

CRUSH

(excerpt)

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ONE

People who've never experienced a cane fire wonder what all the fuss is about, and then they see one, and they know. A cane fire starts off slow, burning around the edges, the fire creeping into the lower part of the cane, and then it roars up into the tops of the stalks making the night glow orange. Suddenly, just as quickly as it roars to life, it's gone, and all that's left is the black snow - the burned cane trash - falling silently back to the ground. It was the sweetest smell Tess had ever known, like Gran's kitchen after she'd made toffee, and it was her favourite part of summer.

Tonight's fire was the last one for the season, except for the small block she and Pop had grown for the Crush Festival, and Tess's job was to keep an eye on any big embers coming down still alight, just in case they dropped into the festival block and set it off. With everyone concentrating on the block they were burning, if the festival block caught, there'd be no putting it out. Especially with the dry heat and westerlies they'd had today.

Tess was sitting on the tail gate of Pop's ute, her spray pack full of water beside her, watching as Lonny and Pete and some of the other farmers from around Chesterfield lit up the block. In the initial stages, it was quiet as Lonny and Pete walked in opposite directions with their drip torches lighting up the bottom of the cane. A couple of other farmers would be doing the same thing from the other side.

Pop was standing on the eastern corner closest to where the ute was parked, talking to Gary Evans from up the road. Probably about the lack of rain and most likely about the council elections coming up next year. Gary never missed an opportunity to put in a good word for his wife, who'd been a councillor in Chesterfield for close to fifteen years.

Lonny and Pete were about half way around the block when the fire crackled to life. Orange flames crept toward the centre of the cane and licked their way up the tall cane stalks singeing the loose leaves as it went. Gary Evans uncrossed his arms, picked up his fire rake and walked with Pop to the edge of the cane. Pop nodded at Tess as he passed and Pete's brother rode past on his bike, Pete's nephew riding up behind him, heading for the far side. They were always the last to arrive at a fire, and the last to leave after the

beer and sandwiches that Gran put on were gone, but they worked hard so no-one seemed to care. Pete's nephew saluted Tess as he hurtled past and then stood up on the footrests, whooping as he fish-tailed around the corner and out of sight.

Tess jumped off the ute, heaved the spray pack onto her back and, adjusting her cap on her head, walked over to the track between the burning block and the festival block and turned her eyes to the sky.

The block was dry, so within minutes, the fire was roaring up into the centre, throwing flames high into the air and spewing black smoke. A few big pieces of trash pin wheeled down and Tess kept a careful eye on them as they fell, but they were out before they hit the ground.

Although it wasn't quite dark yet, the fire was still pretty spectacular, and it had drawn a few people from around the place to come and have a look. There were a couple of cars parked on the side of the road, faces pushed against the windows, watching in awe. Tess smiled. She used to do the same thing when she was little, sitting in Pop's ute watching from the comfort of the driver's seat.

As she was looking at the parked cars, she caught a glimpse of the McGregor house just up the road. There were lights on in the house which made Tess a little curious. There hadn't been anyone in the McGregor house for years, except for a few holidayers every now and then. No-one willingly holidayed in Chesterfield unless they were visiting family, and even then, they'd normally stay at one of the motels in town.

"Tess!" She jerked her head around and saw Lonny waving madly at her. "Spot over," he yelled. Tess followed where he was pointing. An ember had fallen into the grass beside the festival block not far from where she was standing and had caught alight. She ran as fast as she could, pumping the handle on the spray pack as she went to build up pressure in the tank.

When she reached the spot over, she sprayed around the fire instead of directly onto it so she didn't flick up any more embers. Gary Evans had heard Lonny as well and had run over with his fire rake to pull away the grass to make a dirt break around it so it didn't spread. They managed to put it out without too much effort.

"Nearly," Gary said. He smiled and leaned on his fire rake.

"Yeah," Tess replied. She looked back over to Lonny, who shook his head, but she thought she saw a smile on his face.

"Bet you're excited to be done with school," Gary said. He scratched at the orange stubble on his chin and sniffed.

"I guess," Tess said.

Gary nodded. "Jay couldn't wait to get to that big party down on the Gold Coast. Left the day after the formal. You kids heading down there?"

"I'm staying back to help out with the festival. Lizzie and Will are away in Brisbane until the middle of the week but they're coming back for the festival too. Dad said if I didn't go to Schoolies he'd buy me a car next year, so you know, it was an easy decision."

Gary smiled and nodded. "How are your folks anyway? Enjoying Europe?"

“Dad’s not happy about the cold but Mum’s loving it. She saw snow for the first time on Tuesday after they flew in to London.”

“Have you heard from them since they got there?”

“They rang when they got in, but it’s been emails since then. The time zones are hard to work out,” Tess said.

“I hear ya,” Gary said. “It’s hard enough to work out when to ring Matty when he’s on shift in WA. And that’s only two hours difference. I think.” He scratched his cheek.

“Any plans for next year?”

“Uni, if I get in,” Tess replied.

“When do you find out?”

“A couple more weeks.”

“Nervous?”

“A bit. I think I’ll get into the business course I want to, but I’ve picked arts for my second choice just in case.”

“Back in my day, we finished school and went off to work the next morning. None of this partying stuff until we were twenty-one,” Gary said. “Unless you knew the barman at the local. Then you might get a few drinks before then. You kids don’t know how lucky you’ve got it nowadays,” he said. “Only waiting ‘til eighteen to drink.” He shook his head. “Of course, you only went to uni when you wanted to be a doctor or lawyer or something fancy like that. You need a bloody degree to turn on a TV these days.”

“Spot over!” Lonny called again, saving Tess from the rest of Gary’s lecture.

“That’s us again,” Gary said as he raced over with Tess to the end of the track and put out another small fire.

Because the block was a small one, it wasn’t long before the fire had burned itself out. Though the flames were gone, black cane trash still floated down from the sky as Gary and Tess headed back over to the ute. As she took off her spray pack, she glanced up at the McGregor house. The lights were still on but she couldn’t see any movement.

Pop tossed a fire rake into the back of the ute and opened the driver’s side door. “You coming down the sheds with me?” he asked.

“I’ll go up and help Gran out,” Tess said. “Who’s up at the McGregor’s?”

Pop glanced across the cane paddock and shrugged. “Renters,” he said and closed the door. Tess lifted the tailgate and clicked it shut. She banged on the side to let Pop know he could get going and headed back to the house. She’d ask Gran about the McGregor place.

TWO

Running in the country was different from the city. In the city, depending on what time she got outside, Maddie Lambert would be negotiating other runners, bike riders, walkers, mothers with three-wheel all-terrain prams and kids wobbling along on their little bikes. Out here, the only thing she had to worry about was not getting an insect in her mouth. It had only happened once, and that was apparently because she'd been running at dusk. Or so Jo said. So Maddie had decided to run in the middle of the day instead. Mornings had never been her strong point and she needed to run off the calories she'd eaten at the bakery earlier.

Indulging was something she hadn't been allowed to do for a long time, but as soon as she'd seen the size of those overfilled cream buns, she couldn't stop herself. Especially when she discovered it was real cream, and not the fake stuff most of the bakeries back home used. Her mouth watered at the thought of them. She'd definitely have to go back tomorrow to get another one. Of course, that would mean doing another run tomorrow afternoon. Or maybe she could just do an extra lap of the farm today.

The song changed on her iPod, and since she'd heard it a million times already, she switched it to the next one. It flipped over to Bon Jovi and Maddie smiled. Perfect. She was so over the manufactured pop that everyone seemed to be into now. What happened to good, old-fashioned rock? Thumping guitars and strong vocals, now that was something she liked.

For a brief moment, Maddie wondered how everyone else was coping since she'd walked out. Was she sorry to leave like she did? Sure, but no-one could say they hadn't seen it coming. At least Freya understood why she'd done it, and Andy couldn't resist the opportunity to take some time off and go surfing on the coast. Her father on the other hand, wasn't so understanding.

They hadn't argued like that since Maddie was twelve and had wanted to go to the same public high school as the rest of her friends. He'd won that argument, but Maddie hadn't let him win this one. She hadn't spoken to him since she'd left, but Jo had called him to tell him they were safe. As far as she knew, Jo hadn't let on where they were, which is what Maddie had wanted. If he found out, he'd be up in a flash trying to drag her back. She just couldn't deal with the way he was trying to micromanage every little part of her life anymore. Her mother had started to get into the act as well, telling her what she should be wearing or how she should be getting her hair done. God, the look on her mother's face a few weeks ago when Maddie had appeared in cargo shorts and a t-shirt to go shoe shopping was priceless. Not having any make-up on was what had sent her over the edge. "You never know who might see you," her mother had said. "You have to go out in public as if you're going to be photographed. Do you have any idea what people would say if they saw you dressed like that?"

"How about 'there's a nice, down-to-earth-looking girl?'" Maddie had replied. Her mother turned up her nose and said, "You're not going looking like that." So Maddie had stayed home, which annoyed her mother even more.

Without realising it, she'd increased her pace to almost a sprint. She slowed back to a jog and then stopped at the corner of the track, gulping in deep breaths of hot, fresh air. She pulled the ear buds from her ears, leaned on the fence post and stretched. No car fumes out here. Just wide open spaces and a lot of red dirt.

When Jo had suggested they come up here, Maddie was dubious because really, who had ever heard of Chesterfield? Certainly not her, and she was glad she hadn't made any jokes about the place since Jo had revealed it was where she was born. She hadn't mentioned how she felt about it now, but Maddie figured that you always feel a bit nostalgic for the town you were born, even if you left when you were little.

And the house was nice enough. Quaint her mother would call it, but not in a good way. Nothing like their white concrete fortress in Mosman. The farm house felt comfortable and lived in. Jo said she thought it was built in the nineteen-twenties, and the sag in the front veranda seemed to agree with that.

The walls had knocks and scrapes and dents in them and it seemed to absorb sound. Unlike Maddie's place where you could hear someone coming down the stairs from the other end of the house. It used to freak her out when they'd first moved in a few years ago, the way it echoed every little sound when people were moving around in it. Then it would be deathly quiet at night.

The creaks in the farm house had kept her awake that first night too, but they felt different somehow. Jo had said the next morning that it was just the house settling as it cooled. It had creaked as they'd been talking about it that morning and Jo said it was expanding as it heated up. Almost like the house was a living, breathing thing. Maddie couldn't believe she didn't know that stuff. Basic science, Jo had said, which kind of explained it. Science had never been Maddie's strong point. She was more into the creative arts.

She finished stretching and looked back down the road she'd run on. It was a long way back and she thought she'd seen a side road somewhere, so she decided to take it to see if it was a shortcut back to the farm house. She pushed the ear buds back into her ears and took off at a steady pace. *'Eye of the Tiger'* came on, making her heart race. The side track appeared just ahead, and the heavy guitar riff pumping through her ears and into her chest spurred her on, making her feel invincible. She sprinted ahead, Survivor urging her on. She turned the corner onto the unknown track, not caring if it was a shortcut and just happy to be away from the pressures of the last few months.

THREE

One minute Tess was riding along the boundary line on the farm bike, heading out to where Pop, Lonny and Pete were finishing the harvesting, the next a streak of white shot out from the long grass in front of her. She clamped down on the brakes, locking up the wheels and sliding into the grass on Fitzzy's side of the boundary. She dropped the bike and ran back to where the girl was lying, dazed, on the track.

"Bloody hell. I didn't see you. You alright?" Tess asked, crouching down to help the girl up. She was caked in red dirt and no amount of her trying to dust it off was going to change the fact that her white tracksuit was ruined. She was definitely not from around here dressed like that.

"I think so," the girl said. She tried to stand, but stumbled sideways. Tess threw out her arms to catch her before she fell back down. The girl winced. "I think I hurt my ankle."

Tess helped her over to the side of the track and lowered her down so she was sitting on the grass. A pool of red was slowly forming on her right knee. "Looks like you've got a graze as well," Tess said.

The girl pulled up the leg of her pants and prodded at her knee, sucking in a breath as little red droplets of blood oozed from the patch of raw skin. "Great. That's just fantastic," she said, pushing a strand of white-blond hair behind her ears.

"It doesn't look too bad," Tess offered. "It's just a couple of layers of skin. Paw paw ointment will clear that up in no time."

The girl looked up, shaded her face and said, "A paw paw will fix my graze."

Tess smiled. "No. It's an ointment. I have no idea if it's made from actual paw paws, but that's what it's called. And yes, it will fix your graze. Slather it on, cover it up and in a day or so, no more scab."

"You're talking from experience," the girl replied, pulling her pants leg back down.

"When you ride bikes and spend your holidays on a farm, you get a lot of grazes."

The girl smiled. "You're from around here then?"

"I live in town. I stay out here with my grandparents on the holidays."

The girl nodded. There was an awkward silence, so Tess asked, "What are you doing out here?"

"I'm staying in the house up the road for a few weeks."

"Holidays?"

"Sort of."

It had been ages since the last time any of the holidayers staying at the McGregor's had been Tess's age. It would be fun having someone to hang out with while Lizzie and Will were away. "Well, since we'll be neighbours for a few weeks, I guess we should introduce ourselves. I'm Tess." Tess stuck out her hand.

The girl dusted her hand off on her pants, took Tess's hand, gave it a shake and said, "Maddie."

"Why are you running in a tracksuit in the middle of the day?" Tess asked, sitting

down beside Maddie.

“It burns more calories,” Maddie replied.

Burning calories had never been something Tess had ever really thought about.

“Well, if you’re going to run during the day, you should probably stick to Fitzzy’s farm. He doesn’t work the side closest to the McGregor house anymore.”

“So no run-ins with reckless motorbike riders on that side?”

Her nose crinkled when she smiled, Tess noticed. “Highly unlikely,” Tess replied.

“Though in this weather, you should probably watch out for snakes.”

“Really?” Maddie shifted forward a little, away from the long grass.

“It’s summer,” Tess shrugged. “They’ll be out everywhere and Fitzzy’s is so overgrown, I wouldn’t be surprised if he has a whole country full of them over there.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for them,” Maddie said.

Tess checked her watch. “Bugger. I’m late.”

“What for?”

“I’m just dropping off some lunch to my Pop.”

“You should get going then.”

“I should.” Tess hesitated. She thought about Maddie’s possible sprained ankle. It was a long walk back to the McGregor house, even without a limp. “I can take you back if you like,” she offered.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. It’ll save you limping all that way on a sore ankle. I’ll just have to drop off lunch first though, if that’s okay.”

“Sure,” Maddie said. “I’d never turn down a free ride.”

Tess stood and helped Maddie up. Maddie tried to brush off the red dirt from her tracksuit again. “God, is all the dirt around here this red?”

“Yeah. Can’t get it out of anything once it gets in. White probably wasn’t the best choice to wear out here.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Maddie replied.

Tess helped Maddie over to the bike. She picked it up, kick started it and adjusted the soft cooler she’d strapped to the handle bars, hoping that the drinks hadn’t been shaken up too much. She turned to Maddie and said, “Hop on.”

The seat dropped under the extra weight and Tess felt Maddie take hold of her shirt. “You might want to hang on a bit tighter,” Tess said. “Don’t want you hitting the dirt again.”

Maddie’s arm snaked around Tess’s waist. In her hurry to get going, Tess let out the clutch too fast causing the bike to jolt forward. Maddie squealed and squeezed Tess tighter. The last time Tess had doubled someone on the bike was when Will’s bike had run out of fuel last summer. It occurred to her that Will holding her around the waist didn’t feel as good as it did with Maddie.

It was easy to spot where the men were harvesting thanks to the plume of red dust billowing out from behind the harvester and haul out truck. This was the last big block to

be done before they made a start on the small blocks near the house, so the farm was almost entirely an ocean of red dirt, criss-crossed with grassy tracks and dirt roads and cane trash waiting to be raked into rows. Further out past the watery heat mirages were the green tops of new sugar cane growth, and on a clear day, you could see right across three farms and almost to the edge of town.

As they crested a hill, Tess slowed and pointed out the harvester and haul out truck following beside it to Maddie. Pop's ute was parked at the end of the block. He'd probably be sitting in the cab waiting. At least Tess had a good excuse for why she was late.

She pulled the bike up at the back of the ute and killed the engine. Maddie stepped off and Tess unstrapped the cooler. The passenger-side door opened and Pop stepped out. "Man's not a camel," he said, his leathery face crinkling up with his smile.

"Sorry. Almost had an accident," Tess said, handing the cooler to Pop.

Pop looked from Tess to Maddie and Tess explained, "I almost ran her over."

"On purpose?" Pop asked.

Tess knew he was teasing, so instead of taking the bait she said, "Pop, this is Maddie. She's staying in the McGregor house."

"I know," Pop said. "How are you finding it? Got everything you need?" He dug into the cooler and pulled out a can of soft drink. He rolled it across his forehead and then popped the top and had a long drink.

"It's good. Thanks," Maddie replied.

Pop nodded.

"Are you going to be finished in time to start setting up?" Tess asked.

Pop glanced toward the harvester, scratched the back of his head and said, "We should be, but it doesn't matter. Lonny and Pete will just come back and finish it off tomorrow if they have to. There's still plenty of time to set up. Don't worry."

The one thing Tess looked forward to all year was spending the week leading up to the Crush Festival with Gran and Pop, helping them with the set up and then helping out during the festival. "Weather looks good this weekend for the burn."

"How do you know that?" Pop asked. He popped the lid on a plastic container and dug out a biscuit.

"I have a weather app on my phone."

Pop shook his head. He still used the weather service bulletins from the Rural Fire Service. They said the same thing, but Tess's way was more up-to-date. She'd never tell him that though.

"Are you having a bonfire or something?" Maddie asked.

"We've got the Crush Festival on," Tess said. "The grand finale is burning the small block of cane near the house."

"Sounds interesting."

"Don't get too excited," Pop said. "We only got a couple hundred people last year." He sighed. "Crowds have been getting smaller every year."

"Will, Lizzie and I are giving up schoolies to be here this year," Tess said. "We'll get

people in. We always do.”

“We’ll see,” Pop said. “I should have some lunch so I can give Lonny his break.”

“I’ll see you back at the house,” Tess said, climbing onto the bike and starting it up. Maddie slid on behind her, wrapping both arms around Tess this time. Tess waved to Pop and then headed off up to the McGregor house.

When they pulled up out front of the McGregor house, a woman rushed out onto the veranda and stopped dead on the top of the steps. “Maddie?” she said. She didn’t look happy.

“Everything’s fine. I’ll be up in a minute.”

The woman glared at Tess and then turned and walked back inside.

“I hope I didn’t upset your mum,” Tess said.

“She’s not my mum, and no, if anyone’s upset her, it’s me.”

“Are you going to be okay? Getting up the stairs I mean.”

“I can manage. And I’ll get some of that ointment you told me about, for my knee. Thanks for dropping me back.”

“No problem. See that place over there?” Tess pointed to the old stucco farm house a hundred or so metres up on the other side of the road.

Maddie shielded her eyes with her hand and said, “Yeah.”

“That’s my grandparents’ farm. I’m staying up there for the next few weeks if you need anything.”

Maddie smiled and said, “Thanks. I’ll be fine.”

Tess started the bike and said, “I guess I’ll catch you later then.”

“I guess so.”

As she rode back to the house, Tess mentally kicked herself for not giving Maddie her phone number. Just in case she needed anything.

FOUR

“What have you done this time?” Jo took Maddie’s arm and draped it over her shoulder, leading her into the kitchen.

“You say that like I injure myself all the time,” Maddie said, limping beside Jo.

“Tripping down the steps of a caravan,” Jo said. “Running into a glass door at a motel. Catching your toe on the corner of a coffee table. And that’s just in the last month. Should I go on?”

“No,” Maddie replied.

“So? What happened?” Jo asked again.

“I was running,” Maddie.

Jo didn’t look like she believed it but she said, “Come and sit down and I’ll have a look.”

“I’m fine,” Maddie said, trying not to wince as she hobbled along the hallway using Jo as support. She dropped down onto a chair at the table and Jo sat down across from her. She lifted Maddie’s leg onto her lap and examined her ankle.

“There’s a little bit of swelling,” she said, turning it carefully in her hands. She moved Maddie’s foot sideways, making Maddie wince. “It doesn’t look like it’s enough to be broken though.” She stood up, pushed her chair closer to Maddie and placed her foot down. She took some ice from the freezer, wrapped it in a tea towel and wet it under the tap. “Hold,” she said, placing it on Maddie’s ankle.

Maddie did as she was told, and Jo sat down on the other side of the table. She folded her arms across her chest and though Maddie wasn’t looking at her, she could feel Jo’s glare.

This was one of Jo’s tactics. Sit and stare and not say anything until Maddie got too uncomfortable and just had to say something. Maddie didn’t give in this time though, because she was too focused on her sore ankle. She moved it a little and sucked in a breath. The cold got too much so she moved the ice pack to the other side of her ankle.

Finally, Jo uncrossed her arms and asked, “Who’s the girl?”

“Her name is Tess and she lives up the road.”

“And why was she bringing you back here on the back of a motorbike?”

“Because she’s nice.”

“That still doesn’t explain what happened.”

Maddie sighed. “I was running and not paying attention and I ran out in front of her. She almost ran over me but—”

Jo slapped her hand on the table. “Jesus, Maddie. You know I have to take you back in one piece, right?”

Maddie rolled her eyes. “It’s just a sprain.”

“We’ll let a doctor decide that I think.”

“I’m fine,” Maddie said. “Really.”

“You don’t have a choice,” Jo said.

“Fine,” Maddie said. “But it’ll have to be after my hair appointment.”

Jo shook her head.

“What?” Maddie took the ice pack off and put it on the table. Jo raised her eyebrows and Maddie placed the ice pack back on her ankle.

“Don’t you think that’s going a bit too far?” Jo asked.

“Doing something I want with my hair instead of what someone else thinks I should do? Why is that a bad thing?” Maddie couldn’t remember the last time she’d had a say over her ‘look’.

“You won’t be getting the same type of service up here. Not like the salons in Sydney.”

It was Maddie’s turn to shake her head. “I don’t care. This,” she said, holding out a handful of her bleached-blond hair, “was not my choice. I never wanted to be blond. But oh no, image is everything, isn’t it? And no-one pays attention to the girl with mousy-brown hair.” That’s what her own mother had said to her just over a year ago. It had been easier then to just let her mother have her own way, but she wasn’t going to let either of her parents run her life any more.

Jo held her hands up in surrender and said, “Alright, alright. You’re talking to someone who gets a twenty dollar haircut from whoever can fit her in. Just understand that when your father goes ballistic, I’m not stepping in this time to help you out.”

“Fine,” Maddie shrugged.

“Speaking of your father, he called again.”

“And?” He’d called Maddie’s phone too and left messages that she’d deleted without even listening to. She didn’t need to hear him telling her what he thought she should be doing anymore.

“And, you should talk to him, Maddie. He’s worried.”

Maddie snorted.

“Regardless of what you think of him, he’s still your father, and he just wants what’s best for you.”

“What’s best for him, you mean.”

Jo didn’t counter that point and instead changed tack. “Freya has left a heap of messages too. If you just do one thing, can you please call her? She doesn’t deserve to be left in the dark.”

“She knows what’s going on,” Maddie said, though she knew that wasn’t exactly true. All Freya knew was that Maddie had had a massive fight with her father. She had no idea what it was about, and if she told Freya the truth, she’d be devastated. Besides, Maddie hadn’t decided what she wanted to do yet, so it wasn’t fair for her to dump everything on Freya without a solution. And there was Andy to think about too, though he’d probably just shrug and get back to his surfing.

“I’ll call her later,” Maddie said. Though it was to pacify Jo, she did think Freya deserved to at least know she was okay.

“Good,” Jo replied, apparently satisfied. She pushed away from the table and walked over to the fridge and started pulling food out. “I thought we’d do hot dogs for lunch.”

Maddie smiled. “Really? I thought they were full of crap?”

Jo laughed. "You're on holidays, so a little bit of bad food won't hurt."

Maddie decided against telling Jo about the cream bun from this morning. That would count as her bad food allowance for the day, so hot dogs would be off the lunch menu. Thinking about lunch, she thought about what Tess had been talking about with her Pop earlier. "Hey," she said. "What do you know about the Crush Festival?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Tess mentioned something about it."

"I didn't know it was still going," Jo said.

"What do you mean?"

"The Copeland's use to burn the last block of cane for the district and I think they just put on a bit of a party for whoever wanted to come."

"Oh," Maddie said. "So it's not very exciting then?" She was mildly disappointed. Though Tess's Pop had said it wasn't much at all, Tess seemed to be excited by it.

"It was when I was little I suppose, but I left when I was five or six so I don't remember too much about it." Jo turned and leaned against the bench. "I haven't been back in a long time, Maddie, so it could've changed since then. Did Tess say when it's on?"

"Next weekend."

"We can go if you like."

Maddie nodded.

"But," Jo said, pointing at Maddie with the cheese grater, "only if you stay injury free."

"Deal," Maddie replied.

Jo smiled and turned back to making lunch.

FIVE

After dinner that night, Tess was in the kitchen helping with the dessert when Gran said, "Pop tells me you've met our new neighbours."

Tess stopped pouring custard into the serving jug and asked, "What did Pop say?"

"That you almost ran her over on the bike." She jabbed at Tess with a serving spoon. "You know I don't like you roaring around the farm on that thing. It's not safe."

"I wasn't going fast, and she was the one who ran out in front of me anyway."

"Well I'm just glad you didn't hurt the poor girl," Gran said, pouring chocolate sauce over the puddings.

"Actually," Tess said, "she kind of might have sprained her ankle. And got a graze on her knee. And her white tracksuit is ruined."

Gran clicked her tongue. "Has she got ointment?"

Tess shrugged. "I told her about it."

"You should take some over to her. And some washing powder. They're not from around here, so I doubt they'll have anything that can get red dirt out." Gran bent down and pulled a Tupperware container from the cupboard. She spooned in some chocolate pudding, poured over some custard and said, "And take this. As an apology for almost killing the poor girl."

"I didn't almost kill her."

Gran glared at Tess and Tess put her hands up in surrender. "Okay. I'll take it over and apologise." She didn't need to be told twice.

Gran nodded at the dessert plates and said, "Help me take these out."

Tess took two plates as well as the custard jug and followed Gran into the dining room where Pop, Lonny and Pete were talking.

Pete nodded his thanks when Tess handed him his dessert. Lonny, as usual didn't have any. He was skinny as a rake and would eat as much roast meat and vegetables as he could fit in but Tess had never seen him eat dessert. In fact, Tess thought, Gran's Sunday roast was most probably the main reason Lonny and Pete stayed out late to finish the harvesting. If they'd had to come back tomorrow, celebratory dinner would have been made by her, and the only thing she knew how to cook was spaghetti.

Tess poured custard over her pudding and settled into the conversation.

"Mary's got another treatment to go," Lonny said. "Then we have to just wait and see."

"Is she getting new ones?" Pete asked.

"New ones what?" Tess asked.

"New boobs," Lonny said.

"Oh," Tess said. She must have looked confused because Gran said, "Mary opted for a double mastectomy, just in case."

"Oh," Tess replied. She knew Lonny's wife had been diagnosed with cancer but didn't know the extent of it. "I didn't know it was that bad."

"It's not," Lonny said. "She just wanted to make sure, that's all."

“You didn’t answer the question,” Pete said.

“Mary said once she’s over everything and has the all clear, she’s going to get a new set that would remind me of when she was in her twenties,” Lonny said.

Tess almost spit out her pudding. Gran said, “I’m glad Mary’s doing well Lonny, but I don’t think breasts are appropriate dinner table conversation.”

“Sorry,” Lonny said. He turned to Pop. “Mary says you’re still waiting on the cheque.”

“Barry’s supposed to drop it off this week,” Pop replied.

“Did they give you what you wanted?” Lonny asked.

“Half,” Pop said.

Pete shook his head. “Bloody council.”

“Language,” Gran said and Pete apologised. There were two rules at her table; no singlets and no swearing.

“They’re not helping with the advertising either from what I’ve heard,” Pop said.

“Idiots,” Pete said. “Montgomery’s probably siphoning of money for his campaign next year. Corrupt bast—” He stopped mid-sentence. “Sorry. Corrupt man,” he said instead.

“It’s not going to matter though, right?” Tess asked. “I mean, we still get a piece in the paper. Lizzie’s dad puts something in every year for free, so that’s something isn’t it?”

“We can’t just keep relying on the locals to come, Tess,” Pop said. He tipped his bowl up to scrape out the last of his pudding. “People around here are all still suffering from the drought. They haven’t got money to spend. The council was supposed to get us some advertising on the radio this year but I doubt that’s gotten any further than a brainfart.”

“Jack!” Gran said, and Tess had to stifle a giggle.

“Idiots,” Pete said again, this time shaking his head to emphasise the point.

Pop sighed. “We’re missing a lot of stallholders this year too. No-one seems to be interested anymore.”

“Will and Lizzie and I will talk to everyone we know. We’ll get through this year and then next year we’ll—”

“There might not be a next year,” Pop said, pushing himself away from the table and standing up. “I’ll wash up,” he said to Gran and walked into the kitchen.

“But—”

“Tess,” Gran warned. When Tess looked at her she just shook her head.

Tess couldn’t believe Pop was thinking about not having the festival anymore. Stupid council. We’re just going to have to work out a way to make heaps of people come this year, she thought. If they made more money from it, they wouldn’t have to rely on the council for grant money next year, and the council couldn’t have a say in it. She’d talk to Lizzie and Will when they got back to see if they could come up with some ideas to take the pressure off of Pop.

“You should take that stuff over to Maddie before it gets too late,” Gran said. She

took Tess's empty bowl and placed it on top of hers. "I'll clean up."

"We should probably get going too," Lonny said, helping Gran stack the plates.

Tess pushed away from the table. Maybe a visit with Maddie might pick her up a bit.

Crush is due for general release on the 1st of May 2015, and in the coming weeks I'll be sharing the new cover art as well as deleted scenes and the story behind the story, or why I wrote Crush on my website at:

www.srsilcox.com

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