

## *Chapter 3*

It's dark at 5 am. Tess stands at the car park's edge, jigging on the spot to keep warm. Her tracksuit is zipped over her chin, and inside the fleece she feels her hot breath. She watches the boats already out on the river; they cut perfect Vs through the water as the rowers pull hard in unison.

'I'll be back at six-thirty. I'm sorry, kitten,' her dad says, squeezing her shoulder. 'I'll get your gear ready at home. What about your uniform?'

She nods but doesn't lift her eyes from the team now passing in front of her. They work perfectly together; their rhythm is impressive. 'Yep, all done.' She doesn't want to look at him. 'See ya.'

Without looking back she crosses the foreshore

to her coach. He shakes his head. 'Late again, Tess. We need you in the boat at five, not arriving then. C'mon, the other girls are waiting.'

She gives an apologetic grin to hide how mortified she is at being late again, unzips her trackie and inhales deeply. It's bitter this morning. But five minutes out there and she'll feel like a slow cooker. Better to suffer the pain now than be trapped in the hellfire later.

'Sorry guys,' she says airily, sliding into position, the shell hardly rocking. The others acknowledge her with a small smile, but for Debbie, the coxswain, who gives her mandatory grimace.

'Ten minutes into training Tessa,' she snaps, as Tess grabs her oars. 'This is why we always fall two seconds short.'

Tess tries to block out the negativity and focus on her own rhythm — extend, bend, extend, bend, one, two, one, two. Within seconds they are gliding oilily across the river's surface. They skim past the low, sweeping peppermint trees whose branches trace delicate patterns across the tannin-stained water. The air still puffs from their mouths like small

clouds of white smoke, but Tess is already feeling the warmth in her bones. One, two, one, two. She tries to focus on the regulated motion and forget her morning house, her mourning house.

It's like meditation, nothing but the action of her arms against the water and her legs hauling her forwards and backwards. Their unison is perfect. It's easy to drift off. The silence of the river, the stillness of the early morning punctuated only by the dip and splash of their oars and the occasional swoop and caw of a river bird. She looks straight ahead at Maddie's back. Chloe, Maddie's twin, sits in front and, as always, the girls' movements are identical. Tess pulls hard on her oars, matching the twins' actions. A memory of her mother, with her wide grin and swinging ponytail, picking the three of them up from primary school suddenly flashes before her eyes. She automatically stiffens at the vision. So different from the vague woman she left at home this morning. If it hadn't been for the girls and Ned — especially Ned, always Ned — she wonders how she would have made it through the last two years.

'Tess!' — she is startled by Debbie's sharp voice

— ‘you’re out. A half stroke. We’re about to pull sideways.’

Tess straightens in her seat. The others have relaxed their oars and turn to look at her expectantly.

‘Sorry guys,’ she says, smiling at them, ‘got lost for a sec.’

Back on the shore, shivering slightly in their dampened lycra, they listen to their coach, Mr Mycock. It brings Tess no end of pleasure to know his first name is Paul. She can’t help but stifle her laughter every time someone says his full name.

‘Regatta on Saturday,’ he says, referring to his clipboard. ‘Listen girls, we’ve got a fair crack at this one. And no matter what, you’ve all worked real hard.’

‘Except one of us,’ someone mutters.

Tess glances at Debbie, whose mouth sits in its usual downturn of disapproval. For a minute Tess wonders if she imagined it. But no, it’s definitely something Debbie would say.

‘Training okay?’ her dad asks. His voice is the

one he uses for her mother, the one that tries to coax her out of bed each morning, the one that implies everything will be all right. But, of course, nothing really is, underneath all this false jollity.

‘Great,’ Tess says, staring directly at him. ‘I reckon we might win on Saturday.’

‘Honey, that’d be lovely.’ Her dad reaches across and squeezes her shoulder. ‘You girls have worked so hard. It’s time.’

*It is time.* They’ve been on a losing streak for so long now that it’s easy to pin the blame on one crew member not pulling their weight. And Tess knows they all think it’s her.

‘About this morning,’ he begins.

‘No Dad.’ She turns to look out the window. ‘Just don’t, okay.’

‘Okay.’ He stares through the windshield. They’re in their street now. ‘But she’s okay, you know. She’ll be fine.’

Tess tries not to hear him.

Her mother is dressed immaculately. She sits at the table, reading the morning paper. She glances up

as they walk in. ‘How was training, love?’ she asks, getting up to pour a coffee from the percolator.

‘Good, Mum,’ Tess says warily. ‘I’m going for a shower.’

‘Right, I’ll make you breakfast. Eggs?’

‘No thanks.’ Tess is ripping her top off as she walks up the staircase. ‘Cereal will do.’

In the shower she watches the water trickle over her body. Is her stomach getting fatter? It seems so unfair with all the training she’s been doing. She’s never been a big eater; maybe she was before Dad took over the cooking – but that life was so far away, she can barely remember it. Ned has warned her about the high calorie content of the Maccas burgers she tucks in to occasionally. But, as she reminds him, it *is* only occasionally. Surely a body that works as hard as hers is allowed the odd treat or two? Towelling herself dry, she grabs her inner thigh. It jiggles unattractively. What the hell is going on? She’s meant to be a lithe and mean fighting machine. Instead she is this wobbly, flabby pudding.

‘Breakfast,’ her mum calls as she comes down the stairs ready for school. Tess looks at the clock.

‘Too late, Mum. I gotta go.’ Her mother looks crushed, but Tess can’t help it. ‘Just give me the toast. I’ll eat it on the way.’

The toast is still in her hand as she walks to school from the bus stop. She needs to step up her pace or she’ll be late for home room, and Mr Allen has been threatening her with infringements all week. She only needs one more and then it’s an after-school detention, which will mean missing their last training before the meet. She can’t afford that. If she misses training and they lose — what then? It will all be her fault.

Ned is up ahead. She wishes she could be like him — never caring about anything, least of all being late for class. He senses she’s there, as he always does, and his attention makes her heart leap.

‘Hey, princess, how was training?’

‘Shit,’ she says, glancing around. She would give him a quick kiss, but someone might see. ‘Debbie rode my ass as usual.’

‘You need to tell her she’s a big-mouthed bitch. Which is why she shouts the orders and doesn’t row the boat,’ he says.

She nods. She's heard this speech from Ned a hundred times before. Those who can't pull an oar bark an order. He totally hates laziness.

'She is,' she agrees, 'a bitch.' They walk along in silence for a while. 'Ned?' she ventures finally.

'Yeah?'

'Do you think I'm getting ...' She searches for the right word, but what's the point with Ned? He'll tell her the truth. 'Fat?'

He laughs and she feels his hand cupping her stomach. She pulls back, repulsed.

'I wouldn't say fat.'

'I'm fatter than I was,' she says angrily.

He sighs as she hauls her schoolbag higher up her shoulder, defensive now. 'Fatter than when you were thirteen, yes. But face it, Tess, you're fifteen now. All girls change shape, it's normal.'

She can't look at him. She's humiliated and they walk along silently, Ned oblivious to the damage he's caused. He's always like that, so forthright and honest — with an honesty that's like corporal punishment. But he knows her so well. He's been her greatest support and staunchest ally. He's been privy



to her deepest secrets, comforted her at nights when she's cried for Brodie, held her and made her feel loved when it felt like everyone else had gone. He's seen her change, develop, knows what it is she really needs to hear.

She realises she's still clutching the toast, the jam and butter running down the side of her hand. As usual her mum has used too much of both. She flicks it into the bushes and wipes her hand in disgust against her schoolbag. They are now at the school gate.

'See ya at recess,' Ned calls, but she doesn't look back to watch him saunter off; she's too worried she'll be late as she rushes to her home room.

It's Mr Allen who's late. Tess sinks into her chair. Thank God. She pulls her English assignment out of her bag and glances around the room. No one is paying her any attention, which is just fine. These vertical home rooms are weird. A blend of Year 8s, 9s, 10s, 11s and 12s. And none of the other Year 10s are part of her social group.

She reads through her essay. Last night she was

sure she'd nailed it, the thesis statement and all that crap, but now? She wonders if she's answered the question. Last time Miss McLoughlin had written 'retelling' against nearly every paragraph. What if she's done it again? She couldn't bear another B grade. She shoves the essay back into her bag.

Miss McLoughlin is handing back the in-class test. She stops in front of Tess. 'Great effort,' she says. Eagerly Tess reaches for the paper, sees the red scrawled B+ and closes her eyes, mortified — a B! This isn't a great effort. Good maybe, satisfactory definitely. But not great. Not now, not ever!

Everyone is comparing marks. Tess has hidden her essay in her neatly ordered file.

'What did you get?' Chloe asks.

Tess feels alarmed at the question — she doesn't want to tell. 'B,' she says softly without looking up.

'Good on you,' Chloe says admiringly. 'You're so smart. You always get the top marks.'

Tess shakes her head — this isn't the top.

'I got a C minus and only just. I just don't get it. It's so hard.'

Tess nods, looking at the red C- on Chloe's paper. How can Chloe still seem so happy?

'Maybe next time, if it's okay, you could help me work out the thesis statement?' Chloe suggests. 'I always seem to get it wrong.'

'Sure, no problem,' Tess agrees, but why anyone would want her help now that she can't even crack an A is beyond her.

'I can't believe it,' she tells Ned at lunchtime, taking a bite from her salad roll. 'I'd studied so hard. I thought I'd focused on the right topics. But to get a B? What's wrong with me? This is bullshit.' She chews slowly, like Ned has reminded her to do a hundred times before.

'Bs are pretty good,' he says, his eyes reflective. 'Others would be real happy with that.'

'I know.' She glances around the canteen area, everyone happily tucking in to their food. 'But I want As. Maybe I'm being selfish. I don't know. What do you think?'

'Go for it, princess.' He shrugs in that nonchalant way he has. 'If you think you can, if you think you

deserve it. If you think you're worth it, then yes. Don't put up with B-grade bullshit. Go for gold.'

She smiles at him as he gets up to leave. He always makes her feel accepted and loved. She looks at the last of her roll, her appetite suddenly gone. 'Thanks, I always know I can count on you for the truth.'

Maddie and Chloe stop at her table, carrying their lunches.

'Can we sit here?' they ask in unison.

'Sure,' Tess says, pointing to the vacant bench opposite her. 'I was just about to leave anyway.'

'Don't go,' Maddie says, putting her hand out. 'We're not trying to kick you out ...'

'We just wanted to join you,' Chloe finishes.

'Oh,' says Tess, grinning.

'You want some?' Maddie asks, pushing her foil container of chips soaked in gravy towards Tess. The aroma is overwhelming; Tess feels her mouth water. She drops her hand to her half-eaten roll.

'Thanks, no,' she says, 'I've already had lunch.'

'That?' asks Chloe, pointing to her plastic-wrapped roll. 'You've hardly had any of it.'

‘It’s filling.’ Tess tries to not sound defensive.

‘That’s why she’s got such a hot bod,’ Maddie says to Chloe, ‘cos she’s careful about what she eats.’

‘Unlike us!’ Chloe says.

‘Stop it,’ Tess says, trying to sound light. If they could see her body under these clothes, there’s no way they’d think that. ‘You’re both skinny and fit. I wish I could be like you.’

‘Ha ha, Tess,’ Chloe says, rolling her eyes at Maddie, ‘don’t be so modest. As if you’d want to look like us – when every girl in the school wishes they could look like you.’

‘And think like you do too,’ adds Maddie.

‘Stop it,’ Tess says again, this time more forcibly. She’s uncomfortable with compliments that are so obviously false. ‘So training tomorrow – it’s going to be a tough one.’

Maddie nods and Tess feels herself relax as the subject turns to rowing – and what they need to do to win the cup.

At training the next morning she pushes herself past the pain barrier. While her legs and arms are

screaming for mercy and her lungs for oxygen, she grits her teeth, blanks out the howls and keeps going. She's a shaking and sweaty wreck when they finish.

'Shit, Tess,' says Carla, 'I could barely keep up. You were awesome.'

'Two seconds,' Tess pants, looking at Debbie, 'is all we need off our time.'

'Two seconds?' Lisa shouts. 'Girl, you took us so far past that. To unreachable, I reckon.'

That night at home she lets the shower water run over her head and into her mouth. Drown it out, Ned always says to her, and you won't hear their pain — Mum's in particular. She tries so hard to drown it all out. Mum was good today — but that in itself is unnerving, because a good day is more often than not followed by a couple of bad ones. Really bad. The anticipation tightens her gut. She tenses and looks at her stomach again. They need to win on Saturday. Maybe they're hauling too much weight. She imagines pitching Debbie over the side of the boat — that'd have to gain them at least fifty kilos and those two elusive seconds at least. She laughs alone in the bathroom as she imagines

Debbie bobbing to the surface, jellyfish and algae sticking to her hair. Oh God, it'd be so worth it!

She dresses and walks downstairs cautiously. On Friday nights her family used to play games. They'd gather around the coffee table — after Mum had made them all get up and stack the dishwasher — and argue over which game to play. Before Brodie, Tess had begun to feel a certain sway of support for her choice. And though she wasn't aware of it then, she later realised it was their deliberate engineering to keep her in the family games. She was given preference, they accommodated her — it killed her to think of it — because she was nearly a teenager, and they knew she wouldn't want to play with them much longer. That she would want to spend Friday nights out with her friends. Moving on. Who would have thought then, even for a second, that Brodie would be gone first?

Her dad was the Monopoly king — and exceptionally good at Operation. But they all used to complain he had an unfair advantage. Her mum held the crown for Trivial Pursuit, always winning by jumping from one literature question to an

entertainment one until the centre — where they'd try and stump her with a sports question. Tess was best at Balderdash; she outwitted them with her false definitions, studying the cards to word her responses just right. Brodie voted for her answer every time.

'You're just good at lying, Tess,' he'd say when she won again.

Brodie was best at Twister, manipulating his spindly legs into unnatural positions to put left hand on green and right foot on blue.

Now, as a family, they play just one game: If Only.

It's quiet but for the low murmur of the television. She peers into the lounge room. Her mum sits with her feet in her dad's lap. They're drinking tea. They look so normal, so much like they used to that the image stabs her heart.

'What's on?' she says, falling into the recliner and flicking the footrest out.

'Some detective show,' her dad says. 'Criminal Intentions, CSI, RSVP, PTO.'

Her mum giggles. 'Oh Liam, you're so silly.'

'I'm a very silly man,' he agrees, grabbing her foot.



Tess watches them and feels torn. The perfect happy family – sitting around their faux fireplace, its gas flames licking artificial logs, Nero curled in front of it, watching their big-screen plasma TV. They look like an advert for heaters or home insulation. She wants to be happy that they're momentarily happy, but it just makes her angry. It could always be like this but it's not. And it's her mother's fault.

Later, when she tells Ned about it, vents about the madness in her world, how the smatterings of normality only come back when her mother is prepared to play, he's not so ready to accept Tess's side.

'Why do you blame her so much?' He seems pensive.

'Because it's like she doesn't have to be crazy,' Tess says. 'She can turn it off and on. Like she does the love and affection. It depends on how she feels. Our family revolves around her mood swings. And frankly I don't buy it anymore. She's a fake.'

She feels Ned's admonishment emanating from him. 'Tess! How can you say that? You have no idea,