

## Chapter One

MS BENETTI TOLD us to study the classroom window. The thought of painting a boring window didn't excite me – I wanted more from the lesson. 'View this exercise as a chance to paint beyond what you see,' she explained, handing out sheets of paper. 'It could be metaphoric, surreal or symbolic.'

I understood her instructions, but whenever I had experimented in the past and handed work in, the air left her body as if I had disappointed her again.

*Crap*, I screamed inwardly, drowning in the pressure, but wanting to be challenged.

'We're not going to start with a drawing this lesson. I want you to put the following colours on your palettes,' Ms Benetti instructed, cradling her pregnant belly in her hands as she wove her way around our easels, her long, colourful skirt swaying. 'Black, white, yellow and red.' I waited for her to say blue, but she didn't. 'When I say start, you'll have ten minutes. This is what will secure students a place in art school, Stephanie Conner. If you want to paint what you see, you're in the wrong class – you should be in photography.'

I raised my eyebrows at Willow. She mouthed, *Shit*.

I squirted the last colour on the pallet.

‘START! Ten minutes,’ Ms Benetti, repeated, and I went for it, swirling yellow with black, black with red and started painting. ‘Eight minutes,’ she advised. I threw the brush on the table and snatched up another, my hand moving the brush faster and faster, watching the branches moving beyond the window. ‘Six minutes.’ My hand started to cramp as I mixed red with black, adding white, straight black and yellow. ‘Four minutes.’ I had a full-on cramp in the palm of my hand, but I didn’t stop. ‘Two minutes.’ I dropped the brush and started using my hands. ‘Stop now,’ she ordered, but I couldn’t. ‘STOP!’ she repeated.

I swept my hand across my face and backed away from the easel. *Awesome* resounded in my head. Willow pointed at me and cracked up laughing.

What? I mouthed, following her eyes to the paint dripping off my hands.

Ms Benetti stopped at my easel. For the first time I can remember, I didn’t mind her judging my work. ‘Excellent, Steph,’ she praised, ‘well done. How challenging was that?’

‘Incredible,’ I replied.

‘To be a true artist you must learn to let go,’ she said, handing me a fresh sheet of paper. ‘Take a few minutes to view the work of the student beside you, and we’ll try the exercise again.’

‘Have you worked out what you’re wearing to my

party?’ asked Willow as I studied her painting. Her work was excellent, and she knew it. ‘Grant Ford’s going to be there, did Libby tell you?’

I held back from squealing with excitement. ‘Yeah, Libby may have mentioned it.’ Willow rolled her eyes. It was a known fact that I had a crush on Grant. He was the hottest boy, not just in school, but in the metropolitan area.

‘If you’re wearing a dress, Steph, make it short. You have the legs for it. Mine barely covers my ass.’ A rag could cover Willow’s ass and she’d be just as stunning. I envied her natural blonde hair, unblemished olive complexion and striking blue eyes. My skin was pale, sprinkled with freckles, and my eyes were green, or sometimes blue – they changed like the weather. Maybe I was a lizard in a previous life.



Libby Lu, my best friend, was resting her petite body against my locker, twirling strands of her short black pigtail around her finger. She was flirting with a senior boy in sports gear, flashing her long lashes as he went past. She pushed off the locker to follow him, then stopped when she saw me. ‘Hey, Steph,’ she said, pointing to my face, ‘what happened?’

‘I had the most fantastic art class ever.’

Willow strolled up, hugging her leather iPad satchel hard against her chest, flattening her oversized boobs. For someone who was flat-chested, it was annoying that she

saw them as a curse, not an asset. Mine were dormant under my skin. ‘I’m grabbing a coffee at the mall if you’d like to come?’ she offered. ‘We’ll help Steph pick out a dress. I’m thinking short and sexy.’

Libby’s face lit up. ‘Yeah, I’ll come,’ said Libby, ‘but I’ve already chosen what Steph’s wearing,’ she informed Willow.

I raised my brows. ‘Hello, you guys, I’m not deaf, and I’m not your personal dress-up doll. I’m heading off home.’

‘Be ready by seven, Steph,’ ordered Libby, ignoring my comments. ‘My dad’s insisting on taking us, and he doesn’t enjoy waiting.’

‘I’m never late,’ I retorted and started walking.

‘Excuse me?’ declared Libby. ‘You’re always late. Seven, and wash the paint from your hair.’



Our house sat high on the hill above Taronga Zoo in Mosman. The house came with my dad’s job as the head vet at the zoo. The house was old, built of timber and sandstone; a weathervane with a rooster sat perched on the roof, and there was an attic. I was born in the lounge room in one of those inflatable swimming pools. My mum’s a marine biologist. If she had her way, I would have been born in the sea.

I opened the front gate to find Mum kneeling in the garden pulling weeds. ‘Hey,’ I called, closing the gate behind me. ‘It’s too hot to garden.’

Mum placed her hands behind her back and stretched. 'Here,' she said, holding out her hand, 'help an old woman up. I made fresh lemonade if you're interested?'

'Yum,' I said, pulling her up, and followed her up the back steps to the kitchen.

Mum wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand, placed her hat on the kitchen bench and opened the fridge. 'I'm missing Palm Beach. Let's make a trip out to Palmy tomorrow?' she suggested. 'We can go snorkelling. You have time to arrange someone to do your shift. What do you think?' I also worked at the zoo, but only on weekends, public and school holidays.

'Sounds great.'

'You can invite Libby if you like.' Libby was a full-on party animal – it took a day for her to recover from the night before, and she never surfaced before noon.

Dad walked in and placed a matchbox on the kitchen bench. I picked it up and slid it open to find a pygmy possum on a bed of cotton wool. 'How did it die?' I asked, stroking its soft fur with the tip of my index finger.

'Not sure,' he replied. 'We've had two die this month. You can bury it in the garden.' Dad always brought the tiniest creatures home to bury. I think he thought that our backyard was the zoo's official cemetery for anything smaller than his little finger.

'We were discussing heading out to Palmy tomorrow,' Mum told him. 'I thought it might be fun to get in a day of snorkelling.'

Dad's eyes went from smiling to concerned. 'Are you

sure you're up to snorkelling? Your asthma hasn't been under control.'

Mum's asthma attacks made each breath a struggle. I moved in closer and smelt apple blossom shampoo, but couldn't hear a wheeze.

'Swimming's excellent for asthma – everyone knows that,' she told him in her laughing voice. We can leave early and make a full day of it. I haven't had quality time with Cass for ages.' Cass was my mum's older sister. She had moved into my grandparents' beach house after they died. Aunt Cass was also an artist. She'd told me that paint, not blood, ran through our veins like rivers of blue spaghetti.

'I'll ask Jo if she doesn't mind doing a double shift,' said Dad, surrendering.

'Jo will *so* do the shift,' I whispered to Mum, 'She lives to buy shoes.'

I slipped the matchbox into the side pocket of my uniform.



There was a tap on the bedroom door. 'I'm in the bathroom,' I called and walked out in my bra and undies to find Mum holding my sketch beside the window, comparing it to the view outside. 'You've captured it perfectly.'

'Thanks, but it was like my zillionth attempt.'

Our eyes met, and I waited for her to tell me that my makeup was too heavy. I swept my dress off the bed,

tucked it under my arms and swayed as if the music had started. 'Is that what you're wearing tonight?'

'Yep, do you like it? Can I borrow your clutch?'

'Sure,' she said, placing the sketch at the end of my bed. 'I'll get it.' Her cheeks were flushed. Maybe Dad was right – she wasn't well.

I switched off the music in my head and picked up on a faint wheeze. 'Hey, you're not well, are you?'

Mum let out a sigh. 'Steph, you're worse than your father. It's humid today. The humidity makes my chest tight.'

'We're just concerned.'

'I know you are,' she said, raising her brow, 'but I'm fine. If Libby's dad is picking you up, you'd better get a move on.'

'I have tons of time,' I said, tossing the dress over the back of the chair. I picked up the sketchbook and made for the bed. 'I had the best art class today.'

Mum took a piece of charcoal off my desk and threw it in my direction. 'You're impossible,' she sighed. 'Keep your eye on the time?'

I put my hand over my heart. 'Promise, I won't be late,' I told her, sitting against the bedhead, and I started sketching.



'God,' squealed Libby, standing at the bedroom door.

The pitch of her voice made my ears ache. 'Don't squeal like that,' I scolded, dropping my work, scurrying

off the bed. ‘You could perforate an eardrum.’

‘Steph,’ she sighed. ‘Your hands are black. Why aren’t you ready? I threw the piece of charcoal onto my desk.’

‘It washes off.’ I headed for the safety of the bathroom and closed the door. ‘It’ll take a minute to dress,’ I assured her and flushed the toilet to block out the sound of her nagging voice. Then I casually strolled out of the bathroom and started dressing.

Libby scooped my heels up and handed them to me. ‘You’re so frustrating,’ she said. Her nose twitched. ‘Is that turps?’

‘I had paint in my hair.’

Libby rolled her eyes. ‘You washed your hair with turps, didn’t you?’

‘Hey, blame the shampoo, not me. I shampooed three times, and the paint wouldn’t budge.’

‘No wonder you don’t have a boyfriend, Steph,’ she said, taking a tube of roll-on perfume from her handbag and handing it to me.

‘Excuse me, *we* don’t have boyfriends,’ I reminded her, sweeping her perfume across my neck, and handed it back.

‘At least I’m working on it.’

‘And I’m not?’

Libby gazed back at me with a sorrowful look. ‘Don’t get your hopes up.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Every girl at the party will be looking at Grant.’

‘So?’

‘I just don’t want you to be disappointed.’

A horn blasted, and Libby’s stiletto heels clipped across the wooden floorboards to the window. ‘I promised my dad that we wouldn’t hold him up,’ she told me, gripping the sill, leaning out. ‘You don’t try to be on time,’ she whined, releasing her hold on the sill. ‘I’ll meet you downstairs. Can you at least try to hurry?’

Dad stood at the bottom of the staircase. He gazed up and did a double take. ‘Are you sure you want to wear that?’ he asked. ‘Might be a bit, um, short –’

‘You’re forever telling me to wear a dress,’ I snapped, blinking my false eyelashes at him. ‘You’re never happy.’

‘Ignore your father,’ said Mum, handing me a red clutch. ‘He’s never opened a fashion magazine.’

I smiled at Mum, but I wasn’t ready to release Dad. ‘Libby’s dress is way shorter than mine.’

Libby flashed her eyes at me and tugged at her hem. ‘My dad’s bringing us home,’ she told him, and he backed off.



The music was loud. Willow’s brother, Greg, materialised like a ghost through the smoke from the barbecue. ‘Hi, Steph,’ he yelled at the exact time the music stopped.

‘Hi.’ He smiled, and his eyes went in search of my cleavage. ‘Up here,’ I said, reinstating eye contact, and it worked.

‘Are you here with anyone?’ he asked, running his hand through his fine hair.

I detected hope in his voice. ‘Ah, no, but I was expecting to catch up with Grant.’ I switched my focus to the group gathering near the barbecue.

‘Are you hungry?’ he asked.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Hungry?’

‘Oh, no, I’m cool, but thanks.’ Greg gave me a weird smile that made his strong chin more pronounced. He had an interesting face that framed his dark brown eyes, and what might turn out to be great teeth once the braces came off. But he was a bit too short, and his breath reeked of garlic. ‘Have you seen Grant?’ I asked, scanning the pool area.

‘First night of footy training. They don’t finish till eight.’

‘Oh, right, thanks,’ I sighed, turning my gaze in the direction of Libby and Willow. ‘I’ll catch you later,’ I said and started walking. To be honest, if it wasn’t for the garlic, I might have stayed.

‘Did you bring your bikini?’ asked Libby.

‘Yes,’ I said, turning back in Greg’s direction, and he waved.

‘Why don’t you just go out with him once, and put him out of his misery?’

‘I don’t tell you who to date.’

‘True,’ she said, putting her arm through mine.

✎

The water was warm. ‘Hey, Steph, you’re on the other team,’ instructed Alex, Willow’s younger brother. I went under the net, and on surfacing the ball bounced off my head. I swam over to it and threw it back.

‘Take that!’ I screeched, clearing the net and scoring the first point. When the ball came at me again, a hand grabbed me from below, and I let out a scream.

A girl surfaced, and we cracked up laughing.

I copped a mouthful of water that made me puke, which could have been majorly embarrassing if I had eaten. My side won, ten points to two. I was a natural at volleyball.

Seconds after exiting the pool, my stomach rumbled. I was starved. I reached for a beach towel and headed for the food table.

Libby danced over and took a ginormous bite of my barbecued sausage sandwich. ‘Change and join us,’ she chirped with her mouth full. A piece of food went flying from her lips, narrowly missing my eye.

‘I’m going to do some serious moon bathing, maybe later,’ I said and headed towards the row of sun-chairs beside the pool.

‘Suit yourself,’ she sang and danced off.

Greg came out of nowhere and sat on the chair beside me. ‘Hey, Steph –’ He hesitated. ‘Umm, a few of us are going to see a movie tomorrow night, and –’

His words made me panic. ‘Do you think Grant’s still coming?’

Greg’s smile disappeared. ‘I guess,’ he muttered, as an

attractive girl whose name escaped me, stole his attention. 'Catch you later, Steph, good luck finding Grant.'

'Yeah, thanks.'

Libby appeared, holding two bottles of ginger beer, and sat beside me. 'Here,' she said, handing one to me.

'Do you think Greg's adopted?'

Libby screwed up her nose. 'You ask the weirdest questions.'

'Italians reek of garlic.'

'You reek of the zoo. Does that make you a monkey? You're so fussy. Greg's cute. It wouldn't hurt to give him a chance – you might end up liking him.'

'If you like Greg, why don't *you* go out with him?'

'He hasn't asked me; it's you that he likes.'

A girl came running over. She reached for Libby's free hand and started pulling her up. 'Quick,' she told her, 'you gotta see this,' and Libby was gone.

Grant strolled across the pool area. He wore his thick black hair slicked back off his tanned face. His white shirt hugged his broad frame, showing every muscle in his chest, and his black bootleg jeans hung low off his hips. He had girls running behind him like a line of freshly hatched ducklings. I couldn't help but imagine him in a life drawing class.



I stood waiting for the bathroom door to open. Willow strolled out of her bedroom holding a boy's hand. Her lipstick was smudged over her powdered face, her skirt

was caught up in her undies and she swayed like a branch in her stilettos. She was obviously drinking something stronger than ginger beer. She reached out and pinched my cheek. 'You don't like parties, do you, Stephy?' she slurred, and I smelt alcohol on her breath.

As Willow walked away, I rubbed away the pain in my cheek. She was wrong. I'd totally enjoy the party if I were here with Grant.