

Star

ONDINE SHERMAN



PANTERA
PRESS



PANTERA PRESS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organisations, dialogue and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, organisations, events or locales is coincidental.

First published in 2021 by Pantera Press Pty Limited
www.PanteraPress.com

Text copyright © Ondine Sherman, 2021
Ondine Sherman has asserted her moral rights to be identified as the author of this work.

Design and typography copyright © Pantera Press Pty Limited, 2021
Pantera Press, three-slashes colophon device, Lost the Plot, and *sparking imagination, conversation & change* are trademarks of Pantera Press Pty Limited.

This work is copyright, and all rights are reserved. Apart from any use permitted under *Copyright legislation*, no part may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, nor may any other exclusive right be exercised, without the publisher's prior permission in writing. We welcome your support of the author's rights, so please only buy authorised editions.

Please send all permission queries to:
Pantera Press, P.O. Box 1989, Neutral Bay, NSW, Australia 2089 or info@PanteraPress.com

A Cataloguing-in-Publication entry for this work is available from the National Library of Australia.

ISBN 978-1-925700-69-5 (Paperback)
ISBN 978-1-925700-70-1 (eBook)

Cover Design: Astred Hicks
Cover Images: LeonardF, Max play, BLUR LIFE 1975, electra/Shutterstock
Publisher: Lex Hirst
Editor: Lucy Bell
Editorial Coordinator: Anna Blackie
Proofreader: Kristina Schulz
Typesetting: Kirby Jones
Author Photo: Evelyn Rieger
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group



The paper this book is printed on is certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. McPherson's Printing Group holds FSC® chain of custody certification SA-COC-005379. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

Also by Ondine Sherman

The Animal Allies Series

Sky

Snow

*Vegan Living: A simple guide to a cruelty-free,
healthy, plant-based life*

**‘It’s easy to stand in the crowd
but it takes courage to stand alone.’**

MAHATMA GANDHI

Chapter 1

I adjust my laptop and stare at the screen, open to Facebook. The cursor of my mouse hovers over the button: *Join Group*.

No, she'll never accept me. I return to my new obsession of scrolling through the comments on Stella's latest post, reading and liking as I go.

As I lie on my bed, a burst of perfume from the brilliant yellow wattle blossoms outside floats in through my bedroom window. Autumn hasn't got the message that summer's party is over. I hear the roaring start of our neighbour's lawnmower and the squawks from a crackle of white cockatoos in our back tree. I learnt that more than one cockatoo is called a crackle from my bird-watching best friend, Lucy. Groups of birds have the weirdest names: king parrots are a 'company' and owls a 'parliament'. Inspired by Lucy, I can now identify many bird calls, like the fluty melodies of the Australian magpie and the screeching of the rainbow lorikeet.

I sit up, cross my legs, lean my back against the wall then click back to the group's main page. *Activists Unite* is a private group on Facebook run by Stella Morris, a journalist and animal activist with multiple social media platforms. Stella is admired worldwide and followed by millions. She's constantly travelling, speaking, writing and publishing books. She gets interviewed on *CNN*, *BBC* and even *Al Jazeera* when world news breaks on an animal issue. But unlike some, she's not all about self-promotion; she regularly shares other people's accomplishments, supporting and encouraging their advocacy. She's currently on a world tour, delivering eighty speeches in twenty days in ten different countries. Today she's speaking in Beijing and has posted a petition against bear bile farming, an industry that cages bears and removes their digestive fluid so it can be used in traditional medicine. Stella is living the kind of life I aspire to, although I think I'm too shy to command a stage like she does.

I add a comment below the post: *Thanks for this*, then delete the last two words. I want to sound more articulate. *Thanks for informing me about this, Stella*, I write instead, tagging her name as always. Occasionally she pops into the comments and replies to people, but never to me. I'm just one person among a squillion fans.

My phone bings. It's my dad. *I got the job!*

That's amazing, I write back. I'm so happy for him. He'd been waiting to hear if he was going to be photographing West Creek's Country Music Festival, the town's pride and joy.

Star

I met my father for the first time this year when he sent me a plane ticket to Alaska. My three-week trip was packed with more drama than a reality TV show. At my sixteenth birthday dinner, no less, I found out he was a hunting guide, something he had been keeping from me and a job that goes against everything I believe in. For an animal lover like me, it was devastating. And then, right at the end of the trip, I interrupted him and his client mid hunt, causing my dad to get suspended. I felt horrible that my recklessness got him in so much trouble and cost him a whopping fifty thousand dollars from his client. But instead of being angry at me, he spontaneously jumped on my flight back to Australia so we could spend the next few months getting to know each other better. He made me feel, instead of unwanted, like a VIP and showed me his love was unconditional.

Not long after we arrived, West Creek Tourism discovered his photography skills and offered him a cash-in-hand gig. Now it's becoming a regular thing. Like me, they think he has serious talent. The organisation is aiming to put West Creek on the map as a destination for festivals and even rustic weddings. The more his confidence is boosted with photography, the bigger the chance he won't return to being a hunting guide.

Dad responds with a smiley face, and I return my attention to *Activists Unite*.

I read comment after comment, some posted in real time. Many already have tens, even hundreds, of likes from others in the thread.

This is disgusting, ugly, vile and heartless.

Stella, u r my inspiration.

Stop animal exploitation.

The animals thank you.

The doorbell rings.

‘Coming!’ I call through my bedroom window. I leap off my bed and run to open the front door.

My dog, Bella, rushes to greet Oliver, her tail circulating like a ceiling fan. She snorts with happiness and rolls onto her back as he kneels down to find her secret tickle spot.

He gets to his feet and we hug. ‘Missed you,’ I say into the crook of his neck.

He pulls back. ‘We saw each other in the park last night.’

‘But that was yesterday.’

‘Remember, Sky. I said we’d take it slow.’

‘I know.’ A knot of doubt lies undigested in my stomach as I lead him inside the house. It’s been over a month since Oliver and I got back together, but things still aren’t the same as they were.

‘Is that you, Oliver?’ my aunt Paula calls out. She’s on the couch in her default position: laptop perched on a floral pillow and a cup of tea within reaching distance. Paula’s in her last trimester and although the doctor gave her the all clear to end her months of bed rest, she’s still full of anxiety about something going wrong. She looks up from her computer, her fine brown hair sticking up

a little at the back, and smiles at Oliver. ‘How are your holidays going so far?’

‘Paula,’ I interject. ‘They start *next* week, remember?’ She’s so unfocused these days; it’s like she sees me but doesn’t hear me. But I give her a smile; I know she’s having a hard time with her pregnancy. Not to mention she was beyond patient with me when I first arrived here, so I want to do the same for her.

When Mum died from cancer last year, I moved from Sydney to small-town West Creek to live with Aunt Paula and Uncle Dave. At the time, I had nowhere else to go. I didn’t know my father yet, or his parents, who live in America, and my maternal grandparents had passed away long before. I felt abandoned, alone and orphaned. Paula and Dave made so many sacrifices to give me a new home and tried their hardest to shower me with love. Not that I appreciated it at the time ...

‘Want some more tea?’ I ask Paula.

‘I’m all tea-ed out today.’ She adjusts her legs, which are propped up by a pillow under her knees. She’s wearing the same Mickey Mouse pyjama pants as yesterday although she’s put on a clean grey top.

‘That’s a first!’

Paula lives on tea, and we’ve always connected over a hot cuppa.

Oliver digs around in his backpack then hands Paula a large bottle of supplements. ‘These just came into the shop. Mum says they’re meant to be the best pregnancy

vitamins out there; all raw or organic or something like that.'

Paula sits up. 'How thoughtful. I'll call Diana to say thank you. I can't tell you how much I appreciate her taking on the baby-shower project. I keep telling her I'll help organise it, but she won't let me lift a finger! She's an angel.'

When Oliver and I started going out, Paula and Oliver's mum, Diana, who runs a health-food store in town, got to know each other and they've been close friends ever since.

Paula frowns, patting the back of her hair down. 'I wish I could give you freshly baked cookies, like the old days.'

The old days were only a few months ago, before I went to Alaska. 'It's okay, Paula. Where's Dave?'

'Groceries. You just missed him.'

'I can make dinner tonight,' I offer. 'I'll text him to buy a can of lentils for veggie burgers.' Paula has gestational diabetes, which means she can have next to no carbs or sugars, so she'll have to eat her burger without the bun.

'What do you think, my little star?' She looks down, rubbing her belly. 'Lentils? Or too much gas?' She replies to herself in a super high-pitched voice, like she's the baby: '*Yum!*'

The word *obsessed* doesn't come close to describing Paula with this bub: she sings, talks and even reads magazines to her *little star*. I feel for her, knowing she's experienced the pain of several miscarriages before. And

although it was a little hard for me at first, I'm excited for her to have this baby too. I have no siblings and no other young relatives, so to have my very own flesh and blood cousin ... it's a gigantic deal. I do like the baby's latest nickname too.

Oliver chuckles and I roll my eyes as we head to my room, leaving Paula to continue her conversation with her belly. I text my uncle Dave quickly about dinner before closing the bedroom door. Paula and Dave have never had a problem with the door being closed. It's not like I have total privacy, anyway; when they want to talk to me, they just knock and open the door.

Oliver and I kick off our shoes and plop onto the bed. I hope Oliver will take me in his arms again, but instead he lies on his stomach holding his phone.

'We've gotta get more subscribers.' He stares at the page of our YouTube channel, *Keep Kind*, on his screen. 'This number is stressing me out.'

Sundays are our YouTube filming day. We started the channel together because Oliver is applying for work experience at Viola Films, a famous film production company, and when he trawled through the application process he realised they're looking for not only an impressive body of work but a strong social media presence with at least a thousand followers. He says thousands of high school kids will apply, but if he gets chosen, the benefits roll on. The winning candidate will get to intern on the set of a major production next summer. It will also give him a real chance of getting

into the competitive New York film school he wants to go to after we graduate next year.

But while he's focused on making the best films possible and attracting the most subscribers, I have other things in mind. Inspired by Stella Morris and her work, I want to use *Keep Kind* to raise awareness about animal cruelty and make a difference. I'm taking the lead on what subjects we cover, consuming reams of articles on different topics. I'm following all the advice I've read and trying my best to make it newsworthy, light and interesting, while Oliver does the filming and editing. Ever since I was little, I've wanted to be a journalist—ideally, one that travels the world and helps animals too. The TED Talk Stella did last year was flawless and has nearly half a million views. She talks a lot about open discourse, transparency and freedom of speech. Often when I read her articles, I get a fluttering in my chest, a feeling she is reading my mind, sharing my thoughts. Knowing there's someone in the world who talks about how animals should have their own legal rights, who questions their treatment as unjust, unfair and unacceptable, and who people actually listen to, it's so special.

Last week, Oliver and I covered a team of poachers-turned-wildlife-protectors; a real feel-good news piece. I loved watching the videos of elephants roaming. The research process was harder for our first video, when I wanted to write about the live export industry. Hundreds of sheep died from heatstroke, squashed into

ships from Australia to the Middle East in the height of summer. Stella's articles on the history of the ban campaign helped me enormously, and Oliver was sure that the video would be a hit; it's a huge topical issue. But nope. To say our channel hasn't attracted much attention is the understatement of the century.

'It is embarrassing,' I agree. Sixty-three followers is about low as you can get. Some people who haven't even posted a single thing have more than that. I lie next to him, laptop in front of me, following the instructions to sign Stella's bear petition. I refresh my Facebook feed and share a post from a page called *Expose Them*.

'Sky?' Oliver prompts.

I look up and realise he's holding his phone up to me. I wriggle closer. 'That's, what, sixty-four? Better than last week!' I try to sound positive, but he nosedives into the covers.

'I can't believe it's so bad. I'll never get that internship. How did Jaxon get a thousand in a week? His single isn't even that good.'

I cringe inside. I met Jaxon when I visited my father for the first time in Alaska a few months ago. Jaxon and my dad are really close, as Jaxon's own father is mostly absent. When I first arrived, I resented Jaxon's presence as I wanted time to get to know my father. But despite first impressions, we ended up becoming really close friends. Before I left, there was a moment between the two of us and we sort of kissed, but I stopped it before

things went too far, and now we're just friends. But while I want to stay friends with Jaxon, if it's interfering with my relationship, I am prepared to cut it off. That's how much I love Oliver. When I left Alaska, Jaxon's band was about to be signed with a big label. Now, they've just released his single and my dad, who doesn't know about the kiss and apparently hasn't guessed a thing, can't stop bringing it up.

'You haven't even listened to it,' I say to Oliver.

'Whatever,' Oliver says into the covers.

'Be patient.' I put my hand on his shoulder. 'We're competing with millions of channels. Have you seen what's out there when you run a search on animals?'

He doesn't answer.

'All the funny pet videos; the cat obsession is insane. And that's just in the animal category. We'll get there.'

'Time's running out.' He shrugs off my hand. 'And my application is going to suck.'

Nothing I say seems to help. 'You're a great filmmaker,' I try again. 'They'll see that.'

'I'd be better if I had that new editing program. It has so many features and would take us to the next level.'

'But it's insanely expensive.'

'Maybe ...' He lifts his forehead up and then drops back down into the pillow.

'What?'

'Should I ask my father?' He rolls over and tilts his head, his eyes all sad puppy.

I resist the urge to kiss his eyelids. 'For sure.'

Oliver's parents divorced four years ago, and since then Oliver's father has been living in Melbourne. Oliver and his little sister Sabine barely see their dad, although he is flying Oliver down to Melbourne for a rare week together these holidays. Oliver tells me that corporate lawyers work twenty-four seven.

Oliver sits up, takes out his phone. His brow is furrowed as his fingers fly over the screen.

'Done,' he says and slumps back to his original position.

'Don't worry. We'll make *Keep Kind* better than ever.' I press my lips to his single freckle, my favourite spot on his face.

We lie quietly and I feel the heat from his skin transmit into mine. It's moments like this when I'm desperate for him to say it again: those three words. I haven't heard them since I was in Alaska—before the drama with Jaxon. I want to hear him say it again; it will mean he's forgiven me and we're back to where we were.

I force myself to sit up. 'Okay. Time to make a video. Better than ever, right?' I put my hand up for a high five.

Oliver remains face down.

'Camera?' I prod him.

Oliver sighs and gets to his feet. 'Okay, I'll get set up.' He fetches the equipment from my cupboard then starts to fiddle with the el-cheapo tripod stand.

I go to the bathroom to check my hair, smooth down the fuzz. I wonder if I should try to look a bit older in the videos. Maybe people would take us more seriously if I looked less like a kid doing a school project and

more like a real presenter. I put on some mascara and gloss. Better.

Before I head back to Oliver, I open Stella's page again. She's posted a short video of her talking to a crowd of hundreds at a university.

A red notification pops up telling me someone's liked my comment then another one telling me they want to become Facebook friends. I click on her name—Issie Yam—and see she's a vegan, judging from the posts she shares. At school, Lucy's mum, who's a counsellor, came in to do a lecture on internet safety. She gave us ten instructions and I've followed most—like adjusting my privacy settings and cleaning my profile of any personal details. But Issie looks legit and there are heaps of pictures of her with foster cats. She's listed an animal shelter she's volunteering at so I google the organisation to double-check this isn't a fake account. I see a picture of her on their page, bottle-feeding a kitten. I hardly know any vegans like me so it's nice to connect with others who share my beliefs. I press *Accept*.

I click back to the *Activists Unite* group again and my finger hovers over the button to join. Should I?

Yes.

My heart beats faster as I hit the button. A page pops up asking me a series of questions about my background in activism.

'What's taking you so long?' Oliver calls out.

I put my phone away and return to my bedroom, taking a seat on the bed.

Star

Oliver perches next to me, sitting close so we both fit in the video frame. His thigh presses against mine. The camera's facing us, bedroom light on and curtains closed to stop the backlight; a towel's squished under my door to reduce unexpected noise. I'm wearing a new T-shirt featuring an elephant and the words *Born to be Free*, along with my usual cut-off shorts. Oliver's in a grey singlet and his usual whale-tail necklace. His hair's grown longer and is flipped to one side, surfy style.

He nods. We count silently to three, smiling into the camera, and then I start.

'News from the animal world! My name's Sky and—'
'I'm Oliver.'

'This week we've discovered ... What have we discovered, Oliver?'

We're going for the ping-pong-dialogue effect.

'Wait, hold on. You're in the shadow.' Oliver repositions the bedside lamp. Meanwhile, Bella scratches the shag rug before curling up on it. We start again from the beginning.

'What have we discovered, Oliver?'

'Well, Sky ...' He looks at me; his expression is so adorable. 'We've found out ...' I bite my lip, trying not to smile. Oh my god, I love him; I just can't say it. If he doesn't say it back, it will break my heart. So I have to wait. 'We've found out all about crustaceans. Hold on.' He jumps up and stops the camera. 'Let's do that take again.'

He resets the camera and I kiss him quickly. 'Ready?'

‘Actually, I’m dying of thirst,’ he says. ‘Can I grab some juice from the fridge?’

‘Sure.’

While he’s gone, I see that Lucy has sent me her latest sketch asking what I think, and Jaxon’s band has just posted an interview about the making of their first music video. Their success has happened so quickly. When I last saw him at Anchorage airport, I was about to fly back to Australia and he was about to go to LA to meet the record label. They signed his band, and now the label’s PR machine is helping build their brand. That means blitzing all social media platforms with their new single, money for promotion, and daily updates from Jaxon and his friends in the band on their latest performances and behind-the-scenes pictures. It’s amazing, and after the struggles he’s faced with his father I feel happy for him.

Oliver comes back with juice and gets the camera rolling again. I continue with the words I’ve now memorised, talking about how decapods—the group of crustaceans that includes lobsters and crabs—are not considered animals and have zero protection from anti-cruelty laws. We talk about new evidence that they feel pain, and the growing opinion that they should not be boiled alive. ‘We have even discovered a crayfish who gave up his own leg to save himself from a spot,’ I say.

Oliver bumps his knee against mine and stifles a laugh.

‘A pot!’ I correct myself, feeling my face warm.

Star

The video ends with our usual, ‘Keep kind and remember to like and subscribe!’

We sit for a moment with frozen smiles to give extra room for the cut, then relax.

‘Should we do another take?’ I ask, not getting up.

‘That was good,’ Oliver says as he walks to the camera.

‘But I stumbled a bit on the—’

‘I’ll fix it, you were great.’ He takes the camera off the tripod and starts packing away. Oliver always edits the videos, playing around with music, animation and other complicated stuff. Professional-looking videos should attract more subscribers, increasing his chances of being chosen for Viola Films.

‘Maybe we’ll attract lobster fans,’ I say with a smile. I want him to relax a little about the subscribers. We chose this subject because it’s unusual and quirky, trying a different tack to the more serious videos we’ve done previously.

‘Ah yes, the millions of crustacean lovers desperately waiting for a YouTube video just like this.’ Oliver gently pokes me in the ribs and I’m relieved to see his humour’s back.

‘Wait and see. There will be a thousand and one by the end of the day.’ I poke him back, a bit harder. ‘We’ll be stars.’

He wrestles me onto the bed, tickling the sensitive spot under my ribs, making me squeal with laughter. I press my lips against his, and our bodies wrap around each

other, every available surface touching. A tsunami of relief hits me. This is the moment. He's finally forgiven me and he will tell me he loves me again.

His fingers are wrapped in my hair and when he nibbles at my ear, I giggle. The noises rouse Bella, who barks with excitement before jumping onto the bed and licking my face. If that didn't spoil the mood, the sound of my uncle Dave's car does; it fills the room, the crunching gravel announcing his arrival in the driveway. Oliver and I disentangle ourselves and we get up to go help him with the shopping.

As I put the grocery bags in the kitchen and start to unpack, my mind wanders back to *Activists Unite*. How will I answer the questions to join the group? Will Stella accept me?

For some reason, belonging to this group suddenly feels like everything.