Shooting The Moon

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Extract

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The Valentine's Ball

'You're grounded!' roared Dad.

'But Dad —'

'Don't you *But Dad* me! A girl doesn't give a boy a black eye for no reason — and at your age the reason isn't hard to guess. That's it! Grounded! Period! Do you hear me?' The words puffed out at me through the open car window, misty in the frosty air. They might look harmless, but they weren't. This was Dad, and he was mad at me, and his words were as lethal as bullets. And, like bullets, they carried clear across the carpark to where the seniors were lounging in the shadow of the auditorium, enjoying an illicit cigarette before heading home.

A cherry glowed red in the darkness and a mocking voice echoed: *'But Daddy . . .'*

Jordan Archer — the very last person I wanted to think about. I slid into the passenger seat, rolled up the window and risked a sidelong glance at Dad, glowering in the driver's seat. Though my eye was swollen almost shut, I could read the signs. His mouth was invisible under his bushy black moustache, but his sandpaper-stubbled jaw was clenched, his black hair sticking up in angry tufts. The collar of his Homer Simpson PJs stuck up jauntily above the frayed V of his gardening pullover, pulled on for the drive, but there was nothing jaunty about the look on his face. There was no point arguing or trying to explain.

'Dad,' I said, 'can we go home?'

'No we can't! Where the hell's your brother?' Dad obviously hadn't seen what I had — the silhouette of Nick deep in the gaggle by the hall, plank-thin and unmistakable, wreathed in a haze of smoke.

'He said he'd get a ride with his friends, remember? Dad, *please* . . .'

Dad glared round the rapidly emptying carpark one final time, then started the engine with a roar and crunched the truck into gear. Bone-weary, I tugged Dad's borrowed tie down to half-mast and undid my top button, then leaned back and closed my eyes as the first wave of Dad's tirade broke over me. My soul was already so bruised that Dad getting his boot in wouldn't even leave a mark.

It would be a long ride home.

How had everything managed to go so wrong? We'd been counting down to the night of the formal ever since the notice had been read out in assembly in the first week of term. *The Valentine's Ball.* Every time I thought of it I got this knee-jerk reflex in my gut — a twang of excitement, nerves and sea-green nausea.

It was a world first for Greendale High: the first time in living memory Mr Gilroy had agreed to something like this. We'd never even had a fundraising disco, never mind a formal ball open to the whole school. We didn't call him Mr Killjoy for nothing.

The news was met by stunned disbelief, wild celebration — and then panic.

'What do we do?' I hissed at my best friend Michael in the first period after assembly, under cover of the chemistry experiment.

'What d'you mean, *do*? We go, of course.' Mike clunked the 2-litre bottle of soda for the experiment down on the

bench and regarded it dreamily, thoughts elsewhere. 'We rent tuxedos and —'

'Tuxedos?' I squawked, dropping the roll of Mentos that was my contribution to science.

Doc Sweeney's voice crackled into our whispered discussion like static. 'Philip, would you kindly repeat what I have just been saying?'

Desperately I trawled for some clue to what it could possibly have been but there was nothing. Detention loomed. In desperation I glanced down at the two objects in front of me on the bench. 'You said we must . . . uh . . . put the Mentos in the soda, Sir?'

'Correct,' said Doc sourly. 'However, it is vital that you do not . . .' Tuning him out, I waited till his watery gaze had drifted safely elsewhere and continued my discussion with Mike, this time keeping my gaze firmly fixed on the whiteboard. 'But what about partners?'

'We find partners. It shouldn't be too difficult. There are girls all round us.' He was right, there were: heads down, scribbling notes. But the sight didn't fill me with much hope.

I peeled the foil off the end of the Mentos pack and prised two out, one for each of us. My ears registered the tinny crackle of Sweeney issuing yet another of the Hazard Alerts he was famous for: '. . . and most importantly, make sure you do not under any circumstances . . .'

As I sucked my Mento my eyes slid of their own accord to the end of the front bench, where the early morning sunlight slanted in. There she sat, chin resting on one loosely curled fist, gazing dreamily into middle-distance. Her lips were parted to reveal a glimpse of pearly teeth. A tendril of hair caught the sunlight like the purest filament of gold.

Katie Wood.

A year ago we'd been best mates. Then things changed.

Katie changed — transformed overnight into this other-worldly creature who made my heart behave as if it was linked to a pacemaker on steroids. For a while — though now that seemed impossible to believe — I'd hoped . . . but not for long. Along came reality in the form of Jordan Archer, with his swagger and car and careless drawl: 'a walking, talking chick magnet', as Mike ruefully put it, that no chick — especially Katie — was capable of resisting.

It all seemed light-years ago. This Katie was on a different planet — in a different solar system — from me, and I could barely remember how things had been before. The easy friendship; the shared chocolate bars; the secret bird-call we'd used to summon each other to the fence; the casual touches I'd never even noticed. If she touched me now it would burn my skin like a brand. But the days when Katie touched me, even acknowledged I existed, were long gone. Would I have had the courage to invite her to something like the Valentine's Ball, even way back then? I didn't know. It didn't matter. Because now one thing was for sure. Katie would be going with Jordan. They were an item.

I was used to it. I'd even finally managed to convince myself I didn't care. Katie was history, and I'd moved on. But now, watching her dreaming in the sunshine with that tiny smile on her perfect lips, I felt a sudden stab of pain.

I wrenched my eyes away, reached for the soda bottle and ripped off the lid with a savage twist. Back to business! We had a science experiment to do. The Mentos were already open; with a fluid motion worthy of Einstein himself I upended the whole lot into the open neck of the soda bottle, only half-registering Mike's expression of horror before there was a massive *WHOOSH!* and the world erupted, drenching everything and everyone in the lab in a super-charged explosion of flying fizz.

Partners

Beattie lowered me to the ground with a thump. 'So,' she said, 'what have you decided to do?'

Beattie, my climbing partner, was the best belayer around. It wasn't often she lost focus and dumped me in a heap on the floor — in fact I couldn't remember it ever happening before.

I picked myself up and gave her an injured look. 'Dunno. Like I was saying before, it isn't easy. There are girls around, but I don't know any of them well enough to . . . you know. And now there's only a week to go. I'm getting desperate.' I was talking to the back of Beattie's head, bent over her 8-knot. What was going on? We were constantly swapping goss on our two schools, scummy old Greendale High and swank Oriole Girls where Beattie went, and she'd been following the ongoing saga of the Valentine's Ball closely. So why wasn't she listening? I took a breath to ask her, and tackle the subject of my undignified dumping while I was at it — and suddenly my breath whoofed out and my mind flooded with blinding white light like Archimedes when he discovered the Principle of Displacement and raced outside butt-naked to tell the world. I'd had a revelation.

'Beattie,' I croaked, hardly able to believe it was true, 'I've just realised: you're a girl!'

'So,' I told Mike at photography club next day, 'it looks like my problem's solved. I'm taking Beattie. She isn't really

what I'd call the *formal* type . . .' A sudden image of Beattie, small, dark and self-contained, popped into my mind. The first time I saw her she'd reminded me of a troll; now, picturing her as Michael would see her, she made me think of a beetle — practical, efficient, made-to-measure for the job at hand. The fact that for Beattie the job was climbing, not dancing, was something I'd try to ignore. 'But she's coming. So that just leaves you.'

'No it doesn't.' Mike was loading a new film, having more trouble than usual by the look of it. 'I'm sorted.'

'You've found someone? Who?'

'Tildy.'

'Tildy? Who the heck's Tildy?'

Mike's ear and the slab of cheek I could see turned a mottled radish-colour. 'Ballisha Hump,' he said indistinctly.

'What?'

He turned to face me, eyes glittering dangerously. 'Matilda Bunt,' he said, very slowly and clearly, articulating every syllable with exaggerated care.

I stared at him, the cogs in my brain making a ghastly grinding sound as they struggled to process this new piece of information. Matilda Bunt? Beattie was Paris Hilton compared to Matilda Bunt. Matilda was in our class, as much part of the furniture as the desks. She was dumpy, plain and almost completely silent, with thick glasses. She wore a shapeless second-hand blazer like a protective coat of armour, even in the height of summer. She had reddish-brown crinkly hair worn in a lumpy plait and spent every break in the library — alone, as far as I knew.

To the best of my knowledge Mike had never exchanged a single word with her.

At last, with a shudder and a shriek of metal, my brain ground back into action and processed the odd, defiant

expression in my best mate's eyes.

I cranked my mouth closed and stretched it into a grin. 'Smooth move, Hot-shot! Looks like we won't have to dance with each other after all.'

The fact that I was only taking Beattie meant I could relax and enjoy myself. Still, I felt like a prize idiot as I stood in front of Mum's full-length mirror surveying myself gloomily. 'It's too tight,' I grumbled, tugging at the collar of my shirt. 'And the jacket's way too small — like a straitjacket. I won't be able to breathe, let alone dance. And the tie's all wrong.'

'You're nervous, Pippin. Stop hyperventilating.' Mum's face, reflected in the mirror, wore a crooked little smile. On her hip was Madeline, resplendent in saggy pyjamas, eyeing me distrustfully.

'Biffin mart,' she offered doubtfully.

'For your information, Philip McLeod, you look one hundred and ten per cent drop-dead gorgeous,' said Mum in her firmest don't-you-dare-argue-with-me voice. 'You'll have a wonderful time. Your first proper dance is a milestone — unforgettable.' Well, she had that right. She reached up and gave me a kiss, Madeline cringing away as if I was red-hot. Normally I'd have given my baby sister a hug, or blown air into her neck with the fart-sound that made her chortle with delight, but I could read the signs. If I got any closer I'd unleash The Shriek, Madeline's supersonic weapon against the world — and then the house would disintegrate around our ears and I wouldn't be going anywhere.

'Find Dad and tell him you're ready to go. And,' the no-nonsense note intensified, sending warning signals arcing through my brain, 'give Beattie this.'

'*No!* Mum, please no.'

Mum gave me a look. She was holding out a waxy flower with a pin stuck through it — so Beattie could stick it on her dress, I realised. Dress? Till now I'd imagined her wearing baggy old cargo pants . . .

Reality tightened like a noose round my neck.

I reached out and took the flower. 'Dad,' I croaked, 'I'm ready to go.'

But when Beattie walked through the door of her lounge she wasn't wearing the cargo pants, and I realised Mum's flower was right after all. She was still Beattie, but a Beattie I hadn't suspected existed. She'd had her fringe cut kind of ragged-looking as if Muddle'd had a go at it with Mum's pinking shears, and beneath it her eyes glowed in a way I'd never seen before. Nerves, I guessed. She had on a dress the colour of squished-up strawberries, with straps like ribbon noodles. Her bare arms were smooth and tanned. Staring at her, I thought: *If you asked me whether this girl could make it to the top of the Morning After, hardest climb in the Igloo, I'd say* No way! *But I'd be wrong.*

If Beattie was a surprise, Matilda Bunt was a total eye-opener. I should have guessed something was up when Mike met me outside the auditorium with a swagger and a sheepish grin, and when I saw his partner I thought he'd changed his plans at the last second.

Then I saw it was Matilda. Gone were the thick specs; because she wasn't crashing into things I guessed she must have contact lenses. Her hair was piled up on her head with corkscrew bits dangling down the side like one of Madeline's picture-book princesses. All the bits of Matilda Bunt that had seemed lumpy under the shapeless old blazer

didn't look lumpy at all . . . and I realised what the protective armour was for.

For a horrible moment I thought we were going to go through the entire evening all staring dumbly at one another unable to think of a single word, but the band struck up and the mosaic globe in the centre of the ceiling began to turn and the bubble of glass we were all treading so awkwardly inside blew apart and we were pulling the girls onto the dance floor and laughing and I knew Mum was right: my first dance was going to be an experience I'd never forget.

The seniors

That's how it was, almost right to the very end.

We talked and laughed and guzzled enough Coke to send us into orbit. I danced with Beattie and Beattie danced with Mike and I danced with Tildy and Tildy danced with Beattie; Mike and I stopped short of dancing with each other, but only just — it was that kind of crazy night where anything went and everything was cool.

I didn't even realise what was missing. Or who.

I'd known the seniors had organised some kind of before-party. Nick was going with Barney and a bunch of other mates; when I'd asked him about a partner he muttered something about 'kids' stuff . . . cooler to just hang out'. Mum teased him gently about it, calling his group the 'bachelor herd' as if they were wild animals, but let it drop when she saw he wasn't in the mood.

I don't know what time they finally arrived. By then the hall was a disaster area, steamy with hundreds of wildly gyrating bodies, littered with crushed paper cups and chewing-gum wrappers, the air almost opaque with the accumulated sound-waves of four solid hours of hard-out music. My ears were ringing, my eyes were stinging and my feet felt numb, but my brain was singing and I was ready to party all night.

We were near the end of a dance called the Chattanooga Choo Choo — a long train gallumphing round the dance floor — when the double doors at the end of the hall flipped

open on a gust of icy air. The seniors. In the time it took them to survey the scene and advance slowly and in some cases rather unsteadily into the room, all the fun and laughter drained away. What had been a blast before seemed silly and childish. Everyone made way, shuffling their feet, leaving a little no-man's-land of space round the seniors' group. I looked for Nick but didn't see him; for Katie, Jordan Archer . . . and then the band struck up again.

They'd played it once already, to a riotous reception and pleas for an instant encore; the band leader had promised it for later, with a grin. Now later had come: time for 'The Birdie Song'. Before, we'd hammed it up and laughed so hard we could barely stand, mirroring the actions of the lead singer, but now everyone except a few juniors backed off or headed for the wreckage of the drinks table.

Then a tall, broad-shouldered figure sauntered up to the stage. Jordan. The lead singer hunkered down to talk to him, then crossed to the band and exchanged a few words. I caught a glimpse of Jordan's face as he came back towards us; there was a sleek, self-satisfied expression on it that reminded me of one of Mum's sayings: 'the cat that ate the cream'.

The band struck up again, but this time the music was different. I knew the song — you couldn't not. It was on the radio 24/7: 'Girl of My Dreams', by Dark Angel. One of those smoochy, slow numbers with twangy notes that send shivers down your spine and bass tones that turn your bones hollow. I took a breath to suggest a drink — not that I wanted one. I wanted to watch Jordan and Katie . . . and at the same time I didn't. But Mike and Tildy were heading back into the fray, Mike holding Tildy's wrist, neither of them looking at the other, and what had been a fray moments ago was settling to a swaying expanse of bodies,

moving with a completely different rhythm.

Beattie was watching me, eyes very bright. Even in those few seconds the music had seeped into my blood and was doing strange things, making me want to hold that crushed-strawberry close. We pushed our way through till we found an island of space and Beattie moved into my arms.

I'd never held a girl before. I wasn't sure where to put my hands. My heart was swelling inside me with a mixture of horror and something close to bliss. It was only Beattie. The stuff her dress was made of was as soft as one of Madeline's plush toys . . . but I didn't want to think of Madeline now. I hadn't realised how much taller than Beattie I was; her bent head was glossy and dark, and I could feel her breath on my neck. My tie was way too tight. I could smell a faint scent of apples in her hair, and beneath it a deeper note of something musky, like flowers in sunshine. My feet shuffled in a small circle, the only space we had. Hoping Beattie wouldn't notice, I took a shallow, unsteady breath.

And then I saw them.

Jordan's face had a smooth, swollen look, and his eyes were shut. His head was bent, nuzzling Katie's bare neck. And Katie . . . whatever she was wearing was held up by magic. It was the colour of electricity or the dark part of lightning, slinky and sinuous, shimmering as she swayed. Her head was tilted as if she was listening to some secret music the rest of us couldn't hear, the dapples of light from the silver globe drifting over her like snowflakes.

I stared, transfixed.

The crush of bodies between us shifted and parted. Now I could see that Katie's dress plunged in a deep V to where her back ended and the curve beneath it began. Jordan's hand was on that curve, pulling her tight against him. I

wasn't turning now. I was shifting foot-to-foot, staring. As I watched, Jordan's other hand moved up to the soft fall of her hair and twisted itself into it like a rope. Katie was facing me again now, her eyes distant and unfocused. Then her gaze shifted and for a second our eyes met. Hers were deep as night, and there was something in them so foreign it made me flinch.

Rocking from foot to foot, oblivious of Beattie standing stiffly in my arms, I watched as Jordan pulled Katie's head back and his open mouth came down over hers like a shark.

Then Beattie was somehow outside the circle of my arms. I blinked, took a half-step back — and that's when it came, from nowhere: a left hook that caught me smack in the eye and knocked me flat on the floor with the spat-out gum and crumpled tissues.

I lay there stunned, shock and silver spangles of light spinning through my brain as Beattie whirled and marched away, the expanse of shocked faces parting for her like the Red Sea.

Katie Wood

I don't remember how I got out of the hall. All I remember is a mosaic of faces, bright against the darkness, staring, whispering, sniggering . . .

I stumbled to the boys' toilet and shouldered my way in. It was empty. I slammed into a cubicle, locked the door and leaned against it. My heart was turning over with a slow, sickening roll that echoed in my head, as if my eyeball was being slowly pumped up. For once, my brain had been shocked into silence — a hollow, ringing silence louder than a shout. I knew I'd done something terrible, unforgivable, but I didn't know what. I should go after Beattie, apologise, explain . . .

I couldn't. Staring at the stained wall, the oozing cistern, I kept seeing Katie's eyes slowly closing, her soft lips opening to Jordan's probing tongue.

Vomit surged in my throat. I clunked to my knees on the puddled floor, cradling the toilet rim. Spewed into the bowl, closing my eyes to the soggy paper and unflushed turds.

Dimly I heard the door bang open and wheeze shut. There was the flare of a match and the tang of sulphur, then smoke, deep voices, a bass burp. 'Ah, man, I needed that!' A voice I'd know anywhere. Him. I froze, hugging the bowl.

'Archer, you're an animal!'

There was a muttered response, followed by hoots of laughter. The rasp of a fly being lowered, then a gush of liquid like a camel pissing that went on and on.

'So: reckon you'll get lucky tonight, Arch?'

'Me, I'm lucky every night.'

'C'mon, you know what I mean. Man, she's one hot chick.'

'Not too hot for me to handle.'

'So what's the score?'

'Score?'

'Yeah — with Katie Wood.'

'With Katie? D'ya *really* wanna know?'

In slow motion I lowered myself to the filthy floor, slumping back against the door. Before I closed my eyes I saw a snake of smoke curl over the top of the door as if it was peering in at me.

I didn't want to know, but Jordan was going to tell me anyway.

'Let's just say this,' he drawled, 'it isn't Katie *Wood*; it's Katie *Does*.'

I realised my fists were clenched, my teeth clenched so tight they might splinter. I wanted to fling the door open and pound Jordan Archer's pretty face to pulp, but I didn't. I stayed where I was and prayed they wouldn't realise I was there. He was bigger than me, he had his friends with him, and I smelled of vomit.

So I sat there quiet as a mouse till at long, long last I heard the hiss of butts dropped into water, a final thunderous fart, and the sound of the door squeaking open and sighing shut behind them.

It was only after they'd gone that I realised there were tears on my cheeks.

Women

The second the truck lurched to a stop in our driveway I slid out and slunk into the house. Lights were blazing everywhere; Dad wasn't someone who tiptoed around, even at midnight. Behind me the front door slammed shut, the key rattling in the lock.

I'd hoped to make it to my room without bumping into Mum, but no such luck. Her face, smudged with sleep, sharpened to instant alert when she saw me. 'Pip! Whatever's happened?'

I pulled away, turning my face to the wall. 'Everything's fine. I just . . .'

'It's far from fine,' growled Dad. 'The boy's been up to something and he won't say what. Look at the state he's in. That girl — Beattie — pasted him one and went off home on her own, God knows how. *Or* why. But I'll —'

'Jim, enough.' Mum's voice, normally so gentle, could cut like a Samurai sword. Dad stomped off to bed, muttering. Without another word Mum shepherded me to my room and moments later I found myself tucked up in bed in my pyjamas, a bag of frozen peas pressed to my eye and a hot-water bottle warming my toes. Mum moved quietly round the room in the soft light from the bedside lamp, picking up my clothes. If she noticed the state they were in she didn't comment.

When everything was tidy she came across to me, took the peas away and brushed my hair off my forehead, the

way she used to when I was little. 'Want to talk, Pippin?' I shook my head. What could I say? She took a breath, then gave me a tiny smile. 'Whatever it is,' she told me, 'it will seem better in the morning.'

But it didn't. Nor the next day, or the next. Because every day that passed took me closer to climbing training, when I'd be seeing Beattie again.

Tuesdays and Thursdays were climbing nights. Neither Beattie nor I had missed a single session I could remember, but this Tuesday five o'clock came and went, and Beattie didn't arrive.

'Looks like you're without a partner too, Fraser,' said Rob cheerfully. 'You and Phil team up today, OK?'

My mouth felt dry. 'What about Beattie?' I muttered, trying to sound offhand.

Rob shot me a narrow look. 'Didn't she tell you? She phoned earlier to say she's out of action for a day or two. Bruised hand, apparently.' His ice-blue gaze flicked to my eye and away again.

Rob would never ask. And ironically, that made him the single person in the entire universe I could possibly bear to tell.

Rob Gale was the coolest person I knew. He was lean and stringy and somehow ageless, with dirty-blond dreads and a stud earring and a wide mouth set in a self-mocking twist that stretched into an infectious grin. In all the time I'd known him he'd never come close to losing his cool; he seemed to exist in a dimension a degree removed from the rest of the world. Stuff that would leave a normal person gutted and writhing on the ground had a way of somehow sliding by Rob, as if he was surrounded by an invisible

barrier that made him untouchable. He was into Eastern philosophy and meditation and stuff like that; you could imagine him alone on a mountain somewhere, living on watery sunshine and a single grain of rice a day. If you told Rob you were a mass murderer on the run from Interpol he'd look at you with those faraway eyes and smile his crooked smile and say, 'Oh, yeah?'

So after training I hung around a bit and asked if he needed help with anything. 'You could put these up for me,' he said, handing me a sheaf of notices.

I mooched over to the notice board in the corridor, flipping through them as I went. There was a list of gear for sale and a couple of ads for climbing buddies, then an official-looking notice headed CLOSURE OF CLIMBING GYM that sent my heart into free fall till I read on: *The Igloo will be closing temporarily for upgrading . . . improvements to the existing climbing walls, as well as the addition of a new gallery-style café, the* Crag & Cornice . . .

My face cracked into a grin. This'd be the Igloo's answer to the swank new climbing gym, Summit, that had opened across town. Jordan Archer — a climber too, and a good one, much as I hated to admit it — had decamped there with his cronies the minute it opened its doors, on the principle that 'new and expensive' had to equal 'better'. But they didn't have Rob Gale, and we did. The Igloo didn't need to install a new café to make me stay, and anyhow, the improvements to the climbing walls interested me more. Dad always said competition was a healthy thing, though he said it less often now the new supermarket had taken away half his milk run customers.

Next came a job ad on the Igloo letterhead for a Fair Play Coordinator . . . and last of all something that brought me to a complete standstill. My eyes skidded over the words

while my poor old brain stumbled along behind, battling to take them in.

> **UIAA-ICC World Youth Climbing Championships**
>
> National trials for the team touring to the UIAA-ICC World Youth Climbing Championships will be held in March this year. The most prestigious competition in the world for youths and juniors will take place at the National Rock Climbing Centre of Scotland in the Adventure Centre Ratho . . .

'Finished?'

Wordlessly I held the notice out to Rob. 'Oh,' he said casually — though there was a glint in his eyes that was anything but casual — 'I thought that might interest you. I know you've set your sights on making the Highlands team, but this is a whole notch higher. We'll be looking at country-wide talent, and I know you don't like to feel pushed.'

Pushed? 'Do I stand a chance?' My whole being latched onto the idea like one of those dogs that grab hanging tyres with their teeth and dangle there for days. '*Do I?*'

Rob looked down at me, eyes narrowed appraisingly. 'Yeah, you stand a chance. The trial will be informal anyhow, low-key and cruisey — very much your style. Good experience for you and Beattie either way.'

'Beattie . . .' I croaked.

Rob said nothing.

I told him everything.

'I don't even know what I did,' I finished miserably.

'Women,' said Rob, shaking his head. 'I don't pretend to be an expert, but I'd say maybe it's not a question of what you did, but what you didn't do.'

'Huh?'

'Exactly.'

'So what do I do now?'

Rob shrugged. 'What can you do? Only one thing, and you know what that is as well as I do.'

Thursday rolled round with sickening slowness. My eye felt better; the swelling had gone down, and the size was almost normal. But it looked worse: green and purple, as if the skin was rotting.

She was already there when I arrived, back to the door, pulling on her climbing shoes. I walked towards her like someone wading through treacle. Squatted down beside her and cleared my throat.

'Beattie . . .'

Her head whipped round so fast I half expected it to fall off. 'What.'

'Beattie, I'm sorry.'

'Sorry?' she snapped. 'What for? I'm the one who should be *sorry* — for being fool enough to go to the damn dance with you in the first place!'

She jumped up as if she had springs in her legs and crossed over to the bouldering wall, swarming up it like a spider.

After what felt like a long time I took a painful, shuddering breath. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Rob fiddling with ropes by the Midnight Run. At the same moment our heads turned and our eyes met, our shoulders lifting in a helpless shrug.

Women.

Brothers

After the milk run on Friday Dad and I headed to the Igloo to pick up Nick, who worked there after school as a soccer umpire. The Igloo wasn't only a climbing gym, it was a massive indoor sports complex with soccer, cricket and netball, a bowling alley and even an indoor pool. Something for everyone, even Madeline, who'd started going to a toddlers' Gymboree with Mum two mornings a week.

Mum must have had a word with Dad about the dance; he hadn't mentioned it again, contenting himself with giving me dark looks from under his eyebrows occasionally, but I was used to that. Today I sensed something else was on his mind; never chatty, he was more silent than usual while we did our rounds, his hands clenched on the steering wheel so tight I thought it would crack.

The digital clock read 7:58 when we pulled up in the parking lot. By 8:02 Dad was starting to fidget; 8:05 and he was shifting impatiently in his seat, making the milk float rock like a ship on a stormy sea. At 8:08 the muttering started, and two minutes later Dad exploded into action. 'This is ridiculous! We'll go and find him. And when we do . . .'

I bobbed along in Dad's wake like a tugboat as he ploughed through the waves of chattering kids at his usual breakneck pace, his limp doing nothing to slow him down. We headed for the court where Nick usually reffed, but instead of my brother's dark hair and craggy Dad-clone

features there was a rounder, blonder guy, frowning anxiously as he hovered on the edges of the action with his whistle at the ready. Dad's frown darkened several shades; without breaking stride he forged on down the corridor towards the climbing gym — the one place Nick would never be. I was about to call him back when a familiar figure caught my eye. Nick, on Court 3 — the one they called Wembley — playing, not reffing. As I watched he pirouetted on his heel, feinted left and right, then dodged past the defender and smashed the ball into the goal, to whoops and high fives from his team-mates. Instinctively I checked over my shoulder. Dad wasn't going to like this, not one tiny bit — eight o'clock meant eight o'clock in his language, especially when he was hanging out for his dinner.

Dad was standing in front of the notice board, hands deep in his pockets, scowling. 'I've found him, Dad.'

'What? Who?'

Surely Dad couldn't find the contents of the notice board so fascinating he'd forgotten what he was here for? 'Nick,' I reminded him warily. I expected him to wheel on me in typical Dad-rant mode, reminded of Nick's lateness and taking it all out on me, but he didn't. Instead he lumbered round slowly, brow furrowed. 'Nick?' he repeated, as if dredging the name up from some dim and distant past. 'Oh, yes . . . Nick. Well, come on then, Son.'

Even when I pointed out Nick's scarecrow figure whirling about on Wembley like a dervish, Dad seemed unnaturally calm. 'Having a game, is he?' he grunted. 'Might as well watch, I suppose — but he'd better not be long. Your mother will have dinner waiting.'

Less than five minutes later Nick pushed his way over, sweaty-faced and grinning ear-to-ear. 'Sorry,' he said. 'They asked me at the last minute — one of their team's pulled

out for the season. Five–one — not bad, huh? And I scored four of 'em!'

I'd've been grounded for life, but Nick was always able to get away with murder where Dad was concerned. And if it had to do with sport — especially soccer — Nick was on extra-solid ground. He was everything I wasn't: physical, aggressive, and, as Dad told anyone who'd listen, 'with more talent in his left toe than I ever had, even in my heyday'. Which was Dad-speak for 'before my accident' — the accident that put paid to his career as a fireman, and taking part in active sport ever again.

Though some people — me for one — would call the way Dad carried on at soccer matches too active by half: his over-the-top 'encouragement' from the sidelines had destroyed any enjoyment I'd ever had for the game, and come close to wrecking our relationship. But all that was over now: I'd discovered climbing, a non-sport in Dad's book, and Dad had Nick, the soccer paragon, to focus on. This season I'd taken the final step of giving up soccer for photography club on Saturdays, ruling me out of the sporting equation completely where Dad was concerned.

Now I sat forgotten in the back seat while Dad and Nick dissected the game and analysed the players. 'So anyhow,' finished Nick with the elaborate casualness I knew heralded a blind-sider, though Dad seemed oblivious, 'I said I'd join the team, if you don't mind shelling out four bucks a week and picking me up those few minutes later.'

Any other reason and that four bucks would have been a king's ransom, the 'few minutes' the time-span from the Big Bang to the present day. But this was Nick, and sport. 'Good idea,' agreed Dad. 'It'll help your outdoor soccer too — build a parallel set of skills. I don't mind watching now and again.' Just try to stop him, I thought. Anything

that might help Nick's quest — *Dad's* quest — to make the Highlands soccer team, and Dad would be right there on the sideline cheering him on. And Nick was almost there. Six months ago he'd been chosen for the elite Zone Team, and all summer he'd been training — in the special $250 hard-ground boots there was suddenly money enough to buy — with the rest of the hand-picked squad. A tournament had been held over the holidays; based on the performances there, the Highlands team was about to be selected, the letters of confirmation due any day now.

With Nick's usual luck, the question of joining an indoor soccer team couldn't have come at a better time.

'So,' said Dad, as we pulled into Contour Terrace, 'what's the team called, then?'

There was a second's hesitation before Nick replied. '*Hoof*,' he said, very slowly and distinctly, '*Hearted*. The teams all have real wacky names, Dad.'

'Wacky?' growled Dad. 'That's completely meaningless! You should have a proper name, like . . . *The Champions* or something. But *Hoof Hearted?* It's ridiculous!'

Nick was staring set-faced out of the window. Watching him, I saw his face give a convulsive twitch; then he gave a sudden snort, as if he was suppressing a sneeze.

'*Hoof Hearted*,' Dad was muttering as he opened the door. '*Hoof Hearted* indeed! We'll see what your mother has to say . . .'

The door finally slammed behind him, and Nick and I exploded. It was a long time before we dared hobble — with aching sides and streaming eyes — after Dad into the house. It had been a long time since the two of us had laughed together like that, like little kids. It felt good.

If I'd known what was ahead, I'd have hung on to it a lot tighter.

Two letters

To hear Dad, you'd have thought Mum would be pacing up and down in the kitchen brandishing a cleaver demanding to know what had kept us so long. But she was snuggled in her favourite chair in the lounge with Madeline on her lap, reading her a story. Mostly she read Madeline picture books, but recently she'd started reading her proper stories, fairy tales I remembered from when I was small. 'Isn't she too little to understand that, Mum?' Nick had asked once.

Mum just smiled. 'You're never too young for stories,' she told him, 'even if it's just the rhythm of the language she's absorbing.' Mum was an English teacher long ago, so she knew about that kind of stuff. And she was right: Madeline loved story-time, no matter what Mum read.

. . . the old woman sat on the porch in her rocking chair surrounded by the scent of roses. But her face was as sour as a lemon. 'Oh, what a pity! What a pity, pity, pity!' she complained. 'To think I have to make do with a tumbledown hovel like this! I should be living in a smart new house with lace curtains at the windows and a shiny brass knocker on the door!' Mum glanced up and smiled. 'Dinner in five minutes, Pippin. Put those socks away, would you?' . . . *The fairy was surprised. She would have liked a cosy little cottage to live in, instead of flying east and west, west and east her whole life long . . .*

I scooped up the pile of socks — five of them, rolled neatly into balls — and took them to my room, juggling

them absent-mindedly on the way. One-two-three-four flew onto my bed; I stood frowning at the fifth. It was bigger and bulkier than the rest, and though it also smelled of Rain Forest fabric softener, I found myself wrinkling my nose. Nick's training socks. I took a breath to yell 'Nick! Come get your smelly socks!' But I could hear the shower running and I figured it wouldn't kill me to put them in his room this once.

As always, the door was wide open and it looked like an atom bomb had gone off inside. Clothes were strewn everywhere, rumpled socks, muddy shoes and shin pads fighting for floor-space with old towels, water bottles and kit bags. My room wasn't tidy, but it wasn't a tip like Nick's. Mum said our rooms were our business: we could keep them how we liked, as long as she wasn't expected to clean up after us. Dad took a different view, but then Dad would.

There was no way I was going in there — I'd vanish without a trace. I tossed Nick's socks onto his unmade bed, narrowly missing Horace's nose. Horace was the real head of an actual stag Nick shot on a hunting trip with Dad the year he turned 14, the age I was now. Dead as a doornail, stuffed and mounted on the wall, he gazed down at the shambles on the floor, a long-suffering look on his face. A pair of Nick's bright red Liverpool boxers dangled from one antler giving him a festive air, like one of Santa's reindeer.

I headed for the kitchen, suddenly aware that I was starving. Friday night was takeaway night for most of my friends, but not for us — especially now, with money a bit tight. Situation normal. I peered into the oven. Five fat golden pasties, one each, a corner for Madeline, and the rest of hers for Dad and Nick to argue over, though I knew who'd win.

Nick slammed in, instantly taking up more than his fair

share of space, oxygen and attention: 'If I had a cellphone I coulda let you know, but seeing as I don't — yum! Pies! So that's where the leftover stew went!' No leftovers were safe from Nick — he'd eat cold stew, soup, pasta, anything he could find straight out of the container, so long as Dad wasn't around to catch him.

I turned to the table — and then I saw it. I couldn't believe it had been there all that time without me noticing. A rectangular white envelope smack in the middle of my place-mat, doing handsprings and cartwheels and chirping 'Look at me! Look at me! Open me now, quick, before I self-destruct!'

But Nick's voice drowned it out. 'Well, how's about that! My letter's arrived — the final nod from Highlands Soccer!'

That's when I realised my envelope wasn't the only one on the table.

'Well, come on, open it! Don't keep us in suspense!' said Dad, making a grab for Nick's envelope. Nick snatched it away, laughing, backing off with it held high above his head. 'Oh no you don't, Dad — this is *my* moment of glory!'

'I don't suppose you could save your letters till after you've eaten,' said Mum.

Nick thumped down into his chair, hacked off a crispy corner of pie and shoved it in his mouth, then slid the greasy knife into the slit of his envelope and ripped. 'I can read and eat,' he said indistinctly. 'It's called multi-tasking.'

'Don't talk with your mouth full — and read that damn letter!' barked Dad. 'We haven't got all night!'

'Read tory *now*!' chipped in Madeline, banging on her high-chair table with her spoon.

'Yeah, read your letter, why don't'cha,' I muttered.

'Damn right I will, baby bro!' Nick's face was flushed with excitement, his damp hair sticking up haywire as if he'd

been electrocuted, eyes blazing electric-blue like a circuit shorting. 'Listen up, sportsfans!' He cleared his throat, grinning round at us, then deepened his voice, put on a posh accent like a sports commentator, and began to read.

Highlands Soccer Union, yaadee yaadee yaa . . . *Dear Nicholas, thank you for your participation in the recent zone tournament. The high standard this year has made the selection of a 16-strong squad to represent the Highlands Region exceptionally difficult.*

Your physio-something *maturity, technical skills and tactical understanding of the game were noted by the selectors. As with any developing player, there is always scope for further improvement, in your case the adoption of a less individual focus, leading to a more holistic approach to what is in essence a team game* . . . 'What bollocks — sorry, Mum.'

The Highlands Soccer Union has identified you as a player with significant promise, and further opportunities will undoubtedly open to you in the future. However . . .'

'However?' echoed Dad.

Nick's face slammed shut. His eyes went flat as stones, his cheeks grainy-grey.

He grated his chair back and stood, as if he was struggling to find his balance in a world that was suddenly upside-down. Somehow he made it to the door, walking slowly and deliberately, the way I always imagined a sleepwalker would, and out.

But before he went he looked at Dad. The strangest, apologetic, almost furtive glimmer of a glance, like a little boy who'd done something wrong and didn't want to be found out.

But Dad didn't see. He was staring down at the letter, his face wiped clean of any expression at all.