

I

The humid January air was thick with tension. The score was locked at five games apiece in the South Star Tennis Club's B-grade mixed doubles. Sarah Childs bent her coltish frame and bounced a tennis ball, preparing to serve. A hush fell over those watching. A hush shattered almost immediately by a guttural, shuddering moan from the bauhinia tree behind Court 3, where a scene of acrobatic and highly vocal courtship had been taking place between two possums since sundown.

'Jeez, they're really going at it,' drawled club secretary Doris from her vantage point in the umpire's chair.

Sarah looked up in exasperation, concentration broken.

'Well, they are! Haven't heard such gutsy lovemaking since those free-love backpackers cleared out of the caravan park. Sorry, Father.'

'No worries, Doris. Try again, Sarah,' jollied her mixed doubles partner, the portly local priest.

Sarah forced a smile for Father Simon. Verbal encouragement was all he contributed to their partnership, but Sarah knew, even with the priest's lousy backhand, flimsy serve and dicky knee,

they could win this thing. And she could use a win. Particularly against that smug moll Laura Murphy and her wet noodle of a boyfriend.

Fiancé. Sarah heard Laura's singsong voice correcting her thoughts. How could she forget? Especially after Laura's performance in the clubhouse earlier, flashing her new diamond ring while the old ducks cooed over their mugs of Blend 43. 'Don't worry, your turn will come,' Laura had said with a smirk, claiming victory in a rivalry Sarah hadn't realised she was in. Laura had graduated from South Star High the same year as Sarah.

Focus. Sarah's mind kept drifting, from Laura to the 'important conversation' her parents were expecting her for at dinner, but she wrenched it back to the present moment. She narrowed her eyes across the net, Laura shooting back a scowl in return. Sarah bounced the ball again, breathing slowly and blocking out the bellows of humping marsupials as she tried to get in the zone. It worked. Time seemed to slow, while her senses sped up. She was noticing everything – the faded astroturf, clouds of insects mesmerised by the overhead lights, a spectator crunching a biscuit – but it all faded away as she focused on the point where she was going to send the ball spinning out of Laura's reach. She tossed the ball high, drawing up to her full height in one fluid motion before putting every ounce of force she could muster behind the serve.

Unfortunately, before the ball could clear the net it collided with the broad back of Father Simon, who'd been struggling to maintain his squat at the net and had popped up like a bilby. There was a meaty *thwock* as Sarah's power serve pounded the priest's left buttock, and he dropped like he'd been shot.

'Jesus, Mary and bloomin' Joseph!' Doris screeched. 'Sorry, Father.'

'I'm all right,' he called, nonetheless remaining very still, spread-eagled in the right service box.

'You don't have to take it out on the priest, Sarah,' Laura called sweetly from the baseline.

Sarah approached Father Simon nervously. 'Are you okay? Where did I get you?'

Having now made it onto his knees, the priest was holding out the waistband of his shorts and twisting around to inspect the damage. Sarah prayed he was a boxers man. *Oh dear. Briefs.*

Small Town Problems, Sarah thought. *When you play sport with a holy man, you risk seeing his undies and they're holey, man.* Before Sarah averted her eyes out of politeness, she tried to make out the faded print. Was that Jesus in a Superman suit? Was there some special website out there selling gag underwear for priests? Sarah shook her head, trying to remove the visual now burned onto her eyeballs. *See you in confession, Father.*

Finally the priest picked up his racquet again.

'So . . . is that a fault?' Sarah asked Doris, who glared down at her. 'Should I serve again?'

In the end Father Simon retired hurt, and Doris pronounced the match a draw. Sarah and the priest apologised profusely to each other as they headed into the clubhouse in search of an icepack.

It was the first game back after the Christmas holidays and all night Sarah had felt like everyone was watching her. A cluster of trim women in their sixties gossiping around the urn fell silent as Sarah entered. Each had known Sarah since she was born – one had taught her piano, one had timed her races at swim club, one had checked out *Saddle Club* books for her at the library – so she had little choice but to greet them politely even though she knew she was the subject of their chatter.

‘That got a little heated out there,’ one giggled.

‘Are you feeling all right, Sarah?’ There was the inevitable pitying hand on her arm. ‘It must be hard being back here, so many memories of Joh—’

‘Just trying to get Father Simon some ice,’ Sarah interrupted, fussing around in the freezer. ‘It was a terrible accident.’

In a small town, people were always looking for entertainment. The previous year, Sarah had found herself in a starring role in South Star’s drama of the moment. The tennis ladies had had a front row seat as romance blossomed on these very courts between her and Johnno West, newly home from years in London. Now he was gone, and Sarah was alone in the spotlight of their sympathetic curiosity.

Sarah checked her watch and her impatience flared. She was already late for dinner.

‘I’m fine,’ Father Simon said. The scotch he’d administered from a hip flask he happened to be carrying on the court did seem to be taking effect. As Sarah finally withdrew a fossilised icepack and extended it towards the priest, he presented his backside. Did he expect her to numb his bum for him?

‘Don’t worry,’ Sarah’s old piano teacher continued. ‘I don’t expect we’ll see much of Johnno round here for a while. You just let that broken heart mend and take care of yourself.’

There was nothing nice Sarah could think of to say, so she said nothing, clenching her lips in a tight smile. There wasn’t much you *could* say while almost touching a priest’s bottom, though to his credit his hands were busy tipping his flask into a cup of instant coffee. To complete the mortification, Laura had sidled in and witnessed the entire scene. She offered her right hand and brushed back a non-existent strand of hair from her face with the other, letting her ring catch the light.

‘Bad luck, Sarah.’

‘Same to you. It was a draw, after all. Can you take this from here, Father?’ Sarah pleaded, handing off the icepack. She gave Laura the world’s most desultory handshake. ‘See you next week – gotta run!’

Sarah couldn’t get her Prado going fast enough. She knew she’d interrupted the women in the clubhouse gossiping about the latest update from Johnno. Her ex and his new girlfriend, Stevie, were on a grand tour of Australia, researching for the documentary Stevie was working on. They were acting like they were on their honeymoon and shamelessly posting about it on social media for all to see.

It wasn’t that Sarah was jealous. She knew Johnno was happier with Stevie. The break-up, if you could even call it that – their brief farce of a relationship had only lasted a few months – hadn’t left Sarah devastated either. And yet she was now a magnet for looks of pity, like some kind of grieving widow. She’d look up from her phone while waiting in line at the post office or be minding her own business trying to get a Scotch Finger after a tough set at the tennis courts, and there’d be someone offering her a hopeful smile and puppy dog eyes. ‘You’ll find someone else’ wasn’t always spoken out loud, but it was always implied. As if it were incomprehensible that she could be content on her own.

The revs climbed as Sarah stomped on the accelerator, desperate to get home. The speakers were blaring the tragic pop music she’d been playing on the way into town – ironically, obviously. Listening to B*Witched in public was a choice – and her phone seemed to have glitched in a patch of poor reception. It wouldn’t let her

skip the track, or even turn down the volume. She was just crossing the bridge, fumbling with the screen, when blue lights caught her eye in the rear-view mirror. She hadn't heard the siren over the music, and even after she'd pulled over, the song wouldn't stop. It wasn't like Constable Bob to be out on patrol at dinner time, but she'd play along. *Small Town Problems: The local cop is an old schoolmate of your parents.*

'Come on, you bastard.' Sarah stabbed at her phone as a knuckle rapped on the glass. She slowly wound down the window, releasing a barrage of music into the night, trying to arrange her face into an expression that somehow said, 'I'm a responsible driver who wouldn't dream of speeding, and isn't it hilarious this teenybopper music won't turn off?'

It wasn't Constable Bob's face at the window.

'Madam, could you turn that down, please? Do you know how fast you were travelling? And were you using your mobile phone while driving? I'm going to need to see your licence, please.'

'Who are you?' Sarah blurted out.

The policewoman raised her eyebrows under her cap and pointed at her nametag. She had a neat bun that made Sarah very conscious of her own sweaty hair. She took one last stab at the stereo and the music finally, thankfully, cut out.

'I'm Sergeant Georgia Smith,' the policewoman said, her voice suddenly loud in the void where a tin whistle had shrieked moments before.

Sarah dug out her wallet and handed over her licence.

Sergeant Smith squinted at it. 'Is this how you usually speak to officers of the law, Ms . . . Childs?'

'Sorry about that.' Sarah was flustered. 'I'm just used to Bob. He doesn't tend to pull locals over for driving at a reasonable speed.'

‘Reasonable,’ Smith repeated. ‘Is there a fire you’re off to hose down? Or a bank robbery I should know about? Are you in labour and rushing to the hospital? Because you’re going the wrong way.’

‘Sorry, I’m just in a hurry.’

‘I can see that. That’s why we’ve met each other tonight.’

‘No, you don’t understand. I’m late. I have a very important dinner tonight. Can we get this slap on the wrist over with?’

‘You’re right, madam. I really don’t understand. What’s the occasion?’

‘It’s a dinner with my parents. We have important business to discuss.’

‘You’re late for dinner with your mum and dad, and that’s why you were driving at one-hundred and thirty kilometres per hour in a one-hundred zone?’

‘Look, Sergeant, you’re new here, so you don’t have all the context. But I’m a good girl, okay? Talk to Bob. He’ll confirm that I’ve always done the right thing. Tonight my parents are going to tell me they’re handing over management of Dunromin – that’s our property – to me. And I was running late from tennis because I hit the priest in his arse.’ As Sergeant Smith’s eyes widened, Sarah added, ‘It was an accident, obviously. It’s a long story. Which I really don’t have time to tell, because I need to get home and have that important conversation with my parents, who are also my colleagues and my bosses.’

She watched the policewoman’s face as this onslaught of information seemed to sink in. Sarah couldn’t be sure in the low light, but her eyes looked green.

‘Miss Childs, I may not understand all the nuance of why you think you’re above the law, but running late for tea with Mum and Dad does not justify exceeding the speed limit by thirty kays.’

I know you country drivers like to think the rules don't apply to you, but it's not responsible to drive that fast in the town limits. Things are going to change around here if I have anything to say about it.' She took down Sarah's details and told her to expect a fine in the mail.

'I was barely even speeding,' Sarah said. 'Surely you can just give me a warning this time?'

'C'est la vie,' Smith deadpanned as she walked back to the patrol car.

'Well, there's a new bloody policewoman and she's on the warpath,' Sarah called from the mudroom of the Dunromin homestead as she pulled off her sneakers. Even before she'd entered the house proper she could count on having her parents' attention, knowing they would have seen their only child's headlights sweep up the driveway to her park behind the rosebushes.

'Darling, what's happened? Are you all right?' Bess Childs patted her daughter's shoulder while her husband looked ready to bolt out of the room. Bess stopped him in his tracks with a look, and Bill slunk back to the table and busied himself with a copy of the *Country Life*.

'She booked me for speeding, would you believe it? Obviously never spent time outside the city before,' Sarah grumbled. 'Gonna make herself a lot of friends here, that one.'

'Pet, you didn't argue with her, did you?'

'Of course not,' Sarah said. But now that she thought about it, she wasn't sure. What had she said? No, Sergeant Smith had a stern vibe, despite her pocket rocket stature, that no one would argue with.

‘It’s okay to feel angry, dear,’ Bess said in a measured voice. ‘Anger is another one of the stages of grief, you know.’

Sarah tried not to roll her eyes. Her mother had been spouting pop-psychology soundbites ever since she got the news that there weren’t going to be any more dates with Johnno West. If anyone was grieving, it was Bess. All her and her friend Penny West’s plans for a packed-out church in town, a wedding-of-the-decade uniting Dunromin and neighbouring Haven Downs, had been dashed in an instant.

Bill’s eyes flicked between Sarah and Bess in panic, anticipating conflict. Sarah knew he would rather face down an enraged bull than witness an argument between two adult women.

Ever since the break-up, Sarah’s parents had tiptoed around her. They didn’t seem game to risk upsetting her feelings, and as a result there were no jokes, no raised voices – no real conversation. And given that she lived with them, worked with them, and really didn’t leave home much – the odd tennis match to let off steam notwithstanding – it was beginning to wear a bit thin.

But that was all about to change, surely. Her mum had asked her to be home at 8.30 pm so they could discuss something important over dinner. It had to be big, because it was a positively European time to eat by the Childs’ standards. Bill and Sarah were up at day-break to work, so everyone was usually in bed by 9. *Finally*, Sarah thought, it was happening. They were going to hand her the reins to take charge of Dunromin: the job she’d worked, studied and pined for since she was a child.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ Sarah said. The table was already set, the good salad bowl out. ‘There was a whole incident with Father Simon, and then I got pulled over. The bottle-o was closed so I couldn’t pick up any champagne.’

Bess and Bill exchanged a look.

‘Let’s just eat,’ Sarah said, taking her usual seat. Her parents settled into their places and Bess served out pieces of lasagne. There was the usual minute’s silence, punctuated only by the scrapings of cutlery, in honour of the dish, a family favourite. Sarah saw Bess shoot Bill meaningful looks until he took the hint and cleared his throat.

‘Sarah, you know we’re proud of the effort you put in here. You went straight to uni after finishing high school, then studied so hard at uni. And you came straight back here to work after you graduated with your degree.’

Sarah beamed.

‘You know our plan for Dunromin has always been to enthusiastically hand it over to you to run when we retire, so long as that’s what you want to do,’ Bill continued. ‘You’ve made it clear that *is* what you want, which makes us happy, and I know you’ve been starting to think about what you’d like to do when you take over . . .’

‘I’ve been thinking about it for a long time,’ Sarah agreed. ‘And I have lots of ideas I can’t wait to put into action.’

Bess jumped in. ‘And that’s wonderful. But Sarah, you’re still so young. You’re twenty-four and you’ve barely had a break or a holiday since you were a teenager.’

‘That’s okay. This is where I want to be,’ Sarah said.

‘Taking over as manager is a big commitment,’ Bess said. ‘So before you do, we want to encourage you to take a gap year. Like we suggested you do before uni.’

A gap year?! Sarah felt like she’d been knocked off balance.

‘You can drop back your work to a couple of days a week here, spend a bit more time in town,’ Bess continued. ‘You could get a part-time job in South Star, or do some community work. I’d love

to see you join some committees, or a sporting team. You'll never meet someone hiding out here.'

'Is that what this is about?' Sarah asked, trying to keep her voice even. 'Meeting someone? You don't trust me to run Dunromin on my own?'

'That's not what we're saying,' Bess said, speaking for Bill as she often did. 'We know you've got the skills to run this place. But this can be a lonely life, Sarah, and we don't want you to burn out before you've even started. And while it might feel isolated here sometimes, we're not in a vacuum. Dunromin exists within a community, and you need to start acting like it.'

Sarah felt her mother's eyes on her, but she couldn't meet them. She was *not* going to cry.

Bill came in gently, ever the peacemaker. 'You've been so solitary these past few years, Sare Bear. You used to be such a social butterfly in high school. Now you're a bit of a hermit.'

'I just like my own company,' Sarah grumbled. She didn't miss her dad dropping her childhood pet name, supposedly to comfort her, but it felt like a dig in a conversation about her maturity and competence.

'When you started going to tennis last year, that felt like such a step forward.' Bess gave an encouraging smile. 'And it got you and Johnno together. This is a chance to do more of that. Go on some dates, build up your friendships, get involved in the community. Have some fun!'

'Think of it as a kind of Rumspringa . . .' Bill interjected, clearly proud to use the term.

Sarah pictured herself riding into town in an Amish wagon, trotting around in search of suitors and friends. She might be slightly delirious. 'How would this even work?' she asked. 'Dad, you and I can barely handle the day-to-day work between us.'

If anything, I thought you'd want to start slowing down. The long-range forecast actually has some rain in it, so we could be busier than ever if there's some good grass and a decent calving season.'

Bill nodded. 'We'll see. Wouldn't be the first time the BOM got it wrong. But either way, I've been chatting with Rod and Kate from next door. They're down on manpower with Johnno away for a while, and Kate might be out of action later in the year, so we're going to pool our resources and hire a bloke to help out across both properties.'

Bess was nodding along with a big smile on her face, but Sarah's stomach had dropped. They'd talked about this, not just with each other but with their neighbours. They'd made the decision to hire a contractor without discussing it with Sarah. She'd thought she was walking into the next chapter of her future tonight; instead, she was seeing how her parents didn't think she was up to it.

'You're serious about this?' was all she could ask.

'Just sit with it for a few days, think about what you might like to do,' Bess said. 'The contractor gets here next week. I'll need you to give me a hand to get the cottage presentable for him.'

In the shower, the day's cringiest moments circled in Sarah's mind like the suds around the drain. Father Simon hitting the deck; Laura's sneer above her diamond; pitying looks from the old biddies; Sergeant Smith's frown as Sarah had effectively said, 'Don't you know who I am?' Being around people always left Sarah drained and second-guessing herself. Was it any wonder it was her fantasy to run a property alone?

In the fogged mirror she was a blur of blonde hair and pink skin. It was easier to look at herself this way. When she had to see the

sharp edges and real shapes of herself, she couldn't hold her own gaze. A sense that she didn't quite fit had dogged her since she was a child. As if for all her good fortune, the kindnesses of her parents, no matter how well she did at school or how hard she worked, she was different. She didn't deserve good things, so she worked twice as hard; and look where it got her. Her parents didn't trust her enough to take over management of the farm where she'd lived her whole life. If her parents were starting to doubt her, to see through her, it was only a matter of time before everyone else did too.

She pushed the feeling down.

In bed, she pulled out her phone and allowed herself five minutes to study the latest posts from Johnno and Stevie on Instagram. Call it a *Sliding Doors* curiosity or simply staying one step ahead of the local gossip, but Sarah felt oddly compelled to follow what they were up to, on the road with the documentary crew. Stevie had posted a story of the strange paintings and hideous bedspreads in the tatty small-town motel they'd checked into. Johnno had posted a photo of Stevie grinning over a chicken schnitzel as big as her head. Sarah imagined the corners of his eyes crinkling up while he focused his phone's camera on the face he loved. She was under no illusions that he'd ever looked that way at her.

The truth of it was that Sarah was heartsick, but not because she wasn't with Johnno. She'd had fun with him, and their relationship had made her parents happy, but Sarah had known from their first date that they weren't going to end up marrying and uniting the properties. When Johnno had told her it was over, a strange relief had washed over her.

She'd been forming a theory that the whole love thing was a ruse. Maybe the best you could hope for was a good friend to spend your life with, someone you liked talking to and who made

you laugh, and all that talk of chemistry and romance was just a con. Forget the movies, and find a comfortable partner in life and business, like her parents had. So Johnno would have been a great person to settle down with. But then Johnno had gone and run off with the girl he'd been in love with half his life and shot her theory to pieces.

What Sarah wanted more than anything, though, was someone she could have this conversation with instead of prosecuting both sides in her head. South Star was the only place Sarah had ever called home. Twenty-four years following a path mapped out from birth. A path shaped by who her family were, where she went to school and uni, the property that was both home and livelihood. Despite mostly keeping to herself, everyone in the town knew her name. They knew she was reliable and smart and a little socially awkward. They'd seen her grow up from playgroup playdough-eating, to primary school skinned knees, through brace-faced adolescent crushes. They knew every boy she'd ever kissed, not that there were many (*Small Town Problems: No kiss ever goes unnoticed*). They'd nodded with approval when she returned home after getting her degree. She was a good girl, like she'd told Sergeant Smith. But here she was, in her childhood bed on a Tuesday night, her phone's contact book like a census list of the district, and no one she could call to rant about this turn of events.

She was friendly with some of the women in town, but no one she could see herself telling about the strange feeling inside her. Was it so much to ask, someone to come home to who'd ask you about your day and want to hear the truth?

No wonder everyone seemed to agree Sarah needed a boyfriend. *How tragic*. Sarah switched off her bedside lamp. Pinpricks of green lit up in the gloom: glow-in-the-dark stars she and her parents had

stuck on the ceiling a lifetime ago, a constellation of care for their beloved only child. Now each weak star was a reminder that her parents loved her, but they saw her as a child, not a viable successor.

Energy thrummed in her legs, like the self-loathing thoughts in her mind were spilling into her body. She kicked and thrashed for a minute, trying to shake the feeling away. Then she saw herself as if from a distance: a 24-year-old woman having a tantrum in her childhood bed because her parents weren't handing over their business. The way the policewoman had pronounced 'your mum and dad' echoed patronisingly in her ears. Sarah took a deep breath. *If you want to be treated like a grown-up, it might be time to start acting like one.*

If a bit of socialising and joining a few committees meant they'd take her seriously, she could get through it. She could humour her parents for a year if it meant getting to come back to Dunromin as the boss at the end of it. God, maybe she could find a boyfriend and they'd take her back even sooner.

A plan began to take shape in her mind. She'd show them community spirit. She'd be Miss bloody South Star if that's what it took. How hard could it be?