

## Perth Royal Show, 1989

They had all decided to go as a group — six fifteen-year-olds who thought they were far too old to go with their parents as *that* would be childish, but if they went together it was perfectly acceptable.

Kylie Minogue was blaring from the loudspeakers as the two girls and four boys passed from the animal displays into Sideshow Alley, being told it was ‘never too late’ by the singer who was deemed to be pretty bad but secretly loved by them all anyway.

Two girls and four boys – an uneven mix for pairing off later. A recipe for disaster, even. Two boys would have to miss out.

And even this early in the morning, it seemed *who* had already been decided. Jess and Dale were pretty pally, sneaking a kiss behind one of the showbag stands when they thought none of the others were looking. Sharon and Phil were doing that dance of suppressed—but not *really*—attraction where they were laughing at each other’s jokes a little too loudly and sharing fairy floss so they could rub their sticky fingers together in the bag at the same time.

That left Pete and Will, standing awkwardly with their hands in their pockets and frequently left to their own devices as the other four kept finding reasons to stray from the group before reappearing sometime later, sweaty and flushed. It had nothing to do with the heat, which at ten in the morning was already in the mid-thirties.

“So, this is pretty awkward, huh?” Will asked.

Pete looked at him sideways, not really wanting to meet his gaze. “I guess.”

“Wish they’d brought more girls.”

Pete gave a small snort. “I don’t think that was part of their plan.”

“Why are we here, then?” Will kicked at the dirt, almost showering a small girl who was dwarfed by the Madonna showbag she was carrying. Her new jelly bracelets glinted in the sun and she glared up at him, although it was nothing compared to the glare her mother threw his way.

“Safety in numbers,” Pete said. “So we’re the patsies?”

“Yep.”

Will stopped himself from kicking the dirt again. He couldn't afford another almost-confrontation with an angry parent. "So, what shall we do?"

Practically everything, it seemed. The Wild Mouse sent them on thrilling highs and dizzying lows, and the screams from riders in the other carriages made them laugh instead of releasing their own terrified cries. Their bodies slammed against each other in the small cage of the Tumbler; the G-force pressed Pete's head into Will's shoulder and it gave him a warm feeling he was sure wasn't just from the body's need to shit itself in horror at being abused in such a way.

When the cage stopped turning, Pete mumbled an apology.

"What for?"

"Nothing."

Will decided not to press the issue. They lurched drunkenly from the stand, their heads still spinning, and they sought shelter under a nearby tree.

"You hungry?" Pete asked, still looking a bit uncomfortable.

"I don't think I could ever eat again."

But five minutes later they were eating sausage rolls and drinking Masters choc milk.

"Food of champions," Pete said, his mouth full.

"Pig," Will grinned.

Pete swallowed and lay back down on the grass. "I don't think I can go on a ride for a while. I'll spew."

"Lovely."

"Bet that would piss the rest of them off. Nothing like ruining a romance than someone spewing on you."

"Can you stop saying 'spew'?"

"Why? Is it making you want to spew?"

Will chucked his empty milk carton at Pete, and it bounced off his nose.

"Hey!"

Next thing Will knew, Pete had leapt up and was tackling him. There was no malice in it, no threat, just a little wrestle there on the ground. Will twisted underneath him, feeling suddenly that he had to get away, or else Pete would know – Pete would *feel* –

“Uncle?” Pete asked, his breath hot and heavy in Will’s face. And reeking of sausage and pastry.

“Uncle.” Anything to get him off.

“Say it nicer.”

“How can I say it nicer?” he grunted.

“Add ‘please’.”

“*Please*,” Will said, now starting to feel humiliated.

“Nah, all of it.”

“Uncle, *please*.”

“That’s more like it.” Pete grinned down at him, but he wasn’t making any move to get off him.

But he shot off like a rabbit when they heard someone call out, “Bloody poofers! What are you doing?”

It was Jess and Dale. Jess had a cheeky grin on her face. Dale looked confused.

“He threw a milk carton at me!” Pete said, pointing at Will.

Will shrugged calmly, even though his heart was racing.

He was surprised the weak excuse was accepted so easily — but, then, was it an excuse? The crazy organ music coming from the merry go round complemented the dizziness of his brain.

“Where have you guys been?” Pete asked, trying to sound — or, maybe just *sounding* — casual.

Now it was Jess’ turn to look a little flushed. “Oh, you know, just checking things out.”

“I bet,” Pete snorted, and Dale glared at him.

“You jealous?” Jess asked.

“Nope. Not at all.”

“I guess when you’ve got Will here to wrestle with, you don’t mind missing out,” Dale said, and the easy-going banter that had been flowing between them seconds before turned nasty.

Pete looked like he was ready to fight; Will stretched out on the ground. Fear had made everything wilt.

“You all right?” Jess asked. “You look like you’re going to spew!”

She was dumbfounded as both Will and Pete burst into laughter.

Sharon and Phil eventually found them half an hour later. By then the atmosphere had calmed down and things were almost back to normal, especially once Dale got some food in his stomach.

But Will noticed Pete was keeping his distance from him. He led the pack through Sideshow Alley, while Will kept to the back behind everyone else. The couples were too interested in each other to recognize what anybody else might have been up to.

Stuffed toys were won for the girls at the rifle range and the laughing clowns. Will stood around, feeling useless. He contemplated melting away into the crowd and going home – anything would have been better than playing either the fifth or sixth wheel to this group.

But just as he was planning to make his getaway, Pete sidled up to him. “You not going to try and win something?”

“Nope.” Will was still pissed at him, and didn’t want to let him off the hook too easy.

“Do you want me to try and win you something?”

Will glared at him. “You think I can’t win something myself?”

Pete put up his hands in mock surrender. “There’s the fishing game. You might win there.”

Will looked over to the fishing tent, where a group of kids, barely older than five or six, were dunking magnetised fishing lines into the water to easily pull out a prize number. "Piss off."

"Aww, come on. I'm only pulling your leg."

But it still made Will march over to the sandbag toss. Okay, it might not have been the most athletic game, or one that showed the most masculine strength if a guy had to prove his masculinity, but Will played baseball during winter and cricket during the summer and knew how to throw a ball. A sandbag might be a different instrument but it still worked on the same principle.

The other four had disappeared again. Will was glad of that.

"C'mon," Pete said. "Show us what you're made of."

Will wanted to impress him. Something had been bugging him all day, but he knew he wasn't ready to admit it yet.

And he threw the sandbag perfectly, hitting the bucket directly in the centre and knocking it over. He could tell that the barker wasn't impressed as he would have to part with one of his cheap toys – the games were specifically rigged to give away as little as possible.

Pete laughed. "You getting me a teddy bear?"

"No!" Will protested, hoping he wasn't blushing. It was a stupid thing to think.

Desperately looking over the merchandise the barker was pointing to, Will selected a pack of pirate tattoos. He could tell the guy was happy, as it was worth far less than the other stuff he could have picked.

"You have to share," Will told him as they walked away.

"Okay."

They headed for the block of toilets so they would have water to apply the tattoos. Pete chose the biggest, a large ship in full sail with the Jolly Roger emblazoned above it.

"Where's that going to fit?" Will asked.

"Across my chest," Pete said, pulling his t-shirt off.

Will was glad that the toilet was pretty dark and dank. The heat in his face undoubtedly made him flush. Pete bent over the sink and splashed his skin with water and then stood to face him.

“You’re gonna have to put it on for me.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, I can’t do it myself.”

Will’s hands trembled slightly as he peeled off the backing to the tattoo and slapped it on Pete’s chest, his fingertips brushing against the other boy’s skin for only a second.

“It’s wrinkled,” Pete said. “You’ll have to smooth it.”

They were flirting with some unspoken need now. Will slowly spread his fingers across the tattoo, making sure it was adhering properly to the rapidly drying skin. He felt Pete’s chest heave beneath his touch and heard the intake of his breath. Will looked up, and Pete was staring at him. There was a longing in his eyes, and Will knew it was confirmed — he felt the same way —

The door to the toilet banged open and Will jumped back, letting his hand drop.

A boy only slightly older than them entered, and headed for the urinal. He didn’t even give them a second glance.

“I can get the rest of it,” Pete said. “What one are you going to do?”

His enthusiasm waned, Will shrugged. “The parrot, I guess.”

He didn’t ask for Pete’s help. He lifted his shirt sleeve – he wasn’t brave enough to take the shirt off entirely – and applied the tattoo in the same manner.

The other boy left without washing his hands. Pete shuddered and turned to admire himself in the mirror.

“Cool.”

Pete’s tattoo actually did look *cool*, the black of the ink against the pale skin. Will was disappointed as Pete put his shirt back on and then came closer to him.

“Show us yours.”

Will pulled off the paper. Half of the tattoo came with it.

“Shit.”

“Nah, it’s cool,” Pete laughed. “You’re the toughest pirate of all, with the tattoo of a decapitated bird. It must have talked too much.”

Will grinned. “Bloody thing never shut up.”

“All we need now is a bottle of rum.”

“Yo ho ho.” Will gathered up the rubbish and threw it in the bin. “I guess we better get back to the others.” It was the last thing he wanted to do.

“Why?” Pete snorted. “They’ve been giving us the slip all day. Now it’s our turn to lose them.”

Will was thrilled with the suggestion. “Why not? Let’s do it.”

It seemed like the sun had gotten even hotter when they left the temporary respite of the toilet block.

“Ugh, we picked the worst fucking day to come here.”

Will shrugged. “What do you want to do now?”

He had a suggestion, but was too embarrassed to admit it. Earlier in the day he had been planning to sneak off once the opportunity presented itself so he wouldn’t get the piss taken out of him by everybody else.

“Dunno.”

“How about the ghost train?”

Pete looked as if he were suppressing a laugh.

“At least we’ll be out of the heat for a while, I guess.”

“I’ll pay, seeing I’m forcing you into it.”

“Will you stop stressing! Why do you like the Ghost Train so much anyway?”

They started heading further along Sideshow Alley. “I dunno, I guess it was the ride that scared me the most when I was a kid. But I loved it anyway. And I just wanted

to keep going on it again and again. Every year at the Show I've been on it. I don't want this year to be any different."

"It's not that scary now, though."

"You're in the dark. Anything can happen."

Will knew they were definitely skirting around something now, but he didn't want to give it credence just yet. They were fumbling with some truth both boys wanted to reveal.

Scary things happened in the dark all the time. And sometimes scary was good.

The ride loomed ahead of them now, the ghostly figure with the outstretched arms inviting them in — if they dared! The muzak from the loudspeakers tried to sound mysterious and frightening but sounded merry instead. It was the ultimate in saying one thing but meaning another — it wanted you to think you'd be scared but you knew it was all fake. You were more likely to laugh than piss yourself in fear.

All conversation ceased between them as they took their places in line, brought to a screeching halt not unlike the brakes of the ghost train carriages as they shot out of the exit and let laughing passengers off and new ones on.

They chose the back, without even discussing it.

As the train departed, they remained silent. The carriages crashed through the first door and all of the passengers were thrown into darkness. Will couldn't stop the grin on his face. He loved this ride. The muzak was now giving way to screams and moans, and he heard Pete chuckle next to him and shift slightly in the seat.

And he could now feel the warmth of Pete's leg, pressing against his own. All sound faded away. A ghoul burst from the ceiling, his matted hair brushing against the faces of those in the train, carriage by carriage. Pete laughed again, and as the hair hit them he moved in closer to Will.

A girl in the third carriage screamed as someone dressed in a skeleton suit, glowing with fluorescent paint, jumped out and grabbed her by the shoulder. The scream gurgled into giggles as he let her go almost immediately, seeking new prey.

He lunged for Will, and Will threw himself back against Pete's chest. The skeleton's fingers missed him by mere inches, and Will turned to apologise, but found Will staring at him strangely. They could barely see each other in the dark, and that

made it feel like the safest place in the world as they leaned in closer and tentatively kissed. It was just a brush against the lips, so light it seemed non-existent. They stared at each other a moment more, waiting to see if the other pulled away, but neither moved.

This time they were less restrained, but still just as tender. Their mouths met again, the contact firmer, the breathing heavier and time standing still.

Will knew he was sweating, even though it was relatively cool in the dark. He could see a faint gleam off Pete's head as well, indicating he was just as nervous. He leaned in to Will, his breath hot against Will's ear.

"I'm a poofter," Pete whispered.

Will grinned, but knew enough not to laugh. What else could two boys be, when they were pashing under the cover of a ghost train?

Pete reached down in the dark and, thrillingly, laced their fingers together.

To Will, it felt just as good as the kiss. Okay, the kiss was better, but just barely. "Guess what?"

"What?" Pete asked.

"I'm a poofter, too."

It was easy to whisper secrets in the black, buried beneath the screams and moans of ghosts and goblins.

They could tell the ride was getting close to the end, and their lips met again. Frenzied, because they didn't know when the next opportunity would come. It seemed like this moment was magic, and the real world threatened them with the return of mendacity. They pulled away just before their carriage hit the exit door and their eyes were flooded with light.

It was the Perth Royal Show, 1989, and although nobody else in attendance seemed to have noticed, things had changed forever.