

Deadpoint

Today will be Fiona's final climb. Gus is gone. Off climbing with a twenty-nine-year-old bitch of a blonde bombshell who grips rock faces with her bare hands and scales rock walls as if she's a *Hemidactylus frenatus*. Amanda's calluses mean she can hold onto any sharp thing. Fiona can't climb without gloves, never has despite all the dirty looks from the climbing fraternity. Maybe it was the gloves that stopped her from hanging onto Gus?

Fiona hasn't prepared a beta for today's climb, but she's praying for a deadpoint; that heavenly moment of weightlessness when a climber thrusts upwards in a dynamic move. It's a moment when everything stands still, when everything is suspended in time and climbing becomes a beautiful pursuit, not something to break you apart piece by piece, although she's planning a free-fall. If all goes to plan, her body will lie at the base of the cliff and she will finally taste freedom.

In Fee's wardrobe two designer dresses hang by themselves like forgotten wallflowers. The rest of her clothes are freshly laundered, meticulously folded, and neatly packed into big black garbage sacks awaiting delivery to Vinnies. Fiona is tying up the loose ends of her life. She can almost hear her mother's prim tones: it's best if one does not cause too much inconvenience, dear. One cancels the weekend papers; unplugs the fridge; finds alternative accommodation for one's cat; resigns quietly from one's job.

In the last month Fiona has completed her list. Now it's time to unplug the fridge. Easier said than done, Fee thinks easing her arm down the long slim space between the fridge and kitchen wall painted clotted cream. Clotted cream was Gus's choice. Fee pleaded for pale apple green, but he wanted a neutral palette.

When Gus left, Fiona drove her sensible car to Bunnings. Inside the massive warehouse-style store, she bought a 10-litre tin of paint in soft apple green along with a menagerie of brushes, rollers and painter's tape. She laid out Gus's favourite duvet cover as a drop sheet and painted the master bedroom in thick coats of soft apple green. She slapped on paint haphazardly, worked furiously until every inch of clotted cream was eliminated from the upstairs storey of their modern townhouse, and the smell of paint was everywhere. She ran out of steam long before making it downstairs. Upstairs is green with slightly nauseating splodges of paint on the carpet. Downstairs is neutral sophistication.

Fiona's boss was sorry to see her go and surprised by her resignation. She'll be hard to replace. It's never easy to find quiet, dedicated employees and the insurance brokerage business always needs people who clients feel they can trust. After eight years in the job, it was surprising to hear Fiona was going backpacking through South-East Asia with her

smooth husband. Whispers scuttled around the edges of the office: Gus was shagging a blonde bird with double the personality of Fiona.

Early last year while climbing Mount Ngungun, Gus and Fiona met Adam and Amanda. Fiona wondered what kind of couple they could be when their names were obviously incompatible. She'd stopped for a breather while Gus made a reconnoitre. His face took on a predatory look when he returned to find Fiona sweeping her hands in the air explaining the Glass House Mountain Range was formed by cooled molten lava twenty-seven million years ago. Adam's eyes were glued to her face. Gus threw his arms over her shoulders and brushed up against the blonde and impossibly fit-looking Amanda.

Fiona wanted to be a geologist before she met and fell in love with Gus, but he was in such a hurry to start their life together she was compelled to cut her university studies short. She followed him back to Linz, Austria where a Head Chef position was waiting. Gus didn't like her working, but once a week she had a short shift at a bakery in the next neighbourhood.

That was a lifetime ago when Fee excused Gus's behaviour as the outpourings of a fiery and passionate nature. Fifteen years later, their marriage went over a cliff, and it didn't matter a jot Fee could have been a geologist and hasn't spoken to her older sister, Sarah, in years. Gus and Sarah never hit it off despite sharing the same profession. Sarah was a 'Naked Chef' type of chef, all rustic dishes and authentic flavours. Gus was sophisticated. An utter bastard, Fee sees that clearly now.

These days Fee climbs solo with the wind at her back. She pulls the front door shut and stows her backpack in the boot. She swings the sacks for Vinnies onto the rear seats and snorts as thoughts of Amanda with her legs spread-wide for Gus rocket through her head. Gustav made love as efficiently and adeptly as he ran his kitchen. Three and a half minutes in and Fee's body would be racked with orgasmic exhilaration. Gus pumped until his baby-smooth cheeks were covered in red splotches and his hooded blue eyes rolled into the back of his head.

Gus's brothers had hordes of children between them. The *trouble* was clearly on Fee's side, although her gynaecologist advised no medical explanation for her failure to fall pregnant. Gus declined to visit the clinic preferring instead to pump at his wife during the most favourable points in her cycle.

Fiona manoeuvres her car into fifteen-minute street parking and heaves the sacks from her car onto her shoulders. A young bearded man steps out of Vinnies and holds open the door, he quietly appraises the woman hauling sacks into the shop. Her auburn hair is damp, and he catches a tantalising whiff of vanilla as she moves past him.

'Very generous of you, dear,' the sprightly aged volunteer chirps. Fiona nods, ducks her head in a red-hot flush of guilt. The dead's clothes usually arrive at Vinnies after the

corpse is shovelled into the earth, not before. Fiona remembers her dresses hanging by themselves and thinks she should have thrown them in, too. All she owns are the clothes she wears and two silk dresses hanging in her wardrobe.

She steps out of Vinnies and blinks in the harsh sunlight before gazing at the overhanging lilac canopy of Jacaranda flowers. A parking inspector catches her eye and grimaces before shuffling to the next car. His fat neck sits in comfortable rolls above his municipal collar.

'Shoot.'

'Did they get you?'

It's the bearded young man. Fiona nods, thinks the damn ticket has messed up her plans for the day. Should she postpone her free-fall and stand in line at the municipal offices and pay her fine? Could she pay online? She remembers her satisfaction at the sight of her credit cards cut into pleasing triangles lying impotent in the kitchen bin.

The bearded man stands watching the green-eyed woman tap a parking ticket on her chin. She wears lightweight travelling pants, the kind you buy at serious outdoor stores and professional-looking hiking boots. The woman looks out of place. She looks as if she's about to scale Mount Beerwah, not run errands on this bland Thursday morning.

'I could take care of it for you.'

A small frown of consternation creases Fiona's brow.

'Why would you do that?'

'I dunno, so you owe me and say yes when I ask you to dinner?'

Fiona shakes her head a little.

'Or not,' the young man says trying to reel back the words he uttered on a whim. This woman wouldn't want him. He's scruffy and holds the mistaken belief he can make a good impression with wild chivalrous moves. Thus far in his twenty-eight years he's had little success with women. He wants what young people no longer seem to crave: big romantic gestures; quiet evenings in; home-cooked meals (which he cooks, of course); and weekends away at Maleny or Byron Bay. Weekends for slowly making love; for walks along the beach and savouring nice bottles of red. To his generation, he's, what was the word? 'Fucking boring, Jake' his last girlfriend threw at him before slamming the front door. Jake picked himself up, dusted himself down and threw himself harder into work. He's a hydrographic cartographer at his uncle's engineering and surveying firm.

Fiona stops staring down the street. Perhaps this could work. The stranger could pay her fine and she could continue with her day and final climb.

'Does it have to be dinner?'

'What? No, it doesn't have to be dinner.'

Jake recovers his composure, could the green-eyed goddess be interested? He scratches his beard. Fiona calculates, looking at her watch. A coffee. How long could that take? Forty-five minutes should do it, one-hour-ten tops. Then she can get to Mount Tibrogargan and start her climb. She can be flexible; she can adapt to this changing world.

'Could we have a coffee, now?'

Jake lifts his shoulders. He's due in the office, but he can put it off, send a text, say he's been detained.

'Sure.'

Jake pushes open the glass door to a café. His hand finds the small of Fee's back and before she knows it, they're sitting down in a corner booth. Their conversation is stilted until Jake tells her about mapping ocean floors and her eyes begin to light.

'Married?' he finally asks, holding his breath while Fee's eyes tarry over the walls. All those paintings. Why did she never try painting?

'Not anymore. He found a newer model.'

'What an idiot!'

Fiona laughs surprising herself and lingers over her empty coffee cup. Does she have plans for the weekend? She looks away. Her cheeks aflame. There was never supposed to be a weekend.

'Not really.'

'Do you like French films? *Lolo* is showing at New Farm open-air cinema on Saturday.'

Yes, she does. She really enjoys French films, hasn't seen one in ages. Fiona admonishes herself but unexpectedly her date with Mount Tibrogargan is no longer pressing.

Fee waves goodbye to Jake, steps lightly as she smiles to herself. Her auburn hair shines in the sunlight and she strides out onto the road. In a flash, she is shoved back to the pavement. Her heart thuds. She shudders. Her skin clammy to the touch.

'You got a death wish, lady?'

A large, brute of a man has shunted her back to safety. He's inked up to his neck and wears a studded leather vest. She takes a deep breath, focuses her eyes on the man's face, on the words coming out of his mouth.

No, she thinks, not anymore, not a death wish.

Once her heart has returned to its normal rhythm and she has thanked the stranger, Fee heads for home. She will call Sarah the minute she gets in, and she'll catch up on all those wasted years. She will fire up her laptop and google mature-age entry for a Bachelor of Geoscience, and tomorrow she will shop for new clothes.

Maybe this date with Jake on Saturday will lead to something and maybe it won't. It doesn't matter. Fee has woken up.

The bell jangles as Fiona steps into Vinnies. She hauls sacks of climbing equipment onto the counter.

'Thank you, dearie, you're very kind.'

Fiona thinks again about the silk dresses hanging in her wardrobe and suddenly she knows exactly what she'll wear on Saturday night.