen dead with, and, even viewed from behind, he had an aura of confidence.

At that point Jess's perverting was abruptly interrupted, because the guy turned around and started walking towards her.

*Shit*, she thought. And then: *Just act like you're meant to be here. Smile, say hello.*

He was wearing the O-week shirt, too, so he was probably a fresher, but he didn't seem anything like the guys on the steps, his angry blue eyes flickering over Jess in a way that eventually forced her to look away. She felt busted, even though she hadn't done anything wrong—yet. They passed each other in a prickling silence.

Why had he turned around? Had he known she was following him? Jess risked a glance over her shoulder to see him disappear through the doorway they'd just left. Maybe he'd forgotten something. She started to run, which did nothing for her headache, and was relieved when she spotted clotheslines ahead. When she

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peeked inside the laundry, she was even more relieved to find the place empty. It was similar to Unity's: a cavernous room smelling of washing powder and hot air, with a bank of commercial washing machines along one wall and three large dryers at the far end. One of the dryers was on, the clothes inside flopping from the top to the bottom in a steady rhythm.

Jess started with the piles of washing on the table in the middle of the room, churning through them. Jocks and socks, shirts and shorts . . . but no cigar. Okay, the dryer then. The motor stopped as Jess opened the door and checked its contents—jeans and a couple of T-shirts—and in the sudden quiet she realised she could hear faint music. It was coming from an old clock radio on a side bench, its neon display reporting it was after one. The student council lunch would be winding up soon, but her more immediate worry was Blondie's return. The dryer's motor started ticking as it cooled, the sound heightening her sense of urgency.

Jess could feel the back of her throat growing slippery. Oh, not now! She swallowed furiously, walking the length of the washing machines, most of which seemed to be churning water. Except one: it was spinning. The lid made a hollow clanging noise as Jess slammed it open, and she watched the chamber grind to a halt, feeling dizzy. She leaned in and tugged at the circle of clothes, trying to loosen them, her skin breaking out in a clammy sweat.

As Jess pulled a shirt free, she noticed the name tag on the collar: MITCHELL CRAWFORD. *Mummy still tagging your clothes, Mitch? Probably a leftover habit from when she sent you away to that rich boarding school. Lord knows why she didn't just get everything monogrammed.* Then she peeled back a pair of jeans—also Mitchell Crawford's—and hit pay dirt. Or rather, royal blue. Attached to thick cotton was the Knights coat of arms, and the words *Virile Agitur*, which could probably be translated

as *We're Better Than You*. Despite the fact that she was suffering from a rush of blood to the head and was about to vomit, Jess gave a delighted laugh.

The jersey was at the very bottom. She leaned further into the machine, her fingers scrabbling to get hold of the thick cotton, trying to reef it free.

And that was when she heard someone clear his throat.

## CHAPTER 2

# ALPHA

Jess froze. There was a guy. Watching her. Well, technically, he was watching her arse—of all the times to be wearing cut-offs. Worse, the guy in question was probably *that* guy. She didn't know what to do, so she did nothing, just stayed in position, her heart racing like a mad thing. Absurdly, she identified LOLO BX playing on the radio and was glad they were getting airplay.

But then he said, 'Can I help you there?'

Jess turned to look at the speaker, feeling woozy as the blood drained from her head. It was Blondie, all right, his bag of clothes and a box of laundry powder on the table in front of him. So that's what he'd forgotten: laundry powder. His face was expressionless, but Jess had the feeling he'd been standing there for a while. She tugged at the frayed hems of her cut-offs, giving him a nervous smile.

'You gave me such a fright!' she gushed. Then she turned around and started pulling clothes out of the washing machine, piling them onto the lid of the machine beside her. Because what else could she do? She had to ride this one out, act like she

was meant to be there. In an all-male college. Going through a stranger's washing.

'I said, can I help you there?' The words were friendly, but his tone was not.

As Jess straightened again she finally lost it, starting to heave and retch, puking onto the concrete floor. Each contraction wracked her insides so thoroughly that on the final violent heave she thought her actual stomach might make an appearance, but no, that seemed to be it. All that came up were the little-and-often handfuls of water she'd drunk in the bathroom.

'Sorry.' Jess wiped her mouth, feeling dazed. 'What were you saying?'

Most guys would have at least come closer and hovered helpfully, but Blondie hadn't moved a muscle. He'd just watched the free show. Unimpressed.

'Someone's going to have to clean that up now,' he said with distaste.

'Oh. Right. Sorry.' Jess patted her front pockets, finding a wadded tissue that she used to smear the tiny puddle. Then she suddenly wondered what the hell she was doing: squatted down, cleaning up a smidge of *water*, in a *laundry*, while he stood over her, inspecting the job. She straightened abruptly, taking aim and tossing the tissue at the bin.

It missed.

Jess glanced at Blondie, expecting at least a smirk, but he was expressionless. He should have been cute, with that blond hair, that snub nose, that body. But there was a hardness to his face and a tension in the way he held himself that meant he wasn't cute at all. Or stupid, as Jess would have liked to have assumed; if a guy was rich, good looking and athletic, she usually drew the circle wide enough to include arrogant and stupid as well.

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His blue eyes were cold, the pupils down to pinpricks. ‘You should pick that up,’ he told her.

Jess stared at him. Blinked once. Slowly. ‘Sure,’ she said with a sudden smile, and swooped on the tissue, dropping it in the bin with a flourish. She showed him her hand, fingers splayed, displaying her post-drinking tremors. ‘I’ve had a big night, that’s all. And it’s so hot today.’ She made a fist, rubbing it on her thigh, working sweet and ditzzy. ‘I’m used to heat, not used to drinking.’

‘What are you doing here?’

‘My boyfriend’s at that lunch? The inter-collegiate thing?’ That’s it, just keep talking, Jess told herself, stepping back to the open washing machine. Spray him with stupid. ‘And he asked me to put his washing in the dryer? But maybe I should have tried a Hydralyte or something first.’ She giggled—a high, clear bubbling sound. Seriously, she was like an Aero bar: full of nothing. If he hadn’t been making her nervous, she would have been impressed by her own performance.

‘You’re a fresher?’ he asked.

‘Hmm.’ Jess was expecting him to ask her which college she was at—she’d go with one of the all-female ones, the preferred hunting grounds for knights—but instead he seemed to dismiss her altogether, picking up his things and pushing past her. She flattened against the washing machine, aware of his body, sure it would brush hers. It didn’t. He stopped in front of an empty machine and tipped in the contents of his laundry bag.

Jess watched him warily for a couple of seconds, then turned back to Mitchell Crawford’s clothes, hastily scooping them into her arms, careful to keep the jersey on top. She hurried to the dryer, walking the long way around, so she didn’t have to pass Blondie.

‘I know you’re lying.’

Jess whirled around. 'Excuse me?'

Blondie wasn't looking at her; he was measuring out washing powder. 'The song,' he said calmly. 'They're the words, aren't they?'

Jess realised he was referring to the song now playing on the radio. 'Yeah, I guess,' she said. He'd been repeating Meghan Trainor's lyrics, but was there a subtext?

'You should know. It's one of yours.'

'How do you mean?'

He sprinkled powder over his clothes, his tone dismissive. 'It's a chick song.'

There was the subtext: he was a dick. 'I didn't realise music had a gender,' Jess said.

'You want me to open that for you?'

'What?'

Blondie slammed the machine's lid closed and the noise made her jump. 'The door. Of the dryer. Would you like me to open it for you?'

'Ah, no. I'm okay, thanks.' Jess dumped her pile of washing on the table and opened the dryer. For a fresher, somebody was pretty sure of himself. Come to think of it, he looked kind of old to be a fresher, but perhaps that was the stubble shadowing his jaw. Maybe he'd taken a gap year or something.

She was hoping he would leave, but he didn't. Instead, he sat on one of the plastic chairs at the end of the table, riffling through a stack of magazines before selecting a well-thumbed copy of *MAXIM*. Jess started shovelling clothes into the dryer, and, even though he didn't look at her once, she felt watched. Her nerves were shot. Soon only the jersey was left. *Distract him*, Jess thought.

'How's your O-week been?' she asked.

'Predictable.'



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‘They haven’t been too rough on you?’

‘Not as rough as they’ve been on you, by the look of it.’

Jess slammed the dryer door closed with more force than was necessary. The machine hummed into life, and she immediately felt bolder, shielded by sound.

‘You forgot the jersey,’ Blondie commented, turning a page. He looked up, meeting Jess’s gaze, his eyes weirdly bright. She noticed him swallow and she wondered for a fleeting second if she reminded him of somebody else, if that was his problem. But then the moment passed. He raised his eyebrows, an arrogance to the gesture suggesting he expected explanation.

‘He doesn’t want it going in the dryer. My boyfriend. He’s worried it’ll shrink.’

‘Well, aren’t you a good little girlfriend? Running around, doing his washing for him.’

Jess gave him a good-little-girlfriend smile, and said, in a good-little-girlfriend voice, ‘I try to be!’ Then she grabbed the jersey and headed to the door.

‘Who’s your boyfriend? You didn’t tell me his name.’

Jess stopped, conscious that she still had to pass him. ‘Oh, didn’t I? Mitchell Crawford. Do you know him?’

‘Not well, obviously,’ he said, dismissive once more. Did that mean he was a fresher? Jess wondered. ‘I’m curious, though.’

‘Hmm? About him?’

‘No, about you. How did you meet?’ Blondie put his magazine down, giving her his full attention. ‘I mean, you’re . . .’ he tilted his head to the side, eyeing her with an expression that suggested whatever she was it was lacking, ‘. . . a fresher. And he’s not. So . . .’

‘Actually, I met him on the holidays. He’s from the same town.’

‘Yeah? Where’s that?’

'Rockhampton. We got together one night when we were out. At the Heritage. That's a pub there. I mean, a club. Well, a pub-club. In Rockhampton.' Jess gave a little cough, covering her mouth. 'Where are you from?'

He leaned back in his chair, his hands linked behind his head, letting his gaze come to rest somewhere below her eyes. 'Not Rockhampton.'

'Well, that's lucky. For you, I mean,' Jess said, ignoring the urge to cross her arms. 'You know what? I'd better go. I think I'm going to be sick again.' She said the words mechanically, pointedly, not bothering with the charade at all now. She expected him to stop her, or at the very least tell her to leave the jersey, and she didn't even care. Let him try.

But to Jess's surprise, Blondie did nothing, just turned his attention back to his magazine. Maybe he had bought her act after all, and he was only giving her a hard time because she was a woman, and that was the Knights way. Only, when she reached the doorway, she couldn't stop herself from turning back one last time. Because she'd won. And boys like Blondie always turned Jess into a bad sport.

'Well, I guess I'll see you round then,' she told him, sing-songing the words, a smug little smile of triumph pulling at the corner of her mouth.

Blondie looked around in a way that suggested he'd forgotten she existed. His face changed as he processed what she'd said, and he let his gaze tally up each and every facet of her bedraggled appearance, his expression somewhere between amusement and . . . yes, it was pity.

When he answered, he showed his teeth, like he'd enjoyed a joke. 'I doubt it.'

## CHAPTER 3

# PICTURES

Back at Unity, the first thing Jess did was take a shower. When she returned to her room, she left the door open, sliding one of the slatted wardrobe doors across to screen the doorway instead, hoping to generate cross flow—the wardrobe doors were on tracks for that very purpose. When none appeared, she scraped a coin from the pile of loose change on the desk and stood on the bed, setting to work on the screw that held the window's tracking. Windows at Unity were immense, stretching the width of each room and over half the height. It was probably for safety reasons that they were restricted to only opening by a foot—unless of course you busted the tracking, in which case they'd swivel to horizontal and beyond. Everybody did it.

Jess secured the window in its new position, using the belt of her dressing gown as a temporary tie, flooding the room with sky. As she did so, the sprinkler system on the oval below flared into life. Her room looked towards the river. An afternoon breeze pushed through the room, bringing with it the scent of water and a hot smell Jess associated with restlessness. Summer. It made the timetable she'd pinned to her corkboard dance.

She ate some chips from the open packet on the shelf above her desk—salt and vinegar; good hangover food now that her nausea seemed to have finally abated—and looked at the bags clumped on the floor. She should finish unpacking. Outside, she could hear the voices of her floormates in the process of doing just that, doors open so they could shout to each other from their rooms—ten of the twelve of them had been on T-floor the previous year, so it was a reunion of sorts. But what Jess did instead was blow-dry her hair; properly, using a large rounded brush, stopping from time to time when her arms ached. When she was finally done, her long toffee-brown hair was at its full-bodied best, her fringe feathered. Then she tweezed her eyebrows, her dressing gown gaping as she leaned towards the mirror above her dresser. She stopped suddenly, studying her reflection. Made a face.

‘I doubt it.’ Her tone was sour.

Dropping her gown to the floor, Jess rummaged through one of the bags and pulled on undies and a singlet top. Then she slumped in her study chair, legs up on the desk, examining the stolen jersey while she finished the last of the chips. It was still damp. The funny thing was, according to the tag, it wasn’t Mitchell Crawford’s but, rather, Julian Lloyd’s—whoever the hell he was. The person Jess’s thoughts kept returning to, however, was Blondie. *I doubt it*. Using nail scissors, she carefully unpicked the label, and then pitter-pattered her hand across the desk like a spider, finding her Zippo. She opened it with a flick of her wrist, spinning it around her middle finger, before hitting the flint-wheel with her thumb. *Flick-spin-scratch!* Jess did this so quickly it wasn’t a party trick anymore, but a twitch, a nervous condition.

She smiled at the flame, feeling an answering glow somewhere deep inside her. Then she burnt Julian Lloyd’s tag to a blackened, charred crisp, holding it with her tweezers.

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She'd just dropped it in the empty chip packet when a military *rat-a-tat-tat* shook the frame of her wardrobe door. Jess hastily scrunched up the jersey and shoved it in the pigeon hole above her desk.

'Still burning shit?' Leanne asked, shoving the door aside with such vigour it rattled along its track and smashed into the wall. 'You should get that looked at.'

'Do you have to do that?' Jess asked with a pained look at the door. She exhaled. 'I thought you were Farren. Have you only just got back?'

Leanne nodded, pushing inside the room with some difficulty, a large canvas bag slung over one shoulder. She pulled off the cap she was wearing, ditto the sunglasses, then slung the bag onto Jess's bed and unzipped it.

'Check this out,' she said, sounding pleased. 'It's one of those cool retro ones.' She held up an aqua toaster, showing it to Jess. 'What? I needed a new one.'

'You're getting crumbs all over the floor. Did you even look for a jersey?'

Leanne glanced at her, her face untroubled. 'Yeah.' Her voice suggested it was obvious. Over the holidays she'd had her dark hair dyed Rihanna-red and undercut. It made her startling green eyes even more startling. 'Didn't find one, though. Look! Got this for Allie.' She held up a sandwich press, and Jess groaned. 'Relax. No one saw me.'

'There are cameras.'

'I was incognito. Anyway, I went out by the river.' Leanne stepped backwards so she could peer at Allie's room, directly across the hall. The strumming guitars of Wish emanated from her open doorway. 'Damn. Where is she?'

Allie always turned her music up as she was leaving her room—like she could take the music with her, or she didn't want

her plants to feel lonely while she was gone. Jess wasn't even sure it was a conscious decision. Leanne would know: she and Allie were both from Mackay, and had gone to the same high school, back when Allie was Allison.

'No idea,' Jess said.

'Check Instagram.'

Jess laughed. 'Funny one.'

'Yeah, because it's true.' Leanne snatched Jess's phone off the desk. 'Why's it off? Who turns their phone off?' She pushed the side button and Jess's Nokia returned to life with a series of little chimes. Leanne studied the screen, laughed. 'Okay, that makes sense.' And Jess knew she'd seen the missed calls.

'Use your own phone,' she said sulkily.

'The screen's wrecked. I need a new one. Hey, on that—I think we should sell the Telstra shares.'

'You don't sell shares in Telstra just so you can buy a phone. That's a terrible trade. This way you're making money off all the suckers who do own phones.'

'My share is only a couple of hundred bucks. Not like it matters. I'm skint.'

'It will matter, though. Trust me,' Jess said patiently. 'They've just announced they're doing dividend reinvestment. Do you know how big that is?'

'I don't even know what that means,' Leanne said, her eyes still on the screen. 'But, okay, Buffet, I'll take charity then.' She tapped away for a very long time before Jess processed what she was doing.

'What are you up to?' Jess tried to snatch the phone off her, but Leanne moved away. She showed Jess the screen, and Jess peered at it, starting to laugh at the comment Leanne had left on Allie's latest upload: *Show us yer personality!* Then realisation hit

her and Jess's eyes widened, and it was Leanne's turn to laugh. 'She'll think I said that!' Jess protested.

'How'd you go, anyway? Score?' Leanne asked.

Jess felt a surge of pleasure that blew away the vestiges of brooding. She pulled the jersey out of the pigeon hole and unfurled it like a flag, trying to play it cool. Usually, Leanne did all the daring shit.

Leanne gave an admiring whistle. 'Way to go, Flash.'

'Just got lucky,' Jess said modestly, feeling stupidly pleased.

'Here, put it on.' Leanne held up the phone. 'Let's take a snap.'

'What if Farren sees it?'

'She's not even on Instagram.'

A slow smile spread across Jess's face. 'Okay. But make sure it's not obviously a Knights' jersey.' She frowned. 'And I want to look good. *Allie* good.'

She pulled the jersey on and posed as Allie would have done: looking seductively over one shoulder, her long hair teased and arranged around her face, pouting even—and Jess never pouted.

'Filter?' Leanne asked when she'd taken the shot, like you might say, *Sauce?*

'*All* the filters,' Jess said. 'I told you, I've got to look good. And caption it. Say, "Doubt this, wanker".'

'That's a bit strong for you, Smiley,' Leanne mused, tapping the screen.

'Private joke.'

'Done and done,' Leanne said, finally handing over the phone.

Then both girls froze, because from out in the hallway, a booming voice said, 'Where's Jess? Is she in there?' Another voice answered in the affirmative.

'Farren. *Fuck.*' Jess ripped the jersey off, shoving it back in the pigeon hole. 'Quick, hide that bag! It's got the Knights crest on it.'

But what Leanne did was throw the bag down on the floor with the others, kicking it over so the crest couldn't be seen. Just in time, because Farren Ghosh came through the doorway like the human tornado she was—a tornado wearing purple Docs, a galaxy-print miniskirt, and a Unity jersey from two years ago—entering the conversation as she always did: as if they were midway through a different conversation.

'Now, look, don't make it difficult for me. We've got half an hour to have that barbecue set up. I want the freshers to meet their mentors before the Head starts making speeches.'

'Use your minions. What's the point of being president if you don't?' Leanne said, sidestepping her with a smoothness Jess admired.

'I *am* using them. But we need more hands,' Farren said, swivelling around as she spoke because Leanne was already at the doorway. 'Allie's helping.'

That made Leanne pause. Jess, too, was surprised. 'She is not,' Leanne said.

'She is. Come on, don't make me beg.'

'Okay, I won't then,' Leanne said, and left.

Farren made a huffing noise, and turned her attention back to Jess. Frowned. 'Don't you want to get dressed first?'



## CHAPTER 4

# KNOWN BETTER

‘Okay! There are several ways to tie a toga, but I’m only going to show you one. If you don’t listen you’ll have to work it out yourself, because I am not your mother and I don’t repeat myself,’ Farren bellowed.

Jess, standing beside her, snickered. ‘Rehearse that much?’

‘Start by making a noose,’ Farren said loudly, giving Jess a look. She clicked her fingers impatiently and Jess handed over her sheet.

As Farren started winding the tail of the sheet, Jess looked around, pressing her beer to her cheeks and neck. The first few days of semester had been oppressively hot, the air syrupy thick, but for the first time that week there were clouds in the sky, and, now the sun was setting, the stillness seemed charged, expectant: a thrumming beneath the murmur of music and voices. Ahead of that night’s inter-collegiate toga party, Farren, president of Unity’s student council, had decided to split the college for pre-drinks. The girls had gathered on Unity’s flat concrete roof; the boys were down in the bunker.

Most of the freshers were paying rapt attention, sitting directly in front of Farren and Jess, sheets bundled in their laps,

all of them in bikinis or one-pieces—a sea of summer skin. The older girls had already wrapped their togas and were further back, only pretending to listen. The T-floor girls, Farren and Jess's floormates, weren't even pretending. They had their backs to the presentation and were absorbed in pouring their drinks over the railing—presumably they hit target, too, because there came a distant shout.

Farren turned to Jess. 'Arms up, sunshine.' She was British Indian, and still had traces of her English accent despite having lived in Australia for eleven years. Jess, accordingly, held her arms out wide as Farren started wrapping the sheet around her trunk. Tightly.

'Jesus, Farren, it's not a corset,' Jess said. A mistake, because if anything Farren pulled it tighter. Farren was yet to tie her own toga, or maybe she didn't intend to. It was draped around her shoulders like a cloak, paired with a black crocheted bikini top, red velvet shorts, fishnet stockings and her purple Docs, her long dark hair in two plaits. Jess wished she could work a look like that. She felt conservative by comparison in her cut-offs and Black Milk Pixie Dust zippered one-piece (limited edition, thank you very much).

'When you've wrapped it, loop the roped tail around your neck and tie it off with the other tail.' Farren stood back to admire her handiwork. 'If you want more shape, tie some cord around your waist, or under your boobs.'

The freshers broke into a polite round of applause.

'You're kidding,' Jess said.

'They're terrified of me,' Farren murmured, looking pleased.

Jess glanced past her at the T-floor girls. Leanne finally seemed to have remembered she had a part to play, and had stopped dicking around. Giving Jess a theatrical thumb's up, she shouted, 'Hey, Farren!'

## SUMMER SKIN

Farren turned and Leanne held up her phone. Jess's phone, actually—Leanne had demanded a working prop. 'Mikey called. He needs you down in the bunker.'

'Why didn't he call me?'

'That's what I asked him. Do I look like your secretary?'

Leanne said, appealing first to Farren, and then to Vanessa Ng, who actually was Farren's secretary. Vanessa shook her head.

Farren left, muttering dark things about the usefulness of her vice president. Jess knew they didn't have to worry much about their cover story, because when Farren reached Mikey she probably would discover he needed her help with something. As soon as Farren was gone, Allie, standing near the sound system, dropped the volume on Meg Mac.

'Okay!' Jess shouted, trying to get the girls' attention. 'We're going to have to make this quick, so listen up. Guys? Hey!'

'Shut the fuck up, bitches!' screamed Leanne, joining her in front of the group, and there was a sudden silence.

Jess coughed, nodding her thanks, feeling nervous with all attention now focused on her. It was different standing up there beside Farren; Farren just sort of filled a space. 'So, last year, at the toga party, the guys from Knights ran the inaugural Dragon Slayer Sweep.' With those words, the quiet seemed to take on a different quality. The girls had not only stopped talking, they'd stopped moving.

'Yeah. Most of you know what I'm going to say. But for those of you freshers who don't—it was a cash prize that went to the first knight who slept with a Unity girl. Given that we don't actually have a herald, take the dragon label as a further insult.

'The guy who won it slept with Farren. She went back to his room. Obviously, she knew nothing about the sweep—none of us did.' Jess's voice grew raspy, her face starting to burn. She cleared her throat. 'And she also didn't know that the

arsehole was going to stream everything to two other guys—the judges—in another room. Thanks for that, Skype. So, you can imagine how she felt when—’ Jess broke off, unable to finish the sentence, shaking her head. Even now, it made her so angry she wanted to kill somebody. Because she’d been there when Farren returned to Unity, been witness to her distress.

One of the freshers put up her hand, which reminded Jess of high school, and in that moment she was aware of the vast distance between who she’d been back then and who she was now.

‘Speak,’ Leanne scolded. ‘Don’t put up your hand, just speak.’

‘Did Farren take action?’ the fresher asked, and it wasn’t really a question so much as a prompt, an expectation.

Jess opened her mouth, then closed it again, glancing at Leanne, who made a don’t-look-at-me face. ‘Um, no, she didn’t,’ Jess said eventually. ‘It was kind of complicated. She didn’t want—Like, she felt that if she did, she’d be admitting there was something to be ashamed of, and . . .’

A different fresher started to raise her hand, realised what she was doing and lowered it again. ‘Are they still at college?’

‘The guys who did it?’ Jess shrugged. ‘We don’t know. She never told us who they were. And no one from Knights would say anything—they protect their own like that. The whole thing kind of got hushed up. So . . .’ Her voice had grown raspy again, and she coughed. ‘The thing is, tonight brings it up again. We want to make tonight about something else—’

‘Cutting it short, we’re holding our own competition,’ Leanne said, putting Jess out of her misery. ‘The inaugural Knight Rider challenge. I came up with that, by the way, so feel free to clap.’ That broke the tension. A wave of laughter passed through the girls, followed by applause, hoots and cheers. ‘But don’t be misled by the name,’ Leanne continued. ‘To participate, you do

not ride a knight. In fact, under absolutely no circumstances are you to—’

‘Sit on their lance,’ Jess finished for her.

Leanne barked an appreciative laugh. ‘Exactly. No sitting on their lances, no letting them *Virile Agitur*. Do not sleep with a boy from Knights—’

‘Ever,’ Jess added, extra vehemence in her voice because she’d had a sudden memory of Blondie standing over her while she swabbed a concrete floor. ‘Because if you do, you’re like a traitor to Farren, and every other girl in this place. And—and—well, just every girl. Full stop.’

‘That was so beautiful,’ Leanne said, patting her on the arm. ‘So we’ve all got the point? If you make jiggy-jiggy with a knight, Jess will ask you to leave the college. Obviously, tonight, you won’t get them back here on the promise of a coffee alone, though, so you are going to have to pretend you’re up for it. Then, when you’ve got a live one, the first thing you’ll need to do is restrain him. If you pick a fresher, chances are he’ll pass out anyway, but we’ve also got a whole bunch of these.’

Leanne nodded at Allie, always her willing assistant, who stepped forward, holding a plastic bag. Her sheet wasn’t fashioned in a toga. Instead, she’d wrapped it around her like a towel, securing it with a badge of the Aboriginal flag, displaying her ample cleavage. She probably had a strapless bra or bikini top on beneath it, but you couldn’t be sure—nothing like suspense as an attention getter. Jess glanced around the faces in front of her, saw all those eyes focused on Allie, and she knew the thoughts going through their minds as they toted her up: wearing her sheet that way might have showed off her rack, but it didn’t do anything for her chunky shoulders. With her golden brown skin and blonde hair worn loose and tousled, she had the beach girl look down pat, though. Her make-up was minimal, smoky

eyeliner and glossy lips. And her legs were good, but were they good enough for the slits she'd cut up the sides of her costume, nearly to her waist? Wasn't she a little too girl-next-door to be acting like she was a goddess?

And driving all of these questions, was their real question: What did she have that they didn't?

The answer was the kind of self-fulfilling prophecy that messed with girls' heads. Allie had the numbers: a mind-blowing following on Instagram.

Leanne reached into the plastic bag and held up a plastic cable tie; such a small object to be greeted with such a loud round of applause and cheers. And Jess realised, with some surprise, that the girls were onside—always a fifty-fifty proposition with a Unity crowd.

Leanne smiled, pleased with the reaction, and said conversationally, 'If you need to use them, I find they work a lot better if you secure the person's arm to an object, like the leg of a desk, or the arm of a chair, instead of just binding their wrists together.' Jess and Allie side-eyed each other. 'If you're worried about going one on one, go two on one. Tell the knight that you and your friend are going to make all his schoolboy fantasies come true. But the main idea here, in case you haven't already worked it out, is to give him a makeover.'

Jess listed some of the many ways they could get creative, drawing hoots and cheers with each point—it was heady, really; she was starting to understand why Farren liked giving speeches so much. 'Oh, and don't forget to record your efforts. Allie will be your judge this evening—' Allie bowed to the gathering, one arm clasped to her cleavage, scoring whistles and whoops, '—and she's going to need photographic evidence. In fact, we all want to enjoy it, so load it on Instagram, or Facebook.'

## SUMMER SKIN

Leanne took over: ‘Goes without saying, the person who does the most impressive job will become an instant legend, but they’ll also be awarded tonight’s prize, kindly borrowed last Sunday by Flash here—’

‘*Ah-aahh!*’ the second and third years chorused on cue, echoing the song by Queen, and Jess grinned. She’d always secretly loved her college nickname.

Allie held up the Knights jersey with a flourish, showing its front and then the back to the crowd. UNITY KNIGHT RIDER was now screen-printed on both sides.

When they saw it, the gathering erupted. Allie turned the music back up. Everybody was definitely pissed, but it was hard not to get caught up in the energy of the occasion. Jess and Leanne glanced at each other, laughed, and then looked away.

‘You and your stirring emotions,’ Leanne said, nudging her with a shoulder.

‘Oh, fuck off,’ Jess said placidly. ‘Farren’s my best friend.’ They watched Allie, handing out cable ties. ‘Hey, what’s *Virile Agitur* mean, anyway?’

Leanne made a snorting noise. “Do the manly thing”.

‘Oh, God. That is so funny.’

‘It gets better,’ Leanne assured. ‘Do you know what our motto means?’

‘Didn’t know we had one,’ Jess said, surprised.

‘Read your handbook. It’s *Nemo me impune lacessit*.’ Leanne paused for effect. “No one wounds me with impunity”.

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