

**One of the Boys: The (Gendered) Performance of My Football
Career**

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Abstract:

This PhD via creative work comprises an exegesis (30%) and accompanying novel, *Fan Fatale* (70%), which seek to contribute a creative and considered representation of some women who are fans of elite male sports, Australian Rules football in particular. Fictional representations of Australian Rules football are rare. At the time of submission of this thesis, only three such works were found that are written by women aimed to an older readership. This project adds to this underrepresented space for women writing on, and contributing their experiences to, the culture of men's football.

The exegesis and novel creatively addresses the research question of how female fans relate to other women in the sports fan space through concepts of gender bias, performance, and social surveillance. Applying the lens of autoethnography as the primary methodology to examine these notions further allows a deeper, reflexive engagement with the research, to explore how damaging these performances can be for the relationships women can have to other women. In producing this exegesis and accompanying novel, this PhD thesis contributes a new and creative way to explore the gendered complications that surround the sports fan space for women.

My novel, *Fan Fatale*, provides a narrative which raises questions about the complicit positions women can sometimes occupy in the name of fandom and conformity to expected gendered norms. The exegesis deploys the practice of autoethnographic, practice-led reflexive writing to grapple with academic and popular accounts of female sports fans that also engage

with complications of these experiences. A particular focus is placed on how inherent gender bias and social surveillance influences how women are perceived in the sports fan space by not just men, but other women. This is additionally reinforced in literature and popular culture that is addressed in this work.

The exegesis and novel provide an important contribution to the knowledge concerning female sports fans. It is only from representing the varied, intersectional complexities of this arena that women enter unequally, that we can learn how to make it a more even playing field. This work provides an approach to the research question that is nuanced and investigative and offers a way to open up conversations that bring women back into the few sports literature narratives that we have to work towards achieving this goal.

Student Declaration

Doctor of Philosophy Student Declaration

I, Kasey Malisse Symons, declare that the PhD thesis entitled *One of the Boys: The (Gendered) Performance of My Football Career*, is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature:

Date: 26. 3. 19

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Introduction

This exegesis and accompanying novel seek to contribute a creative and considered representation of some women who are fans of elite male sports, Australian Rules football in particular. This contribution is focussed on the adding of women (Pope, 2012, p. 177) back into a discourse where female fans are still typically portrayed in a stereotypical or one-dimensional way, if they are indeed not ignored from the narrative completely.

The exegesis and novel will creatively address the research question of how female fans relate to other women in the sports fan space through concepts of gender bias, performance, and social surveillance. Applying the lens of autoethnography as the primary methodology to examine these notions will further allow me, an engaged participant myself, to explore how damaging these performances can be for women striving for acceptance in the male-dominated sports fan space.

A central aspect of this process is the mining of my past and present as my football fan identity has developed and been shaped by the cultures that I am embedded in. Author and researcher Enza Gandolfo notes her approach to the craft of writing with reference to writer Joan Didion, ‘For me, writing is first of all an act of exploration. Joan Didion puts it best when she says: “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear”’ (Gandolfo, 2014). This sentiment by Gandolfo and Didion captures the process I am engaging with through my own reflexive work in this thesis.

My personal experiences in different aspects of the culture, as well as my own developments and understandings, provide insights into this complicated space and its impact on the relationships between women. The autoethnographic reflections included in my exegesis detail the journey I have been on as I continue to become the type of fan that I believe(d) will serve me best as a female supporter of elite male sport. This journey is supported by a review of the literature and examples of the problematic ways female fans can be portrayed in popular culture that build on the existing research. The complexities with which women come to be passionate and invested fans of men's sports as well as experience and maintain their fandom in multiple, gendered, and complicated ways are still a relatively unexplored field, especially in sports fiction.

The genesis of my aims for this project lies in a series of tensions that I have wrestled with over the last decade being involved in Australian Rules football in multiple ways. Most predominantly I have been a life-long, self-identifying, female sports fan, while I have also actively consumed sports media, popular culture and related literature, and have worked professionally in the industry. I have loved football for as long as I can remember and have equally loved literature and reading. However, when I look to literature for sports narratives, I am left wanting. The experiences of female fans are seldom explored in nuanced, creative ways that capture what I see and feel in the culture of elite male sports.

Fictional representations of Australian Rules football are rare, with those written by women even rarer. At the time of submission of this thesis, only three such works were found that are

written by women aimed to an older readership. ‘For something so culturally unique, Aussie rules football is under-represented in our literature, especially given the obsession with the game of our UNESCO City of Literature, Melbourne’ (Wright, 2014). A lack of literature in this genre has led to a lack of varied representations of the many experiences women can have in the sports fan environment. That results in the further perpetuation of narratives that neglect the female fan or fantasise her. It also maintains the male fan narrative as the central and most authentic experience, continuing a culture of complicity in the fan space.

My exegesis provides an autoethnographic exploration of the discourse and research pertaining to female fans of elite male sports while engaging with the literature and pop culture that represents women in this space. My accompanying novel additionally contributes a creative response to this research and autoethnography. This novel, titled *Fan Fatale*, depicts a young woman at a sports marketing agency who works closely with athletes and sporting clubs in marketing and public relations. She is an Australian Rules football fan and spends most of her spare time going to matches and engaging in the fan culture around the game. As she continues to develop professionally, she starts to notice the gendered narratives that accompany the perceptions and participation of women in different aspects of male professional sport. The novel traces this process of the primary character’s dawning awareness of both the discourse that surrounds her sex and gender in this space, and how she is perpetuating it not only in her work, but also in the multiple spaces where she is ‘being’ a fan (at the game, online, through her personal fan writing, by consuming multiple sports, and watching sports in public spaces such as sports bars). As she becomes more conscious of these issues, we see her in a battle with herself in how she behaves within this world. We see how she performs and negotiates her gender along

the way to gain acceptance by her male colleagues and fellow fans. My main character is someone who is on the inside with so much access and knowledge, yet remains isolated and restricted. She is 'within and without' (Fitzgerald, 1925), holding so much power but still so compliant. As the narrative progresses, guilt begins to plague her when she realises how the way she often acts is in conflict with her growing understanding of the gendered nature of the worlds around this elite male sport.

An example of academic research that has produced a work of fiction is Toni Bruce's 2016 novel, *Terra Ludus*. Bruce's creative endeavour sought to bring attention to the (lack of) media coverage of women's professional sport, basketball in particular, through creating a world where the women's competition has been taken away. Bruce described her novel as follows:

At its heart, it is an imagined world in which contradictory discourses collide and effloresce into new patterns that disrupt traditional ways of understanding the place of women in sport and media.

Terra Ludus is my response to the spectacular failure of sport studies scholars and activists to convince the mainstream sports media to increase coverage of women's sport' (Bruce, 2016, p. xii).

In a similar manner, *Fan Fatale* is my response to the omission of complex narratives when it comes to the representation of female fans of elite male sports. I wrote *Fan Fatale* to place a

story into the discourse that reflected some of my experiences and the experiences I observed of others. It seeks to ask questions about place and belonging and love in sport. It seeks to discover what it means for a woman who simply wants to be considered as an equal fan in such a male-dominated space.

The novel and exegesis are not an examination of the politics of representation, but a way of creatively exploring and responding to a lack of representation. I wanted to write this story because I wanted something to exist that I could see myself in. In writing this novel, I know how much more writing is needed to bring the stories of other female fans into the discourse. My narrative aims to give voice to *some* of the complications women participating in the sports fans space can have, but there are most certainly more voices that we need to hear from to begin considering female fans in a comprehensive manner. It is important to consider how intersecting forms of power and prejudice shape the way different women experience sexism and misogyny as participants within a sports fan culture. In this thesis I will not seek to comment on or imagine how women might have different views or sentiments on these positions from myself as a white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied woman. Indeed, it is not my place to speak on behalf of women who have different experiences than I do. But it is my place to strongly advocate that we need those stories added to the discourse.

Additionally, the focus of this thesis is not the experiences of those women who work in professional sport and the issues caused by inherent sexism in sports administration that limit their progression to executive positions, prominent roles in the board room, or even coaching roles. I am therefore not thoroughly engaging with the research in this space, but acknowledge its importance. I lightly touch on aspects of the problematic nature of sexism in the sport industry for women who work within it and have used some research as inspiration for my novel (see

Brown & Light, 2012; Merrill, Bryant, Dolan & Chang, 2015; Burton, 2013). However, my primary interest lies in how fandom operates as a pervasive force that is not only contained to the sports arena. I mention my professional history not as an intention to document my career in order to learn more about the experiences of women in sports administration, but rather to frame how my self-professed, obsessive love of the game and self-identification as a female sports fan, tied in with my work experience, worked together over many years to create a sports fan identity for me in a gendered way. Because of my constant proximity to the sport I loved as a fan, as an academic (completing my honours thesis part-time and the first two years of my PhD while employed full-time in the industry), and as a professional, there were certain gendered behaviours I was complicit in to maintain my fan identity. Due to my complete immersion in the culture, it took me (too) long to identify how damaging these behaviours were, not only to my perceptions of and relationships with other women in the culture surrounding sport, but to myself and how I distanced myself from being a feminist ally to become 'one of the boys'.

This is not an experience exclusive to women working in sport. It pertains to so many spaces as fandom is not a contained phenomenon, but a learned performance of self, (Goffman, 1959) that becomes an identity. The commentary on women working in professional sport in the novel is used as a device to keep the conversation about sport continually present. The novel's narrator cannot escape from this world. It is all encompassing and the question becomes whether she even wants to leave it given how much it means to her, despite its problematic hierarchies.

My exegesis builds on emerging research pertaining to female fans of elite male sports (including but not limited to: Palmer & Toffoletti, 2019; Richards, 2018; Montez de Oca &

Conter, 2018; Toffoletti, 2017; Sveinson & Hoerber, 2016; Klugman, 2012; Pope, 2013; Jones, 2008). These works begin to bring attention to the varied and complicated relationships women can have to sport as fans along with the historical representation of female fans (see Hess, 2000; Klugman, 2016). I engage with this research through forms of autoethnography to explore questions of how female fans enveloped in the patriarchal system of an elite male sporting code can perform and negotiate their gender and fandom, not only with men, but also in relation to the other women who enter this arena. More importantly, I consider how some female fans have come to believe that these performances are not just necessary, but also beneficial to their fan identities. These motivations and the complicated relationships they create between women at the game are an important, yet relatively unexplored, female fan experience.

The method of autoethnography also enables me to engage with my own personal position in the field as a self-identifying, female football fan. As Meredith Nash notes, one:

key feature of autoethnography is that the researcher's narrative is 'written in' to the research process (Chang, 2008). Autoethnographic research can take many forms from evocative or emotional representations (Sparkes, 2000) to analytic representations in which the researcher has clear analytic goals (Anderson, 2006). Benefits of autoethnography include the rejection of the 'traditional' position of researchers as uninvolved observers in qualitative research and the possibility of inspiring others to reflect critically upon their own embodied experiences (Sparkes, 2000). Autoethnography also offers an embodied understanding of gendered performances (Nash, 2015, p.4).

My use of autoethnography draws on methods developed and deployed by researchers working in literary studies, sports sociology, and the cultural studies of sport. Megan Popovic, for example, uses autoethnography in her research on self-identity through sports fandom and participation in ice hockey by engaging with her personal memories, poetry, song lyrics and theory. Her intention in doing this was to share ‘memories from a first-person perspective, with the conviction that my stories will inspire the unveiling of a new way to do, or more so to be, history within our academic ice rink’ (Popovic, 2010, p. 236). Likewise, I intend to bring a different way at looking at the history of representation of female sports fans through this framework in my own way, in order to creatively explore new ways of engaging with the research.

Nash meanwhile uses autoethnography in her research into women’s participation in boxing culture as athletes in Australia. Nash observes that:

the criticism that autoethnography is self-indulgent assumes that autoethnography only reflects the experiences of an individual. Autoethnography is important intellectual work because it permits an exploration of the personal and emotional dimensions of research and it is relational (Nash, 2015, p. 4).

This is what I always find to be valuable in studying the fan culture around an elite male sport. Fandom is an emotional space where passions are foregrounded (see for example Klugman, 2009 & 2012). Autoethnography allows me to draw on my personal passions and

broader emotional connections to Australian Rules football in a reflexive manner that helps me analyse the relevant research and popular literature around this sport.

Another researcher who engages with the methodology of autoethnography is Jessica Richards. Richards uses her lived experiences reflexively as part of her research in the fan culture of the Everton Football Club in the UK as both a female fan and a foreigner (an Australian coming into the English football fan space). By using an autoethnographical methodology, she shares the added complexities her position brought to her initial project and identifies how that was a beneficial addition to her research. Richards notes that her 'status as a female researcher studying football fans often resulted in members of the Everton football community identifying my position in terms of my gender identity and sexuality' (Richards, 2015, p. 393).

My autoethnographic approach to my research is shaped by all three of these styles along with a literary autoethnography that contributes to the creative writing that my novel produces. Richards writes about her gendered experience while researching football fans - she is researching herself, while researching others. Nash is researching herself primarily as a female athlete competing in a male dominated sport, assessing her gendered experience and then analysing the setting in which she is a participant. Popovic also achieves this with personal reflections and thoughts on related song lyrics and poems that help her collate streams of consciousness to portray her research in a creative way. I also revisit past experiences with a new lens after becoming more aware of the ways in which I have been complicit in the patriarchal system that is the sports fan space of elite men's sport.

Rebecca Olive's recent discussion of her use of autoethnography encapsulates a central element of the methodology for me. As Olive explains:

I had been using this idea to develop a reflexive methodology in my ethnographic research for my doctorate about women and recreational surfing. In this project, I was researching my own community, culture, and subjectivity, so thinking the social through myself helped me understand how the subjective position I occupied in my research impacted the ways I experienced surfing culture (Olive 2013, 2016). It helped me feel the weight of my cultural difference in surfing, as well as my privilege, while accounting for the ways my difference is contextual, helped me locate any tendencies toward self-indulgence in accounting for my subjective position (Couldry, 1996). It helped me make the familiar strange (Olive, 2018, p. 237).

Through my experience of writing in a reflexive, autoethnographic manner, I have made the familiar strange. I have also become aware of just how much of the strange I had made feel familiar in my own quest for authenticity as a self-identifying female fan. This process was difficult and shaming but illuminating of the ways in which I have also been compliant within the culture I am critiquing in this thesis.

I didn't realise how deep I was in. I am sitting at my desk re-reading my thesis, this piece of work I've put four years of my life into in the aim of highlighting these issues that women still experience because I want change. I want women to be welcomed with open arms into the stadium and I want to help that happen. I look over the autoethnographical pieces I've written and shared to highlight some experiences I've had that made me uncomfortable or made me question my place. How sometimes I felt like maybe I didn't really belong. But now these scenes haunt me. I was so in. And I think, if I didn't know then, how can I be sure now? I'm an academic; I know the theory around gender and performance and social surveillance thanks to my research. During these last four years I thought I was just viewing these behaviours and these interactions while I was at the game or talking footy around the water cooler in the office, or even tweeting my thoughts into cyberspace. I thought I was above it all because I was aware of what was happening in this space. I was watching other women and I was writing about them. I was working. But now I read these notes back and realise how much a part of the problem I was. How much I still am. And after all this research and knowledge gained, and my own self-awareness, it terrifies me that maybe I haven't done enough. That I won't be able to do enough.

By reviewing historical representations of women as sports fans in multiple football codes (Hess, 2000; Jones, 2008; Klugman, 2008, 2009 & 2016; Mewett & Toffoletti, 2011, 2012; Pope, 2012 & Dixon, 2015) and investigating socio-cultural theories of looking (Foucault 1979 & Mulvey, 1989) that tie into my personal, autoethnographical revelations, I bring to light the

complicated ways in which the public performance of self, (Goffman, 1959) occurs in gendered ways for women in the sporting arena. The primary sporting code I will be engaging with in this thesis is the culture surrounding Australian Rules football due to my personal fan experience in this environment. From my personal experiences I can provide reflexive, autoethnographical contributions to the discussion on the position/s of women watching in the stands. The exegesis additionally demonstrates how similar the fan experience can be for women of many elite male sports in Australia as well as internationally. Moreover, I explore the fan experiences of women in these sports cultures as well as provide depictions of women in sports literature and popular culture and how these comply with the commentary of female fans provided in the research.

In regard to the terms “sex” and “gender”, I am mostly exploring the complications that performance of gender can add to the female fan experience however when sex is also applicable to the argument, both the terms “sex” and “gender” will be highlighted. In this exegesis, I subscribe to the definition of the terms as detailed by Jaime Schultz in her text, ‘Women’s Sports – What Everyone Needs to Know’ (2018). Schultz states that:

the terms “sex” and “gender” are often used interchangeably, but there are important differences between them. Sex refers to biological or physiological characteristics that define male and female... sex does not always align neatly according to the male-female binary, but typically we think of it that way. Gender has to do with the socially constructed roles, understandings, and expectations we

have about how boys, girls, men, and women should look, think, and act (Schultz, 2018, p.53).

What interests me beyond the gendered performances and negotiations some women are complicit in to be accepted and awarded authenticity in the sports fan space, is the impact this has on the relationships female fans have with other women. These kinds of gendered fan performances have been explored by Jones (2008), Mewett and Toffoletti (2011) and Richards (2015). However the relationship between different female fans is only briefly touched on by scholars of female fandom. This thesis therefore offers something new in exploring the deleterious effects of women to viewing other women in the fan space with disdain as they endeavour to be accepted as ‘one of the boys’.

In the design of this thesis, the novel follows this introduction. Three exegetical chapters are then placed after the creative work. This design allows for the creative to respond to the research questions outlined in this introduction and explore them through the fictional narrative. The exegesis that follows both further addresses the research and engages with my creative response to this research. The conclusion addresses both the novel and the exegesis by returning to the questions that have driven this thesis, and reflecting on the answers that I have come to.

Each exegetical chapter addresses key aspects of the gendered roles that some female fans feel the need to perform, in order to become the idealised fan they believe will be fully accepted into the fan space of elite male sports. Chapter one revisits the three published novels written by

women on Australia's elite male Australian Rules football competition for a mature audience. This chapter reviews these texts through the lens of the representation of women in sports fiction, contrasting these with a recent effort to re-write women in children's literature. I then provide a reflexive autoethnographical re-view of these texts to provide a commentary on the unconscious gender bias that at least partially clouded my initial judgment of these books about a men's sport written by women.

Chapter two investigates how some women perform their fandom in gendered ways while gazed at in a sports stadium. This chapter explores the complications of that experience through concepts of social surveillance and gender performance by taking Foucault's panopticism theory (Foucault, 1979) and extending it to the spatial dynamics of sports stadiums where the watched also watch others. The undisclosed nature of the gaze is then complicated in that it can fall on participants who would like to believe that they are immune to it.

Chapter three examines the complexities of the concept of 'becoming' in gendered ways based on Judith Butler's germinal work, *Gender Trouble* (1990). This is then applied to the process some women engage with to perform elements of their fandom that they believe will see them gain acceptance in the male hegemony that exists in the fandom of elite male sport. What is evident is that this process is aided by idealised depictions of how female fans should be when presented in male driven sports narratives such as fan memoirs and popular culture. Using Butler, as well as Erving Goffman (1959) to explore elements of gender performance and negotiation, I explore how women are framed in popular sports culture and how that contributes to an unattainable and misguided female fan fantasy figure.

Structurally, these three exegetical chapters are interspersed with theory, vignettes from popular culture and literature, plus segments of my autoethnographic writing. The autoethnography acts as the methodological guide post that speaks to each chapter's central concept and carries the narrative of the exegesis. Each time the writing moves into my reflexive writing, these sections will be broken, separated by three small dashes and placed in italics.

The novel, *Fan Fatale*, which makes up the creative section of this thesis is the first fictional attempt that I know of that focuses on the experience of female fans of Australian Rules football. It is a unique contribution to the literature around the game, like the recent 'The Women of W.A.R. series' which provided the first books on the pioneering players of the new national women's competition, AFLW (Marsh, 2018; Evans, 2018; & Andrews 2018). My novel is based in an accurate timeline from October 3, 2015 which is the date of the 2015 Australian Football League (AFL) Grand Final between Hawthorn and the West Coast Eagles. It concludes on April 3, 2016 which is Round 2 of the 2016 AFL season in which these two teams met again. During this time, an actual sexual assault allegation was raised which occurred a week after the Grand Final. This is represented in the novel through the protagonist's and other characters' responses to the scandal and these reactions begin to frame the hyper masculine environment in which the protagonist performs her fandom and gender. This is the only real-life occurrence that appears in the novel, besides the actual results of the AFL matches portrayed. All other events and characters are fictional and woven into the timeline between the two matches which act as bookends to the narrative.

Deb Waterhouse-Watson has examined the online responses to the aforementioned allegations of sexual assault in a recent paper and her findings provide examples of the discourse used by fans to minimise the gravity of sexual assault perpetrated by professional athletes. She details that:

When rape is used as a metaphor in sport, it is usually an attempt at wit, describing one team's defeat at the hands of another, or in one case here, describing another Twitter user apparently losing an argument. Six tweets employed these metaphors. Using rape as a metaphor is problematic in itself because the violence and sexuality are deflected away from the violated female body. When juxtaposed with a literal alleged rape, it enacts a double marginalisation—first through the use of humour, and second by implying that a football team losing a game is more important and more damaging than (possible) actual sexual violence against a woman. The following example shows two users responding to the same tweet about the Hawthorn case with rape-as-sport metaphors. The first tweet got two “favourites” (now known as “likes”) and a retweet and the second got three favourites; neither was challenged:

Metaphor1:

@initialtweet its Rioli he raped Mitchell of the norm smith [medal for best on ground in the Grand Final]

Metaphor2:

@initialtweet yeah ... I watched the grand final, what they did to west coast would count as an assault ...' (Waterhouse-Watson, 2019, p. 12).

Waterhouse-Watson's work is productive for my creative work, as it helps to frame the nature in which fans can ignore serious issues in the name of the love for their sport and even bring a dark humour to further discount their seriousness. In both my exegesis and novel, I explore how women can also be complicit in these fan behaviours despite it being detrimental to their own sex. Importantly, the process of writing the novel enabled an opportunity to explore these real-life examples creatively and thus further informed the research into the motivations for gendered performances and negotiations in female fans.

While writing reflexively and developing my fictional narrative, I have been able to understand how some scenes came to be through the historical representations of women in sport and current research on female fans. The creative writing has informed the exegesis where I am able to take scenes or dialogue I have crafted to hold against the research and explore why these situations occur. I have also been able to further engage with my own work, as well as the academic work to provide examples of my own experiences of navigating the field as a fan through autoethnographic interludes.

This PhD was difficult to write. Beyond the challenges of bringing together the research and toiling away at the writing for years, the way in which I have written it, by exposing myself and my complicity in the male hegemony of the sports fan culture has been really hard to process. I have written things that I forgot happened to me because I forced myself to believe that they were OK. I forced myself to believe that they didn't matter. I forced myself to believe that how I responded to these events was normal; that it was what a real fan would do. I have laid myself bare in this work. It was terrifying, but I had to because I had to know why. Why did I behave in these ways in this space? Why did I crave the attention of men and had become so desperate for them to invite me in with a beer and a pat on the back for correctly reciting a stat? Why did I roll my eyes at other women and question their place at the game? And after all these years of performing in this way, who was the real me? What kind of fan am I, if indeed, I am a fan at all?

Pope has shown that most researchers of sports fans 'seem to "add" women to their analysis, almost as a side-product to the main research focus, and perhaps as a response to feminist critiques or else the alleged rising numbers of female fans at matches' (Pope, 2012, p. 177). And while women are most certainly not a side-product to my research I guess I am 'adding' in some sense. I am adding some narratives into the discourse that are underrepresented, I am adding questions to the field that need to be considered and I'm adding myself. Much in the way some women writing on sport have done to further highlight issues of sex, gender, family, and career in this field for women (see Abdou, 2018; Leavy, 2010), in this 'adding' to the research field of female fans of elite male sports, I will begin to understand my place in the stands as a fan. In first

understanding my place, I can illuminate a greater understanding of the complicated experiences of sports fandom women can encounter and how this affects our relationships and perceptions of each other.

Fan Fatale

A novel by Kasey Symons

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ONE

3.10.15

Move, move! Get out of my fucking way!

Kristin wanted to scream.

She needed a clear exit and nothing was working for her. No clear path, just people motionless, transfixed by what was unfolding before them.

Kristin was half-walking and half-running, doing some sort of a weird skip-like-jog in a zigzag pattern. Looking like a desperate fool. She moved as fast as she could without drawing attention to herself. She couldn't stand to be there for the end. But she couldn't bear the judgement from her fellow fans for leaving early. She'd never left a game early.

Kristin turned her focus back to her escape route and her desperate need to avoid having to endure hearing *it*. For the past five years the biggest perk of her job at the sports marketing firm, *The Agency*, as far as she was concerned, was having the privilege to hear *it*. The final siren on Grand Final day.

The first time Kristin had heard it, she was entertaining clients in a tiny corporate box at the MCG. She made an excuse to leave two minutes before the end of the game and ran down to ground level and to hear it with all the real fans. It wasn't her team out there on the hallowed turf on that one day in September. But in those few seconds it didn't matter. The roar that reverberated through the stadium made her want to cry. It was the most beautiful, pure and joyous sound she had ever heard.

Yet now she was running away from it. Away from the sound that would signal that her team had lost it all.

Kristin managed to dart through the abandoned turnstiles and get outside the stadium. But she was still too close. She had to get further away. She wanted to run but there were too many bystanders in the way. Arrogant Hawthorn fans already delirious with the coming triumph.

Then it happened. *It* ripped through her like razor wire. The cacophonous cheer as tens of thousands of happy Hawthorn supporters celebrated their third consecutive Premiership.

Kristin felt assaulted by all the noise. Then the Hawthorn Club blared over the speakers. And she felt physically sick.

Kristin wiped an angry tear from her cheek and slapped herself to shape up. Just ahead a tram pulled up behind the tennis centre. The path was finally clear. Now she did run.

Kristin bolted the last few metres and made it as the doors snatched shut behind her. She released a small sigh of relief, her first relief since Luke Shuey kicked the opening goal of the game. She felt like she had just gotten away with something. Like a criminal escaping the scene of the crime.

No one will know I was ever there. No one will know how much I cared.

Kristin almost snorted. Of course they would know.

She'd been bragging around the office all week about how it was the Eagles' year. About how good Priddis was. How Gaff and Naitanui would be phenomenal. Her colleagues saw her almost cry when she secured a scarce Grand Final ticket through the members ballot. They laughed at her for being stupid enough to turn down the VIP access on offer through *The Agency*. But Kristin was vehement. She didn't want to sit with the suits and corporates she knew from work. They'd care more for the free bar than the actual game. She'd stand instead with her fellow Eagles fans. Together with her tribe for the biggest game of her life.

Monday is going to be hell.

Kristin found a tiny space to sit at the back of the tram. She zipped up her jacket to cover the signed guernsey she'd paid a small fortune for, and plugged in her headphones. Not for the music. She just didn't want anyone to talk to her. She hadn't realised anyone could crave silence as much as this.

But her entrance had been noticed. Two men in ordinary clothes had looked her up and down as she boarded the tram. ‘I would have left early after that performance too!’ One said too loudly to the other.

Kristin felt so ashamed.

The trip into the city that morning had been unimaginably different. Kristin was a headphones-in-ears traveller. Sports podcasts, audiobooks, music. Anything to escape into another world. But this time she’d wanted to be completely present. The tram was buzzing. Kristin had never seen so many of her Eagles fans in Melbourne before. She loved it.

Being a Victorian based West Coast Eagles fan always confused people. They presumed Kristin had grown up on the other side of the country in Perth. But she was born and raised in a small Victorian town a few hours outside Melbourne with its nine different teams. West Coast was a random choice made while resisting the pressure placed on her by her Richmond supporting father. She’d choose her own team. Do things her way.

The 1992 Grand Final sealed the deal. She’d only been six, but choosing West Coast might have been the best decision Kristin had ever made. And now on her way to see them play in another Grand Final. If she had given into her father she’d be home sulking over yet another season of missed opportunities.

Kristin listened to the excited chatter of the groups of Eagles fans. They'd journeyed across the Nullarbor in a variety of ways. Some even flew to Bali to then fly to Melbourne because it was cheaper. 'Fucking airlines!', they bemoaned with a smile, and she shook her head along with them in comradely agreeance.

They were already predicting the Norm Smith winner. 'Nic Nat, Pridda, and what about young Andrew Gaff for the dark horse?' The tram driver, perhaps tired of the reigning Hawks, or just sensing more Eagles on his tram than Hawks, even gave a 'Go Eagles!' over the PA as they disembarked at the 'G. The tram went wild. 'Carn the Eagles! Go West Coast!'

As the lucky ticket holders marched to the sold-out stadium, a raucous 'Eeeeeeeea-glessssss!' chant started among the fans. For a second, Kristin forgot who the opposition were. All around her was a sea of blue and gold. She'd never seen so many Eagles fans in her city before. All she could see were West Coast supporters. Her Eagles. Her people.

Kristin didn't care that she'd only managed to secure a standing room ticket. She was too nervous to sit anyway. She squeezed into a small spot against some railing in the Great Southern Stand, right in the pocket. And counted down the hours until the opening bounce.

The time passed quickly, helped by more deafening 'Eeeeeeeea-glessssss!, Eeeeeeeea-glessssss!' chants. The banner was raised. 'UNITED' printed on it boldly. It captured Kristin's feelings perfectly as her team tore through it, the West Coast song blasting through the speakers.

The 50-something year old bloke to her left wiped a tear away. Kristin tried to hold back hers. She'd never felt part of something this special. Not in all her years working in sports marketing. Not in meeting players or going to the VIP parties as part of the inner sanctum. This meant more than all of it.

Kristin proudly clapped her team on to the Grand Final field until her hands were red raw. She didn't know at the time that this was as good as her day would get.

It was over too quickly. The hope. The anticipation. Gone.

When Josh Hill's smartass attempt to kick a goal on the line was smothered half-way through the last quarter Kristin was done. She couldn't take this anymore.

'I'll mind your spot, love?' The burly bloke next to her nodded as she made a move to get the hell out of there. The group around her in the small standing room section had been taking it in turns all day to mind each other's places for beer runs and bathroom breaks.

'Yeah, thanks mate.' Kristin muttered not making eye contact. She knew he knew she wasn't coming back. She wanted to cry, this time in despair. How disappointed he must be in her. She wasn't a true fan.

Sulking on the tram home, Kristin was consumed by just how bad a fan she was.

She tried not to think about the office on Monday morning. She'd set herself up for weeks, maybe months of torment. And she deserved it. Her face fell into her hands.

Liam would be the worst.

Kristin could see his smile now. The 'I told you so' smirk that she'd want to slap off his face. She shook the image away as she walked into her little inner-city apartment. Instinctively turned on the TV.

Brown and Gold everywhere. Kristin shut it off and cursed herself for such a stupid mistake. What a rookie. She threw the remote into the couch. And stormed off to the shower to wash the day away.

TWO

5.10.15

With slumped shoulders and sunglasses on like she was managing a hangover, Kristin walked into the office of *The Agency*. She was trying to be invisible but was also preparing herself for the backlash.

She'd arrived early to avoid walking past too many desks with people chuckling at her team's misfortune. She took her seat and hoped people wouldn't want to make the effort to walk across the office to make fun of her.

The Agency was a small sports marketing company based in the city. It was relatively boutique compared to some of the larger marketing firms but the fact that they exclusively dealt with Melbourne based sports meant they could cater to the specific needs of athletes, teams and brands in a focused way that some of their competitors couldn't. *The Agency* was small but they did pretty well from building relationships and word of mouth. They had some big contracts with star athletes and sports-aligned brands that kept them going. Sports business in Melbourne was a fairly connected space and collaboration was common so the office felt bigger than it was with so many different people coming in for meetings. The constant trips to studios and Melbourne's iconic sporting locales meant that Kristin felt like she really worked with hundreds of people, not just those in her small company.

Kristin collected these contacts like footy cards. She was obsessed with expanding her social network in the industry. She wanted to know everyone, but more important to her was being known.

Working in sports marketing in Melbourne was a surprisingly small pond. For what was arguably the world's sporting capital, Kristin knew the names of just about everyone who worked within the business of sport. Mostly because it was the same people who moved between working at different sporting clubs or codes or advertising agencies and also because she researched them. She was constantly looking at the staff lists on the websites of different football teams, stalking people in LinkedIn, trying to learn who she needed to work harder at getting to know, who to 'connect' with. But what she learnt quickly was it seemed most people only worked a couple of years at one place and then moved on to the next, constantly trying to get ahead but ultimately continuing to move only sideways in an awkward and unfulfilling career dance. She was determined to avoid this in her career.

Kristin had worked at *The Agency* for five years and admittedly was feeling a little itch to move on. She'd started desiring change or to take the next step in her career but at the same time she also knew just how lucky she was to be working there. She had seen so many people try to move on, to take that next step and have it not work out or they ended up doing the exact same thing at another organisation, just with a more convoluted job title to mask it. Her best friend Rebecca had done just that last year. She'd left *The Agency* tired of the pressure of her role in trying to continually bring in new clients that she desperately took a job at a football club that

was basically an assistant job. She has some long-winded title that Kristin can't ever remember that has the word 'executive' thrown in there but Bec was essentially the CEO's personal assistant. Kristin couldn't believe she'd thrown away her position at *The Agency* for something like that. Bec should have held out for something else but she guessed that some girls couldn't hack the hard work like she could.

Things had worked out for Kristin so far. She had moved to Melbourne to do a journalism degree and landed a job that allowed her to primarily work with AFL clubs and players as soon as she had graduated. It was a dream come true. She'd grown up wanting to be a sports writer and loving football. Now she was writing copy for sports marketing campaigns and meeting players and being paid to attend football matches to 'host clients'. Kristin would have almost done that side of the job for free. She was convinced that this was the kind of job that most of her classmates from her small, country hometown could only have dreamed of doing. They'd become teachers, tradies, stay-at-home-mums by age twenty-one and she was in the big city working with some of the country's best athletes and being paid to be at the football. Her parents were so proud. They told anyone they saw in the street about which footballers she had met that week or repeated with a thrill any locker room secrets that she knew. Kristin had made it in their eyes and she loved how much they spruiked her success back home.

Kristin was determined to keep impressing them. To keep showing everyone what she could do. She wasn't going to follow suit with all these others and move around the Melbourne sports scene aimlessly. She wasn't going to be yet another female executive assistant to someone that

mattered. She was going to matter. She knew she'd be rewarded for her hard work and loyalty soon enough at *The Agency*.

The West Coast Eagles team poster pinned on her wall of her tiny cubicle made her sigh as she sat down at her desk. They all looked so happy. Strong and optimistic. There was a photo of her with Nic Naitanui from a few years ago when she got to work on a campaign for a brand that he was an ambassador for. That was one of the highlights of her life. She remembered meeting him, he was sitting on a stool signing autographs for competition winners at the long table in their office meeting room. She timidly approached him and asked for a photo before her boss came by and scolded her for acting like a crazy fan. She did have the crazy eyes in the picture, like she was about to cry but was surprised about it. She'd worn sky-high heels that day but he still towered over her even as he sat. A behemoth of a man. A God.

Oh how she loved him, but if only he'd had a better game on the weekend.

Kristin noticed a few people arriving out the corner of her eye and kept her focus on her email inbox, trying to appear engrossed in work.

A few of the guys just took their seats, and she could hear them muttering a few non-descript things about the game but her ears pricked up when she heard them mention the after party.

It was like a punch in the guts.

The after party.

She'd forgotten all about it.

A client was one of the league's sponsors and they had been given VIP passes as a thank you for a successful campaign they had put together for them that year. Her work friends had watched the game from the corporate box the client offered them too but she'd declined. She wanted her 'real fan in the stands' experience instead. She wanted to be with her people. Every year she'd worked at *The Agency* she was always required to host clients at one of the luncheons. She loved it but she also couldn't really let herself enjoy the day. She was expected to be on her best behaviour during the game. No excessive drinking. Always making sure everyone at her table was looked after and happy. It was never an issue for Kristin though. She was at the Grand Final – she would do anything to be there and have it deemed 'work'. She could always let her hair down at the after party. But this was the first year she had been invited to the game as a guest. It was an honour. It was a sign that things were about to change for her. She was starting to be considered at that next level. But she'd said no. Those rooms were full of people who didn't really care about the game and just wanted to destroy the open bar. She couldn't do that when it was her team playing. She needed to do it right. She'd said she'd catch up with them later at the after party but Kristin was so heartbroken and hell-bent on getting away from anything to do with the game that she'd completely forgotten. Perhaps she wouldn't have even wanted to go if she'd remembered. Though if she wasn't in a party mood at least she could have drowned her sorrows with some free booze.

Kristin usually loved those sorts of perks of her job. They rarely popped up for her at the middle-management level. Her boss, Brian, and the senior executives were always at some event or in a corporate box at games. She occasionally got the call, but mostly she was waiting in the wings for someone more important than her to turn it down.

Kristin wondered if there were any good stories from the party. There was usually some gossip from dance floor towards the end of the night. People drunkenly pashing each other in full view of very important people. She shuddered remembering her first Grand Final after party five years ago when she'd been at *The Agency* for six months. The open bar was 'open' like she could never have imagined. Cocktails, shots, French champagne and the drink that undid her, the double scotch on the rocks that she'd started when she wanted to make an impression on her new male colleagues.

She wanted them to think she could hang out with them and be their mate. That she wasn't like other girls who worked in sport. It was going great until they started giving her the doubles without her realising. Kristin kept trying to drink them at the same speed as the guys who, by that stage of the evening, were either drinking singles or were having a sneaky break on plain Coke. They thought it was hilarious, getting the new girl plastered. She ended up making out with someone in front of all of them and taking him home where she fell asleep. Kristin woke the next morning to a very disappointed, unattractive, older man. She had sex with him in the morning before he left as she felt so guilty for leading him on at the party and passing out. She also did it out of gratitude, thankful that he didn't do anything to her while she was asleep. She'd awoken fully clothed and he was sleeping above the covers while she was tucked in. He had looked after

her and she knew the minute she woke how much trouble she could have been in. She had no idea who he was and what he could have... she didn't want to think about it. Awkward morning sex fully conscious seemed like a fair price to pay for her safety.

Kristin tried to think who could have been the story of the night. Liam was usually keen to drink as much as possible at those things, he saw it as a way to recoup all the overtime he worked during the year. He was supposed to have a girlfriend but no one had met her so who knew if she was real or not, but he wasn't a random hook-up kind of guy.

Jay was always on the prowl but he was terrible at it. Over confident and extremely annoying after he drank too much. She felt sorry for all the potential girls he would have bothered that night with his inane drunken ramblings.

'Morning!' Liam shouted and shook her out of her musings. She hadn't seen him approach and was now unprepared for the teasing.

Kristin sighed heavily.

'Good morning.'

'I know what you're thinking and I'm not going to say a word, I swear!' He pulled his face into a solemn but kind expression, like someone famous had passed away whom she had loved and he felt her pain.

‘It’s fine, take your best shot.’ Kristin countered. She didn’t want to be pitied, especially by him.

‘No no,’ he shook his head sarcastically. ‘I know how much pain you must be in.’ He patted her on the shoulder in faux sympathy. She rolled her eyes and smiled.

‘I’m fine.’ She rapidly removed his hand.

‘Okay, okay. Well, I will just say - what the fuck Josh Hill!’ He roared with laughter at the ill-fated attempt at goal. ‘That was the worst thing I’ve seen since Riewoldt in 2010! And at least they got the chance to try again the next week - you guys fucked it up from the start!’

Kristin put her head in her hands. This is the worst thing, she thought. Right now. Having to endure this.

‘I need coffee.’ She interrupted his cackling.

‘Me too,’ he wiped an imaginary tear from his face as if his own comments were that hilarious to him. ‘Let’s walk to the cafe on the other side of the road though, I’ve got a story!’

She flashed him a grin. The first time she’d smiled since the start of the game when Luke Shuey had kicked the first goal. ‘Tell me, tell me!’

Liam put his finger to his lips and shh'd her. He motioned his head to nod towards Jay and she got up from her desk coolly to follow Liam out of the office.

'Good morning guys!' Kristin felt a small pang of guilt as she turned quickly to see Tina sitting at the reception desk. She'd blatantly ignored her while chasing Liam out the building in the pursuit of gossip.

'Hey Tina, sorry, didn't see you there.' She mumbled.

'So sorry about your Eagles lovely,' she cooed. Tina was in her early forties, a motherly figure in the office. She was exceptionally attractive and always well put together. Kristin often wondered how she could afford her wardrobe on a receptionist's salary, especially as a single mother with two young kids who were always in day care.

'You left the party pretty early T, I was looking for you - I was going to show you my moves on the dance floor!' Liam was leaning over her desk, flirting unashamedly.

'Oh, I'm too old for all that now! I needed to get home to my fluffy robe and slippers! Those parties are for you youngsters, not us old ladies!' She swished her chic golden bob and laughed.

'Oh stop it, you're still one of us! I bet you even still get asked for ID!' Liam was laying it on thick now. Kristin was yet to figure out if Liam's constant flirting with Tina was just another

outlet of his compulsively charming nature, or if he had some sort of hot-mum-fantasy he wanted to play out. Either way it made her uncomfortable. He was too brash about it, surely Tina could see that. Though she seemed to be equally as into it. She probably just liked getting the attention from a younger man.

‘No, you stop it!’ She giggled back.

‘We’re getting some coffee, can I get you one?’

‘No thanks sweet, I’m on the green tea at the moment.’ She motioned to the mug on her desk. ‘I’ve started a new detox program. Thank you, though.’

‘No worries.’ He winked at her and as soon as they exited the building Kristin grabbed his arm to bring his attention back to her.

‘So? What happened?’

‘Well first of all - what happened to you? You should have been there to stop it!’ He poked her jokingly.

‘What do you mean? Stop what?’ She started to feel disappointed in herself that she didn’t go to the party and guilty that she had just skipped out on a work event. Most of all though she felt stupid. She had missed out on everything.

‘Jay and Anna!’ He whispered into her ear.

She pulled back away from him. Mostly from shock but also from the unwelcome warm air that his whisper left on her skin in the cool morning air.

‘What?!’ Kristin put her hand to her mouth in disbelief and looked Liam in the eyes. ‘How?’

‘You know Jay, he was drunk and persistent. She probably did it out of pity or to shut him up.’ He snickered.

‘She’s too old for him.’ She scoffed, disgusted in Anna’s predatory behaviour. ‘What’s it going to be like in the office now?’ She looked at Liam and he shrugged his shoulders.

‘I don’t know but it’s going to be weird. And she was weird already.’

Kristin shook her head in judgement.

‘I actually think he really likes her.’ Liam started and Kristin rolled her eyes at him.

‘Come on!’

‘Seriously. He was trying to play it cool at the party, like she was an easy target but I think he definitely wanted her. He just knew how much shit we’d give him if he was actually into her so I think he’s playing it up.’

Kristin put her hands in her pockets to warm while they crossed the road and were exposed to the crisp wind. She knew exactly what Liam meant. The boys in the office couldn’t really stand Anna and neither could she. She was disingenuously nice to everyone. Her voice was irritating and she sucked up so much to Brian that it made Kristin feel embarrassed for him. He must have regretted hiring her every time she complimented his ideas and his advice by flirting and batting her false eyelashes at him.

Kristin had never really enjoyed close friendships with other women. She preferred being mates with the boys, avoiding all the drama that girls brought to situations. She had a couple of close girlfriends back home where she grew up but mostly she preferred the company of men. Now she lived in Melbourne where she could just watch sport and drink beer and not have to deal with everything else. Where she could just be herself.

Anna was the epitome of the type of girl Kristin hated. She was so girly. She wore these full, high-waisted skirts with high heels with bows on them every day. The fullness of her skirts made them sit much too high and exposed an amount of her thigh that Kristin was uncomfortable seeing. Kristin wore fitted slacks and nice shirts with tailored blazers. She didn’t want her clients to think she was a princess. She wanted to be taken seriously.

‘Why would he like her?’ Kristin turned up her nose at the thought. She had to be the most unattractive girl at work.

‘No idea, she’s so annoying.’ Liam held the door for Kristin as they walked into the cafe. He walked up to the counter and ordered two lattes and paid promptly.

‘I’ll get the next one’s’ Kristin blurted as they moved to the side of the counter to wait for their coffee. She hated being paid for and always made a point of trying to even the score.

‘Nah, don’t worry about it.’ He winked at her.

She smiled coyly and brought the conversation back to Jay.

‘So how did it even happen, you have to tell me everything.’

‘It kind of happened all at once,’ Liam started as he picked up a spare newspaper on an empty table and turned to the back page. Two days later and Hawthorn’s celebratory shots were still taking up the first five pages of the sports section. Liam made a sarcastic sad face to her and turned the paper back around so she wouldn’t have to see it.

‘We were all hanging down the back of the marquee at the bar that had the least people and we made best friends with the bartender so he was making us all kinds of shit.’ He laughed

reminiscing. ‘Anyway, we hadn’t seen her all night and she just appeared and she was all done up. She must have gone home after the game to change.’

Kristin cringed. The disapproving thoughts flashed across her mind. Who did that? You just go straight from the ground across the park to the party. It’s not even a hundred metres away. Why would you go all the way home and then back again?

‘Typical.’ She snorted.

‘Yeah, anyway,’ Liam continued. ‘She came up to us and said hello, I don’t think she was drunk, well not as drunk as we were anyway and we were laughing and being stupid and I think she didn’t want to hang around us anymore as she said she was going to get a drink and she walked off. I mean, we were right next to a bar so it was weird. Then Jay just followed her. It was like a signal that it was on.’

‘Lattes.’ The barista called their order and Liam collected their coffees. He handed hers to her.

‘Careful it’s hot.’ He warned.

‘Thanks.’ She took a sip and flinched. He was right.

‘So... then what?’ She blew on her coffee.

‘Well, he came back after a bit and we were like, ‘What the fuck mate?’ And he said that she told him she was into him and they should get out of there. Such a lie.’ Liam laughed.

Kristin believed him, Anna wouldn’t do that and Jay had his own way of storytelling.

‘We told him not to, that it would just make things weird at work but you know. He’s young, he wanted some, so he left.’

Kristin shook her head. ‘Oh my God, it’s going to be so weird today. Have you spoken to him since?’

‘Only a couple of text messages yesterday. He said she was pretty good but he’s probably lying and he was that drunk he wouldn’t know. She would be lazy I reckon.’

Kristin laughed. She was a lazy worker so that made sense to her.

‘You need to talk to him today and find out what’s going on!’ She whispered as they approached *The Agency* door and headed back in.

‘Definitely, I’ll get the scoop for you.’ He winked at her.

She giggled as she walked back inside, forgetting about the anxiety she'd felt about being teased for her team losing the Grand Final, someone else was in the firing line now.

Anna waltzed into the office at 9.27am with a takeaway coffee cup in hand and sunglasses on despite the overcast Melbourne day. Kristin pried on her out of the corner of her eye in detest for her nonchalant attitude to the hours of the working day. She had been there since 7.30am, a whole hour before she was officially on the clock, Anna was fifty-seven minutes late but she still found time to go down the street and buy a coffee. Probably spent another fifteen minutes reading the newspaper there too. Most likely the gossip columns though.

Kristin observed the boys as Anna walked in. Jay acted like he was buried in paperwork at his desk, pretending he didn't notice her. Pathetic. Liam stared her down with a sarcastic smile.

'Good Afternoon Anna!' Cocky bastard, she thought as she smiled at him. Anna pursed her lips and slowed her saunter into a calm stride with her head down until she sat at her desk. She removed her sunglasses. She looked awful.

Anna was rarely seen without layers of make-up that always tempted Kristin to run her finger down her cheek to see how deep the clay was. Today, she was naked and Kristin cringed. She watched Anna surreptitiously grab a cosmetics bag from her bottom desk drawer and make a

dash for the bathroom. She shook her head as she caught Liam's gaze from across the office. An email popped up on her computer screen:

'WTF?'

Kristin giggled to herself, this was so weird. Anna was always so put together, she seemed to value her appearance more than anything else although Kristin didn't know why. Anna wasn't that attractive, though she might be if she didn't try so hard.

Kristin looked up above her computer and shrugged her shoulders at Liam with a smile. She didn't like to respond to these comments using her work email account. She glanced over at the other boys now that Anna had retreated. Jay was whispering with Michael and Liam had pretended to print something so he had a reason to be standing near their cubicle to be part of the conversation. Kristin wanted to know what they were saying. She was contemplating printing something too when Brian emerged from his office.

'Kris, you got much on after lunch?'

'Umm,' She pretended to check her calendar, 'not too much, what's up?'

'Just pop in around 2pm. Okay?'

‘Sure.’ Kris replied nervously. She added the appointment to her calendar and wondered what he wanted.

Brian wasn’t usually so vague with meeting requests, there would always be an agenda promptly sent through via email with talking points to cover ahead of time so all meetings ran with disciplined efficiency. He hated long meetings that went nowhere and wasted his time, usually making his staff have most of the meetings without him, sensing their tendency to raise unrelated topics and dribble on. He liked order. And other people doing his work.

This meeting mustn’t be related to one of her current projects then. If he wanted an update or projected timeline for completion he would have been straight about it. Had she done something wrong, was she being reprimanded for something? Kristin racked her brain to think what she’d done.

The party.

She’d bailed on the party. She must have offended him and their clients by not showing up after already turning down their invitation to the box. She couldn’t believe she hadn’t thought of that. Of course *The Agency* would have wanted her there to schmooze the guys she’d worked with all year and put them in good stead for a contract renewal. All she’d been worried about was the gossip she was missing out on and the loss of her team like a damn child. She hadn’t even thought about the thing that was most important to her, her career.

She banged her head on her keyboard. She was an idiot for letting one stupid game of football turn her into an unprofessional, little girl.

Another email popped up on her screen from Liam.

‘*Fan Fatale* slams industry Brownlow Medal chain.’

‘Have you seen this?’ Liam had written. Kristin clicked on the link that took her to her least favourite website. One she visited too often, the sports scandal blog, *Fan Fatale*.

It wasn’t that she wanted to read the *Fan Fatale* blog, rather that she forced herself to. Kristin had convinced herself that she needed to be across the whole media landscape to do her job. She needed to see all the different points of view and this was one of the voices that she needed to be aware of. Despite how much she disagreed with everything this annoying blogger wrote.

The blog had remained anonymous, even though it had been around for over a year now. Some speculated that it was an unhappy WAG. A dumped girlfriend of a philandering football player who was sick of the macho attitudes of the football community. Some thought it was a female football journalist who wanted to write what she really thought but had been restricted by her editors. But it remained a mystery and no one really cared enough to actually try to figure it out. Posts were only put up occasionally when there were off-field issues to discuss, and it wasn’t that popular. Although sometimes one of the major newspapers picked up a *Fan Fatale* post, drawing attention leading to social media clicks. Which was annoying when it was

something negative about one of Kristin's favourite players and she wanted nothing more than for the hurtful words to disappear from cyber space.

This latest piece was another attack. Kristin's eyes rolled as she read it. It was all about a PowerPoint presentation that did the rounds every year after the Brownlow Medal that made fun of people's outfits and had other commentary about the night. No one really knew who made it each year but it always made its way around most people working in the football industry via email. It was called 'The Downlows' and Kristin looked forward to seeing it every year, she found it hilarious.

The blog was now accusing it of being demeaning to women and was lashing out at senior industry staffers who should know better than to circulate it. Kristin closed the article out of frustration. It was two days after the Grand Final and this woman was writing about a stupid email chain? Where was her analysis of the game? Not that Kristin would have read it in her delicate state but she was perplexed that this woman who claimed to be a sports writer couldn't even write about the biggest game of the year. Instead she was writing about something that didn't even matter.

She responded to Liam's email. 'Good grief. This woman does my head in.'

'lol'

‘Kristin – what are you doing for lunch?’ She popped her head up from her desk and saw Liam calling from the door to the kitchen. She could hardly believe it was lunch time already, she had wasted three hours stressing over her meeting with Brian. It had drawn her into a deepness of thought she rarely let herself enter due to the terror it provoked - what would she do without this job?

‘Umm, probably just grabbing something from the café downstairs.’ She responded clearing her throat, ‘What are you guys doing?’

‘We are heading to the sports bar down the street to watch the last bit of Sunday night NFL.’ He flashed a grin. ‘Want to come?’

‘Sure.’ Kristin thought she could use a cheeky beer with lunch after the crappy start to the day. She gathered her things and caught up with the boys. All five of them, Liam, Jay, Michael, Sam and Xavier lunched together at the same time every day without fail. The boys club.

‘Ham gave me the stink eye this morning.’ Michael snickered to the boys as Kristin jumped in the elevator just before the doors closed.

‘Yeah well, she saw you talking to Jay, obviously she thought you were saying shit about her.’ Liam giggled.

Kristin did a double take. ‘What did you call her?’ Unsure she heard Michael correctly.

‘Ham.’ Liam replied bluntly like it was an obvious reference and the laughter from the boys was thunderous.

‘What the fuck is ‘Ham’?’ She looked at them blankly, they eyed each other snickering like childish hyenas, evaluating if she was worthy enough to know their secret.

‘K’s one of the boys – it’s ok.’ Liam vouched for her and she took it as the compliment it was intended to be. She was one of them. It was the biggest slap on the back to be considered one of them and she was grateful that Liam kept voting her into the group. He was a good guy.

‘It’s Anna.’ Michael confirmed. ‘She hooked up with Jay at the Grand Final after party.’

‘Yeah I know the story...’ Kristin cut him off, ‘why do you call her Ham?’ She looked at them and they were all trying not to laugh.

‘She’s got legs like ham!’ Michael exploded. ‘The top part of her legs, they look like Christmas hams!’ He continued to cackle and they all burst out laughing.

Kristin was stunned. She quickly shook off the shock with a smile and rolled her eyes sarcastically.

‘Oh guys, that is so wrong!’

They kept laughing.

‘It’s true though! Look at them the next time she walks past Kris, it’s hilarious! We don’t know why the fuck she wears those short skirts for, it’s not doing her any favours!’ Xavier chimed in.

They kept laughing as they walked down the street, poking fun at Jay for ‘going for the bacon’. They almost fell over in hysterics as a Bertocchi branded truck happened to drive past with advertisements on its sides for honey glazed hams.

‘Oh the timing, the timing! So good!’ Michael screeched as the rest held their stomachs.

‘Look familiar Jay?’ Sam laughed as Jay went red, trying to laugh it off with the lads.

Kristin forced a smile and pretended to giggle a little to keep up appearances. She looked at images of the hams. Anna’s legs were like that, a little bit, she thought.

They moved on to talking American football. Kristin tried to surreptitiously feel her own thighs as they walked along, not the tightest in the office by far, she could definitely up the gym visits – did they say anything about her? About her body? Liam would tell her, surely. He was her mate, he told her all the office gossip. He'd keep her in the loop.

Liam sensed her uneasiness as they walked into the bar and took their seats.

'K, don't worry about Anna, she's a bitch, we just don't like what she's about you know?'

She forced a smile as a response - she wasn't quite sure what to say.

Liam leant in and whispered to her, 'I know you wouldn't, but just don't say anything to her about it yeah? – she'll turn it all around on us.'

She pulled back, the hot air of his whisper on her ear made her cringe.

'I don't care what you say about her.' She lied and made an excuse to move to the end of the table to see the game better.

After lunch and three pots of beer, Kristin tried her best to walk back into the office as calmly as possible, moving with exaggerated care. She wasn't drunk. She wasn't even tipsy, but the anxiety at the thought of her colleagues perceiving her as such was powerful.

Drinking at lunch wasn't a habit. But it was Monday after the Grand Final in which her team had lost and now she had this ambiguous meeting with Brian and she was just done. Kristin felt dirty, after hearing everything the guys were saying about Anna. Like she needed a shower.

Still, she wasn't worried about meeting with Brian now after a couple of drinks. Kristin was almost angry about it, if he was going to scold her then she was going to defend herself, make sure he knew just how much work she did for him. How valuable she was to the business. One missed party couldn't undo all that. He wouldn't notice a few beers anyway - the guys had had five, taking full advantage of the silent Monday after Grand Final is a Free Pass rule, but she knew better now than to try to keep up with them. She'd earned enough of a place with them that they didn't egg her on too much anymore. They had other targets in their sights now.

She slumped at her desk and flicked between the multiple webpages open on her computer. Mostly marketing blogs in case she had to flick to them quickly if Brian walked past her desk and she was sneaking a look at her Facebook page.

An email from Brian popped up on her computer and Kristin instantly brought up an article on the latest global marketing campaign from a sneaker company in a Pavlovian response.

She opened the email.

'Come see me.'

Kristin sighed and immediately caught a whiff of beer on her breath. She panicked. There was still a mouthful left of the dregs of her latte from the morning, she swished it around like mouthwash before she swallowed the cold, milky mess and cringed at herself. Cold coffee breath was better than beer breath.

Brian was sitting at the little meeting table in his office rather than behind his desk. He had some magazines and papers sprawled out in front of him.

‘Shut the door and take a seat Kris.’

Kristin surveyed his face, he didn’t look pissed off or angry. He looked like he was in a good mood. She felt immediately at ease.

‘Something’s come up that I think you could be great for.’

Her cheeks reddened. ‘Really?’ she responded, surprised at how girlish she sounded.

‘Dan Colpevole, “Vollie” has just signed on to be the spokesperson for *Country Coffee*, you know, that new organic stuff that is really cheap but meant to be good for the environment or some shit?’

‘Umm, yeah I’ve heard about them...’ Kristin lied.

‘Anyway, they want us to manage the brand campaign for them and work with Vollie on it. They want to do this whole narrative, tying his Italian heritage to their Italian style coffee, making it a real family-community-ish story and I thought you’d be perfect to run point on this, give you a chance to flex your writing muscle.’

‘Wow.’ Kristin was lost for words.

Vollie was a real up-and-comer. He’d had a great season. It was a shame his team hadn’t done better this year and had missed finals, but in the next few years he could lead their charge for a premiership. He also seemed like a nice kid, in all the interviews she’d seen of him, he was polite and funny, always thanking his mum. He had the knack for the media down already.

‘This sounds fantastic.’

‘I’m glad you’re excited. I know you’ve got your writing degree and that’s your passion and you know I want to get more into that space. This will be our first time working with a brand that isn’t a traditional sporting brand – it could mean a big step forward for our business. If this project goes well and we get a long-term contract out of it with these guys, we’ll have another discussion about what’s next for you here.’

Kristin glowed. ‘Thanks Brian, I’m going to put everything into this.’

‘It’s going to be a lot of work, and we’ll have the regular stuff going on at the same time that you will still have to manage, but I’m sure you’ll make it work. Get Liam to help out where he can, it will be good development for him as I know he wants your job someday.’ He grinned at her.

‘No problem, I can handle it.’

‘Great. I’ll send you though all the information *Country Coffee* sent me. We’re meeting with them on Thursday to go through initial concepts. If you can take a look and come up with some ideas by then we’ll be off to a good start.’

‘No worries, thanks Brian, I really appreciate this.’

‘You’re welcome, show me what you’ve got, hey?’ He smiled a sporadic smile and she almost wanted to laugh at him. His smile was so rarely seen that he looked like a sarcastic vampire, cold and calculating but also silly. She nodded and left his office.

Kristin sat down back at her desk invigorated and opened another webpage on her screen.
Country.Coffee.com.au.

THREE

8.10.15

The next few days Kristin averaged about four hours sleep a night.

Between her usual daily work and coming up with ideas about how to tell the *Country Coffee* story with Vollie as the hero, she was overstimulated, overexcited and overtired. She had deep dived into both the company's corporate history and previous ad campaigns as well as Vollie's career. It was beneficial to the project that she was dedicated to it like this, but she was mostly doing the extra work to avoid her usual online activities.

News sites, sports blogs and football forums were still a no-go zone for Kristin. Brown and gold were still the dominant colours of the news coverage and she feared she might vomit should she read the word 'three-peat' again. The research was a great distraction.

Usually Kristin wrote in her spare time. After consuming as much sports content as she could during the day at work, she'd reflect on it at night. Writing was a passion. She loved crafting articles and putting together pieces on sport, especially football. She wrote opinion pieces about her West Coast Eagles, anything from commentary on team selection to match reports. She wrote about that state of the game in general, what she thought about rule changes and how sport impacted her life. How sport gave her life, how it meant to her as a fan.

She'd sit in front of her computer and type away freely. She wasn't restricted to a corporate style guide. She didn't have the weight or anxiety on her that once she'd finished and sent her work to Brian, she'd soon receive a document back full of his changes marked in offensive red track-changes.

At night Kristin could write what she liked, how she liked and on what she liked. She could just write. She knew she was good. Everyone her whole life had complimented her on her writing. She was "The Writer".

Responsibility fell on her whenever there was a group birthday card to be written. She'd written her brother's best man speech for him to give at his best mate's wedding. She wrote letters for her father to send to their family overseas. These tasks were not difficult but were, she thought, a waste of her talent and time. But she always did them because it kept her treasured role as "The Writer" safe.

Brian also called her 'The Writer'. But when he did it, it felt different. It wasn't this glorious title that she had dreamed of having her whole life. When he said it, it was almost a way for him to lessen his responsibility for somethings and put more on her. It was, 'well you do this because you're "The Writer".' It was a responsibility he didn't want and a duty that had been put on her. But he was still in control of everything she wrote. He still had the final say over her words, her ideas. She did it dutifully, although sometimes reluctantly. Anything to keep her in the orbit of being classified as a writer in any capacity. If she could keep it going maybe someday it would be true.

Not everyone liked Kristin's West Coast match reports on the little sports fan forums she had found over the years. Not all the comments people wrote were positive. People were passionate about their football club, their team and favourite players, their game that they loved. Their feedback, however, was almost always constructive. If someone didn't like her analysis of a player's performance or her suggestions on how to attack the next opponents the following week, they offered their opinions. Sometimes she agreed and thanked them for the extra insight or felt comfortable challenging them back. It was never vicious. It was the kind of banter that she lived for. It was a conversation between fans. And she always felt on an equal playing field in the chat rooms. In control of the person she wanted to be. In.

Kristin always posted her articles under an alias. She never wanted *The Agency* to find out what she was writing just in case some of her commentary was ever 'off-brand' or in conflict with something they were working on with one of their clients. So she posted under the name 'Chris'. It was close enough to her name but gave her a cloak of masculinity that she was very comfortable wearing. Like a safety vest. She didn't want people to think she was a tacky female football blogger. She wanted people to take her seriously. She didn't want to be a '*Fan Fatale*' – she didn't want to be thought of as an annoying and opportunistic mystery blogger. A gutless shut-in who sat behind a veil of anonymity because she was too afraid to face the music but who was more than happy to throw Molotov cocktails into the sport and watch it burn.

Kristin wasn't like that. She wrote about the sport she loved. Pure football. No politics or clickbait. She just wanted to write and have her fellow football fans take her opinions seriously. All she wanted was respect for her knowledge of the game.

But now that was all on the backburner. Kristin couldn't bring herself to write about the Grand Final. It was too painful and she wasn't ready to occupy the football fan forum space just yet. She still hadn't read anything, not a newspaper, not any of her favourite sports blogs. She hadn't even been on Twitter. Maybe she'd just wait until trade period and by then it would be forgotten. Everyone would be focussed on the next season and be hopeful for what was ahead. The past would be the past.

For now, it was her real work to the forefront and brainstorming ideas for this campaign. And she was more than happy to bury her head in the sand and forget.

By Thursday morning Kristin was a cross-between an overly excited puppy and a nervous wreck. Everything would be different for her from this point. Things were going to change.

She'd gotten up early, made herself immaculate and ironed her favourite business shirt, a tailored crisp white number that she seldom wore in fear of staining it with food. She was too anxious to eat anyway so she thought she'd be ok.

She went over her notes and ideas, key stats from Vollie's career in case that came up. She was ready.

Kristin arrived at the office at ten-to-seven before any of the office lights had been switched on. She walked around *The Agency* illuminating the space from the multiple switches, dancing around and singing along to ‘Eye of the Tiger’ in her headphones. She hadn’t felt this enthusiastic about her job since she first started working there, when everything was shiny and new.

She listened to music while she went over her notes once again, made herself a coffee. A *Country Coffee* coffee. She’d gone out and bought their pre-ground filter beans from the supermarket in bulk for the office. Brian seemed impressed with this move, more so that she didn’t try to claim it on her expense account. It was a strategic decision. Kristin wanted him to know how committed she was. She wanted to try everything though, she was throwing everything at this one. This was her time.

The coffee wasn’t anything special. It tasted like what you would expect from any commercial, pre-packaged instant-style coffee, but the fact that it was ‘organic’ and ‘good for the environment’ and the company had a ‘community focus’ forced the Melbourne coffee snob in Kristin to see beyond its taste. To her it tasted like success, like she was finally going to get everything she wanted.

Kristin noticed some movement in the corner of her eye and saw that Tina had arrived. She was in her gym gear and looking too elegant in her post-workout sweatiness.

Some people just have it, Kristin thought to herself.

Tina grabbed her gym bag and moved through the office towards the showers when she noticed Kristin and made her way over.

‘Hello early bird!’

Kristin removed her headphones.

‘Morning Tina, you’re good getting an early workout in.’

‘Oh I try. At my age, everything starts to sag so I’m trying my best to keep it together!’

Kristin flashed a quick glance over her body. Not a single thing was sagging.

‘Why are you in so early, sweet?’

‘Big meeting today, just wanted to get myself prepared.’

‘Yes, I saw that in the calendar, that coffee company you bought all those beans from. Not bad if you ask me. I like their packaging, it’s very cute. What are they looking to use us for though? They’re not in sport?’ She took a swig from her expensive, brand name, insulated water bottle.

Kristin straightened herself up and engaged her managerial marketing voice that she had been rehearsing for the meeting.

‘They want us to produce a new brand campaign for them for the Melbourne market. They want to take on the coffee capital of Australia. But they want to connect their product to football and sport in general as in Melbourne, coffee and sport are what we are known for of course.’ Kristin babbled feeling confident and superior. ‘Pretty smart by them to go down that path. And they’ve just signed on Dan Colpevole as their brand ambassador so they want to use us because of our experience working with athletes. It’s going to be pretty cool to be able to work with him, he’s such an exciting player.’

Tina choked on her water and gave a little cough.

‘Dan Colpevole?’ she stuttered.

‘Yeah, are you ok? Didn’t think you were such a fan girl of his?’ Kristin smiled brightly as Tina cleared her throat and wiped underneath her eye.

‘Oh well, you know...’ She muttered timidly.

‘Don’t worry, he’s not in the meeting today so you don’t have to be nervous about him coming in. When I meet him though I’ll be sure to get you an autograph!’ Kristin winked at her.

Tina made another cough.

‘That water really did go down the wrong way.’ She paused. ‘Well, I better get my sweaty butt into the shower before anyone else sees me like this. Good luck with the meeting.’

‘Thanks Tina.’

She hurried off to the bathroom and Kristin watched after her. Tina was a weird one. She was so into designer clothing and make-up and how she looked, she was so professional and put-together but under it all she was just a footy fan like her. Kristin liked that about Tina, she was effortless in how she presented herself as a fan, she didn’t shout about her fandom from the rooftops or pretend she knew everything about the game. She kept to herself. She was classy.

Kristin returned to her notes, anxiously awaiting ten o’clock.

‘Ready?’

Brian towered over Kristin as she rapidly tried to shove her print-outs and piles of paper into her sleek, leather-bound compendium.

‘Yes, I’ve got everything.’

She saw two people in tidy business suits with briefcases speaking to Tina at reception and she put her game face on.

Veronica and Mark were the sales executives from *Country Coffee* and seemed like great people. They spent the first half of the meeting just chatting football and listening to Brian speak about all the great football work *The Agency* had done which they were equally enthralled and impressed by. Kristin just sat by his side nodding along and smiling. They tried to get a bit of gossip out of Brian about players who were difficult to deal with but he remained tight lipped and diplomatically brought the conversation back to Dan Colpevole.

‘Well I’ve never met Vollie but a great get by you guys. You must have a great relationship with his manager to be able to get him on board, I hear he’s very picky about what Dan does.’

‘Thanks Brian, I think he was just really engaged by what our core values as a company are all about so he was excited to be a part of it.’ Mark responded with their party line and Kristin smiled to herself cynically thinking of the dollars that came along with being ‘motivated by *Country Coffee*’s core values’.

‘That’s fantastic.’ Brian responded with a friendly tone of voice that Kristin wasn’t sure belonged to him.

He was so polished in these situations, he'd adopted this corporate persona that the clients were lapping up. Kristin wished she could take out a notepad to write down all of Brian's hand gestures and facial expressions for reference later. She felt like a fish out of water, trying to woo a client and sell them on an idea.

For a long time, she'd felt herself as above these kinds of meetings. She let the boys do the deals and schmooze the clients in the negotiations and she came along later to 'wow' them with her content creation. She was better than working the pitches and angles. Than selling herself. She had a journalism degree. Kristin felt smarter than most of the people here but she was starting to see maybe why she'd sat at the same desk all these years with the same job title. She hadn't been playing the game.

She wished she hadn't dismissed opportunities to come into meetings she thought weren't worth her time as she endeavoured to put her time into creating impressive campaigns that would see her succeed. If only she had paid more attention she might have learned what now seemed to be the lesson. No one remembered the person behind the work. They knew the person who charmed them in the meetings and business lunches. She needed to learn how to play the game if she wanted to write more than sales brochures for club membership campaigns and MC notes for corporate functions. She wished she hadn't been such an idiot. She needed to work harder in following the rules in this world if she wanted to achieve her goals. And this was her shot.

Kristin decided to jump in and make sure these people knew she was finally ready to play ball. ‘Would you like to hear some of our ideas?’ She flashed as big a smile as she could manage in a slightly awkward attempt to bring the focus to herself.

‘Yes, we’d love to hear what you’ve been thinking up and see if we can get this rolling pretty quickly. We’d usually take a few months to develop something like this but we want to push this out pre-Christmas.’

‘Absolutely. Sounds great Veronica.’ Kristin nodded chirpily, mimicking Brian’s meeting personality. ‘Well, I had a couple of thoughts based on the information you already sent through...’

‘Yes,’ Brian jumped in ‘I forwarded on all your briefs to Kris, I’d really like her to run point on this for you guys, she’s my best creative person so I know she’ll come up with something amazing for this campaign. Kris, why don’t you go through your ideas?’

‘Yes, we’d love to hear them!’ Veronica chirped.

Kristin looked at Brian quizzically. She felt like she’d just experienced déjà vu. The same thing had just been said twice, hadn’t it? It disarmed her that Brian felt the need to still speak when it was her turn. But she liked that he’d also complimented her, so she proceeded as if unperturbed.

‘Thanks Brian’. Kristin smiled politely and addressed Veronica and Mark.

‘I think what you’re going for is great. Positioning an Earth conscious product that is affordable and already has a great design is an excellent starting point for a branding campaign, as we already know what you’re about. My first idea was to create something that brings that message closer to home on a community level, like you mentioned. You want your product to become a staple of the family and the community, like local footy is – this isn’t just another organic product for urban hipsters, it’s easily accessible for everyone...’

Mark and Veronica snickered at the ‘urban hipsters’ line.

‘Absolutely, that’s exactly what we want!’ Veronica nodded enthusiastically.

‘Great!’ Brian interjected ‘That’s why I briefed Kristin about your company’s background. I knew once she had a sense of your brand story, she would knock this out of the park.’

Kristin blinked. Brian hadn’t briefed her. He’d forwarded twenty emails that she had to read through herself and put everything together alone. She did her own research. She’d bought the crappy coffee with her own money. Maybe this was all part of the corporate back-and-forth conversation that just made everyone sound better at their jobs than they actually were? She made more mental notes about how to talk in meetings and proceeded.

‘Umm’. Kristin tried to regain her focus. ‘I thought how we could do this was to bring more women into the campaign, I’ve done a lot of research into the demographics of supermarket coffee shoppers and it’s heavily skewed towards women – you’ve got mothers both single and married, and young, career-driven women who need to have a constant supply of coffee in the home. So with Vollie as the face of the brand, I think he’ll already engage male audiences and general footy fans, but if we can bring more women into the narrative of the campaign, we’ll engage with another big part of the market.’ Kristin followed Mark and Veronica’s eyes, they seemed to be connecting with her now. Her confidence returned.

‘Which is a big plus if you’re looking to go live leading up to Christmas when a majority of women will be stocking up on everything they need over the holiday period.’

‘Yes, imagine all those mums shopping and thinking that they are going to need all the caffeine they can get to deal with all the kids, in-laws and distant relatives over Christmas!’ Brian joked causing the two executives to giggle.

‘Oh God yes!’ Mark laughed. ‘My wife drinks four cups a day when the kids are on school holidays – she can’t handle it!’

‘Well there’s your target market!’ Brian laughed his ‘meeting’ laugh. Kristin tried to play along and imitate the condescending chuckles of the group though she was becoming increasingly annoyed with his interjections and off-hand comments. This was her moment.

‘This all sounds fantastic Brian.’ Mark commented. Kristin flinched at the omission of her name, though she quickly convinced herself that it didn’t matter.

‘We’d love to get a thirty-second ad on TV in November to get a piece of that pie. Do you think you could write up a treatment for an ad that addresses all this in the next few days and send it through for us to sign off to go into production?’

‘No problem at all. I’ll have it to you by Monday.’ Brian responded and Kristin smiled meekly at Mark and Veronica. She suddenly felt invisible again.

‘Excellent. We look forward to seeing what you come up with but we’re very excited by this approach. We hadn’t even thought of focussing on the female shopper with Vollie – we just thought he’d appeal to men, fantastic idea.’

‘Well some women like footy too I guess!’ Brian grinned charmingly.

‘Who knew!’ Mark laughed sarcastically. Now Kristin felt uncomfortable. They were joking, weren’t they? They knew women liked football, they were being sarcastic. Making fun of themselves that they forgot that fact for a second. Kristin wondered if Veronica was a football fan at all, she probably wasn’t if she forgot that women could be fans too. She probably didn’t even know who Vollie was when her company signed him on.

Mark gathered his notebook, motioning that the meeting was done. They all followed suit collecting their belongings.

‘Well the data doesn’t lie so we know you’re going to get you a good return on this.’ Brian added.

Kristin raised her brow impulsively then corrected herself. Brian didn’t know the data. She’d done all that work by herself too and hadn’t gone through it with him. He hadn’t even asked to see it, this was meant to be all her.

‘Excellent. Could you send your demographic report over to us so our business analysts can take a look?’ Mark asked Brian as he shook his hand.

‘Absolutely. Kristin, can you send that through asap?’ She reacted instantly at the mention of her name.

‘Of course, I will email it as soon as I go back to my desk.’ She smiled in complicity.

‘Good girl.’ Mark smiled at her.

Brian ushered them out of the meeting room and escorted them through the office back to the reception area.

‘Well thanks for that Brian, we’re very excited to be working with you and your team.’ Mark shook Brian’s hand.

‘Yes, us too, thanks for connecting with us, we’re going to make something pretty spectacular for you.’

The men lingered on their handshake while Kristin hovered awkwardly.

‘It was lovely to meet you Kristin!’ Veronica went in for the air-kiss on the cheek and Kristin was grateful she knew the etiquette for this situation as she was flying blind.

‘You too!’ she air-kissed back and then Mark stepped in to also plant one on her.

‘Yes, great to meet you, looking forward to working with you.’

Brian didn’t try to kiss Veronica, rather flashed a charming smile at her from across the group and let that do the job.

‘Thanks again for coming in and we’ll be in touch soon.’ Brian waved them off and Kristin stood back smiling like an idiot.

‘That went very well. Well done Kris.’

She turned to face him and he looked proud. His recognition in her work gave her a rare sense of achievement. For a moment she felt blissfully happy.

‘Thanks Brian, thanks so much again for this opportunity.’

‘No problem. Now if you can send me all your research and notes, I will flick them across to the guys and you can get working on the ad.’

‘Will do. Thanks Brian.’

FOUR

10.10.15

It had been a long Saturday. Despite it being the weekend and the first day Kristin was meant to have had off in weeks after a busy finals series, she was sat at her tiny desk in her small inner-city apartment writing and re-writing the script for the *Country Coffee* TV ad.

The words from the meeting rang through her mind as she tried to come up with a concept that rang true to her pitch of focussing on women, the community and something that made Vollie the hero.

She'd written some rubbish to begin with. Her first idea was to put a mother in the supermarket with her kids annoying her while she tried to choose the best coffee. She picks up *Country Coffee* then her fighting kids are knocking each other around and bump her, she accidentally throws the packet in the air. Vollie who is nearby jumps into action and takes a specky over the trolley to save the coffee from hitting the floor. The tag line was going to be 'This coffee is worth those extra 1 one-percenters'. Or 'This coffee is too good to spill the beans'. But she knew it was unoriginal as well as tacky. A mum in a supermarket with annoying kids? Women were always portrayed like this, as the stressed-out mothers overwhelmed by simple things like shopping. Even though her data told her that was exactly her demographic, she was bored by it. It didn't represent her and so many women that she knew. She didn't want to make a boring ad. Any advertising agency could do that. She wasn't just a copywriter employed

by an advertising agency. She was a sports writer and she could do better. She wanted to create a football narrative, something different and creative and cool. She wanted to show that she could do something special. She wasn't just a copywriter who wrote advertising material. She was a proper writer.

Kristin trawled through google for inspiration but she didn't really know what she was looking for. She searched through Vollie's pages a few times, she kept getting distracted by reading analysis pieces on his season then she had to remember that she wasn't doing her usual Saturday morning reading of news from the football world. She searched 'community football' and made some notes about recent initiatives some small country football clubs from rural areas had done to raise money which were nice stories. She found some human-interest stories about different people who had been involved in football their whole lives. A video she found about a property steward at one club who had volunteered there for sixty-years because he loved his team so much and that it had given him reason to go on after his wife had passed away had made her cry. Football really was something that made people's lives complete.

Kristin kept going. She searched, 'women, football' almost as a bit of a joke. She thought it would be a dead end and she'd only find a bunch of trashy pieces on WAGS and fashion. She wasn't going to get the golden idea she was after in how to represent women in different way. But she did. She found something completely unexpected. She found articles written about women playing the game. Something clicked for her.

The AFL CEO had announced earlier that year that he was bringing forward the date for a national women's football league to be established from 2017. It was in the original plans to kick-off in 2020 but he'd made a bold statement about how the AFL wanted to invest more in women. She'd forgotten all about it. She was at the luncheon when it was announced. The 'Women in Industry' lunch that Brian bought a table at every year to tick a box and give the women in the office something to be happy about. Liam and the boys always complained that they didn't get to go and it was sexist to just take women to a corporate event. She agreed. Wasn't equality the whole point? Why did they need to have a women's lunch?

Kristin dreaded it every year. Her focus for the event was not to be stuck sat next to Anna and that she drunk enough champagne to make the so-called inspirational speeches tolerable. She always wished the boys were there so they could make fun of everyone and laugh together, but she always sat there bored and alone, rifling through the gift bag to see if there was anything of value. One year they had included a one kilogram box of washing powder and everyone lost their mind. Giving away washing powder at an event predominantly attended by women? How dare they? But Kristin loved it. It saved her buying it and it was something she could actually use.

Kristin read through the articles covering the announcement and wished she had retained the information from the lunch so she could have used it in the meeting. There could be six clubs coming into a women's league in 2017 and now they needed to figure out which clubs would get a women's team. She wondered if West Coast would get one and then she thought that she didn't really care that much about it. Her true love was the boys, but anything else was a bonus she figured. She glanced through more articles. Apparently there was a VWFL, the Victorian

Women's Football League. She'd had a vague awareness that women were playing footy but no idea how many. The VWFL clubs had heaps of women involved, and junior girls' teams too. It was pretty amazing how popular it was, why hadn't she known anything about it?

Kristin made notes of the key phrases she saw keep coming up on the notepad by her laptop. 'Women', 'future of footy', 'the future is female', 'equality in sport', 'women's footy finally', and 'you can't be what you can't see.'

This was it. She could craft some of this narrative into the campaign. This could be something ground breaking. *Country Coffee* could be the first company to portray female football in an advertising campaign in a positive way. And it would tick all the boxes. Women, community, suburban footy. Vollie would seamlessly be a part of it, showing his support, as an elite male footballer, hitting the other demographics in men and generic football fans. *Country Coffee* would be seen as progressive and supporting Australia's sporting women. Kristin was shaking with excitement as she kept scribbling all her ideas down. They were flowing like water from a faucet. This was the inspiration she had been looking for. The thing that she needed to make this campaign great and an example of what she could do as a content creator. A writer. A real writer.

Kristin chuckled to herself as she continued to pull her thoughts together on the page. Who would have thought that women's football could be so inspiring?

Kristin awoke abruptly to her phone ringing, The West Coast Eagles theme song accosting her eardrums and ripping her from the deep comfort of dreaming. She glanced at the time glowing in green digits on her clock radio. 2.14am. She picked up her phone with Liam's name emblazoned across the screen.

'What are you doing?' She murmured tiredly. The background noise was vibrating loudly and she could feel the pulse of the bass from the terrible nightclub music through the phone into her body. A classic Liam drunk dial.

'Kriiiiiiiiiistiiiiiiiin!!!' He shouted down the phone. 'What are YOU doing?'

'Sleeping you idiot – it's 2am!' She rubbed her eyes.

'It's early! You should be out with us! We're in the city, get your arse down here!' He slurred.

'I don't think so, I'm going back to sleep – I can barely hear you. It's too loud.'

'We're all here – all of the boys! You should be here!'

She was hurt instantly and felt embarrassed to be alone in bed.

They were all friends at work, they were a group. She knew they did things without her all the time, she just had to suck it up that they wanted to do ‘boys only things’ every now and then. It was ok, she supposed, that they did that. But she hated missing out.

‘Well you guys didn’t tell me you were going out.’ She tried to play it cool.

‘It’s boys’ night out!’ Liam retorted predictably. ‘We’re celebrating the season being over!’

There was an awkward pause.

‘But you’re one of the boys, you should be here!’ He corrected himself.

Well why the fuck didn’t you invite me, Kristin wanted to yell. But Liam was drunk and this conversation was pointless.

‘There are so many guys out too – it’s like, where are all the chicks? It’s a fucking sausage fest.’ He started laughing. ‘You should come and I can be your wingman! You could score so easily here Kristin!’ He laughed at himself. Unsure whether he was making a joke at her expense, Kristin ignored him.

‘I’m going back to sleep now!’

‘Seriously Kristin, how are you single?’ He spat down the line. ‘I don’t get it. You’re so cool. You love sport. Why are you single? You’re like the perfect girl.’

Kristin was silent.

Liam did this all the time. He would have a few drinks and tell her these things. About how great she was and how she should be married by now because she was such a catch. She hated it. When he asked why she was single she felt like she had failed something. Like everything she had done in her life so far meant nothing. And she didn’t know why she was alone. She hadn’t chosen to be. She wanted to be with someone. She wondered if Liam liked her. Was he telling her this because deep-down he had some feelings for her? She didn’t think so; he had this apparent girlfriend and despite not having met her, she could tell by their Facebook photos that she was a certain kind of girl. Kristin wasn’t peroxide blonde with a spray tan and size-six body. Liam would never go for her, and she didn’t want him to either. He played with her too much.

‘I’m going to give your number out to some guys here!’

‘No you fucking won’t!’ She shouted.

Liam was cackling away. ‘Don’t you trust my judgement? I’ll find a good one I promise! Maybe a Hawthorn supporter!’

‘Stop it Liam, you’re not funny’. He started drunkenly singing the Hawthorn theme song down the line to her.

‘I’m going now!’ She yelled over the top of his dribble. ‘I’ll see you Monday.’

‘Byeeeeeee Kriiiiiiiiiistiiiiiiin!’

She hung up and placed her phone back on her bedside table just as a text message came through.

‘Srsly – your the best chick. I wish all girls were like you xoxo’

She stared at the message for a long time. What did something like that even mean? And why would he write that to her? He wasn’t interested in her like that, she was positive of it. Maybe he was just trying to make her feel good about herself, he was just being nice. But why did he add the ‘xoxo’? That was unlike him. But he was drunk. This didn’t mean anything.

Kristin put her phone on silent and went back to sleep dreaming of the boyfriend she’d land when she became a success in the football industry and men would be begging her to be with them.

FIVE

19.10.15

‘Have you seen this?’

Brian slammed the newspaper on Kristin’s desk, shaking her concentration from her Facebook page. She hadn’t even sensed his approach and felt instantly guilty about her online activity, wishing she had an international sports marketing article open on her screen.

It was before 8am on Monday morning and she was barely awake, still waiting for the grainy, *Country Coffee* instant espresso to kick in. Kristin hesitated meeting Brian’s eyes and searched his aggressively stoic expression for clues.

She fumbled the newspaper nervously to see what he was talking about. She hadn’t picked up a paper since the Grand Final and she’d been so preoccupied with the campaign that it had been very convenient to avoid any football news. She’d shifted her focus to American sport coverage to get her sports media fix, which made her feel less childish about disengaging with Aussie Rules for a moment. She tried not to think about the Grand Final anymore, but it still hurt. Kristin wanted to at least be proud her team had kept fighting till the end. But they’d been awful. They’d thrown it away. Let her down. Broke her heart.

Kristin knew it was important to be on top of the latest sports news, especially AFL news but she thought she had at least a couple of weeks of reprieve after the Grand Final. The trade

period was starting soon but her work didn't have too much to do with that. There was a natural lull at the end of the season while Melbourne geared up for the Spring Racing Carnival that was supposed to buy her some time to heal. And she was working hard on this campaign. After dedicating the weekend to writing up the treatment and script to the TV ad, Kristin had walked into the office that morning thinking she'd nailed it. Brian was meant to come over to her desk and pat her on the back, not throw a newspaper in her face. She searched the page in front of her for what she was meant to have already known.

'Hawthorn players in alleged sexual assault'

'Oh my God.' She almost whispered.

'I just emailed you the *Fan Fatale* piece too – she's having a field day with it. One of the papers has bought her piece it looks like and they've re-published on their site. It's spreading like wildfire on social.'

She moved to her screen and clicked on the link he'd sent her. Kristin looked back up but Brian had already gone back to his office to answer a phone call.

The article made her sick. Two Hawthorn players had allegedly raped a woman in a taxi not even a week after their Grand Final win. But it wasn't the woman who she felt sick for.

Kristin was instantly outraged that these players were so arrogant that they thought their club could beat her team to achieve a Grand Final three-peat and then do something like this to top it off.

Because of the timing and nature of this story, *Fan Fatale*'s article was starting to get some traction. There wasn't much football press at the moment before the trade news peaked so now people were arguing about elite athletes and entitlement, the same commentary that always accompanied an AFL sex scandal. Kristin felt a sense of relief that *The Agency* did not represent any of these guys, or anyone at the club. She could imagine the press releases being written by their media managers, the strategies on how to communicate with their members and fans, the calls to lawyers, the re-branding of campaigns with sponsors. It would be a nightmare when they should be living the dream.

Kristin smiled in devilish schadenfreude. The thugs that beat her boys so mercilessly were now in trouble, their victory marred by scandal. She didn't bother reading the rest of the article. She didn't care.

Brian re-emerged from his office.

'Caught up now?' He asked her flatly.

'Um, yes - terrible. Just awful.' She fumbled as she folded the newspaper back.

‘I can’t believe you didn’t see it over the weekend - I was waiting for you to text me about it.’ He glowered at her.

‘Sorry, I just, I’ve kept away from the news after the loss...’ She trailed off, she didn’t mean to admit that to him and wished she’d thought of a more professional excuse. Like that she was working all weekend on her own time, which wasn’t even an excuse but the truth. Why didn’t she just say that? She knew how ridiculous and immature she sounded.

‘You’re just lucky we have no connection with it. Imagine if this was Vollie. We’d be responsible to work with the brand on damage control. What if we had to deal with a scandal like this and you had no idea about it. We always need to be prepared.’ He gathered the ill-folded paper from her desk and looked down at her.

‘Kris, this is what I was talking about when I gave you *Country Coffee*. If you want to do more writing and help me add more of a content creation component to this business you need to be across everything. Do you think news journos ‘switch –off’ because they don’t like the news they’re reading?’

Kristin forced herself to meet his eyes and nodded sheepishly. ‘Yes, I know.’

She knew how pathetic she must have appeared to Brian in that moment, and feared that he might be regretting putting his faith in her.

‘I know you know. I know you want more responsibility.’ He waved his hand over her cubicle. ‘You just need to help me help you.’

‘Yes, Brian, thank you. I won’t let it happen again.’

‘And don’t be such a sook. Your team were shithouse, you deserved to lose. Get over it.’

Brian walked back into his office and closed the door. Kristin looked at the stapler on her desk and wondered if she threw it hard enough would it shatter the glass surrounding him. He just didn’t get it. He was a St Kilda supporter.

Kristin forced herself to read the rest of the article now after being scolded by Brian and thanked her lucky stars that it was so early and none of the guys were in yet. She couldn’t handle having them see Brian address her like that. Like she was some sort of irresponsible little girl. She never got in trouble. She always did the right thing.

The article was terribly written. Overly dramatic. Beyond hyperbolic. Mixed metaphors all over the place. It was also careless. *Fan Fatale* was pretty close to naming the players, you could figure out who they were if you had half a footy brain and trolled the footy blogs. Kristin thought that was highly unethical. It was the first thing she’d learnt in her crime reporting class in university. Never name names.

Thinking back to her uni assignments, Kristin knew that she could've written something better. How did writing like this get published, promoted and praised? She continued reading below the article, going through comments from *Fan Fatale*'s adoring feminist fans. None of them mentioned anything about football. They were all going on and on about the issues of sexism in elite sport and how 'brave' *Fan Fatale* was for continuing to expose this terrible epidemic. All the comments were from women. They probably didn't even go to the football to know what they were talking about.

Brian's words echoed through her mind. Was she really going to have the opportunity to write more here at *The Agency*? What did that mean? Would he finally change her job title change to 'writer'. That was her dream. She just wanted to tell people that she was a writer. Now she had to frantically preface her title with the fact her primary role was to write. 'Oh, I'm an account manager at a sports marketing agency but I am mostly a writer... of copy... and marketing material... for our clients...'

Kristin was almost ashamed of her current job title. It wasn't clear enough about what she did. She sounded like a glorified secretary who literally managed accounts or an actual accountant. Yes, Kristin looked after the needs of clients. But she wrote and designed campaigns. She was creative and clever. Liam's title was 'Strategic Relationships Coordinator'. It didn't mean anything but it sounded so much better than hers. It even sounded senior to her, despite her having been at *The Agency* three years longer.

That would all change if Kristin could be ‘Senior Content Writer’. Or something equally impressive that had the word ‘writer’ in it. She’d craft decent articles, get published properly on a decent and respected platform, and blow that bitchy blog away.

What she would do just to get a by-line on an article...

A takeaway coffee cup magically appeared on Kristin’s desk. She looked up at Liam’s cheeky grin flashing at her.

‘Good morning Miss. Regular Latte!’

‘Good morning Mr. Regular Latte Deliverer.’ She flashed a grateful grin back at him. ‘I thought maybe you might have pulled a long weekend after how you sounded Saturday night – well technically Sunday morning!’ Kristin giggled falsely. She still felt the sting of not being included in the boys’ Saturday night antics but was also flattered that Liam had been thoughtful enough to bring her a coffee. She was also happy to wash down the *Country Coffee* with something decent.

‘Yeah I thought about it! It was a massive night!’ He laughed sipping from his latte.

‘Thanks for the invite!’ She sniggered sarcastically, wondering if Liam remembered calling her, or what he said. She doubted it.

‘You wouldn’t have wanted to come. We ended up down King St. at the ‘rippers. You would have hated it. No place for a classy girl like you.’ He winked and Kristin resisted the urge to raise her eyebrows.

Her mind flashed back to when Liam first started working at *The Agency*. He hadn’t known her for more than a month but they had gotten along very well, very quickly. Kristin liked his humour, and he’d become immediate mates with the other guys there. He fell seamlessly into the group dynamics and one Friday night they all went to the pub together for after work drinks. He’d texted some of his colleagues from his previous job. A sports clothing brand he had worked in the sales team for. He told Kristin that she was perfect for this guy he used to work with, Tom. He was in marketing and loved journalism, he read sports books. He was the right man for her and it was the first time he’d told her what a perfect girl he thought she was. And how she was single was beyond him. A girl who not only liked sport, but worked in it and lived and breathed it and could have a beer with the boys. She blushed and she believed him. Why was she still single?

Tom arrived with a couple of others. They had a few beers and they talked. He was cute and he was definitely well read. They listed their favourite sports books. He was a fan of ‘Paper Lion’ by George Plimpton and she could feel her heart melt. She told him how much she loved ‘Friday Night Lights’. The book before it was a popular film then a popular TV show. She thought there was definite potential between them. He was funny and sweet and kept offering to buy her beers.

Liam then decided the night was getting boring and needed some spicing up, but most of the other boys were playing in their local footy leagues in the morning and needed to head home. It was just Liam, Tom and her remaining.

‘Let’s take this party around the corner hey?’ He beamed and Kristin eyed him confused.

‘To where?’ She asked innocently, not realising they were drinking on the corner of King St., Melbourne’s top destination for strip clubs.

‘Which one?’ Tom asked laughing. Kristin still didn’t get it.

‘Does it matter?’ The boys both laughed and Kristin’s eyes darted between the two of them confused. She followed them blindly down the street until she realised where she was going.

‘Seriously?’ She exclaimed out the front of the club, trying to play off her disapproval with good humour.

‘C’mon Kristin, it will be funny! And girls always drink for free so you’ll have the best time!’ Liam patted her on the back and pushed her along the line to the bouncer to check her ID.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll look after you.’ Tom whispered in her ear. She smiled at him and thought, why not. It could be fun. She’d never been to a strip club before.

They entered the foggy room full of men sitting in sticky leather booths as the women moved seductively through the crowd in their sequin covered underwear. Kristin instinctively felt her own arms and thighs as she looked at the slim and toned women working the room. She was gazing at them as much as the men were, at their beauty and their bodies. She wished she was wearing a bigger coat to cover hers. Liam had slipped over to the bar and had left her and Tom alone.

‘This is a bit weird, isn’t it?’ He smiled at her.

She nodded, ‘Yeah, it is!’ She tried to smile widely to hide her discomfort.

‘Don’t worry about it. The only girl I’m looking at in here is you.’ He leant in and kissed her. A half-drunk, uncomfortable kiss that she accepted as she was so unsure of what to do in this situation. Who makes out with a stranger at a strip club? But he liked George Plimpton so it was ok. He wasn’t a random sleaze who was hanging out at the strip club. They had come here for a laugh, as something funny to do on a Friday night. They weren’t here in the same way all these other gross men were.

Liam bounded over to them with beers.

‘I knew you two would hit it off!’ He laughed and Kristin blushed. ‘Cheers to you guys!’ He toasted as she and Tom awkwardly clinked their beer bottles and sipped self-consciously.

A stripper approached their little group and Kristin was filled with terror. What did she want? She tapped Liam on the shoulder and whispered in his ear. He nodded and smiled.

‘We’re on guys!’

Tom and Kristin looked at each other.

‘What do you mean?’ Kristin asked fearfully.

‘I bought us a dance! Come on!’ He followed the dancer and Kristin took a deep breath.

‘Come on, it will be fun.’ Tom took her hand and kissed it gently before leading her after Liam and into a room next to the bar.

The woman had set up three chairs all facing each other in a triangle and they each sat down.

The next fifteen minutes Kristin was frozen.

She had no idea what to do, where to look as the woman weaved herself among them. She tried to sneak looks at how the boys were responding. She hoped they weren’t looking at her to see how she was responding. The woman touched them all, played with them and when she stroked Kristin’s hair she was paralysed. Her instincts were in conflict with each other. She almost wanted to reciprocate the touching because it felt weird to be that intimate with someone

and not do anything back. But all she could think of was every TV show or movie that had a scene in a strip club where if someone touched a dancer they were wrestled to the ground by a burly bouncer. The woman tonight hadn't told them not to touch her, maybe it was implied. She didn't know the rules. But she didn't want the woman to think she was doing a bad job. She wanted to be polite but she didn't know how.

After the woman finished and walked them back into the main room, the boys burst out laughing.

'That was hilarious.' They cackled and Kristin forced a smile.

'Kristin, you're the best.' Liam pounced on her and gave her a bear hug. 'You're the only girl I could ever take to the 'rippers! You're a legend! Didn't I tell ya mate?' He patted Tom on the back.

'Yeah, she's pretty cool.' He winked at her and suddenly she saw the whole night in a new light. She was cool. She was the coolest girl she knew.

They left the club and Tom asked for her number. She gave it and jumped in cab headed home. He texted her right away saying how he regretted not jumping in her taxi, she responded, 'another time.' But she never heard from him again.

Kristin took a sip from her coffee and assessed Liam's sly face. Did he not remember that night? Or maybe he did and he had only called her 'cool' to make her feel better at the time. Maybe he did see how awkward she was and she'd actually failed the 'cool' test. Maybe that was why Tom never called.

'Well, thanks for protecting me from that.' She smiled politely.

'Anytime!' he winked. 'We'll do a night out again soon with everyone, that will be a much classier affair.'

'Sounds good.'

'So, what else is news? What's the fallout from this Hawthorn stuff?' Kristin blinked at him. How was he across this but she wasn't?

'Yeah, it's pretty bad but I guess it's all up to the police now, it's all just allegations at the moment.' She bluffed pretending she was all over the news.

'Naughty, naughty boys.' Liam shook his head.

'Yeah, it's awful.' Kristin nodded along in sympathy for the woman, she supposed. She must be feeling pretty bad, if she was telling the truth.

‘What amateurs,’ he shook his head, ‘in a fucking taxi? Don’t they know they have cameras in those things? What idiots.’ He scoffed.

Kristin pursed her lips trying to understand what he meant. Did he feel bad for the players just because they had got caught? She shook it off of her, it was all hearsay anyway, this story didn’t matter until there was evidence.

‘Yeah.’ Was all she could manage to reply as he left her to her work. She looked at her computer screen at her beautiful script she had worked on all weekend while the boys were at the strippers and the Hawthorn players were “allegedly” doing whatever it was they “allegedly” did. She was so proud of it and was so excited for Brian to see it but somehow now, in the space of fifteen minutes she’d gone from feeling on top of the world with her work to feeling ashamed and rejected and not good enough.

SIX

26.10.15

He walked in like he was no one.

Not the rising star that he was, still a boy and nervous about where he should be. Out of place and awkward with his hands now that they weren't caressing a football. He was more akin to a work experience kid than a professional footballer and Kristin had to force herself to remember that he was only twenty-one, just a few years younger than her.

She had always thought of footballers as bigger, older. As more than what they were. It was in part because of their size and appearance. It was so hard to believe sometimes that kids in their early twenties had achieved so much. They were in the papers every day, televised every weekend and spoken about like what they did, or didn't do, contributed to the fate of the world. There was so much grandeur attributed to these players, it was so unbelievable to situate them back to being young boys recently out of high-school when she saw them in person.

Dan Colpevole looked like he should still be in high school in real life. Kristin hadn't ever paid that much attention to his physical features before but he looked younger than her little brother who had just turned twenty. He was skinny, with patchy skin and a naiveté in his eyes

that made her feel instantly protective of him. Like people might take advantage of him and she wanted to step in and be the person to protect him from the big bad world. She could help him.

Kristin was holding court with Tina and a couple of the crew members, giving them instructions and running through the script to cover everything they needed to get done that day. She finally felt like a boss. She'd bought a new power suit that was too hot for the warm November weather and much too expensive for her salary. But it made her feel invincible. She needed a costume for the day to convey that this was all hers. She was in charge and she was going to get used to that feeling.

Brian had instilled the confidence she'd needed going into the day of the shoot. He was impressed with her concept and the script she'd written. He'd said he was 'surprised' that she could write a script. She blushed taking it for a compliment. She shyly told him that she'd taken a semester of writing for film and TV for fun during her degree but she never thought what she'd learned would ever come in handy for her working in sport. He laughed sarcastically at her. He'd often made subtle remarks about her doing a journalism degree instead of sports business. Like she had made a big mistake.

He'd passed it on to Mark and Veronica and they were equally impressed. The email they wrote back to Brian which he then forwarded onto her had a tone of excitement to it. They were thrilled to claim the status of the first major brand to outwardly endorse women's football in the lead up to the new competition. This would open up so much more of the market for them as well as for the other brands they had under their parent company's umbrella. They felt that *The*

Agency had given them a golden opportunity and there were already a few subtle mentions in the email about future collaboration which was music to Brian's business ears.

Kristin was focussed on the task at hand. She needed to pull together an amazing video for this campaign. She was nervous about how the day would pan out but she also knew she had it in the bag. She knew she'd created something great.

Brian was behind her, the clients loved what she had come up with. She had presented the concept to the entire office earlier in the week and everyone had cheered and applauded her. She couldn't stop smiling all week after that moment. She didn't care about those idiot Hawthorn players, that stupid blog and she finally pushed the Grand Final loss out of her mind. This was her Grand Final. She was about to show everyone just how much more she was than her current job title and how much more she could do and things were going to change for her. Her time was now. She'd paid her dues, worked her way up and now she was ready to move into the next phase of her career. All the over time, the working weekends, the extra unpaid projects she took on for 'professional development' were about to pay dividends.

Dan's presence was only brought to her attention when she noticed Tina's upper body stiffen in the corner of her eye and she followed her petrified gaze to see him standing at the edge of the filming set looking lost. She winked cheekily at Tina.

'Come on, I'll introduce us both to Dan. You can be his little minder today if you like!'

‘No.’ Tina looked terrified at herself for responding so forcefully. She tried to cover her impulsive reaction.

‘That’s okay, I don’t need to meet him, I’ve got so many other things to look after.’ She looked like she’d seen a ghost. She was usually so composed and convivial, it was a strange sight for Kristin to see her so shaken. Her bright lipped smile was always switched on upwards but today her mouth was a straight line of indifference. Kristin was stunned by her forcefulness, she was always so agreeable. She could barely manage an, ‘ok’ as a response before Tina bolted off to help someone set up the props on the set.

Wiping off a wrinkle of confusion from her face, Kristin dashed over to Dan quickly but calmly. In control and professional. She wanted him to feel comfortable and relaxed for the shoot but also ensure he knew that he could trust her, she was there to look after him. She was on his team, there to make him look good.

‘Dan! Hi. I’m Kristin.’ She shook his hand directly.

‘Oh hi, nice to meet you.’ He shook her hand back politely and gave a nervous smile.

‘It’s so great to meet you.’ She smiled widely. ‘I’m looking after this whole thing today so if you need anything, let me know, and hopefully we’ll get your part done nice and quick so you’re not held up too much. I’m sure you’ve got other things you’d rather be doing than filming an ad!’ She flicked her hair unconsciously and then realising it, wished she could undo it. Flicking

your hair was a girly, annoying thing to do. Something Anna would do trying to be flirty. She had to get on top of this stuff. She smiled hoping he didn't think she was another annoying sports marketing woman.

'That's fine. I'm happy to do whatever you need.'

Kristin was impressed. In most of her past experience working with athletes, they had been rude, always complaining about how long things took, constantly on their phones and not paying attention to directions. It was like pulling teeth to get them to deliver the simplest line or just stand still for a few moments while the photographer adjusted something. She'd braced herself for the same thing with Vollie but she now had a good feeling about him.

Dan was polite and professional. It was going to be perfect. She ushered him to the set and she set herself back on task at nailing her first national ad campaign featuring a football superstar. Tina had scurried off focused on a clipboard, avoiding Dan at all costs. Kristin was still baffled by her behaviour. Athletes came into *The Agency* all the time, not every day but Tina had met football players before, she even used to work at a football club back in the day. She always made her usual charming 'Tina' small talk with them at reception while they waited for their meetings. She was never flustered or flirty. She was the perfect receptionist, she was made for that job. What was it about this guy? She wasn't even a fan of his team.

Before she could pull out a copy of her script, Liam grabbed her arm out of nowhere and thrust his marked-up copy in her face.

‘K, I’ve been chatting to the director and he thinks we should make a couple of changes.’

She felt a white-hot heat of betrayal burn across her chest. Changes?

‘What are you talking about?’ She bit back defensively. She wondered why Liam was even talking to the director in the first place, he was meant to be there to assist her with what she needed. He was meant to be shadowing her. Learning from her. He didn’t even need to be there, she’d brought him along so he could get some experience. Why had he taken it upon himself to talk to her director? Why was she only now seeing her work bleeding from an assault by his red pen?

‘He was thinking that the actresses we have to play female footballers don’t really fit the bill. They are too pretty. We just got the standard women we use from the casting agency who we’ve used before and I don’t think we really thought about who they’re actually going to be in the ad. They should have put more thought into really. They’ve stuffed you around a bit I think.’

Kristin tried to read his eye movement, he wasn’t really looking at her, his gaze was darting from side to side and she realised that he was trying to save her.

She had hired the actresses.

She'd picked them out from a show reel the casting agency they used had sent her. Why didn't she think about what they looked like more? She just decided to pick two blondes and a brunette who looked athletic. Why hadn't she done more research on what female footballers looked like – she had absolutely no clue. She'd only really just discovered that women played the game at all. Why hadn't she done more research? She felt sick. She'd ruined this shoot before it had even begun.

Liam had figured this out. He was trying to protect her. He knew she'd picked out the actresses. He was leaning over her computer watching the reel with her making comments about all the girls and rating them out of ten. He wasn't blaming her for her mistake, he was going to help fix her mess. Thank God he was there. She could have broken everything. She was an amateur just pretending. She wasn't ready for this.

'Maybe one could be Vollie's girlfriend, or they could be excited fans who love him or something like that? There is also one that looks a bit older on the screen, with some make-up she could pull off being his mum?'

She began to panic as she remembered her original clichéd idea with the mum in the supermarket.

'Liam, the whole point of this was to promote women in the game and do something progressive for the brand – I don't want an ad full of WAG's fawning over Dan!' She was

panicked now and glanced a look at her watch. They needed to start filming or they would start losing time rapidly.

‘I know, OK, I get it – it doesn’t have to be that. I’m just trying to help.’ He patted her on the shoulder to try to calm her from her impending hysteria. ‘Work with me here. How about we do a mum, and just fans, no girlfriend, avoid that WAG minefield, girls can be fans, just like you are, hey? That’s a positive message, including female fans who are cool like you?’ He winked and she forced a smile.

Kristin took a deep breath and knew she had nothing to give. She nodded slowly at Liam in a complicit transfer of power so she would be spared the responsibility of her mistakes. Liam smiled at her reassuringly.

‘Awesome, good call, K.’ he bolted back to talk to the director.

She looked down at the copy of her script she was holding and all the words on the page blurred together as she squinted trying to find something in it that she recognised when she was writing it as the great piece of work she thought it was. How did she ever think this was good work? She didn’t know anything about women’s football. She was a complete fraud and had written something completely off the mark. How did she think she had this in the bag, thinking that one semester of writing dummy scripts for soap operas in university would give her the skills to write a TV ad for a national brand campaign? Kristin felt the bile rising in her throat,

embarrassed at how confidently she'd walked into the studio in her expensive suit. It was choking her now and she wanted to rip it off. She felt hot. Smothered.

Liam dashed back and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. 'It's going to be fine. Matt agrees, he thinks the whole women's football thing is too fresh anyway, it only just got announced that it's coming but it's still two years away, no one cares about it yet. This is better.'

Kristin flashed a look over at Matt the director. She hadn't even spoken to him today and now didn't want to. He was squatting on the ground by the camera, using his knees as a desk with her script splayed over them. It was covered in lines of marker blacking out her words and arrows moving around her ideas. She had worked with Matt before but Brian was always in charge and she was always in the shadows watching. Seeing what he had done to her script, she wanted to stay back there forever.

Kristin stifled a sigh. Liam was right. She didn't really care about her women in football idea anyway. She just knew it opened up a whole new market and her gut told her to be proactive and get into this space first, make a stand. But what if she was wrong? Why would the people who wanted to buy supermarket coffee beans give a shit about women playing footy? They were probably all mums anyway, maybe Liam's idea was spot on the demographic. Maybe she'd miscalculated everything.

Underneath all of the stress, all of the anxiety that she had been feeling lately leading up to this moment felt like a palpable lump in her lungs. Kristin couldn't breathe. The fear that she'd suppressed for so long was being realised.

She wasn't good enough to be running a campaign featuring a footballer. She didn't know enough about the game. She'd never played footy, didn't understand what it was like. How could she create something that reflected everything that she didn't know? She wasn't even a real writer. She was a marketing hack. She was out of her league and she didn't even know what her league was. What was she doing here?

Liam bounced away back to Matt on a new level of enthusiasm at taking the reins, and in a flash, this wasn't hers anymore. As soon as Kristin realised this she felt relieved. The fear of doing something so big and failing was debilitating. She was glad for Liam to take charge and take away some of the pressure and responsibility. She needed more experience. She should have told Brian 'no'. She should have been honest with herself but she let her pretentious writer personality get in the way. She always thought she was better than what she was.

For the rest of the shoot, Kristin relegated herself to the role of a production assistant. She ran around the set grabbing props, handing out the scribbled-on scripts, prompting the new lines to Vollie and the actresses who were now trying their best to adopt to the changes. Every time they got a line wrong she felt a pang of guilt. She'd put this extra pressure on them by having to make all these last-minute changes. It was her fault when they made a mistake and had to do it again. She was wasting everyone's time. Liam sat next to the director and ran the show. She

busied herself with as many menial tasks as she could to cover up her inability to step forward and assert herself in the action. The things she thought Liam would have done for her when she first walked into the studio that day.

Though Kristin was thankful for Liam's leadership and happy to be playing assistant, working to alleviate her guilt, she still thought she'd have Tina with her to help with the basics of the shoot. She had just assumed Tina would be there for the day, would stick around to help her and hang out with Vollie, lingering for a selfie and an autograph. But Tina had gone home early with some excuse about feeling like she was coming down with something.

Kristin didn't believe it for one second but she didn't question Tina despite her disappointment. Tina had never been so unprofessional in all the time Kristin had known her. She'd never seen someone so star struck before so even though she could have used the help, thought it was better for her not to be around if she wasn't able to control her emotions. It was embarrassing.

'That's a wrap!'

Everyone clapped and patted each other on the back. Kristin wanted to fall down and fall asleep. She was exhausted with relief. It was over.

The crew started to pack up and she went up to Dan.

‘Dan, thank you so much, that was just great!’ She shook his hand.

‘No worries. Just took a bit longer than I thought.’ He was annoyed and it hurt her. She could feel that he was annoyed with her personally.

‘I’m so sorry, these things are always tricky and we just had to make some changes on the fly – it’s going to be great though.’ She smiled anxiously.

‘Yeah, no worries. See ya around.’ He left abruptly and she wanted to cry.

‘Good job K!’ Liam hugged her from behind and ruffled her hair like she was a four-year-old.

She laughed awkwardly. ‘Thanks mate. And thanks so much for your help.’

‘Anytime, it was so much fun! I’ve never been on a shoot before – felt so Hollywood. And how cool was Vollie? That guy is a champ!’

‘Yeah, he was great.’ She forced a grin.

‘Come on, I’ll give you a lift back to *The Agency*.’ She gathered her things, politely thanked Matt and the camera crew for their hard work and followed Liam to his car.

The day didn’t feel real. It was a flash of images and feelings melted together in her mind and she felt immense relief that it was over. That everything had been fixed before it was too late. Imagine if they had just gone with her original idea and it was awful. She shuddered at the thought.

‘So she could probably be number 2 – the other one definitely not’ Liam was prattling on about something and she realised she’d been off in another world for a while as they got into the car.

‘What are you talking about?’ She snapped sarcastically.

‘The list!’ he exclaimed. ‘Those two who played the fans would definitely make it if we include externals as part of it – not the mum though, well maybe before the mum make-up and clothes but after that she looked too much like my mum. Gross.’

‘What list? I don’t know what you are on about.’ She was confused in her internal anguish and whatever she had now missed from Liam’s prattling. She was always behind.

‘Do you seriously not know about the list?’ He shot her a raised eyebrow and she shrugged her shoulders.

‘Shit – whoops! I shouldn’t have said anything!’ He cackled.

‘Well you have to tell me now, you can’t leave me hanging!’ Kristin punched his arm, annoyed at something else she didn’t know. But she was also almost too tired to care this time. Kristin was exhausted. She just wanted to sit in the car in silence and let the day wash over her. To figure out what she was going to do next. But she played his game.

‘Ok, ok, no need to resort to violence!’ He laughed at her. ‘It’s *The Agency Top Ten!*’

‘What the fuck is that?’ She snapped and realised how harsh she sounded. She made a mental note to sound less moody in the conversation. She couldn’t take out her anguish from the day out on Liam and have him tell the boys that she’d been a bitch.

‘Language, please!’ He teased her and chuckled. ‘*The Agency Top Ten* is our list of the best chicks in the office, and sometimes we give exceptions to the ones we work with that are external. Like clients, waitresses who work at our events, or those actresses who are in our ads, like those two fan-girls. I think the blonde one was definitely worthy!’

‘Are you serious? That’s disgusting!’ She tried to cover her shock at his admission with gentle laughter. Don’t be a bitch.

‘Yeah, she was hot!’

‘Not about her – about the list!’

‘Are you jealous?’ She raised his eyebrows at her.

‘What? No!’ She tried to keep her cool.

‘Well, don’t worry, you’re not on it K. You’re one of the boys, you’re one of us!’ He winked at her. She uncomfortably shuffled in her seat. Was she meant to be flattered?

‘Well who is number one?’ She asked looking at her feet.

‘Ah, the million-dollar question!’ His bravado took over. ‘It changes, but at the moment, Sophie from payroll. She’s been wearing some very cute dresses lately!’ He laughed and Kristin tried to picture who Sophie was. She then remembered she was a university intern. She couldn’t have been much older than nineteen.

‘Good grief, you boys are disgusting!’ She rolled her eyes and forced a smile so he realised she was being silly and sarcastic.

‘There’s no harm in looking!’ He defended himself and his cohort. ‘I should send you the email chain, it’s fucking hilarious!’

Email chain?

She flashed him a quizzical look.

‘We update it every Friday afternoon, around four o’clock when we start knock-off drinks. We know we’re not going to do anymore work so we flick the email around and consider if we need to move anyone around. Sophie’s been number one for a while now though.’

Kristin didn’t know why she asked the next question but there was something in her that was desperate to know.

‘Is Anna on the list?’ She tried to ask the question coolly, like it didn’t matter to her.

‘I thought the list was ‘disgusting’! Now you want to know who’s on it! You’re such a hypocrite!’ He evaded the question.

‘It is disgusting!’ She reacted and quickly calmed herself and laughed. ‘I’m just curious.’

Liam laughed at her and sighed.

‘Ahh, Kristin, you’re hilarious.’

She knew she was never going to get her answer but in her exhaustion, she was easily able to convince herself that her knowledge of this list now meant that she was one of them. They wouldn't treat her like they did the other girls, the girls who get put on a list. She was one of the boys like Liam had said. She was better.

SEVEN

30.10.15

The text placeholder icon on the blank word document she had open in front of her was flashing judgementally. The longer she stared at the empty white page, the faster it seemed to flash. It was pulsing, begging her to write something. To write anything.

Kristin took a sip of from the glass she'd filled to the brim of pinot gris and sat it next to her laptop. It was a Friday night. The past week had made her feel the most disconnected from who she thought she was her whole life.

Kristin had gone from feeling on top of the world with her idea on how to make this bold and creative campaign for new and exciting clients, to having her whole sense of self torn down by it. She's let the idea carry her away and she'd lost sight of what she needed to do for the business. She felt pathetic that she'd let that happen and kept shuddering to think what would have happened if Liam wasn't there to fix everything for her. What if they had shot the video exactly as her original script called for? She took a gulp of wine.

Brian had praised her quick judgment call when she'd returned from the set and given him a debrief of how everything went. He told her that she'd made the right decision and she wanted to ask him why he didn't say anything to her when she'd pitched her original idea? Why had he indulged her when he thought it wasn't the right way to go about it?

The whole week while she waited to see the finished video was excruciating. Kristin was desperate to see how it turned out but she also wanted to never see it at all. The idea of watching it made her feel sick knowing how close it was to being something else. Something that could ruin her.

Kristin buried her head in her work. Making sure all the accompanying artwork and copy was prepared to surround the campaign launch in all the different media they needed to hit. She'd prepared all the media kits to go out to their social media influencers that included complimentary samples of coffee and mini footballs. She'd thought of everything and done it all herself. She didn't want anyone's help. She already felt like a burden with all the last-minute changes that had been made at the shoot and the flow on effects they had. It was her responsibility.

The video had been emailed to her that morning and she'd watched ten times before she sent it around the office to show them the final product. It was good. It was modern with hipster music and Vollie had done a great job in front of the camera. He'd broken through his shy and awkward demeanour when it mattered. He just flicked it on like a switch. He was great. His smile almost shone through the screen and she breathed deeply. It was fine. It had turned out fine.

People wrote back to the chain email congratulating her on a job well done. Kristin started to relax. But there was still an anxiety in her that she couldn't shake off. Something crawling under

her skin. It was unsettling watching it. It was devoid of her words, her vision. There was nothing of her left. She thought that would bring relief but she was as tense as ever. She thought it was still the fear sitting in her of what almost was. It would go away eventually.

The boys had attempted to organise Friday night drinks after work but not many were keen. It had been a big week and people were going to the races on the weekend. Kristin was relieved. The last thing she wanted to do was sit through an evening of dumb jokes and exhausting banter over beers. But she'd never admit that to the group. If they were all going, she knew she would go along with the crowd. She was thankful others had pulled the pin first so she could easily follow suit.

Kristin had never really experienced anxiety before so she really wasn't sure what this itchy-skin-short-of breath feeling she had was. But she knew she needed to get home and away from people. And have a big glass of wine.

She'd lost control but it was more than that. This feeling was made more unsettling because people were treating her like she was still in control, like she didn't let someone else take over everything that day. It was all a lie. People congratulated the video like they had on her original pitch idea. They'd patted her on the back as they left the office. Brian reassured her that she'd been making all the right decisions the whole way through the project and he was proud of her. Everyone seemed to think she had everything under control, like she always did. She was the person who was always on top of everything and for them, this campaign was no different.

Everything had come together, and she had worked so hard on it. But all of this was a lie now. She was spiralling.

She had thought that Liam might have said something to her about that day on the set. Told people that it was actually him who had made the changes to save the campaign from coming off the wrong way. He loved the limelight, loved being the big shot. Why hadn't he tried to claim some extra kudos for what he had done? Maybe he'd just told Brian what he'd done and now they were both humouring her. She felt things were slipping away from her.

A flashing sign from the small bottle shop next to her apartment complex was advertising two bottles of wine for twenty-five dollars. She walked towards it like a mirage and picked up two bottles of pinot gris before heading up to her place where she collapsed on the couch, flicking around channels to find some bad TV to watch.

She couldn't find anything to relax her. She still felt itchy and hot. She was exhausted but she couldn't sit still, constantly pressing the channel up button on the remote, desperate for something to take her away from everything. Suddenly she stumbled on an old episode of *Sex and the City*. She'd never cared much for the show, but a particular scene caught her eye.

Carrie Bradshaw was sat at her little desk, looking out her little window into the New York night as she typed away on her computer. The scene encapsulated the idyllic life of a writer. Sitting in the perfect place, in the perfect city, looking perfect in high fashion while in the comfort of your own home, exploring your thoughts and ideas on the page.

She turned the TV off. That was what she needed. She needed to start writing again.

A massive glass of wine was poured and Kristin re-positioned her desk from the wall to face out of her lounge room window. She had a great view over busy streets full of cafes and stores and bars. On a clear day, you could even see the light towers of the MCG peeking through the buildings. She wondered why she hadn't thought to use this view to its potential before. Finding little trinkets from around her place to style her desk elegantly like how she imagined all real writers did. She framed her writing space perfectly and if she wasn't so self-conscious of her social media feeds, she would have taken a photo and uploaded it to Instagram. But her accounts were for sports content only and she didn't want people to know how seriously she took her writing in her own time.

She took a seat at her new writer's space and held the glass of wine in her hand. She was a writer. She was in her space and she felt relaxed for the first time in weeks. But she didn't know where to start. The last thing she had written was ages ago. BGFL. Before Grand Final Loss. She brought up one of the fan sites she wrote for and re-read her Grand Final preview piece. How optimistic she was.

She re-read a few more of her old articles while she sipped away at her bargain booze. She started to feel warm and comfortable again, like she was being embraced by the words and the idea of being a person who belonged in this world. A world of sports writing and words. She liked it there a lot.

Kristin opened a new page and decided she needed to write something new. This was her catharsis. Writing would bring her back to herself and get rid of this sticky, itchy feeling she'd had all week. But all she could do was stare at the white page on the computer screen.

There was nothing coming to her. No ideas, no inspiration. Normally she'd write after a game or something she'd seen on one of the nightly football shows that she had an opinion on. She'd stayed so far off the football radar since the loss and with how busy she'd been she hadn't even thought about what she currently thought about her football team. She didn't even know what the biggest trade news was. She'd stayed so far out of it and now she felt lost. It was time.

She went to her usual sports news sites and consumed everything. She read the grand final match reports she had so desperately tried to avoid. Read the reviews of each team's performance for the year, trade news, draft prospectuses, run downs of all the clubs' best and fairest award winners. The sting of the loss was still painful but it had eased and the joy of consuming football content again was starting to mask it.

How she loved it. She loved football.

That was it. That was what she was going to write about.

She went back to her Word document and started typing away. The words flew from her finger tips as she explained how hard the last couple of weeks were while she refrained from

anything football related while her broken West Coast Eagles heart mended itself. She felt alive as she wrote and she smiled to herself as she hit 'submit' to post the piece on a sports fan blog she subscribed to for the world to read.

She leant back in her chair with her glass of wine, looking out at the Melbourne night over the top of her computer, gazing out to the street of people enjoying their Friday night at bars and restaurants with friends and she could not have felt happier that she was alone and writing.

Saturday morning rolled around and over coffee and a croissant enjoyed at her new writing space overlooking her city, Kristin watched her ad in HD on the *Country Coffee* Facebook page.

Her baby had been born. The campaign was live and she could track how many likes and shares and retweets it was getting from the comfort of her new favourite spot. It seemed to be tracking well so far, good comments, mostly just on how much people thought Vollie was a gun or some girls commenting how cute he was.

Kristin breathed easy. It was done. She'd done good and now she was going to take the next step in her career. She sipped on her coffee. She'd popped out to the café across the road to get her morning caffeine fix, she couldn't bring herself to drink anymore *Country Coffee*.

She clicked out of the brand's social media pages and closed her laptop. She'd also picked up the Saturday papers and for the first time in weeks she automatically turned them over to read them back to front, the only way she read the paper. The sports section first.

Kristin's morning was uninterrupted bliss. She drank good coffee, read the newspapers and put all her work thoughts out of mind. It was a beautiful spring day in Melbourne and she planned on taking a big walk around the park while listening to sports podcasts. She felt like she had her life back.

She put on her trendy active wear and found her expensive headphones but just before she walked out the door she thought she'd check back on the *Country Coffee* social media pages to see how the video was going.

That's when she saw it.

A twitter tirade from her least favourite blogger, someone she would have never thought to hear from on a generic ad for instant coffee. It was *Fan Fatale* at her finest.

She was savage. Her twitter handle had created a thread below the tweet from *Country Coffee* that had launched the video. 'Antiquated', 'Is this all @CountryCoffee thinks women in footy do?', 'Who made this ad? An ancient white man? #patriachy #dinosaurs'.

She slapped her laptop shut in a panic.

What had she done?

EIGHT

17.11.15

The second the little meeting request notification appeared on her phone, temporarily blocking the *Fan Fatale* article she was reading, Kristin knew what her presence was required for.

‘Is it 2015 or 1950? Dan Colpevole’s new marketing campaign places subservient women at the feet of the rising star.’

Kristin could feel the bile in her stomach rising but knew better than to vomit. She couldn’t bring herself to anyway. It took all her concentration not to pass out. Her breath was short, mind fuzzy and trying to focus on the back-lit white screen. She needed water. Or more oxygen. Or something to make the feeling that she wasn’t on solid ground go away. But she was consumed with the irrational need to read the words aimed at her like a missile. They were harpooning her but she couldn’t look away.

Kristin did what she knew you never should. She read all the comments.

‘Not only is this narrative blatantly misogynist and ignorant of the role women play in Australian Rules football, it is also mind-numbingly mediocre advertising’.

‘Whose bright idea was it to put a mother washing her adult son’s guernsey, essentially his work uniform, and a young female volunteer cutting up oranges to provide for the men in an advertisement for a modern, environmentally conscious product that is hoping to test well with women?’

Even the ironic, ‘this must be the work of another middle-aged, white man in a suit who just doesn’t get it when it comes to women in sport and rolls his eyes at you when you try to tell him what’s wrong.’

Kristin was the old, white man in a suit.

She didn’t trust her gut, didn’t assert herself and in the end, she had unintentionally achieved the complete opposite tone that she’d conveyed in her pitches to *Country Coffee*. She’d been so clever. She didn’t even care that much about women playing footy. But she’d used it to her advantage to get the pitch right. And she knew people would eat it up with how excited everyone was about the new women’s league coming in earlier than expected. She saw the opportunity to leverage something great and she’d let it slip through her hands.

The article was bad enough but it was the link at the end of it that was the most horrifying thing. It was a link to an audio file of a radio interview.

Fan Fatale had never done radio before.

It was only an independent Melbourne station that played stuff that was too alternative for mainstream radio. Whose announcers were all young, left-leaning grad students. But it still terrified Kristin to know that this once anonymous, lonely blogger, who she imagined in a dark room in a black hoodie obscuring all of her facial details, had ventured out into the world. Had shown herself to someone. It was the boldest move the blogger had made yet.

What kind of arrangement had *Fan Fatale* made with the radio station to conceal her identity? Was there a non-disclosure agreement? Did she enter in disguise, a mask? Did they obscure her voice to avoid detection? Kristin wanted to click on the link to find out but she didn't have the strength to endure any more of it.

She clicked out of the blog and accepted Brian's meeting request for 7.30am the next day.

Kristin didn't sleep a wink all night anticipating the ugliness of the encounter with him. She knew he would be angry with her. She'd embarrassed him. Embarrassed *The Agency*. That wasn't something that was easily forgiven. Especially when Brian had gone out on a limb for her. He'd thought she was ready to take the next step in her career. And how did she repay him? By not only producing an un-original, outdated piece of rubbish ad, but producing it for a big new client while involving an exciting young athlete whose experience working with them on this disaster would surely have a ripple effect throughout the league. Players would definitely not be keen to work with them based on this.

Kristin had caused irreparable damage on multiple fronts. She'd blown it.

Brian had also done something unusual in scheduling this meeting that had caused her additional anxiety. He'd requested they meet at a café around the corner from *The Agency*.

Café meetings were always the worst. It meant he didn't want anyone in the office to know what was going on. He wanted no one near it.

The next day Kristin arrived fifteen minutes early to get in an early espresso to wake herself up to whatever was about to come her way. She sat in a corner in the back of the café and picked up the paper that someone had left behind on the table. She flicked frantically through the sports pages to see if they had run *Fan Fatale's* piece that had now gone viral. There was nothing. Kristin sighed in a short-lived relief before she noticed a line at the bottom of the last page of sport. A prompt to turn to 'opinion'. 'Young gun Dan Colpevole's latest fumble wasn't on the field... turn to page. 12 to find out more.'

She turned the pages quickly, not wanting Brian to walk in and catch her looking at it. Then she saw the piece. Kristin scrunched up the paper and tossed it on to the next table. She took small satisfaction in that at least it wasn't considered 'sport'.

She spied Brian storming in out of the corner of her eye and tried to look casual, like she was waiting for a friend.

He spotted her and made his way to her table without ordering a coffee. She was glad she'd had her espresso. This clearly wasn't going to be a friendly chat over a latte. He meant business.

'Hello.' He said flatly.

"Hi Brian.' She responded, much to chirpily for the situation.

'So, we have a bit of a problem.' She pursed her lips and nodded slowly at him.

'What happened? I thought we were on track to do something really different and modern? Weren't those your words? Modern? This wasn't what was in any of your notes or planning. Where did it go wrong?'

She could tell he was trying his best not raise his voice at her and cause a scene in the café. But his restraint was terrifying. She wished he would just yell at her so she knew exactly where she stood.

'I don't know.' She responded meekly. 'We were concerned about the look of the actresses and that perhaps the women's footy angle was too fresh, that people wouldn't connect with it so early in the piece. Like I said to you after the shoot, we just rolled with some changes that everyone thought was a good idea at the time...'. Kristin trailed off.

Brian looked out the window at the dreary grey Melbourne day that was unfolding. It was about to start raining any minute.

‘I should have been there on the day. It’s hard to make the right decisions under so much pressure.’

Kristin was silent. She didn’t know what to say. He had no faith in her.

‘It’s my fault.’ He conceded. ‘I let you run with this all by yourself and you weren’t ready. It was too big.’

She felt her skin warm up, rising slowly in temperature under her suit. She’d been saying that to herself all week. Cursing herself for thinking that she was ready for an opportunity like this. When Brian said those words out loud she was surprised that she didn’t automatically agree. As soon as she heard them out loud Kristin, in fact, knew they weren’t true. She was ready. She’d been ready for a long time to stop being a glorified assistant running errands and entertaining clients like she was Brian’s secretary. She had done everything he had told her to do for years. She’d had enough and she wanted more, she could do it. She thought about the joy she had felt on Friday night when she was writing. She wasn’t going to give up on that dream. She could fix this.

‘I am ready!’ She involuntarily blurted, then cleared her throat to cover the tenacity in her tone. ‘I mean, I can do this, I just misjudged the situation and it was a learning experience that

I'll develop from.' She tried her best to throw in as much corporate jargon as she could to appease Brian's 'business first' brain.

'Can we convince *Country Coffee* to do a re-shoot? It will cost a bit but I'll do all my work for them for free. And I'm sure I can do some deals with the crew with some corporate football tickets to cut down on costs...' Kristin was rushing. She could hear ideas being shouted at her by her brain. She could salvage this, this could be great. She was still going to be a star and make it in this industry. People were going to know who she was and for the right reasons.

'We can do a re-shoot and issue a press release and position *Country Coffee* as the company who listens. Who took on the feedback and actually did something about it. "The brand for the fans". We could float the idea with them to donate some money from sales to youth girls footy or something, make a whole show of it. It would make them look humble and socially conscious, just how they want their brand to look.' Kristin stopped herself. She was rambling and didn't want to lose Brian in her dribble.

Brian sized her up, thinking over what she had said. She tried not to look too desperate.

'It does sound like something that could work...' He pondered out loud and she beamed.

'Let me speak to Mark and Veronica and get their take on it. We have to put the client's needs first here and make sure they are 100% happy.'

‘Of course.’ She nodded like a child.

‘Leave it with me Kris, in the meantime, get back on top of everything else, you’ve been a bit behind lately.’

The comment was the punch in the guts it had intended to be. ‘Yes, I will.’ She replied like an obedient little girl.

He sat silently for a moment, seemingly off in another world.

‘You know, I was thinking last night,’ he started, ‘everything *Fan Fatale* wrote – it hit too close to home. Like, she knew stuff that she couldn’t have known. All the brand positioning stuff we worked up – that was all in internal documents...’ He trailed off eyeing Kristin over. ‘It’s not you, is it?’

‘What? No!’ Kristin responded too defensively to be convincing. She quickly scanned her mind of everything she’d written online under her pseudonym but it was just commentary on West Coast’s performance (or lack thereof) over the years. She’d never written anything controversial or about the industry or about her work. She never relayed anything she’d overheard from work. She wasn’t pathetic like *Fan Fatale* who was a sad social justice warrior. Kristin was a football writer. She wrote about the sport.

‘Was just a thought. It would make sense then that the ad was so bad as you sabotaged it to make a name for yourself as a writer taking us down. I thought that perhaps that was the only way something like this could happen, because there was no way that you of all people could let it happen.’

It was the cruellest thing Brian had ever said to her. It took all the energy she had to hold back the tears. Kristin didn’t know what to say. She did let it happen. It was her fault and her writing career was going nowhere. She was failing at everything.

‘Okay, well I’m meeting another client here in ten minutes so I’ll see you back at the office.’

‘Sure.’

Kristin made her way out of the café like someone who had just been given a head start in a race. She looked at her phone, it was only 7.50am. She didn’t want to go to the office just yet though in usual circumstances she would already be sitting at her desk by now. Clearing out her email inbox and on her second coffee. Not today. She didn’t want to be anywhere near *The Agency* today.

She walked down to the end of the street to the other regular café. Kristin ordered a large cappuccino and sat in silence at a small dark table in the back for thirty blissful minutes before she had to force herself to leave. She took her time flicking through the sports section of Melbourne’s daily papers. She read every article. She focussed on her favourite journalists,

savouring how they wrote in a particular style and used unique turns of phrase that she'd recognise even without a by-line. She sighed when she had to move on. This is what she wanted to be doing with her life. Encompassed by words. Writing. And the game.

As Kristin entered *The Agency*, she could feel the energy in the room change. This time she didn't walk in like she owned the place, with unabashed confidence. Everyone liked her, respected her, wanted to be her friend. She felt like the popular girl at school in this place and she loved it. She loved that feeling of being loved. Now as she walked in she felt like the loser. The one others whispered about their poorly chosen outfit or acne-prone skin.

Tina was on the phone as she walked past and gave her a forced, sympathetic smile. Kristin smiled flatly back as she wondered again if something was wrong with Tina. Most times Tina would put the person on hold so she could chat. She loved grabbing people as they walked by her isolated reception desk at the entrance of the office but Tina had avoided talking to her for days. Had Kristin said something wrong? What could she have possibly done to upset her?

The boys were huddled around Liam's desk reading something on his computer screen. Laughing. Brian clearly wasn't there yet, they were being way too loud.

Kristin took a deep breath and approached them like nothing had happened. Everything was normal.

'What's so funny over here?' She asked flashing a big smile.

The boys looked up with a quick fear that she might be someone else but relaxed when they realised it was only Kristin. One of them.

‘Nothing, nothing K!’ Liam smirked exiting the window on his browser. ‘A stupid YouTube video. You wouldn’t think it was funny.’ The others were still chuckling away in sporadic spits.

Kristin rolled her eyes, ‘I see. You guys are such children!’ She forced a giggle.

‘I know, I know!’ Liam laughed. ‘But it’s a good way to start the day – a bit of a laugh. You probably need one today too, hey?’ He slapped her on the back.

She cleared her throat. She may as well stop pretending.

‘I think it will take more than that.’

‘Don’t be silly. It was fine. This will all blow over, you’ll see.’

‘I’ll believe that when I see it.’ She made her way to her desk and turned her computer on. The screen told her it was 8.24am. It was the latest she’d been to work in her life.

She opened her emails and saw a notification appear from the manager of human resources, Diana.

‘Hi Kristin, come see me when you have a minute.’

The last thing she wanted to do was walk into HR’s office. Walking into that office was a signal to everyone that something was wrong. It would provide too much ammunition to the boys to make fun of her. She thought she’d try to bite the bullet and go in now while they were distracted by their juvenile videos.

She walked over and tapped on the open door.

‘Hi Diana, just saw your email?’ She was as casual and polite as she could be.

‘Kristin, yes. Close the door, love.’

She hated being called ‘love’. Diana was only in her thirties but spoke down to everyone like she was their elderly grandmother, trying to coax them all to believing she was on their side. Kristin reluctantly closed the door.

‘So how are you going with everything?’ Diana tilted her head sympathetically with an over the top frowny face. ‘It’s been a tough few days hasn’t it.’

‘Yeah.’ Kristin responded flatly. ‘But I’m fine.’

‘No one is blaming you Kristin. We are a team here at *The Agency*. We do things as a team and we take responsibility as a team.’

‘OK.’ Kristin nodded along trying her best not to roll her eyes.

‘And we support each other as a team. So, if you need to talk about anything, I am here for you.’

‘Thanks Diana.’ Kristin wanted to laugh. What was she going to do for her? There was nothing she could do. Kristin had to fix this herself. HR was so far removed from everything in the business, they had no idea what it was like to work there. Diana just sat in her tidy little office and read articles about ‘how to best motivate yourself’ before circulating them to everyone. Clogging up their inboxes with pointless dribble, distracting them from actual work.

‘You’re welcome.’ Diana beamed.

Kristin forced a smile and made her way back to her desk, frantic with everything she needed to do to cancel out the damage she’d done.

Tina was standing at her desk with a pile of papers.

‘What’s up Tina?’ She tried to sound casual and cool, not like her world was crushing her.

Tina looked at the floor.

‘Just invoices that need to be checked before Christmas break. I know it’s the last thing you need but I need to get them all signed off before I submit them to finance.’

‘That’s fine Tina.’ Kristin tried to catch her eye but she was relentless in her evasion. Tina had never behaved like this to her. She was always overly lovely and bubbly. Nothing phased her.

‘Is everything ok, Tina?’ Kristin asked hesitantly. ‘You seem a bit... distracted.’

Tina looked at her like she’d just been caught out and shifted into damage control.

‘Fine, I’m fine! Just tired I guess.’ She paused shiftily as she placed the pile of papers on Kristin’s desk. ‘It happens when you get to my age!’ She laughed simulating her former perky self. ‘I can’t keep up at the end of the year when everything needs to get done!’

She skipped away as she finished her sentence to avoid any further confrontation and Kristin sat heavily in her inflexible office chair.

Did Tina think she was everything *Fan Fatale* said she was? Kristin had never taken Tina to be one of those feminist types. She was too concerned with her hair and clothes to be bothered with all that. She was a mother and a receptionist and was hunting for another husband to take care of her. What did she care about feminism? Maybe she was just embarrassed on Kristin’s

behalf that she'd done such a bad job. That she'd failed. Maybe Tina was disappointed in Kristin's efforts like a mother was when one of her children had let her down.

Kristin was determined to make her proud again. To make everyone proud to know her and work with her. She re-opened her original script that she'd been so satisfied with. And got to work to prove everyone wrong.

NINE

4.12.15

It was not like Kristin to be rude to event staff. She usually prided herself on being overly polite to everyone. She always wanted to be liked. Adored. If the first thing people said about her was ‘she’s so nice’, then she would be happy. But she couldn’t commit to that goal now. She was so miserable. The last place she wanted to be was at the office Christmas party after the past week.

She’d read the articles, she’d had to face Brian’s disappointment, she’d had to profusely apologise to *Country Coffee* and offer to do more work at no extra cost. And she’d had to put up with the whisperings of the office boys every time she went to the printer.

Liam was adamant that they were never talking about her or thought she did the wrong thing. That everyone was making a big deal out of nothing and no one important actually cared. That the only people writing about it were ‘femi-nazis’ who didn’t even give a shit about football or the amazing player that Dan was, they just jumped on everything with their political correctness.

He had offered to pick her up tonight and bring her to the party but she’d declined. She didn’t want to deal with him before she’d had at least three drinks and a sober cab ride with him while he poked fun at her was out of the question.

Kristin shoved her jacket in the face of the woman who greeted the guests at the door of the venue and refused to take a ticket for it.

‘I’ll find it.’ She replied flatly and heard how horrid she sounded.

She walked into the dimly lit room and grabbed a champagne off a tray from a waiter offering them to her with a smile she didn’t reciprocate.

She was one of the first one’s there and didn’t know who she was going to talk to. Anna was in the back with the work experience girl. Kristin laughed nastily to herself. Anna was so pathetic she could only make friends with a nineteen-year-old university student.

Brian was talking to some of the members of the company’s board and she pretended like she didn’t see him. She grabbed a seat at a high table by the bar and settled in for the night.

She saw Tina walk in and make a beeline straight past her to Anna. Kristin still didn’t understand why Tina was going out of her way to avoid her. It had to be something else. She couldn’t be this cold to her just because of this stupid ad campaign. Kristin tried to remember anything that could have happened, anything else she could have done to offend Tina. Maybe it was that she made her work on the ad in the first place, that Tina was connected to Kristin’s failure and was ashamed. Kristin remembered how Tina had made an excuse to leave that day, she went home sick. She had acted weird about not wanting to meet Vollie. Maybe she was mad

about that. Maybe she was one of those never-meet-your-heroes types and blamed Kristin for putting her in that situation.

In thinking of these excuses for Tina, Kristin started to feel the anger rise. These were pathetic excuses for Tina to be avoiding her. Tina was the mum of the office. She was always the first one to be supportive of her and check in on her and make sure she was ok. Kristin wanted to shake her and shout, ‘what’s wrong with you!’ But Tina felt like also felt like the least of her worries at the moment.

Fan Fatale was still under her skin and she wanted to claw it out. Nothing Kristin had ever worked on had been mentioned in the press before. It wasn’t front page news or a feature in the sports section, her name hadn’t been mentioned, but being written about was humiliating. It made her feel sick.

Kristin took a big gulp and finished her champagne like it was Gatorade. She got up and ordered a gin and tonic and decided that the bartender would be the only person she would be nice to tonight. She needed him to be on her side.

‘Thank you very much!’ She chirped as he handed her the drink and flashed a cheeky smile. He was somewhat attractive, perhaps he could be an option later in the night if she still felt miserable.

She turned back and was off-guard as Liam swooped straight in for the kiss on the cheek.

‘Kristin, looking lovely as always!’

She faked a kiss back and smirked at his trendy grey suit and bright apricot tie. ‘You too Liam, very dapper.’

He ordered a scotch and took a seat next to her.

‘How are you going tiger?’ He asked condescendingly.

‘I’m fine.’ She sipped her drink quickly. She was on a mission.

‘Good, that’s the spirit, don’t worry about all that – it’s Christmas! You need to enjoy yourself.’

Before she could respond he had already got up and retrieved two more drinks from the bar for them. Kristin was impressed by his speed but also afraid. She worried if this was going to be another night she didn’t remember at his hands. Perhaps though, that wouldn’t be so bad. She wanted to forget this whole mess.

The room quickly filled with the rest of *The Agency* staff and assorted clients and plus-ones. At these kind of parties Kristin was always making the rounds and chatting to as many people as possible. Making sure she remained known by certain people. She hated playing the corporate

game, the schmoozing and building connections, but she knew how important it was. If she was ever going to leave *The Agency* one day, she needed contacts and opportunities. And the idea of leaving *The Agency* was appealing to her at the moment. If she could walk away from everything, she wouldn't have to deal with all this. But the guilt would always plague her. She needed to fix her mistake.

Kristin remained close to the bar and the boys kept her company out of convenience. She had wisely secured the closest table to the drinks. They all used it as a home base as they wandered off to talk to women and suck up to executives and returned only when they needed a refill. Kristin didn't care. She remained perched on her barstool, downing her gin and feigning interest in the boys' assessment of the talent at the party.

Her eye scanned the room and she locked her gaze with Tina who turned her head instantly away from her. Kristin was still so confused at Tina's behaviour towards her. It was infuriating. She finished her gin and got up to get another, seething at the second snub for the night she'd just received from her adoptive mother. Kristin wanted to do something about it. She wanted to confront her and call her out on whatever her problem was. Surely it couldn't be any worse than what *Fan Fatale* was writing about her. Or what Brian had said to her face. Kristin wanted it over with.

Tina was on the other side of the room and she seemed to be alone, waiting for Anna to return from the bathroom. This was her chance. Gin in hand, Kristin stormed up to Tina whose face went white at the sight of her.

‘What did I do to you? Seriously Tina, what did I do?’ Kristin felt her tongue stick to her teeth on the word ‘seriously’, a drunken lisp causing her to slur.

Tina avoided eye contact and looked at her delicate hands that were tightly grasping a designer clutch.

‘You’re drunk Kristin.’ She replied flatly.

‘So.’ Kristin flapped her arms defiantly. ‘It’s Christmas! Answer the question – what’s your problem with me? I didn’t do anything to you!’

Tina glanced around to see who was watching them. It seemed most were preoccupied with the party, trying to grab as many drinks as possible while the bar remained free. The music was loud, the room was dark and Tina’s eyes were darting around looking for an escape. She grabbed Kristin by the forearm and dragged her to the coat room.

‘What are you doing?’ Kristin pulled her wrist back and rubbed it, feigning a little bit of pain to make Tina feel bad.

‘You didn’t do anything!’ Tina yelled at her in a disorienting shriek that shocked Kristin. She’d never heard Tina even raise her voice.

‘It’s him. I couldn’t stand to be anywhere near him after what he did.’

Kristin felt Tina try to look through her to see if she could piece together what she was talking about. Kristin was confused, who?

‘Dan Colpevole raped my sister.’

Kristin took a step back and almost tripped.

‘He what?’ she whispered.

‘It was a couple of years ago. They went to school together and were at a twenty-first birthday party. She passed out in the bedroom late in the night and when she woke up he was on top of her.’ Tears flowed freely from Tina’s eyes and she wiped them away violently.

Kristin searched for words. Her head was spinning but she couldn’t understand if that was because she was drunk or if she was in shock from hearing this.

Not Dan, he couldn’t have.

‘Why...’ was all Kristin could manage to say. Tina completed her thoughts for her.

‘Why would he do that when he could have anyone he wants because he is an AFL player? Why didn’t she go to the police? Why doesn’t anyone know about it? Why is he still playing football? Why isn’t he behind bars? Why was she passed out at a party full of drunk boys? What was she wearing? What do you want to say Kristin? Why what?’

Kristin scowled defensively at Tina. She’d never heard her speak like this. It was like when her mother was disciplining her for something she hadn’t done but she was protecting a friend so she couldn’t say anything. She felt powerless and incredibly sad. It wasn’t her fault, but she felt like she’d profoundly let Tina down.

‘I’m sorry,’ Tina wiped a tear from her cheek. ‘This is why I don’t ever talk about it. I just want to forget it happened but when I saw him during the shoot – it all just came back. I never, ever thought I’d have to work with him.’

She spoke with her eyes fixated on something behind Kristin’s ear and Kristin felt like she was looking right through her. Or speaking to a ghost. Tina’s eyes were wide and unblinking. It was surreal to see beautiful, composed, motherly Tina so shattered.

‘I thought as soon as the ad was done, we’d be done working with him. But now, I’m sorry, I know it’s not your fault, but, all this... just all this drama. It means he’s still going to be around. And when I see you. All I can see is him. You’re the reason we still have to work with him. I’m so sorry that I’m blaming you.’

‘No, no. Tina...’ Kristin tried to find words. ‘I’m so sorry. I just can’t, I can’t believe this.’

The two were silent for a while. Kristin could feel her sobriety come back. The shock and the mood now demanded her mind be present. The frivolity of the evening had been erased. She still needed an answer though.

‘Sorry, Tina, I know this is probably a dumb question. But why didn’t your sister go to the police?’

Tina sighed.

‘We talked about it for a while. I mean, it took her weeks to even tell me that it had happened, she was so ashamed and scared. She only told me everything after I confronted her about acting so strange, I guess like you did to me hey?’ She forced an ironic smile.

‘We agreed we would tell her mum. She’s my half-sister. My dad re-married and had Catherine. I never really got close to my step-mum but I knew she would be there for Cathy. She needed to know. They talked it through and made the decision not to go to the police. They didn’t think that they would be able to get a conviction. There were no witnesses and it would be too hard with his profile.’

‘Cathy didn’t want people to know who she was or what had happened to her. She decided that she just wanted to forget everything. They told my dad and he was adamant that they were

going to report it. His best friend was a retired cop so he spoke to him about it. But he was told the same thing that we already knew. That there wouldn't be enough evidence. And it would be public and ugly. Cathy would have to go through a lot of questioning and emotional pain and it would probably all be for nothing. He had seen it happen too many times before. So nothing ever happened. Cathy went to therapy to help her get through it and he went on to have the best season of his career.'

It was too much for Kristin to process. Dan had been so great on the day of the shoot. He was annoyed at all the last-minute changes but he did everything they asked. He put in the work and was professional and nice.

Kristin then wondered if Dan had any idea that Tina knew his shameful secret.

'Does he know who you are?'

'No. I'm a lot older than Cathy.' Tina answered. 'He would have no idea that I know what he did. He was so lovely to me on the set too – it made me sick. I couldn't handle it and I had to get out of there. I'm sorry I've been taking it out on you.' Tina fished around in her clutch for a tissue to wipe her eyes.

'I can't believe I told you. Please, you can't tell anyone Kristin.'

Kristin watched Tina's beautiful face twist and contort in agony. It was confronting. Tina baked healthy muffins for the office and gave her advice on how to wash her whites. Kristin's own mother lived hours away and Tina made it feel like she had a mum in Melbourne too. She always asked about her writing and pushed her to keep it up. She knew what Kristin wanted to do. Knew she was smarter than what she was doing. Tina encouraged her and did what all mums should do. She made her feel special.

Kristin felt sick. Her mind flashed back to the day she teased Tina about being a 'fan girl' and crushing on Dan like he was some young, hot stud she thought was cute. The white, hot rage Tina must have felt towards her in that moment. She thought she was doing a good thing by getting Tina involved – getting her access to behind the scenes and meeting an AFL star. Kristin felt like a big shot, helping lovely Tina the humble receptionist, who never got to be a part of the action and experience what it was like working with the players.

Tina had only played along to help Kristin out, knowing that this was Kristin's big chance to take the next step in her career despite her own personal pain. Kristin wanted to cry at what she had put Tina through. What she was still putting her through.

'I won't say a word. I promise.'

Tina bit her lip to hold back tears and nodded a 'thank you.'

'I'll make sure you never have to be around him ever again. I'm so sorry Tina.'

‘It’s ok. I’m sorry. I’m sorry to put you in this position now.’ Tina choked.

‘You don’t need to apologise.’ Kristin looked for her jacket and saw it hanging by Tina, she grabbed it and put it on slowly.

‘Are you going?’ Tina asked.

‘Yeah, I’m done with this night.’

‘I’m so sorry, I ruined your night.’ A tear rolled down Tina’s cheek and she rapidly wiped it away.

‘Tina, no. Not at all. It was ruined already with everything else. If anything, you sobered me up and stopped me from making an idiot of myself out there in front of everyone.’ Kristin tried to smile.

‘I’m sorry about everything that’s happening with the ad Kristin, it’s not fair. You put so much work into it.’

Kristin snorted.

‘Not enough.’

‘It will blow over, you’ll see. Everyone will forget.’

TEN

7.12.15

The automatic doors opened revealing a garish reception overwhelmed by strong, bold colours. Although the players' gym was probably nowhere near the Club reception area, Kristin swore she smelt liniment seeping through the walls. The aroma stirred her jealousy. It was the one thing that was missing in her career working at *The Agency*. Constant contact with the players.

Kristin approached the receptionist and gave her name. A tiny, blonde girl dialled a number with her acrylic nails and repeated her name down the line in a disarming squeak.

'She'll be down in a minute.'

Kristin smiled a 'thank you' and wandered around the room looking at team photos from premiership wins over the years and wondered what it would be like to work for a football club. To be part of a team.

People always asked if that would be her dream job. To be offered a role working for the team she adored. But Kristin would never work for West Coast. Working for the team you loved would be too difficult. She would be too biased. Too star struck seeing her heroes in the hallway. And she would be incredibly afraid to see what was behind the curtains now with what she knew.

What if there was a Dan at West Coast? Kristin shuddered at the thought and convinced herself that it couldn't happen. Not at her club.

'Hi love!'

Kristin jumped as Rebecca pulled her from her daydreaming.

'Sorry, I was a million miles away. How are you Bec?'

 Kristin kissed her on the cheek.

'Great, I'm so happy you emailed, it has been forever since I've seen you!' Rebecca glowed. She looked happy.

Rebecca walked Kristin through the building to a tiny café area behind the reception. They ordered coffees and caught up. Rebecca was still loving her job at the Club and had been given a lot of responsibility. She didn't regret leaving *The Agency* at all even though she'd technically taken a step backwards in her career. At *The Agency* Rebecca was an event planner. She managed all the parties and launches and business lunches. Kristin thought she loved it, planning the catering, deciding the theme, choosing the flowers, deciding the wine. But Rebecca decided to leave and go into what Kristin and her colleagues called 'Club Land', taking the position of executive assistant to the CEO. Kristin couldn't believe it when she told her. Why was Rebecca going to leave just to be someone's assistant? She was smarter than that. But she wanted a change.

Kristin hadn't worked with Rebecca for two years but still valued her friendship. When she was at *The Agency*, Rebecca was the only other woman that Kristin had felt comfortable with. Kristin could tell that she wasn't just there to meet football players or to say she had a cool job working in footy. Rebecca was down to earth and didn't really care about what people thought. She just did her own thing and Kristin liked that about her. They found it hard to see each other without being at the same workplace but tried every couple of months to stay in touch and gossip about everyone they knew who worked in football. People moved around in the industry a lot. They might work for a couple of different clubs and marketing agencies and media outlets over just a couple of years and Kristin liked to be across it all, just in case opportunities came up. Rebecca was the best person to keep in contact with because she knew everything.

Rebecca was a smart girl. She worked very hard and was very strategic in forming strong relationships. Rebecca had always played the game and knew how to make people love her. At *The Agency*, Brian had always depended on her as she knew all their important client's favourite wines that she had delivered on their birthdays. She knew their wives' and kids' birthday's too. She knew the exact seat number where they each liked to watch the footy and made sure that seat was there for them at every game they wanted to go to. Kristin had no doubt that she had perfected the same kind of system in her current role.

But although Rebecca was smart, she wasn't ready to fight for her worth. That was the real reason she left *The Agency*. Brian wouldn't up her pay and rather than create a scene Rebecca retreated. Kristin couldn't ever fully respect her after that. Kristin wanted to smash glass ceilings and prove herself. Not work to exhaustion on insignificant things like the birthdays of clients.

After a few sips of their lattes, they had covered all the bases. Kristin could see Rebecca start to get awkward as the small talk receded. She decided to put it out there herself so she could be in control of it.

‘I don’t suppose you have seen all the stuff from that *Fan Fatale* blog about the ad I worked on?’ she asked as nonchalantly as she could.

‘No.’ Rebecca responded too quickly. ‘I mean, not really. I thought your ad was great. You should be really proud of yourself Kristin, you have come such a long way – writing your own ads. That’s huge!’ Kristin was irritated by what appeared to be the genuine pride of her friend.

‘Thanks.’ She replied flatly and there was silence. She played with the remaining foam in her latte with her spoon and tried again.

‘I just don’t know – I guess she had some good points about how the women were portrayed. I should have seen that stuff you know? It’s so stereotypical just adding a mum next to a footballer.’

Rebecca looked confused.

‘So what? Footballers have mums. That’s real life.’ She shrugged her shoulders and took a sip of her coffee. Kristin could feel her frustration building. This wasn’t what she wanted from Rebecca. Her old confidant and one of the few women she thought she could talk to honestly

about anything. Yet Kristin found herself trying to have a conversation that Rebecca kept shutting down. She tried again.

‘Yeah, totally. I just, I had this idea where the ad was going to really focus on women. I made this big deal about the AFL bringing forward the women’s league three years and there being so much momentum behind it. It would have been the perfect chance to be a frontrunner in that space and the company loved it. Then on the day, I just lost track of that. I got all flustered and turned it into the other storyline. It was easier, and Dan seemed happy with the change.’ She caught herself saying his name. She hadn’t spoken his name aloud since she’d learnt what he’d done.

‘Oh, what’s he like, what’s he like!’ Rebecca beamed at her.

Kristin had to hide her disgust. She hadn’t thought Rebecca would care. She saw footballers all the time in her job now. Why would she get all girly over Dan?

‘He’s nice.’ Kristin retorted, before trying again to bring Rebecca around.

‘I just hoped that I would be able to make something that was ground breaking. Something new that people would say I was the first at doing it in that way. I don’t know – I just didn’t ever want to end up in that stupid blog.’

‘I don’t really care about it to be honest. I hate that whiny stuff.’

Kristin was taken aback. She'd thought Rebecca would be concerned enough to ask more about it as a woman working in sport, especially after her experience at *The Agency*.

'I hate when the feminists complain about this stuff, I think it just makes us all look stupid. Like all we do is complain. Just shut up and get over it, you know?' Rebecca rolled her eyes and she brought her latte glass to her lips.

Kristin didn't know how to respond. She hated *Fan Fatale* too. But what Rebecca had just said sounded so ridiculous. Then another thought struck her. Maybe Rebecca would think that she was 'complaining and whining' too. Kristin took a steadying breath.

'Don't you think we need to make a bit of noise about it though Bec?' She said in what she hoped was a calm and friendly tone. 'I understand that you don't want to be seen as "whinging about it" and looking like all you're doing is complaining. But surely we need to talk about this stuff? I mean, I wish I talked about it more with people before I made that ad. Maybe I could have avoided all this?'

Kristin tried to frame her statements as questions. Maybe this would help Rebecca understand. Help her see the need to be Kristin's ally as she tried to think things through. Hadn't Rebecca left *The Agency* because Brian wouldn't pay her what she was worth? This affected her as well, didn't she see that?

‘I just don’t think it’s that bad.’ Rebecca placed her glass back down on the saucer with finality.

‘I can still do everything I want to. I’ve got a good job in sport, which is what I wanted. I don’t feel disadvantaged. I’ve never been held back. I hate talking about this crap, it’s such a waste of time. It’s not like ‘effing Mad Men and we’re getting our arse’s pinched by dickheads on a power trip. There would be a riot if someone slapped my arse! And, you know what? Some of us don’t want to be powerful women. We just want to do our jobs. I don’t think you have anything to worry about. You did a good job, the ad you made was lovely. Who cares what those idiots think.’

‘Thanks Bec.’ Kristin could only manage to take the compliment baffled by her friend’s resistance. She took another slow sip, worried that she’d left her old friend behind. Rebecca was just an assistant to a man in power while Kristin was fighting to gain her own.

She wasn’t even going to ask her what she thought about women’s football coming along in 2017, she knew the answer.

‘It’s definitely better than what it was back then’ added Rebecca as an afterthought. Kristin nodded, unable to say anything that wouldn’t put her in the ‘whiny feminist’ category.

‘My mum would kill to have my job,’ Rebecca continued. ‘She’s a massive Geelong fan. She used to volunteer down the Club doing the washing and selling raffle tickets when they needed

extra cash but they would never hire her. She just had babies and worked as a relief teacher every now and then. She'd be filthy if I was kicking up a stink about my job like that because I'm so lucky to have it you know? I think we've come so far, why screw it up?'

Kristin could feel her face reddening. Hopefully Rebecca didn't notice as Kristin diligently kept smiling and nodding. What was Rebecca even talking about now? Did her job as an assistant mean that everything was now better? That the women in Kristin's ad would be happy to be on the periphery?

Did Rebecca hear what she was saying?

'Yeah we're pretty lucky.' Kristin observed, before trying one final salvo. 'But don't you think there's still a bit of a way to go? I mean I've started thinking about the way women are characterised in footy. Wives and Girlfriends or footy sluts. Most of the women who play are called lesbians. And for girls like us who work in the industry in some way, I don't think we're looked at with the same respect as the men look at each other. It's like we're in their way or something.'

Kristin could see Rebecca's eyes start to glaze. When she realised Kristin had finished talking she looked back towards her and sighed.

‘I think women put themselves in those categories. They can be so opinionated.’ Rebecca took a big gulp of her coffee and stirred the remaining foam. Then she placed the cup down gently and with a quick flick of her long, golden locks she dismissed the topic.

‘So what else is new with you?’

Kristin wanted to shake Rebecca. To scream at her to be on her side. She was meant to be her friend. Kristin couldn’t do it alone anymore. The meetings with all the men, the jokes, the smiling the head nodding. She wanted someone who understood.

‘Not much, just work, work, work.’

ELEVEN

10.12.15

Kristin flopped on a rickety old wooden seat along the boundary line and took a breath.

They were shooting out at Brunswick Street Oval which she loved with its rich football history, gorgeous grand stand and city views. It was an unseasonably cool day. One of the last days where you feel the crisp air nibble at your exposed skin before the harsh summer settles in for the holidays. The sun was peeking through the clouds just to take a little of the bite out of the cold breeze. The air was still. It was footy perfection.

This was going to make it all okay, wasn't it?

She'd put women in the ad now who weren't just arm candy and performing 'passive' roles. That's what she'd said she did, didn't she – she'd kept the women 'passive', she'd 'sidelined' them. Kristin repeated the words over in her head, 'passive', 'sidelined'... they were words she'd used before. Words she'd used to talk about this campaign. She'd written them in her pitch document with her original idea, they were the words she had used to talk about what she wasn't going to do. She was bringing women to the front. She had forced herself to include women in a new way – she didn't care about women's football. But she'd made the effort to think about it for the sake of her job. She knew this was a new market opening up and she had to be on top of it so

she did the research, she made the effort and she still failed. She still couldn't believe that she had failed. How did it happen? She'd done so much work.

But now she'd pushed her original vision back to the front and had female footballers in the mix. Kristin was still mortified at herself for letting it all fall away in the last shoot. It was so hectic that day when they filmed the last ad. She'd been unprepared and overwhelmed. She'd let others take care of things for her in a moment of fear and weakness.

That was then and this was now. Kristin felt she'd learned that she didn't want to be in the shadows. She wanted to excel in her career. She wanted to be important and she wanted to take responsibility.

This new ad would fix everything. Brian's disappointment in her. Her standing at *The Agency*. The relationship with their new clients. It would get *Fan Fatale* off her back. It would erase everything.

Dan placed his hand on her shoulder from behind and she jumped.

'Shit, oh Dan, sorry.' She mumbled, annoyed at herself for swearing in front of an athlete.

'Sorry, didn't mean to scare 'ya.' He giggled.

‘No it’s ok, was just off in another universe.’ Within a second she went from being self-conscious in front of the star to feeling sick with the realisation of who this person actually was to her now. Kristin swallowed hard to keep the bile down.

‘Yeah, I get that.’ He sniggered. ‘I just wanted to say thanks for today. I know the last one was a bit messed up or whatever so thanks for doing it again. It’s a big deal for me, or that’s what my management said anyway.’

‘No, no, thank you for being so understanding, I’m really sorry we had to re-shoot. We should’ve got it right the first time.’ Kristin grovelled, feeling pathetic and helpless and completely contradictory. What would her career be without the cooperation of this man?

‘Nah, it’s cool. Who could have guessed what people would say? People are so precious about all that stuff these days.’

Kristin felt like she was having an out-of-body experience. Here was this man, this athlete, standing in front of her and thanking her and being completely professional and nice to her. She breathed deep. She thought about how easy it’d be to forget what she knew and just deal with the polite person in front of her. He was a good guy if she could do that.

‘People are so precious these days...’. His words rung through her. Was she being precious? What was done was done. Was in the past. He was perfectly lovely to her – didn’t that matter?

Was Cathy being ‘precious’? Was Tina? No one really knew what happened that night, it was Cathy’s word against Dan’s.

But Kristin wanted to punch him. And hug him. He’d made everything so hard, but so easy at the same time. She knew how much athletes hated the promotional side of the business, let alone this incredibly annoying circumstance of having to do it twice. He was going to save her career. Dan was a villain and her hero right now. She’d stuffed up and he was treating her like she was doing him the favour. She could feel tears building. And aggressively forced them back down.

Kristin cleared her throat. ‘Yeah, well it was my job to know what was wrong with the first one so I’m sorry about that. But we’ve fixed it now so thanks for your help.’ Dan smiled and she saw why he was so popular with his young fans. He looked like a member of a boy band – inoffensive and sweet with hair flopping over his baby face.

‘This one is going to be great.’ She continued. ‘It will put *Country Coffee* right up there as the first company to outwardly embrace women’s football. And you’ll be tied to that positive message now. People are going to love you. This will be the start of a lot of positive media for you and your club. *Country Coffee* might even sponsor your women’s team when the league starts – how great would that be?’

Kristin could feel the spin flowing out of her. But this time she wasn’t selling a product or event, she was trying to convince herself that she wasn’t talking to a criminal. That this was a

normal business conversation to a client who could provide more business to *The Agency* and help propel her career as well. Kristin was disgusted with herself.

‘Yeah, I can’t wait until we have a women’s team at the Club!’ He winked at Kristin and laughed. She forced a confused smile back not comprehending his tone.

‘Though they probably won’t be interested in us boys, will they!’

Kristin laughed instinctively and hit him gently on the shoulder with her clipboard. It was an instant reflex and she immediately panicked. She’d do that to Liam or any of the boys if they made a silly but offensive joke. Flirt while faux-attempting to chastise them. Not showing how outraged she was at anything they said, burying any reaction in a girlish giggle. Laughing along with them. As one of them.

‘Oh, stop it, you’re so bad!’ Kristin chuckled like they were old friends. But he wasn’t her friend, wasn’t her colleague. He was her meal ticket and he was a monster.

Dan laughed, ‘I know, I know. I better not make those kinds of jokes anymore, you never know who’s listening!’

Kristin smiled deliberately at him and tapped her nose in a sassy and sarcastic way. If she didn’t know what he had done, would she be genuinely laughing? Liam said this kind of stuff all

the time and she joked along with him. But he hadn't assaulted a passed-out woman. He was harmless.

'Well, you're all done for the day Dan, so you can take off now.' She smiled widely and hoped he wouldn't realise how fake she was being.

'Yeah, thanks, can't wait to see it on TV!' He leant in and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Kristin froze. And time stood still.

She could feel Dan's unwelcome approach into her personal space. The forcefulness of it. And she couldn't do anything but accept him in her corporate compliancy. In that small moment, he could have done anything to her. She felt like a statue as the predator advanced. Kristin didn't move, didn't even flinch. Then he pulled away.

'See ya!' And he bounced off.

Kristin felt like she had held her breath the entire time they had been speaking now Kristin was panting like she'd just run to escape an attacker in a dark alley.

But she couldn't think about Dan anymore. She had to put him out of her mind. Her focus needed to be on this campaign and to get *Fan Fatale* to finally shut the fuck up.

She smiled to herself picturing a sad, lonely little blogger sitting in the dark in front of her computer having just seen her new ad and having nothing to write. Nothing to complain about because the ad was so perfect. Kristin had portrayed strong women, women in sport and promoted a young gun as well as some god-awful coffee. But coffee that was climate conscious. She'd nailed it.

'Kristin!' She spun around rapidly to see Veronica and Mark bounding over to her. Veronica rushed up to her with a hug and Mark patted her on the back.

'That was great Kristin, the location looks awesome on the vision the producer just played back for us – it's essential Melbourne, local footy and coffee. This was a great idea!' Mark beamed as Veronica bobbed her head along smiling.

'It's so good Kristin, we love it.' She beamed.

'Thank you,' Kristin kept humble, 'I just really appreciate you allowing us to give it another go.'

'Well we were actually just talking about that.' Mark started looking at Veronica with a Cheshire Cat like grin. 'I've been in the marketing game for a long time and I rarely come across someone who puts their hand up when they've made the wrong call. Let alone works so hard to rectify the mistake.'

Kristin blinked. What were they talking about?

‘Most of the time when something misses the mark it’s all excuses and people trying to shift the blame onto each other or they just bury their heads until it passes. Or if the social media is bad enough, they just quit.’

Kristin remained confused.

‘So I’d like to offer you a job.’

‘Excuse me?’ Kristin replied bluntly, then realised how rude she’d sounded. She was in shock. ‘I mean, I don’t understand?’ She looked back and forth between the two of them.

‘I want you to work with us!’ Mark laughed, sensing her unease and trying to lighten the mood. ‘The role would be Campaign Manager and you would run our advertising department – reporting into me directly.’

‘Umm...’ was all Kristin could manage. What was going on?

‘It’s a lot, we know.’ Veronica cooed. ‘You don’t have to make a decision right now. We’ll send you all the documents with the official job offer with all the information and you can think it over during the Christmas break.’

‘OK.’ Kristin paused. ‘I’m sorry, I just didn’t expect anything like this.’

‘Don’t be sorry!’ Mark patted her on the shoulder. ‘We did spring it on you but we didn’t want to waste any time. Like I said, you’re a rare breed Kristin. Watching you work these past few weeks, I’ve seen something in you that I want on my team. I think you’re wasted in your role at *The Agency*, you’re running the show there but get none of the credit. This job would see you run the show and it is your show. We’ve got other brands under our umbrella, Earth friendly washing powder, a range of spices and we’re about to take over a linen company and go into bed sheets – there’s so much that you would be able to manage the creative direction of.’

Kristin’s world was spinning. Washing powder? Sheets? Was this what she wanted?

‘Wow, this all sounds really exciting.’ She smiled through her teeth at the two executives standing in front of her in expensive suits on the grass oval. They couldn’t have looked more out of place.

‘Think about it, take your time.’ Veronica assured her.

‘I will, thank you so much.’

‘No worries Kristin. We look forward to seeing how this all comes up. I’ve got a good feeling about it.’ Mark smiled and they both walked off.

Kristin sat back down on her bench. The cool wood seat felt oddly comfortable. Like when she used to sit along the boundary at local football growing up, watching her father terrorise his opponent on the field. He was ferocious. She loved it when the play came close enough for her to hear his sledges. Kristin was so proud that he was her dad. He was the big bully everyone was afraid of and it made her feel so safe. He was on her side and he'd always be there to protect her like he did his teammates.

Kristin looked out across the empty oval and wondered if he could protect her now.

TWELVE

14.12.15

Nothing. There was nothing.

Kristin refreshed the page on her phone again and again. She opened twitter and searched the brand's handle and hashtag to see if there was anything that had come through in the last few seconds since her last search. She'd already torn both of the newspapers on the table in front of her at the café to shreds. Nothing.

She felt a severe anxiety. Nothing is good, right?

Is nothing good?

There was no slamming of her ideas, no ripping apart the reputation of her employer, no commentary on the representation of women. But there was no praise either. Was Kristin hoping for a virtual pat on the back from her online harasser? Some sort of validation, or apology for what she had previously written? Someone to tell her she'd done a good job? That she was good at her job?

No, she instantly dismissed the thought. She didn't care about her. She'd prefer *Fan Fatale* remain silent and leave her and the game she loved alone. In fact, the silence proved Kristin

correct. That that sad little shut-in didn't care about football and its players, she didn't care about the game. She only wanted to pull it apart and cause problems for everyone who loved it. She was a parasite. Who got up on her soapbox only when it suited her.

Kristin brought up the ad on her phone, put her headphones in, and watched it again for the umpteenth time. She watched women training on a suburban oval working hard on kicking and handballing drills. Women looking focused, determined and athletic. Dan jogs by and they catch his eye. The women finish up their training and the female coaching assistant has the coffees ready. As the women enjoy a warm brew in the cold morning chill Dan walks up and says, 'Looks fantastic!'

A female footballer says, 'it is, try some!', and hands Dan a cup of coffee. He drinks it, smiles and says, 'I was talking about your skills out there but this is pretty great too!' They all take a sip and laugh together. Another player then says, 'well I'm ready to go again, come on, show us what you got!' Dan follows the women back onto the pitch and they have a kick-to-kick as the vision fades and the *Country Coffee* logo appears on the screen.

Kristin smiled to herself. It was exactly what she had always wanted for this campaign. Simple. Easy. And organic. She didn't want to push a huge 'women in football' agenda, it was a slowly, slowly approach. Giving visibility and subtly placing women in a role they hadn't traditionally been shown in on commercial TV advertising. It was a modern approach but the local football ground backdrop brought it back to grass roots footy. To the romanticism and nostalgia of the game that its fans cherished. And Dan had done so well. She tried to ignore his

now problematic placement in the ad for a short moment to see the ad through the eyes of people lucky enough not to know his vile deed. He played the role perfectly. He was a natural in front of the camera. He looked great, his smile was charming and he knew instinctively how to hold the coffee to get the logo placement right. Everything about it worked. It was perfect. But it wasn't.

This video made Kristin angrier than the first one. It should have been the first one. She couldn't believe how she'd let it slip away from her. How she'd allowed that video to be created and put a blight on her pristine career.

If Kristin hadn't been such a pushover, such a weak and pathetic person, she would have backed herself in. She'd have said no to those who doubted her. No. She wasn't going to make any changes to her original idea. She'd done the work, done the research. She knew what the market was like. They hadn't helped, they hadn't read, hadn't spent all their personal time developing a campaign that hit all the requirements. They'd just walked in on the day, had one tiny thought and had believed that that was enough to re-do an entire brand campaign.

And she had let them do it.

Thinking back to that day, when Liam came up to her, all she could feel was his disapproval. She'd gone into overdrive to fix it. To make him look at her like he admired her. Respected her.

If only Kristin was strong enough to not care. If only everything had gone to plan. Then she'd have spent the Christmas party drinking happily with the boys. She'd have ignored Tina,

wouldn't even know about Dan. She'd have ridden the high of her success into the Christmas break, told Mark and Veronica thanks but no thanks. She'd be on top of the world right now with a job that she loved. Where she was loved.

Instead all Kristin felt was the guilt of having a rapist in her campaign.

She watched the ad one more time.

She wanted to cry.

She was so proud of it but she couldn't be. It shouldn't have happened like this. It should have been her defining moment.

Kristin checked all the social media accounts again. Still nothing. No people were giving it their digital thumbs up and sharing it around. No love, but no barbs either. Nothing like last time.

Kristin wished she could feel relaxed about it but she couldn't. She picked up Veronica's business card that was sat next to her computer, flicked it over in her fingers. Could she work for them? Could she work for a brand, work purely in advertising for products that sat on the shelves of supermarkets? Maybe. Maybe it would make everything easier. If she had a normal job, 9-to-5 doing something she wasn't so passionate about, then perhaps she could switch off. Perhaps she'd enjoy football more if she wasn't so close to it.

Leaning back in her chair in her little writer's oasis, Kristin imagined the freedom a job like that would give her. She'd have no professional ties to the sport. She'd have her weekends back. There'd be more time to write. Maybe she could write that novel she'd always wanted to. And she could do it under her own name. She'd be free.

She wouldn't have to worry about stumbling across another landmine like Dan.

It didn't sound so bad. It sounded easier. All Kristin wanted was to write and enjoy football again. She couldn't wait until the next season started and she could walk back into the MCG and forget everything. The previous Grand Final wouldn't matter anymore. There'd be another one to win. She wouldn't have to sit with the boys and worry about what they thought of her. She wouldn't have to sit in those corporate seats again at games among all the fake fans. Maybe she could finally become a cheer squad member and sit behind the goals with the real fans.

Kristin smiled to herself for the first time in weeks. She could finally be a real fan if she left *The Agency*. She'd had to keep so much of herself hidden for so long in this job. She'd convinced herself it was worth it to be part of that world. To know that she was on the inside. That she was better than a regular football fan. That she had more access, more insight.

Kristin sighed. This was the feeling holding her back. She did have more than most people. And she loved it. Could she really give all that up just to sleep a little easier? There must be heaps more players like Dan in the league. He couldn't be the only one. He was young, he did something stupid. It was a mistake. People made mistakes. He was probably drunk and doesn't

even remember what he did. He might be mortified if someone told him. He'd be sorry. He was a good guy. He had been so nice. He had done everything she'd asked to get the campaign right. He was good.

But then she thought of Tina and Kristin covered her face in shame. She was a bad woman. How could she think these things about the rape of other women? What if it had happened to her?

What was she going to do? Kristin wished she had enough money saved up to jump on a plane and fly somewhere far away with no internet so she could escape.

That was exactly what she wanted. Escape.

Kristin clicked out of all her open tabs on her computer that were playing the ad or on the social media accounts of *Country Coffee*. All the football news sites. She closed everything and opened a word document and started writing fiction, something she hadn't done in years.

The story flowed out of her. A woman had just discovered her favourite sporting hero's deepest darkest secret. Now she was on a crusade to bring him down. To bring justice. Kristin typed away inspired and invigorated. Painting her character as the strong, confident and morally sound woman that she could only wish that she was.

THIRTEEN

24.12.15

The *VLine* train sped through the Victorian country side, whipping violently through golden fields of canola, revealing desolate plains of red dirt the closer Kristin got to her home town. Yellows, reds, browns and greys. The colours of Australian Christmas.

She sweltered in the barely air-conditioned carriage attempting to read the newspaper and the coverage of the upcoming Boxing Day test. But the heat distracted her. It wasn't the temperature. It was the pressure cooker inside her. The burning anticipation of going home.

In two more hours, her parents would be waiting for her at the station with open arms. Hafey, named by her Tigers loving father, would be barking a welcome. Kristin was excited to see them. Recently she'd had more moments than she could count yearning for a big bear hug from her mother. Not that she'd ever let anyone know, least of all her mother. She was a strong, independent woman. She didn't need her mum.

She continued to flick through the pages of the paper. Not reading anything, not even really looking at the photos. Just acting busy. Kristin wanted to keep busy. She needed to distract herself from the disturbing thoughts that would occur the moment she allowed herself to stare out the window to take in the vista and let her mind travel outside the tin can train.

North west country Victoria was not one of Australia's most famous landscapes. There were no white, sandy beaches, no creeks or rivers, no interesting rock formations or forest or mountains. It was dry bush, often left for dead. Grey eucalyptus trees with peeling black bark. Endless fields fenced with rusted bronze wire that seemed to contain nothing more than red dirt. It didn't inspire much. Yet to Kristin it was beautiful. It was home.

She loved Melbourne. She loved the concrete jungle and glass skyscrapers. But the bush was honest. There was no hiding in the expansive desert. No cover.

She checked her phone. No service. She couldn't even play with her twitter account to keep herself from thinking about everything she wanted to escape.

But the urge was too much and she caved, moving her gaze to the rustic scenes flashing rapidly by her and let her head collapse on her shoulder as she stared into the Australian outback abyss.

Merry Fucking Christmas Kristin, she sighed to herself.

Veronica's phone call replayed in her mind. She had called her to 'wish you a very merry Christmas' but was still chasing her for an answer.

‘This could be the start of something huge for you. For us... you know Dan just loved you. Maybe we could do another campaign with him and you two can work together again. Wouldn’t that be amazing?’

Kristin shuddered.

Dan. Dan. Dan.

She’d thought of his name more than her own over the last month. All she could think of was names other than her own. All the people she was letting down either way with her impending decision.

Dan.

Tina.

Cathy.

Brian.

Mum.

Dad.

Kristin didn’t even know anymore who her work was affecting. Who she was hurting.

She took out her headphones and began to blare some Eminem to drown out the voices in her head that were telling her to walk away from it all.

‘There she is!’

Kristin could hear her mother’s excited voice as she alighted the train before she saw her, standing back holding Hafey’s lead as he barked at the commotion. Her father trying to calm his excited wife down.

Kristin gave herself a mental slap across the face to wake herself up and turn into ‘happy to be home for Christmas Kristin’. She forced a smile. Kristin was happy to be home, to have a break, but she was exhausted. She was so tired of pretending to be ok. To love her job. To be excited about being in the bubble of football. She just wanted to go into hibernation, like a bear, and wake up in a couple of months when it was all over and she could just go to a football game without any of this hanging over her. The game. She just wanted the game.

She bounced over to her parents and fought back a tear as her mother squeezed her. She gave her reserved father a brief embrace and then bent down to scratch Hafey’s floppy ears. He jumped in her lap to give his paws a break from the sizzling concrete.

Kristin held him in her arms as her parents collected her luggage and made their way to the car. The drive to her childhood home was always confronting. As they made their way through the small town they passed through Kristin’s personal history. Her primary school. Her high

school. The local football oval where she spent every weekend watching her dad then her brother play. The takeaway shop that sold her and her friends beer when they were underage. The movie theatre she went to on innocent teenage dates. The music shop she worked at part-time to save money to move to Melbourne. She loved seeing all these things again and going back through her memories but it also made her think how different she was now. The familiar feeling of coming back home as a success and as having achieved something wasn't there. This time Kristin couldn't decide if she'd come back better.

The town was decorated in the spirit of Christmas. Red and green tinsel was everywhere. Cardboard cut-outs and statuettes of Santa and snowmen were adorned with sunglasses. No one was on the street. It was just under forty degrees on Christmas Eve and the whole town had migrated to the banks of the Murray River for salvation.

They arrived home to welcome air-conditioning. The house smelt exactly the same.

Her mother had been talking the whole time during the drive. Kristin had been nodding and adding the occasional 'yes, ok, sounds good,' without really listening. She still wasn't sure what the plans were for the festivities but she knew it was going to be hectic. Family from here and there, breakfast here, lunch there, drinks here, dinner there. Presents in the morning. Secret Santa in the evening. The whole day was planned from six am until whoever was last man standing. It sounded exhausting. She just wanted to sleep.

Kristin took her things to her childhood bedroom and collapsed on her old bed. Her room was still the same. Posters of footy idols Glen Jakovich and John Worsfold. Her most prized possession which her landlord forbade her from hanging in her rental apartment, a framed and signed Ben Cousins guernsey from 2006 when the Eagles last won the Premiership. She had all the Grand Final posters from then as well. Three from the Herald Sun adorned her wardrobe doors. Her little West Coast Eagles oasis in the middle of the Victorian desert.

Despite her exhaustion Kristin knew she had to play the prodigal daughter. She retrieved her gifts from her suitcase and re-joined her family in the kitchen.

‘Are those all for me!’ Her little sister piped up.

‘You wish jellyfish!’ Kristin smirked as she hugged her. ‘Go put them under the tree, I’m not going to try because you’ll just move them around anyway.’

‘She rearranges that tree every night!’ Her mother laughed. ‘Always the perfectionist!’

‘Kristin! Did you get shorter?!’ She turned to find her brother had emerged from shooting hoops outside and he gave her a sweaty squeeze.

‘Eww, gross! You’re so disgusting!’ At six-foot-five her brother was a behemoth to her and was impossible to fight off.

Kristin couldn't help but smile. The anxiety of the last few months washed away. Everything was the same here. Always the same.

Her brother and sister made their way into the lounge room, fighting over what was on the TV. Emma wanting to settle in to watch the Christmas Carols and Brendan demanding ESPN. Kristin sat at the kitchen bench and watched her mother start to organise dinner.

'So the train was good? Not too hot?' She cooed as she started peeling carrots.

'It was fine.'

'It'd give you a chance to catch up on your reading I suppose, you must not get too much time for that now with how busy you are living the football executive life!' She made a funny little movement indicating how posh Kristin now was. It made Kristin snigger. People in the country didn't really understand sports administration and she definitely wasn't an executive just because her mother had purchased her a new blouse from the 'executive' range at the town's small clothing store for her first day of work. Everyone thought what she was doing was so exciting. So glamorous. If only they knew.

'Well I've been thinking about that.' Kristin needed more than anything to talk about her job. But she was so fearful that she'd sound like she was throwing some golden opportunity away.

'Thinking about what dear?'

‘My job – how busy I am. All the time. The pressures...’

‘Yes?’ Her mother wasn’t really paying attention, distracted by unpeeled vegetables.

‘Well someone offered me another job that would be less crazy and I’m thinking about it.’

Kristin was looking at the floor as she spoke. Like she was embarrassed that she was thinking about another job that was not related to football. That was not related to her childhood dreams and why she moved to the city.

She was embarrassed.

‘Wow, my daughter is a wanted woman! What’s the job sweetheart? At a football club? The sports section of a newspaper?’

Kristin gulped. ‘It’s actually at the company that I worked with to do that coffee ad with Vollie.’

‘So you’d be working with Vollie?’

‘Well, not really. Maybe if they do another ad with him but I’d be managing the ad campaigns for a few of the brands they have. Like the coffee and they own a washing powder

brand and... stuff like that.' She trailed off. The job sounded so, so average coming from her own mouth.

'Oh, ok.' Her mother paused and looked at her. 'Is that what you want to do though? Advertising? I thought you loved being a sports writer?'

It was a punch in the guts.

Kristin wasn't a sports writer. She allowed everyone to believe that she wrote about sport to build this idea up in their heads. To believe that she was more than a glorified assistant to Brian. That she wrote important things and people cared what she had to say. It was all she wanted. And hearing her mother say that to her, made Kristin realise that not only wasn't she a writer. She wasn't even close.

'Well I don't do that much writing in what I'm doing now, and it's a lot of long hours and not much money. This new job would be a lot more money. I wouldn't have to work weekends at the footy so I could come home and visit more often.' Kristin had lost sight now of who she was trying to sell into this job. Herself or her mother who loved her daughter working with the stars of the game.

'I guess that's a good thing.' Her mother stirred a pot, seemingly unaware that she was questioning the need for Kristin to come back home more often.

‘I think they just liked what I did for them so they offered me this job – I’ve got a few days to think about it.’

‘You know we’ll support any decision you make sweetheart.’

Dissatisfied for the first time since stepping into the house, Kristin got up off her stool and went to the fridge and grabbed a beer. She moved to the living room. Her siblings were wrestling each other across the floor for the television remote. Kristin folded her legs up under her and settled back into the big armchair in the corner of the room and watched them. They were both so fiery, so passionate in their quest for the remote. Unrelenting. Kristin had lost her fire. She didn’t know what to fight for anymore.

Things were starting to blur and Kristin felt the poorly constructed paper crown from her Christmas cracker sag over the corner of her eye.

She was reclined in a deck chair with the other adults as they watched the kids throw water balloons at each other on the lawn. The scotch and cola pre-mix she was drinking was sickly sweet and hurt her teeth but she continued to down them. There wasn’t much of a choice with this crowd. She needed something stronger than beer. It had been a long day.

Just when she had settled in, felt at home and like she could turn herself off from the noise, they had come at her like a pack of hyenas. Her mother had told everyone that she was thinking about leaving her job.

‘You can’t do that! How will I get my footy tickets?’

‘Why would you give an opportunity like that up? Isn’t it your dream job?’

All day she teed off to defend herself. ‘I haven’t made any decisions.’, ‘I’m not looking to leave, someone just offered me a job and I want to think about it.’, ‘I’ll still help you with your tickets.’

After she quelled some of the disdain her family had shown her for even thinking about giving up such a post, the rest of the questioning began. The things they really wanted to know.

‘What’s Dan like?’

‘Is he as good looking in real life as he is on TV?’

‘Is he single?’

‘Do you really have his number in your phone – call him right now so we can talk to him!’

‘Will he take you to the Brownlow next year?’

‘You should date him.’

‘Will you get to meet more of his teammates?’

‘Can you get him to sign a guernsey for me?’

It didn't stop all day. The adoration. The need for them to show her off. One of her cousins had called his friend in the middle of Christmas dinner to put her on the phone to confirm that yes, she had met Dan Colpevole, yes, he was a nice guy and maybe she could try to get an autograph for him.

Maybe I could get him to sign a confession.

Kristin felt sweaty and sick. Sick of everything. Her whole family just loved him. And loved her for what she was doing. She wondered if they would care about her the same way if she had never got this job. What if she'd just got a job out of uni working in retail?

Dan didn't even play for any of the teams they supported. They just loved that she knew him. That she could hold up her phone and prove she had him as a contact. Could call him at any time

if she wanted to. That she could get them signed merchandise and free tickets. She could tell them what he was really like.

All she really wanted was to tell everyone what he was really like.

Like a bolt of lightning in a summer storm Kristin decided that she would. She lazily removed herself from her deck chair and started making the rounds to all the cousins and aunts and uncles to say goodnight and feign enthusiasm and give promises.

You want to go to the Grand Final next year? Sure! You want a signed football to raffle off at your school's fundraiser? No worries! You want a corporate box for your birthday? I'll see what I can do!

Her brother called her a lightweight as she headed inside the house and she paused for a micro-second. It was the sort of comment that not too long ago would have incensed her enough to stay. To keep drinking with the boys until they were all completely written off and she was one of them. It was a source of pride whenever they had family get-togethers and the next day people would say, 'Well the boys and Kristin were up all night'. Or 'The boys and Kristin will be hungover today!'

'The boys and Kristin.' That was always how she wanted to be referred to.

Now, she didn't care. She poked her tongue out at her brother. Grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and sat down on her yellow and blue bedspread. And wrote.

She wrote everything. What Tina had told her. How much it still affected Tina and Cathy. How Dan was the face of a new campaign that was promoting women being part of the game as equals and he was a hypocrite.

She copy and pasted it in to the 'contact us' section of the *Fan Fatale* website and clicked 'submit'.

For the first time since the Grand Final, Kristin slept a solid eight hours.

FOURTEEN

26.12.15

‘We should meet.’

That was it. That’s all Kristin got from this so-called feminist football blogger who exposed the underbelly of the sport she loved.

She’d expected, ‘this is the most scandalous story I’ve ever heard!’ or, ‘you’ve exposed one of the biggest stories in sport’ and maybe even, ‘you’re a hero.’

She’d put her heart and soul in the piece. She’d written it beautifully and she was so proud of it. Maybe *Fan Fatale* wanted to tell her in person how great it was?

She replied ‘Sure – name the place and time.’ And closed her laptop.

Kristin emerged from her childhood bedroom feeling slightly hungover and guilty. The rest of her family were already up and positioned under the air-conditioning in front of the T.V. Ready for the Boxing Day test to start.

‘Good afternoon!’ Her mother greeted her with her standard greeting. No matter how early she got up, it was never early enough to escape this judgment from her mother. She smirked and grabbed a croissant.

‘Get us a beer sis!’ Her brother waved an empty bottle at her. It was afternoon somewhere in the world apparently. She grabbed him a cold one and took his empty bottle.

‘Did you get one for yourself or are you too soft after hitting the hay early last night!’ He joked. She smiled at him and internalised the frustration of the familiar dynamic. You couldn’t stay up late enough or get up early enough around here.

‘I’ll have one in a minute you alcoholic.’ Kristin defended herself, though the last thing in the world she wanted was a beer at nine-thirty in the morning. She just wanted the comfort of a Melbourne latte. She searched through her mother’s cupboards for anything that could resemble good coffee. She found four packets of *Country Coffee* with his face on them. She slammed the doors closed. A beer sounded good after all.

Kristin sat down with her Dad, brother and few remaining cousins who didn’t make it home the night before, sleeping on their couches and pool toys and cracked one open as she pulled out her phone and kept refreshing her emails.

After about an hour she got her response.

‘Tomorrow. 10am. *The Red Wheelbarrow* café in Brunswick.’

Kristin almost choked on her beer. She hadn’t planned on returning to the city until after new year’s. She wanted to stay in her country home town bubble for as long as possible. To figure out what she was going to do. But what if this was it? What if *Fan Fatale* was going to offer her an opportunity to be a secret blogger like her? They could rule the blogosphere, breaking stories and exposing scandals together. She could be a writer. This could be her ticket to get out of middle management corporate life and do what she’d always dreamed of. First, she’d get on the blog, then she’d get picked up by the Melbourne daily papers, then TV. Kristin could feel the blood pulsing through her veins. She was going to do it. She was finally ready to be someone in this industry.

Then she could leave *The Agency* behind forever.

Kristin got up and headed to her room to pack her stuff and look up the train timetable. She could be on the next train in two hours. Perfect.

She’d easily be able to make up some work excuse that she had to get back asap for something that had come up. She’d make herself sound very important. Drop his name. They’d all be super proud and send her off with their blessing and requests for autographs.

The train ride home was excruciating. Kristin didn't sleep a wink that night as she devised scenario after scenario about what future could be awaiting her at the café the next day.

She didn't know what she should wear. She was treating this like a job interview and thought she should wear a suit. But it was hot, and it felt weird to put on her usual work suit of armour when she was technically on holidays. Kristin decided to play it cool and opted for a plain white t-shirt and nice jeans.

She'd never been to this café before and had a bit of trouble finding it down a random laneway off of Sydney Road in Brunswick. Kristin was nervous it was the wrong place. It looked run down and dirty but then remembered she was in hipster central so it was probably all part of the aesthetic charm. She found herself a table towards the back of the café and ordered a latte while she waited. She was, in typical Kristin fashion, fifteen minutes early.

Then she saw her and she almost choked on the foam of her coffee. What the hell was she doing here?

Anna had just arrived and had flicked her long, black hair at the barista, laughing at some shared joke between them. She batted her false eyelashes and ordered a coffee. Kristin wanted to shrink. She lifted up her menu and pretended not to see Anna. This was a disaster. What if she saw her meeting with *Fan Fatale* and told Brian? She'd be finished in football. Brian would see to that.

She kept her eyes focused on the cardboard menu, reading their pretentious description of smashed avocado over and over again.

‘Hello Kristin.’

Fuck.

She put down her menu and prepared her surprised-to-see-Anna face.

‘Oh, hello Anna! What are you doing here?’ She shrieked in a fake high-pitch shrill.

‘I’m here to talk to you!’

Anna pulled out a chair and sat opposite Kristin and nonchalantly crossed her legs revealing her upper thighs in her very short skirt. The waiter placed her coffee in front of her and she smoothly added a sachet of sugar and stirred, all while looking Kristin in the eye.

‘That was some piece you wrote.’ She smiled, enjoying every second of Kristin’s shock.

Kristin was suddenly very aware of the magnitude of her article and whose hands it was now in. She was searching herself to feel some guilt, she’d betrayed Tina by passing on her sister’s story so casually. But she wasn’t blaming herself for her participation in this situation. Her blame

was focused on Anna. She felt ridiculously enraged at the person who had done nothing but read an unsolicited article.

‘It’s you?’ Was all Kristin could manage.

‘Yeah, it’s weird, I know. But it’s me!’ She flashed one of her infamous fake grins. Kristin wanted to punch her in the face.

How could it be her? Then it made sense. That was why she hated *Fan Fatale* so much. It was never insightful, analytical or interested in the game. Because the person writing it didn’t know what the hell she was talking about. Kristin also realised why she had known so much about the creation of her ad campaign.

No one else could have known the details of it like someone from the inside. As Brian had pointed out to her when he posited that Kristin was capable of corporate espionage and sabotage – it was bleeding with internal access. Anna had torn her to pieces again and again. Then smiled to her face in faux sympathy. The rage was beginning to boil over.

‘Weird is a good word for it.’ Kristin shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

‘Yeah.’ Anna laughed and stirred her coffee. ‘So I wanted to talk to you about what you wrote.’

Kristin crossed her arms uncomfortably. She could only feel now that she had given her secret to the enemy. She'd been tricked, betrayed and she felt the fool.

'I think it was really brave of you to write that.' Anna started slowly, looking her in the eye and Kristin couldn't bear it. She never realised how much she abhorred the woman in front of her. However, there was a shift now in that Kristin was desperate to please Anna. She hated this new feeling that had washed over her in a matter of seconds. She wanted Anna's approval, she wanted her help. Anna had been writing all this time, doing something amazing. And Kristin hadn't. She'd been sneering at Anna and joking about her with the boys that she wouldn't amount to anything. That no one would take her seriously and she'd be a glorified secretary forever.

But now Kristin saw herself through Anna's eyes. Anna must be pitying her just as much. The woman who did all the work but got none of the praise. Who was working the job of three people while the boys club in *The Agency* took long lunches and left work an hour early because they had footy training. Kristin was the chump. She always had been when she thought she was playing the game with class, calculating her climb on the corporate ladder but she was a joke. Anna was making her moves, she was doing something real. Kristin despised her but was in admiration of what she'd done.

'I'm not going to publish it on my site.'

Kristin could feel the heat of hatred envelop her. Had Kristin treated Anna so badly that she was going to hold that against her and hold back this scandal that needed to be exposed? Was it that she couldn't stand that Kristin had written something better than her? That she'd finally have a well written piece of journalism on her site that would put all her other work to shame? Was she so conceited that she wouldn't expose one of football's creeps just to protect her pride? Did she have a crush on him?

'Why not?' Kristin retorted bluntly, almost snorting at Anna.

Anna calmly took a sip of her coffee and considered her words carefully. Kristin was infuriated by her patience. Anna was so in control and collected that she doubted that she had even read her article. How could Anna be so calm if she knew what he had done?

'Kristin, I need you to really think about what you wrote.' The urge to punch Anna was bubbling beneath Kristin's surface. She could feel how red her face must be.

'What do you mean?'

'I know this is difficult to talk about,' Anna began soothingly. 'It's such a horrific story and the fact that it happened to someone we know and love just kills me.'

Kills you? You didn't have to make the guy a loveable face of a family focused company!

Anna must have felt Kristin glowering at her as she went on.

‘I just can’t do that to Tina, Kristin.’ She looked down solemnly. Do what to Tina?

‘If Cathy wanted her story told she would have told it already. She’s the most important person in this story. If she doesn’t want it out there, we can’t do it on her behalf. It’s not fair.’

‘Not fair!’ Kristin spat involuntarily and instantly regretted her loss of control.

‘I know, I know.’ Anna soothed her. ‘It’s frustrating to hear, but we need to keep her front of mind. Imagine waking up to this going viral and you had no idea why. She’d have to go through all of it all over again. There would be police involved. The papers. The media. We can’t do that to her if she’s not ready to go public with it.’

‘What if we don’t mention any names?’ Kristin was desperate now. She could feel her opportunity to be a respected journalist slipped from her grasp. This was her story. This was her chance to do something important.

‘It doesn’t matter. Cathy would know it’s about her and she would have to go through that hell again. Her health and wellbeing is all I care about. I can’t put a woman through that. It has always been my rule.’

‘Always?’ Kristin’s ears pricked up.

‘This isn’t the first time someone has come to me with something like this Kristin. I get it all the time. And it’s always from the friends and families of a victim. People who are standing by killing themselves to help but knowing ultimately there is nothing they can do. I won’t ever publish anything without the express consent of the victim, and I have never had one come forward to me. That’s their decision. I won’t take that power away from them.’

Kristin couldn’t believe what she was hearing. It all made complete sense and was incredibly considerate, ethical and intelligent. Who was she talking to? This wasn’t the Anna she knew. The Anna who was a flirt and wore ridiculous clothes. Who pranced around the office like she was Tinkerbell, attempting to enchant the boys and get her way with the boss. She was a nuisance, a pest. Yet now she was telling Kristin on how to be a better woman? What the fuck was going on?

Silence dragged on as Kristin considered what Anna had said. She knew she was right. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt Cathy and Tina but she was so angry. And now angry to hear that this was happening to other women. That there were other players who were just like Dan. Players who played the game she loved.

Kristin wanted to cry. She was never getting out of this damn mess and she was going to have to rock up to *The Agency* in a week after the break was over and go on like nothing had happened. She wasn’t getting her big break. She wasn’t going to be a writer. She was a joke.

‘Why did you want to meet me?’ She suddenly asked. It dawned on her that Anna could have explained all this to her via email and kept her identity hidden. Why did she want Kristin to know who she was?

‘I wanted you to know.’ Anna looked down now, not speaking as confidently as she had just done. ‘I wanted you to know that I’m more than what you and the boys think of me.’

Kristin now looked down too as the wave of guilt hit her. What did Anna know about all they said about her?

‘And I know you won’t say anything, you’ll want to protect Tina. And now I know you’ve shared Cathy’s story I can go to Tina if I need to. I won’t though, just as long as you keep my secret too.’

Kristin squinted at Anna. Was she now being blackmailed? She couldn’t believe this. She’d come to this meeting with her heart full of possibilities. Now she felt more confined than ever. She couldn’t fight this battle anymore.

‘I won’t tell.’ Kristin managed to say through gritted teeth. Anna was right. She’d never want Tina to know that she had told Anna, of all people, her sister’s most guarded secret. Kristin was prepared to tell the world but the sting of people knowing she’d confided in Anna? She couldn’t handle that.

‘Thank you.’ Anna smiled like a little girl and finished her coffee. ‘I just want you to know how much I respect you Kristin.’

Kristin almost did a double take.

‘You’re so strong and confident and smart. Everyone loves you at *The Agency* and you’re going to go far in your career. I can see it.’ She paused. ‘I just want you to know that I’m working hard too, to make something of myself. I know you think I’m not that great at my job but hopefully now you know, well, at least you know I can do something.’

Kristin nodded at her understandingly and took the compliment for what it was worth.

‘Okay, I’m going to go. Thanks for making the time.’ Anna got up and smiled and sauntered out of the café, blowing a kiss to the barista on her way out.

Kristin sat at the table in shock, rapidly wiping away a tear of frustration from her cheek before anyone could see.

FIFTEEN

4.1.16

‘This is it. This is it. This is it.’ She told herself under her breath.

Kristin pushed open the glass doors to *The Agency* for what she had now convinced herself would be the last time. She was done. She was tired. She was going to take the job with *Country Coffee* even if it meant she might have to work with Dan again, at least she knew his bullshit, there were no more surprises.

But she couldn’t stand working with Anna anymore now that she knew who she was and what she could do to her. Was she going to be lurking over her shoulder in every meeting, watching her every move? Waiting for her to stuff up again and expose her on her childish website? And it was more than just Anna. Kristin wasn’t going to sit through Brian’s demands and criticism of her work before he took the ultimate credit for it. She wasn’t going to pretend she was here employed as a writer anymore, living some sort of fantasy that allowed her to justify her place in the world.

Kristin was living a lie and it wasn’t worth it. She would give up her free football tickets. The invitations to the parties that football players went to where she could feel for a fleeting moment that they were actually all friends and she was someone important. She wasn’t. She was broken. She was no one.

She could still feel important working somewhere else. Sure, Kristin wouldn't be as closely connected to football as she was now with all the connections *The Agency* gave her. But she had Dan as an ace up her sleeve now. He could be an in for her when she needed it.

Kristin shook her head at herself. What was she thinking? He was the reason she was leaving. What he had done. What he was getting away with. What people around her were willing to turn a blind eye to. Kristin was making a stand against all this hypocrisy, all this bullshit. She was going to be the bigger person and walk away. She deserved better.

'Good morning gorgeous, happy new year!' Tina chirped up from behind the reception desk. 'Did you have a wonderful break my dear?'

Kristin wanted to shake her. She held her gaze for a moment, searching for any recognition in her bright blue crystal eyes of what had happened between them. The secrets exchanged that had changed everything. There was nothing. It was done. Over.

Tina had crawled back under the rock of denial she had been living under for the past few years. Plastered her pink-lipped happy face back on. It was like watching a robot that had been reset from wanting to destroy the world to being everyone's best friend. No recollection. Blind complicity.

Kristin smiled falsely, trying to match her obliviousness, ‘It was great thanks Tina, happy new year to you too!’

Kristin powered through the office to her desk and fired off the email she had sitting in her drafts folder without re-reading it again. She was satisfied in her indignation. She selected Brian’s name from her list of ‘important contacts’ and requested an urgent meeting first thing this morning. As soon as the little swoosh sound came through that the email was sent, Kristin exhaled and fell back into her chair.

Her heart was pounding through her rib cage. Was this what she really wanted? Yes, she thought, yes, she needed to get out. She couldn’t handle this anymore. She didn’t want to be the girl who worked her arse off while no one noticed. Unless she stuffed up. She didn’t want to pretend to be so cool with everything. She was sick of the jokes, the innuendo, of pretending everything was so goddamn funny. She was sick of being left out even when she was supposed to be one of the boys.

And Kristin didn’t want to come into the office every day and see Anna across the room smirking, so satisfied with her secret life, knowing that she held more power than anyone there. That she was holding an armoury of assault weapons hidden from plain sight, ready to discharge the moment she felt like it.

Kristin was out.

She saw Brian enter out of the corner of her eye and kept a steely stare on her computer screen. He bustled into the office in an unbalanced way, like he was still asleep or slightly hungover. Still on holiday mode and not wanting to be back at work already. He gruffed a 'hello' grunt at her and she didn't move her eyes from her screen to meet his. She was game ready.

Within two minutes Brian approached her desk.

'Come sit in my office.'

Kristin jumped a little in her chair at his abruptness, surprised that he'd come to her in person. It wasn't a reply email or meeting request appearing in her calendar. He'd walked to her desk. That was different.

Brian escorted her back through *The Agency* to his glass office and closed the door behind her. She sat cautiously in the chair opposite his desk, like a student in trouble sitting in front of the principal.

'I know what you're thinking and I think it's a mistake.' He started and the mood changed. He was no longer the principal but a grovelling boyfriend begging her to stay. Kristin straightened herself up, she suddenly felt powerful.

'Mark called me before Christmas. He told me they'd spoken to you but were waiting for your answer.'

Brian wasn't even looking at her. He was a sheepish, little boy, staring at the papers on his desk and fiddling with a pen. She didn't say a word.

'It's a mistake Kris. This isn't you.'

She frowned. How dare he think he knew her. He didn't know who she was and what she wanted. He didn't know what she had been through.

'I know the last couple of months have been hard work. That whole campaign was challenging to say the least. But if you think walking away from all this - working for a coffee company for fuck's sake - is the right move then maybe you're not right for this job anyway.'

He was scolding her now and instantly she felt the mood switch back to principal and student. Kristin had thought he was about to beg her to stay because she was so amazing at her job. Now he was making her feel like a petulant child. How did she keep losing her power so quickly?

Kristin remained silent. She didn't know her role in this conversation anymore. She thought she'd storm in and say that she'd had enough and was taking a fabulous job offer that was going to pay her more money. That she'd be happy and Brian could take this job and shove it up *The Agency's* arse. But Brian's chastising pulled at her in a strange way. She despised him. She wanted to get away from him. Yet she desperately wanted to still impress him. To have him

think the world of her so he would continue to give her the access she wanted to the game she loved.

She remembered her meeting with Anna. How Anna had played it all so cool and to her advantage. Kristin could do that too. She could make this work for her. She was smarter than he was. And in realising that, Kristin knew her fate.

‘It’s not that I want to leave Brian, it’s just you promised me that my job would change and nothing has happened...’ she said meekly and cheekily, like a little girl promised the pony she never got.

Now Brian leant back in his chair and sighed.

‘Kris, I know. I know. It’s been so hectic over the off season. You know how it is. People think we’re busy when the football is on but they don’t realise how much goes on behind the scenes and it’s more and more each year. This whole campaign just took over and we had to deliver. But I haven’t forgotten what I said to you. Time just got away from me.’

Kristin nodded slowly showing her understanding, trying to play her cards right. She knew she wasn’t leaving *The Agency* and that she had never wanted to. Brian was right. Her mother was right. Her whole family were right. Anna was right.

She loved football. She loved working for a company that brought her closer to that world and she wasn't going to give that up, for anyone. She was in love with the game. She always would be and she would never let it go.

'Look,' Brian started flatly. 'Let's sort this out right now and put this rubbish behind us.' He grabbed a pen and paper and started making notes.

'Ok, so let's get you a pay raise, I can't do much with the current budget already signed off but we should be able to squeeze at least 2% out of it.' Kristin, tried to do that math in her head. She wished she knew if that was a lot. It didn't sound like it.

'We'll get you moved into a management role. You pretty much do that anyway and that has been in the works for a while. Liam will report into you. He can take on more of the account management duties and I'll give you the company blog which we will launch soon and the new website to run. You'll manage all our content – still running things by me of course.'

He kept jotting down these changes and Kristin's heart kept pounding. She was finally getting what she wanted.

'So you'll be Commercial Content Manager – how does that sound?'

The job title sounded like something that didn't exist. It was a weird mix of words that sounded good but didn't quite make sense. Still this job title edged her closer to being able to tell

people that she was a writer. It sounded more like she created things. But most importantly it sounded like she was in charge.

As soon as she realised she wasn't leaving Kristin felt calmness come over her. She realised her place in the world. Maybe it didn't matter that she wasn't happy or wasn't doing something that made her truly happy. She was where she was meant to be. She belonged there and that was enough to mask her ambivalence.

Kristin didn't even care what Brian was writing down on his scrap piece of paper as he attempted to fulfil her dreams. She just nodded and repeatedly said 'yes, thank you, yes, thank you.'

Brian stood up at the end of the transaction and offered his hand to shake. Kristin looked at his extended hand tentatively and embraced it. Her soul was sold. She felt immense relief.

'This is going to be a great season Kris.' Brian shook her hand tightly and she grimaced back at him. It was a new season. She was starting fresh with her new job title and outlook on her life. This season would be different.

'Oh and listen. I'm hosting my usual table for clients in the official function at the opening game for Round 1 again this year. You know Richmond vs. Carlton on the Thursday night? I'll give you and Liam tickets. I can't get you into the dinner but you can sit in the good seats and

I'm sure I can sneak you both into the bar after half time. Just a little something extra to say thanks.'

Kristin smiled.

'Thanks Brian, that means a lot.'

SIXTEEN

11.1.16

‘Kris? Kris... Kris!’

‘Sorry, what?’ Brian glared at her and she reactively shuffled the papers she had in front of her. She looked frantically for the meeting agenda for a helpful prompt. She had nothing.

‘Sorry.’ Kristin replied meekly. She felt ashamed to still be disconnected from *The Agency* after everything Brian had given her now. She’d made her choice, everything was meant to be better now. So why did she now feel adrift?

She could hear Liam’s quiet hissing next to her, trying to suppress his patronising laugh.

‘Anything to add?’ Brian tried to signal something to her. But she couldn’t pick up on his intention. What had she missed this time?

‘It seems our new Commercial Content Manager has gone shy.’ He started and she went red. The room murmured snide laughter.

‘Well if she doesn’t want to tell you herself, I’d like to take this chance to let you all know that Kris will be taking on a lot more of the content creation aspect of our business as we grow

into some more markets. Especially as we look into what we can do in the women's sports space with how successful women's cricket and soccer have been and the upcoming women's footy league. There will be a lot that I'll be working with the executive team on as we investigate potential opportunities there. She'll be a big part of that. And of course, off the back of the successful new partnership she's managed to secure with *Country Coffee*, she's the perfect man for the job.'

The room applauded and Liam wolf whistled. Kristin could feel her cheeks flush with pride. She hadn't been given a job title with the word 'writer' in it but it was good enough. She had imagined introducing herself now to people and not having to fluff around like a fool to make sure they knew that she could write. The mention of the women's sport threw her a little. Brian hadn't raised that in their discussion. It must be a pretty small thing then, she thought. A morsel to toss to the executive team now that women's sport was the talk of the town. Kristin probably wouldn't have too much to do with it though. She didn't even know about women's cricket and she hated soccer.

'So, congratulations, Kris, we're looking forward to seeing what you'll be able to do for us this year to help *The Agency* continue to grow.'

The room gave her another small round of applause and Liam winked at her. Anna avoided eye contact, picking at her acrylic nails. Kristin stared at her, indignant that she hadn't joined the congratulations. What did Anna expect after she refused to publish Kristin's exposé? Anna could

have taken her writing and really made something of her blog. They could've made something together but Anna had closed that door on that. Now Kristin was opening her own.

‘And to follow on from this, Liam will be moving into Kris’ previous position as an Account Manager and we’ll also extend his portfolio to include new business after he really proved himself these past twelve months. Well done Liam.’

Another round of applause. Anna rose out of chair and tapped her watch at Brian as she left the room. He nodded at her and she unsubtly made her way out of the meeting room, the rustling layers of her full skirt following her noisily as she exited.

‘I guess that wraps up everything for now. Round One is coming up and it will be here before we know it. We’ve got plenty to do so let’s get on with it.’

They gathered their compendiums and coffee mugs and vacated the cold, glass-walled meeting room.

‘Where was your brain in that meeting?’ Liam sniggered into Kristin’s ear. She shuddered.

‘I’ve got a lot on my mind.’ She replied flatly. Exhausted from making excuses for her constant malaise.

‘Like what, hit me with it. I’m your 2IC now, your go-to guy, your little elf!’ He replied playfully poking her, moving to face her and blocking her route back to her desk.

‘It’s nothing.’

‘Were you thinking about a boy? Are you seeing someone?’ He continued to poke her jokingly and she hit his hands away. It always went somewhere sexual with him.

‘You’re such an idiot. No, I’m just tired. I need to get myself back into the swing of the season. The lead up to Round One is always a killer and I’ve got so much more to do now with my new fancy job.’ She tried to play it up.

‘Sure, sure.’ He winked. ‘Just be careful... you know...with, whatever you’re doing that’s making you so tired!’

‘You’re gross.’ Kristin walked off and the thought quickly flashed across her mind how only a few months ago she would have craved an interaction like that with Liam. To be noticed and made fun of used to make her feel like she was ‘in’. That she was part of a little group that was better than anyone else. Now she couldn’t feel more outside of it.

She sat down at her desk and looked across the office. Anna wasn’t at her desk and Kristin was desperate to know why she had left the meeting so abruptly and where she could have possibly needed to go to. She didn’t have her own clients or projects. If she had another meeting,

it would have involved other people. Perhaps Anna was doing something for *Fan Fatale*? The thought made Kristin panic and try and remember what had been discussed in the meeting. Had she said anything that could get her into trouble? Nausea washed over her as she flashed back to that article where Anna had slammed her. She could still feel the weight of that humiliation in her gut. This wasn't fair. Anna couldn't do this. Take private conversations and turn them into her missiles that she launched into the football world. Kristin was going to tell Brian. Anna had to go.

An email notification popped up on the bottom of her computer screen. The subject line read, 'SOS'. She opened it reactively, noticing it was sent to just her and the boys. There were only two letters in the body of the email.

'HR'

Kristin automatically looked over to Diana's office. The door was closed. It was only ever closed when something worth knowing was going on and Kristin knew instantly that it was Anna in there. All the things she might be telling Diana flashed through Kristin's mind. Was she confessing as *Fan Fatale*? No. She couldn't be, she'd be fired instantly. Was she dobbing in Kristin for telling her Tina's story. She'd broken Tina's confidence. She'd put a client of theirs in a vulnerable and potentially career-ending position. Did Anna want Kristin's new job? Was she trying to get rid of her all of this time and now Kristin had given her a reason to get her fired on a silver platter? How could she have been so stupid? Why did she ever send that story? Why did she think that Anna could be trusted?

Kristin's heart pumped away. She could only manage shallow breaths. She was going to lose everything that she had fought for. She finally had what she wanted and this bitch was going to blow it up for her.

Anna emerged a few moments later. Her arms folded and face blotched pink from the tears she was trying to hide. She bolted to the bathroom.

Another email notification appeared from Jay.

'Guys, just saw A coming out of HR... crying.'

Kristin sat back in her chair and wanted to cry herself. She couldn't bring herself to look across the office and catch any of the guys' eyes. She was so embarrassed. What would they think of her when they found out what she'd done? She kept her gaze on her computer screen and saw another email.

'She must have overheard us in the elevator...' Liam wrote and added a worried face emoji.

Kristin blinked. What had they said? Was this not about her? She felt instant relief and bought into her exoneration immediately. She read on through the email chain. She was so happy to be part of their communications and foolishly thought they had brought her in because of her new job title. They respected her now. The messages kept popping up.

‘I knew we were too loud.’

‘But there’s no way she knows Ham means her...’

‘She must have picked up on it. Unless, Jay, did you tell her??’

‘Fuck off I did.’

‘You must have said something!’

It went on and on. Now all Kristin could think of was getting out of this conversation. She wanted an unsubscribe button. The instant relief she felt that this reason for Anna’s visit to HR had replaced her fear for her own misgivings was now gone and a new fear arose. She could be implicated in an office harassment scandal by being included in the very email chain she’d so desperately wanted to be a part of not so long ago. She hated how the boys group emailed without her. Now she saw how stupid they were. This was not a private conversation, this was company email. She tried to think of excuses for when they all got called into HR and Diana asked her why she was involved and how she could be so stupid after just getting her promotion.

Kristin imagined the email chains that the IT guy could pull out of the ether to implicate them all in some sort of scandal. Her mind wandered to the ‘Top Ten’ email chain. For the first time, she was grateful that she wasn’t part of it.

Kristin thought about that moment in Liam's car when he let it slip about the list. Only, he didn't really slip. He just told her about it. He brought her in but only enough, why? To test her coolness again? To give her something to aspire to, to be on the list? It was some sort of game, a game of trust?

They tested her to see what she could handle. What she would let them get away with. And she thought she proved to them time and time again that she was trustworthy, that they could do whatever they wanted. But it was never enough. Kristin was never one of them. She was only ever a compliant accomplice. Only now did she realise that if they saw her as one of their own, she'd have been included on that group email from the start. There must be a specific reason that she was on this one. She wasn't one of them, they wanted something from her.

Kristin suddenly saw that she performed more for the boys when she found they were excluding her from certain conversations. She wanted to be in so much she gave them license to behave this way. She gave license to herself to behave this way.

And now here was the biggest test. They'd brought her in to see if she'd perform once more.

Another email appeared on her screen.

'We're fucked.'

‘Let’s go for a walk.’

Liam’s text disrupted Kristin’s reverie. She’d not left her desk all day, waiting in nauseous anticipation for Diana to call all of them into her office. Waiting for her to read back years’ worth of email chains between them all directed at Anna’s thighs and then ask Kristin if she knew about it.

Kristin looked up from behind her cubicle partition and caught his eye and nodded. They made their way out of the office under the guise of a coffee run.

‘This is fucked.’ Liam said as soon as they were outside.

She didn’t say anything as she walked next to Liam with her arms folded, trying to brace herself for whatever was coming her way.

‘Do you think you could talk to her?’ He spoke outwardly in front of himself. Not looking her in the eye. Kristin shot a damning look at him.

‘What?’ She blurted incredulously, about to rise into anger. But then she saw the look in Liam’s eyes as he stared out in front of himself. He was scared.

‘I know it’s a lot to ask,’ he cooed, trying to remain calm. ‘But we need your help.’

‘I don’t understand, what do you mean?’ Kristin shifted her arms uncomfortably.

‘We were talking about it and we thought the best way to figure out what’s going on, is if you can talk to her. You know, like “girl talk”. And you can convince her that it’s all harmless fun and all that.’ He looked down now with his hands in his pockets as they walked slowly down the street.

Kristin frowned frustrated. When had they all had a chance to talk about this and decide to ask her to do this to save them? She felt so alone.

‘I can try.’ She replied softly, not wanting Liam to be upset. Wanting instead to be the one who could fix everything and prove her worth to them. But she felt guilty because the only reason she’d put herself on the line like this was because she was scared for herself. She wanted to save herself and her new job and this was the only way to do it. She needed to know what kind of bomb Anna was about to drop on her. If she had nothing to do with this, she’d have let the boys figure out this mess themselves.

‘Thanks so much Kristin, you’re the best.’ He put his arm around her shoulders and shook her like a younger brother.

‘I wish she was like you, you can take a joke.’ He smiled his famous grin at her.

‘This is a bit weird, isn’t it?’ Anna smiled in an awkwardly audacious way as she sipped on her gin and tonic, eying Kristin.

‘What do you mean?’ Kristin nervously moved her drink around on its coaster, avoiding eye contact.

She hadn’t ever been so uncomfortable. She had done what she needed to do. Sent Anna an email asking if she wanted to grab an after-work drink. She deliberately sent it via email. She had thought if she had something friendly on file on the work server it would help her case if she needed it. She mentioned something about getting together to talk about some ideas she had for *The Agency* in her new role. How she thought Anna could be part of some of them. It would look great, friendly, thoughtful, she was trying to help her colleague in her career. It would be helpful.

Kristin was also sure Anna saw straight through it and knew it was code for wanting to talk. She wrote back in pink font with a cat gif that made Kristin’s eyes roll. ‘Sure thing Babe!’.

Kristin took an uneasy sip from her beer.

‘Well, we haven’t really spoken since you tried to blow up the football world with your “scoop”.’ Anna did the air quotes with her manicured fingers and Kristin wanted to slap her.

‘Then you went back to pretending I didn’t exist and now here we are.’ Anna was different now. Sarcastic and mean. The last time they had met, she had been cautious but kind. Sympathetic to her cause and understanding. Something had changed. The power had shifted and Kristin was stunned. She’d never seen this side to Anna before. And she didn’t know how to bring up what the boys wanted her to say with her as this person. She shifted her glass around on the table and became defensive.

‘I didn’t want to draw attention to you. I was trying to protect your secret.’ She responded guiltily.

Anna pursed her lips tightly and smiled cynically, her eyes big and bright as if she might burst into a fit of laughter. It was a frightening sight.

Kristin continued to babble to try to justify herself. ‘I didn’t want people asking me why we were suddenly friendly. We weren’t that close before and people would have thought it was weird if we started talking more.’

‘You mean your boys’ club?’ Anna was still smiling manically at her and Kristin clearly didn’t get it. She changed the subject.

‘I just wanted to see if you were ok. I saw you crying today and I was worried about you so I wanted to check in.’ She took a gulp of her beer.

Anna laughed.

‘Worried about me? Why on earth would you be worried about me?’ Kristin was confused and reacted abrasively.

‘You were crying!’ She snapped. ‘Of course I would be worried about you if I thought something had made you that upset.’

‘Please, spare me Kristin. You couldn’t give a fuck about me.’ Anna smirked.

Kristin had never heard Anna swear before and was instantly disarmed. She felt a heat build in her throat and she thought she might be the one to cry now.

Anna took another elegant sip from her drink and flipped her hair.

‘I know you only asked me for a drink because you want to know why I was in HR and if anyone is in trouble.’ She eyed Kristin up and down. ‘You want to know if I told your secret?’

Kristin’s nausea returned. It was about her. The boys were worried about nothing. Their stupid jokes were safe and now they had thrown her alone into the lion’s den to defend them for no reason. That was why Anna was being so smug. She knew Kristin’s days were numbered. Was this some sort of payback for her not being Anna’s friend after they had their first meeting?

Did Anna think that by revealing her alias to Kristin, they would become best friends? That Kristin would leave the boys behind? Is that what she wanted, a friend?

‘You’re so conceited Kristin.’

It was like Anna stood up and slapped Kristin from across the table. The words had weight. She felt physically hurt. She could feel the white-hot heat of confusion and rage growing in the back of her throat, she swallowed and fought to keep her eyes dry.

‘You didn’t want to check up on me. You’re only here because you’re worried about yourself. It’s the same selfishness that I saw in you when you sent me Tina’s story. But I let that go thinking that you were too emotional or foolish to understand what you were doing. Then you come back to work like nothing happened. You take on a new job where you’re going to work more with the bastard who you tried to expose! You don’t care about anyone else but yourself and I’m glad that I’m not going to have to see your double-crossing face every day anymore.’

Kristin was still and silent. What did she mean by not seeing her every day? Then she clicked.

‘You quit?’

‘Yup!’ Anna raised her glass in a ‘cheers’ to Kristin and took a celebratory sip. ‘I was offered a cadetship at the newspaper. I’m going to shut down *Fan Fatale*. I’m going to start putting my

name to things and step out from behind my blog. I'm going to be a writer. I'm going to have my name on everything I write and I can write about whatever I like.' She spoke quickly like she was releasing energy held on to for years and she was in ecstasy once her truth was out free in the universe.

'That's why I was crying.' She explained. 'I was so happy to tell that dumb bitch Diana to take the job and shove it. That I was going to go somewhere that would appreciate me. That would respect me.'

'Wow.' It was all Kristin could manage. She didn't see this coming at all. She looked at Anna who was looking off into the distance across the bar. Gazing forward to all the new possibilities and opportunities that lay ahead of her. Anna was a writer now. She was everything Kristin wanted to be. She was brave and bold and better. So much better than Kristin could ever be.

Kristin wondered why she wasn't feeling intensely jealous. The rage she'd felt at being called 'conceited' had dissipated. She wasn't angry at Anna. Anna was right. Kristin wasn't jealous because she finally understood her place in the world. She wasn't brave enough to do what Anna did. That's why she had sent her story to her in the first place before she even knew who she was. She had sent the only article that she had ever written about something real to an anonymous blogger because she was afraid. Having her name appear on her writing terrified her. She wrote about the game under a pseudonym. She wrote marketing campaigns as part of a team so nothing was distinctively hers. She now wrote for the company website in the corporate voice

of *The Agency*. Nothing she did was her and for the first time she knew it wasn't because she was being 'held back' or she was 'biding her time' until she had that opportunity. She was afraid of losing everything. Of losing her claim to her one true love, the game.

Kristin couldn't be jealous of Anna. She could never do what Anna did. For the first time, she felt proud of Anna and sad for how terribly she'd treated her. For every awful thing Kristin had said about her behind her back, for everything she had allowed others to say as she laughed along. Anna had pushed through it all, building towards her future. Kristin had the strange compulsion to hug her but she sat still, stupefied.

'Congratulations Anna.' She spoke softly.

'Thank you, Kristin.' Anna beamed, 'It really is a dream come true.' She downed the rest of her drink. 'And don't worry, I'll never reveal your secret. Not because I want to protect you, but I would never do that to Tina and her sister. And I know you'll never reveal my secret. Not because you want to protect me but because you want to protect yourself.'

Kristin nodded numbly. She couldn't see who was right in front of her anymore. This wasn't the Anna she'd hated all these years. She was this person who was so much better than her, than everyone. Then Kristin thought of one flaw she could still beat her with.

'Can I ask you one thing?'

‘Shoot.’ Anna smiled.

‘Knowing all this, who you’ve really been all along. I just can’t understand why you slept with Jay?’

Anna finished her drink and looked her in the eye.

‘We all see what we want to see Kristin, and we all believe what we want to believe.’

Kristin, frowned. What was she talking about?

‘Thanks for the drink, this was fun!’ Anna stood up and blew an air-kiss towards her. Then she was off. Her high-waisted bubble skirt bouncing behind her as Kristin bolted to the bathroom to let her tears flow freely in the privacy of a cubicle.

SEVENTEEN

24.3.16

Kristin looked at her watch, they had about ten minutes before they needed to leave to catch the train to the MCG.

It was Round 1 of Season 2016. The traditional opening night rivals Richmond and Carlton were surely going to ignite the new season in a traditionally lackadaisical and anti-climactic performance. But that didn't matter. Football was back and after everything, all she wanted was to hear that siren signalling the start of a new season.

Kristin headed to the ladies to fix herself up and looked at herself in the bad lighting of the work bathroom mirror. Thursday night games were tough. After working the whole day there were bags under her eyes and her hair was flat. She brushed it quickly and wondered if she had time to re-straighten it. Kristin shook her head against the idea. She didn't want to look like she was trying too hard. She re-applied some concealer to remove the worn look of the day, but didn't re-apply any eye shadow, working fast to achieve the effortlessly natural look.

Kristin's mind flashed to her slightly worn jeans in her bag that she had brought to change into for the game. Then remembered they were sitting in Brian's corporate seats tonight. Her gift for remaining loyal.

Still her grey work slacks and white button-down shirt did not look like football attire. She hated how she looked. She ran back out of the ladies across the office to her desk to grab the jeans. Liam shouted to her, ‘What are you doing? We are going to be late!’

‘Just one minute!’ She raced back to the bathroom to change. Kristin left on her white shirt with the jeans and swapped heels for flat boots. She added a fitted leather jacket and was happier with her more casual, yet still professional appearance. She went to apply some lipstick but thought better of it. It was too much. Her lips were irritatingly dry though and she needed something. She hurried back to her desk and found an old jar of paw paw ointment and quickly applied for relief before anyone could see her engage in an act of beauty maintenance.

‘Kristin! Come on – are you ready?’ Liam bellowed across the office from the exit.

‘Coming!’ She threw the jar back into the draw and ran after him.

‘Bloody women!’ He laughed at her as he held the door for her. She let it wash over her. Bloody women indeed.

The office had been Anna-free for weeks. After she had resigned it was decided she was heading to what was deemed in their contracts as a ‘rival organisation’. Her notice period was waved and she didn’t say goodbye to anyone.

Kristin was sure Anna was aware of all this when they met for that ill-fated drink but had neglected to mention any of it. Kristin had just walked into the office the next morning and saw an empty desk. All the glitter covered stationary and cat photos were gone. Her existence erased.

There was an all-staff email sent out that morning from Brian that advised of Anna's departure and wished her well in 'the next phase of her career'. The boys had all high-fived each other as soon as they saw it pop up on their screens. Kristin had told them all they were in the clear and Anna was out of there and the instant nature of Anna's exit was a relief to them. And her.

Kristin had spent the last few weeks working away on blog posts for the new company website. Following through on new ideas that people had pitched her. Organising all the new content she was going to run for the new football season. There was so much she was going to do and she was determined to bring as much of her writing passion to this new role and make it her own.

Kristin considered a player interview series where she could do write ups on all the athletes who they worked with and debrief on their campaigns. It'd build their brand ambassador profiles which would make their clients happy and she could write feature pieces. She thought about all her favourite sports media concepts and how she could adapt them to suit *The Agency* and her creative appetite.

She loved the *ESPN* series *30 For 30*, sports documentaries. Maybe she could find a way to do something like that. Or perhaps she'd work out a way to get the business involved in books. It would be a dream come true for her if she could have her name appear in the front cover of a book, or in a magazine as an editor. Everything she thought gave her back her lust for her job. For her place in the sports industry. She was meant to be here and everything that had happened was old news. Kristin shook her head at herself, she couldn't believe what she had almost done. She was glad Anna had shut her down and not published that pathetic piece of dribble she wrote about Dan. She was right. It wasn't her place and it was up to Tina and Cathy to deal with that. It wasn't her problem, it had nothing to do with her.

As she worked away, satisfied in her new role and responsibilities, Kristin wondered what Anna was doing. What was she working on, what was she writing? What was better than what Kristin was doing now that she had all this power? Now that she could make all the decisions about whatever she wanted to work on. Kristin had checked the newspaper's site everyday searching her name but was yet to find a by-line.

Fan Fatale was still up. No new posts. Kristin wondered what the point was of keeping it around. Surely no one was checking it with no new articles or information. Just a stale website taking up space. Kristin thought it was irresponsible of Anna to keep it up, to jeopardise her new job by having someone connect her with it. She was so naïve.

Kristin and Liam power-walked to the train station. She laughed obligatorily at all his jokes along the way about the Tigers. And she started to feel the calming anticipation of attending live

football wash over her. She loved everything about it. The travel to the ground, the banter, seeing a sea of people kitted out in their team colours. All of it brought her so much joy and it started to feel again like it was all worth it. Everything was worth this feeling.

They arrived at Flinders Street Station and rather than wait the eight minutes for the next train to Richmond, they decided to walk. It was Kristin's favourite walk in the world, the walk from Federation Square to Melbourne Park and the MCG.

Following the curves of the Yarra River to the footbridge with its gradual incline. Climbing then until, just as you reach the summit, you begin to see it. First the tall, white beacons of light and hope, illuminating a yellow glow across the rainbow of a Melbourne twilight. Then slowly it emerges before you, this glorious colosseum in the middle of the lush, green park. The arena of the gods. The house of football. Home.

Kristin didn't know what Liam had been going on about while she was taking in the magic of it all. It didn't matter how many times she saw it, it always took her breath away. She was so happy to be back there.

'I just think it's bullshit. We should be at the function not fucking Brian.' Liam stopped quickly to bend down and pick up an errant football that had crossed their path, he handballed it back to a kid that was running up to them in a Trent Cochin guernsey.

‘Yeah, I guess...’ Kristin started reluctantly, not wanting to get into a work bitching session after everything that had happened. She was finally back at the football and that would make everything ok. She just wanted to focus on the game.

‘Kristin, you and I pulled together that whole campaign and this was our reward! Corporate tickets to the first game of the season and it doesn’t even include the dinner! That’s fucked!’

She sighed. Kristin really didn’t want to think about that campaign ever again. She didn’t want to think about Dan, though she wondered if he would be going along tonight to watch. No, she thought, he would have his own game to focus on this weekend, he’d be watching at home. Kristin didn’t want to think about Anna and what she’d done to her. And Kristin didn’t have the energy to yell at Liam that it was her campaign, not his. That his involvement had ruined it in the first place. She was at the football and that stuff didn’t exist. She was safe here.

Kristin didn’t care that the corporate tickets Brian had passed off to her as some sort of incentive to stay turned out to actually be just standard tickets that were close to the function room. She chose to think it was thoughtful of him to at least find her some wristbands so they could access the bar at half time. Kristin didn’t give a shit about the function and a three-course meal. She just wanted a pie and to watch the warm-ups. She didn’t want to listen to the club president of a team she didn’t follow talk rubbish about how this season was their year.

‘Oh well.’ She shrugged trying to encourage Liam to shut up.

She grabbed the tickets from her bag and with a flick of her hair, ‘*The Agency*’s Kristin’ was gone and ‘football fan Kristin’ started her shift. She wanted to bring fun Liam back. The Liam who she had loved since he started at *The Agency*, who thought she was so cool and treated her like his equal. She wanted more than anything just to go back.

‘C’mon let’s forget about all that work shit and get plastered.’

‘Ha, that’s what I’m talking about!’ Liam slapped her on the back with agreement and Kristin smiled in relief. She could go back. Football would help her get back.

Kristin loved the time before the game where it was all beer and banter. She loved that she could be the girl that loved a beer with the boys and could talk about sport with them. She felt comfortable and safe, like she could finally be who she was. Just a girl from a country town who liked a beer and a yarn. Of course, she loved the actual games, but often she didn’t actually enjoy them. She was stressed, angry, anxious or disappointed. Joy didn’t come until the final siren confirmed a victory for her team.

They entered the stadium and Liam made a beeline for the bar.

Kristin walked to the back of the seating bays on Level 1 in the Ponsford Stand and looked out on the ground where the Blues had come out for their first warm up. They were running their goal kicking drills, kicking ball after ball into the temporary net behind the posts.

She leant against the railing, watching the Carlton cheer squad set up directly behind the goals. They leaned over the fence cheering encouragements to the boys as they lined up their set shots. They looked like they were having the time of their lives. Their enraptured faces gave Kristin pangs of jealousy.

Every year she looked up the cheer squad application form on the West Coast Eagles' website and let the mouse hover over the 'submit' button. She never clicked it. She was always too worried about what people would think of her, she didn't want to be known as 'one of the crazy fans'. She would watch the cheer squad throughout games and think of how much fun it looked. They just didn't care what people thought. They let everything out. They bled their hearts for their team. True fans.

Liam returned with a tray of four beers.

'Did you want something?' He winked at her and she rolled her eyes as she took one from the tray.

They made their way up to their seats on Level 2 where they had the luxury of a cup holder and a thin veil of pleather padding on their so-called premium seating. They sat down and kept chatting about work, though were mindful about their conversation in the area where they were sitting.

There are a few bays of seats at the MCG that are invariably filled with what were referred to as ‘industry people’. These were people who worked in the business of football and the people they sometimes entertained. There were players, player’s families and friends, executives from the clubs and corporate sponsors. Then there were just your average worker bees like Kristin and Liam, who every now and then got the call up. Worker bees, however, never got the invite to the pre-game dinner.

Kristin turned her nose up at the idea of the functions they held before games anyway. Why they focused on the ‘dinner’ aspect of that event was laughable. No one was there to eat, they only went along to drink as much free piss as possible or to ‘be seen’. She thought those events were pointless and elitist. Though she’d never turn down the opportunity to go, if she was ever invited. Kristin did want some of the people she knew in different parts of the football world to know she was important enough to be there.

She thought briefly that maybe now with her new job title she might be included. She shuddered at herself for thinking that. It felt like a betrayal to her footy fan ethos. She wanted to be successful but to be seen at those sorts of things and talking with those sorts of people? She couldn’t stand it. Not anymore. Kristin didn’t want to be fake. She wanted to be who she really was now.

She leaned back in in the faux-leather comfort of her seat and took a big gulp of her beer while Liam dribbled on next to her. They polished off the two beers each well before the game started. Kristin was determined to make a point of keeping up with Liam tonight. As he went for

another beer run she pushed her cash towards him, but he insisted and jogged off. It felt like before, when Liam always looked out for her and treated her like she was special.

She put her money back in her pocket with a smile and looked out over the ground. It was so beautiful. She watched the people filing in, slowly taking their seats, the ground filling up like a mammoth scale game of Tetris. Soon the arena would be packed and she couldn't wait to hear them cheer when the first ball of a new season was bounced.

Liam returned with another four beers and Kristin raised an eyebrow at him as he sat down and handed her an overflowing plastic cup.

'They only serve mid-strength at night games – so we need to drink twice as much!' He winked.

She shook her head with a laugh, his logic made sense she supposed. She held her mid-strength beer in her hands and cupped it like a warm cup of comforting hot chocolate.

The teams were moving into position now and there was a pouring out of men in suits from behind the glass windows behind them. All the elites who had been in the pre-game function drinking the heavy stuff now faced the indignity of taking their beer in plastic cups into the outer. Some preferred not to take their seats, staying inside to watch behind the glass windows. Drinking from glass pints.

A small fluttering of butterflies started in Kristin's stomach the anticipation of the siren built. And there it was. The sound. The signal. Nothing else mattered now as everything began again. The height of the crowd's cheers climaxed in a slap of two bodies together in the ruck and Kristin's attention was fixed as the clock rewound and a new season dawned.

The half-time siren sounded and Kristin made her way merrily, slightly tipsily, towards the bathrooms when she was almost blind-sided by a shiny, tall someone, stumbling along on her spiky shoes.

'Shit, sorry hun, are you ok? Didn't see you there!' The woman patted Kristin on the shoulder then bounced off to air-kiss another woman behind her. Kristin watched them make their way into the VIP bar, the sound of their high heels click-clacking on the concrete concourse following behind them. She shook her head at the women and rushed to the toilet in her sensible boots.

She came out of the bathrooms after the obligatory waiting period that accompanied women's facilities at sporting stadiums. Then made her way to the bar when Liam grabbed her from out of nowhere and she almost had her second spill for the night.

'I'll get in there and grab four from the other end, you get in here and get four from this end and we should be set for a while.'

Kristin rolled her eyes at him. That was a lot to drink. She wasn't going to say no to him though. This was her night, her reward.

They flashed the security guard their fluoro green wristbands like children at an amusement park and entered the private bar. It was packed.

She made her way into the masses, trying to avoid getting spilled on in the crowd carrying dripping trays of beer past her.

Then there she was again, the shiny woman, in front of the queue leaning over the bar and yelling her order at the bartender. She was impeccably dressed standing with a man in a perfectly tailored suit. She was wearing a fitted trench coat but it looked like she had a red cocktail dress on underneath, the sparkly evidence peeking out from below the hem of her coat and matching her red stilettos.

Kristin made her way to the front where she squeezed in next to her, hoping to avoid eye contact and ordered the four Liam had directed her to. They only got access to this bar at half time and they needed to make the most of it. Liam was smart like that, she nodded to herself. From the corner of her eye, Kristin saw the woman collect her two champagne flutes and noticed her elbow was raised as she turned around to exit, it was too late before Kristin realised it was going to collide with her on the way through.

‘Oh, I’m soooo sorry darl!’ The woman apologised automatically before Kristin could see her mind tick over and remember her face from the previous incident. The woman giggled. ‘Oh shit! That’s twice now I’ve nearly knocked you over! Did I spill?’ She examined her own clothing before she gave Kristin’s jeans a quick once over.

‘All good, no worries.’ Kristin mumbled, trying to move away without spilling the beers on the woman’s expensive looking coat.

‘Though...’ she started up again before Kristin was able to move away and flashed a cheeky grin, ‘maybe it was on purpose, we might be enemies! Who do you go for?’

Kristin smiled at her politely, ‘I’m neutral tonight, I’m a West Coast supporter.’

‘Oh I see. Well of course, you wouldn’t know I was going for the Tigers – I look like a complete idiot in this outfit!’

Kristin’s eyes narrowed in confusion as the woman explained herself.

‘I just came from my cousin’s engagement party. I told them I’d go for the dinner but I wouldn’t miss the game. Not the first game of the season! They just made me promise not to wear my footy jumper to their party!’ She laughed at herself and Kristin attempted to laugh with her out of politeness.

‘Well, you look great – red is better than yellow and black.’ Kristin joked.

She laughed. ‘Nothing is better than yellow and black! I’ll try and stop knocking into you!’ She held up her champagne glass in a ‘cheers’ and made a smooth exit through the crowd, people making an effort to get out of her way.

Kristin struggled back to her seat impressed with herself for only spilling the beer twice. She’d misjudged the woman before. Despite her outfit and ridiculous shoes, she was a real fan, wasn’t she?

‘Good effort.’ Liam congratulated her as she returned with her bounty. Liam was already a beer down. Kristin sighed as she realised he must have skulled it and she now was behind. ‘What took you so long?’ He joked motioning towards the empty cup.

‘I guess I was at the wrong end of the bar.’

Kristin took a big gulp of beer attempting to catch up as she spotted the woman rushing down the aisle, champagne in hand, to grab a seat before the third quarter began. Her attempts to watch the game appeared to be genuine.

‘That’s the problem with these seats’. Liam started as he followed Kristin’s eye line to see the women making everyone in row stand and move for her so she didn’t spill her drink. ‘They are a great view, and I’ll never knock back free drinks. But you have to put up with those types.’

‘I know.’ Kristin scoffed. ‘I’d rather be down with the plebs I reckon.’

She eyed the Carlton cheer squad down below looking like they were having the time of their lives.

‘Cheers to that!’ He clinked their plastic beer cups together and she forced a smile, feeling immediate guilt. She needed to tell him the truth about her fellow female fan.

‘But what if,’ Kristin attempted to defend the woman, ‘she’d just come from a party or something?’

Kristin frowned at herself, why was she speaking hypothetically? She knew the truth.

‘She could have just rushed to get here for the game, maybe she’s a big Richmond fan?’

Liam just looked at her like she had just told a bad joke.

‘I doubt it, she could have put on a scarf at least! No one “rushes” to get to the game after half-time to see bloody Richmond. She’s just here for the free booze.’

‘Yeah, you’re probably right.’ Kristin guiltily took another sip of her beer. Ashamed that for some reason she didn’t automatically want to save her kindred spirit from Liam’s judgmental remarks.

‘They’re the type of girls us guys look out for. They’re like a trap.’ Liam started, and Kristin narrowed her eyes at him in confusion.

‘They are all, “I love football” and “I’d miss anything to go to the football” and “I don’t care if you don’t hang out with me and go to the football with your friends!” But that only lasts so long.’ He explained, starting to slur his words. ‘They hook you in and before you know it, they hate football and couldn’t even give a shit about the team they said they loved so much. They yell at you for going to the game without them because you should be “spending quality time together.” So, you ask her to go with you and that’s the worst thing in the world because “quality time” is just girl code for stuff that just she wants to do. My girlfriend is like that.’

It was the first time Liam had actually mentioned his girlfriend to Kristin and she wondered why he had chosen to do so in such a derogatory way. Was he going to break up with her? Was he going to tell Kristin that he had feelings for her?

‘That’s why you’re so cool,’ he casually put his arm around her and she knew instantly that it didn’t mean anything. He wasn’t hitting on her. He wouldn’t do that, she was too important to him, to his career. He only hit on girls he knew he would let him get away with it. He wasn’t trying to make a move but his embrace made a statement to Kristin. Whatever they were in, they

were in it together. And now that she'd signed the dotted line on her new title and work responsibilities, they were in it for the long haul. She knew she was Liam's manager but he acted like he had some sort of ownership over her in a way that told her that she was inside his world now and she wasn't getting out. And if she was honest to herself, she didn't want to.

Liam pulled away and took a swig of his drink.

'You see, you get it, Kristin. All of this.' He waved his arms over her beautiful MCG and she sighed to herself. He was right. She did get it.

That stadium was Kristin's favourite place in the whole world. She had cheered there, cried there. Joked that she would get married there and have her ashes scattered there. That place was everything to her. It made everything better. It made everything OK.

She thought of how sometimes in her time working for *The Agency*, she was able to go there when there wasn't a game on. Or how she could get into the ground early before the public were even allowed in. If there was an event or PR opportunity happening before a game, she had always put her hand up to work it because to be there, being inside the empty colosseum brought her such sheer joy. Of course, she also loved a packed 'G of screaming fans in a tight game, that atmosphere was electric. But there was something intrinsically sacred about being there alone. No one else was allowed to be there. But she was.

She'd linger and sit in a random seat in the Great Southern Stand, thousands of empty seats around her, and feel a completeness that she couldn't explain. Kristin imagined it might be what a gardener might feel looking out over a garden full of prize roses. It was like the place was hers, her prized possession. She felt a pure love for it. She couldn't walk away from it.

'You're the perfect girl Kris.'

Liam broke her meditative state.

'You're an idiot!' She gave him a cheeky smile, feigning flattery and punched him a bit too hard.

She brought her index finger to her lips to 'shh' him and then pointed at the field. Indicating to him that it was time to focus on the game, but she really did just want him to shut up.

The players had just re-entered the field but Kristin couldn't stop thinking about that woman and what Liam had just said.

Kristin's first impression of her was way off. She was cool, wasn't she? She'd ditched an engagement party to go to the football. If that was the truth, then she was probably a bigger fan than Kristin. Kristin didn't even know if she could be brave enough to do that. Maybe in finals. Definitely for the Grand Final of course. But for the game tonight? Kristin might have just stayed at the party, as long as she could watch it on a TV somewhere.

Was she just another piece of corporate arm candy like Liam accused her? She wasn't with the punters, the general public or the dedicated cheer squad fans. She had corporate tickets. How did she even get them? Maybe she wouldn't have made the effort to come if she didn't have excellent seats and unlimited alcohol. Then neither would have Kristin.

Kristin sat for the remainder of the match mostly in silence. Steadily drinking herself into a stupor and focussing on the surprisingly close game happening in front of her. Richmond had some fight in them. It was good to see them not being bashed around and making the same stupid decisions. She'd always liked the Tigers in sympathy for her father.

The Tigers won by nine-points. There was nothing like hearing the Richmond Club song belted out by happy Tigers fans at the MCG. They had the best song in the league. Kristin hated the West Coast Eagles song but wouldn't change it for the world. You don't change in football. You choose a team and you stay loyal to it. You don't like the song but you sing it. You don't like the colours but you wear them. You don't change and you don't wish for change. You accept what you have. Cling tightly. And never let go.

EIGHTEEN

29. 3. 16

They were gathered like a pack of hyenas at Liam's desk, almost salivating at the prospect of some fresh meat.

Kristin spied their strange formation and strategically made her way to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. She walked over to them nonchalantly, thinking she had busted them watching more inappropriate videos. Maybe if she snuck up on them, she could finally see what they were watching.

But they sensed her approaching and she noticed the way they almost panicked before they realised it was her and immediately relaxed. They weren't gathered around Liam's computer, they were positioned awkwardly along the side of his desk.

'What are you guys doing?' She snickered at the odd way they were standing.

They looked at her smirking and then at each other, silently deciding among themselves what they should say and who should say it.

Liam winked at the boys and took charge.

‘Talent scouting.’

Kristin frowned confused and Liam continued.

‘Brian’s interviewing people for Anna’s job. He’s got one in there right now and if we stand along here, we can see in his office without them seeing us.’ He tapped the side of his head. He was an ingenious pervert.

Michael moved down a little bit and indicated to her.

‘Jump in and have a look K!’ She reluctantly manoeuvred herself in between Michael and Sam and leered into Brian’s glass office. Sat in front of Brian’s desk nodding along politely was a young woman with long dark brown hair swept elegantly to one side, highlighting her smooth dark skin exposed by the sophisticated sleeveless shirt she was wearing. She was beautiful.

They were all just staring. Kristin watched them. And felt invisible.

They instantly jumped as the first sign of motion from within Brian’s office. Michael bolted to the printer to pretend he was looking for something. Xavier and Sam rushed off to the kitchen. Jay bounced back to his desk, almost in some sort of pre-meditated action plan that Kristin

wasn't a part of. She stood motionless, not sure what to do other than remain at Liam's desk and pretend she was there for a reason.

She watched the woman emerge from Brian's office and shake his hand with a wide, bright smile. She was stylish and slim. Kristin's thoughts went to her own thighs as she watched her walk smoothly out of the building.

'She'll be the one to beat on the list this year if she gets the job.' Liam whispered and winked at her. She hit him on the shoulder and made her way to the kitchen.

Brian was in there making a coffee.

'Kris, how's it going?' He was disarmingly chirpy.

'Good thanks, good interview?' She asked trying not to sound too interested.

'Yeah, she was great.' Brian smiled. 'I've got a few more to see but she's the top of the lot so far.'

Kristin cringed. 'Great.'

‘I really want to hire a woman though,’ he continued, ‘we can’t let this place become full of blokes, need to keep our diversity up. Diana said that to me before, and I thought that is something we could do. Hire someone new who isn’t what we usually go for. It could be good.’

Kristin frowned, and thought, why don’t you just hire the best person for the job? HR ruined everything.

‘Anyway, I wanted to talk to you before my afternoon gets swallowed up by more interviews.’

‘Sure.’ She responded dutifully.

‘I’ve been talking to the executive team, we’re really keen to jump into the women’s space now that things are heating up there. We think it could be a good addition to our business and there isn’t much out there yet so we want to make a name for ourselves. Your name came up quite a bit in the meeting.’

‘Oh, really?’ Kristen responded awkwardly. She was confused. Why were they talking about her while talking about women’s sport? She didn’t know anything about women’s sport.

‘Well, you really nailed the market with the *Country Coffee* ad, from the start. They made me see it wasn’t your fault that it all got so messed up. And we talked about how you fixed it. You

still knew how to address the women's football angle and it was a huge success for the client. You know your stuff.'

Kristin was stunned. She didn't know her stuff. She just did her research and made it work. She didn't say anything. She didn't know where this was all going.

'We think what we're going to do with your new role is bring women's sport into your portfolio and you can manage all the creative direction for all those opportunities. You can be our patron saint of women's sport!' He tapped her on the shoulder like she'd just won a raffle.

'Oh, wow.' It was all she could manage. She felt blindsided.

'We'll talk about it more later but just wanted to let you know that the executive are really happy with your work and they see big things for you. It's going to be a good year, Kris.'

She flashed an awkward smile to try to match his as he grabbed his coffee and went off to his next interview. She slowly made her cup of tea trying to process what he had just told her.

It felt incredibly humbling to be told that the executive were not only talking about her, but talking about her future with the company. She thought maybe they didn't know who she was. They had their offices on the next level of the building and very rarely mixed. They never came to staff drinks and at the Christmas party they kept to themselves and left early. Brian was the only one she had any contact with as her direct boss. He was her only insight into their exclusive

meetings. She'd only met their CEO a few times over her whole career. She had always felt invisible at the bottom and now she was finally getting noticed.

But for women's sport? She stirred her tea bag around her mug.

She'd worked so hard to write about men's football, her football. The game she'd loved her whole life. And she knew it. Kristin knew everything about it. It was her life. Now that was being taken away from her, that she was being pushed aside to do something else. Wasn't she good enough to work on men's footy?

Was she just being silly? The new women's league could be really exciting. It was history in the making and she could create a whole new part of the company. Maybe she could be on the executive as the Head of Women's Sport? Kristin could make this work for her. But why was it her? Just because she did one thing based on women's footy, now that was going to be who she was? Would she work with her favourite footy players ever again?

It was too soon to be spiralling on all of this and Kristin knew it. Brian had just mentioned it in passing, nothing was set in stone. It would all be fine. Brian was looking out for her now, wanted her to stay at *The Agency* and be part of the team. He wouldn't take everything away from her and just give her women's sport. He wouldn't do that to her. She was sure of it.

Kristin took her tea back to her desk and tried to calm herself. She could feel her cheeks reddening out of confusion and fear. She kept trying to talk herself around that everything would be fine and nothing had even happened yet. Why was she getting so emotional about it?

She'd wanted to be noticed. For people to start thinking about her as an authority on something. For the executive team to know how great she was and consider her as someone who could join their ranks one day. This is why she stayed at *The Agency*. To keep being a part of this. But she felt like she was being pushed to the side, pushed outside. She'd just gotten in with the County Coffee campaign and now that meant she had to step to the side and back out of it. To do something else that she had never wanted to do just because she was a woman working in sport?

Kristin fidgeted with her mug, feeling too erratic to take a sip. She played with her mouse and clicked through various websites on her computer, trying to find something that would dull her increasing paranoia. Arriving on Twitter, she scrolled through her feed desperate for distraction. And that was when she saw it. A tweet from the newspaper. It was a standard tweet. Something the newspaper did as soon as a new article was posted. Teased the story, pointed to the link to keep reading and credited the journalist. The name burned her retinas.

Anna.

She clicked on the link without thinking and seethed with envy in seeing her full name appear at the beginning of the story. It was an interview from the weekend. She had attended one

of the press conferences and asked questions of the coach and written a story that profiled him and his team's efforts after their first win of the season.

Anna had spoken to a senior AFL coach and written something for the newspaper and had her name on it. Kristin defiantly held back tears. She was heartbroken. It should have been her.

NINETEEN

3. 4. 16

Kristin sat forward in her plastic chair, her elbows on her knees, face in her hands.

How did this happen? How did this keep happening? It was a new season. It was all meant to be different now after everything. But it was all lies. The season lied to her over and over again and she fell for it every time. It was always the same. She couldn't believe what she had just seen. But she could.

Kristin peeked at the ground through her fingers. The MCG was emptying but she felt apathetically glued to her seat. The Hawthorn players were still on the ground, celebrating and handing out signed footballs to the happy little Hawks kids in the crowd. She'd forced herself to stay. She still hadn't forgiven herself for leaving early on Grand Final day, for how weak she had been when things got tough. She'd endured this game even after her initial hope had faded early. The hope that a new season brings new opportunities. It gives a capacity to begin again and wash away the past.

It was the second round of the 2016 season. It was Kristin's first chance to see her West Coast Eagles play live in front of her at her favourite place in the world and rectify everything that had happened. They'd played Hawthorn in a rematch of that devastating Grand Final. And

they'd fallen. Again. There'd been no revenge. No redemption. Just an excruciating loss by the exact same losing margin as the Grand Final defeat.

Kristin fumed in her seat. What was this all for? What had her team been doing all off season if they were going to produce this same result and allow themselves to be walked all over again? She rubbed her temples as she tried to calm herself. She'd been so happy coming to this game today. She just needed to see her team play, she needed to be at her favourite place, her home and experience that feeling that she kept convincing herself made everything ok. It had always worked. The MCG had always fixed everything.

Today was the first time in her life that it had failed her. She'd seen her team lose there before. And of course the Grand Final loss last year had killed her. But today was different.

Different because it was the same. How could her team let themselves be beaten in the exact same way? Didn't they have anything to fight for? Couldn't they fight for her? She looked at the big screen to confirm the score again in case by some small chance she was wrong. That her weakness for math had taken effect. The chances of it being the same margin were so small. Surely she was wrong.

Hawthorn 14. 15. 99 def. West Coast Eagles 7. 11. 53.

Forty-six points.

The same.

That number had haunted her for months. Now it was once again flashing at her. Taunting her in her favourite place. Kristin felt numb. Struck by an immense wave of sadness. Like she was about to, or had already lost, something important. Something she loved.

Kristin forced herself to move out of the stadium. If she couldn't come here to escape everything and feel the only thing that mattered, what was left for her? She was determined not to dwell on this confusion as she moved through the empty seats. It was OK. It would be OK. She would figure this out and so would her Eagles. They would all come back from this and try again and everything would be back to normal.

Making her way to the tram stop, Kristin walked behind two older women dressed head to toe in their brown and gold, waddling their way awkwardly through the crowd.

'Looked good today. We sure needed to lift after last week.'

'Last week was a disaster, bloody Geelong.'

'Do you think we can do four?'

'I think we can do anything if we can stick to a game plan. But it's early days Mary, early days.'

Kristin rolled her eyes. Hawthorn supporters were the worst. She tried to find a gap in the crowd to move around them.

‘Have you heard anything else about that awful taxi scandal?’

‘Oh no, I haven’t, I’d forgotten all about that!’

‘Me too, I don’t know why it just popped back into my head. I hadn’t thought about it all summer.’

Kristin blinked. Neither had she. What did happen to that story? With the *Fan Fatale* dormant, she realised she’d been less aware of what was happening off the field. She thought for a second how blissful that was. Even Anna wasn’t writing on these scandals anymore. She was interviewing players and writing match reports. Kristin wondered if she was in the rooms right now. Still inside the inner sanctum of the MCG, talking to a player who had just beaten down her team once again. Anna was living the dream. She was living Kristin’s dream.

Kristin couldn’t be bothered thinking about Hawthorn anymore. Not their stupid scandals or over-confident fans. She made a beeline for the tram platform hoping she could leave the two Hawks fans to discuss their delusions of grandeur. That she could ride away from the MCG in peace.

But they caught up with her and as they boarded the tram together Kristin put her headphones in to escape from the noise. She zipped up her jacket to hide her Eagles guernsey, put on her sunglasses and stood awkwardly in the tram's doorway while it moved them into the city.

Kristin watched the MCG become smaller and smaller as the tram pulled them away. It was still so beautiful. It was still home. She let the music blast through her ears and drown out her thoughts and the Hawks fan chatter around her. She'd read online during the week that every time in the Eagles' history, no matter that it was a short history, when they had lost a Grand Final, the next year they went on to win it. They lost in 1991, won in 1992. Lost in 2005, won in 2006. It wasn't Hawthorn's destiny to win four in a row. It was her Eagles' time to right their wrong and get the flag they deserved.

It would all be OK. Kristin needed to be hopeful and positive and believe that this season would be different from the last. The Derby was next week and she was sure West Coast would destroy Fremantle. If they could do that, everything would be OK. The Derby was more important than a Grand Final rematch. This game didn't mean anything.

Exegesis

Chapter One: Goodnight Stories for Female Fans

In May 2016, Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo created a *Kickstarter* campaign to publish a picture book that featured biographies of exceptional women in history aimed at young readers. Their goal was to create new types of fairy tales for young girls that shone a light on often overlooked, under-appreciated, or forgotten women. The campaign broke *Kickstarter* records for publishing, the book became a reality (Flood, 2016), and *Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls* (Favilli & Cavallo, 2017) was an instant sales success.

Favilli and Cavallo set out to counter the way children's books still tend to reinforce, legitimise, and reproduce a patriarchal gender system (McCabe, Fairchild & et al., 2011, pp. 198). In other words, to counter the persistent "symbolic annihilation" of strong girls and women in children's literature (Tuchman, 1978) and instead to make girls and boys aware of resilient and resourceful women. Rebellious women. I myself was inspired by Favilli and Cavallo's work. When I picked up the beautifully designed *Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls* in my local bookshop, I flipped through the pages and I couldn't stop smiling. This book would change the world.

But would it change my world as a female sports fan? Reading Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls brought me back to questions of the representation of women in traditional male

sporting spaces such as sports fandom, especially in the literature of Australian Rules football that I am studying. In particular, it took me back to three fictional accounts of Australian Rules football written by women. When I began my research into the field of the representation of women in sports discourse and discovered these books, I was elated. I had consumed so much content written by men that finding these, no matter that there were only three, was exhilarating. Books about Australian Rules football written by women. Finally, I had found my fairy tales. I wanted these books to be my inspiration as I set my personal goal towards being a published female football fiction writer. But I hated them.

In this chapter, I want to explore why I ‘hated’ these three books, and what this revealed of the unconscious biases that structure significant parts of my complicated relationship to (other) female Australian Rules football fans. Drawing on the tools of autoethnography and studies of female sports fans, I want to open up the question of how female sports fans read sports fiction that is written by women. More specifically, I want to explore the structural prejudices faced by women writing about predominantly male sporting cultures, while also still critically engaging with these texts. How do sports fans who have not been exposed to the varied roles of women in this environment, due to their omission from the discourse, actually *read* female characters? How do adult fans, particularly female fans, absorb and relate to how women are depicted in a modern sports literature that seeks to add women back into it? (Pope, 2012).

Australian Rules football, colloquially referred to as “footy,” is a beloved national sport. The game’s fans are enamoured with it and are frequently celebrated as ‘mad, fevered, obsessed, fanatical, and addicted’ (Klugman, 2009, p. 67). Matthew Klugman argues that the seemingly pathological, though feted, devotion of fans is grounded in the love of their team, as well as the specific love of certain players, and a more general love of the game (Klugman, 2009).

Despite its immense popularity, the game has not inspired much notable fiction. The most renowned work is David Williamson’s play *The Club*, which was written more than forty years ago (Williamson, 1978). Most of the literature written on Australian Rules football is directed at boys, with the adventures of *Specky Magee* being the most popular of these (Arena & Lyon, 2014). More recently, radio personality and comedian Jo Stanley has published a four-book series focusing on Australian Rules football for girls (Stanley, 2017), to coincide with the launch of the first ever national women’s Australian Rules competition (AFLW) while another series, *Fox Swift*, features a girl playing with a team of boys (Lawrence & Rioli, 2013).

In contrast, the three books that this chapter focuses on are the only fiction books published to date written by women about men’s Australian Rules football for an adult audience. An autoethnographic analysis of my experience reading these works as a self-identifying female Australian Rules football fan, will illustrate how the (unconscious) tendency to identify with the male-led fan behaviours can affect how female fans of elite male sports experience other women in that environment. This is primarily exemplified by self-identifying female fans still considering women occupying the space as ‘other’, and by placing the same negative stereotypes upon women that they, as female fans, are also in a constant battle to defend (Pope, 2012 &

2013; Jones, 2008; Mewett & Toffoletti, 2011 & 2012). This concept will be explored further in the following chapters of this thesis.

Autoethnography is an important tool for me as a researcher and participant in sports fan culture and will assist in my understanding of my multiple experiences of reading these three texts. It will become evident later in this chapter why I needed to experience multiple readings of each book. Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams and Arthur P. Bochner define autoethnography as ‘an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience’ (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010, p.1). The reading of these texts and this subsequent exegesis and novel is practice-led, a process noted by Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean in which they describe the approach to writing where, ‘the artist intuitively adopts the dual roles of the researcher and the researched in a “reflexive process”’ (Smith & Dean, 2009, p. 28). In following this process through the act of reading, and writing about my reading, I expose and explore thoughts and feelings in a manner that cannot be done without such a reflexive process.

The three texts of sports fiction based on Australian Rules football that I address in this chapter are *The Family Men* by Catherine Harris (2014), *Game Day* by Miriam Sved (2014), and *The Whole of my World* (2013) by Nicole Hayes. It is interesting to note that they were all published around the same time; however, no others have followed them as of yet. I will also note that Hayes’ text is technically young adult fiction as it features a teenage protagonist; however, I consider it separate enough from the young adult texts written by women that focus

on participation in junior sport and are aimed primarily at young girls. In contrast, Hayes' protagonist is sixteen and the book deals with adult themes.

Why did I initially hate reading these books? When I first read them, they didn't seem to ring true. They felt inauthentic. I identified some factual inaccuracies that I believed any football fan should know and I immediately discredited them.

Months later I returned to these books after exploring the research on unconscious gender bias (Blair & Banaji, 1996; Kunda & Spencer 2003; Ridgeway, 2009) and gender performance in female fans of elite male sports (Jones, 2008). I had to ask myself if my strong antipathy to these three texts was in fact framed by my biases. 'Research shows that sex categorization unconsciously primes gender stereotypes in our minds and makes them cognitively available to shape behaviour and judgment' (Ridgeway, 2009, p. 151), to quote Cecilia L. Ridgeway. But I thought this meant unconscious bias toward women was something only men did to us, to me. When I made comments about the game or sat in the stands self-consciously cheering, feeling, when I felt like my own authenticity as a fan was on the line all the time - how could *I* also be participating in this bias toward other women? I am a woman. Was I unfairly critiquing these texts because they were sports texts written by women?

On my initial readings of these texts, my 'footy fan' position was unrelenting. My love for the game placed me as a guardian of it. I wanted to protect it from anything that could be understood as an attack. The flaws I noted in these narratives ranged from small factual inaccuracies to what I deemed to be completely impossible situations comparative to the context of elite and professional Australian Rules football.

One example of a small error in Sved's text is when she indicates a senior player's distaste for some of the newer and more exciting players coming into the team who could threaten his position. The character is bitter that he has missed an award that might have made him stand out against the young players, the *Mark of the Year* award. In the Australian Football League (AFL), this award is given to a player who takes the best mark of the season as voted by fans, and is awarded at the conclusion of the *regular* season. Sved's character is upset that he missed this award; however, the 'mark' he is referring to was taken in a *finals* game. Marks taken in finals games are not eligible for selection, as voting has already concluded.

It seems like such a small thing but this incorrect piece of information instantly pulled me out of Sved's story. This incident is a small, innocuous comment made by this character. It's a device to help frame his disgruntled nature toward the new recruits on his team and his missed opportunities. It occurs early on in the book and because of the error in the technicalities surrounding how votes for the award work in 'real life', I was prepared to discard the entire text.

In Harris' *The Family Men*, my criticism of her narrative is based on her central story as opposed to Sved's small inaccuracies. Harris depicts a horrific scene that takes place at an end-of-season team awards night. This is where the football club awards its players with individual honours such as 'Best and Fairest' (The Australian Rules football equivalent to the Most Valuable Player - MVP), most improved player, best first year player, etc. At this event, the football team, in some sort of hazing ritual, encourages the young star player and protagonist to sexually assault the exotic dancer that has been hired as entertainment. This incident then sends

him into deep emotional turmoil as he is haunted by his actions and the attitudes and culture of the football club with which he has become complicit.

While the writing in this text is powerful and Harris' prose is elegant and engaging, I was furious while reading it as I was indignant in believing these events exist. Harris was writing lies. Elite football clubs hold their Best and Fairest (MVP) events at large public venues with hundreds of people in attendance. Family, friends, partners, and even average fans can purchase tickets, though they are expensive. These events, additionally, are filmed and live streamed on team websites and social media services; there are mainstream media doing live crosses to the six o'clock news and photographers that chronicle the night in a rapid series of flashes for the newspapers. There are certainly no strippers.

The scene Harris depicts where a modern day, elite football team could be secluded away from the eyes of the public and the media and behave in such an abhorrent way is impossible. It reads like it could have happened at an amateur football club based in the middle of nowhere, away from prying eyes. While I do not deny that some depravity remains in professional sporting environments today, the advent of social media makes such audacious acts restrictive. And Harris is not depicting a secluded, secret football club event or ritual. She is not indicating that this is an amateur organisation and she is not describing the past. She is depicting the behaviour of an elite, national football club based in Melbourne in modern times and for that, I could not allow myself to believe in her story.

Hayes' story was equally unbelievable to me. *The Whole of My World* is the tale of a sixteen-year-old girl being denied the opportunity to play the game herself in 1980s Melbourne. She then shifts her passion for the game to the stands as she becomes a devoted fan of her football club. This narrative is somewhat engaging and I was empathetic to the protagonist's heartbreak at not being able to play the game because of her sex. How her relationship then develops with a senior player at the club who is married with children, however, was entirely incredible to me.

While reading this text I asked myself, 'Why would a thirty-year-old father and elite athlete continue to drive a sixteen-year-old school girl "super fan" home after she had lingered at the football club while the team trained and loitered around the change rooms until he left? Would he really then try to have sex with her on the front lawn of a stranger's home after a Grand Final loss to ease his pain?' I wondered if these thoughts were naïve. I knew footballers were (are) not saints, but this was a sixteen-year-old. She was not depicted as a football 'groupie' on a quest to bed footballers, she was just a young fan. She loved the game. Did athletes really behave like this with young fans?

The important thing to note is that these texts are all fictional. The question I needed to ask myself was, why was I so intent on discrediting them due to small factual inaccuracies or my predispositions on how I believed football clubs operated or players behaved? Why couldn't I have agreed that, in Sved's fictional world, the *Mark of the Year* could be awarded for a 'mark' taken in the finals series? Why couldn't I have allowed myself to imagine Harris' created world where a team's end-of-season celebrations could have occurred in the way she described? Why

couldn't I give Hayes any credit when depicting the football fan culture of a time when I was not even born?

I realised that I was reacting to these texts much as I have discovered female fans relate to other women in the sports fan space when they are in fear of being classified as 'inauthentic fans' (Pope 2012 & 2013; Jones, 2008; Mewett & Toffoletti 2011 & 2012). In her study of female soccer fans in the UK, Katherine Jones notes that her female respondents:

looked down on female fans who practiced different versions of femininity and fandom than they did; these femininity and fan practices did not conform to their notion of correct attire, behaviour, knowledge, and desires. Their rejection of these ways of doing fandom suggests that the interviewees thought these women were not proper fans (Jones, 2008, p. 529).

Was I looking down on these women writers because I thought they did not conform to what I believed a 'proper fan' should be? Had my predisposition to align myself with male-led behaviour in the sports fan environment by criticizing other women given me a license to be overly critical of these texts just because they were written by women? How would I have read them if they were written by men? I needed to re-read them with this in mind, acknowledging my ingrained football fan as well as my unconscious gender bias that my whole life has put women outside the game despite the fact that I am also one of them. These women needed a chance. That is all that I am asking for as a female fan, too, is it not?

I am afraid of reading these books again based on my initial reactions. I am afraid I cannot give them the chance they deserve not just because of the entrenched prejudices I have but also because I am so desperate for these books to be more than what they are. I want to see myself in them, to see women how I see women in sport today. And maybe that is unfair, but that is the insatiable demand I have for football content now, especially from the women who are providing it because the men are not giving me what I want. I want these women writers to give me something that I have been missing from football writing my whole life: adequate representation. However, it appears that no matter how much they do give me, I am not ready for it; my instinct is still to tear it down.

Maybe I do just want it from the men?

As Larena Hoeber and Shannon Kerwin (2013) state in their research paper in which they employed an analytical technique called ‘collective self-ethnography’, that biases in this type of research method are also the reason why this information is beneficial. The biases point to problems in a specific way which begs for further reflection and action:

We argue that we should not dismiss or ignore our own personal interests and experiences as a means of informing our research. We, as women, researchers and

sport fans, may be particularly credible sources in that our trained ability to critically reflect on our own experiences can contribute to knowledge regarding female sport fans. Further, self-reflexive methods allow for more evocative writing and representations and thus can provide alternative understandings of what it means to be female sport fans (Hoerber & Kerwin, 2013, p. 330).

This points to how important it is for me to be as aware as possible of my prejudice while still critically reading these three texts written about Australian Rules football by women. I know my bias is there and now I am exploring how I can move past it to read women with as little bias as possible.

Hoerber and Kerwin's position on bias in ethnography should embolden me and strip away the fear that I feel about writing in a biased way on this subject. The fear I am feeling is part of the research. But it is still there, making it hard for me to breathe sometimes. I do not feel that it is fear based on my scholarship. I know the research and I know my position. It is the fear that I will experience the same prejudice that I am showing toward my female cohort. That I will be seen as yet another fraudulent female fan who doesn't know what she is talking about. My fear is always central to my self-identification as a female fan and is complicated and contradictory, as I also participate in the discrediting of other women. Joan Didion was right. In writing in this way, I have uncovered my fears. Am I a big enough football fan to be writing about my experience as a female fan?

Upon re-examining the three texts I have found myself exploring the authors themselves. It feels important to me to know their motivation for writing a football novel, which is also something I would not necessarily do for writers of other genres of fiction, or perhaps even male sports fiction writers. But football fiction is overly personal to me. There is some sort of proprietary relationship I have with football as a fan that makes me feel extremely protective of it. I am in love with it. This is almost a vetting exercise and I know how unfair it is for me to be asking if these women writers are qualified enough to write on the subject. I expect them to be well researched and versed in the game as well as having a thorough understanding of what it is like to be a fan of it.

I discovered each author occupies a different place on the fan scale that I created. Nicole Hayes is a self-proclaimed fan of football. She is part of an all-female football podcast, *The Outer Sanctum*, and has collaborated on additional football texts, *A Footy Girl's Guide to the Stars of 2017* (2017) and *From the Outer* (2016). I am an avid listener of her podcast and actually discovered this book through listening to the show. I also learnt through listening that the six co-hosts, all Hawthorn supporters, mostly came together as a group due to discovering Hayes' text and bonding over the narrative (Race, E, Race, L, Race, F, Hayes, N, Seear, K & Sometimes, A, 2019). Miriam Sved is a new football fan. After moving to Melbourne to live with her partner, she quickly fell in love with the game. Catherine Harris is not a fan at all and has no desire to be one. At the Williamstown Literary Festival in 2015 after the publication of *The Family Men*, she acknowledged her aversion to the sport and explained that her motivation

for writing the novel came from the need to expose the misogynist culture of football clubs based on inner sanctum rumours she had encountered. However, her main goal was employing a writing technique that she was critiquing in her PhD thesis. Harris was reluctant to specify which specific events she was depicting through the guise of fiction, though she was not defensive when it was suggested that it could be based on a famous footballing family connected to the town of Geelong in Victoria.

Harris also expressed a small regret in writing her text as fiction, mentioning at the festival that it appeared readers had an easier time dismissing the content through the fictional gaze and not wanting to acknowledge that it could be reality. This indicates that her story was based on some ‘real life’ events. Despite knowing this, I still place myself as part of the audience who has discounted her tale.

I wondered, while reading these texts, why I was not responding to them in a more positive way. Why was I not supportive of women writing about my favourite sport? Do I dislike these books because I am protective of the sport I love, because I am afraid that they are speaking some kind of truth that will threaten it? I tried to force these thoughts out of my mind in my critical re-reading. I was determined to look at style, how women were represented, and avoid falling instantly off-side with the narrative if some small comment about the game stood out as incorrect.

Miriam Sved’s *Game Day* depicts a season of an AFL football team and is told through the perspectives of multiple characters. Each chapter gives a new voice to the story and moves

the narrative along. Sved portrays a variety of participants in the football club environment throughout these chapters. She depicts the usual suspects whom you would expect to hear from in a football text such as different players, the head coach, a talent scout, and a former player. What she also gives us is the voices of those who might be thought of as having peripheral roles in the sport. And these provide new and interesting insights. They include the team's (female) media manager; the young daughter of a cheer squad member; a female fan determined to 'hook up' with players despite having bad prior experiences with them; an umpire whose deteriorating relationship with the game causes him to purposefully change the outcome of a match via his officiating; a semi-professional player trying to take his career to the elite level while dealing with the fact that his girlfriend is a more successful athlete than he is; and the team doctor who has been hiding his sexuality in fear.

These latter characters are a fascinating addition to the sports literature landscape as they are seldom represented and have complicated and significant contributions to the sporting narrative. It is also frustrating reading *Game Day* in that these characters are represented only in small vignettes and the story moves on. We do not know how their plights are resolved or left unresolved. This could be considered clever by Sved. The tactic could be read as a representation of how little consideration peripheral characters are given, not only in sports literature, but in the sporting landscape as a whole. In commentary, analysis, and discussion of the game, we tend to only see and hear voices from the same types of people. By portraying these outside voices only fleetingly, Sved shows us that these stories are worth hearing and proves her point by leaving us wanting more. However, my preconceptions keep me from being completely convinced that this was her initial strategy.

My other criticism is that, although Sved attempts to give voice to more than just the usual suspects in sports literature, her chapters are still dominated by the male experience. Of the fourteen chapters, ten depict male characters and only four are dedicated to a female voice. Again, this makes me wonder if it was Sved's intent to accurately mimic the current landscape, as male voices do dominate the conversation of sport. But it also makes me think an opportunity has been missed. This is particularly true when there are female characters we are introduced to through the eyes of some of the male narrators. I would have loved to see them have their own chapter. The daughter of the head coach who is passionately studying gender theory at university and questioning her father's hegemonic working environment; the daughter of the male media manager who is sleeping beneath a poster of the player whose sex scandal he is trying to cover up; the female media manager who takes his place when he throws in the towel after the scandal; the girlfriend of the Victorian Football League (VFL) player who is likely to head to the next Olympics. There is so much these characters could have given to this story and, again, I question whether this is the point: that these people involved in football's fan culture we seldom hear from have stories that we not only need to, but *want* to hear.

But again, I tried to discredit Sved when she depicted something in dialogue that didn't sit well with me. In chapter five we experience the world through the perspective of the head coach. When addressing his young recruit, he uses the term 'forward corridor'. In Australian Rules football, the 'corridor' refers to the passage down the middle of the ground. It effectively is between the two fifty-meter arcs which act as the offensive/defensive zones. These are referred to as 'forward fifty' or 'back/defensive fifty'. Reading this term 'forward corridor' was jarring

for me. I had never heard anyone use this term before and I could not imagine a head coach using it in a conversation with a player. I asked some of my fellow fans about the term to see if I had missed something. Admittedly, I only asked male fans.

‘Would you ever use the term “forward corridor” to describe an area of the field?’ They all said no. They said things to the effect of, ‘You would say “inside fifty” or “forward pocket”’ or ‘You would just say “corridor” - not “forward corridor.”’ I felt validated but also confused. Why was I being so picky? Was it because I was pre-judging Sved as a new fan to the game? She only took an interest after moving to Melbourne and living with her partner who was a big football fan. Was I punishing her for these tiny inaccuracies because I considered her an outsider?

Through fleeting glimpses that are interesting but move on quickly, Sved has drawn attention to the problem of the underrepresentation of women in football narratives by continuing to represent them in this way, which can be read as a powerful statement. If this is indeed Sved’s intention however, it misses the mark as there is not enough nuance in her narrative to convince me that this is what she was trying to do. An opportunity has been missed to really highlight this problem within the culture. Its impact is then lost.

Harris also uses multiple narrators in *The Family Men*. She has a dual narrative where we see the fallout from the sexual assault through the eyes of the player, and we are then shown the lead up to the night through the eyes of the young exotic dancer. The narrative is split by voice and time and is elegantly constructed and executed. I could not criticise Harris’ writing. She is a

beautiful writer. But I still have a problem with her story; it is still too far away from what I believe to be reality.

In *The Whole of My World*, Hayes uses elements of her experience growing up as a passionate Hawthorn (an AFL team based in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne however in the text the team her character supports is re-named as ‘Glenthorn’) supporter and the disappointment she experienced in not being able to continue playing the game along with her twin brother after she reached early adolescence. I do not dismiss Hayes’ text due to factual inaccuracies in football jargon, as she is perfectly adequate in describing the passion for the game her protagonist, Shelly, holds. However, my issue is my inability to identify with Shelly. And my passing of judgment on her when she behaves in certain ways with the players. My unconscious gender bias is almost ‘slut-shaming’ her, a teenage school girl who is hanging around the football club at every opportunity, and I find myself asking aloud while reading, ‘What does she think she is doing? Does she really think these men respect her as a fan?’

I find I am putting myself into Hayes’ text as the ‘better fan’ to further discredit Shelly’s experience. I class myself as a female fan who knows how to be compliant and not want to play *with* the boys. I know my place and keep out of their way like a ‘good fan’ is supposed to do. A good fan participates in fan activities but does not ‘hang around’ too much to get a name for herself. I was comparing Shelly to myself and thinking how much better I was than her, thus deeming her story irrelevant and inappropriate.

In light of my reading, and then re-reading, of the three texts written by women about Australian Rules football I wanted to turn to one final text. This is a fictional book based on Australian Rugby League, *Playing The Field*, by Zoe Foster-Blake (2010), which acts as a point of difference from Australian Rules football. I wondered if reading a fictional account of a sporting code that I was not so intrinsically connected to and protective of, that was also written by a woman, would be a different experience.

Zoe Foster-Blake was the partner of the South Sydney Rabbitohs star, Craig Wing for almost a decade before they split in 2009, after which she wrote this novel. It is a fictional tale of a young woman navigating through the world of WAGS (colloquial term given to the wives and girlfriends of athletes - in this case Rugby League players) in Sydney. While the account is fictional, we can assume her protagonist, Jean, is a somewhat reflexive representation of the feelings and experiences Foster-Blake faced while being involved in the culture first hand in her high-profile relationship.

Foster-Blake's text is quite disappointing considering the access she had over such a long period to the inner sanctum. Additionally, her characters are underdeveloped, and her dialogue poor. Most disappointing is how she has portrayed a sporting culture that brings down a confident girl who never recovers her power, ultimately portraying Jean's submission to her athlete boyfriend as a happy ending. In 'real life', Foster-Blake walked away and has become a successful businesswoman, writer, mother, and celebrity in her own right. Why did she not give this dignity and strength to her protagonist? Or why was the ending not left as a representation of

the many women who are caught up in this world and left cold by it? It would have been so much more powerful if Jean either walked away or was walked over.

Jean *is* left broken and completely changed as a person from the vibrant and ambitious young woman we are introduced to at the beginning of the book. Yet this is not acknowledged. Jean chooses to stay with her footballer who has lied and disrespected her, and moves with him to France, giving up her life for him. This is subsequently packaged for the reader like the happy ending Jean always dreamed of. It reads like the end of a romance novel.

Despite the poor narrative, Foster does give some brief moments of key insights into the psyche of the women who occupy the ‘WAG’ world. When on their first date, Jean is incredibly eager to please the star footballer, Josh. The waiter suggests a red wine to which Josh agrees enthusiastically. Jean smiles in complicity but reveals via her internal monologue:

The truth is I don’t like red wine, but I didn’t want to look like hard work. I’d drink straight ouzo from a gumboot in order to appear the easy, non-fussed girl who could roll with whatever she was given; for whom nothing was a drama.

Guys loved those girls (Foster-Blake, 2010, pp. 75).

This is a recurring theme in the book as Jean fights for Josh’s affection by effectively not fighting at all, remaining as indifferent and ‘non-fussed’ as possible. In one instance, after being stood up and not being contacted by Josh for a week, upon hearing a long-winded explanation about ‘a crazy ex-girlfriend’, Jean forgives Josh instantly for the whole mess. ““Relax,” I said

casually, trying hard to be the no-fuss, no drama girl I thought Josh would like' (Foster-Blake, 2010, p. 92).

Just after this moment Jean allows him to go drinking with the boys. Upon this suggestion, Josh is elated at her 'coolness', comparing her to his ex-girlfriend who always complained when he went out. Jean further performs her role of the easy-going girlfriend at this faux compliment, rather than challenging his behaviour. Jean is, in a very self-aware way, playing the role that she knows will eventually get her what she wants. This is an audition. She is being tested with these situations but she knows that how she responds to each one will determine if she lands the lead part.

Another aspect of performance is portrayed in the way Jean changes the way she dresses and does her hair and make-up while spending time with the other wives and partners of the players. She spends most of her small wage on revealing clothes, lightening her hair to be blonder, and blow-waves at the salon before games. Josh mentions at one point that while he likes the blonde hair, he still likes the way she looked when they first met. Why is she changing her appearance if he doesn't seem to care? She has customised her performance to appeal to the other women as she knows that their opinions of her are just as important as the men's to be accepted in the culture.

When Foster-Blake finishes her text with Jean leaving the country with Josh, I felt deflated. Not just because I had finished reading a book I didn't enjoy. I felt so angry that this woman could still be with him after everything he had put her through, everything she had

changed about herself to be with him and somehow, as a reader, I was meant to be satisfied that they were still together.

I went back to my feelings towards Sved and Hayes and Harris and thought, was I not giving Foster-Blake the credit she deserved here? Was this narrative more about the toxicity of sports culture for women who are in romantic relationships with athletes? Was the ending where Jean stays with Josh a metaphor for how broken Foster-Blake was at the end of her 'WAG' experience that she felt she might as well have stayed in that world? I have an aversion to giving her that credit. I still find the ending highly problematic.

After experiencing these emotions and trying to answer these questions while engaging with these texts, I find I am still looking for answers which I am quite fearful of. My fear of re-reading these Australian Rules football texts written by women is the same fear I have about not being prepared enough to be an advocate for women who are football fans. A fear that I am not enough of a football fan myself.

This dichotomy of fear is essential to the understanding of how women experience the cultural world of sports fandom. The constant denials of authenticity, disregard for legitimacy, and blatant sexism cause many women to retreat to a place of safety, and the only safe place is in a bubble of silent compliancy. Despite how vocal women can be while cheering on their team, they remain silent in regard to calling out sexism and poor moral behaviour committed by the male fans and still judge other women just as harshly in the space for not 'doing' fandom in the appropriate ways (Jones, 2008).

What I wanted from these texts is something that they'll never be able to give me. I want them to be my good night stories. My beacons, my bibles. My examples of women in football who I can aspire to be or who I can recognise myself in from my experience as a football fan. I want to see *my* struggles, what *I* have had to learn along the way and, more importantly, what *I* can still learn.

I want the stories I was denied as a young girl trying to find my place in a patriarchal society and see how I can make my own fairy tale by getting my happy ending as a female football fan. However, as I come to these texts in my later years with my gender bias from a lifetime of being told that I needed to be 'one of the boys' to be accepted, that bias is keeping me from embracing them as my survival guides. I needed these read to me as I fell asleep dreaming of my future and now I fear it is too late. I am reading these texts as someone lost within a discourse of cool girls and compliancy. There are no goodnight stories for girls like me and I do not know if I am strong enough to break the spell and save myself from the deep sleep of gender bias I am in.

Re-reading these texts proved a valuable exercise where I believe I was able to give each a thorough and critical reading with awareness of my prejudice toward women writing on my

sport. I can categorically say that re-reading them in this way with the tools of autoethnography was essential to understanding them and understanding how women are placed in sports literature. A second reading may in fact be an essential approach to sports fiction written by women while we operate in a heavily gender-biased society. From my second reading, I acknowledge the strength in the writing and the offerings of different representations of women to the sports discourse. But I still did not enjoy them. And, unfortunately, I do not think I will be able to trust myself to decide if that is because of my bias or because of their content. I may have to wait for the young *Rebel Girls* to come along, armed with positive representations of women, their goodnight stories, from the outset to teach me how to read women so I can know for sure.

Chapter Two: Female Fans Watching Females Be Fans

This chapter looks at looking. What it feels like to be watched, to watch and the complex ways in which gendered practices complicate the position of women as spectators of sport. It also looks at the role that women can play in policing the behaviour of other women in the environment of a sports stadium. I want to begin this chapter with a scene from the Christopher Nolan film *Inception* (2010):

‘Why are they all looking at me?’

‘Because my subconscious feels like someone else is creating this world. The more you change things, the quicker the projections start to converge on it.’

‘Converge?’

‘They sense the foreign nature of the dreamer. They attack like white blood cells fighting an infection.’

‘They’re going to attack us?’

‘No. Just you.’

In this scene Ariadne (played by Ellen Page) is being trained to ‘build’ dreams for Cobb (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) who operates a service to extract information from the rich and powerful by covertly entering and manipulating their dreams. During her training, Ariadne enters Cobb’s subconscious with him as he teaches her. They walk through his dream of the busy streets of Paris and the people walking by them begin to focus intensely on Ariadne, staring at her overtly, knocking in to her, their agitation growing at her being present in this space she does not belong. Ariadne asks Cobb why the people are reacting to her this way. He explains that the people walking are his subconscious, projections of his mind looking back at her, aware she is not meant to be there. She is an intruder.

This scene is striking as it is a commentary on the ownership of space, belonging and the challenging of the status quo. The reason the projections start to pay attention to Ariadne is that she is ‘changing things’. As she continues to manipulate the space, the crowd descends on her violently and causes Ariadne to wake up, expelled from the dream she has built.

Watching this scene, I found myself unexpectedly triggered. I felt so connected to Ariadne’s experience but I didn’t know why. Yet the more I thought about it, the more it felt related to my life as a female Australian Rules football fan. In this chapter I want to explore this by analysing the spatial dynamics of Australian Rules football games for those watching in the crowd. When sitting in the sports stadium, the gaze of fans is assumed to be towards the field of play. ‘Real fans’ of whatever sport is being played would not deviate from watching the action,

or so it is assumed. Yet many female fans act as if their behaviour is being watched while they themselves watch the game. As if, in other words, they are under surveillance in a Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1979). At issue is the hyper-masculine space of most spectator sports arenas, and the questions – and quest – for authenticity which female fans continue to wrestle with (Jones, 2008; Mewett & Toffoletti, 2011; Pope, 2012).

How then sports stadiums enable a male gaze (Mulvey, 1989) to operate in a space where women are not positioned to be gazed at, but are still pressured to police their own behaviour, is an unexplored and complicated fan experience. The complication lies in how women comply in a self-surveillance of their own identities in this space (Foucault, 1979) but can also be complicit in the policing of other women.

This behaviour of constant self-surveillance occurs in multiple gendered ways for women who attend live sports events. It also highlights the complicated history female fans have endured, and are also complicit in, in the quest for authenticity (Jones, 2008, Mewett & Toffoletti 2012 & Pope, 2012). Moreover, it raises questions of belonging functions in hyper masculine spaces such as sporting arenas. Butler's work on gender performance (1990) helps us see how historical, socially constructed elements of gender contribute to the concept of becoming or building an identity or identities. 'As a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations' (Butler, 1990, p. 10). If we place this within the historical context of Australian Rules football where, from the game's inception in Melbourne in 1858, it was 'evident that the hierarchies within these [football] clubs were the natural expression of the status

and power distinctions within the community' (Hess, 2007, p. 6), we can see how historical and societal gendered assumptions of women are placed into the sports arena both then and now.

What interests me from this notion of constructions of gender, is how gendered spaces are perpetuated and regulated over time socially. When attending live sports, we often assume the performances of the participants in the culture are organic displays of passion. Fans cheering and (often literally) showing their true colours. The behaviours on display appear to be natural and uninhibited. However, we know from historical social and performance theory (Goffman, 1959; Giddens, 1984; & Butler, 1990), that public presentation of self/selves can be can anything but natural, particularly when it is socially moderated.

The concept of how people perform in social spaces and modify their behaviour to suit perceived social norms is not new. Social surveillance, specifically the research on surveillance and behaviour is most famously discussed in the germinal text on this subject, Foucault's, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1979). Foucault used Jeremy Bentham's panoptic prison structure to explain how the policing of prisoners from a centrally located tower in which a guard can see the prisoners at all times without being seen themselves created an environment where self-policing by the prisoners took effect. The fear that they might be being watched by a guard they could not see was enough to influence their behaviour. Foucault investigated how this concept extends outside the prison and into society in the ways people police themselves in certain ways when under the threat of being watched, casting an inward eye.

Though it is not just enforcement of correct behaviour on a law-abiding sense that Foucault looks at from this model taken from the panopticon, it is also that of the social. In how we interact with others in different social environments where social contracts are in play that force a particular behaviour for acceptance. Yet while the notion of the panopticon has been extended to sports studies, few scholars have incorporated it into an approach that also engages with questions of gender and the method of autoethnography.

In an exception, Jennifer Ann McMahon and Dawn Penney (2013) used interviews with elite swimmers as well as autoethnographical accounts from one of the author's (McMahon) who was also an elite swimmer, to study the pressures swimmers faced to maintain specific weights while competing became normalised. 'In Foucauldian terms, normalisation refers to social processes through which ideas and actions come to be seen as normal' (McMahon & Penney, 2012, p. 159). The constant weigh-ins administered by team doctors and coaches had a panopticon-like effect on athletes. The relentless external monitoring along with the fear of not making weight became something that was monitored internally by the swimmers. This act of self-monitoring became a normalised yet traumatising experience for these athletes as they became motivated by fear. As McMahon and Penney note:

An important feature of *panopticism* is "the total visibility of bodies, of individuals and things under a system of centralised surveillance" (Foucault 1997, p. 226). Lyon (2001) used the concept of panopticism and applied it in the contemporary sense, saying that the panoptic gaze does not need to surround a

physical structure of an institution but “permeates the spaces of everyday life” (Scott, 2010, p. 220).’ (McMahon & Penney, 2012, pp. 159).

For the swimmers themselves, ‘The external application of surveillance eventually becomes unnecessary as the swimmers [prisoners] inscribe in themselves the power relation such that they simultaneously play both roles, they become the principle of their own subjection (Foucault 1977)’ (McMahon & Penney, 2012, pp. 160).

This research is interesting to me as someone drawn to research on self-surveillance in sport and the use of autoethnography as a methodology. While McMahon and Penney focused on the experiences of elite swimmers, not female sports fans, their research highlights the ways in which monitoring can ‘permeate the spaces of everyday life’ (Scott, 2010, p. 220). I want to build on this observation to examine the way the monitoring in sports stadium occurs in gendered ways. This monitoring does not come from one single central point of surveillance, but through the permeating of the everyday experience of the active male gaze and the extension of this through a duality where women are seen through it and can also contribute to looking at other women through it.

I walk down the aisle and find a seat a few rows from the fence. This is not great viewing at the Docklands Stadium, you can't see all the way across the ground so when the play is in the opposite pocket, you have to watch it on the big screen, but I don't care. There is no one around

these seats and I can have the row to myself – all while being close to the action when the play is on my side of the ground. It is a St Kilda home game, they are taking on my West Coast Eagles and I haven't seen them play live in a long time. I'm so excited to watch them. I feel completely alone but not lonely. I feel like my team is about to play just for me. There is much to be said about being at a sold-out blockbuster at the MCG. The sound of the crowd is exhilarating. But I love the quiet at West Coast Eagles games in Melbourne. The intimacy of it. Sometimes I wonder if that is why I chose them as my team. I wanted something that I could call my own. Something that I didn't have to share. I am relaxed. I am happy. I am at the football watching my team.

Two male Saints supporters sit directly behind me and I straighten up in my seat. I am immediately angry. There are so many seats around us in this empty stadium that have been left open for general admission, why have they sat right behind me? I can feel them on my skin. I feel itchy. I try to ignore them.

I tune out their innate St. Kilda dribble about how awful their team is. I don't disagree. The Eagles begin to kick away and I clap every goal with a 'Go Eagles' cheer. I love cheering at the game. I seldom get to do it. It is a release and in these games with few in attendance, I know that they can hear me. They can hear my support and I feel like I am contributing, I am a part of this. After a few goals, I hear the men mocking me. They clap slowly and thunderously in my ears behind me, mimicking my cheers sarcastically.

It kills me. It silences me. I feel exposed and ashamed. I feel I have caused shame. Have I embarrassed my team by clapping or cheering them in an embarrassing way? Am I distracting the players? Are the players also rolling their eyes at me wanting me to shut up, to leave?

Why don't I roll my eyes back at the men who have sat directly behind me in a stadium with a capacity of 50,000 at a game with an attendance of approximately 20,000? They chose to sit directly behind a singular Eagles fan in an empty bay of seats. Why don't they move if I am such a bother to them?

I sit on edge with them behind me. I don't want to move because I don't want them to think that I'm not tough enough to handle their mockery. I don't even go to the bathroom at half-time because I don't want them to think I have caved and left. But I also want to remain still, silent, invisible. I want them not to see me. I feel sick with a cavalcade of confusing and conflicting feelings

It's now the third-quarter and I notice my lips are irritating me. Dry from the dehydration of not wanting to drink anything to avoid having to go to the bathroom and also from the winter chill. I have paw-paw lip balm in my bag. I go to reach for it and immediately stop myself on two accounts. Firstly, I don't want the men behind me to see that I have brought a designer handbag to the game. Secondly, the action of applying the balm to my lips is something I can't bear for them to see me do. I don't want them to see me taking my attention away from the action to do something 'girly'. A real fan wouldn't do that. A real fan should be so focussed on the game that they shouldn't be distracted by such trivial things as applying lip balm.

I hear them go to the bar several times to get beers during the quarters and I never question their loyalty to their team. Why do I think they are questioning mine? Why do I think they even give a shit if I put some lip balm on? Why do I feel their eyes on me when I know they are watching the game?

They leave halfway through the final quarter, they have given up as my Eagles continue to school their Saints. I relax. I cross my legs and lean back. West Coast are going to win. I can finally enjoy the game. And I can apply some lip balm.

During my personal experience as an Australian Rules football fan, there have been countless times when I have been brought back to the reality of my place within the culture of the sport. I have walked in through the turnstiles of the biggest stadium in Australia – the Melbourne Cricket Ground – wide eyed, excited and happy, going about my fan-ness like it was no one else’s business and feeling like I belong until something wakes me up. From these experiences, a subconscious desire for my participation not to be ‘seen’ in a gendered way has developed into fear to not be awakened or expelled from the place I love. This fear has then driven me to subconsciously devise strategies and performances that are traditionally more accepted in spaces with a historically dominant male social group.

If we go back to Bentham's panoptic prison and bring it into the social space, the tower can be represented by the concept of dominant groups who have more social currency, thereby somewhat masking explicitly where the gaze of surveillance is coming from. We never know if it is indeed falling on us, which then brings a constant inward self-surveillance, out of fear. In the context of a sporting arena, the theory relating to performance of self, surveillance and self-surveillance in gendered ways, is seldom explored as the watching or role of the watchers is complicated. I posit that not only do people watching the game at a sport stadium internalise the panoptic gaze, but that they then shine it on the others around them.

Modern sports stadiums tend to be like the Ancient Roman 'Circus'. Whether circular or rectangular in nature, everyone in the stands is supposed to look inwards. If we try to compare them to the panopticon, there is of course one key element missing. The central surveillance tower. Instead, there is a field of play in the centre of the space. Without a tower and a central point of surveillance, as well as the added focal point of the game, which participants in this environment are 'watching', what or who normalises the behaviour of the participants? Who holds the power? Who watches the watchers? The male gaze.

Laura Mulvey developed the notion of the 'male gaze' in her seminal text, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989). More specifically, Mulvey explored the male gaze through the study of film where the positioning of female characters on screen is framed by their sexualisation and objectification, catering exclusively for the 'visual pleasure' of a heterosexual, male audience. She notes that:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey, 1989, p. 19).

Mewett and Toffoletti have applied the concept of Mulvey's male gaze in their research on female fans, with a perspective on the role of women as watchers. They state that, 'while feminist film criticism reveals the social power historically accorded to the male gaze, it also illuminates the role women play as spectators' (Mewett & Toffoletti, 2012, p. 100). The 'gaze' of female spectators at elite male sports is acknowledged in popular culture, but in a largely dismissive form through jokes that these women only attend sport in order to 'perve' at the bodies of the male players in some form of 'reverse' sexual objectification (see Wedgwood, 2008; Klugman, 2012; Richards, 2015). Yet as much as some women attending games might receive occasional (or more) erotic pleasure from watching male athletes play, these spectators are still susceptible to the male gaze. As I will later show, this is exemplified by the controlled nature in which many female fans 'look' to protect their fan identities, maintains the traditional hierarchy of power and allows a general (and at times specific) male gaze to continue its surveillance of them.

Toffoletti and Mewett critique the purported role that female sports fans play in sexually objectifying male athletes. How women can experience some pleasure in the looking at male

athletes performing in the sports arena is complicated as heterosexual female fans have an awareness that admitting to finding athletes sexually attractive can contribute to their fandom being deemed as inauthentic (see also Jones, 2008; Pope, 2012). It also creates another problem, that of the perceived reversal of sexism, that this kind of looking equalises a gendered power imbalance.

Simply inverting the binary so that women are made active subjects in the process of looking does not automatically position men as sexualized, degraded objects of female voyeuristic pleasure. Female fans reinforce the superiority of the sportsman's body through reference to his athletic capabilities, which, in our view, renders problematic the notion that the sexual objectification of male athletes by female spectators constitutes a form of 'reverse' sexism (Toffoletti & Mewett, 2012, pp. 108).

Furthermore, Nikki Wedgwood (2005 & 2008) notes:

not all women who have an interest in men's football are (hetero)sexually motivated (Wedgwood, 2005). Even in colonial times, female spectators attended games not simply as "ornamental figures, socialites or voyeurs but also as barrackers and civilisers" (Hess, 1996, pp. 360-366). Thus, Hess wisely warned against women's interest in football being trivialized and reduced to "a discussion of the delights of male bodies in tight shorts" (Wedgwood, 2008, p. 357).

Indeed, the research of Rob Hess has shown that not only were there ardent, passionate and knowledgeable female fans of Australian Rules football from the game's inception, but that female fans made up a significant portion of the early football crowds (Hess, 2007, p. 121). Yet while there is evidence that large numbers of women have always attended Australian Rules football matches, there is also evidence that these women have often been maligned. Despite their knowledge and passion for the game, when women became too passionate or perhaps were not performing their prescribed gender in the correct social ways, their passion was perceived as unruly and inappropriately aggressive. Hess quotes an article from the *Argus* in his research that describes an account of some female fans at a game played in Melbourne in 1896 where the women spat on opposition players or tried to stab them with their hat pins, screaming 'kill him' towards the umpire (Hess, 2007, p. 122). Hess thus states that,

female spectators were seen in some quarters as having a deleterious effect on the tone of football matches. They took their barracking too seriously, and were, as a consequence, blamed for at least some of the social ills surrounding the game in Melbourne (Hess, 2007, p. 122).

While Klugman's analysis of the historical representations of female Australian Rules fans in late 1800s and early 1900s revealed examples where women's passion for the game was not always seen as interpreted as 'unruly', the male journalists still intimated that these female fans were out of place (Klugman, 2016). Indeed, Klugman notes that the male journalists 'seemed at once amazed and disconcerted by the way these women invaded male spaces and

expressed no shame in vigorously adding to the cacophony of sounds at football games’ (Klugman, 2016, p. 2098).

Looking at female sports fans in a modern context through popular culture offers an interesting contrast to this historical representation of the female fan in the surroundings of a sports stadium. While it might be considered more socially appropriate for women to attend and cheer at sporting matches in contemporary times compared to Melbourne in the 1890’s, women are still watched and monitored and considered outsiders or novelties, while they watch the action. Essentially, they are still considered ‘invaders’.

An example of this is in the 2018 Netflix film *Set It Up*. In this scene two assistants who are conspiring to get their difficult bosses to fall in love are at Yankee Stadium in an attempt to get their bosses to kiss on kisscam. While they wait, they are watching the game in the stands. Harper (played by Zoey Deutch) is a big Yankees fan. She is happy sitting in her favourite viewing spot in the stadium where she knows the people in the seats around her from years of attending ballgames. She is wearing her Yankees gear with pride and is heavily invested in the game. As she cheers and yells out to encourage her team, Charlie (played by Glen Powell) watches her. He takes out his phone and takes a photo of her.

‘I’m going to take a picture of you and post it on *Tinder* because guys love girls who love sports.’

‘Are you kidding me?’

‘They do.’

‘Guys think that they like girls who like sports but what they actually like is a girl in a very tight sports jersey serving them wings and getting the terminology wrong. Guys like girls who like guys who like sports.’

This exchange is brief before the characters become re-focused on their goal to romantically connect their bosses but it points to a mostly unexamined female sports fan experience. Harper is aware of how men perceive her, and other women’s fandom. She has a confidence in her fandom, she has a genuine love for her sport and for her team. She feels comfortable in the stadium surrounded by friendly fans. But the moment when Charlie goes to take her picture pulls her out of that comfort and identifies her as other. Charlie sees her in this space as not a genuine sports fan enjoying herself at the stadium watching her team, but interprets her *fan-ness* as a novelty. Something that is different, other.

Harper’s insightful and astute response is not explored further in the film. This is disappointing considering Harper herself is an ambitious sports writer and her boss is a woman who has created a sports media empire. Further conversation about both character’s position in the world of sports media through the prism of fandom, and as women working in the industry would have been a complimentary addition to the commentary of women in sport in popular culture.

This scene, as well as the historical commentary of how actively engaged women can be while watching sport, highlights the ways in which women can both feel like they intrinsically belong at the stadium and in the fan culture as well as feel excluded from it. It also shows how women can both be aware and unaware of the gaze that falls on them while they are watching the action.

Warren St. John's 2004 Alabama football fan memoir *Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer* also highlights a way that a woman is watched in the stands while she is watching the game and the gendered assumptions that come along with it:

The young woman next to me is probably twenty or twenty-one, lithe and tall, with collarbones like wire hangers, perfectly pedicured toes the size of jellybeans, and a feathery bob of brown hair that rustles seductively against the back of her neck when she stands to cheer. A red silk sundress seems to have floated down over frame the way a parachute might fall atop a small tree. She seems altogether too prim and refined to chat with a total stranger at a football game, but in the lull after an early Crimson Tide first down, I decide to give it a try.

“Great seats don't you think?” I say.

“I don't give a damn about the seats”, the young woman barks. “I just hope Alabama kicks some ass!”

A fan, I suppose, is a fan (St John, 2004, p. 73).

Despite how organic and passionate the fan performances can be by female fans, these fans are constantly monitored, critiqued, and identified as other, in both negative or (often misguided) positive ways. St. John and *Set It Up* highlight that for women in a space where they are there to watch, rather than be watched, they are still subject to the male gaze.

But this is not limited to men as they watch women. How women can also adopt the position of the watchers of other women adds a complicated layer to the spatial dynamics of the panoptic gaze at sports stadiums. It also points to ways that female fans can complicitly adopt the male gaze to apply to fellow female fans.

I sit down and make myself comfortable in my second level seat in front of the AFL Members dining room with a free beer. I've been invited to the first week of finals as a VIP guest and have just eaten two courses of two different kinds of chicken - something that should not be served at the footy. But it was free. And I have had a lot to drink for free. Two teams are playing tonight that I don't care about. I barely care about the game at all but I am thrilled to be here. I have finally been invited to sit at the table with esteemed colleagues in the football industry after working in it for so long. I feel respected. I feel seen. I'm here. I'm in.

I'm sitting next to a former colleague who I've stayed in touch with via Twitter to ensure I know what he's up to. We laugh about juvenile things we used to do in the office when we were

fresh out of university and spending our first full-time pay checks on extravagant nights out after we finished working for the night at the football. He brings up how we used to send email chains rating how 'hot' everyone in the office was. I force laugh. I never sent an email like that. Or received one. But I knew about that email chain. He had shown it to me one day when I was at his desk going over some planning documents and I saw the subject line of the email pop up on his computer. He tried to hide it in a silly, flirty way that forced me to beg him to see it. He was enjoying the power he held over me. I gave him my best Betty Boop inspired puppy dog eyes and he relented. He told me that I was cool. That I was cool enough. It ranked the women in the office in a top ten style. My name was not on the list. He told me it was because I was one of the boys. I did not know whether to be flattered or insulted.

I laugh with him as I watch the players run through their banners as he reminisces about the good old days. I tell him I miss those days but I think I am lying. He tells me he misses having someone like me working with him now. Someone who knows how to take a joke.

A woman from our table sits in front of us. The invitation to this game came with a dress code but it was not formal. 'Smart Casual'. She is wearing a red, sparkly cocktail dress and heels. I roll my eyes at my friend and indicate towards her with my beer. He laughs and directs his gaze over her from head to toe. '7' he says. I laugh and playfully hit him on the arm. He whispers in my ear, 'Only here for the free drinks!' I nod smiling. 'Who does she think she is?' I shake my head as I watch her stand back up as the siren sounds to begin the game. The umpire bounces the ball and she goes back to the bar for another drink. She's going to miss the start of

*the game! I shout in my mind. I would never get a beer during game – aren't you a real fan?
Wait until half time. I roll my eyes at her. What is she thinking?*

*'Real' sports fans would never dream of missing a moment of the game. What is she
doing here?*

Foucault observed that, 'a gaze – an inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer with each individual thus exercising this surveillance' (Foucault 1980, pp.155). McMahon and Penney as well as Thomas Mathiesen (1997) explore this internalization of the gaze – McMahon and Penney, more so in line with Foucault's theory that the role of observer becomes self-administered, whereas Mathiesen argues that the rise of the internet and new media has led to many viewing the few, rather than the few observing the many.

What element is missing from both positions of these contemporary interpretations of panopticism is the unexplored notion of the many watching the many. Or the power given to the 'prisoners' to also police others. The process is not simply one of internalisation, but of people then applying the internalised gaze onto others around them. In other words, to borrow from Lyon's (2001) phrase, the way the panoptic gaze permeates sports stadiums is through the gaze of the many in attendance who police what is considered normal behaviour, and what is

considered other. It is my regular experience of this process made that scene in *Inception* so triggering.

This mass policing is not limited to sex and gender, but extends to other minority groups who come to the traditionally white, male, and heteronormative environment of the sports arena. In one example, the Melbourne journalist and television presenter Waleed Aly wrote of a fan experience where he felt exposed as an intruder in the space in a racial way (Aly, 2005). Aly was facing a writing deadline, but did not want to miss attending a game of his beloved Richmond Tigers. He therefore took his laptop to the game to work during the breaks. At half-time, Aly was approached by a security guard who told him that other fans had raised their concerns by reporting his actions as threatening. Aly questioned the guard who simply responded by saying, 'You know with the way things in the world are at the moment... Especially for dark people like you and me' (Aly, 2005). Aly suddenly felt exposed in the space he had come to for comfort. He portrays his conflicting emotions about his experience in his piece:

However I am meant to feel about this, I know how I did feel: humiliated. Never have I wanted so much to be invisible. I contemplated going home, but it is against my football supporter's code of honour.

And in any event, it would have looked even worse; as though I had no business there once I was found out. I had no idea who among the 30,000-strong crowd complained, but I could feel their burning, suspicious gaze upon me. I couldn't shake the thought that some unknown people suspected I might be a terrorist. I

wondered if they were also Richmond fans, and for some irrational, tribal reason, the thought embarrassed me even more. (Aly, 2005)

When people ask if I like football I correct them and say, 'I love football.'

I'm not exercising my football fan-ness over somebody else's in an arrogant way by stating this and I'm not being dramatic. I want to correct the assumption people have of my 'liking' of the game of Australian Rules football because, if I actually take the time to think about the exact wording of that question, 'Do you like football?' – the answer is 'no.' I don't 'like' it. When I think about how I'm feeling when I sit down to watch my team play, whether it be a live match in a stadium or at home on television. I'm sick. I'm nervous, anxious.

True relief never comes. Only fleeting moments of it when a goal is scored and I can take a breath, but it's never enough. Another one must be scored, and another. Even if we're demolishing a team, it's still not enough. We should have done more. Beat them by more. A win is also fleeting. The joy is momentary as the mind quickly shifts to the next game and the next. I'm always left wanting more, never completely satisfied.

I ask myself how can I 'like' something that makes me feel so fundamentally awful most of the time?

Because I love it.

Klugman says, '[t]here's something about Aussie Rules footy that is too much, that drives people to the edge of sanity. It produces suffering and joy, and an insatiable hunger for more' (Klugman, 2009, pp. 67). I say I 'love' football because to me, no other sentiment can encapsulate my relationship to it. It's not because I am solely infatuated with it or find it idyllic and romanticise it (though I do definitely do this). 'Love' is the only concept which can explain why I actively participate in this culture despite being aware of the roles it forces me to play and the fan identity I have created that is in direct opposition to my feminist values. Love gives me license.

Carrie Brownstein in her memoir, *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl*, (2015) says, '[t]o be a fan is to know that loving trumps being beloved.' (Brownstein, 2015, pp. 3) The love of the game for some female fans can drive them to be a part of it so much that they subconsciously change themselves to fit in to its fan space. Love of the game can also explain why, for some women, sexist behaviour, homophobia, and racism displayed by other fans and sometimes the athletes themselves can be justified as 'part of the game'. Their love can act as an excuse or can blind them to seeing the flaws and their impact.

Kevin Dixon in his interviews of female fans of football/soccer in the UK also identifies this blindness for these behaviours in his respondents who claim their love for the game. He

therefore suggests that women's attendance at the game 'does not necessarily disrupt established gender discourses but perhaps offers a sense of blindness to gender inequality issues' (Dixon, 2015, p. 645).

There has been much important research produced in academia on the concept of love (Klugman, 2008, 2009 & 2015; Pope 2012; Esmonde, Cooky & Andrews, 2015; Mewett & Toffoletti, 2012; Wedgwood, 2008) and sport and this thesis does not seek to dissect the conversation on fans' connection to sport through the lens of love. Instead, I use the idea of 'love for the game' as one of the many complicated motivations as to why women might perform in gendered ways to feel accepted in sporting spaces and how gendered issues can be excused or ignored because of this love. This thesis is primarily concerned with the behaviours and efforts some women take to perform roles that ensure a sense of belonging while operating under and enforcing gaze from (mis)representations in literature and media of what a female sports fan should be.

A clichéd phrase that is repeated in romantic comedy films, including Set It Up (2018) is, 'you like because, and you love despite'. Hearing this phrase again while watching this film caused me to think about one of the most significant relationships in my life. My relationship to football. This phrase, though clichéd, as well as Brownstein's quote, highlight the fundamental flaw with my fan relationship. I love the game so much, too much. Despite everything I don't like about it and don't like about myself when I am participating within it. The love keeps me complicit.

My love holds me back from calling out the behaviours at the game that I find appalling. My love keeps my awareness of the other participants in the sports fan space limited, despite all of my reading and research on it, it has still not allowed me to develop a consideration to the intersectionality of other women's experiences as fans. My love is so singularly focussed on myself, on my position in the game, how I can be more accepted, that I still look at other women and question their place.

And in realising this I know why I find that scene in Inception so triggering.

In Ariadne's terrified face I can see my fear in not wanting to be seen as an intruder in the fan space. I want to stay safe and comfortable in the stadium and enjoy the game I love. But in the crowd who converge on her and cast her out, I can also see myself trying to push someone else out. I can see my gaze put onto other women like me, women who just want to participate and be accepted in the sports fan space like I do. But in my complicity to perform under the male gaze I don't let them. I can see the dual roles of internalising the panoptic gaze and then shining it on others exposed in this small moment in the film. And I feel shame to see myself in both positions.

I want to walk into the sporting arena like Ariadne walks into dreams with the bravery and boldness to change things. I want to continue to build on my sporting experience by working hard to change the perceptions of the place of women and make it better for all of us. But the

fear of being expelled from the place I love, from people converging on me and telling me I don't belong paralyzes me and instantly become one of the oppressors.

This duality of looking that continuously circles between the inward eye and self-policing of one's outward performance under an unwanted gaze subsequently extends to the policing of others out of the fear of being identified as an intruder. This process thus highlights the significant complications of the female fan experience in the stadium and that this kind of looking in and looking out needs to be further looked at.

I force myself to forget that there is an issue at all. That I'm wading through research from years ago and things are not like that now. I'm thinking about it too much. Things are different this post #metoo world where we finally have women playing the game in a national Australian Rules women's competition that I am loving following. Things are better now. This stuff doesn't matter anymore and what I'm writing about doesn't make any sense. I don't have anything to complain about. I know I belong here, right here at this stadium. No one cares that I am here or that I am a woman. I am just watching my team play and I am happy.

I let the happiness of being in the stadium wash over me and I forget. There is nothing but the game I love.

I am standing behind the race gripping the railing as I sway nervously, unable to sit as the seconds count down and I hold my breath waiting for the siren to confirm a West Coast win. A man taps me on the shoulder and pushes his phone in my face.

'For my Snapchat!' he winks.

And I wave at the camera lens with a complicit smile and wake up.

Chapter Three: Fan-tasy Figures and Gone Girls

This chapter focusses on how heteronormative masculine values are perpetuated to frame an idealised female participant in the sports fan space, and how this then shapes the relationship some female fans have with other women in the sports fandom space. I explore this framing by bringing together findings from the emerging scholarship of female fans with questions of becoming and the lens of ‘The Cool Girl’ concept from popular culture. By investigating the complexities of this increasingly popular term in modern culture, I will demonstrate how being a ‘Cool Girl’, can position women against other women in the sports fandom space, as they try to become what is seen to be the ideal participant in this environment.

The concept of ‘The Cool Girl’ was famously referenced in the popular 2012 thriller *Gone Girl*, by Gillian Flynn (the film adaptation was released in 2014). Flynn’s interpretation of the idea of ‘The Cool Girl’ drew attention to a particularly aspirational form of female gender performance in popular culture. Through the protagonist’s inner monologue, the book’s narrator bemoans that:

Men always say that as *the* defining compliment, don’t they? *She’s a cool girl*.
Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her

mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. *Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl.* (Flynn, 2012, p. 210)

'The Cool Girl' is typically portrayed in narratives as the sporty and casual girl - someone who is 'not like other girls' being the underlying compliment. When we look at sports fandoms, we can see how this representation of women plays out not only in the relationships female fans of elite male sports have to male fans, but in how female fans relate to each other. Moreover, the notion of 'The Cool Girl' problematises the concept 'real' or 'authentic' fans. This is evident in Katharine Jones' research on female soccer fans in Britain (previously mentioned in Chapter Two) where she discovered that these female fans 'looked down on' other women who were not conforming in ways expected of them in this space (Jones, 2008, p. 529). Just as feminine qualities are unwelcomed on the field of play, they are equally shamed in the stands and also shamed by women. These female fans don't want to be seen to be 'like other girls', they want to be seen as better than them. As 'cooler'.

Autoethnography also continues to play a pivotal part in addressing these problematic notions as I reflexively address my own participation in these damaging fan practices. Looking at the self - myself - is an important contribution to this aspect of the research, especially at this point of the exegesis. As Jessica Richards notes, a number of leading scholars of female fandom such as Jones and Stacey and Pope omit themselves from their study:

Jones and Pope appear to have overlooked the ‘self’ as a gendered subject in their own research. Both authors discussed that females perform fandom with the knowledge that, to some male fans, their gender makes them inauthentic (Richards, 2015, p. 394).

This is an important note as the performance and acknowledgement of ‘self’ in the sports fan discourse, particularly in gendered ways, is an under-researched concept. It is through using autoethnography and reflexively analysing myself in this context that I am able to contribute more information to this discussion and also portray that experience in a creative way in my novel. Richards goes on to state that:

female scholars in the field of football studies have tended to omit issues of sex and gender, and overlook the methodological issues and concerns that arise from being a female researcher in this environment. The silencing of the experiences of female ethnographer in football studies can be attributed to the prominent position male fans and scholars occupy in the field, and the importance placed on ‘fitting in’ by adopting the role of ‘one of the boys’ (Richards, 2015, p. 394).

Both Chapters One and Two explored the framing of female fans of elite male sports in different ways. Chapter One explored the lack of female sports fans in the literature of Australian Rules football, and the potential biases of readers. Chapter Two examined the complications social surveillance and the way female fans are watched, and then monitor the performance of the identities of other women at sports stadiums. Other spaces also can extract performances

such as online sports blogs and forums, social media (see for example Waterhouse-Watson, 2019), social venues such as pubs and hotels (see for example Richards, 2018) where matches are being played on the televisions. In all these different spaces, women can feel the need to perform a fan identity that is expected of them, that has been created for them. This chapter continues to ask the question of why that is, and to provide examples of how damaging these performances continue to be in how some women can then view other women also as intruders in this space.

In a pioneering study of male hegemony in sport Lois Bryson described sport as, ‘a crucial arena in which masculine hegemony is constructed and reconstructed’ (Bryson, 1987). In a summary of Bryson’s work more than two decades later, Richard Light and Nikki Wedgwood explain that:

Sport, she said, celebrates the dominant form of masculinity and it is this monopolization process which either excludes women from the terrain completely, or if they do manage to pass through the barriers, effectively minimises their achievements (Light & Wedgwood, 2012, p. 181).

Light and Wedgwood add that ‘success for women in sport still necessarily involves the negotiation of a field dominated by men and masculine values’ (Light & Wedgwood, 2012, p. 181). This understanding of the gendered negotiations and performances around sport are no longer new concepts, but their complexities remain under-explored, particularly when we think about women’s experiences in the fan culture of elite male sports.

At issue are not only questions of representation, but the representations which many female sports fans accept or put up with. As Jones' observed, '[i]n an effort to fit in and become "one of the lads", women sometimes accept male definitions of women and femininity as trivial, worthless or laughable' (Jones, 2008, p. 519). This brings to light the notions of gendered performances highlighted previously through the work of Judith Butler (1990) on multiple gendered selves as well as ideas posed by Erving Goffman (1959) in regard to the presentation of self or selves.

Examples of this are evident in the Australian Rules football fan memoirs that are written by women. These fan memoirs seek to add the female voice to the fan experience however most remain an example of the performance of authenticity that scholars like Jones have identified (see Brown & Sheedy, 1998; Pippos, 2006; Leicester & Mackison, 2003; Courtin, 2016). In Dawn Leicester and Penny Mackison's *Real Women Love Footy* (2003), even when questions of this denial of authenticity immerge, the authors do not address their frustration at their passion not being taken seriously. They move on and continue to perform their fandom by talking about the year their team won the Grand Final, placing their love for the game above exploring further why their place as fans is often diminished by male fans:

Why do men find it so hard to accept that women can enjoy and be knowledgeable about football and allow to join in the office post-mortems?

Anyway, back to 1990' (Leicester & Mackieson, 2003, p. 26).

What interests me in particular from Butler, is the investigation of the performance of the body as an evolving gendered or sexed subject in contextual environments (Butler, 1990). The constant process of becoming and adaptation taken from social cues and surroundings. Butler begins her first chapter of her germinal work *Gender Trouble*, with Simone de Beauvoir's famous quote: 'One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one' (1949). Butler helps me reframe de Beauvoir's statement into the following questions – how does one become a female fan of men's sport? And, importantly - what are the different female fans that one might become?

'She'll have a beer, she's a real girl.' He winked at me.

I smiled and winked instinctively back, giving him some faux credit for knowing me so well and roll my eyes with the rest of the guys as they all laugh at my female friend who has just ordered a vodka soda. She plays along with them, trying to make out like it is not big deal that they are cackling at her, and that I am too. 'You footy bogans!' she giggles, 'I have class!'

They are not laughing at me. He called me a 'real girl'. I smile at myself. I'm flattered and thankful that I'm being validated in this way. I feel warm and included and a glad my friend has taken some sort of social hit. It is making me shine more. I don't think about it until later on that night that this guy is almost a decade younger than me.

Yet I had a moment during the laughter when I realised that actually, a vodka soda was exactly what I felt like drinking. It was a hot night and chilled sparkling soda with the lightness of a dash of vodka finished with a twist of lime sounded irresistibly refreshing. But I didn't have a choice. I don't know if I'd ever had a choice. I'd ordered beer with my football friends for as long as I could remember because it was what you drank at the footy. The boys' drank beer at the footy. And so everyone did. It was easier to all drink the same for the round shouts to keep track of who paid for what. And beers were easy to carry back from the bar together rather than the weird cups they put wine and spirits in. It even smelt like the footy. Boys and beer.

I wonder briefly, do I even like beer? What a stupid question, of course I do. I wouldn't have drunk something for all these years if I didn't like it. But maybe sometimes I do want something else. Maybe I had pushed myself so much to drink it that now I don't even know if I even do like it? What do I know that I do like? I know I really like gin. But you can't drink gin at the footy. I love champagne. I can get away with drinking some champagne on Grand Final day. It's a celebration, a special occasion, definitely more acceptable to drink it then than at a regular season game. I would never do that. I would never be the girl who is laughed at for drinking something girly. But I'm sure I like beer.

He hands me my plastic cup full of foam and I raise my glass in a 'cheers' and take a sip. I'm certain it's delicious.

Using Butler allows for a gendered investigation into the term, 'becoming'. Jones asks in her research, '[h]ow is it possible to be both a woman and a fan? In responding to this question, women must negotiate between their gender and their fan identities.' (Jones, 2008, p. 518). What Jones does not address here, is the way women can not only perform their gender in the different 'fan' arenas to suit men to feel more accepted as 'real fans', but also how they perform their gender in relation to other women who enter that space. This is where the notion of 'The Cool Girl' becomes detrimental as it tells women that to be 'real' you must distance yourself from other women and stereotypical feminine or female behaviours.

Jeffrey Montez de Oca and Molly Conter found that female fans of the National Football League (NFL) in the United States also have to wrestle with questions over the authenticity of their fandom despite the code having a close to 50/50 gender split of fans:

Still, the literature finds that the growth of women fans does not change the fact that they must negotiate a gendered terrain overdetermined by the masculine norms hostile to them that generates exclusionary questions about 'true' or 'authentic' (i.e., male) fanship (Montez de Oca & Conter, 2018, p.113).

As Anne Cunningham Osborne and Danielle Sarver Coombs observe of the fan culture around the NFL, '[m]any traditional male fans want to maintain the status quo and resent what they see as the women's 'infiltration into the boys-only clubhouses'. For these men, sport is an

arena where they can ‘act like men without fear of feminization’ (Osbourne & Coombs, 2016, p.4).

Women attempt to counteract this fear by playing a role where they try to prove they are not a threat to men. They become compliant with their existing dynamics, someone who is both ‘cool’ in and of themselves, and ‘cool’ with the existing male hegemony in the grandstand. They want to be seen as separate from their socially imposed gendered stereotypes or at least separate from the elements of it that are unwelcomed by the male fans in that environment. They want to be considered ‘cooler’ than the other women that occupy this space, cool enough to be seen as ‘one of the boys’ instead of just another stereotypical female fan who is at the game for the wrong reasons.

In his book, *Superfans* (2018), George Dohrmann dedicates a chapter to asking the question, ‘is there such a thing as a female fan?’ He details the creation of the company *Jersey Girl Sports* by two female American football fans, Angela Davis and Marcelle English. Davis and English on their website state that:

Jersey Girl Sports is a lifestyle brand for female sports fans. We create an experience where a woman can find her place and add value within her favorite sport. We understand that for women, sports encompasses a lifestyle. This includes everything from understanding the game to what women wear to a game, and we present a platform where women can get sports on their terms (<http://jerseygirlsports.com/about-us/>).

Jersey Girl Sports provides content and events they believe appeal to other female fans who might be interested in varied elements of the sport which for them includes more lifestyle elements that sport can offer such as fashion commentary, (heterosexual) sexualised gazing (they have a ‘hottie of the week’ feature on their site). They also run informal social sessions that assist women in learning about different sports. These sessions are named things like ‘First and Flirty’ for football and ‘Hoops and Handbags’ for basketball.

Looking at the Jersey Girl Sports website, I can immediately feel my eyes roll. It is full of things that I am instinctively repulsed by when other female fans do them. There was a section on how to look ‘sporty, sexy, and cool’ on the golf course and advice on game day snacks that ‘won’t grow our waistlines’. It seemed frivolous, overly-feminised and something that men could use against us. Against me. These are the kinds of things I want to shout at the top of my lungs, ‘I’m not like this!’, ‘This is not me!’, ‘I’m real!’

Dohrmann defends Davis and English against accusations that they are not unaware of the different ways women can perform their fandom. He says, ‘they know women who are diehards, who couldn’t care less about Terrell Owens’s hotness, and concede that female fans are not a monolith. But generally, they see women as a different kind of fan’ (Dohrmann, 2018, p. 116). He also sees how other fans, both men and women could view Davis and English’s approach to sports fandom as problematic and even threatening. Dohrmann by way of using Toffoletti’s

work of female fans of Australian Rules football explores this. ‘In one of her papers, Toffoletti writes about what feminist scholars call the falsifying lens, a reality that has been “constructed through men’s eyes”’ (Dohrmann, 2018, p. 122). He goes on to say that most women:

have never fit the female fan reality that men created. They have long hoped that reality would come to resemble their reality, that men would toss the lens and see them for who they are. But if anything, men seem to be so rooted to a perception of the female fan they created that they are working to preserve it (Dohrmann, 2018, p. 122).

Women can believe then that performing as a ‘Cool Girl’ is the best way to be welcomed into the sporting arena because this is the created perception of the female fan that is perpetuated through sports narratives when women make an appearance. It is a model that has been continuously laid out for women through popular culture to aspire to for acceptance in the sports space. The male ideal. While this ideal was touched upon in the film *Set it Up* (see Chapter Two), it is also represented in some of the most iconic sports fan writing.

One example is in the renowned work of Nick Hornby’s popular fan memoir *Fever Pitch* (1992), which details his life as an Arsenal fan. In a chapter he titles, ‘A Male Fantasy’, Hornby introduces us to a ‘Cool Girl’, detailing how he finds a girlfriend who seems as passionate about the sport as he is. He feels like he has won the lottery. What Hornby soon discovers though, is that ‘The Cool Girl’ does not live up to what the fantasy promised.

More specifically, Hornby finds that after the initial joy of having a girlfriend who actually enjoys football like he does, he now has to share that experience with her. He may have to potentially make sacrifices should they have commitments and both want to attend the game, he no longer gets to go by default as the fan in the relationship. There is now another passionate fan in the mix and that makes Hornby very uncomfortable. He reveals:

I began to wonder whether this Arsenal-sharing thing was what I really wanted. Once during the height of her sudden passion, we were watching a father struggling with a very young child, and I remarked in passing that I wouldn't take a child of mine to a game until he or she was old enough to want to go; this led on to a conversation about future child-care arrangements on Saturday afternoons, a conversation that haunted me for weeks, months and afterwards. 'Alternate home games, I suppose,' she said, and for a while I presumed she meant she would try to get along to every other match at Highbury, that our children could be left somewhere once a month but no more frequently than that, and that she would come when she could. But what she meant was that we would take it in turns to go, that for half the home games every year I would be at home listening to Sport on Five or Capital Gold - while she sat in my seat watching my team, the team to which I had introduced her just a few years before. So now where was the advantage? Friends with partners who loathe football get to go to every game; meanwhile I - who have an apparently ideal relationship with a woman who knows why Arsenal aren't the same without Smithy leading the line - I'm looking at a future sitting in my living room with a pile of Postman Pat videos and the

window open, mournfully hoping that a gust of wind will blow the roar my way
(Hornby, 1992, p. 164).

Hornby's shocking realisation he has to share his passion of football is the fundamental flaw of 'The Cool Girl' concept. 'The Cool Girl' that is held up on a pedestal as the exemplary woman that we are told men idolise is not one who is a fun, casual, easy-going sports fan – the girl these men are searching for is not a 'Cool Girl' but a 'I'm Cool with whatever you want Girl' - a 'Compliant Girl'.

In *One of the Lads* (1997) Anne Coddington, a self-proclaimed 'true fan' of Association football in the UK, complains that men are not able to distinguish the 'real fans' among the women who attend games and therefore dismiss the group as a whole. What is interesting about Coddington's objection is that she tries to defend her female cohort by protesting that some, perhaps many are not just 'typical' women, but can be 'like the men' too. Coddington therefore is an example of the women who try to align themselves with the male-led behaviour to claim acceptance as authentic fans.

Coddington also references *Fever Pitch* in her text. However, when she highlights the passage that I detailed previously, she views it as a humorous anecdote without commenting on Hornby's disregard for his partner's passion. Coddington is struggling with her place at the game, along with the place of other women. She wants to express herself and be part of the fan experience that she can see is so readily available for men but is frustratingly restrictive for

women. In seeking acceptance Coddington doesn't question ways to change the system, she only continues to cling to 'The Cool Girl' concept as the method to overcome it.

This issue is not limited to fandom in the sporting arena and permeates many spaces of the sports fan experience. As previously stated, this thesis does not seek to critically explore the experiences of women working in the sports industry through the lens of gender equity. However, I do want to highlight some examples of the gendered performances these environments can also extract from some women who work in them, and who are also fans of the sport. To give an example of how 'The Cool Girl' can function in the day to day working environment, I want to turn to an article by the US sports writer and former attorney, Julie DiCaro.

DiCaro talks about how she tried to perform the role of a 'Cool Girl' and became 'fixated on moulding myself into the kind of woman I thought would serve me best, no matter the deleterious effect it had on me or the other women in my life' (DiCaro, 2017). DiCaro believed that if she could truly become 'cool' with everything in elite male sports, like many of her male colleagues appeared to be, then she would have access to the centres of power that these colleagues did. But despite DiCaro's wholehearted efforts, she got nowhere. This realisation epitomises the biggest problem with women playing or feeling the need to play 'The Cool Girl' role. There is no real reward for it.

DiCaro regretfully admits that 'for all my criticism of other women, men didn't take me any more seriously than they would a strange woman off the street. In the end, being the Cool Girl

got me nothing' (DiCaro, 2017). As the Canadian women's rights advocate Julie S. Lalonde noted to DiCaro, often the 'The Cool Girl Spell' cannot be broken until 'women have a patriarchal-come-to-Jesus moment when something awful happens to them' (DiCaro, 2017).

Yet for some women, such as Australian sports journalist Angela Pippas, remaining complicit with sporting cultures of hegemonic masculinity entails keeping quiet about those moments when something awful happened to them. In *Breaking the Mould: Taking a Hammer to Sexism in Sport* (2017) Pippas details a horrific moment when a male colleague exposed himself to her in the bathroom of a formal event. She explores her memories of the pressure she felt to ignore the incident and repress it. She did not want to be defined as a woman who complained:

I was trying to carve out a career in sport in a new city, and the last thing I wanted to do was further ostracise myself.

So I opted the way of the three wise monkeys: hear nothing, see nothing, say nothing. Some would call this 'cowardly', some 'smart'. And some would call it 'necessary'. I left my conscience behind and I buried my values deep – something I would do over and over again in my work situations to keep relationships intact. I knew that by turning a blind eye to one of the darker elements of sporting culture, I was compromising my values. It was a conscious decision to just get on with those around me, to make my work life as comfortable as possible and kick career goals. I didn't feel great about it (Pippas, 2017, p. 136).

Montez de Oca and Conter critique the way the NFL has recently been trying to market a compliant, ultra-feminine vision of the female fans who follow the game. While some people applaud the recognition of female fans, Montez de Oca and Conter note that the depiction of these women:

is not about inclusion and empowerment in order to transform a patriarchal society or capitalist institutions. It is about producing a particular feminine subject. One who produces herself through consumption in a manner that supports her team, her partner and her family in a clearly hetero-feminine way; unthreatening to patriarchy and capital accumulation. In this sense, it is a new subjectivity that remains consistent with traditional gendered identities (Gill, 2008a, p. 11). This makes NFL marketing a type of neoliberal governmentality that manages women's uses of their bodies by managing their emotions and contouring their formation of self' (Montez de Oca & Conter, 2018, p.127).

The gender relations bound up in these promotions of 'Cool Girls' are fundamentally flawed because they are based on a relationship of unequal participation. Female sports fans are constantly performing to prove an authenticity that is never going to be awarded to them because they have been sold a lie. Being 'cool' is not what is welcome in the fan space. Being compliant is. Going back to Jones' research, she highlights that despite these performances by female fans, a sense of belonging to their team is not considered an issue for female sports fans. As Jones notes:

it is significant that in some cases they prioritise their fan identities over their gender identities. Although my data suggests that though women might have to downplay emphasised femininity to be considered real fans, many women at football matches feel that they belong, despite being women' (Jones, 2008, p. 532).

Belonging is such a big part of team sports for fans and it's interesting that for women who constantly feel that they are being deemed as 'inauthentic' by men and other women, they still feel like they intrinsically belong at the game. There is a personal relationship between fan and team, in some way, fans are 'in love' with their team. As Klugman notes in referring to fans of Australian Rules football:

Adoration like this can blind the conscience, and it's little wonder that passionate fans are often referred to as blind or at least 'one-eyed' for, no matter what the club does, these barrackers will maintain their love (Klugman, 2009, p. 13).

A sense of belonging may not be under threat for women when their devotion to their team can be such a singular experience. A love story between them and their team that can blind female fans from acknowledging the gendered roles they are performing. As a sports fan, you feel entitled to your team, it's yours. John Cash and Joy Damousi detail this sentiment in *Footy Passions*:

Being devoted to a footy team somewhat resembles the way young children attach significance to a special teddy-bear, toy or blanket. This special object is part of

the child's fantasy life, but it is also real. It sits between fantasy and reality. But it isn't shared with others. Like the loved security blanket that the child will not surrender, the football club as a special object also sits between fantasy and reality. It becomes the container of dreams, memories, ambitions, hopes and desires. When it is damaged it hurts (Cash & Damousi, p. 197).

For Jones her research 'illustrates that women experience a tension between fan identities and gender' (Jones, 2008, p. 531). Again this leads me to return to Butler's sense that the performance of gender is constant, moving - an almost awkward dance back and forth but is also a conversation at the same time (1990). There can be multiple movements all at once but they are more often than not contradictory rather than complementary for female sports fans.

And perhaps this is not just about sport but popular culture more generally. In reflecting on Jessica Leski's film, *I Used to be Normal*, Anwen Crawford details the negative presumptions ascribed to female fans of popular music:

Girl fans are bad and wrong, it is assumed, because they don't know how to listen, not in the discriminating, temperate, knowledgeable way other listeners (male listeners) know how to listen. Instead, they lust. They look, and the gaze of innumerable girls upon the pretty faces of their boy band idols is a kind of embarrassment, both to the idol and the world. See how I used the word pretty there, without even thinking why - the male musician is made girly by girls. And

who would want to be made into a girl, if you don't already have to be one?
(Crawford, 2018, p. 86).

In a similar manner, female fans of elite male sports are often defined in popular culture by their lustful gaze than by their knowledge (see Toffoletti, 2017; Klugman, 2016; Wedgwood, 2008). Yet the presence of female fans is also used to protect these sports from feminist critiques of their hypermasculine cultures. And as I have shown throughout this exegesis, these compliant female fans can then act to police the behaviour of other women.

Crawford acknowledges her own automatic gendered use of language when it comes to describing popular music fan culture in this way. This is important in how we continue to talk about women fan cultures as well as in many different spaces in society. We have been, and still are, so influenced by our predisposed biases and lived experiences of how women have been positioned that no matter how aware of the manifestly unfair way women are maligned in most spaces, our inherent bias is still there. Continuing to call out our biases in this way is important to eradicating that bias and the primary reason why I have engaged with the method of autoethnography in this thesis. It is time to stop burying the biases we have and expose their damaging potentials.

Dohrmann portrays the reaction Southern Illinois University psychologist and sports fan Julie Partridge had to the *Jersey Girl Sports* approach to fandom to exemplify how once we acknowledge our biases and where they come from, we can learn to move past them and begin to accept all types of fans:

She wanted to be critical of the approach Davis and English have taken – her gut says they are perpetuating gender stereotypes – but then she thought about it a bit more. To judge them for their choices would be to do what men have done for decades, she concluded, and would also be repeating the mistake fan researchers made before Dan Wann came along: viewing all fans as the same (Dohrmann, 2018, p. 124).

This is the potion that will break the spell of the damaging way we can view women in the sports fans space. By stepping back, knowing that we all come from a different place and there is no correct way to ‘do’ fandom and allowing everyone to be the fan they choose to be. Until ‘we’ can do this - those of us who continue to perform our fandom in gendered ways to comply with the fantasy figure that has been designed for us - we are the ones who lose this game. We are today’s Gone Girls, girls who have retreated into a protective shell, an image that has been created for a gaze that is unwelcome yet unavoidable that make us not the down to earth ‘Cool Girl’ female sports fan, but the compliant girl. A Gone Girl

Conclusion

‘Winning never causes the fan to question the pursuit of being a fan, but losing almost always does.’

Warren St John (2004, p. 97)

In producing this exegesis and accompanying novel, I have contributed a new and creative way to explore the complicated relationship women as fans can have to professional men’s sport, Australian Rules football in particular. My novel, *Fan Fatale*, provides a narrative in which questions are raised about how some women can experience sports fandom and the complications those experiences provide when the journey is marred by scandal. My exegesis deploys the practice of autoethnographic, practice-led reflexive writing to grapple with academic and popular accounts of female sports fans. In particular, I focused on the construction of the ‘ideal’ in a hyper masculine world, along with how inherent gender bias and social surveillance influences how women are perceived in the sports fan space by not just men, but other women and how this is reinforced in literature and popular culture. This has been achieved by engaging with the landscape of both the academic and popular literature that exists in often framing female fans in gendered and stereotypical ways in different sports and the complications the history of social surveillance and social performance add to this space.

I have shown how the need for varied representations of women's experiences in the sports fan discourse is evident in that it is not just the male fans that can still perceive women as inauthentic fans (Pope, 2012) or invaders of male spaces (Klugman, 2016; Osbourne & Coombs, 2016). While scholars continue to emerge to address women's varied participation as sports fans (Palmer & Toffoletti, 2019; Richards, 2018; Toffoletti, 2017; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016), there is no current fictional literature that seeks to explore the complex, enduring, and passionate nature of the relationships that female fans have to the sports they love, and the fan cultures which they circulate through and in.

In the novel that accompanies this exegesis, the loss of the 2015 AFL Grand Final by the West Coast Eagles, the protagonist's team, sets the tone that causes her to question her fandom. By gradually becoming aware of her complicity in detrimental gendered behaviours that affect her relationship to and perception of other women, she realises what the cost of her fandom is and then has to decide if that cost is something she is willing to pay.

At one stage during the drafting process, I believed the story should end in the protagonist developing an evolved feminist moral compass as she becomes increasingly aware of the gendered issues her fandom causes. I had her walking away from her relationship to the game in a sort of breakup, portraying some sort of a 'hero's end' in the narrative, showing her to be the bigger person. The 'losses' that she kept experiencing would drive her to this personal revelation. However, I began to see how this ending for my protagonist was problematic. It was not reflective of the experiences of many of the female fans discussed in the research on sports fandom which highlight the significance of love and sense of belonging in the fan relationship.

(Jones 2008; Wedgwood 2008; Toffoletti & Mewett 2011; Pope 2012; and Klugman 2012). It is not in the moral code of many fans to walk away, even if they see behaviours in the game that they find upsetting or against their moral code, these fans can find a way to deny, ignore, or justify it.

One example of this can be found in Deb Waterhouse-Watson's study of the online responses to the sexual assault allegations directed towards Hawthorn players in 2015. Social media users talked down the seriousness of the allegations and became defenders of the players, the team, as well as the football code itself. In reflecting on this Waterhouse-Watson notes that:

Although what users actually believed about the case when they posted cannot be known, that proportionately few publicly acknowledged it as serious and many played down its importance suggests unwillingness to consider that 'their' players could be guilty, and/or a desire to protect the club, like the fans who acted as 'surrogate crisis responders' in Brown and Billings's study. (Waterhouse-Watson, 2019, p.15)

For my novel's protagonist, this was a complication she needed to exemplify for readers as she navigates between trying to expose the hypocrisy in the game she loves and at the same time becoming a 'surrogate crisis responder' in order to defend it. She also experiences what Waterhouse-Watson identifies as 'schadenfreude' (Waterhouse-Watson, 2019, p. 17) in that she does not just feel relief that the athletes involved in the scandal are not players on her own team, but some sort of vengeful pleasure that this is happening to the team that defeated hers in the

Grand Final. The horror of this serious crime is at least partially swept away via the colloquial language of sport that Waterhouse-Watson describes. In portraying this creatively through fiction, I encourage thought (and hopefully discussion) around the complicated nature of being in love with a culture that is fundamentally flawed by the complicity it demands of its female participants.

That all said, it is possible for female fans to walk away from the game when their fan relationship is broken by reasons that speak to their innate human values. I discovered two accounts of this while editing the book, *The Women's Footy Almanac 2018* which detailed the 2018 national women's Australian Rules competition via match reports and essays written from fan perspectives. One piece that detailed this rare experience was by comedian Bobby Macumber. She abandoned the (male) football club that she had loved due to the position they took regarding the same-sex marriage plebiscite that occurred in Australia in 2017. As a gay woman, Macumber felt betrayed by her football club who she believed no longer represented her. She then chose another team who she felt had been proactive in the space of inclusion and celebration of a diverse fan base, 'I now support a team who proudly supports marriage equality and all LGBTQI people' (Macumber, 2018, p. 72).

Waterhouse-Watson, whose academic work has been cited in this exegesis, also wrote of the end of her fan relationship with men's football. Waterhouse-Watson recalls that, 'I was once a massive fan of AFL men's, but we went through a bad breakup in 2008, when I found out about a sexual assault case involving my team and I avoided pretty much anything to do with sport of any kind' (Waterhouse-Watson, 2018, p. 187). I can also imagine the toll her extensive

research into sexual assault allegations by elite footballers took on her, which (among many other things) might have led her to maintain her separation from the game. Yet Waterhouse-Watson notes that it was the advent of the national women's competition that brought her back to following football in emotional detail. 'I don't think I've ever enjoyed a game of football so purely and thoroughly as I did that game. I don't remember who took the marks and kicked the goals. Not one moment stands out for me, except the one where I found myself in tears, with an overwhelming sense of coming home, of joy that this, this was what I had been waiting my whole life for' (Waterhouse-Watson, 2018, p. 188).

These fan experiences are rare in the discourse of female fans and further research into these narratives (that also contrasted them with the experience of fans of professional women's sports) would be a welcome addition to how we understand women's connection to the game they love. Yet the accounts of Macumber and Waterhouse-Watson also testify to the pleasures of sports fandom. While both women saw different flaws within the sport they were emotionally connected with, and both took bold steps to distance themselves from the parts of it that were in conflict with their values, each still found a way to be part of the game again that suited their fan identity and their morality. This says so much about the complicated navigation some women must do in order to enjoy the pleasure that sports fandom can provide. Complicated pleasures that are so underrepresented in the current literature.

A big part of me really believes that I would not have been able to conclude this exegesis without the experience of the 2018 AFL Grand Final.

I began my PhD at the beginning of 2015. That year the West Coast Eagles would go on to play in the AFL Grand Final only to lose in spectacular fashion. My heart was broken and I didn't think I'd be able to enjoy a Grand Final every again. But I was wrong. On the last Saturday in September in 2018, I stood in the Great Southern Stand of my favourite place in the world, the MCG, with tears streaming down my face as I watched my captain, Shannon Hurn and my coach, Adam Simpson, raise the AFL premiership cup to the cheers of thousands. As blue and gold confetti exploded around them, I realised exactly what my relationship to football was.

It is too much. It is too deep. It is too unreasonable.

For on that day, with six months to go in writing my thesis, after years immersed in the research of the experiences of female sports fans, gender performance, social surveillance, gender inequity and sexism in sport and my own (and other women's) shameful complicity in it, I finally got it. I finally knew why I had let so much go in the past, and despite having learnt so much during my research, I know why I still let so much go.

Because I can't ever let the game go.

Watching my team win the premiership, being there at the stadium to see it happen, to feel that euphoria, that unrivalled sense of joy. To experience my body react to that final siren so instinctively confirmed to myself that everything I doubted about my fan-ness was not true. I am a real fan. I could feel it.

And in knowing that, I knew instantly what choice I would make, if I was ever forced to choose. If the world of sport still retained a toxicity towards women or got worse. If male players continued to commit crimes against women. If football clubs and the league still were not able to progress the careers of women in their administration. If female athletes never got paid adequately. If I still felt like a fraudulent female fan a majority of the time, intruding on male space at games and feeling the eyes of the world on me. I still would not walk away from the game. Because those few moments after the final siren sounded on Grand Final day to confirm that my team, West Coast, were enough for me. They were worth everything to me.

Warren St. John is right. But it is not just winning that keeps us fans quiet and compliant, it is the pursuit of it. This is why we have seasons and finals and premierships and championships. One win is never enough and while losses are an inevitable part of sport, the questions they bring up are just as easily forgotten the next time a 'W' is placed by your team's name. Matthew Klugman portrays this pursuit in the context of love:

The premiership is the object of the club's desire, something the club lacks and desperately wants. Fans adopt the desire for the premiership in identifying with their club. This is not the love of infatuation but the love of the conquest, of the chase, the pursuit (Klugman, 2008, pp.33).

Women can forget the questioning of their authenticity, the pressure to be cool with everything, the social surveillance that permeates football stadiums, in moments of glorious victory. Victory can come in the form of a big team win or a pat on the shoulder from a man who just told his mates that you're 'not like other women', you're 'one of the boys' and everything else melts away.

For my protagonist, the wins she experiences are enough for her to forget what she's been through despite that fact that she never really wins. Her wins are a re-distribution of her work load which is dressed up as a job promotion, a free football ticket that is dressed up as a VIP invitation, and a pat on the back from a male colleague that is dressed up as acceptance into the boy's club. The novel finishes with her football team losing the Grand Final rematch the following season by the same margin. This provides a metaphor that I initially thought would symbolise that she too has lost. Nothing has changed for her despite her revelations and the loss of her team again brings her full circle to where she was at the beginning of the narrative. She has not developed her morality or removed herself from an environment that does not value her and allows herself to still be complicit in demeaning other women. However, this is just one reading of her journey. I can now also read her ending as someone who has retained her power to invade a male-sports culture and claim a part of it as her own. At the end, she still has access to

the tremendous pleasures of suffering of the fan. Pleasures so powerful that when Waterhouse-Watson re-experienced them when she came back to the game through AFLW, she was overwhelmed with joy.

The question of winning and losing in the world of sports fandom for women is complicated by the constant navigation and (re)positioning some women experience. But these are the questions that need further consideration and debate in both the academic space and the broader culture through accessible literature. The more stories we have that continue to portray varied experiences, the more we will understand and value the contribution female fans give the game.

I had forgotten many of the experiences detailed in this exegesis in the sections that are my personal memories written in an autoethnographic, reflexive way. What caused me to remember them was the practice-led process of the creative writing in which I was creating scenes for my characters and suddenly I realised that I had a memory of something similar happening to myself. I had forced myself to forget these moments and many more like them over the years because they embarrassed me. And because they took me outside of the feeling that I crave the most, the feeling like I belong.

The memory of the male fan taking a snapchat photo of me at a game, I repressed because it happened only last season (2017) and I felt so stupid that I didn't tell him no. I was right in the

middle of my research and I knew what he was doing, I knew how he saw me in that space and I still did nothing. I was also at that match with someone I was dating at the time who had gone to grab a drink when it had happened. This person was not a football fan and I was trying to let football win him over by taking him to a game and having him experience its greatness. When he returned he saw the man running off, he asked me what was going on. I didn't tell him about it. I was too embarrassed. I changed the topic back to how great football was.

Kevin Dixon states that:

To be a 'real fan', participants suggest that one must embrace characteristics and 'banter' that has history and authenticity. This illustrates the unintended consequence for females in the system of structuration as transcendence or evolution for dominant practice, and thus, equity for female fans can be painfully slow. After all, 'fitting in' with masculine culture does not necessarily contribute to the equality of practice that those participants in the current sample desire (Dixon, 2015, p. 648).

It can additionally be 'painfully slow' in that even when women have some consciousness and agency over their presentation of self, participation in gendered 'banter' and performance of their fandom, their choice might still be to be complicit in behaviours that undermine the place of females in these male cultures. Yet awareness of this is not enough to

abandon the love some women might have for the game and my protagonist exemplifies this by making a conscious choice to remain complicit in the culture despite her negative experiences.

Will the emerging interest and fandom around women's professional sports re-shape how female fans are perceived across male and female sports? Palmer and Toffoletti recently highlighted the role the rise of women's professional sport could play in shifting attitudes in sport, but concede that because of the long history of marginalisation of women in sport, this has had little impact so far:

Despite the growing visibility of sportswomen in these high-profile sports, women's and girls' negotiations of gender in these contexts 'are part of a long history of contestation'. Inequities in pay, access to resources, infrastructure and media airtime are some of the legacies of women's marginalisation in sport historically, which endure in the current economic, cultural and social organisation of Australian women's sports participation (Palmer & Toffoletti, 2019. p. 2).

In her research Waterhouse-Watson also concludes that while we might see perceptions towards women in the sports fan space change as we see a rise of professional women's sports, it feels like we will not see this occur for some time:

It is possible that the inclusion of women's teams within traditionally male clubs (including the AFL women's league, two Super Netball teams, the Super W rugby

union competition, and NRL women's league) will have an impact on the way women are viewed in these sports, although such changes will undoubtedly be slow (Waterhouse-Watson, 2019, p. 17).

It is interesting that while the visibility of women's sports is being raised, particularly in Australia, that it is not directly impacting the male hegemony that still pervades sports culture. This may only be the beginning and may take time as Waterhouse-Watson and Dixon suggest, however in its current state, the rise of women's professional sport appears to create another space that sits outside of the professional male sports space for athletes, administrators, media and fans.

A common comment I receive when discussing this thesis and its focus on female fans of Australian Rules football is how 'topical' my research is now due to the creation of the Australian Football League's national women's competition (AFLW). I find this response to be extremely telling and revealing of the way women are still seen as 'invaders' (Klugman, 2016, p. 2098) of the traditionally male space of Australian Rules football stadiums. The presumption is that I, as a female researcher, looking at women as fans of football, must be focussed on the women's game. In those moments when I am faced with this response, I feel I am being removed from the men's game, the sport I have loved and followed for so many years. I feel like I am being ejected from my dreamscape and relegated to another place that could be interpreted as a more appropriate space for me to occupy as a woman.

It is a frustrating comment to endure as I want to strongly reinforce how women have been fans of Australian Rules football since the game's inception (Hess, 2000). So this thesis is in fact, not so 'topical'. Or if it is topical, it is a subject that has been topical for well over a century. However, I understand that because of how the way women's roles in sport continue to be marginalised and misrepresented will always keep this conversation topical as we continue to strive for gender equity in sport on multiple fronts.

The presumption that I must be focussed on the women's game is also complicated by the guilt I feel in attempting to remove myself from it. I have been a passionate supporter of the national women's competition from its inception in 2017 and have written on it extensively in multiple publications outside of this thesis in my capacity as a journalist (my writing has appeared in publications such as *The Guardian*, *The Footy Almanac*, *The Women's Game*, *Change Her Game* and the book *Balancing Acts: Women in Sport* (2018)). I do not wish to distance myself from AFLW as a code I thoroughly enjoy and consider myself an ambassador of. The West Coast Eagles will be fielding a team in this competition in 2020 and I am so excited to have another team representing my club. Another team to cause me stress and anxiety as a fan. I do want to continue to be a champion for the women's game because I know how important it is but, it seems I cannot discuss my research without some people even considering that I might not be focussed on women playing football. It is not even a passing thought that I have a valid place in the men's game too and I find that vexing.

I am sitting at an AFLW game in the middle of a summery February afternoon at Princes Park watching Carlton play Adelaide. If this were a men's match, I would not bother to attend. They are not my team and neither club interests me as a general football fan. But I will go to any AFLW game I can because the fan experience here is so different. I feel more welcome here. I don't feel the stress of the game here because my club do not yet have a team in the competition (this feeling may change significantly for me in 2020 when they do...). And I can watch women here. I can watch women be supported by women and men, and children. It's wonderful.

I am sitting next to a woman who has recently transitioned. She plays football herself and has a great football IQ as she commentates the game to me. She's lined up against some of these girls before in the state league and she knows their style. We chat about football and AFLW and my thesis. She tells me that sitting in the stands watching men's football is one of the only places she feels completely comfortable as a trans person.

I am surprised. I thought she was about to reinforce all my positions on having to perform gender in specific ways to feel like you belong in these masculine spaces. That she would have to work twice as hard to feel like she belongs and she would be almost afraid in that environment. I wonder if all this work I have done is for nothing. That I am only thinking about myself, my position, and my experiences and no one else feels this way at all.

She tells me that football is the great equaliser. That it makes everyone the same and she can talk to a 'bogan footy bloke' about the game and there's no difference because in that moment they are the same. They are just two people talking footy.

And then she says, 'I just can't talk about anything else'.

And then I realise that she's still restricted. She's still performing in a way that will ensure she's accepted by the 'bogan blokes'. She still has to speak their language. But the feeling of belonging that that brings her is enough to forget about the other stuff. She's happy to be in that space where she feels accepted and can talk about the game she loves and I get it.

But I can't speak for her or give anymore context to her story. It is not my place to hypothesise on her thoughts on belonging. I have no idea what her experience is like as a trans person who is also a football fan. I have no idea what it is like for a football fan who is not a white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, atheist woman. I wish I did. I wish we talked more about all the different ways women come to the game to create a space where we didn't have to force ourselves to feel like we belong when parts of us don't. Maybe that space is here, at the women's game. Maybe that's why people keep pushing me here.

Jessica Richards notes that '[r]esearchers writing about the experiences of doing fieldwork usually focus on the collection and interpretation of data, rather than on the roles of the researcher within this setting.' (Richards, 2018, p. 10). I wanted to address this through my contribution of autoethnography to highlight my position in the field and how my experience adds to the research in a way that is not explicitly an extraction and interpretation of data. It is a

moving collection of important considerations that aid the process of collating the research. What I have found though, as I write this conclusion to this PhD thesis, is that perhaps in focussing on my position rather than the interpretation of the data, I might actually have my answers.

Richards concludes that at the end of her field work she, ‘experienced an overwhelming sense of emptiness. It seems that fieldworkers rarely reflect on the loss and sadness that they may experience when leaving the field.’ (Richards, 2018, p. 9). I wondered how I felt about concluding this PhD and ‘leaving the field’ so to speak, of something that I have been working on for four years. Was I sad?

No.

The first, raw emotion I felt was relief. Not to be done and submitting my work to move on to the next phase in my academic career. But relieved to not have to be ‘in the field’ anymore. To not have to think about all this anymore more and just go to football matches and watch my team and just be a fan.

In thinking that thought, no matter how fleeting it was, it brought everything back to me that the process of writing this exegesis and the novel and attending the 2018 Grand Final exposed. My inherent gender bias towards other women writing on men’s sports is still there. I still instinctively monitor and judge other women at games in gendered ways and I still catch myself performing in ways to be the ideal ‘one of the boys’ female fan, even after exposing all the damage it does. I still have the same fears I have detailed in the chapters of this exegesis.

And I am ashamed that my first natural thought is to abandon all of I have learnt to be back at the game and unaware of it because it is all too hard.

That is why this kind of creative, reflexive work is so important to the contribution of knowledge in the field of female sports fans. It's difficult and nuanced and subjective. But it holds us accountable and offers us the chance to keep moving the conversation forward. If nothing else, this PhD will be my personal reminder to not walk away from all I have learned because it is easier to pretend these complexities do not exist. To pretend that football is just a game.

But to achieve more than just my personal revelations, we need more research and stories to add women back into the discourse in meaningful, intricate, and creative ways to explore the different ways different women experience this space. We need more stories like Macumber's and Waterhouse-Watson's that explore how damaging the relationship between fan and team can be if the team you love continues to exclude you or lets you down in the most damning and shameful ways. We need more stories that explore why some women can also experience these feelings but not take the steps to question them. We need more stories from more women. It is only from representing the varied, intersectional complexities of this arena that women enter unequally, we can learn how to make it a place of equality for the young Rebel Girls and Boys, and those who choose not to identify with either, so they can come to the game like I want to, and just sit down and watch without questioning if they belong.

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