



Girlfriend *fiction*

**WHAT
SUPERGIRL**

**DID
NEXT**

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ALLEN & UNWIN

CHAPTER 3

‘Right . . . okay . . . and does she need to bring anything?’

It was Monday morning and Mum was on the phone. I shifted in my seat, bad leg resting on an extra chair, and started stabbing my Weet-Bix to get the milk soaked through.

Two seconds later, Mum slapped a sticky note on the table beside me: *Grey St Physio Thurs 4pm*. She was wearing a business jacket and suit skirt. As always, her hair and make-up were flawless.

‘anks M’m,’ I managed, mouth full of soggy cereal.

‘What else can I get for you, sweetie?’ She’d already cleared away the cereal box and the milk.

I wiped a slop of milk from the table and shrugged. ‘Don’t know. Nothing really.’

‘Well, I’m going to be working from home today, so I have to make some phone calls.’ For a moment Mum’s brisk efficiency faded as she tilted her head and looked at me. She brushed the backs of her fingers against my cheek. ‘Just yell if you need something, okay?’

I nodded, and by the time I had started scooping cereal again Mum was talking on her mobile in the study.

After breakfast I spent a good twenty minutes visualising my floor routine from start to end – *without* any injuries – with my leg up and my knee packed in ice.

I was feeling a bit better about State Squad. *Next year* wasn’t so far away. And I’d have one advantage at least – more time to prepare than everyone else. Maybe I could start building so far out and work so mind-numbingly hard that I could blast into the Nationals next year and blitz even better than anyone could ever expect.

The thought made my breath come fast. I could do it, I knew I could. I just had work harder than ever . . .

I took the ice pack off my knee and started into stomach crunches – 120 pounding ones. They worked fine because crunches are hardest when your knees are lifted on a chair or, in my case, a pile of flimsy pillows. Man it felt good – the strain in my muscles and the grunt in my gut, my blood surging and pumping. A stupid weak knee wasn’t about to make me go soft.

After that I tried some leg raises, but they only worked on my good side and I imagined myself turning into the elephant-girl gymnast – huge muscles on one side and all

spindly and weak on the other. Not exactly a winning look.

By ten o'clock I had no idea what else to do. Mum, the Terminator Woman, was busy working and everyone else was at school. It took me about ten seconds to realise that morning TV was a total yawn.

The day felt stretched out and strange. Usually I was really busy. Training twenty-two hours a week meant I had to be super-organised with homework. Sometimes I had to finish assignments days before they were due because the rest of my week was so chock full of gym. Any extra time I could sneak I spent with Rene, but I couldn't call her during class time.

For a while, I stared at the tired old trophy that Samantha had left beside my bed, trying to conjure up the bold, brash feeling that would help me show the universe I was a winner. But after a while my mind wandered and I began thinking about the club championships when I won that little trophy. I hadn't thought about it for ages, but Samantha did that comp too. She was the reason I started gym in the first place. Now that I thought about it, those club championships were the last gym comp that Samantha ever did.

It's weird the things that pop into your mind when you give yourself space to think.

After that I mucked around on the crutches, swinging with both feet in the air, lifting my good leg up in a graceful pointed kick. I got pretty good after a while, with only a weenie bit of pain. Then I practised using the crutches properly, making sure I could get around without looking completely unco.

'Jade, do you have a minute?'

Mum called as I clunk-

hopped past the lounge room. She had work papers covering the coffee table.

‘Just let me check.’ I rested on the crutches and pretended to read through a list of important appointments on my palm. ‘Yep, I can squeeze you in.’ Then I clunked back with a little crutch-assisted leap here and there.

Mum was sitting on the edge of the couch, her knees pressed tightly together. ‘So, Jade, do you have an action plan from here? Or is it too early to ask?’

I liked it when she spoke to me as if she were talking to a work colleague in a business meeting. It made me think that maybe, one day, I could even work *with* her – learn everything she knew about the world of property development that had made her so Superwoman successful.

‘Well . . .’ It was hard to look businesslike with my bad leg stuck out. ‘I’ve been thinking of aiming for State selection *next* year. Lots of time to prepare at least.’

Mum’s face relaxed into a smile – a real one for once. Then she sighed. ‘Good. That’s my girl. A setback like this can make some people think of quitting . . .’ Her eyes narrowed.

I shrugged and smiled because the idea hadn’t even entered my mind.

Mum’s face relaxed again and she nodded. ‘And I was thinking . . . you could use this extra time to get ahead with school, so when your knee’s back on track you can catch up at gym and not have homework to deal with.’

‘Well . . .’ Keeping up-to-date with homework was one of my superpowers, but getting *ahead*? I didn’t want to think what would happen if anyone at school found out. But

there was a book report due in four weeks that I could get stuck into.

‘Okay . . .’ I said slowly.

Mum clapped her hands once and smiled. ‘Great, let’s get to work.’

‘Right.’ Business meeting over. I stood up on my one good leg, and clunked back to my room concentrating on moving as efficiently as possible. From my bedroom I could hear the beeping of Mum’s mobile.

Terminator Woman and Supergirl take on the world.



By the time I heard Rene click the front gate behind her, I was desperate for some company. I’d finished reading the book, and had started planning my report. A laugh a minute.

‘Thank heavens you’re here!’ I called from the front door. I hopped forward and sat gingerly on the front steps. My knee felt almost comfortable resting like that.

‘Hey, babe! You look better already,’ Rene said. She tucked her skirt under her legs and sat next to me on the step. Then she held up a chocolate frog and swung it temptingly. ‘I guess you don’t need this to cheer you up.’

Chocolate! That’s my girl. I put my hands up like paws and let my tongue flop out like a puppy.

‘Good doggie.’ Rene patted my head and held the frog up in front of my nose.

I bit the edge of the wrapper, pulled the frog out of her grasp and dropped it into my lap. Then I picked it up, tore it open and broke the frog in half.

Rene took her gooey chocolate piece. 'Thanks, chum.'

'So, tell me everything,' I said eagerly, licking strawberry goo from my fingers. 'What did I miss at school?'

Rene shook her head. 'You've only missed one day.' But her cheeks seemed pinker than normal.

'Come on, Rene, out with it,' I said, rubbing my hands together.

Rene glanced at me, then down at her knees. 'Well. I did see Marco on the weekend . . . shopping at Highgate . . .'

'Tck!' I shivered. Marco was one of those guys who believed he was *God's gift to the universe*, and to his football team. 'Is he a total sleaze outside of school, too?'

'Not really,' she said quickly, looking at her knees. Her cheeks were still bright pink. Then she jerked her head up and smiled as if glad to have thought of something new. 'Actually, there is one bit of goss. It's kind of weird . . .'

I nodded with my eyebrows raised.

'You know Levi Sinclair? He hurt his knee on Saturday too. Same day as you.' Rene frowned at my bandage. 'I don't know if it was the same knee . . .'

'Really?' I asked, not sure if it was interesting or not. Even though we were in the same PE class, I didn't know Levi very well. He looked about eighteen and was a total star of the football team. From what I could tell, Levi wasn't an arrogant jerk like Marco. Though it was hard to be sure. Levi hardly said anything.

'And he went to school today?' I asked suddenly.

'Yup,' said Rene, staring into space. 'I wonder if a sore knee was in your stars or something. Do you know when his birthday is?'

I shrugged. ‘Don’t know. Don’t care.’ But part of me didn’t like the idea that Levi had gone back to school while I sat on my bum at home.



Going back to school was tougher than I’d expected. It hurt. I was bumped a couple of times in the corridor, just lightly, but the slight jolts were enough to make me worry about some idiot crashing right into me. It was hard to get comfortable in class, too. I had to sit up the back with my leg on a chair, trying not to take up too much room. By lunchtime, my knee was tender, my armpits were aching and staying at home working on homework not due until next century was almost looking good.

‘Want to eat lunch beside the oval?’ Rene asked as she lifted my backpack and manoeuvred it awkwardly off my shoulder and down my arm. Normally we ate under the old pine tree behind the middle school wing, but we both knew it would take me ages to get there on my crutches.

I shrugged, rubbing a tender part under my arm, then slipping my crutch back in place. ‘Okay, oval sounds good.’

‘Great!’ cried Rene, bouncing on the balls of her feet, even though my bag was pretty heavy. ‘You head straight there while I get your lunch?’

‘Thanks, Rene,’ I said. Man, did I hate the fuss and fiddle. But I wasn’t about to complain out loud and let the universe think it was winning.

On my way to the oval I had to cross a gravel road that made crutches totally annoying. So I headed for the closest

set of bench seats, backing onto the road and looking across the green.

And that's when I saw him. Levi, my partner in bad knees, was sitting alone on the first bench seat with his bulky bandaged leg stuck out at an angle, as if he was trying to keep it out of his line of sight. His ginger hair was so short that even his skull seemed muscular.

On my way past I nodded at Levi and scrunched up my mouth as if to say, *pretty shitty, eh?* He responded with a single, clean nod.

I kept going, concentrating on moving both crutches as cleanly as I could. If Levi could make it to his bench without any trouble, then I could make it to the next one twice as well.

After that I savoured the rare peace of sitting, and settled in to wait for Rene. A few other kids trickled past, munching and talking. A seagull squawked overhead.

A bunch of footy boys were doing their thing on the oval – kicking and running and calling. At one point Levi broke out laughing and yelled, 'Go easy, Saxon!'

I started lifting my bad leg, testing it, tempting it to hurt. As long as I didn't try to bend it, everything was fine. So I did some leg raises to pass the time and to remind my leg not to get too soft and cosy.

After a while, Marco walked up to Levi and shook a paper bag in his face. Levi jerked his head in what looked like a combined *g'day and thanks* and pulled out a steaming meat pie.

No wonder Levi was a bit beefy – his diet sure wasn't low-fat. Maybe he did his knee because he was carrying

too much weight. I couldn't remember the last time I'd let myself eat a meat pie, but watching Levi eat his made my mouth start to water . . .

I got so busy fantasising about the hot runny gravy that it took me a while to notice Marco staring over at me, grinning.

I looked out across the oval as if I hadn't noticed. But when I glanced back, Marco said something to Levi and walked past the rubbish bin towards me.

I sat a little straighter and took a breath. Talking to Marco was about as exciting as having a knee reconstruction. The year before he'd been selected for some big-shot football clinic and spent weeks telling the whole world about it. As if anyone cared.

Marco stopped right in front of me. 'What's this, hey? Cripple Club?' he said and cracked up laughing.

I just shrugged and looked over my shoulder. *Come on, Rene . . .*

'So, Jade, I reckon this proves it once and for all,' said Marco.

He paused, and despite myself I looked at him. 'Proves what?'

'That girls *really are* softer than guys,' he said, smiling so I could see all his straight, white teeth.

'*What?*' I said, scrunching up my nose.

'See young Levi over there?' Marco flicked a thumb at the other bench. 'He did his knee on Saturday, same as you, yeah? But he still turned up at school yesterday.' Then Marco tilted his head and pouted as if talking to a baby. 'But you, Jade? You did the same thing, and needed an extra day tucked up safe in bed . . .'

'Rack off, Marco,' I said.

Marco cracked up again. ‘Whatever you say, sweetheart!’

He sauntered back to Levi, while I fantasised about ramming my crutch into Marco right where it hurts guys most. *Think that’s funny, Marco? Saying girls are soft? We’ll see about that.*

That was when Rene finally turned up. *About time . . .*

As she passed Marco and Levi on their bench seat, Marco said something that made Rene stop and giggle. She flicked back her hair and just stood there.

My stomach was really rumbling by now. *Hellooo! Hungry best friend sitting over here!* Her hair was out of its ponytail, and her cheeks were pinker than normal.

When Rene glanced over at me, I shot her a look – *WTF?* But she pretended not to notice. She just kept smiling at Marco, nodding at whatever he was saying. Then – my eyes virtually popped out and rolled around on the ground – Marco stood up and gently pushed a strand of hair off Rene’s face.

Geez was that guy a sleaze! Part of the problem was how good-looking he was – it helped him get away with anything. Not just his face, but his body too. It was beautifully proportioned, lithe and well-muscled. There was a bit of the black panther about Marco – dazzling all those around him with the ripple of muscle under a sleek black coat. Whenever he pounced, his victims were so dazed by him they had no idea what was going on.

When Rene finally joined me, I just shook my head slowly. ‘So why did you want to eat beside the oval today, Rene?’ I asked, eyes narrow.

‘No reason!’ said Rene and beamed back at Marco.

I pulled out half of my sandwich – soft wholegrain bread and crisp crunchy salad. That was the lunch of a true champion.

‘So, get this.’ I took a bite and kept talking between chews. ‘Before you got here . . . Marco came over . . . and said that I was soft to take yesterday off.’ I swallowed and took another bite, waiting for the news to take effect.

Rene flicked back her hair and peered past me at Marco. ‘Aw . . . he’s just razzing you up,’ she said. ‘Marco knows what you’re like.’ She broke a bit off her sandwich and started nibbling with her eyes stuck dreamily on Marco.

‘What *I’m* like?’

Rene looked at me, her cheeks still too pink for my liking. ‘You know, babe, you and Marco have a lot in common really. You’re both really easy to tease . . .’ She giggled when my eyes went wide in disbelief.

I tweaked her ear and pretended to look inside. ‘Can I just check what’s between your ears, Rene?’ ‘Cause that sure isn’t your brain in there.’

Even that gave her the giggles.

I rolled my eyes and took another bite of my sandwich. Maybe I’d just have to wait until Marco did something super-sleazy in front of Rene to make her see sense.

Knowing Marco, I wouldn’t have to wait long.

CHAPTER 4

The next morning, I was feeling good. I'd slept properly for the first time in four nights, rolling over and snuggling into my doona without a sharp wake-up call from my knee. It was improving fast. The swelling had gone down, leaving an ugly old purple bruise – a shadow of the pain I'd been in. The knee was still tender but I could bend it further and it was getting stronger. More like the way Supergirl should be.

The morning was crisp and crunchy-cold. I waited for Rene before school at our usual spot beside the front gate, rubbing my hands together then forming them into a cave and blowing in hot air.

Then I started testing my knee – adding weight, trying different ways of stepping, wondering if I could leave my crutches at home the next day.

By the time the first bell sounded, Rene still hadn't turned up, which was weird. I hooked my backpack over my shoulder. Maybe she was home sick. She did have a major history assignment due at the end of the week – about ancient human societies or something. Maybe she was faking a sickie to finish.

I turned around and jerked in surprise. Rene had rushed up behind me, flushed and out of breath. Her hair was pulled into a messy bun, making her look careless and classy at the same time.

'You'll never believe what just happened!' she whispered, clutching her hands under her chin and rocking on the balls of her feet. 'It's so, so, so unbelievable!'

The other kids around us were disappearing up the path.

I let my bag drop. 'What?' I asked, with a sinking feeling.

'Marco asked me to GO OUT WITH HIM!' Rene squealed. 'Can you *believe* it?'

I swallowed, trying to ignore the unnerving truth that she'd been spending time with Marco while I waited . . .

'Really?' I forced a smile.

Rene knew me better than that. 'Come on, be happy for me, Jade.' She held my hands and looked clear into my eyes. 'This is a big deal for me.'

Her voice was soft and close. I didn't know what to say. 'I *am* happy for you Rennie . . .' I trailed off as a million icky images of lips and straight teeth went through my mind. 'Just as long as he treats you well . . .' I tried.

‘Treats me well!’ Rene let go of my hands, laughing, and pulled up her sleeve. ‘How’s *this* for treating me well?’

A gold bracelet sparkled on her wrist with ‘Ren’ engraved on it. I hadn’t realised that they were so far down this road.

For a long moment Rene stared at it, biting her lip. When she looked at me again, her eyes were brighter than I’d ever seen.

I managed a small smile. ‘If he makes you this happy, then I’m happy too,’ I said quietly.

Rene kissed me on the cheek, then pulled back, beaming, and didn’t stop smiling for the rest of the morning.

But *I* spent the rest of the morning feeling as if my entire life had been flushed down the toilet. First my knee gives way at the gold-class worst possible moment and then my best friend falls for a guy who’s destined to break her heart . . . *Congratulations, Jade, this week is turning out to be awesome.*

At lunchtime it got even worse. When we reached the bench seats beside the oval, Rene smiled at me with a new kind of shyness then skipped over to sit with Marco. He snaked his arm around her waist straight away – squeezing so that her whole body curved into his.

Levi was sitting at the other end of the bench, his leg stuck out straight as he inhaled another steaming meat pie.

I threw my apple core into the bin then leaned back against the fence, facing the bus road and doing anything . . . *everything* . . . to avoid looking at Rene and Marco. All that was visible was the back of Rene’s elegant hair and Marco’s arms wrapped around her – they were in for a nice long kiss.

‘So, what happened to you?’ I asked Levi, trying to pretend that everything was normal. *Yup, my best friend snogs macho morons all the time.*

Levi shrugged. ‘Sprained my ACL,’ he said, gazing at the footy boys on the oval. ‘It’s a grade two. But I don’t have to have a knee reconstruction.’

I nodded as if I knew what an ACL was. He seemed to know a lot about knees.

Levi indicated my knee with a jerk of his head. ‘What about you?’

‘Oh . . . hyperextended it,’ I said.

‘Aw, take a load off, Jade,’ said Marco who had just come up for air. He jumped up and held out his arms as if his place on the bench was a gift.

‘Nah, I’m right,’ I said, shaking my head at Rene.

Come on, she mouthed, nodding as if I was being silly to refuse such a chivalrous offer from Marco.

I decided to ignore both of them. ‘So what’s an ACL?’ I asked Levi.

‘Oh . . .’ Levi sighed and rubbed his knee. ‘It’s the anterior cruciate ligament. When it snaps totally you’re meant to hear it go pop.’

‘Eeew!’ Rene lifted her shoulders up to her ears and screwed up her face. ‘I guess playing football means you end up knowing a lot about knee injuries?’ She shivered and flicked a piece of loose hair off her shoulder. ‘Footballers seem to get knee injuries all the time . . .’

Marco was leaning on the fence next to me. ‘That’s because football’s the toughest sport around,’ he said.

Gimme a break. I didn’t even look at him.

Rene was smiling up at Marco as if he was the answer to all her prayers. She sighed and leaned against the backrest of the bench. 'I suppose football's a hangover from the tribal days in a way . . . when the men went out hunting together? Teamwork and tactics, that kind of thing.'

Oh, come on . . . I rolled my eyes as Marco's words from yesterday rolled and rumbled in my mind. *Girls are softer than guys . . .*

When I glanced up, Marco was watching me closely as if he knew exactly what I was thinking. 'You got a problem with that?'

'Um . . . er . . . well, *yeah!*' I spat. 'As if playing football somehow puts you two in the league of ancient warriors!' I laughed, but no one else joined in. I couldn't tell what Levi was thinking.

Rene bit her lip and frowned. 'Well, what's wrong with that?' she said.

I opened my mouth to spell it all out, but Marco was sitting next to Rene with his arm around her again. 'Nothing, baby doll.' He smiled up at me.

A rush of disbelief hit me in the chest. 'But that's so sexist!' I cried. 'Why should you guys get treated like heroes! What about the top gymnasts? Or the women's hockey team? As far as I can tell, football is just boys playing with balls! Kicking goals doesn't make you freakin' warriors.'

All three of them were staring up at me from the bench seat. Levi had his mouth open slightly.

'Anyway, how often do football guys lift their own body weight?' I said, nice and loud. 'Gymnasts do that all the time.'

Some Year Sevens eating their lunch nearby stopped talking and looked at me.

Levi lifted both hands like stop signs. ‘Hey, Jade . . . gymnastics is cool.’ His eyebrows were tilted as if he was trying to hold back a smile – soothing a puppy that was barking and growling.

Rene shook her head. ‘Come on Jade. We didn’t mean it like that.’

But Marco rubbed his hands together, a glint in his eyes. He jumped the fence into the oval, raised both arms, blew a sharp breath out and balanced upside down on his hands.

Everyone turned and watched, even the footy guys.

His line wasn’t great, but Marco’s sense of balance was better than I expected. After a few seconds he flipped upright, blew a breath out and winked at Rene.

She rolled her eyes. ‘Come on, Marco.’

By now Marco was beaming at me. ‘Whaddya reckon, Jade?’ he called, lifting his arms up again. ‘Not bad, eh?’ Then he was upside down again, pushing up and down, doing a couple of inverted push-ups . . . lifting his own body weight.

‘Wow, Marco,’ I spat out. I knew I was overreacting a bit, but it still annoyed me. ‘I’m . . . I’m . . . speechless.’

He stood upright again, red in the face, and held his arms out wide, looking from person to person. ‘Yeah? Yeah? Pretty good, eh?’

‘Pretty good . . . for a beginner,’ I said.

On the bench, Levi snorted with laughter.

‘I train twenty-two hours a week, Marco,’ I said as if I was talking to a little kid. ‘And half of that time I’m upside down.’

Did you think I'd be impressed by *schoolyard* handstands?'

Marco held out his hands as if offering a patch of grass. 'All right, I'm ready. Show me what you can do,' he said.

I lifted my bad leg slowly, considering how it would feel upside down in a handstand. But when I glanced back at the bench, there was Rene standing with her legs apart and arms crossed . . . if looks could kill then I'd already have been stabbed to death.

'Ah, maybe some other time, Marco,' I said quietly.



It's impossible to run when you're on crutches. Running requires two *good* legs, not one good leg and two awkward crutches. But that wasn't going to stop me trying.

At the end of lunch, Rene headed off as if she didn't have to wait for a best friend on crutches, and I followed. It wasn't a run exactly, it was more of a *hop, hop, big-glide-though-crutches*, but I still kept up with her. Pretty much.

At the entrance to the locker hall, Rene stopped and turned to face me, cheeks red and eyes flashing in a way that made me nervous.

'I know what you're doing, okay?'

 Rene said, once I'd caught up. 'And I want you to stop.' She had the same arms-crossed-legs-apart stance that she'd used at the edge of the oval.

'What?'

 I clunked to a stop, puffing. 'He started it . . .'

That made Rene look up at the sky and shake her head. 'I mean it, Jade! Don't wreck this for me . . .'

'That's just it!' I yelled over her. 'It's not me, it's

Marco – he’s the one who’s being a dick. *He’s* the one who’s sexist!’

Again Rene shook her head. ‘Look, I know why you don’t like him. I know he seems like a little kid trying to show off. But there’s more to him than he lets on . . .’ She shook her head helplessly then just looked at me.

I looked back at her, then sighed and sagged a little on my crutches. Rene had no intention of changing her mind.

‘So . . . what?’ I asked. ‘The next time he shows off, I should clap and say what a great guy he is? When he starts saying that guys are strong and tough, I should nod and pull out my sewing?’

Rene bit her lip, holding back the hint of a smile. Then she glanced through the door leading to the locker hall and shook her head. ‘No, just . . . give him a chance, okay? This is my choice, Jade. My life.’ She looked me straight in the eye.

I nodded, just once. ‘Okay.’ It wasn’t going to be easy, but this was Rene, my best friend who brought me daffodil bulbs and chocolate frogs and never complained when I spent so much time training.

No matter what I thought about Marco, I had to do what she asked.



‘Alright, people!’ yelled Mr Bird. ‘Stretching first, then I want three laps of the oval.’

As if my crappy lunchtime wasn’t enough, the next class had to be PE. The universe seemed to be playing a sick joke.

Missed out on State selection, Jade? Keeping quiet while your best friend gets her heart broken by an idiot? Why don't you sit around and feel totally useless . . .

While everyone stretched, Gillian Macmillan stared over at me as if she wished we could swap bodies for a while. Gillian wasn't exactly headed for the Olympics. I shrugged and waved at her. *It's all yours, Gill . . .* that was, until I got my knee back to normal.

Already, Levi was sitting in the best of the bench seats. As I clunked over he glanced up.

'Hey, Jade,' he said when I was pretty close.

'Hey, Levi.' I didn't want to imagine the kind of dumb stuff Marco might have said about me after lunch. But it looked as if I was destined to spend a bit of time around Levi, now that Rene and Marco were going out. Until it ended in disaster, that was. Might as well make the best of it, I decided.

I thudded on to the seat next to Levi.

Then we just sat watching our class finish their first lap of the oval – the fit sporty kids in a pack at the front, and the rest dragging behind like a limp, lazy tail.

When Rene passed about mid-tail, I clapped and screeched, 'Go, Rennie!' I glanced at Levi, wondering what he was thinking.

Not much, it seemed. He was clenching his jaw and staring across the oval as if watching a bunch of phantom footy players.

After a while I picked up a small stone and flicked it though the wire fence. That helped pass, oh, about two seconds . . . I'd need a few more stones to get through the whole class.

I managed to get the next stone through exactly the same hole. But my third one went way too low.

I was just taking aim for another go, when *pling*, Levi shot a stone through the exact same hole . . .

Of course, I considered that a challenge.

My next stone went slightly too high and was followed straight away by another perfect shot from Levi.

I took my time for my next one – shutting one eye and taking aim. It went straight through and was followed immediately by another from Levi.

‘Well . . . you think you’re pretty good now, don’t you?’ I said and laughed.

Levi nodded slowly, a smug kink at the ends of his mouth.

I picked up a handful of gravel and chucked it all through the fence. Game over.

As Levi shifted on the seat I noticed that his fingernails were short from being chewed.

‘So, I was thinking . . . about what you said at lunchtime, Jade,’ he said.

Here we go. After everything I’d said at lunchtime, Levi was sure to have a go at me. I shuffled a bit in my seat – getting ready.

‘Do you really train twenty-two hours a week?’ asked Levi.

I wasn’t excepting that one. ‘Yeah, well . . . when I don’t have a bad knee.’ It was weird how different my life felt these days. Empty, lazy . . .

Levi nodded slowly. ‘Even when I add running and weight training, I barely make it to ten.’

I shrugged. ‘Yeah, well, there are four apparatus in women’s gym, so that keeps us pretty busy.’

The bulk of our class passed again on their next lap – cheeks brighter now, steps slower.

‘And the stuff you do . . . is it like those, ah . . . like they do at the Olympics?’

I nodded, impressed that he’d been thinking about what I said – thinking about something other than football. ‘Yep, well, you know. Not quite that good. But yeah, lots of aerial stuff, flips and somersaults. I can do a lot of stuff that you’d see at the Olympics.’ I glanced sideways and caught Levi’s eyes lingering over my body. Not in a sleazy way but with curiosity and respect, as if he was considering what it was capable of doing.

It made me aware of how close we were sitting.

‘So, since you’re so serious and all,’ said Levi carefully. ‘I was thinking . . . are you missing anything important? You know, since your knee’s been injured.’

My mouth dropped open. His words seemed to hover in the air. *Missing anything important . . .*

That question was so fitting, so much the right question to ask. I nodded. ‘Selection for the State Squad . . .’ Then I swallowed. Saying those words made it achingly real – the disappointment, the frustration, the anger . . . And more words kept coming. ‘I was ready this year, you know? Everything was in place – my fitness, my skill level. And it was just a freak accident, you know, it shouldn’t have happened . . .’

I trailed off, suddenly worried I’d said too much. Would Levi think I was whinging? But when I glanced over, he

looked me clean in the eye and nodded, as if he knew exactly how I was feeling.

I looked down at my hands and said, ‘What about you, are you missing anything important?’

For a moment Levi kept staring across the oval, then he sighed as if it hurt just to say the words. ‘I’m out for the rest of the season . . .’

We were just two athletes talking about normal stuff, but it felt like we were opening up, too. Unwrapping our bandages and comparing our scars, revealing our hidden raw parts.

I nodded. ‘Man, that really sucks.’

Another sigh. Then Levi went back to staring out across the oval, clenching his jaw muscles and frowning.

I sighed too – leaning forward with my hands on the seat. Although we were quiet for the rest of class, sitting out with Levi wasn’t bad at all.