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First published in 2024

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 978 1 76147 071 4

Author photograph by Zhenshi van der Klooster
Set in 13/18 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by Midland Typesetters, Australia
Printed and bound in Australia by the Opus Group

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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‘If there was a game of football that went forever,
I would play until I died.’

Kai Trewin at age 11 (2012)

Please remember

These are children

This is a game

The coaches are volunteers

The referees are human

This is not the World Cup

Sign at a junior club football field

PROLOGUE

Siren wailing, lights flashing, the ambulance threads its way through traffic. Cars veer, swerve, try to pull out of the way. But it's gridlock, three packed lanes all the way to the intersection.

'Take her up on the footpath,' says the senior paramedic.

The rig rocks as it climbs the kerb. Wild eyes peer through car windows as they pass. At the lights, they drop back onto the road and roar through.

The paramedic squints at the GPS. 'Turn left here.'

They round the corner and accelerate along a side street. The field is straight ahead: a patchwork quilt of pitches fringed by orange cones. Imposing concrete clubhouse. Tiered spectator seating. Large car park lined by pine trees.

The other paramedic, driving, kills the siren as they draw near.

A man stands by an open gate and waves them through.

They bump across pock-marked grass, bypassing a stalled game, gaping faces, a bloke videoing on his phone.

In the middle of the field, an official in a fluoro-orange vest directs them to a gathering of long-faced people huddled in small groups. Adults and kids, some in tracksuits, some in coats. Players in blue-and-white vertical stripes, others in red jerseys and filthy white shorts. All watching.

The man in the vest yells at everyone to make room.

The crowd parts.

The driver eases the ambulance through. All around, anxious faces. Kids with tear-streaked cheeks. Drooping shoulders. Heads hanging.

On the ground, someone in recovery position beneath a grey woollen blanket.

They pull up as close as possible, grab their gear and leap out.

The paramedic sets down his bag and drops to his knees on the damp grass, takes a quick look at the patient. Pale skin, slow breaths, fluttering lids. Crooked face. Bruising and swelling already emerging on the jaw. Undoubtedly, a significant fracture.

He checks the eyes. Lifts the lip. Assesses the neck carefully. Takes the pulse and blood pressure while his partner tugs back the blanket and navigates her way along the patient's prone body, checking for injuries.

No other breaks. But a broken jaw and a serious head injury.

The paramedic can't work it out. They're nowhere near the goalpost, which means it wasn't an encounter with an upright. So how did it happen? An accidental mid-air collision? Or something more sinister? He's seen bad injuries like this in fist fights in pubs. Surely not here . . .

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He glances around. The crowd has shuffled in close. Air heavy with tension. Guarded looks. Restless feet. The scent of roast lamb and barbecue sausages on the wind.

Across the field, all the way to the clubhouse, people are watching, waiting.

Cockatoos screech in the pine trees.

He exchanges a glance with his partner, sees the quick lift of her eyebrows.

Her face is studiously blank, a polished veneer. But she's thinking the same thing as him. *What the hell happened here?*

NINE MONTHS AGO



SUPPORT

Having other team mates nearby to help in attack or defence. A phrase spoken to a team mate to let them know you are there.

JONICA

Jonica swings her black four-wheel-drive Mercedes into the car park beside the football field and checks the time. It's the first trial for next season, and they're late. She did her level best to hurry the twins out the door this afternoon, but they were slow. Who wouldn't be, after a full day at school in this heat? And who in their right mind would hold trials on such a hot day? Only six weeks since last season finished, and here she is again, early November, the end of spring, dropping her kids off to exert themselves in 38-degree heat when they ought to be home in the pool. But football is their *passion*, as Ben calls it. And this is what you must do if your kids want to play in the Youth Premier League.

Too much soccer, she'd told Ben last night. And he'd laughed. *It's football, not soccer*, he'd said. *And there's no such thing as too much, and you know it. You want them to succeed as much as I do.* Normally she would agree—she's fully invested in the twins and their interests. But holding a trial when it's so hot?

The coaches should have cancelled it. Someone might get heat stroke.

Hot air pours in through the doors as Alex and Audrey tip out onto the tarmac. ‘Got your water bottles?’ she calls after them. Audrey waves hers in the air, but Alex is already gone, silver Nike soccer boots flashing as he darts across the car park.

Audrey stops and looks back, face scrunched, shoulders up near her ears. This morning she was all fired up, talking to Ben about trials, but since she got home from school, she’s been quiet. After the Women’s World Cup, she became super-enthused about soccer. Ben had told her that she needed to play with boys to go the next step—that’s why she’s trying out for this team. As far as Jonica’s concerned, the presence of a bunch of adolescent boys simply adds extra pressure. She tried to raise this with Ben, but he’s from a family where it was just him and his brother and he has no idea what it’s like to be a teenage girl in a transforming body.

She lowers her window and summons a bright smile. ‘You’ll be fine,’ she calls. ‘How many other girls can do two thousand juggles? Only girls headed for the Matildas!’

A small grin from Audrey. She’s worked hard on her juggling; it sets her apart from other players.

‘Go on,’ Jonica says. ‘Remember everything Dad told you.’

Audrey hurries off.

Jonica reminds herself that it’s natural for her daughter to be anxious. She’ll be right once she’s out there. Ben says it works like that for him in front of a jury: a few nerves can enhance performance, get the neurons firing. He was the one

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who insisted that the twins play soccer. Apparently, *all of life is to be had out there on the field*. Jonica is yet to see anything in it other than stress and anxiety.

She performs a contortionist back-seat inspection to check for Alex's water bottle. There it is, on the floor. She'll have to take it to him—he's going to need it in this heat. She grabs the bottle and swings out of the car, plodding across the car park under a cloudless sky. She can smell the baking tarmac, the tangy pine trees alongside the field. Maybe they're in for a stinker of a summer. Maybe it's climate change.

At the Minotaurs clubhouse, Dominik the coach, his assistant, Kyle, and a few of the parents, are helicopters hovering in the shade. They turn to look at her as she arrives. All the usual faces. It's the same out on the field: the same kids trying out all over again. Most were in the team last year and they'll probably get in again. But a few players have left, so there are vacancies. Even so, you have to wonder why the coaches have scheduled so many trials—five in a row from tonight, one each week from now into December. Jonica doesn't understand it. Surely it will only take a couple of sessions to detect any new talent—it's pretty obvious.

Alex has been with this team for three years now, ever since he and his mate Noah decided the school team wasn't good enough. The school wasn't happy, of course—private schools think they own you these days. But Ben had argued that the school couldn't hold kids back unless they could provide the same level of coaching as an external club, so Alex and Noah were allowed to go. Ben chose the Minotaurs because it's a highly ranked club with a good reputation and a program

that goes from youth to adults. Most of the teams finish high on the ladder, which is important to Ben—he likes winning. For a Greek club, it's more diverse than you'd think, with kids coming from suburbs up to an hour's drive away, all over north-western Sydney.

Jonica would have preferred the twins to play at the little local club, closer to home, which is where they first started in the Mini Roos when they were five. But Ben said the local club wasn't strong enough in the older age groups. And he wanted the twins to have the best. *The Greeks are passionate*, he'd said. *And that's a good thing. Passion can take you a long way in football.* He also liked the fact that the club allowed girls to play on boys' teams, if they were good enough to get in.

Jonica twists the water bottle in her hands and wonders how to deliver it to Alex. He's out on the field, kicking a ball with Noah. The coaches are watching; she'll have to wait.

Audrey is over near the pine trees, doing her stretches. Last year, in the Minotaurs girls' team, she tore a ligament in her ankle and the physio gave her exercises as part of her regular warm-up routine. She's doing them now. Jonica hopes the coaches will notice, but they've turned away and are yapping to each other in the shade, hands folded on top of their bellies.

As another girl strolls onto the field, Jonica stiffens. She'd recognise that flat-footed stride anywhere. The round shoulders. The jutting chin. The long dark hair in a high ponytail. It's Katerina.

Katerina was in Audrey's team last season. She had a habit of slamming into people at training—the sort of play that's

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effective during a game, but out of line with your own team mates. Jonica and the other parents had been upset about it, murmuring among themselves every time Katerina knocked someone down. Nobody raised it with the coach, of course, because that's not what you do, in case the coach takes it as criticism and then has it in for your kid.

Jonica had stayed quiet too, until Katerina had deliberately body-slammed Audrey during training, knocking her down and causing the ankle injury. Jonica took Audrey to the physio and he'd shaken his head. Told her he could patch up the ankle with tape and give Audrey strengthening exercises to get her back on the field as soon as possible, but she might need surgery later on. *You have to talk to the coach and put a stop to this*, he'd said to Jonica.

At the next training session, which Audrey was still expected to attend to show she was committed, Jonica and Ben had approached the coach after everyone had gone home. The coach was affronted at first and said that rough play was part of the game. But Ben had insisted that Katerina was over the top, and if the coach didn't take action he would have to go to the committee. The coach hadn't liked that, of course, but was forced to acknowledge that Katerina's collisions were excessive. In the end, she'd agreed to talk to Katerina.

Katerina's mother, Carmen, hadn't taken it well. She'd confronted Jonica, declaring there was nothing wrong with Katerina's game. *It's not my daughter's fault that Audrey twisted an ankle*, Carmen had said (Jonica remembers every word). *If Audrey can't hack it, she shouldn't play at this level. Next time*

you have an issue with my daughter, come to me. Jonica had been glad of her legal training as she stared Carmen in the eye and informed her that she wasn't the only one who was unhappy about Katerina.

But even after that, Katerina remained the coach's favourite and queen bee of the team, always criticising and bossing the other players around. Every weekend, she was on for whole games while other girls spent half the game on the bench. For Jonica, the injustice of it still stings.

She twirls Alex's water bottle in her hands. It's such a shame Katerina is here. More competition for Audrey. Carmen must have got word about it, somehow, though God knows how she found out—Jonica didn't tell anyone that Audrey was trialing. Then again, Carmen's an expert at tapping into the club grapevine—always first to know what's going on, hanging round the coaches as if she's their best friend. There she is now, under the pine trees in all her dark-haired, pear-shaped glory. People say she was a soccer star in her time. Hard to believe when you look at her.

Audrey spots Katerina and casts a pained look at Jonica. But there's nothing Jonica can do. Audrey will just have to deal with it.

One of the boys—Braedon—sneers at Audrey as she walks out and tacks herself onto the group. 'Why are there girls here?' he demands.

Jonica hopes Dominik will tell the boys to pull their heads in, that the club includes girls who are good enough to qualify. But he claps his hands above his head and shouts, 'Okay, boys. Time for a warm-up. Four laps of the oval.'

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Jonica's blood fizzes. She sidles up to join Noah's dad, Miles, who is standing nearby. They've talked on the sidelines before. Not that she's much good at chatting when her kids are playing—she likes to watch. Miles is nicer than most of the other parents. Whenever they interact, he seems genuinely interested—something to do with his eye contact and ready smile. He's a single dad, friendly and not too intense about football . . . unlike some of the other parents in this team. Viktor's dad, Santos, for instance.

There's Viktor now, at the front of the pack, leading the way, hair tied back in a man bun just like Erling Haaland from Manchester City.

'Those poor kids,' she murmurs to Miles, as the players stagger past. 'The coaches should be warming up too. Then they could see what it's like. Too hot for running.'

Miles chuckles. 'I don't reckon those two have jogged round an oval in years. Not in any weather.'

She hides a smile. When the kids run by again, red-faced and panting, she notices that Noah has fallen behind. Even though he's not as good as some of the others, he'll get selected because he's been with the team for so long. That's how it goes. Today, though, he's much slower than usual. 'Is Noah okay?' she asks.

Miles scratches at his thumb with a fingernail. 'It's his knees. Osgood-Schlatter disease. He's grown so fast his tendons can't keep up with his bones. I had it when I was a kid too.'

Jonica is glad neither of the twins have issues like that. 'Poor Noah. Anything you can do?'

'Massage and stretches. The cure for everything at this age.'

‘Look how hot they are,’ she mutters. ‘It’s appalling to make them run in this weather. I wish Dominik would let them go home.’

‘He won’t push them too hard,’ Miles says. ‘And, anyway, kids don’t feel it like we do. They love playing so much nothing can stop them. Weren’t you addicted to sport as a kid?’

‘I’ve never really been into team sport, other than a bit of netball at school . . .’ she says. But she feels like a fraud, because that was years ago, and she wasn’t much good. ‘I play tennis every week with a few girlfriends, but we get out early, before it warms up. The rest of the time I’m the family taxi service. It’s full-on with twins . . . That was a surprise I didn’t sign up for.’

He eyes her with respect. ‘Must’ve been tough when they were little. One at a time was enough for me.’

Jonica remembers lying on the padded bench for her ten-week ultrasound. The cold, wet probe on her belly. The sonographer pausing before telling her she was carrying two babies.

And didn’t that change her life! Nearly killed her. Six weeks maternity leave morphed into extra time off because it was so overwhelming. No sleep. Endless feeding and nappy changing. Both babies screaming at once. Sometimes she’d fed them simultaneously: Alex slung under one arm, Audrey under the other. She wanted to be a good mother, but sometimes it seemed they were eating her alive.

She wipes the sweat from her forehead. When the twins were small, she’d thought she would go straight back to work. But when it was time to return, Ben had asked if it was really necessary. They could afford a nanny, of course, he’d said.

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But didn't she want to breastfeed them as long as possible, to give them the best start in life? Maybe she should stay home a while longer and look after the kids. *He* couldn't do it, obviously, and felt bad about the long hours he worked. But he would be happy to support her for a few years. *Just look at the poor little things*, he'd said, when the twins were asleep and perfectly angelic. How could she argue? In the end, the guilt won out.

At first, she hadn't minded it—her mother had given up a career for kids, and Ben's mother had been a stay-at-home mum too. When the twins were small, it was easy not to think about what she'd given up because she was eternally exhausted and consumed by their needs. She immersed herself in their lives, and before she knew it, they were at school. She helped where she could, providing support, basking in their smiles when they won races, smoothing things over when they lost, applying Band-Aids to scuffed knees.

Recently, though, there's been a worm turning in her belly. There's only so much satisfaction to be had from helping at athletics and swimming carnivals, covering books for the school library, driving to soccer training, organising playdates, parties, family holidays, doctor and physio appointments, visits to the dentist or hairdresser, cooking meals, helping with homework.

For the past few months, she's felt the twins begin to pull away. And that's a good thing, because she's keen to use her brain again. To be someone other than a mother. The twins don't need her so much anymore, and she *could* go back to work, except that Ben likes having her home.

She looks at Miles and pastes on a smile. 'Having twins is very busy.'

'Good on you,' he says. 'You're a better person than me.'

Jonica wishes Ben was more like Miles. Ben takes her for granted, ignores her worries about Audrey and the team, makes her feel insignificant. She can't imagine Miles doing that. He seems too kind. He's good-looking too. She can't understand why his wife left him. Word is she took up with another man. Jonica wonders if she regrets it.

Out on the field, the kids have finally finished their laps and now they pull up in front of Dominik. Jonica sees those crimson sweaty faces and wishes she'd brought Powerade. Audrey will have a headache tonight and Alex will be grumpy. When they get home, they'll slump in front of the TV instead of doing their homework, and then she'll worry that their schoolwork is suffering.

She wonders if now might be the moment to deliver Alex's water bottle, but Dominik tells the players to pair up for a drill. The boys instantly gravitate towards each other, leaving the girls isolated. Jonica is proud when Audrey steps forward and invites Katerina to join her. Katerina hesitates, inspecting Audrey as if she's being offered a cane toad as a partner, but there's no one else to play with so she has to say yes.

The players form parallel lines and start firing balls at each other. Alex looks loose and relaxed, whereas Audrey is being careful—maybe *too* careful. Jonica sees the tension in her daughter's thin frame, the frown of concentration on her face, and can't bear to watch. She turns to Miles. 'Have you ever played soccer?' she asks.

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‘No. I prefer running.’

He does look fit, she thinks. But she can’t imagine running for fun, it looks like too much hard work. ‘I never run, except on a tennis court.’

‘You should try it,’ he says. ‘Works for me. The endorphins keep me sane. All you need is some good shoes and a Couch to 5K app to get started.’

On the field, Audrey has loosened up, and she and Katerina are passing to each other with elegant touches and far more finesse than most of the boys.

‘Audrey’s a good player,’ Miles says. ‘She moves like a real athlete.’

It’s true that Audrey has an easy loping gait. She’s strong too, and fast. She can’t match the boys with their pumped-up teenage testosterone, but she beats them on skills every time.

Katerina boots the ball to Audrey. It flies up into her face and she drops to the ground, covering her nose with her hands.

Get up, Jonica thinks, clutching Alex’s water bottle. The coaches might see you.

Audrey stands slowly then trots after the ball.

‘Good on you,’ Jonica murmurs. ‘Good on you, sweetheart.’

Next, Dominik hands out coloured bibs and divides the players into two teams. Audrey and Alex are together, which is good—hopefully Alex will pass to his sister.

The kids spread out across the field. When Dominik gives the signal to start, Alex races forward with the ball, looking for Audrey, but she’s too wide, so he passes to Katerina.

Katerina takes off, head-down, dribbling. The coaches nod like bobble-head toys. *So that’s how it’s going to be, Jonica*

KAREN VIGGERS

thinks, swiping her hair from her hot neck. Showing off and ball-hogging will be rewarded, even though it's the opposite of what's required in a game.

Eventually Katerina passes to Braedon, and Audrey dashes along the line, calling. But Braedon won't pass. And neither will any of the other boys. Finally, Alex kicks a pass to her. She controls the ball beautifully and passes back, her face alight with a smile. Jonica smiles too. Surely the coaches will notice her daughter now. But they're looking the other way.

Audrey's smile fades. And so does Jonica's. She tugs her dress away from her body because, somehow, the fabric has turned into cling wrap.

'Are you okay?' Miles asks.

'I can't bear the heat,' she says. In truth, she's aching at the disheartened look on Audrey's face. The disappointed kink of her mouth. The discouraged slump of her shoulders.

'Maybe you need a cool drink,' Miles suggests.

'Yes, I think I'll go and sit in the car for a while with the air conditioner.'

She heads for the car park.

When she gets to the car, she realises she's still holding Alex's water bottle. She can't go back now. Not with the tight feeling that's lodged itself in her throat.

She'll go to the shops and buy Powerade.

