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'A gorgeous evocation of
the wildness of youth ...
A beautiful, resonant book.'

PEGGY FREW
author of *Islands*

The Golden Book

a novel

KATE RYAN

It happened this way.

It was so black on the track that you could hardly see in front of your face. Night.

But first they had to get there. Cal would have come down all paternal and disciplinarian, and Matty could never be persuaded to do anything, so Jessie asked Eli. Everyone in Bega had their licences at seventeen, and Eli almost did. He reluctantly took them in Matty's ute, windows down, a warm, dry breeze. Tim Buckley growling out desire, the three of them squashed together, Jessie in the middle jiggling her bony knees and throwing her head around, singing along loudly, embarrassingly to 'Get on Top'.

Even with Jessie between them Ali was freaked out by Eli's proximity. She stared out into the dark and thought of once seeing him do a perfect swan dive into the Merimbula pool. He'd come up shaking his head and smiling wide, and at that moment she loved him more than any of them.

'You sure about this?' he asked as he pulled up to the path leading to the falls.

'Yes,' Jessie said. She gave a little toss of her head and stared straight ahead.

They got out of the ute. Eli left the door open so they could see what they were doing in the cabin light. He pulled Ali's bike off the back and wheeled it over to her. Jessie leaned over to grab hers, dragging it so the back wheel jarred and banged the tray. She dropped it to the ground with a crash, and then leaned over to get Ali's backpack, and her own bathers and towel, which were stuffed into a Safeway bag. She scooped up the sleeping bags in a slack, disdainful way. She had scoffed at this luxury but Ali, this time, had prevailed.

'What about a tent?' Eli said.

'Won't need one,' Jessie muttered. 'It's warm.'

Ali stood clutching her bike, feet planted, wishing she was home watching the footy replay with her dad.

'Might be a bit uncomfortable.' Eli looked at Ali as if to say, *Do you really want to do this?* but she looked away. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him shrug. 'Oh well, don't do anything stupid.' He waited for a second or two, standing by the driver's side, and Jessie made her dopey clown face. 'Too much to hope for, I guess.'

He got back in the ute. Tim Buckley started up again. 'Sweet Surrender'. 'Okay, catch you adventurers tomorrow then.' He paused, looking towards them in the light of the still-open cabin door. 'What time d'you reckon you'll be heading back?'

Ali looked towards Jessie, who frowned, silent, irritated by any hint of constraint.

Eli gave a minuscule sigh. 'Fine. See you when I see you.' He turned away and pulled the door shut.

Ali watched the tail-lights glowing until he turned out of sight.

They stashed their bikes in the scrub. They would need them to ride back to town tomorrow. At least twenty ks. The day before Ali had tried to say it was too far but Jessie had just mumbled, 'It's practically all downhill.' That wasn't true, but Ali went red and didn't reply.

They moved along the path slowly. Jessie's torch was running low; little glimpses of things, a curving trunk, a scrunched bush, the explanatory signs that she never read. Behind her, Ali's torch gave a steady beam, but even with this anchoring she had a sense she was moving inward, away.

You could hear little scratchings in the bush, and their runners sometimes snagged on stones and twigs in the dirt. Once Ali stumbled and grabbed hold of Jessie's T-shirt. It felt warm and rough under her fingers, and she could smell Jessie's juniper shampoo. Aggie always managed to get that, even when there was no money.

'Can't be far now,' Jessie said.

Ali steadied herself and looked down at the back of Jessie's legs. As her eyes adjusted, their pallor caught the light. She heard her own breath. She thought of her dad, a glass of red beside him, watching TV, thinking she was at Jessie's, not in the dark in the middle of nowhere. She thought of her mother's outrage if she knew. She would have vetoed the plan before Ali had the chance to step out the door.

Jessie had said they should go at midnight. 'It's the gods' time,' she said, narrowing her eyes dramatically. '*Anything* could happen.'

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Ali was pegging out washing on the line, a hot, ticking day. She dropped the clothes back into the basket to rush inside to answer her phone.

It had been another morning of sitting at her desk, trying to write, the new/old her, revised, reinvented.

The class itself was wonderful. The teacher's name was Clara, and Ali found her endlessly fascinating — mid 60s, wavy copper hair with silvery streaks. Was she really a redhead or was this a late artifice? *Of course she was*, Ali had decided, staring at her while listening to the mini-lecture on characterisation. There were faded freckles and a pale, creased-looking neck. A striking silver necklace, too; a bold, amulet thing, encasing amber. Ali was by turns rigidly attentive and dreamily wondering about Clara as a young woman. She thought of her as a bold '70s type, Vietnam moratorium, lots of lovers. She was a poet, but also the author of several acerbic collections of short stories. 'I want you to imagine two people who are very connected,' she said. 'Perhaps they are siblings, perhaps they are lovers, perhaps they strongly dislike one another. Maybe they are an old man and a young man caught in a lift together. It can be any two people. They may not even know each

other. The point is, even if temporarily, they need one another somehow or are bound together. Imagine their lives, where they live. How do they feel about their connection? Who are they separately and together? Maybe it's a couple you glimpse on the train on the way to work, a man in a suit reading *Anna Karenina* while his girlfriend stares at her phone. Who *are* they and what is their relationship like? Maybe one of your characters is the homeless person outside the bank in the city with their doona and their little dog, their cap out for change. Who are *they*? How have they come to be there? Who are the parents who couldn't look after them or the teacher who tried to help them? Or maybe it's someone you've known all your life but not known. *Not really*. Put them together in a scene. What will happen? Clara had paused for effect, her round, expressive blue eyes encircled with smudgy blue eyeliner. Ali was transfixed.

'I'm going to get you to write about a couple, *any kind of couple*, for twenty minutes or so, and then we'll see if someone would like to read,' she had said.

Murray shuffled and opened his laptop.

'No,' Clara had said firmly. 'We're going to write in long-hand today. I have extra paper and pens if you need them. I want to get you out of your usual habits.'

There had been a general murmuring and stirring, the odd self-deprecating comment — 'Two characters! *God*, one is hard enough!' — the opening of water bottles and picking up of pens. Murray looked a bit doubtful. Still, he was very diligent and not opposed to an audience either. He always perked up at the idea of reading out loud. He was a retired high school teacher, Australian history, but his passion was

boat building. His daughter suggested he come to the class: *All you do is work on that boat every spare minute!* Murray had reported this, and they'd laughed dutifully. Then there was Ruth, the scientist. She was a thin woman in her late 40s who wore a lot of navy, like some kind of uniform. To Ed, Ali referred to her as the Nurse, though equally she might have been the Scientist, the Officer, the Scout Leader. The point was she frowned and wrote down absolutely every word Clara said. At the latest direction she squared her elbows, arranged a notebook, a pen, and a small Tupperware container of almonds directly in front of her. Murray was next to her, but there was no question of offering him any. Mike was a retired lawyer. He had some idea of writing interlinked stories about his former clients. Disguised, of course. 'Don't want anyone suing me!' There had been another dutiful laugh. Mila was Ali's favourite, early 30s, Indian background, intense and beautiful, dressed elegantly in layers of black silk. She said intelligent things, very quietly, so that even in that small group you had to lean forward to hear what she said. She wanted to write about her grandmother as a young woman, a proto-feminist figure in Mumbai. 'The right for women to be seen as *human*,' Mila said in her beautiful soft voice. 'She was *unlike anyone else* at that particular time.' Everyone leant forward again, nodding vigorously.

Ali had known immediately which couple to write about. Jessie was doing badly, had been doing badly for a few months. She had come back into Ali's life, as if she had ever left it. Ali's mother phoned in from Bega with concise little reports, like a small-town war correspondent. 'Fading. Giving up. I suspect it won't be long now.'

KATE RYAN

The day she got the call Ali had eased her way into the writing as if into bracing water; it was both exhilarating and terrifying. She had been Jessie's scribe, her manipulator of words. The ridiculous quests of the Experiential Club, written in Ali's best cursive, a curious mishmash of influences: *The Tales of the Greek Heroes, King Arthur and His Knights*, a bit of the Famous Five. The quests were agreed upon, and this was where it had started.

Quest 1: the golden apple and the Hound of Hell

Quest 2: ascending the highest place in the land

Quest 3: laying an Unquiet One to rest

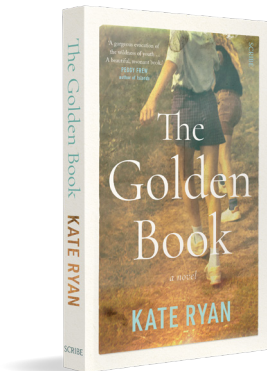
Quest 4: a test of love

Quest 5: pulling the sword from the stone

Quest 6: the coming of the Immortals

It was just an exercise, she reminded herself. She didn't have to read it out loud. And if she did, for all they knew she had made it up.

Jessie had conceived of the first quest. She said the words, made the plans, and later Ali wrote it all down in the Golden Book.



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