

Saturday night and the beer was flowing as wet and free as the rain bucketing down outside the Katinga Arms. The barman positioned a plastic tub under the drip in the far corner to the boisterous jeers of a cluster of drinkers nearby.

The young man surrounded by his mates at the end of the bar accepted another glass, his friends clapping him on the back.

‘Not the end of the world, mate.’

‘Best medicine. Get it into ya!’

He smiled and took a swig. They thought he’d been keeping up, but he’d skipped a couple of rounds without them noticing. Still, he’d had at least three, maybe four. One more than the coach allowed. But what did that matter now, anyway?

As the rain eased, the pub began emptying slowly, but the boys were still going strong, getting rowdier with each round. He tried to laugh along, keep his chin up, but every now and then the shouted conversations and the laughter around him faded to a dull buzz, and he found himself staring blankly at the scuffed timber floor—staring and wondering what the hell he was going to do now.

He managed to slip away around eleven, sneaking out the side entrance so the boys wouldn’t see and call him back. As the door swung closed on the warmth and light inside, he felt the chill in the air, and the grey mist of despair settled over him again. He made his way up the narrow lane beside the pub, decided to take a leak

before the long walk home to the Plains.

As he zipped up his fly, footsteps from behind. He began to turn. Too late. Arms pinned, chest slammed into the wall with a thud, a grunt of air emptying from his lungs, his head clamped against the brickwork.

Heart thumping, he thought of his mates so close on just the other side of the wall. They wouldn't hear him call. *Shut up. Stay cool. Breathe.*

The shorter one did the talking—right up close, bourbon on his breath. 'We know you, kid.' The other guy ground his head harder against the brick wall. Sharp pain in his cheekbone. 'And we know where you and your missus live.'

The short guy took a step sideways, his arm swinging back, fist hitting him hard in the guts.

No air. Gasping. Winded is all. Breathe.

They wore beanies pulled low and thick scarves across their faces, only their eyes showing. The tall guy shoved him and he fell face first onto the dirty, wet pavement, long, skinny legs appearing in front of him—square-toed boots like a frickin' cowboy, one of them swinging. He got a hand up to soften the blow as it crashed into his ribs.

'Me mate here wants to kill you now,' said the short one. 'Reckon I might let him.'

He pushed himself up onto his knees, tried to stand. The next boot landed in his groin, flattening him again.

'But nah, you're a lucky prick. Someone wants you alive...for now—so long as you keep your mouth shut. Not a word, hear me? Not a fucking word!'

'Yeah. Yeah. Okay,' the young man whispered.

'I haven't finished yet, shithead. You make yourself scarce, right. Leave town.'

He felt a pressure in his back—the cold, hard muzzle of a gun.

'You got that? You feeling it?'

The next kick came hard to his stomach. A croak came out as he tried to breathe. Then the short guy held a burning cigarette in front of his face, pinched between forefinger and thumb. He wanted to shout, but the man put a finger to his lips.

‘This is a test. Not a sound.’

He bit down, eyes scrunched tight, as he felt the man pushing up the sleeve of his jacket. A faint sizzling sound, the smell of his own flesh burning. He sucked air through his teeth, smothering his scream, lay there groaning.

‘Top marks. A-plus,’ said the man, straightening up and taking a step back. ‘That’s the sort of quiet we’re after. You’re a fast learner, kid, I’ll say that for ya. Let’s just hope the bub takes after you, eh?’

CHAPTER 1

Eight o'clock and the team had finished their warm-down. Bathed in the harsh oval lights, steam rose from their bodies, the smell of smashed grass and sweat filling the air.

'All right, boys, that's it for the night. Well done,' she said. 'Looking good for Saturday.'

The men made their way towards the sheds. The click-clack of their boots on the concrete seemed to give Clementine confidence. They were strong and fit, and as the season moved on they were gaining momentum, working together now like a well-practised rock band—a long way from the discordant rabble that had turned up that first day. She smiled to herself, not wanting to jinx anything, but it was hard not to predict a win this weekend against Jeridgalee.

Not for the first time, she wondered how she'd ended up with this job. Must have been the only applicant. There was no other way she could explain it.

As she bent down to pick up her backpack, the last of the players trotted past her, a small group of five. A voice came from the pack. 'Nice tits, Jonesy.'

She stiffened. A top button had worked its way loose on her shirt. 'Hey! Stop there!' she called with a ferocity she hadn't had to use for a while.

They pulled up, shuffling, dirt-spattered, sheepish.

'Who said that?' she demanded.

‘Just a joke. Nothin’ in it,’ said Beasley. She knew it wasn’t him, but she also knew no one would own up.

‘Right then. Twenty push-ups. All of you,’ she said, her voice stony.

Groans, headshakes, hands on hips.

‘All right, if you want to act like high school kids, get going and keep going, all of you, and don’t bother turning up to the game.’ Stunned looks. ‘Yes, that’s right—anyone who’s never seen a woman’s breasts before, keep walking,’ she barked. ‘I only want men on this team.’

The giant ruckman, Torrens, dropped to the ground, the others falling over themselves to follow. Bodies stretched taut, hands square, Torrens keeping count through clenched teeth. She stalked off when they got to fifteen, too annoyed to speak to them again tonight.

As she walked to her car, someone called her name from the other side of the car park. Jenny Rodham—fifty-something club treasurer and business manager at the only bank in town—waving something at her.

‘System’s down,’ Jenny called as she hurried across. ‘Had to write out an old-fashioned cheque! Haven’t done that since Noah was a boy!’ Her raucous laugh was hard not to enjoy as she handed Clementine her weekly wage, all \$140 of it. ‘Oh, and by the way,’ she said, ‘you’ve been here nine months, high time you came round for dinner.’ She cocked her head sideways, her neat black bob falling across the beginnings of a double chin. ‘Are you free this Sunday? I do a damn fine lamb roast, and Trev does an amaaaazing gravy.’

Clementine’s smile faded. Holed up in the hills, she’d stuck to the plan, never going anywhere or doing anything that wasn’t mandatory—certainly not hanging around chatting in car parks like these country folk seemed so keen on.

‘No thanks, Jen. I’m having a quiet one at home.’

All her evenings were quiet ones, and they both knew it.

One of the players, Clancy Kennedy, was jogging towards them, looking like he wanted to speak with her. A diversion from the dinner invitation. Good.

‘Hey, Jonesy,’ he called. ‘Could I have a word with you?’

‘Sure.’

His eyes darted around the remaining cars. ‘It’s kind of private. Can we talk in the sheds?’

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Clancy sat on a red plastic chair on the other side of the fold-up table, feet spread wide and his hands resting on his knees. The biting chill of the evening air hung solid and heavy between the concrete block walls.

She was still speechless.

‘I’m sorry, Jonesy, I just have to look after Mel, you know. She’s nearly due, and she’s a bit scared.’ His voice was unusually soft—she could barely hear him.

‘But there’s still five weeks to go till the baby comes, right?’

He nodded, dropped his head. Something odd, she thought, something he wasn’t telling her, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. In fact she couldn’t think straight at all. His words were ringing in her head: *Quitting the team. Quitting the team. Quitting the team.* Her star player, the key to the midfield. It didn’t make sense. The bloke just loved to play, lived for footy. She was doing her best to stay calm, but it felt like she had one of those huge antibiotic capsules stuck sideways in her throat.

Clancy said nothing, staring at the grey cement floor.

‘Couldn’t you at least play the home games? We could have someone on stand-by ready to drive you to the hospital as soon as we get the call.’

Clancy shook his head. ‘Our first kid and all. Just gotta be there. Wouldn’t be right not to.’

The words sounded rehearsed and he shifted nervously in the chair as he spoke. If this were a negotiation she'd feel like she had only to dig a bit further, find a weak spot, and an opening would appear, a way to take a point, a win for her client. But this was a long way from the corporate office towers of Sydney and a long way from anything that smelt vaguely like business. No, this young man sitting in front of her, coiled tight like a spring—nothing could be more personal.

She stood up, walked over to the dirt-smearred window looking over the oval. The lights were off now and the car park empty. It was a clear night, and once again she marvelled at the thick smudge of stars across the midnight-blue sky. She thought of the conversation she'd had with Mrs Lemmon at the club fundraising fete. Standing at a stall packed with knitted beanies and crocheted tea-cosies, the old woman had grabbed Clementine's hand as she was leaving.

'My Tom would have loved you, Miss Jones. Yes, yes,' she crooned, 'he would have loved you. Would have called you a bottler of a girl.' She patted Clementine's hand, the soft crepe of her skin and lavender perfume reminding Clementine of her gran.

'He played for Katinga back in the sixties, you know, before he went to Vietnam. Yes, he was one of those high-flyers, full-forward mostly, deadeye Dick with the boot. Of course Tom couldn't play anymore after the war—his back was never the same. Well, I guess you can't fly high when part of your spine's missing, can you now?' She chuckled sadly. 'Oh, but did he love going to the game, though! Oh yes, he was the Cats' number one supporter for five years running.' Her eyes glazed with the sheen of Tom's memory.

'They gave him life membership, you know. That was just before he died, the year after we made the finals in '82. He was gutted when we lost in the semi, but oh was he chuffed to get the life membership.' Her voice trailed off, and she'd smiled kindly at Clementine. 'Hmm, yes, Tom would have said you were the best thing to come to Katinga since Jesus.'

Clementine didn't feel like she could walk on water right now. The town was counting on her to save them from a decades-long losing streak, and now she was going to disappoint them. She should never have taken on the coaching role. Stupid idea.

Turning back towards Clancy, she heard herself say, 'Family always comes first, Clancy. You have to do what's best for Melissa and the new bub.'

He flashed her a look and then quickly glanced away.

After he'd left she sat down with her head in her hands, the edge of the chair cutting into her thighs. The smell of thirty-four years of disappointment overwhelmed her, the echo of hundreds of men, the steam from their panting and the exhaustion in their eyes, the murmurs and bowed heads of the supporters and Mrs Lemmon putting flowers on her Tom's grave.

CHAPTER 2

Clementine forced her eyes open. Through the crack in the curtains she could see the bare branches of the plum tree in the backyard against the pale hues of dawn. Such cold winters—probably only three degrees outside. The folds of her doona felt extravagantly warm. She snuck her fingers out just enough to pull the covers up over her nose.

She had woken twice during the night, each time replaying the scene in her head. Something about Clancy's story didn't stack up. What was it? She searched her memory. Was it the way Clancy had muttered his wife's name, like he didn't want to mention her? Or maybe his eyes, darting all around? He hadn't looked at her once as they spoke. Maybe something to do with Indigenous culture, she thought. But then, when she made that lame comment about putting family first, his eyes had landed right on her.

Family first. How dare she speak of family after what she'd done? She shuddered and rolled over on her side, taking care to keep the doona over her shoulders. The cockatoos in the mountain gums were getting up a screeching chorus outside.

What was she going to tell the team? Shit. Her stomach lurched. What the hell would she say? She should have tried harder—for the team's sake, at least, and Mrs Lemmon's. God, for the whole bloody town. A kid with that much talent—the best coaches would have challenged him, persuaded him to stay.

A kookaburra let out an exuberant *guuguubarra*, the morning

air carrying the echo back to her from the escarpment on the other side of the valley.

Oh, for God's sake, why are you comparing yourself with the best coaches? She sighed. *Stay out of it, Jones. Keep your head down, and people will leave you alone. That's the plan. The football is just something to keep you from going crazy, nothing more. Bloody hell, don't start believing the Jesus comments.*

She gazed up at the white meringue of plaster cornice framing the ceiling. Pieces were falling away, exposing the pulpy greyness underneath. She'd planned to paint this room but hadn't got around to it. There was so much that needed doing around the place, and she'd only scratched the surface. She'd made an energetic start, replacing the guttering and painting the kitchen, but then the place started to grow on her. The faded carpet and scuffed timber hallway spoke of the people who had lived here before her. Were they like her? Had they been hiding? Or just keeping to themselves up here in the hills? She had felt the warmth of their company, the glide of their hands on a worn doorknob, a reverberation of voices when she turned on the shower. It had stripped away her modernising zeal.

She threw the covers off and swung her legs out of bed, peeking behind the curtains to observe the whole of the new day. Pocket was bounding after a galah that had landed in the backyard. She'd chosen him as a six-month-old puppy from the Earlville pound. Spiky black fur stuck up higgledy-piggledy along the ridge of his back, white chest dappled with enough flecks of black to make it grey. He had some cattle dog in him, a touch of border collie—a bit of this, a bit of that. It didn't matter, he'd made her smile, and the cottage was different, lighter with his presence.

She padded down the icy floorboards in the hall to the bathroom, fluffy dressing-gown wrapped tightly around her waist. Hot water took ages up here, not like her flat in Sydney. She waited until the last moment to drop her dressing-gown and step in. By the time

she'd emerged from the shower, the decision was made—a quick conversation with Clancy couldn't hurt. She would stop at his place before training on Thursday.