

# For the Long Run



CHEYENNE BLUE



# Chapter 1

## Follow That Ponytail

SHAN GLANCED TO HER LEFT. Her training partner, Celia, ran steadily, crinkly ponytail bobbing against her black shoulders as she picked up her pace. Shan increased her speed to match, remaining half a stride behind Celia as she rounded the curve and entered the final hundred-metre straight. Celia would kick now, as agreed. Shan focussed on the finish line.

Sure enough, Celia surged, pulling away to a full pace in front.

*Ha! I got you.*

The air moved faster in and out of Shan's lungs as she, too, increased her pace, matching Celia then pulling ahead. One stride. Two. She caught Celia's annoyed frown as she passed, but the adrenaline spike pushed her on for the final sprint and she crossed the line a metre ahead of Celia.

Breathing deeply, Shan rested her hands on her knees and bent forward, sucking air into her lungs, her spiky blonde hair plastered flat to her forehead.

"What the hell was that all about?" Pieter's voice came from somewhere over her head. "This is *training*, Shan, not the bloody Olympics. The race is next week, not today. This was supposed to be an easy, final sharpening, workout. At least Celia can follow instructions."

She raised her head to see her coach's annoyed face. "Runner's instinct. She was slightly ahead of me. I couldn't let that happen."

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“Well, don’t do it again.” Pieter’s mouth twitched as he nearly cracked a smile. “It was a strong finish, though. You ran those four hundred metres in sixty-five seconds. Too bloody fast for training.”

“Thanks.” Shan straightened, went over to Celia, and clapped a hand on her friend’s sweaty shoulders. “Sorry. I felt good and couldn’t resist.”

Celia’s annoyed frown melted. “I should be used to it from you by now. You just have to be that bit ahead, even on the slowest of recovery runs. But don’t expect me to hold back in the race. Big stakes for that one.”

“I know, and I won’t. Maybe we’ll come first and second and both make the trials.”

Celia turned and started walking to cool down. “Or maybe Jamila will thrash both of us—again.”

“Well, she is the number one female distance runner in Australia. We’re just a lowly six and seven.” Shan nudged Celia’s arm as they walked across the grass. “But not for much longer if we have any say about it.”

“Yeah.” Celia stopped in the middle of the grass and started her stretches. “I’m hoping for a top three finish. Even though it’s a road race, the course is flat, and I should get a good time.”

“Me too.” She shot Celia a cheeky grin. “I’ll wait for you at the finish line.”

“I’ll be finished, cooled down, stretched, and waiting for you with coffee while you’re still trundling along the final kilometre.” Celia switched to stretching her hamstring. “Do you want a ride to the race?”

Shan shot her a glance, but Celia’s dark eyes were wide and free of guile. Maybe it was just a lift to the race. Even so... “Thanks, but I should be fine. I’ll take the tram and chill.”

“No worries. We can catch up after.” Celia’s gaze switched to the other side of the track. “Pieter’s beckoning us over.”

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Their coach was making big, elaborate sweeps of his arms that might have meant, “Get your arses over here!” or “Clear the field, the rescue chopper’s about to land.”

Together, they broke into a jog and returned to the group.

Pieter sat on the bench while the runners gathered around him. “Right, everyone, you’ve all got your plan for Sunday. As of this morning, Jamila has pulled out. Shan, Celia, Hanuni, you’re aiming for a top five finish. Don’t hold back. For all that this is a road race with the usual shambolic public fun run starting behind the elites”—his sour expression showed what he thought of that—“it’s possible to get a good time. Trina and Sunita, you won’t place but should finish in the top group. Use the race to fine tune your strategies. Jessie, you’re just running for the experience. Questions?” He glanced around.

Shan shifted from foot to foot trying to keep her muscles warm and shook her head.

“No? Well, I’ll see you all afterwards for the usual post-race briefing.” Pieter gave a short nod, stood, and walked off.

Shan and Celia went back to their sports bags and pulled on tracksuits, then ambled once around the track as was their custom.

“Got plans for the week?” Celia asked. “I’ve postponed a couple of my clients, but I can’t put them all off. I’m going to couch-potato as much as I can, and then call the cute tradie I met a couple of weeks ago, see if she’s up for some more fun. You should see her tool belt.” Celia winked. “Unless of course, you’ve changed your mind?”

“It’s still a no, Celia.” Shan grinned to soften the sting. “I’ve got to work tomorrow and Thursday, but after that no real plans. Just a couple of light, slow runs. Keep to my routine.”

“Mm. You’re great at that.”

“If it works, why break it? I couldn’t do it your way.”

“My way’s more fun.” Celia wrinkled her nose.

Shan laughed. “I’m sure it is.” She stopped and turned to face her friend. “This could be it. Our big break. I don’t think I’ve ever had a race with such high stakes.” The buzz in her stomach was like a hive

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of bees. If she felt like this now, she'd be bursting out of her skin by Sunday.

"Me neither." Celia did a jiggy dance step. "Last time this came up, I was injured. Time before, I wasn't half the runner I am now. This is the first time I've got an actual chance."

"I just missed out last time. I don't mean to mess up now." Shan gripped Celia's forearms. "I'm aiming to win on Sunday. Sorry about that. But you can come second."

They resumed walking.

"Do you remember when we first ran together?" Celia asked. "I do. Cross country in primary school. I beat you."

"We were eight. You had bad hair and great teeth. I had the opposite."

"The hair wasn't my fault. The foster mother of the time tried to plait it, and when it didn't work, she hacked most of it off." Celia shook back her thick hair, still in its ponytail.

"The teeth weren't my fault either, but orthodontists can do great things."

They reached the entrance to the sports field. "Want a lift?" Celia asked.

"Thanks, but no. I think I'll walk." She leaned in to peck Celia on the cheek. "See you Sunday at Fawknor Park."

"Don't be late."

"Of course not. Imagine how awful that would be!" Shan turned and shouldered her sports bag, turning for home.

It was a thirty-minute walk to her apartment. She took deep breaths, focussing on the clear autumn day, on the elm trees resplendent in orange and gold, the crisp smell of mown grass, and the warmth of the sun on the exposed back of her neck.

Sunday would come soon enough.

She couldn't wait.

# Chapter 2

## Endangered Species

THE KNOTS OF PEOPLE GREW thicker as Shan jogged toward Fawkner Park. She cut through a gaggle of women with strollers and cursed under her breath as they meandered out of her way. Increasing her pace, she took a shortcut over the grass toward the gathering of tents and stalls.

A group of people dressed in corporate colours unfurled a banner and arranged themselves behind it for a group photo. For a second, Shan considered running through it, arms upraised as if she'd won the Boston Marathon, but instead she cut a loop around them.

The pens of runners were now only a couple hundred metres ahead. Celia would be among them, no doubt wondering where Shan had got to. Maybe she wasn't too late after all.

Shan's anxiety spiked. If she could gain access to the elite pen before the starting pistol went, she would be okay. Nerves twanging, she shrugged off her tracksuit top and yanked at the pants, pulling them over her shoes. The material gave with a rip, and she tugged it free, then left it with a pile of similar clothing under a tree. In her running singlet and shorts, her race number already tied around her middle, the chip that would record her time affixed to her shoe, she ran toward the starting line.

Not for the first time, she cursed the driver who'd cut across in front of the tram she was on, causing the tram to clip the car's rear. A

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flash of anger spiked for the obstinate tram driver who'd refused to let passengers off simply because it wasn't a recognised stop. Eventually, he'd relented, and Shan had run the remaining four kilometres to the race start at a pace that would be the envy of most of the fun runners.

It was hardly the greatest way to warm up for a race—her final race ahead of the all-important trials in four weeks' time.

The crack of a starting pistol split the air.

*Shit!* Shan pressed her lips together as her heart rate bumped up a notch. The mass of penned runners shuffled toward the line. Already, the elite athletes at the head of the field streamed out, limbs moving like quicksilver along the course.

*Shit, shit, shit.* By the time she reached the starting line, the elite start was long gone, and the runners jogging toward the start were the casual runners. Two middle-aged men high-fived each other as they approached the start.

"Here's to finishing in under an hour," one said.

Shan dodged around a marshal and started to duck under the rope.

"Hey, you can't do that," the marshal said. "Wait your turn like everyone else."

Shan straightened. "I missed my start." She pointed to her number, the red signifying her elite status.

The official shrugged. "Sorry, mate, I can't let you in now. Health and safety. You'll have to go to the back."

*Yeah, yeah.* Shan flashed him a closed-lip grimace and walked back along the pens. Finding a gap in the ropes, she glanced left and right, then slipped in. With muttered apologies, she pushed her way forward, slipping into gaps in the crowd, past strollers, toddlers, and charity runners dressed in costume. The constant high-pitched beep as each runner crossed the starting line grew louder, until finally—*finally*—she crossed the line herself.

Shan dodged around the groups of friends walking arm-in-arm five or six people across. Her mind pounded an urgent refrain: *Go forward, go faster, get ahead of these people.* It wasn't anyone's fault except her own that she'd missed the elite start. She should have left

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her apartment earlier, screamed and beat the doors of the stationary tram until the driver let her out.

If only she'd taken Celia's offer of a ride.

The brown fur and bouncing tail of someone dressed in a kangaroo suit caught her eye. How could anyone even walk five kilometres dressed like that?

A gap opened up ahead, and Shan put on a spurt. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the elite field stream past in the opposite direction along the looping course. She refused to let herself look for Celia, but saw her anyway, black ponytail tied high on her head, legs and arms pumping as she matched another runner stride for stride. She would get the perfect race, while Shan was wasting energy and forward motion weaving around people dressed as Aussie wildlife.

She passed someone in a platypus costume, the duckbill on the head waving from side to side as they jogged at a tortuously slow pace. Next to them, someone dressed as a wombat shuffled along. It must be a group from a conservation charity. In other races, she had cheered such groups as they crossed the line, a long time after her own finish.

The joggers on the gravel path in front of her momentarily parted. Shan pushed her legs to a faster pace, her stomach unknitting a little. She fixed her gaze on the line she'd take as her arms settled into their racing swing. She accelerated toward someone in a koala suit jogging next to a woman holding tightly to a small child.

As she approached them, the child slipped from the woman's grasp and ran ahead. A burble of laughter drifted back to Shan.

"Reece, come back!"

The child stopped dead to listen.

All at once, the koala stepped into Shan's path and crouched down to the child. "Reece, you have to listen—" The cartoon-like eyes stared at Shan, and with a gasp the koala pushed the child out of the way.

Panic pulsed in Shan's throat, and she swerved left, feet scrabbling as her running shoes failed to get grip on the gravel path. Her foot slipped from underneath her, and she lurched, twisting to try to remain upright. She fell forward, her heart rate pounding a mile a



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minute as her arms flailed for balance. Her hamstring twinged but she ignored it.

The koala was less than a pace in front. *Shit!* Desperately, she tried to avoid the furry lump. *No! Too close!* Her foot caught the koala's body and her knee twisted with a pop that echoed through her bones to her brain. Shards of fire and red-hot agony lanced through the joint. She fell heavily, her shoulder taking the brunt, her palms skidding along the gravel.

She rolled over and sat up. Her left knee pulsed pain, sharp and abrupt, and for a second her vision blurred. Sound washed over her: running feet, the child screaming, and somewhere a woman's voice, high-pitched with concern: "Oh my God, are you okay? I'm so sorry. It was my fault. Are you all right? Your leg..."

Shan's knee shot bullets of pain into her thigh, and she cupped the knee as if she could knit it back together with her hands. Surely, if she didn't, it would disintegrate into a thousand fragments. She swallowed against the nausea. Either she would throw up or pass out; she wasn't sure which.

She stared into the furry face of the koala, at its big, black nose and ridiculous wide eyes. Another wave of pain, and she screwed up her eyes, trying to stop her vision swimming, to merge the two koala faces back into one. "I'm..." The pain bloomed to a white-hot agony, and she slumped to the ground.

# Chapter 3

## Karma of the Universe

LIZZIE CROUCHED NEXT TO THE runner on the ground. The woman was whiter than bleached bone, the angles of her face standing out like knife cuts.

Next to her, Dee scooped up her son, rubbing his back and telling him in soothing tones that he was okay.

Lizzie's mind whirled in panicky circles. First aid. What should she do? The runner seemed to have passed out. *Think, Lizzie.* What was the point of slogging through first aid refreshers every year if she couldn't remember the first thing about it? Was the woman breathing? That was it. She placed a hand on her abdomen. It was moving steadily up and down. Now what?

"Dee, can you help me get her into the recovery position?"

The runner moved, groaned, and her eyelids flickered open. Hazel eyes, golden brown and flecked with green, stared up at her. A frown creased the woman's forehead and then her eyes screwed up tight.

With a lurch, the runner sat up and gripped her left knee with shaking hands. "Fuck. Oh fuck it. Oh fucking fuck it."

Beside her, Dee tutted at the language, her pale face pinched with disapproval.

"Are you okay?" Lizzie heaved a breath. It was possibly the most banal and stupid thing to say. Obviously, the woman wasn't okay. Her chest moved in shallow pants, and her striking eyes stared out of skin

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so white it was almost translucent. She shivered in the cool morning. Shock, maybe. And even now, Lizzie could see the knee swelling underneath her hands.

“My knee.” She glanced around, as if only now realising where she was.

“I’m so sorry,” Lizzie said again. Guilt welled in her throat. It *was* her fault. Of course there would be runners on the course—it was a freakin’ fun run, for crying out loud. She should have been more careful.

Dee nudged her with her toe. “It was an accident.” Her blue eyes flashed a warning to Lizzie. “Could have happened to anyone. Just like when I ran up the arse of that Bentley on Toorak Road. The light wasn’t supposed to turn red. And this runner here shouldn’t have been going so fast.”

The runner rolled her eyes at Dee. “You must have crashed out of law school very early. Can you help me off the path?”

Lizzie stood. “I’ll get the first aiders. They’ll have a stretcher. Ice.”

“No.” The runner’s teeth chattered. “I need to go to the hospital, get a scan.”

“You can’t drive,” Lizzie said. Quite apart from her knee, the woman was trembling, her face tight with pain.

“I don’t have a car.” She clenched her hand over her knee. “I’ll get a taxi.”

Lizzie stood. “I’ll drive you. My car’s over there.” She pointed to the row of cars that lined St Kilda Road, only a hundred or so metres from where they were.

“If you drive the same way you run, I’ll be safer in a taxi.” The runner loosened her grip on her knee and peered at the swelling. “This isn’t good. Please help me up so I can get medical attention.”

“I’m a safe driver. Let me take you.” Lizzie heaved a breath. “It was my fault you fell, after all.”

“No argument there.”

Lizzie turned to Dee. “You’re continuing the race?” At Dee’s nod, she added, “Then I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

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Dee hesitated. "Sure you'll be okay? I mean, she doesn't look like a psychopath, but you can't be too careful. Remember Great-Aunt Esme?"

"I can't forget," Lizzie said. "I've never eaten fruitcake since you told me that story. It's fine, Dee."

"I haven't stabbed anyone this week," the runner said. "But if you don't help me up, that might change."

"Okay." Dee set Reece down. "One each side." She hooked her arm under the runner's right shoulder as Lizzie went to the left.

They waited until the woman manoeuvred her uninjured leg closer to her body and gave a tight nod.

"Three, two, one, and away she goes," Dee chanted.

The runner surged upright and stood balanced on her good leg as she leaned heavily on Lizzie's shoulder. If anything, she had now blanched a whiter shade of pale.

Lizzie stood solidly, letting her stabilise herself.

"Do you need me to help you to the car?" Dee asked.

The runner shook her head. "No. Thanks. I think." She put her injured leg to the ground and shifted a little weight onto it. "I'll manage. You're wrong about the Bentley, by the way. I'd pay up if I were you."

Dee narrowed her eyes. "It wasn't my fault."

"Whatever." The runner shrugged, her face tight with pain. "You better get your kid before he brings down the government."

Dee turned to where Reece was legging it as fast as he could after the stragglers in the race. "Shit!" She took off at a sprint after him. "Text me when you get home," she yelled over her shoulder.

Lizzie nodded. She pushed back the head of the koala suit so that her face was visible and summoned a smile. "I'm Lizzie, by the way, and Australia's greatest parent who might catch her child eventually is Destiny. But don't call her that; she goes by Dee."

"I'm Shan."

"Can you walk?"

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Sweat beaded Shan's face and she took a tentative half step. "I think so, if we go slow. Which car is yours?"

"The blue hatchback."

"Okay." Shan rested more of her weight on Lizzie's shoulder. "Let's do this."

By the time they reached the car, Shan's arm was damp with sweat against Lizzie's neck and her short blonde hair was plastered to her forehead. Lizzie opened the passenger door and leaned in to shovel the assorted junk from the passenger seat and throw it into the back.

Shan lowered herself into the car, lifting her injured leg in with both hands.

Lizzie stripped off the koala suit and threw it in the boot. Dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, she slipped into the driver's seat.

Shan studied her. "So there's an actual person inside the marsupial. You must have been boiling alive."

"It is better for winter fun runs," Lizzie agreed. She touched the back of her hand to Shan's arm. "You're icy cold." She pulled a blanket off the rear seat. "Wrap yourself in this. Sorry, it stinks of dog—I foster rescue dogs and they're sometimes in the car."

Shan pulled it around her shoulders. "Thanks."

"You'll smell like a German shepherd. You won't thank me when every dog in the neighbourhood wants to hump your leg."

Shan's expression didn't change. "I've had worse."

"Like now." Lizzie touched the back of Shan's hand. She told herself it was to check her skin temperature. Which it was. Of course it was. It had nothing to do with her touchable pale skin.

"Yeah, I've had better days." Shan closed her eyes and rested her head back against the seat.

Lizzie glanced at her sharp, narrow face rising out of the dog blanket like a thin-skinned greyhound on a winter's night. That knee didn't look good. And Shan hadn't looked like a casual runner; more likely, her usual place was at the head of the field, striding out for the win, not shuffling along with the fun runners like her. She started the engine and turned the radio down when it blared.

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“Which hospital? The Alfred is closest.”

Shan opened her eyes and treated Lizzie to a piercing hazel stare. “Not there. Epworth.”

Lizzie pulled out into the road.

The prestigious Epworth hospital often treated acute sports injuries. Every Saturday night newscast had the obligatory shot of a reporter outside the Epworth as they reported on the latest footy player to get carted off the field groaning in agony.

Worry pushed into her throat. *How serious is Shan’s injury?* She concentrated on driving smoothly, and in only a few minutes, they arrived at the Epworth and pulled up outside Emergency.

A porter approached with a wheelchair and assisted Shan into it.

Lizzie dithered. Should she accompany Shan in? After all, she’d have to wait, and then unless they admitted her, she’d need to get home. The knife of guilt gave another twist in her gut.

“I’ll park the car and come and wait with you.”

“There’s no need. Thanks for driving me here.” Shan handed back the blanket. “Your doggo pal will need this.” She faced the emergency room doors as the porter wheeled her away.

*Dismissed.* Lizzie shook her head. Well, she’d offered.

A polite beep made her turn. The driver of a shiny four-wheel drive gestured to her car, which was blocking the drive.

Lizzie mouthed an apology, got into her car, and started the engine. It still didn’t feel right to simply abandon Shan like that. She was dressed only in the briefest of shorts and a singlet. No phone, unless she’d stuck it in her sports bra. Maybe no money.

Lizzie drove off and turned into a side street. The last time she’d been to Emergency was a few years ago when she’d had appendicitis. Even that had meant a three-hour wait. And a knee injury, however painful, wasn’t life-threatening—Shan’s wait could be longer. She clenched the steering wheel, guilt and duty rising in her chest.

A car in front of her pulled out from a parking space. If Dee was here, she’d smile smugly and say she’d willed the space into existence.

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Karma of the universe. Whatever it was, that space had her name on it. She reversed into it first try. Maybe Dee had a point about karma.

She grabbed her bag and jogged back to the hospital. Emergency was half-full, and she spotted Shan sitting in a wheelchair near the desk.

“The triage nurse will be with you shortly,” the receptionist was saying. “Are you alone?”

“Yes,” said Shan.

“No,” said Lizzie at the same time. “I’m with her. It took me a few minutes to find a park.”

The receptionist nodded. “If you could wheel your friend to the first cubicle on the left, the nurse will be along in a few minutes.”

“Thanks.” Ignoring Shan’s frosty stare, Lizzie grabbed the wheelchair handles and pushed Shan in the direction of the cubicles.

The Emergency Department walls were so white they hurt her eyes, and the area had an air of hurried calm. It was very different from the rather tired-looking Emergency in the large public hospital she’d been to.

She parked Shan so that she was facing out of the cubicle and took the seat next to her.

“You didn’t need to return.” Shan stared fixedly ahead, as if the bank of monitors and trays of medical equipment were the most fascinating things she’d seen all day. “I could be here a while.”

“That’s why I came back,” Lizzie said. “It would be pretty dull being here alone. Also, I didn’t know if you had anything with you. Money, phone, keys, that sort of thing. You seemed to be travelling rather light.”

“I don’t race with a wheelie case trundling behind me, if that’s what you mean. But I have what I need.” Shan unzipped an inner pocket in her shorts and pulled out a ring with two keys, a credit card, a Myki public transport pass, and some glucose sweets. “See? I’m fine.”

“And you’ll call a taxi how?”

“I’m sure the receptionist will organise one.”

“Okay.” Lizzie settled back into the chair. “Then I’ll just wait until you’re seen, and the nurse clears you to leave by yourself. What if they won’t discharge you unless there’s someone with you?”

“I’ll phone a friend.”

“And wait for them to arrive? Most people are still crashed out on a Sunday morning or wrangling their kids at the park. I’m not trying to impose, but it’s got to be easier to have me wait with you and then drive you home, if that’s what the doctors allow, rather than bothering someone else. And yes, I do feel responsible, before you throw that at me.”

Shan’s eyes crinkled in what Lizzie thought was her first genuine smile, although it may have been a grimace of pain.

“That’s the pleasantries out of the way. Can I get you anything? Are you warm enough?” Emergency seemed overly warm to her, but at least Shan wasn’t shivering anymore.

“I’d kill for some painkillers and a litre of water, but there’s no way you’ll be able to get those.”

“No way at all. Nil by mouth until we’re finished here.” A nurse dressed in scrubs hustled into the cubicle and swept the curtain closed behind her. “I’m Linh, the triage nurse. Can you tell me your full name, age, date of birth?”

Shan hesitated, eyes boring holes in Lizzie’s face.

*Of course!* Heat rushed up her neck into her cheeks, and she stood. Keeping Shan company was one thing, but being privy to her personal and medical information was another. “I’ll wait outside.”

“Okay.” Linh gave a short nod. “Waiting area is around to the right. I’ll let you know when I’m done so you can return. Now”—she switched her attention back to Shan—“those details, please.”

“Thanks.” Lizzie edged around Linh and out into the corridor. As she moved away, she heard Shan say, “Shannon Majella Metz, I’m twenty-eight...”

Most of the cubicles seemed occupied, and medical personnel wearing scrubs or white coats moved swiftly around or conferred with their colleagues. Lizzie hitched her bag higher on her shoulder and



returned to the waiting area. She spied a coffee machine in the corner and headed in that direction.

The outside doors burst open, and paramedics pushed someone in on a trolley. For a second, Lizzie caught the patient's panicked expression as they were wheeled straight through to the treatment area.

Life or death? Maybe. Coffee forgotten, Lizzie slumped in a chair. Shan's emergency was nothing compared to heart attacks and strokes, and probably a thousand other things she'd never heard of.

They could be here a while.

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"Hey," Lizzie said as she re-entered Shan's cubicle. "How did you go?"

Shan shrugged. "The triage nurse can't tell me what's wrong. I have to see an orthopaedic specialist. They'll probably do scans." She swallowed down the knot of anxiety that pushed into her throat. Linh had been carefully non-committal in her comments, simply saying that Shan would need further tests before they could discharge her.

"So, we wait." Lizzie's voice held a bright optimism. "Did they say how long?"

"Maybe a couple of hours. I'm not a priority case."

Lizzie's gaze fixed on the tablets and tiny cup of water on the trolley. "Are they for you? Painkillers?"

"Yeah." She should take them. The pain in her knee was now a dull, pulsing ache, but the boulder of worry lodged in her chest was growing bigger by the minute. What if her knee was totally stuffed? Would she need surgery?

*When can I run again?*

Lizzie picked up the tablets. "Hold out your hand." When Shan did so, she placed the tablets on her palm and curled her fingers around them. "They don't work if you don't take them."

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Obediently, Shan swallowed the two tablets. *Now what?* She closed her eyes and the fall replayed itself behind her eyelids. The child stopping dead. Lizzie in the ridiculous furry suit pushing him out of the way. And Shan herself, going too fast to stop, her foot catching on Lizzie's body.

The popping sound as her knee twisted.

And then regaining consciousness on the ground with that bloody koala peering down at her.

Shan's eyes shot open. She needed a distraction to stop the scene replaying over and over. She glanced around. No TV, no three-year-old copy of *Women's Weekly* with its recipes and child-rearing articles.

She focussed on Lizzie. Long, black hair was woven into a thick plait which hung down her back. Her skin was an even gold tone. A dark metal infinity symbol hung on a leather cord around her neck.

"So why did your idiot friend run up the back of a Bentley? More to the point, how could she think it wasn't her fault?"

Lizzie's lips twitched. Rather gorgeous lips, Shan noted absently, with a thin bow at the top, but a full lower lip that even now was curving up into a beautiful smile.

"Dee believes she can alter the universe in small ways to make life easier for herself. At work, her desk is opposite mine. She thinks she can make it so that calls from our difficult clients come through on my line rather than hers."

"And do they?"

Lizzie's lips completed the smile. "Not all the time. But I do seem to get more of the awkward ones. We work at an agency matching jobseekers with employers and there are nightmare clients on both sides. Anyway, Dee thinks she can will a parking space into existence when she needs it most, or traffic lights to turn green as she approaches, or the supermarket to mark the chicken down to half-price thirty seconds before she arrives."

Shan snorted. "Right." Dee was obviously delusional. "What's her record with the lottery? I bet it's not good."

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“You’re right. She claims she can only alter the universe on small things that don’t impact others. If a lottery win went to her rather than an elderly widow with sixteen cats who was in danger of being thrown out of her home for non-payment of rates, then that seriously messes with the universe. According to Dee, anyway.”

“Very convenient.”

“Anyway, a couple of weeks ago, Dee was driving along Toorak Road. There was a sleek silver Bentley in front of her. The traffic lights were green. Dee willed them to stay that way, so she accelerated knowing the lights would remain in her favour. You can probably guess the rest.”

“They went red; the Bentley stopped, and Dee didn’t.”

“Pretty much. She claimed the light was yellow and the Bentley should have kept going. The driver and the Melbourne police disagreed. Apparently, having the universe on your side isn’t a good enough defence.”

“I’m siding with the police.” A wave of pain washed through her knee, and she bit down so hard on her lip she tasted blood. “Pity she didn’t get the universe to control her son this morning.”

“Reece is hyperactive. That’s why we were both keeping an eye on him.”

“Not well enough, it seems.” She waited a couple of breaths for the knot of anger to subside. “What would you be doing this morning if you weren’t in Emergency with me?”

“Not much. I’d have gone for coffee with Dee, then home and cleaned house, maybe called a friend to see a pub band or something. You know, usual urban millennial activities. What about you?”

Shan pressed her lips together. What had she expected? That Lizzie would be doing something meaningful and important? “Debrief the race with my training partner, Celia, and others from our running club. Coffee. Rest up this afternoon, then a short walk and stretches this evening. And food of course.”

“You’re serious about running, aren’t you?”

## For the Long Run

“Yes.” Shan looked away, out to the corridor. She didn’t want to talk about how serious she was right now. Not until she knew how bad her knee was. Maybe she could attempt Dee’s trick and will a doctor into seeing her sooner. She closed her eyes and visualised someone in a white coat sweeping in.

Medical personnel scurried to and fro, but none entered Shan’s cubicle. Of course.

Lizzie shuffled in her chair. “Do you live nearby?”

“Parkville. I have a small apartment there.” A small *cheap* apartment, one that she could afford on her limited income, but was still near the large parks and running tracks. “What about you?” For a second, she wondered why she cared enough to even ask—but at least it was a slight distraction from the drumbeat of worry in her head.

“Abbotsford. I rent a terrace house. It’s just me at the moment. Actually, it’s been just me for a while, ever since my girlfriend moved out almost a year ago. I should find a roommate, but I haven’t got around to it.” Lizzie lifted one shoulder.

Maybe Lizzie had somehow sabotaged her girlfriend as she had Shan. She bit back the uncharitable thought and said, “That’s tough.”

Lizzie shrugged. “We weren’t meant to be, and it was an amicable split. No dramatics. We’re still casual friends.” She fished her phone out of her pocket and held it out to Shan. “Do you need to call anyone? Say where you are?”

Did she? Shan considered. It was a loose arrangement with her club, people either turned up or they didn’t, but she should let Celia and Pieter know. She took the phone. “Thanks.”

“Do you need privacy?”

“No, it’s okay. This will only take a couple of minutes.” Luckily, she had Celia’s number memorised.

Celia answered on the fourth ring. “Hello.”

“Hi, Celia, it’s me.”

“Shan? I didn’t recognise the number. Has your phone broken?”

“No. It’s someone else’s phone. I’m just letting you know I won’t be at the debrief. I’m at Emergency waiting to have my knee scanned. Can you let Pieter know?”

“That’s a bugger,” Celia said. “I wondered what had happened to you. Hopefully it’s nothing much. I’ll tell Pieter. I’m meeting friends this afternoon, but I can put them off if you need a ride home from the hospital.”

“I’ll get a taxi. How...” She swallowed hard against the lump in her throat. “How did you go?”

“Second.” Celia’s voice hummed with satisfaction.

“Congratulations.” She hoped her voice radiated some enthusiasm and didn’t sound as flat as she felt. “That’s great. You’ll be a shoo-in for the trial now.”

“Thanks. If your knee’s okay, you could still be in with a chance. Look, I have to go. I’ll see you next week.”

Shan ended the call and closed her eyes for a second. That was great for Celia, fantastic. But... *I could have finished second. Or even first.* Her fist clenched on the arm of the wheelchair and she gave in to the white-hot moment of anger. It was all Lizzie’s fault. Lizzie in her stupid koala suit, that idiot friend and her uncontrollable son. Shan clenched her jaw so hard her back teeth ground together.

“Shan? Are you okay?”

Lizzie’s voice came from somewhere above her head, just as when she’d passed out on the path.

“Of course I’m not bloody okay.” Her voice sounded harsh in her own ears, and she opened her eyes.

Lizzie took a step back. “Shall I call the nurse?”

“No.” She closed her eyes again, but this time an image of Lizzie danced behind her eyelids.

Lizzie, with her T-shirt dipped down to reveal a wedge of skin the colour of warm teak on her chest. Toned, lightly muscled arms and legs. Lizzie didn’t have a professional runner’s build—she was too solid for that—but she obviously took care of herself. Clear skin, white teeth, and a nice amount of padding.

## For the Long Run

Shan pulled her thoughts up sharply. Lizzie was irrelevant to her life. She shook her head to shake those thoughts loose. The painkillers Linh had given her must be strong to make her think like that.

Lizzie slumped back in her chair. “I could murder a chocolate-dipped raspberry jam doughnut right about now. Maybe even two. I haven’t eaten much today because of the fun run.” She eyed Shan. “I’m sure you haven’t either.”

Right. There in one sentence was everything that set Shan apart from Lizzie. *Doughnut* wasn’t a word in Shan’s vocabulary. Neither was *fun run*. Running was serious; running was what life was for. Doughnuts didn’t make the cut.

“What would you eat right now in normal circumstances?” Lizzie continued.

“High GI carbs and protein,” Shan said. “Maybe a smoothie with yoghurt, and something like a chicken sandwich. Not doughnuts.” She managed to keep the horror from her voice.

“Friday doughnuts are one of the reasons I run,” Lizzie said. “And wine.” She closed her eyes and sighed as a small smile curved her lips.

Such a different motivation. There wouldn’t be a pastry in sight at the running club debrief, and the talk would be of personal bests and splits, not merlot or cab sauv. Lizzie’s motivations seemed so... unambitious. Sure, not everyone could be at the elite level, but sport was as much about personal challenge. It wasn’t about eating junk food.

“I yearn for something sweet and sticky,” Lizzie said, “but tonight, I’ll go home and eat a salad. Everything in balance.” Her eyes opened again, and for a second, her gaze pinned Shan.

Shan forgot to breathe.

And then Lizzie broke the connection and leaned down to scratch her ankle. “I wonder how long you’ll have to wait. Surely they can let you have some water?”

“They have to do the scan first,” Shan said. “To make sure my blood vessels and nerves are all where they should be. Then, if I don’t need immediate surgery, I can guzzle half the Yarra River if I want.”

## Cheyenne Blue

“Dee used to swim in that as a kid. She doubtlessly peed in it a time or three.”

“I don’t doubt it. I’ve had coffee that wasn’t as brown as the Yarra.”

Lizzie rose and stretched, then peered out into the corridor. “I’d get a coffee, but I don’t want you to rip it out of my hand in desperation.”

“Go ahead. No point both of us suffering.”

Lizzie took a step toward the corridor. A white-coated man with iron-grey hair picked up the clipboard from outside and entered the cubicle. Lizzie moved aside to let him pass.

“Shannon Metz? I’m Dr Simon Gupta. I hear you’ve messed up your knee. Let’s take a look.” He eased up the blanket covering her leg.

“I’ll be outside,” Lizzie said.

“We need to arrange scans,” Dr Gupta said as Lizzie left. He fired off a series of questions which Shan answered. Then his warm hands pressed and manipulated her knee.

“I’m very sure you’ve ruptured your ACL—anterior cruciate ligament. There’s a lot of swelling, but we’ll still do some preliminary scans to make sure there’s no further damage. If I’m correct in that preliminary diagnosis, we can discuss surgery at an outpatient appointment.” He set down the clipboard. “Let’s take you over to radiology.” He gestured to an attendant who entered, removed the wheelchair’s brake, and guided Shan out of the cubicle.

It was as if she was being wheeled to her doom.

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# FOR THE LONG RUN

BY CHEYENNE BLUE

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