

ONE LONG  
*Summer*



# ONE LONG Summer

A journey to adulthood

SEAN  
THOMAS

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by Sean Thomas

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*For all the young boys and girls I have spent time with over the years.  
You were actually my inspiration!*



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# One

## Meeting Dylan

“SHRIMPY, pay attention!”

Matt spun around to face the teacher, sinking into his chair as he turned. The teacher stood hands on hips, her head tilted to one side.

Matt’s classmates turned to face him, slowly at first, then with confidence, giggling and grinning. They were going to enjoy this. The giggling became more confident as Matt’s discomfort grew. He sat in silence. He felt his face burn as he looked down at the desk in front of him.

The teacher opened her mouth to speak but said nothing. She had hit the wrong target and she knew it, everyone knew it. She raised her hand to the side of her face and slowly turned her gaze toward the window as if looking for a way out. The class knew she would take the easy option. Who wouldn’t? It was the last week of school after all.

Rooster, the tormentor, kicked Matt’s chair. “Yeah, pay attention, Shrimpy,” he hissed, loudly enough for those nearby to enjoy. Matt felt his face redden even more. He did not move.

Shrimpy! The teacher had called him Shrimpy, in class, in front of his friends. Matt’s world was divided into two groups, those who called him Matt and those who called him Shrimpy. Only the best of friends would call him Matt now and there were few enough of them.

“Matt. Face the front and don’t talk with your friends.”

Friends? Matt felt his heart thumping in his chest. How dumb could this teacher be? How could she think these were his friends? These were not his friends. Matt sat frozen and resolutely stared at his desk.

When Matt first met this teacher he really liked her. He thought she was pretty. Slight, with glasses and shoulder-length, light brown hair. She always wore dresses, she smiled a lot. Although Matt would not admit it now, he had been quite smitten with her. He made quite an effort to get a seat near the front of the class, in the safety zone.

Sitting in the safety zone did not last long though. In an effort to break the pack she made Matt swap places with one of the boys from the back, one of the wolves. The boy he was swapped with had never forgiven Matt, and Matt had never forgiven the teacher. Matt had been put amongst the wolves. There had been no hiding from them anymore.

“Hate you, ugly cow,” thought Matt. He looked up at the teacher, willing her to understand what he was thinking. This was it, the final straw. Matt had reached this point before but had always come back. Not this time. He would from this moment not speak in class. He would sit there silently, uncommunicative, unresponsive in every way possible. He would, except for his bodily presence, not be there.

“What a bitch,” said Jed as they filed out of class. Matt did not respond, he was still focused on being mute and just wanted to be left alone, even by his friends. Jed was a best friend. He faced the same challenges, he understood. They regularly consoled each other and plotted imagined revenge on their tormentors. Matt enjoyed the creativity Jed put into planning his big day when the world would flip and revenge would be had. He particularly liked the modified rack that Jed had drawn that would allow various pieces of the body to be pulled off selectively, one by one. They had fantasised and laughed about just who they would like to see face the ‘rack re-education programme,’ as Jed called it, and in what order and how slowly each piece would be pulled off.

“Shrimpy, pay attention, Shrimpy,” called a boy in a mock-feminine voice as Matt walked through the school gates.

After school was a risky time for Matt. Boys would often congregate outside the gates and if they had nothing better to do, would look for a soft target. On the worst days, they followed him down the road and slowly escalated the torment to pushing and tripping. ‘Good trip? You’re such a pushover,’ they would sneer while laughing.

Fortunately, this was not one of those days. Matt fought back tears as he walked down the road. To cry would somehow be a violation of his vow, a defeat, an acknowledgement of hurt. He was determined not to let this happen again. Matt walked with his head down, his hands in his pockets, lost in his thoughts.

It took him around twenty minutes to walk home if he did not stop. Most days he did stop, sitting under the trees by a pond and watching the ducks. “Ducks,” he thought, “they have great lives, simple, just paddling around in the sun.” He sometimes saved crusts for them from his sandwiches. He was envious of the ducks’ seemingly easy life and wished his life was as simple and as happy as a duck’s on a sunny day.

“Matthew?”

Matt awoke abruptly from his thoughts. Who was this? He heard his name clearly but did not recognise the voice. Furthermore, whoever had called out did not seem certain they had the right person.

“Matthew, is it you? You’ve grown so much!”

Matt turned and looked across the road toward the young man strolling toward him. Who was this? He was smiling broadly and looked very relaxed. Matt stood up and wiped his hands on his shorts.

“Great to see you.” A hand stretched out toward him. “Remember me?”

Matt shook the offered hand. He had no idea who this smiling stranger was.

“I’m Dylan, one of Simon’s friends.”

“Oh yeah,” said Matt, realising as he spoke it was obvious he had no idea who he was talking to.

“How have you been?” Another smile.

“Were you the guy with the motorbike?” Matt immediately regretted asking this and looked at the ground. Motorbikes and Simon were forbidden topics. But was this the link to Dylan?

“Yeah. Simon and I rode a lot.” There was a quietness in Dylan’s voice.

Matt realised he had mentioned the one thing he should not have. “Sorry,” he said, dropping his head.

“You’ve nothing to be sorry about. It was a long time ago and nothing to do with you.” Dylan paused, now seemingly lost in his thoughts. “This must be your last week at school. How’s it going?”

“Okay, I guess,” said Matt unconvincingly.

“Hmmm, school. Remember it well,” said Dylan with a wry grin and raised eyebrows. “Which way are you heading?”

Matt pointed and started to walk, Dylan joined alongside him.

“People call me Matt now.”

“Okay, Matt it is! Are you into any sports?”

“Not really,” said Matt knowing this sounded a bit lame. He was tired of being asked about sport. Simon had been the sporting one and Matt avoided sport at every opportunity.

“I’m staying with a friend in town,” began Dylan, “well sort of a friend. He was my mum’s partner for a while, but he was a lot younger than her, so not really old enough to be my father. I think friend is the best description.” He looked at Matt. “You’re starting college next year right, year nine?”

Matt nodded.

“Okay, you’ll see him there, he’s a teacher. Simon and I were best buddies at school. We trained together, rode together, and planned to travel together once out of school.”

Matt looked at Dylan and tried to imagine what Simon would look like now if he were still alive.

“I’ve finished university, been travelling for a year. Mostly doing all the things Simon and I dreamed about. In a couple of months I start a new job but thought I’d spend the summer here first. Catch up with some old friends and enjoy my last bit of pre-corporate life.”

Matt stopped walking and pointed down a long driveway. “This is my house.”

Dylan folded his arms and stared down the drive. He took a big breath which he let out very slowly. “Yep, remember this place well.” He turned to Matt and smiled. “I’m going to be around for a bit. We should catch up.”

“Sure,” agreed Matt while thinking it would never happen.

Dylan put his hand on Matt’s shoulder. “Same time, same place tomorrow?” Dylan grinned again and Matt found himself grinning back. Dylan squeezed Matt’s shoulder a bit more firmly. “It’s good to see you, Matt. Catch you tomorrow.”

Matt watched Dylan walking down the road. He looked very athletic and was wearing new jeans and a collared, short-sleeved shirt. Matt turned and wandered down the driveway. He could still feel his shoulder where Dylan had squeezed it. He threw his schoolbag onto his chair and lay on his bed.

Matt’s room was a sleep-out attached to the garage. He liked being separate from the house and it certainly impressed his friends. Besides, if he lived in the house his friends wouldn’t come and visit. It was hunger that eventually prompted Matt to head into the main house.

“Hi, Jane,” said Matt quietly as he walked past his mother.

Jane did not respond. She was sitting in her usual place, the reclining chair in the lounge. Matt made a sandwich as quietly as he could. His friends were scared of Jane. She didn’t speak to them, she just stared and if there was much noise she would leave the room. The problems with noise had been the catalyst for Matt moving to the sleep-out. It wasn’t so bad now. Matt and Bill, his father, had learned how to navigate the day without upsets. No surprises, no mess, and no noise. Matt had long since stopped wondering

what Jane thought about while sitting in her chair. She just looked out the window as if waiting for someone to come, or something to happen. It was just the way it was. Matt returned to his room and flicked his computer on. Jed was online, “Bummer about last class, what a hag,” wrote Jed. Matt paused for a moment, funny, he’d forgotten about it already. “All good,” he wrote, “Game on.” Matt loved gaming and so did Jed.

Later when resting on his bed he heard the squeak of brakes and the familiar creak of his father’s car door. He called out, “Hey, Bill, come here.”

Bill walked over and leaned against the door frame. “What’s up?”

“Do you remember Dylan?”

Bill gave a puzzled look. “A friend of yours?”

“Nah, Simon.”

His father thought for a few moments before blowing out a long slow breath and nodding slowly, “Yes, I remember Dylan.” Bill raised his eyebrows. “Why do you ask?”

“Well...” Matt hesitated as he knew this was going to be awkward. “I met him today, after school. He’s back in town for a bit.”

Bill looked at Matt in silence for a few moments. “Please don’t mention it in front of Jane.”

Matt nodded. “After school tomorrow I’m going to meet some mates.”

Bill stood up from the door frame. “Okay, be back at six for dinner.”

Bill started to walk toward the house, paused and turned. “Dinner will be in twenty minutes.”

# Two

## Meeting Art

The following day at school was little different, except for Matt successfully ignoring Rooster the tormentor. Rooster had stepped up the torture to include poking Matt in the back with the sharp edge of a broken ruler. Matt's vow of silence had grown to a vow to show no response, to acknowledge no victory to his tormentors. He ignored them and focused on catching up with Dylan. Rooster was not happy in defeat. He had been very confident he would get Matt to react in class and had not enjoyed failing. He was particularly annoyed he had not received the complete support of the back row. Some clearly thought Matt had won the day by ignoring the relentless jabbing.

"Leave him alone, man. That's enough bro." In other words, Matt won. Rooster sat back in his seat, his arms folded, eyes fixed on the back of Matt's neck. He shook his head slowly and scowled, a storm was building.

Matt and Jed chatted excitedly as they hurried through the school gates. Jed was keen to meet Dylan too. The boys were so deep in conversation they failed to notice they were walking into a trap. Matt fell forward as his knee was pushed into the tarmac from behind. He felt the skin tear on his knees and hands.

"Sorry mate," sneered Rooster. "I was just trying to get past."

Matt stayed on the ground only partly because he was hurt, mostly because to stand up would invite further abuse.

“Here, want a hand? C’mon man, it was just an accident.” There was a sound of triumph in his voice, an unconcealed delight. He had Matt just where he wanted him. Matt stayed on the ground hoping Rooster would give up and move on. But Rooster was going nowhere, he was still smarting from his defeat in the classroom. There were few opportunities left to target Matt and he was not going to miss this one.

“Hi, Matt. Who’s your friend?”

Matt turned his head and looked up. There was Dylan, smiling, hands in his pockets. This was not the same smile as yesterday though, or the same voice. The smile was tight, the voice menacing. Dylan walked closer.

“It was an accident, I was trying to help him up.” Rooster stepped back. He didn’t sound very sure of himself now and Matt knew why. Rooster knew he could work the teachers, but he didn’t know Dylan and potentially there was more than a detention at stake.

Dylan stared at Rooster while he spoke. “It was no accident, I saw what happened. You’re a bully and arse ugly at that.”

“Excuse me, Miss,” called Dylan as he waved his hand to a passing teacher.

“Yes?” she asked, with practised disinterest.

Matt slowly got up and inspected his grazed hands. He could see they were going to hurt for a while. He looked at the teacher, then back down at the ground, she would be no help.

“Is there a problem?” her disinterest made even clearer.

Dylan stared back at the teacher for a moment, thinking. “This boy’s just tripped up Matt, look at his knees.” He pointed to Matt’s bleeding knees then looked back to the teacher.

“You boys are always mucking about,” she said dismissively. “Just leave each other alone.”

She gave Rooster and Matt a stern look, turned, and strode away. As the teacher left, Rooster walked slowly backwards, grinning in triumph. Just before he reached the school gates he pulled the finger at Dylan.

Dylan nodded slowly. “Thanks for the invitation, pal.”

He turned and held out his hand to Jed. “Hi, I’m Dylan. Okay, let’s get going. We can sort the wounds out when we get to Art’s.”

Matt looked down at his knees and held out his hands for closer inspection, but Dylan and Jed were already walking down the road and chatting. Matt had been hoping for a bit more sympathy.

“Can we go by my place and drop off my bag?” called Matt.

Just as the day before, Dylan led the conversation, asking Jed about school, plans for the holidays, and what was happening in his world. Matt wanted to join in but didn’t know how. He felt a little jealous but kept this to himself. After all, Jed was his best friend and he would soon be walking a different way.

Dylan waited on the footpath while Matt ran down the drive to drop off his bag. “How’s Jane?” he asked when Matt returned.

“Okay,” Matt replied. “Where are we going?”

Dylan noted the change of subject and decided to leave further questions about Jane for now. “We’re going to see Art. He’s the bloke I was telling you about yesterday. Come on, let’s go.”

Matt struggled to keep up and began to puff so hard he could only speak in short bursts. Dylan pressed on though, seemingly unaware of his struggle. Matt stared at the house, he had often walked past and wondered who lived there. It was an older white wooden house with elaborate trimmings around the windows and under the gutters. It was perfectly painted, with comfy-looking chairs on the verandah. Between the gate and the house there was a crowded flower garden flowing onto a brick path. Matt thought it looked beautiful, it was nothing like his house. Matt paused on the path and looked at the garden. He could hear bees buzzing and smell the flowers.

“Fatso, we’re home,” called Dylan as he opened the door.

Matt heard music and the clatter of dishes. “Come in, come in. I’m in the kitchen.” It was a cheery call, almost singing. “But leave your shoes and attitude outside.”

Matt took off his shoes and put them next to the others by the front door. There was a small sign that read 'Shoes and Attitude.' The floors were polished wood, there were colourful rugs, flowers in vases, brightly patterned covers on the couches and chairs, and paintings on the walls. Matt walked slowly, there was colour everywhere. This was Matt concluded, the most beautiful house he'd ever seen. The kitchen was huge and to Matt's eye, very flash. The dining room alongside it was partly a conservatory that opened out onto a larger deck where Matt saw an awning, outdoor furniture and more garden beyond that.

"Welcome, you must be Matt. I'm Arthur, but you can call me Art."

There was an emphasis on the 'you' that made Matt feel special. Art put his hand on Matt's shoulder. "Now come and show me what vegetables you like and which you don't. There is only one rule." Art held up one finger and smiled. "You must be honest. Food is to be enjoyed. Especially here, and you can't do that with food that makes you gag! Though when you get older you'll find a few wines will help."

Matt looked at the vegetables. They were lined up on the kitchen bench, they all looked perfect, clean, and fresh. Matt pointed to the broccoli and carrots. Actually, they were the only ones he recognised.

"Broccoli and carrots it is, with rack of lamb," said Art rubbing his hands and jiggling his eyebrows. "What would you like to drink? There is of course water, but also apple juice or orange juice."

"Orange juice please," said Matt.

"Did you hear that, Dylan? Matt said please. I thought you said he was just like you?"

Dylan was relaxing in a chair. "I meant he was slim and good looking like me, that's all," he said while winking at Matt.

"I'm kind of skinny, don't you think, Matt?" asked Art with a pleading tone.

"Remember, Matt," said Dylan with a hint of triumph, "it's the same as the veges, the truth, and only the truth!"

Matt smiled, he didn't know what to say. Art wasn't skinny, not really fat either, mostly just a big belly, though he did have quite skinny legs. He took the offered juice, sat next to Dylan, and watched Art preparing the food. Art was singing along quietly with the music. Matt noticed Art had long hair at the back, which he thought made him look a bit playful.

"Hey, Art," called Dylan. "Do you have something for Matt's knees?"

Art turned around and looked down. "Goodness, what happened there?" He disappeared for a few moments and reappeared with a plastic box.

"I fell over," offered Matt as Art knelt in front of him.

"Hmmm, socks off and outside," ordered Art with mock authority.

Matt sat down on the deck outside the kitchen, he could hear the sound of water splashing in a sink. "Right, you can sponge your knees with this while I get a towel."

Matt could smell the antiseptic, it reminded him of going to the dentist. He felt a little guilty as after a closer look he could see his knees were not that bad.

"How are they looking?" asked Art as he returned with a towel. "Hmm, not too bad. Well done, now dry them off with this and let's take a good look."

Matt gently dabbed his knees, not wanting to get blood on the towel.

"Don't worry about the towel, Matt, it'll clean up just fine. Right this job's done, no bandages required. Let's get back to cooking!" He rubbed his hands and smiled broadly. "Cooking is one of the delights of life, along with the eating of course. You can help with that part."

Matt felt a sudden chill in his stomach. He hadn't told Bill he was out for dinner, more importantly, he hadn't told Bill he was with Dylan. A nauseous feeling flooded through his body.

"Dylan," called Matt with a slight waver in his voice.

Dylan walked over and sat down next to Matt. "What's up, buddy?"

"I didn't know about dinner and didn't tell Bill, I'm supposed to be home by six."

“Do you want to call home?” asked Dylan.

Matt sat quietly, he didn't know how to explain the situation to Dylan. “Jane will get upset,” he said quietly.

“Okay,” said Dylan, pausing while he thought. “Should we call Bill?”

Matt nodded glumly, he was not looking forward to fessing up. Then abruptly, “No, I should just go home.” Matt had changed his mind, it was best to avoid trouble.

Dylan rubbed his chin and looked straight ahead. He leaned forward and placed his face in his hands. Matt wondered what he was thinking. Was he angry? Finally, Dylan turned to face Matt. “No, Matt, that would not be best. We need to sort this. Please trust me and put Bill's number in my phone.” Dylan pulled out his phone and handed it to Matt. “Please don't put in the number for Dial a Prayer.” Dylan was resolute, the voice matter of fact. Matt reluctantly put Bill's number into the phone.

“Bill might get upset if you call,” he said as he passed the phone back. He felt cold in his stomach at the thought of Bill finding out he was with Dylan.

“That's his choice and his problem,” said Dylan, “he has to get over it at some point, and the sooner the better.” Dylan put his hand on Matt's shoulder. “Trust me.” Dylan stood up and wandered off with the phone to his ear. Matt heard him say, ‘Bill, great to hear your voice, it's Dylan.’ His voice faded as he wandered through the house.

Matt was sitting, staring into the garden wishing he'd insisted on going home when he felt a nudge on his back. A small white and grey cat was pushing up against him. Its back was curved up high and its tail, a very long tail, was stretched right up to Matt's shoulder. Matt gently reached around to stroke the cat, being careful not to scare it.

“Matt, meet Tac. Tac, meet Matt,” called Arthur from the kitchen.

Tac carefully made his way around and climbed onto Matt's lap, sniffing as he went. Once satisfied with his inspection Tac started prodding with his paws. Matt felt the prickle of claws through his shorts. After a minute

or so of prodding and prickling, Tac turned around and around in circles before settling down and starting to purr. Matt tentatively ran his fingers along Tac's back.

"Tac is a very good judge of character," called Art, "and he seems to really like you!"

Matt smiled, he liked the feeling of Tac on his lap. Tac wriggled a bit and carefully tucked his tail around as he made himself comfortable. Dylan's voice got louder as he walked back to the deck. "He's right here, I'll pass you over. Great to chat, Bill. See you soon." Dylan winked and passed the phone to Matt, giving him a thumbs up.

"Hi, Bill," said Matt tentatively.

"Giddy, Matt," said Bill, sounding surprisingly happy, "you enjoy your dinner and I'll see you later. Please text me when you start walking."

"Yep, sure," said Matt.

"You enjoy yourself. Everything's okay."

Matt handed the phone to Dylan.

"It was easy," said Dylan, smiling and holding his hands out wide. "I just told him the truth."

Matt smiled back while wondering quite what the truth was that Dylan told Bill.

"Now this is a meal, Matt." Art was smiling and holding out his glass. "A bit early I know, but this way we can sit outside in the sun. Here's to tomorrow, Matt's last day of school for the year!"

Matt held up his juice and they ceremoniously clinked their glasses together.

"This really is a meal," thought Matt. Large colourful plates, a bright tablecloth. Even the food was laid out carefully. Best of all, it tasted great. Matt listened as Art and Dylan chatted about the news of the day, teasing one another and involving Matt in their banter. Music played gently in the background. After they had eaten, Matt helped Art clean up in the kitchen and wash the dishes. Matt had never seen such a clean and well-organised

kitchen, everything had its special place. He learned that Art was a music and art teacher.

Art led Matt over to the piano. "Play any music?" asked Art.

Art sat down and started to play then looked up at Matt. "Music is the soundtrack to life, Matt."

Matt listened while Art played several tunes, some classical, some not, a few he recognised. Matt thought Art must be the very best pianist there was. After a while Art stood up, smiled, and beckoned Matt to sit at the piano.

"Now press any keys," said Art, flippantly waving his arm. "Any keys."

Matt didn't know what to do. He carefully put his fingers on some keys and pushed down. An awkward sound, not very musical at all, filled the room.

"Did you hear that, Dylan? Matt can play the piano!" exclaimed Art with theatrical delight.

"I'm actually very impressed," called Dylan from the couch.

"Now, Matt", said Art leaning forward with both hands in front of him. "You can tell someone who can't play the piano very simply. When they press on the keys, no sound comes out. If sound comes out, they can play. And you, Matt can learn to play." He smiled. "Now let's get started."

Art pulled up a chair alongside Matt and began explaining the layout of the keys, showing Matt a simple tune to try and remember. Dylan watched from the couch and smiled to himself. He could remember Art taking him through the exact same lesson.

Art stood up. "Now you practice that for a bit while I catch up with Dylan."

Dylan smiled and gave Art a thumbs up. After a while Matt turned around, he was tired from concentrating on which keys to press and seemed to have reached a plateau.

"That was very good, Matt", said Art while nodding thoughtfully. "You're welcome to practice whenever you visit."

Matt nodded back. "That," he thought, "would be good."

Dylan stood up. "Before you go, I have something to show you. Follow me."

Matt followed Dylan outside to an old shed with folding wooden doors. Dylan jiggled them back and forth until they slid open. The shed contained most of the things you might expect to find in an old shed, an old car, and gardening tools hanging on the walls. But there was also something you would not expect to see, the motorbike. It was a gleaming, purposeful speed machine which was, as Dylan put it, a 'road weapon.' This bike was not made for gentle touring. It was made to test the limits, to enthral and specifically, Dylan had said while stroking the tank, 'to top 300kph.'

"Tomorrow, on your last day of school, I'm going to pick you up on this bike. And this is what I need you to do".

Matt listened to Dylan's instructions. He practised getting on and off the bike and putting on the helmet. He practised squeezing with his knees and holding the straps on Dylan's jacket. Though all the while he was thinking, "I can't do this, I must not do this."

As he walked home, his head was awash with worries. Would Bill still be happy that he hadn't come home for dinner? Would Dylan really meet him tomorrow after school?

# Three

## Last Day of School

Matt paused and stared at the school gates. This would be the last time he walked through them. He took an involuntary breath as a wave of discomfort flooded through his chest. Although school had been far from fun, there was a certainty about the routine. He had learned ways to cope with teasing and bullying. There was a degree of safety in the familiar, the known, however unpleasant this had been. What new miseries might college bring? Matt felt his chest tighten at the thought of college. His discomfort drifted away quickly as he remembered that this day would be very different. He could hardly believe he'd agreed to meet Dylan after school and leave on the motorbike. Neither could his friends when he told them. This would be the most rebellious thing he had ever done.

The last school day was uneventful. Everyone, including his tormentors, had been preoccupied with plans for the coming holiday season. Matt had asked Dylan to meet him across the road from school, away from the inevitable bustle of the last day. In particular, he didn't want any of his tormentors pushing in on his meeting with Dylan. When the bell rang, he hurried toward the school gates. He was so focused on crossing the road and avoiding any unwanted attention he failed to notice the crowd which had formed on the grass circle at the front of the school.

“MATT, MATT. Over here, man!” Jed looked wildly excited and was waving furiously. “Come here, man!”

Matt tentatively made his way to the crowd on the grass circle, the forbidden grass circle. The meticulously groomed grass circle that declared, ‘This school is in order and everyone knows the rules.’

But not today. In the middle of the grass circle was Dylan, sitting on the bike with arms folded. He had a very dark visor on and was ignoring both the kids milling around and a very annoyed looking teacher, the same teacher from the day before. Somehow Dylan looked impossibly relaxed, resting on the bike as if nothing was unusual in the slightest. As Matt drew close Dylan reached down and picked up a helmet from the ground and held it at arm’s length. Matt felt awkward and conscious of the stares. To his surprise he found it hard to walk normally. His legs felt funny and awkward. As he took the helmet he felt Dylan holding it tight and looked up. Dylan nodded slowly and deliberately. Matt knew what he meant. He had to do what he had agreed to. But could he? His heart pounded. Matt put the helmet on and slowly mounted the bike. He felt the engine burst into life beneath him. The teacher and other kids stepped back and waited, but the bike just sat there, burbling, waiting to do what it was made to do. Matt looked down and could see Dylan looking at him in the mirror. The bike issued a short impatient roar and Matt knew this was a prompt for him. His time had come, this was the moment the new Matt stepped up. Slowly he looked around at the onlookers, his stunned friends grinning insanely, the curious onlookers, the tormentors, the impatient teacher, and a montage of faces from the last two years of his life. He turned halfway around toward the onlookers and slowly raised his arm and stuck out his finger. He knew his friends wouldn’t mind, it wasn’t meant for them, they would know that. Matt counted slowly to three and turned back to face the front of the bike. He felt a tap on his knee, his cue to hold on. He gripped the seat with his knees, grabbed the bottom of Dylan’s jacket tightly, and held his breath.

The bike angrily spat and twitched. Slowly it began to move forward, the back wheel spinning on the grass, the sacred grass. The kids in front of the bike jumped back and made space. When they reached the concrete strip Dylan paused, gave the engine a sharp blast. Matt felt the rear tyre tearing at the concrete, leaving a little reminder, a tag. Dylan looked up and down the road surveying the scene, he waited for a car to pass before rolling purposely, slowly, out onto the road like a plane lining up on a runway. The bike rolled forward, Dylan focused on the street ahead then gradually at first, the bike drew breath before lunging forward. Matt felt the thrill of acceleration, the blip of a gear change followed by a frightening rush of power. He felt the front wheel lifting as they launched down the road. Matt saw glimpses of astonished faces as they tore away from school. Once they were out of sight Dylan slowed down and rode cautiously through town, they both knew they had rolled the dice. Matt looked at the passing houses and wondered what his friends would be thinking now. He also wondered where Dylan was taking him. They weren't heading to Art's. Instead, they headed out of town and up the winding road that led over to the beach. Dylan slowed down as they reached the top of the hill and pulled over at a lookout. Matt stumbled when he climbed off the bike, to his surprise he found it hard to walk.

Dylan grinned at him. "The same thing happens to me sometimes." He held out his hand, smiling, and as they shook he said, "Welcome to the holidays, buddy!"

Matt grinned back and walked over to the lookout platform and leaned on the wooden barrier. The sea was glistening in the sun.

"Well. You've finished school in style! What are your holiday plans?" Dylan asked.

"Computer games with Jed," suggested Matt, unconvincingly.

Dylan stared at Matt in silence for a few moments. Matt looked down and shuffled his feet in the gravel. "I'm going to be around for summer, perhaps we could do a few things."

“Sure,” Matt replied.

“Let’s sit on the grass for a bit.”

Matt sat down alongside Dylan and followed his gaze out to sea. “What a stunning view,” said Dylan, “it doesn’t get any better anywhere else in the world.”

They sat for a few minutes, both looking out across the water. Matt watched the waves rolling slowly onto the beach below, too slowly it seemed, but they always did from this far away.

Dylan broke the silence. “Is there anything you’d like to do during the school break?”

“Not really,” replied Matt. He hadn’t even considered what he’d do, apart from getting away from school and keeping to himself and a couple of friends.

“Any idea what you want to do when you leave school, Matt?”

“Nup,” replied Matt.

“Me neither at your age. Apart from leaving town!”

“Yeah, me too,” agreed Matt.

“Do you have a bicycle?”

“Yep,” replied Matt. Although he hardly ever rode it. He was happy to walk and it was in a rather rough condition.

“Righty ho, let’s head back to Art’s and walk around to meet a friend of mine. I’m going to borrow a bike. We can go cycling.” With that Dylan rolled back onto his shoulders, thrust his legs hard into the air, and landed on his feet. He pushed his arms high above his head, stretching as he strode back to the motorbike.

“Set?” asked Dylan once Matt had climbed on.

“Yep.”

“Better be,” replied Dylan as he gave the engine a short sharp burst.

Once back at Art’s house Dylan changed into shorts and a tee-shirt. They were a lot rougher than the clothes he wore earlier. “Drink, bathroom?” asked Dylan.

“All good,” Matt replied.

“Great, let’s go and meet Fuzz.”

It was a long walk across town, to a neighbourhood Matt did not frequent. It wasn’t dangerous as such, he just found it a bit intimidating. Some of the school bullies lived there and he had long ago decided to avoid passing through. It turned out that Fuzz lived in one of the most run-down houses. The grass was long, children’s clothes, toys, and junk mail lay discarded on the front lawn. The house paint was peeling, where there was paint. The roof gutters hung sadly with tufts of grass peeping out in places. Surely it would not be long before they fell off. A cat, which must have been watching them approach, burst out of a garden and ran around the side of the house.

Dylan banged loudly on the door. “It’s the police, please come out naked immediately,” he yelled.

There were noises from inside as someone made their way to the door, seemingly moving things out of their way. The door opened, a scruffy hairdo and bushy beard appeared.

“It’s a crime to impersonate the police you know,” said the bushy beard through a broad grin.

“Oh well,” replied Dylan, “let’s call the real ones.”

“No way, they’ll smoke all my gear,” came the reply.

The bushy beard withdrew into the house as the door swung open. Matt followed Dylan inside not knowing what to expect. However once inside he realised everything was as should be expected. It was dark, the curtains were closed, the floor, couch, and table were covered in clothing and rubbish. There was fast food packaging and, judging by the smell, fast food scattered around the room.

“Make a space to sit guys, eat anything you find. Nothing’s more than a month old.”

Dylan walked over to the bushy beard. “Hug me, baby.”

“I hope you don’t smell bad,” replied the bushy beard as they gripped each other in a bear hug.

Dylan, still with an arm over the bushy beard's shoulder, turned to face Matt. "Hey, Fuzz, this is Matt. He's Simon's younger bro."

"Simon the machine?" asked Fuzz.

"Simon the machine?" thought Matt with surprise, he'd never heard his brother called this.

"Good to meet you, Matt, we all went to school together." Fuzz slapped Dylan enthusiastically on the back. "What the hell are you doing back here, Dyl?"

"Just taking a break before starting my corporate life," replied Dylan, "I'll be around for a couple of months."

"Cool, what ya doing these days?"

"Lawyer," replied Dylan.

"Crap bro, I was just about to offer you a smoke!" laughed Fuzz. "Matt, would you like a smoke?" Fuzz pulled a small plastic bag from his pocket.

Matt looked quizzically at Fuzz. Fuzz burst out laughing and threw the bag at Dylan. "Some papers on the table."

"All good, Fuzz. Not today."

"Sheez," said Fuzz, shaking his head and looking at Matt. "He really must be a lawyer."

Dylan turned to Matt. "Now you can't know Fuzz without knowing why he's called Fuzz. The reason this gentleman..."

"Gentleman?" exclaimed Fuzz, "I haven't been called that in a while. Wait a second." Fuzz rubbed his bearded chin, his eyes raised in contemplation, then very loudly. "I've never been called a gentleman!"

Fuzz and Dylan laughed loudly and Matt quietly joined in. Fuzz had a well-practised, clownish manner and Matt began to feel more comfortable. He leaned back into the chair, having decided to ignore the possibility he was sitting on old food.

"Well that's likely true," said Dylan. "The reason for the name Fuzz is that this dude had a beard from about age six."

Fuzz laughed loudly. “Not quite,” he said.

“I can remember the very moment I wanted to be Fuzz’s friend,” Dylan continued. “A female teacher asked him if he was going to shave that ‘silly bit of fluff’ off his chin. He said ‘I’ll shave my fluff off if you do too, but I want to see the proof.’ Can you believe it? The whole class nearly fell out the window.” Dylan was laughing so hard he struggled to complete what he was saying. Fuzz was trying to reply, but he too was struggling to talk while laughing.

“Bastards caned me, good and proper,” said Fuzz finally while shaking his head. “So I shaved my fluff and every time the teacher asked me something I would rub my chin, with a big smile of course.”

Again Dylan and Fuzz laughed and laughed. Matt laughed too. He tried to imagine this happening in his class, but couldn’t. There was surely no one in his class so cheeky.

“And I can remember the very moment when I wanted to become Dyl’s friend,” began Fuzz.

Dylan raised his hand.

“Shush you, he can hear both stories,” continued Fuzz while waving his finger at Dylan. “We had this dude teacher, he was cruel. Would put you down, make you feel stupid, just for fun. We hated his guts. He used slides on his laptop during class and one day just as we were arriving, he was stepping out for a bit. So Dyl goes to his computer and wadda you know he hasn’t logged off. So Dyl starts fiddling around with his computer, now I had no idea what Dyl was doing but...” Fuzz paused to laugh. “Let’s just say that a VERY interesting picture appeared halfway through class.”

Through more laughter, Dylan interjected, “It should be noted that I was sent to be caned too, Matt, so think carefully.”

“But you weren’t caned were you!” laughed Fuzz, “your mum came down and sorted them out.”

“Yep,” replied Dylan, “she sure did. Something about not teaching students that the female form was offensive.”

There was a brief silence once the laughing died down.

“What are you up to these days, Fuzz?” asked Dylan.

“Machine operator at the mill, well at least til they do drug tests.” Fuzz burst out laughing.

Dylan smiled. “Partner, family?”

“Little girl, Lucy, three. Stays on the weekends. The missus is back with her parents.” Fuzz tipped his head from side to side while thinking. “It works. How about you?”

“Single, no strings,” Dylan replied.

“Not for long now you’re a lawyer bro. They’ll be queuing up,” laughed Fuzz. “You know how it works, first G-strings then just strings.”

Dylan smiled. “No queue at present, but I’m working on it.”

“Hey, I’ll show you the bike.”

They walked out the back of the house to a wooden shed. The shed, as should be expected, was in a similar state to the house. Matt wondered if the only thing holding the shed up were the contents inside it.

“Haven’t ridden it in a while,” Fuzz said, “but she was all functional the last time I did.” He started dragging a bike out by the back wheel. There were clanging and banging sounds as various items fell to the floor. Eventually, the bike broke free and was dragged out for inspection. It was so dusty and covered in cobwebs it was hard to even know what colour it was. The bike almost looked like it was cringing in the sunlight.

“Well, that looks like a pretty darn good bike, Fuzz, awesome.”

“It was a good one when I got it. Bought it to ride to the mill when I started. There’s a pump on the floor, looks like you might need it.”

“Yep,” said Dylan as he bent down to pick up the pump. “Got a hose to blast off the cobwebs?”

“Yeah, bro, over here.” Dylan hosed the bike before brushing it with a broken broom head he had found in the shed.

“Thank you so much, Fuzz, this will be perfect. Just needs a bit of love.”

“Be careful, the bike might get a fright if you do that,” laughed Fuzz, “and remember, if anyone says ‘hey that’s my bike’, you didn’t get it from me.”

Dylan gave Fuzz another big hug and slapped him on the back. “So good to see you, man, so good.”

“You too, bro. Stay in touch,” replied Fuzz, before turning to Matt. “Remember, bro, if anyone around here bothers you just let me know. That way I can avoid them and save my own ass.”

Fuzz slapped Matt on the back and they all laughed loudly. As they walked through the gate Dylan looked at Matt. “Let’s go past your place, we can chat on the way. I’m not going to try and ride this until I’ve had a closer look. The chain is pretty rusted up for starters. Let’s cut through here.”

Matt felt a tightness in his chest and an urge to walk another way. “Rooster lives on this street,” he said, with a slight quiver in his voice.

Dylan noted the quiver. “Rooster?”

“The boy who tripped me after school.”

“Oh, butt face, I remember him,” replied Dylan. “Which house?”

“Further up, there, the green one,” replied Matt pointing across the road, but without looking up.

Dylan stopped walking. “Seriously, that green one?” Dylan stood still, shaking his head and pushing his lips together. He took a big breath in and breathed out slowly, then in a calm, but serious tone he asked, “Does Rooster have an older brother? A really ugly one, could be mistaken for a donkey’s butt. About my age, but behaves like a three-year-old.”

“Yep,” replied Matt, mimicking Dylan’s tone and nodding his head. “Rooster’s always telling us he’s going to get his big brother to beat us up.”

Dylan shook his head and laughed quietly. “Oh boy, what a small world. Okay, okay. Well, that’s made my day. Ha! It must be genetic. Donkey butt used to be a proper nuisance when I was at school.” Dylan shook his head, before quietly adding, “One more, Simon, one more.”

They walked slowly past the house and Dylan had a good long look. “Wonder if that’s his car?”

“One more what? What did this have to do with Simon?” Matt wondered to himself.

Dylan walked in silence for a while, before asking Matt, “By the way, Fuzz explained a very important thing to you today. Do you know what that was?”

“Don’t keep food in the fridge?” joked Matt.

“Well, I guess that would make feeding the cat easier. The lesson was ‘don’t use drugs’, got it?”

“Yep,” replied Matt.

There was another period of silence as Dylan reflected on what to say next. “Fuzz kept up with the rest of us until about halfway through college, before he disappeared into a cloud of smoke. To be fair he had a seriously mucked up home life. But others made it through. He’ll probably lose his job you know. Everyone’s moving to drug testing for jobs like his.”

“Bill says they’re going to start drug tests at the mill,” said Matt.

“Is Bill still an electrician there?” asked Dylan.

“Yep.”

# Four

## Meeting Gary

**M**att checked the time on his phone, he couldn't believe he was getting up early on a Saturday, let alone the first day of the holidays. He and Jed had planned a competition to see who could stay in bed the longest, he'd lost this on the very first day. He walked fast to make sure he arrived at Art's house on time. Walking fast wasn't a problem as he felt rather excited. Today was going to be an adventure, he was going to meet Gary. He'd heard about Gary many years earlier from his brother Simon. Gary sounded impossible. Impossibly strong, impossibly fast, and just a little bit scary. Gary had been Simon's karate instructor. Matt slowed down as he approached Art's house to give himself time to get his breath back. Dylan was standing in front of the old car from the shed, the bonnet was up and he was poking things, pulling on cables with a look of curiosity. Matt walked up and stood beside him. He had not seen the car up close, it seemed very small, almost like a toy.

"The oil looks a bit goopy," mused Dylan.

"Isn't oil meant to be goopy?" asked Art.

"Hmmm," Dylan replied. "Well, I think we'll get there and back, guess we'll find out." Dylan wiped his hands slowly and carefully on a rag, looked at them, clearly not satisfied with the result. "Grab a drink if you need one while I wash my hands, jump in and we're off!"

Matt felt a slight clunk as he opened the car door. Art noticed and called out, "Just lift the door a bit to close it. I think the elbows are worn."

"Elbows?" asked Dylan with a smile as he climbed in.

"Well whatever," replied Art, "it's arthritis of some sort I'm sure."

Dylan leaned over to Matt. "Thank goodness they don't make em like this anymore," he joked, "check out these dials!"

Matt had noticed the unusual dashboard, this was the oldest car he'd been in. Dylan gave a toot on the horn and waved to Art as they gently rolled down the road. Dylan laughed as he changed gears.

"Wow, this gearbox has character, Matt. I think we'll do Art a favour and service his car. We might be using it a bit. Put your window down, we'll blow some of the smell out if we can. It'll also keep things a bit cooler, there's no air con in this baby."

Matt gazed out the window, watching the town slowly rolling by. It was a beautiful, clear summer day. The morning was warm, the afternoon would be hot. They drove inland alongside the river before heading up a minor road into the hills. Dylan drove slowly and treated the car with great care as if he expected it to fail at any moment.

There was almost no chatting on the drive. Once they hit the open road it was just too noisy, particularly with the windows down. Matt noticed that Dylan was continuously adjusting the steering wheel back and forth, even on straight sections of the road. He too reached the conclusion it was a good thing they did not make them like this anymore. Eventually, they reached Gary's farm and pulled up to the gate. There was a winding gravel driveway that led to an almost entirely hidden house. Dylan parked alongside a shed on the right and looked over at Matt. "Okay, buddy, let's go."

Matt detected a waver in Dylan's voice and thought that he looked a bit uncomfortable and nervous. "Why was this?" he wondered.

As Matt opened the car door a black and white dog came tearing around the side of the house, skidding in the gravel. It was barking, baring its teeth,

and lunged at Matt. He quickly pulled his leg back and closed the door.

“Bess, Bess, get over here. Over here you miserable excuse of a dog,” called Dylan.

Dylan put a knee on the ground as Bess approached him cautiously, growling and snarling, but wagging her tail. Bess sniffed Dylan, paused for a moment then started furiously wagging her entire body and jumping at Dylan’s face. Dylan rolled her over and roughly scratched her belly while she playfully bit him on the arm. “You’re a silly dog and you have dog breath. What’s your excuse? How come you have dog breath?”

Dylan waved to Matt indicating he should get out of the car and come to him. “Just stand still and let Bess sniff you. She’ll be fine once she’s had a little nibble. And anyway, she never eats much.” In fact, Bess was very welcoming and Matt even dared to squat down and give her a tentative scratch.

“Looks like I’ll need to shoot that dog and get another one,” said a loud voice, “she’s supposed to chase the riff-raff away.”

“I was wondering what we’d have for lunch,” joked Dylan.

They greeted each other with arms held out wide. Matt watched as they hugged, he could see Dylan being moved side to side as Gary hugged him and patted his back. Gary let Dylan free and walked over to Matt. “Matt, pleased to meet you. I’m Gary,” he said with an outstretched arm.

Matt was struck by the size of Gary’s hands, they were very big, strong hands. Matt followed Dylan and Gary as they walked toward the house. He watched Gary very closely, Gary was about ten centimetres taller than Dylan and seemed twice as broad. Indeed Gary was a very big man. Matt was surprised when they walked around the side of the house to see a complete change of scenery. There was a very well kept garden and outdoor living area. It was like they had just walked from a farm to town in ten steps.

“Heather, are you in earshot? We have guests,” called Gary.

“Guests?” a gentle voice called back. “Okay, I’ll put the gun away.”

Heather bustled through the door. "Oh, Dylan, how good to see you," she said as she hugged him long and hard. "Goodness, how long has it been?"

"You must be Matt, lovely to meet you," smiled Heather as she shook Matt's hand. "Come and sit down."

Matt sat quietly and listened to the others talk. Heather asked Dylan endless questions about what he'd been up to. Matt was curious to hear that Dylan not only had a law degree but had been travelling around Asia and Europe. After a while when the talking had slowed Gary pushed his chair back.

"Right, time to see what you've actually been up to. Your kit is where you left it. Will meet you in five."

Dylan gave Heather another hug before leading Matt around the side of the house to what looked like a shed. It was not a shed. When they stepped inside Matt could see it was a dedicated dojo. There were shelves with neatly folded karate gis, a shower, and coloured interlocking mats on the floor of the training area. Dylan collected his gi and showed Matt where to sit. When Dylan returned Matt was most surprised and quite impressed to see he was wearing a black belt. Dylan walked through the door to the main training area, bowed, walked on to the mat and started to bounce around. He looked very purposeful as he worked his way through what was clearly a well-practised warm-up routine.

Gary arrived through another door, that Matt surmised must connect directly with the house. His black belt was almost white around the middle from years of being tied and untied. He smiled at Matt and patted him on the shoulder before bending down and whispering in Matt's ear, "I'll soften him up and you can finish him off."

Matt looked up at Gary and smiled when Gary winked at him. Gary bowed and walked onto the mat. Dylan stopped warming up, faced Gary and they bowed to each other.

"Bag, kata, let me know when you are ready," said Gary.

"Hai," replied Dylan.

Dylan walked to the back of the dojo and began to move much more quickly, his gi cracking with punches and kicks. Matt was fascinated. After a few minutes Dylan stopped, he lightly bounced around, and looking satisfied, picked up a square impact pad, walked to the centre of the coloured mats, and waited.

Gary walked over to Dylan. “Warm up each technique as you need, five of your best when you’re ready”.

“Hai,” Dylan replied.

As Gary called the commands Dylan worked his way through a variety of standing punches, stepping punches, kicks, and simple combinations. With each technique, Dylan would build up slowly and nod to Gary before giving the pad five of his best. Matt marvelled at the sound as the pad was hit. “Those hits,” he thought, “were pretty darn hard.”

“Very good,” declared Gary as he put the bag down. “When you’re ready, pick your favourite kata, take your time, don’t rush it, focus on technique and balance.”

Dylan walked back a few steps, he looked down, closed his eyes, took a big breath in and breathed out very slowly and deliberately. He bowed and stepped forward. He yelled a word Matt did not understand and launched into the kata. Matt was transfixed, he had never seen a kata before. He could feel the power and scarcely believe the speed that Dylan moved around the mat.

“Good,” said Gary nodding, “very good.” Gary walked to the back of the dojo and picked up a pad. As he walked back past Dylan he casually handed it to him. “Set?”

“Hai,” said Dylan.

BOOM. What just happened? Dylan had gone flying backwards and was now walking back toward Gary. BOOM and again Dylan went backwards. Matt could see that Dylan was feeling those hits even with the pad. Gary moved on to some kicks and Matt started to worry about Dylan, he was being knocked around and folding in the middle. But he kept walking back. BOOM, BOOM, BOOM.

When Gary had finished he patted Dylan on the shoulder. “Thank you, that was great, I don’t get to hit the pads so often these days.”

Gary and Dylan bowed to each other and walked off the mat. Dylan winked at Matt as if to let him know all was well. After Dylan was changed into his clothes, he and Matt walked around to the patio where Heather and Gary were waiting. There were drinks and, as Matt would come to learn, the inevitable baking. They did not stay for long, but it seemed clear that Dylan would be back soon. He wanted to make the most of the opportunity to train with Gary.

Once in the car and heading down the driveway Dylan said, “I don’t think I’d survive one of those hits without the pad.”

Matt looked at Dylan thinking, “Who would?”

“Don’t worry though,” said Dylan with a smile. “Gary knows what he’s doing, you always make it, just. Did you look at the photos on the wall?”

Matt nodded.

“Simon’s there and so is Liam. Liam was Gary’s son, he died of cancer. Liam was the beast, no one trained harder, or was better than Liam. He had all of the genes and he lived, breathed, and dreamed karate. We were all a bit scared of Liam.” Dylan looked over at Matt and raised his eyebrows to reinforce his point.

“What was Simon like?” asked Matt.

“Simon was very good, he was a technician, with very tidy technique and he was way better than me at kata,” replied Dylan with a laugh. “I think he’d be happy with that assessment. Would you like to learn karate, Matt?”

“Yes,” Matt replied. He immediately wondered if this was true. Karate looked great, but was he up for it? It did look a bit scary.

“I’ll talk to Gary then.”

“Gary?” thought Matt. He had presumed that Dylan would teach him. He was not so sure about training with Gary.

“How about an ice cream? I reckon I’ve earned it,” asked Dylan. Matt raised his eyebrows in reply.

“Righty, let’s go get them! We’ll leave the car at Art’s and walk in. Parking might be an issue.”

It was indeed busy in town and parking would have been tricky. There were also plenty of people vying for somewhere to sit, so Matt sat at a table to hold a seat while Dylan waited in the queue. Matt was not used to getting an ice cream in town. As his father would always point out, they were much cheaper at home. He did mention this to Dylan, however, Dylan had replied, ‘Just think about how much I’ll save once I’m dead!’ Matt was not too sure about the logic, but could not think of a reply. Matt and Dylan sat in silence, slowly eating their icecreams, enjoying the sun, and watching people walk by.

“Hey, there’s someone I know, gosh what’s her name?” mused Dylan quietly to himself.

“The ice queen,” replied Matt. He immediately regretted saying this, he did not know her at all. He was just repeating what he’d heard others say. Matt had seen her in town many times, always with dark glasses, always with copious, yet impeccable makeup. She was of voluptuous proportions with long dark hair. “She was,” Matt thought, “very beautiful.”

When she walked into a shop nearby Dylan said, “Wait here, buddy, be back soon.” Matt watched Dylan walk to the shop, drop the remainder of his ice cream in a bin on the way, and stand just inside the door.

Dylan could not hear the conversation, but he did see the shop assistant reach into the cigarette cabinet. He had long, straight thinning hair, and Dylan guessed he looked a lot older than he was.

“One day,” said Dylan loudly, he paused. “One day you will be so ugly that children will cry when they see you and just to be kind, their mothers will scratch their eyes out.”

She stood very still, put both hands on the shop counter and leaned forward with her head down. Dylan could see her head shake slowly from side to side. What he could not see was her smile. The shop assistant noticed the smile and looked at Dylan with his head tipped and eyebrows raised.

“One day,” she said, before pausing to gather her thoughts. “One day you will be even smellier. So smelly in fact that when you walk down the street the birds will fall dead from the sky and the flowers will suck themselves back down into the ground.”

“One day,” said Dylan, he paused. “You will be so fat that all the concrete paths you walk on will crack and your personal gravity will suck the moon from its orbit so that it splats into Earth.”

She took a big breath and smiled. Although she came here often the shop assistant had never seen her smile. “Dylan... you cheeky bastard.”

She turned around. Dylan held his hand out and wobbled it from side to side. “Maybe not so ugly,” he said.

Matt watched the two of them walk back to the table. He very much hoped that Dylan would not mention the ice queen comment.

“Jude, meet Matt.” Jude smiled and waved.

“Jude, do you remember my friend Simon from school?” asked Dylan.

“The athletics guy?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. He was friends with your brother too. Matt is Simon’s little brother.”

Matt groaned inside. Yes, Simon was the athlete and he was anything but. Also, he was not used to hearing Simon’s name used in general conversation. He was very surprised to see Jude talking and smiling, he’d only ever seen her looking somewhat expressionless and unapproachable. Matt sat quietly and listened to Dylan and Jude catch up. He soon learned that they once had a relationship based entirely on teasing and this used to drive Jude’s older brother bonky. When Dylan would visit the teasing would interrupt serious boy stuff, like pimping their bicycles and practising stunts. It seemed that Dylan had been quite the wheelie master. After a while, Matt decided to walk home. Dylan promised to get in touch after he spoke to Gary about karate. Matt looked back before heading around the corner and could see that Dylan and Jude were still laughing and reminiscing. He walked slowly

back to his house. He was still thinking through the karate idea. He liked the idea of learning karate, but at his own pace. He was not so sure about training with Gary at all.

“Hi,” called Matt as Bill passed the kitchen window. Bill understood this as code to drop by Matt’s room for a chat.

“I met Gary today, the karate teacher,” offered Matt to see what Bill would make of this.

“Oh yes, what did you think?”

“Well, I’d like to do karate. But I don’t know if I can yet. Dylan’s going to ask.”

“Are you sure it’s right for you?” asked Bill.

Matt knew this meant that Bill did not think that karate was right for him, or more likely that Matt was not right for karate.

“Dunno,” replied Matt. He really didn’t know. He certainly never wanted to be hit as hard as Dylan was.

“Well let’s see what happens. Where’s the karate club?”

“I don’t think there’s a club. It’s at his farm.”

“How will you get there?”

Matt could hear the tone of voice that said, ‘What a hassle? How far out of town? How much will it cost?’

“Dunno. Maybe ride my bike,” offered Matt.

“It’s way too far to bike, boy.” Bill turned and walked away.

# Five

## Trip to the Lake

Matt woke early, he lay still and listened to the sounds of the neighbourhood waking. Mostly it was the sound of birds. There were not the usual sounds of neighbours preparing for work, the slamming of doors, coughs, and starting of cars. Weekend mornings were quiet and private. Getting up early was easy, he liked having the town to himself. Anyway, he was too excited to stay in bed. Dylan was taking him for a ride, on the road weapon. Matt had not told Bill, but he often didn't explain what he was up to, or who he was seeing. The key was to be home on time and eat your dinner. Matt knew if he was back on time and calm there would be no questions. He packed his backpack with a jumper and jacket as instructed. To avoid entering the house and waking Bill and Jane he skipped breakfast, he could eat later. There was plenty of time to kill before arriving at Art's house, so he decided to walk through town and past the marina. He often did this, he would sit and watch people prepare their boats and head out to sea. Matt dreamed of having a boat one day. When he was much younger his family had a small boat, he could just remember this.

Although a sunny day was looming it was still cool and Matt kept his hands in his pockets, walking briskly to warm up. It was quiet in town, still too early for the tourists and only a couple of shops were in the process of opening. Once through town, Matt walked along the stopbank next to the river. A

diving bird looked at him before flipping under the water and disappearing. The bird reappeared further down the river alongside Matt, he imagined it was following him. At one stage he saw it flash by under the water, he was surprised at how fast and elegant it was. Nearly every time it surfaced it would tilt its head back and with a quick shake swallow a small fish. “What a great life,” thought Matt, “fishing whenever you’re hungry, resting whenever you want.”

“Hey, what are you doing here?”

Matt jumped, he had been daydreaming. “Hi, Dylan.”

Dylan was walking up the side of the stopbank with his hands on his hips and mouth wide open, panting. He was soaked in sweat. “Thought I’d get a run in before breakfast, I’ll walk with you for a bit. Where are you headed?”

“Just going to look at some boats.”

“Great, I’ll show you Gary’s.”

“Gary had a boat, at the marina? What a surprise,” thought Matt. He couldn’t wait to see it.

Gary’s boat turned out to be a smallish launch. Dylan explained that it had been on the farm for years and sat idle following Liam’s death. It was a project Gary and Liam had been working on together. The boat was called Eldie, which Dylan explained came from ‘LD’, or Liam’s dream. The boat was quite small compared to some others. Small, but very sturdy Dylan had explained. He said that one of Gary’s sayings regarding the boat was, ‘The idea is to stay for a long time, not get there in a short time.’

“I’m going to keep running before I get cold, see you at Art’s. Just come now if you like, he’s up”.

Matt watched Dylan run ahead along the stopbank, but he quickly disappeared from view. He was very fast.

Dylan took his shirt off and used it to wipe his face as he opened the door. “Hey, Art may as well start cooking, I’ll zip through the shower. Matt’s about ten minutes behind me.”

“Perhaps take Matt in there with you...,” replied Art with a sigh.

“Yep, he’s pretty smelly. There’s no bathroom in his sleep-out and I don’t think Bill’s onto this,” replied Dylan.

“What about his mother?”

“Still the same I hear, mental health challenges and stuck in the house.”

“Well, we need to make a plan. It’s grim.”

“You’re not joking! There’s no way he can train with Gary smelling like that,” replied Dylan.

Matt could hear Art and Dylan laughing as he walked up the steps to the front door. The door was partly open so he walked in. His stomach stirred when he smelled the food.

“Come in, sit down, breakfast is ready to go,” called Art, “to save time I took a guess. Hope this is okay.”

Matt smiled at Art and nodded. Art winked back. It was of course very okay. After they had finished eating Dylan stood up and started to pick up the plates.

“Leave the dishes, Dylan. I have nothing better to do. You two saddle up and go have some fun.”

“Are you sure?” asked Dylan. “I’m sure Matt would rather clean up.”

“Absolutely, besides I quite enjoy it,” said Art while winking at Matt.

Actually thought Matt, Art must enjoy doing the dishes as he always seemed to be tidying up something.

Dylan spent some time with Matt in the shed, explaining what to do and what not to do on the back of the bike. It seemed pretty simple and Dylan assured Matt they would be taking it very gently. Matt was particularly intrigued with the helmets and their ability to play music and let them talk to each other. Flash. Once the final checks were done and they were on the bike Dylan beeped the horn and called out to Art to let him know they were on their way. Art leaned out of a window and gave them a thumbs up. Indeed Dylan did take things very gently and Matt enjoyed the meandering ride through the hills toward the lake. They overtook a couple of cars and

when they did Matt felt a thrill from the brisk and effortless acceleration of the bike. After a while, he even hoped Dylan would push things along a little harder.

As they came over the crest of the last hill before the lake Dylan slowed down so they could have a good look before dropping down amongst the trees. The lake looked stunning. It was a mix of sparkling blue and glassy patches, surrounded by hills of deep green native bush. Matt remembered boating on the lake when very young, though he had not been here for years. They turned onto a narrow, unsealed road and slowly made their way to a small beach. There was no one else at the beach, it was too early. This was just the way Matt liked it. Dylan parked the bike off the road under a tree, taking care to put some sticks under the stand so the bike would not tip over in the sand. Matt noted that the sand was different from the beach at the sea, it was coarse and crunchy to walk on. He picked some sand up and let it run through his fingers.

“It’s volcanic,” explained Dylan, “pumice and other igneous rock.”

Matt looked at Dylan with a slightly baffled look on his face.

“Igneous rock is full of gas, so it’s very light. It comes out of volcanos. Simon and I used to ride our bikes here all the time, and guess what we did when we got here?” Dylan raised his eyebrows and held his hands out wide, hinting that Matt should make an outlandish guess.

“Went fishing?”

“Nooooo,” laughed Dylan, “that would’ve been more sensible though. We had a skinny dip! Now guess what we are going to do?” Dylan was smiling broadly.

Matt could see he was serious. “No way, just no way,” he thought. Matt shook his head, he felt very uncomfortable taking his shirt off in front of anyone, let alone getting naked. He just didn’t know what to say.

“Life is to be lived, Matt. Today you start living. Up until now, you have just been getting ready. It is not a crime, it is a bit of fun so... ready, set,

GO.” Dylan started ripping his clothes off and putting them on the bike. “Come on, before anyone turns up!”

Matt had no answer. So riding on Dylan’s enthusiasm he started undressing as fast as he could. The sooner this was over with the better, it seemed like a very bad idea though. They ran down the beach and into the water. It was very cold and normally Matt would not have got in at all, let alone completely naked. But he pressed on trying to keep up with Dylan. Swimming naked felt rather weird to Matt. He was surprised how different it felt to swim with shorts on. A mix somehow of being vulnerable, yet free. Dylan swam over to Matt and they both looked out toward the centre of the lake. Matt could just touch the sand with the tips of his toes.

“Well done, Matt. I am sooo proud of you. Let’s stay in just long enough that the pie we get for lunch will be the BEST pie we’ve ever had. But, not so long our willies fall off,” he said while jiggling his eyebrows and smiling.

Matt smiled back. He loved pies and it was a funny thought, but Dylan was right, that pie was going to taste pretty good. Dylan dived under the water, popped up for a breath then dived again swimming back to Matt.

“I think my willy is falling off,” said Matt, hoping to prompt a return to the beach.

Dylan smiled and shook his head while looking over Matt’s shoulder. “You have got to be joking, there’s a car coming.”

Matt raised his eyebrows and gave Dylan his best ‘Yeah right’ look.

“Actually there IS a car coming. Don’t look and get their attention. Hopefully, they’ll drive on by.”

But the car paused. Dylan waved, then with considerable resignation said, “They’re getting out. Darn, it’s getting rather cold out here too. Just our luck, two girls.”

One of the girls was looking around, she spoke to the other one who also looked around. They both turned and looked at Dylan.

“Hey guys,” yelled the first with her hands on her hips and a big grin. “I don’t see any towels!” Their triumph was unmistakable. After some further chatting and giggling, they walked back to their car and sat down in the sand.

“Got all day,” one of them called. They were both grinning broadly beneath their sunglasses.

Dylan turned to Matt. “Okay, buddy, we can’t stay out here, we’ll have to front foot this one. Just smile, walk over to the bike and put your clothes on. Don’t make a fuss, be as relaxed as you can. Think of the pie.”

Matt felt panic welling up inside. There was NO WAY he was walking out naked. He took a couple of fast breaths, surely it would be better to die. Dylan watched the panic sweep across Matt’s face. Matt’s panic reminded him just how tough it was to be young and vulnerable. Matt, he knew, was not ready for this.

“Plan B,” said Dylan, “don’t make eye contact, no matter what, just wait for me to distract them. Head along the beach and keep looking across the lake. Walk calmly to the bike and put your pants on as fast as you can and call me. Got that? Just your pants, nothing else. Don’t make me wait. Remember no eye contact and no sudden moves. Smooth and steady.”

Matt nodded. Dylan smiled and put his hand on the side of Matt’s head. “You’re all good, buddy. One day you will laugh so hard about this, I promise you.”

Matt smiled weakly. He believed Dylan, but right now he would rather die than face the girls while naked. Dylan winked, turned around, and walked straight toward the girls. That certainly got their attention, he was right about that part. He did not just walk toward them, he walked right up to them and stood with his legs apart right in front. Matt quietly slid along the beach as inconspicuously as he could while looking out to the middle of the lake before slipping out of the water. Using a tree by the motorbike as cover he walked briskly to the bike. He struggled to put his undies and trousers on quickly, they stuck to his legs and were full of sand. However, out of consideration for Dylan’s predicament, he did not take time for comfort.

“Hey Dylan,” called Matt, “stop showing off.”

Both girls swung their heads to look at Matt.

“Bye ladies gotta go, the boss is calling,” said Dylan as he walked toward Matt. He looked up and silently mouthed, “Thank you.”

“Hey, the other one got away!” called one of the girls.

“He was very kind,” called Dylan as he pulled up his pants. “He did not want to show me up.”

“Don’t worry, Dylan was it? We will put your presentation down to the cold water!” The girls laughed and laughed.

Dylan looked at Matt. “I will bet you anything they’re from a farm, only farm girls are that cunning and that cruel.”

Matt smiled and chuckled to himself. Dylan rubbed the sand off his feet. “Let’s go get that pie, it is going to be the best pie ever! Also, let’s find a bathroom and lose some of this sand.”

Matt nodded, at this moment losing the sand was a higher priority than the pie. It was a slow ride around to the store, it was as Matt was discovering, very uncomfortable to ride a motorbike with sand in your undies. It was indeed a very good pie though. Dylan also suggested they get a chocolate milkshake to make up for the skinny dip mishap. Matt was already starting to see the funny side of the day. Would he be able to tell Jed?

“Just so pleased I didn’t get a boner,” offered Dylan.

“Or the girls pull their phone out,” replied Matt.

“Oh yeah! That would have been deadly.”

Soon they were back on the bike and heading home. Dylan rode even more carefully than before, he was scanning the side of the road as if looking for something. He slowed down and pulled off the road. Matt guessed what this meant. Dylan turned off the engine and dismounted.

“Do you know this place?” he asked as he waved his hand around.

Matt had never known the exact spot, but he knew this was it. This was where Simon died.

“Yep,” replied Matt, looking down at his feet.

Dylan put his arms around Matt and hugged him tightly. Matt felt Dylan take a very big breath before he started to sob. Gently at first then more and more strongly. “I loved him, Matt, we were like brothers.”

Matt felt his own emotions welling up. Had he ever cried about Simon? Surely he had, but he could not remember. But he was crying now. Uncontrollably. Together they hugged and cried and cried.

Dylan rubbed Matt’s back. “We’re brothers now, Matt.”

Dylan hugged Matt long and hard before patting Matt on the back and heading to the bike. They put their helmets on in silence. Once they were back on the bike Dylan spoke to Matt through the helmet comms, “Remember how to hold on?”

“Yep.”

“Life is for living, Matt.”

The bike burst into life. This time Dylan rode more quickly, pushing through the corners and accelerating and braking more aggressively. Not in a scary way for Matt, but enough to know they were on a mission. As they left the winding section they came to the crest of a hill, Dylan slowed right down with his head held high as he scanned the road ahead. “The road is clear. This was one of Simon’s favourite songs, Wildflower. Hold tight.”

The music started thumping, the bike accelerated and they left the day behind. It was only a short burst of speed, just enough for the bike to make its point. Dylan slowed down to the speed limit and they gently made their way back to Art’s home. Dylan offered to walk home with Matt saying, “I need to stretch my legs.” After walking in silence for a few minutes Dylan stood still. “Matt, there’s something I want to tell you. On the morning Simon died he made me promise to look after you. This is why I have come back.” He put his hand on Matt’s shoulder. “I’m going to keep that promise.”

Matt walked in silence, he didn’t know what to say. The day had been challenging in many ways and at times overwhelming, like no other he

could recall. When they reached his driveway, Dylan hugged Matt. “See you tomorrow.”

Matt nodded. He thought he might cry again, so turned around and walked down the drive.

That night as he lay in bed Dylan’s words kept coming back, ‘Simon made me promise to look after you.’ This could mean only one thing, Simon knew he was going to die. But why?

# Six

## First Karate Lesson

Shorts, tee-shirt, and undies. This is what Dylan instructed Matt to bring to his first karate lesson. As he packed his backpack he felt a stirring in his belly, a little discomfort. Of course, he knew he would be fine, but there was still a lurking unease. He walked briskly to Art's house, replaying in his mind when Dylan was hit by Gary, wondering, "Would Gary hit him too? Surely not."

"Had a crap?" called Dylan as Matt approached.

"Yep."

"Great, you've passed the first test. Taking training seriously. Chuck your bag on the back seat." Dylan tooted, waved to Art and they were on their way.

"We're going to service Art's car while we're at the farm, that's what all that stuff's for," explained Dylan while pointing to the back seat. "I'll get started while you're training, might even be finished before you."

Matt was quiet. He did not want to sound nervous or scared and was sure he would if he talked about training.

"You're very lucky to have the opportunity to train with Gary you know, he only takes a few students on these days," said Dylan, breaking a long silence. "You'll realise one day that you have been trained by one of

the best. Over the last couple of years, I've travelled and trained with many clubs and I have not met anyone I'd swap for Gary."

Matt looked over at Dylan. He was looking serious and seemed to be thinking, reflecting on something.

"And you'll have some fun!" He was back to smiling, he slapped Matt on the knee. "We might even get to fight one day, at one of your gradings, wouldn't that be great."

Matt gave Dylan his best 'whatever' smirk.

"That's a good look, Matt. Just as well you're going to learn to fight," Dylan retorted.

Again Bess came tearing toward the car barking and growling. This time when Matt got out Bess ran over to him, wagging her tail and pushing the side of her body against his legs. He squatted down and gave her a big scratch.

"Bess, you please, what about me?" Bess looked over at Dylan with her ears pulled back, but stayed firmly pressed against Matt's knees. Matt scratched her with extra fervour as reward.

"Come on, Matt, let's get you sorted," called Dylan as he walked toward the dojo.

"Okay, these are the main points. ALWAYS take a shower before training, wash your hair, wash everything. This is your locker. Your training clothes will be in it. After training, put your clothes in the basket, they'll be in your locker when you next come. So go take a shower, get changed and wait just inside the dojo. All good?"

"Yep," replied Matt quietly, he could feel his guts churning again.

Dylan put his arm around Matt's shoulder and pulled him in tight. "You'll be fine, buddy. We've all had our first day. I'm going to give Art's car a bit of love, catch you later."

Gary was already warming up when Matt walked in. "Welcome, Matt. Today is about setting the scene. About learning the absolute basics. The very first of which is etiquette. When we enter the dojo we bow like this.

It's a sign of respect and also a reminder to ourselves to focus on why we are here."

Gary walked to the side of the mat. "So let's bow and get started." They bowed together and walked onto the coloured flooring.

"Before we start training we bow once more, to each other and that is that, we're underway. We'll use English to start with after all this is a karate lesson not a language lesson. However, if you progress we will switch to Japanese, which will make it much easier for you to train with other clubs. Truthfully though most of us butcher the language so badly we cannot understand each other and I am certain that a fluent Japanese speaker would be bewildered. Follow along."

Gary did a simple warm-up, working his way from the head to the feet. He demonstrated push-ups and various sit-ups, leg raises lying down, leg raises standing up. Matt did his best to follow along, he could feel his breathing deepening and his heart thumping harder and harder.

"Let's take a break while you catch your breath. I'm going to ask you the most important question there is to ask at karate. It's the most important question to ask regarding anything you do." Gary paused. "Do you know what that question is?"

Matt shook his head.

"Excellent answer. The question is, why do you want to learn karate?"

Matt paused, he had no immediate answer. Was it because he was so impressed with what he saw previously, or so he could be like Dylan or Simon? Then it came to him, there was a reason. "So I don't get bullied."

Gary nodded. "That's a very good reason." He paused and looked upwards for a moment. "Not being bullied is a good reason. To exact revenge on bullies is a very different reason and not a good one. Does the difference make sense to you?"

Matt nodded.

Gary smiled. "I understand a nod, but in the dojo, we say 'yes sensei' or 'hai', I don't mind which."

“Hai,” Matt replied.

“Fast learner, good.” Again Gary looked up, looked down and rubbed his chin. “The reason why we do things is very important. In fact, the why is the only reason we keep doing anything. The why is the only thing that gets us through tough times. Learning karate can be hard work, there needs to be a very good reason why we train and at times we will want to give up. Imagine for example you cannot swim, but have decided to learn to swim and have set yourself a goal of swimming one kilometre. Now you know what you want to do, swim one kilometre. You know how to do it, start jumping in the pool and training every day. But will you get up every day and train? What about in winter, or when you are sore or tired? The answer depends on why you are learning to swim. If there is no good reason you’ll probably give up. If, however, you must learn to swim to save your life you’ll be motivated. You’ll train and easily learn to swim one kilometre. The why of anything you do is the most important part.”

Gary paused before continuing. “The reason why we do karate will change over time. That’s fine, it’s to be expected. What we all must do is to make sure there is a very good why, not just for karate, but for anything we do. Your first challenge is to find your why, one that will get you out of bed in the morning. I will leave you to think about this. Let’s cover the basic stances.”

Gary set about demonstrating, with Matt following along. Gary pushed and pulled Matt in different directions while showing him how to make his body shape stronger. Eventually, Matt began to tire and lose concentration. Gary indicated to Matt they should kneel facing each other.

“What is the measure of a man’s strength? We do karate to be stronger, what does stronger mean?”

Matt was stumped, he was not expecting questions like this. He could feel that he looked a bit vacant.

“Take your time,” said Gary.

“Well,” Matt started, then paused. “Whether you can beat someone in a fight?” he offered hopefully.

“That’s a sort of measure of strength, but not the one we’ll use here. I’ll tell you mine.” Gary looked straight into Matt’s eyes. “You are strong when people feel safe around you.”

Gary raised his eyebrows to make his point. “People will never fear your strength, they will only fear your weaknesses. Your lack of boundaries, your lack of respect for others. People will never fear your strength. You are strong when people feel safe around you.”

“To finish up, thirty, twenty, ten. Thirty push-ups, thirty sit-ups, thirty squats. Then twenty, then ten. Let’s GO.”

Matt hit the floor and tried to keep up with Gary. What a pace. Matt was breathless before the first set of push-ups and hardly managed any sit-ups.

“Keep going, think of your why,” exhorted Gary, “don’t give up, never give up, your life depends on this. Dig deep.”

At the finish, Matt could hardly get up. Did Gary notice he only did two sit-ups in the last set?

“Follow along with me for a warm down,” Gary instructed, “it’s important to warm down to avoid injury and muscle burn.”

Matt did his best to follow along, but it seemed his arms and legs were ignoring him.

“Well done, Matt, let’s wrap up here. Bow. Now go and tell Dylan that training was easy peasy and you don’t know what the fuss was about!”

Matt smiled sheepishly. “Definitely not easy peasy,” he thought.

“I have asked Dylan to teach you how to do rolls, dive rolls, and walkovers. I’ll see how you are going with these at your next lesson. Before you go. You’re thirteen right?”

“Hai”

“Well done, that was a good effort for thirteen. Do you drink fizz?”

Matt shifted from side to side. “Yep”. Surely Gary was not going to offer him a fizzy drink?

Gary raised his eyebrows. “There’s a better answer.” He paused for effect. “I used to.”

Matt smiled and nodded. Okay, no more fizzy drink. Matt took time getting changed, his arms and legs felt heavy and slow. He popped his training clothes in the basket and headed out to the shed to see Dylan.

“You don’t look as beat up as I was hoping,” joked Dylan.

“Easy peasy, don’t know what all the fuss was about,” Matt replied.

Dylan chuckled. “Now where have I heard that one?”

Matt stood alongside Dylan and looked under the bonnet.

“Actually all wrapped up here for now,” said Dylan. “It’s hard to know where to stop, but today was just the basics.”

Bess, who had been lying down in the sun, started to growl and walk stiffly down the driveway.

“Good girl, who’s that?” asked Dylan.

A small red car came up the drive, as it passed by the shed Matt could see two girls laughing excitedly. They beeped the horn and parked right up by the house. Gary and Heather must have been expecting them, as they were outside almost before the girls got out of the car. Bess was going bonky. Jumping and barking, once she sniffed the driver she went into a frenzy. There was a lot of hugging going on and it looked to Matt, based on the handshake and gentle hugs, that the second girl was being introduced.

“Well,” said Dylan quietly, “get ready to meet Sandra.”

Gary gestured toward Dylan and Matt and the entourage, complete with a very excited and bouncing Bess, walked toward them. Sandra was dressed unusually, Matt thought, she had overalls with shoulder straps. Not work ones, nice ones, just not what you might expect a lady to wear. But she was very solid looking and had dark glasses on. It somehow all seemed to fit.

“Hi, Twinky,” called Sandra as they approached.

She squealed as Gary grabbed her and threw her across his shoulders with her head hanging over his back. "What was that?" he asked. "You be nice, or Allicia and I will take you behind the shed and give you a right spanking."

Allicia was laughing, but she also looked a bit startled. Heather was cajoling Gary to put Sandra down. But he was having none of that. Gary casually carried Sandra the rest of the way over to Dylan and Matt. He turned around so Sandra was facing them.

"Sandra, meet Matt."

"Hi, Matt," she said, waving her hand and smiling.

"Sandra, apologise to Dylan."

"Sorry," smiled Sandra. Then through a very cheeky grin mouthed, "Twinky."

"Apology accepted," said Dylan. He mouthed something back to Sandra which Matt could not make out.

Gary put Sandra down and turned around. "Sandra is my eldest and fattest daughter," he said with his arm over her shoulder and pulling her off balance against him. She was clearly very comfortable with this behaviour.

"I'm also the youngest and skinniest," added Sandra while jiggling her eyebrows up and down. "Hey, Allicia, come here. Dylan, Matt. Meet Allicia."

Heather clapped her hands gently to get everyone's attention, "Lunch is ready. Dylan and Matt, would you like to stay? You're most welcome."

Dylan was quick to reply. "Thank you so much but we have lunch arranged already. In fact, we gotta get going. Thanks for the use of the shed, Gary, and a big thank you from Art."

"You're welcome. Matt, four PM Wednesday," Gary replied.

"Good to see you, Sandra, and nice to meet you, Allicia," said Dylan as he opened the car door. Matt took the hint and walked around the car and climbed in.

Just before they left Gary bent over through the open window. "Dylan, please tell Matt about my neighbour, don't want him getting a fright."

Dylan gave Gary a thumbs up. “Is that old fart still going, surely he’s running out of steam by now?”

“We will have to see, Dylan. We will have to see,” replied Gary.

Dylan drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as they rolled down the drive. “Well, surprise, surprise. Sandra is back. Judging by the gear in her car, she and her pal are back for a while.”

Matt looked over at Dylan wondering what Dylan found surprising about that. “Why did she call you Twinky?” asked Matt.

“Oh boy, that’s a big one,” Dylan looked briefly at Matt. “But it had to come up one day I guess.” Again Dylan drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Well, when I was at school, most people thought I was gay.”

He paused and tipped his head left and right. “And I let them think I was gay. So they called me Twinky. But no one called me Twinky to be nice, alright. They did it to be miserable.”

“Are you gay?” asked Matt.

“Darn, you really just pop out the big ones don’t you. No. I’m not gay, but there’s nothing wrong with being gay and if people were bothering me for being gay, they weren’t bothering others, who were.” Dylan paused. “I was trying to help a friend who was gay and was doing it pretty tough.”

Dylan slowed down and parked the car on the side of the road. “Do you know who I was helping?”

“No...” Matt looked at Dylan. Surely not.

Dylan put his hand on Matt’s shoulder. “Yes, Simon.” They sat in silence. Dylan left his hand on Matt’s shoulder and spoke very softly. “I was trying to show Simon that it was okay to be gay, but it backfired badly, really badly. I was given hell and he knew it. It just made the whole being gay thing look worse. It was a big mistake, Matt.” Dylan’s voice quivered as he finished. He took off his sunglasses and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. Matt felt tears roll down his cheeks. “It was a big mistake, Matt. I’m so sorry.”

They sat in silence for some time, each looking out their windows. As much as this shocked Matt, it also made sense. Simon the perfect. Top of his class, athletics champion, good looking. All eyes were on him, waiting for him to get the girl, fall in love, have a family, and complete the cliché. It's what his parents were waiting for. But he was going to let them down. Only he couldn't let them down.

"I wish I had a friend like you," Matt said, triggering a flood of tears.

Dylan rubbed Matt's shoulder. "You do now, buddy, you do now." Dylan took a big breath and blew it out noisily. "Okay, let's empty the garbage can." He put his hands behind his head and slid his legs forward, leaning back in the seat. "When Simon died I beat the crap out of anyone who called me Twinky. I hunted down anyone and everyone who'd made Simon's life miserable and made damn sure they regretted it. Gary and I had a falling out over this. I stopped training for a while." Dylan looked over at Matt and took his sunglasses off. "Matt, it was the wrong thing to do. But no one could convince me at the time. I doubt that me now could convince a young Dylan that it was the wrong thing to do. I went to war. Now Sandra, well she was in a similar situation. The guys at school used to call her Ugg, short for... However, Sandra could look after herself. Well, what would you expect from one of Gary's kids! Not sure if all those boys went on to be dads if you understand. She called it 'splatty sack'. Hey mate, wanna play splatty sack - splat." Dylan looked over at Matt. "She didn't understand why initially I didn't fight back like she did and she teased me day and night, didn't even take the weekends off, seriously. She thought I was a puss. I couldn't say anything back because of Gary. When I finally did tell Gary, he must have blasted her, cause things got pretty tense between us. Sandra is one tough cookie pal and she's had a rough time. I'm glad to see her looking happy now."

"Change of subject. What did you learn at karate today?" asked Dylan.

"Don't drink fizz."

Dylan laughed and laughed. “Hilarious, damn I got the same lesson once. Now lunch. We’re meeting Jude in town. Okay?”

Matt nodded.

“Good. Let’s park this chat for now.”

“What about Gary’s neighbour?” asked Matt.

“That miserable old fart, just can’t believe he’s still going. What a nuisance. I’ll tell you all about it before Wednesday.”

Matt looked over at Dylan, wondering in what way this neighbour was a nuisance.

“Let’s get your bike around to Art’s and make sure it’s hunky dory. For now though we’ll drop the car off and walk into town. That da plan man.”

Art had insisted that Matt was covered in sunscreen and had a hat. It was, Matt thought, a very silly hat. Next time he would definitely bring his own. It was very hot and sunny though and sunburn was a certainty without it. The centre of town was busy again, the summer crowds had arrived as they always did once school was out. Jude had managed to secure a prime table on a small paved outcrop that jutted out into what would have normally been a car park. It was a sought after location in summer. It was the best place to be seen on a bustling summer day. Matt noted the slight awkwardness between Dylan and Jude. Was that almost a hug before the handshake?

Jude leaned over to Matt and looked at him above her sunglasses. “Now, Matt, be sure to eat whatever you want and plenty of it. Dylan’s shout.”

Matt wriggled a little in his chair and glanced over at Dylan. “Okay, well I’m not very hungry. But I’ll just order heaps anyway. It won’t matter if I don’t eat it.” He glanced at Jude who laughed and gave him a thumbs up.

“That’s me too. Don’t want Dylan to feel his offer is unappreciated!” smiled Jude along with a wink.

Dylan looked at Matt, then over to Jude. “Really. Well, in that case I might not order and just eat your lunch.” He reached over and roughed

up Matt's hair. "You're finding your sense of humour, pal. Looks like I will need to keep an eye on that."

Actually, Matt was starving. The karate training had triggered a hunger far beyond what he was used to and the smell of food around him had sharpened this feeling further. Fortunately, Dylan was onto this and pushed Matt to get the Chicken Max burger. "You've got to feed the machine, Matt," he added.

Matt let Jude and Dylan chat away as he ate. He was so focused on eating that it took him a while to realise that someone was calling out to get his attention.

"Hey, hey. Guys." It was an excited shout. One full of anticipation.

Matt looked over his shoulder to a car parked alongside them. No way, not the girls from the lake. He stopped eating and looked over at Dylan, who was waving gently and not looking particularly happy about being recognised either.

"How's it going, boys? Fancy seeing you here," called the girl in the passenger seat.

Matt recognised that broad, triumphant grin. A car further back in the queue forming behind them tooted. The driver started to inch the car forward.

"Almost didn't recognise you with your clothes on," called the passenger. "See you around," she added as they drove away.

"With your clothes on?" asked Jude. "What's that about?"

Dylan leaned back in his chair and took a big breath in and breathed out slowly. "Well, the joys of a small town, you can't hide around here." He folded his arms and looked down. He started to shake his head. "I don't think you'd believe me." He looked over at Matt. "Finish your burger and tell Jude EXACTLY what happened. Don't leave anything out."

Jude looked at Matt over the top of her glasses again. "Really, Matt, this is your story?"

“Pretty much,” he replied, before looking down at this plate and starting to eat. Not so fast this time though, he wanted some time to think about what to say. When Matt had thoroughly cleared his plate and no more time could be reasonably be spent on it he looked up at Jude. Jude was already looking at him.

“I think they have people in the kitchen to do the cleaning,” she said.

Matt smiled. He was cornered and they all knew it. Dylan stood up and patted Matt on the shoulder. “I’m going for a short walk. Just as it happened, buddy.”

Matt watched Dylan walk away before turning back to face Jude. Jude held her hands out wide and put them on the table. “Just can’t wait,” she said. Her mouth was partly open and Matt could not tell if she was happy or angry.

“Well...,” started Matt, wriggling in his seat. Then he just told her what happened. Quite matter of factly at first. He added how embarrassed he felt and how he would have rather drowned than face the girls naked. How Dylan had saved him by distracting them. How Dylan had said that one day this would be one of the funniest things he remembered about the summer. Matt looked up. Jude did not seem angry now. Actually, she looked quite sympathetic. She smiled and slowly shook her head. “It’s okay, Matt, I’m quite proud of him for doing that. What a funny guy.” She put her hand on Matt’s. “It’s okay, don’t let those girls bother you. I know them, they’re pretty hard work.” Jude leaned back. “All good. How about you go and find Dylan. He still has to pay.”

Jude leaned forward, dropped her head, and looked at Matt over the top of her sunglasses. “But don’t remind Dylan about that, he mightn’t come back!”

# Seven

## Cycling to Karate

“Training clothes, water?” asked Dylan.

“Yep,” replied Matt.

“Okay. Your bike looks good. Remember, as soon as you get there write down how long it took you from the bridge to the shed in your notebook. Take a shower and start warming up. All good?” Dylan smiled and wrapped his arms around Matt. “Here’s a good luck hug and remember, if you meet Gary’s neighbour ignore him. Just peddle a bit harder and leave him behind. You don’t want him in front, he really stinks.”

Matt nodded and pushed his bike down the driveway. He had one last look back at Dylan and Art. Art waved and turned to Dylan. “That was a nervous-looking smile.”

“It would be more nervous looking if he knew what he was in for,” replied Dylan, “I remember my first proper session with Gary. Couldn’t walk for days. Every time I went back I would wonder why and promise myself, this was definitely the very last time.”

Art chuckled. “Sounds like relationships to me!”

Matt checked the time as he left the bridge at the edge of town. He was not sure why he needed the times, but both Gary and Dylan had mentioned it, so he duly made a mental note. Thirty to forty minutes was the estimate

to ride to Gary's farm, 'Depends how good your bike is,' Dylan had joked.

Matt had not ridden his bike much and it didn't take long to feel the effects of pushing a bit harder. The insides of his thighs hurt and his throat started to burn, his breathing got heavier and heavier. Matt reflected on Dylan's advice, 'Don't kill yourself, if you get wheezy, just back it off for a few minutes. But never stop.' When Matt reached a slightly downhill section he stopped pedalling and coasted. He reasoned he would not lose much time having a rest here. Besides, there were some hills to climb before the farm and he should save his energy for these.

Back at the farm, Heather was leaning on the kitchen bench to steady herself as she looked through binoculars. She called out to Gary, "I think your young visitor's on the final approach."

Gary walked behind Heather and put his hand on her shoulder, wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close. "Thanks, honey. I'm on my way."

"Be gentle, hun. He is such a sweetie. Perhaps a bit fragile, this one."

Gary kissed Heather on her ear softly and whispered, "I know." Gary paused while taking a long slow breath. "This is a favour for Dylan, and Simon too I suppose. Let's see where we end up. Better go."

Heather picked up the binoculars and looked again at Matt in the distance. "He's struggling," she called to Gary as he closed the door behind him.

Matt's legs were burning now, but he could not take a break on the hill without stopping. At times he slowed down to the point he struggled to ride straight. 'Pace yourself, but never stop. Never give up,' Dylan had advised. 'Think of it as being a fight, if you stop you die.' Matt heard some loud coughing as he passed a side road. Instinctively he looked down the road and saw a man on a bike.

"HEY," the man called angrily.

"No way," thought Matt, not Gary's neighbour on his very first day. How could he be so unlucky?

“HEY,” louder this time and more menacing.

Matt pushed a bit harder and to his considerable surprise and great delight he found a renewed energy in his legs. Surely the safety of Gary’s gate must be close. Matt pushed and pushed, he could not last much longer at this pace. He heard some coughing from behind. It seemed a bit closer. He snuck a quick look. It WAS closer. He looked ahead and felt a burst of joy, there was Gary’s gate. He dug deeper, pedalling as hard as he could. His lungs were burning but he did not care, he would be first to the gate. Matt pulled off the road and stopped. When he got off his bike he struggled to stand, his legs felt very wobbly. He decided to wait for the grumpy neighbour to pass before opening the gate, Matt did not want the neighbour to see how wobbly he was. But the neighbour did not pass. Instead, he felt a hand on his shoulder. Matt got such a fright that he started to fall over on top of his bike. He prepared to hit the ground but stopped in mid-air. The hand had caught him by the upper arm and pulled him back up.

“Very well done, Matt. Very well done.”

Matt turned, he knew that voice. It was Gary, beaming. Gary put his hand back on Matt’s shoulder. “You put up a good fight, couldn’t quite catch you. Now note the time, there’s a notebook in your locker to write the times down. I will go ahead, just walk slowly up the drive and get your breath back. See you in the dojo.”

Matt watched Gary ride easily up what now seemed to be a very steep drive. Indeed he did walk slowly, he had no choice. Matt put his bicycle in the shed and scuffed his shoes in the gravel as Dylan had suggested. Sure enough, Bess heard this and came tearing around the house barking and growling. He squatted down and Bess ran at him, wiggling her entire body. She sure knew how to make someone feel welcome. As was her way, Bess pushed hard up against Matt’s knees and tilted her head up toward him with her ears pinned back. Matt ran his fingers through her fur, digging down to the skin. Bess it seemed, had a good life, just like

the ducks. Matt felt a lot better after a warm shower. His legs were still a bit heavy, but his throat and chest felt almost back to normal. He bowed and walked onto the dojo mats. Matt felt rather awkward waving his arms and swinging his legs. He was aware anyone watching would see he had no idea what he was doing.

Gary arrived. They bowed. "Thirty, twenty, ten," called Gary.

Just like that, they were straight into it. Gary went through all the same exercises as last time, but with less talking and at a much faster pace. Matt felt his breathing getting heavier and heavier.

"Good effort, you should be warmed up now," said Gary, "let's take a short break." Gary held out his hand pointing to the mat in front of him. Matt knew this to mean he should kneel. Gary knelt in front of Matt. "You've already had your lesson for today. Before you arrived actually." Gary looked straight at Matt in silence. Matt looked back. What could this lesson be? "Could a Matt pedalling up a hill all by himself ever beat a Matt being chased by an obnoxious neighbour, or better still a pack of fierce dogs?"

Matt shook his head.

"Interesting isn't it. So what's going on? In part, it is the fight or flight response, a reaction to danger. In part, it is having a why, which we talked about last time." Gary paused to let Matt consider what he'd said. "But why don't we just perform our best at any time? What do you think?"

Matt thought for a moment before shaking his head. "I don't know."

Gary nodded. "Most don't. We're wired to save our energy for when it really matters. For a high-risk situation, or to achieve a goal that really matters to us. Imagine if we could just turn this energy on when we needed it. That would be good, wouldn't it?" Gary had a habit of speaking slowly when making his points, with sometimes quite long breaks between sentences. Matt had come to understand that he should just wait, Gary would make it obvious when he wanted a comment.

Matt nodded. "Hai," he quickly added, remembering his etiquette.

“Karate is not just about learning to beat someone up. It’s also about learning self-control and self-understanding. Frankly, I feel this is the most important part. However, let’s focus on beating someone up just for the moment. If Matt in a relaxed state would always lose a fight to Matt in ‘being chased by dogs state’, we’d better learn how to turn that state on. Right?”

“Hai”, replied Matt. Now he understood the lesson.

“This takes effort and this takes pressure. You cannot learn this just by thinking about it. Though thinking is an important part of learning. So you will feel some pressure. But you’ll never actually be at risk. You’ll never be hurt. You can bow and walk out that door anytime you like. You just cannot come back again. Understand?”

“Hai.”

“If you don’t regret coming here sometimes. If you don’t say to yourself ‘This is it, I’m never coming back’, then I’m failing you, I’m not playing my part. I’ll respect the effort you make to come here by training you as hard and as well as I can. You will respect me by putting in the maximum effort you can. Effort is the currency of karate. I do not mind how good my students are, some are better than others. I take note of the effort they make. I respect their effort. Is this clear?”

“Hai.”

“You don’t need to tell me whether this is acceptable to you.” Gary smiled. “I will know the answer depending on whether you return.

They stood up and started going through drill after drill. Blocking, stepping, punching, jumping, running three steps forward and back, forward and back, endlessly it seemed. Matt was soaked in sweat and starting to struggle to do even the most basic moves. Finally, Gary indicated for Matt to stand to attention.

“There is one more thing to consider today. Karate is not just about hard work, it’s also about understanding ourselves and self-control. One area we’ll focus on is self-calming for example. Let’s start with a simple exercise. Let’s

kneel. Now with your knees slightly apart, put your hands on your thighs with your fingers on the inside. Now, roll your head back and lean back a little like this, slowly bring your head forward until you feel balanced. The idea is to make sure we are not hunched forward and need to use tension in our muscles to stay upright. That looks good. Now close your eyes, take a big breath in so that your belly sticks out, hold for a count of three and breath out very slowly. As you breathe out focus on nothing but your belly relaxing and falling as far forward as it can. Try that on your own for five breaths. Focus on nothing but your belly relaxing.”

Matt slowly went through the exercise.

“Now open your eyes. Please try that at home, once each morning as soon as you get up and once each night, just before you get into bed. Think about how you feel, try and understand what changes within your body. You will learn to calm yourself in a single breath while standing, while walking and very importantly when threatened. This will help you stay in control and make better decisions.”

They stood up and bowed.

“Before you go, come and have a go on this,” said Gary pointing to a bar mounted off a wall. “It’s a chin-up bar, let’s see how many you can do.” Matt watched as Gary gripped the bar and did a few quick chins ups before letting go and putting a small stool under the bar for Matt to stand on. Matt stepped up and firmly gripped the bar. He did a small jump and a chin-up, then two, then with much leg kicking and straining a third.

“Three,” said Gary, “go and put that in the back of your book with the date. Each month you will get three attempts to do as many chin-ups as you can. Simon and Dylan could each do one hundred over three attempts. Dylan can set you up with a bar at home to train on.” Gary smiled. “Well done. Take a shower, you’ll have clean clothes in your locker. Heather has very kindly washed the ones you arrived in. Once you’re all cleaned up come through this door into the house. We’re in luck, Heather has been baking.”

Actually, Matt had been smelling the baking for the last hour and it reminded him of just how hungry he was. He definitely had not eaten enough. While having a shower he noticed it was hard to lift his arms and legs, he'd never felt like this before. Once dressed Matt poked his head cautiously through the door to the house. Gary and Heather were sitting at a table chatting quietly. Heather looked over and smiled as she stood up.

"Please come in, Matt. Come and have a seat."

Gary pulled a chair out from the table. "Sit up and eat, you must be hungry."

Indeed Matt was hungry. The smell from the dojo was enough to remind him of that, but sitting with food under his nose was almost too much.

"Start with this," said Gary as he picked a scone and slice of cake and put it on Matt's plate. "We don't want you going hungry because you're shy. Eat those while you decide what you really want."

Matt smiled. "Thank you." As Matt looked up with the cake in hand he noticed a piano. Not one like Art's, it was a huge one, open at one end like a big seashell.

Heather noticed Matt's focus on the piano. "Do you play the piano, Matt?"

"Not really," he said, "I've only had one lesson."

"Same as karate, a lot better than you used to be!" joked Gary.

"Well, you're very welcome to practice on this one when you visit," Heather offered.

"Thank you," Matt replied. He turned his attention to eating, Gary kept topping up his plate and Gary and Heather chatted about their plans for the week. When Matt had eaten slightly more than enough he sat back in his chair and looked around the room.

"All done?" asked Gary.

Matt nodded. "Yes, thank you."

"Okay. Throw your bike on the back of the ute. I've got a job to do in town so I can give you a ride. Which is just as well as we've gone a bit late."

“Thank you. Are you sure?” asked Matt. He’d been preparing himself mentally for riding home.

“Absolutely, see you in a few minutes,” Gary replied. Gary watched Matt walk out the door, before turning to Heather. “Poor little bugger. Left to his own too much it seems. He has some heart though, I hope he comes back. Let’s pack some food.”

“All done,” smiled Heather.

“What a woman,” said Gary as he gave her a long hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Gary gave the bike a jiggle to make sure it was settled in the tray of his ute. “You must be special,” he said as he tossed a small paper bag to Matt. “Some snacks from Heather.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” replied Gary, “if Heather wasn’t looking I would have kept them for myself.” With that said they were off. Gary handed his phone to Matt. “Here, call your folks. They must be wondering where you are.”

“As if”, thought Matt. However, he called Bill and let him know they were on their way. What he didn’t know was the real reason for the call was to let Bill know that Gary would be visiting.

Gary had the most relaxed driving style Matt had yet encountered. He doubted they hit the speed limit at any stage. As he looked out the side window he felt his eyes starting to droop and without warning he fell deeply asleep. Gary looked across at Matt with his head uncomfortably on the window and mouth open. He slowly pulled off the road, picked up a jacket from the back seat and rolled it up. He gently lifted Matt’s head and put it back down on the jacket.

Matt briefly opened his eyes and looked directly at Gary. “I’m going to train like Liam,” he said, before falling back into a deep sleep.

Gary put both hands on the steering wheel and stared into the dimming light. He took a long breath, wiped his eyes and looked at Matt. “Where did

that come from, buddy?” he said quietly to himself. Gary drove the remainder of the journey even more gently, to allow Matt to sleep in comfort. He crept up the driveway and parked behind Bill’s car. He remembered the house now, he had seen it after Simon’s funeral. It hadn’t changed much, if at all. He quietly lifted the bike out of the tray and put it in the carport. He heard the house door click as Bill came to meet him. Gary held his finger to his lips, then put both hands to the side of his face to indicate that Matt was asleep. “Good to see you, Bill,” he whispered as they shook hands. “He’s showered with clean clothes on, so we can just pop him in bed. Where are we heading?”

Bill pointed to the sleep-out. Gary nodded. “Open the door, I’ll bring him in.”

Matt did not wake as Gary carried him to his bed and lay him down. Bill pulled the duvet over him and pushed it down around his neck.

Gary motioned to Bill to come over to his ute. “I’ve got something for Matt.” Gary lifted a large chilly bin from the back seat. “When he wakes up he is going to be ravenous. He’ll eat your neighbour’s cat if you don’t feed him.”

Bill nodded and smiled. “I think that’s a risk already.”

“Okay. We have a tray of eggs, bacon, pork chops and some spuds. I would start with four eggs, six rashers and chop. That would be a good start.”

Bill raised his eyebrows and smiled. “Okay.”

“I’m serious,” Gary replied, “that boy has had the biggest day of his life today and he gave it hell.”

Bill nodded. “He was pretty excited about it.”

“We will see,” said Gary, “you’ll know before me. When he wakes up in the morning he’ll either be busting to get back to training, or he’ll want to change his name and leave town. I can never tell which. I let the kids decide for themselves.”

“By the way,” asked Bill, “how much do I owe you? How much will this cost?”

Gary looked down for a few moments, moving his lips slowly as he thought. He looked Bill straight in the eyes. “Nothing. This is for Simon.”

Bill watched Gary reverse slowly down the driveway, they waved and Bill headed back inside the house, put the food in the fridge and headed for bed.

Bill had woken before his alarm went off, which was unusual. He checked the time, five-thirty. Plenty of time to snooze. He looked across at Jane, she had her own bed now. It was easier that way. What had woken him up? He became aware of a shuffling and sliding sound outside his window. He sat up and lifted the blinds.

It was Matt. He was sliding forward, jab, jab. Then back, jab, cross. Bill watched in silence as the memories flooded back. Simon used to wake him up early when training in the carport. Bill got out of bed quietly, walked to the kitchen and opened the door.

“Matt, early breakfast?” called Bill.

“Yep, I didn’t get any dinner.”

“Shhh, Jane’s asleep,” replied Bill while holding a finger to his mouth. “Give me five minutes head start.”

“Yep,” said Matt as he turned around and went straight back to his drills.

“Well”, thought Bill, “that answers the karate question.”

# Eight

## First trip on Eldie

So much for sleeping in every morning once school finished. Yet again Matt found himself getting up early on a Saturday, this time to meet Gary at his boat. In fact, his biggest challenge was not getting up too early. He was excited, not just because he liked boats, but because they were going to have breakfast on the boat. As Gary had explained, ‘You can’t crew if you can’t cook.’ But first Matt would complete his training drills. He’d been doing them every morning and every night and did not want to miss a single session, just in case Gary asked. Once finished, he wiped himself down with a flannel and put on some clean clothes. He could not use the bathroom in the house without waking Bill and Jane, which definitely would not be a good idea early on a Saturday morning. Matt walked purposefully across town and along the river bank. He loved the feeling of walking after doing his drills. He enjoyed the spring in his step and the feeling of being ready for anything. As Matt approached Eldie he could see Gary reclining on a seat, looking across the harbour.

“Morning,” called Matt quietly.

“Good morning to you too,” replied Gary as he turned around. “Climb aboard and have a seat.”

Matt felt the boat move gently as he stepped aboard.

“The only thing I’ve done is get these squabs out,” said Gary, while tapping the bench seat he was sitting on. “They live under here. So what’s the most important thing with boating?” asked Gary with a smile.

“Catch a fish?” asked Matt hopefully.

“Excellent guess, but not quite what I was looking for. I’ll give you a hint. It’s the same thing for when driving a car, using a chainsaw, having sex or meeting your prospective father in law for the first time.”

Matt looked around as if hoping to see a clue. “No idea.”

Gary smiled back. “Safety,” he said, “it’s safety. I haven’t done one thing to prep the boat. You’re going to do it. The best way to learn is by doing. Just like karate or playing the piano, you don’t learn much until you give it a go.” Gary reached into his pocket and held out his hand. “Here are the keys. Unlock the door and let’s get started by getting the little things right. Always latch the door so it doesn’t bang around. Never throw keys or anything else, always pass them carefully so they don’t go overboard. If you take a look at the shelf on your right you’ll find some laminated sheets. Let’s take a look at those.”

Matt pulled out the sheets, the first one was headed ‘Every Time’, the next one ‘Every Now and Then’.

“Okay, let’s start with the Every Time list. You read them out and I will show you how to do the checks.” Gary and Matt spent the next thirty minutes going carefully through the list with Gary explaining why each check was important and how to do it.

“Reckon you could do them on your own next time?” asked Gary.

Matt looked down at the list. “I think so,” he said.

“Do you think you could do them without a list?”

Matt looked down at the list, it was quite long. “Nope, not a chance.”

“Excellent answer. For everything that matters, make a list, use the list. Checklists are gold, Matt, never forget this. Let’s do one thing on your other list, pick one.”

Matt looked down the list for something interesting. “Verify bilge pump operation,” he suggested.

“Good choice. The bilge pump should be working all the time, just in case of a leak. Do you remember where it is?”

“Yep,” said Matt pointing to the floor.

“Great, lift off the cover and come and get a bucket of water.”

Matt carefully lifted the bilge covers and put them to one side before heading to the back of the boat where Gary was waiting. Gary passed him a bucket on a rope. Matt dipped the bucket in the water and pulled it along to fill it up. He carried the bucket inside and under Gary’s guidance tipped the water into the bilge alongside the pump. The pump burst into action and the water was gone in a few seconds. Gary clapped his hands. “Looks good to me, mop up the drips and we’ll make a plan.” Matt dried out the bilge with a towel from a locker called ‘Old stinky towels’, replaced the floorboards and sat by Gary.

“I was thinking,” said Gary, “that we should have breakfast at sea. That way you can learn how to drive the boat.” Gary carefully explained the departure process and asked Matt to explain it back to him. Once Gary was confident that Matt understood he directed him to the bow of the boat to cast off. The boat eased out of the berth very slowly and as planned, which Gary had explained it should, given there was no wind. Wind, he assured Matt, changed everything. As they slowly chugged out of the marina Gary explained the reason for making a radio call outlining their intentions. Matt was not surprised to find there were laminated checklists for this too. Once clear of the marina Gary bumped up the throttle slightly and called to Matt, “All yours.”

Matt cautiously steered the boat down the harbour and out to sea, sticking to the right-hand side of the channel as instructed. Once at sea the boat began to gently rise and fall with the swell.

“When we’re clear of the entrance, turn her to starboard,” said Gary, pointing to his right. “We’ll head a couple of kms up the coast to get clear

of other boats.” Gary sat down and made himself comfortable in the sun. After about fifteen minutes Gary walked back to Matt. “Okay, this should do it. Pull the throttle back, pop her into neutral. Great, now you can flick the engine off. Breakfast time!” exclaimed Gary as he rubbed his hands together. “It’s very quiet, so no need to anchor. Let’s go.”

Again Gary took his time to carefully explain how to fire up the stovetop and cook breakfast. But he did nothing. Matt did his best to follow the instructions, he found some things a bit tricky though. The eggs in particular looked a bit messed up. “Marvellous,” declared Gary as they sat down to eat. “Nothing tastes better than a cooked breakfast, on a boat, on a summer’s morning.” While eating Gary explained how the boat had been a project that had begun with Liam. It turned out that Liam had created the checklists and put the interesting names on the cupboards.

“Do you think you’re up to starting her and heading back?” asked Gary.  
“Yep.”

“Okay, finish this up and we will head back,” said Gary as he emptied the rest of the food onto Matt’s plate. “Training hard is only part of the puzzle, eating your way there is important too. You can’t build muscle with air and water, or fizz and fat.”

Matt had never eaten so much in his life, but he liked it. Gary instructed Matt to go and sit in the sun while he tidied up. “Cooks never clean,” he declared. When the clattering in the kitchen came to an end Gary called out, “She’s all yours again, take us back, skipper.”

Matt started the motor, put it into gear and gently pushed the throttle forward and off they went. Gary took control as they entered the marina and slowed the boat to a walking pace. “If you go slow enough, accidents can be quite fun,” he joked to Matt as they approached the berth.

Matt attached the ropes as instructed and sure enough, they berthed without incident. Gary gave Matt a thumbs up signal. “What a great landing, you’ll be doing this on your own soon.”

Matt went through the shutdown checklist while Gary looked on. “Awesome, Matt. All good for training at ten tomorrow morning?”

“Yep.”

Gary patted Matt on the back and headed to his ute.

Matt walked briskly to Jed’s house. He couldn’t wait to tell him about training, the boat trip and importantly, to fill him in about the girls at the lake. Matt had told Jed a little about the lake trip over the phone and surprised himself about how calm he’d been. Jed had been hysterical. He kept screaming ‘Whaaaaat?’ and wanted all the details. Jed’s excitement reminded Matt just how eventful the last week had been.

The next morning Matt set about preparing for training according to Dylan’s instructions. Eat plenty, but at least two hours before leaving and drink plenty, but only water. He had not asked Gary why training was in the morning this time, but now he wondered. To date, all the training sessions had been at four in the afternoon which suited Matt perfectly. He could pedal home, have a shower, eat and go to bed, as invariably he would be dead tired. The rides to Gary’s farm were getting easier. Matt was not getting much quicker it seemed, but he was arriving in better shape, in that he could still walk. He had, encouraged by Dylan, started to ride his bike at every opportunity. Matt had even started to choose longer ways to get around town and traversing a hill whenever possible, all in the pursuit of getting stronger and fitter. When Matt arrived at the farm he noticed another bike in the shed. Then the unmistakable sounds of talking in the dojo. He would not be alone today it seemed. Matt saw a glimpse of Gary as he walked to the shower, but didn’t see who else was with him. He pondered this while showering. What was going to happen today? Once in his clean clothes, he entered the dojo and waited at the side of the training mats. The boy training with Gary was a bit older than Matt. He had a green belt on and to Matt’s eye looked pretty sharp. He also looked fit and strong. He had long neat hair and Matt could tell

immediately that he would be one of the cool boys at his school. They paused, Gary turned to Matt and waved him over.

“Matt, meet Ricky.”

Ricky bowed and Matt bowed back. Gary indicated they should all kneel. “It’s time to start training with someone closer to your own size, Matt. It’s also time to have a target in mind that is realistic in the medium term. If, as a thirteen-year-old, you wish to be an All Black, the first step is to be a good fourteen and under player, then sixteen and under, then nineteen and under. You cannot just join the All Blacks. Ricky is two years ahead of you at school and karate. He goes to the school you’ll be starting next year. So this is a chance to start next year with a friendship in the bank. I would like you to look closely at Ricky and to set your sights on getting to where he is now, as fast as you can. So we’ll run through some drills, kata and bag work. Please watch Ricky closely.”

Gary looked at Ricky, leaned forward and squinted. “Now, Ricky, don’t get stage fright and make this too easy for Matt, or make me look like a bad instructor.”

“Hai, sensei,” replied Ricky with a smile. He turned to Matt and raised his eyebrows in a welcoming way.

“Matt. Ricky knows the rules of partner training and you’ve heard them once, but let’s be sure. The goal of training together is that BOTH participants learn. The goal is not to dominate and crush our partners. We push each other along and make it real. If we want to have effective blocks, we need to practice with real punches. But if a block fails we don’t push through and smash some ribs. Understand?”

“Hai,” replied Matt.

They stood up and started going through the usual drills. At the end of each drill, Gary instructed Ricky to do another set for Matt to observe. It was very clear to Matt that he had a lot of improving to do before he caught up with Ricky.

“Good,” said Gary when they finished the drills. “Face each other, rei.”  
Matt and Ricky bowed to each other.

“Now each of you put your left hand on the other’s right shoulder. Now put your right hand on the other’s left arm from the outside, just above the elbow. That looks good. Matt, try and push Ricky around a little bit, make sure you have a firm grip.”

Matt rather gingerly tried to push Ricky backwards, but he did not budge.

“Ricky, give Matt a nudge.”

Ricky immediately pushed Matt backwards off balance and just as Matt put his foot back to steady himself, Ricky pulled him forward. He would have hit the floor if Ricky had not held him up.

“That’s what we are after, give it another go, Matt,” urged Gary.

This time Matt gave a sudden push as hard as he could and just managed to push Ricky back, but Ricky very quickly regained his balance and Matt could not move him again. “Good effort, Matt, but Ricky is taller, heavier and stronger. If it comes down to brute strength he will always win. Let’s look at other options.” Gary stepped in front of Matt. “Stand in a short strong stance like this.” Gary placed his hands on Matt’s shoulders. “Be as strong as you can, do not let me move you.” Gary pushed Matt forward and backwards. Not too hard, but hard enough that Matt had to strain to hold his ground. “Okay, so forward and backward is strong. What about rotation?” Gary twisted Matt’s shoulders, again he held firm. “Hmmm. That seems pretty strong too. So I won’t try that in a fight. Let’s try this.” Then with the lightest of touches, Matt fell forward. Gary let him get his balance, immediately Matt fell backwards. “Ahhh, something seems to be working. Let’s see what’s happening. Let me show you using Ricky.”

Gary put his hands on Ricky’s shoulders. “Make yourself strong.” Ricky dropped his hips low into his stance, with his left foot forward. “Now if I push forward, backward, twist, he’s just too strong for me.” Gary looked at Matt to get his attention and pointed to the floor. “But look at his feet. What if I push in a direction perpendicular to the line between his feet.”

Ricky stumbled. "This is like pushing a bicycle from the side, it just falls over. Now Ricky, same again, but this time resist."

"Hai, sensei," replied Ricky in a strong, determined voice. This time as Gary pulled Ricky off balance he immediately stepped and made his stance strong.

"Okay," said Gary, "it seems we need to do better. It is just too easy for Ricky to counter this approach by stepping." Gary grabbed Ricky's shoulders again and Ricky dropped his hips and stiffened his body. But no matter what he did he fell forward, backwards and sideways.

"This is better," said Gary, "we seemed to have stumbled onto something. Let's take a closer look." Gary grabbed Matt's shoulders again. "Now feel your feet. If I simply push you perpendicular to the line between your feet can you step?"

"Hai," Matt replied as Gary gently pushed him from side to side. Matt found he could easily step to regain his balance as Gary pushed him back and forth.

"What's different now?" asked Gary as Matt fell forward. "Or now?" as Matt fell backwards.

Matt looked down at his feet which had just failed him, he had no idea.

"I will show you," said Gary. "Put your left foot forward, now make yourself strong. This time I will hold your left shoulder still, but pull your right shoulder around, using your left shoulder as a hinge. Feel that?"

"Hai."

"Let's try that again. This time try stepping to keep your balance. Ready?"

"Hai."

Gary pulled Matt off balance and Matt easily stepped with his back foot to keep balance. "Okay, let's do that five times," suggested Gary. "Awesome, you have this sorted. Now just one more time."

This time though Matt fell forward. "Hey, what happened?" said Gary. "Let's try a few more times." Now Matt fell forward each time, he could not get his balance no matter how much he tried.

“What’s gone wrong here?” asked Gary. “Any ideas.”

Matt shook his head.

“Well, let’s take a closer look”. Gary indicated to Ricky to step forward and he put his hands on Ricky’s shoulders. “Now watch closely. Put your left foot forward and set,” instructed Gary. “Now I hold the left shoulder steady and turn the right shoulder forward in an arc and look, Ricky can step around. Let’s do that again. This time as I turn the right shoulder around, I slightly tip Ricky to his left and what happens? Look at his right foot! It’s in the air and he can’t step with it. He needs it for balance. With his right foot in the air, he cannot step with his left foot. He’s doomed.” Gary looked at Matt. “Do you understand?”

“Hai.”

“If fighting was only about strength you could stop karate right now and go to the gym instead. Strength is important, but technique and strategy are more important. Now take turns moving each other around, practice what you have been shown. Ricky, you can give advice as you see fit. You have five minutes.”

“Hai, sensei,” said Ricky loudly and strongly.

Ricky faced Matt and bowed, Matt bowed back and they started the drill. Back and forth they went with Ricky easily and relentlessly throwing Matt around. Matt tried to push Ricky off balance, but could only manage it when Ricky coached him and cooperated. Matt could feel himself being totally outmuscled and outmanoeuvred. He could also feel his arms and back tiring quickly. Five minutes had never seemed so long. Matt was relieved when Gary called for them to bow and take a break. He indicated they should kneel and again they knelt facing each other.

Gary looked directly and intently at Matt. “Why do you want to do karate, Matt?”

Matt had thought a lot about this since Gary first raised it. He knew he would be asked again. “So I can look after myself and those around me. So people can feel safe around me.”

Gary nodded and looked at Matt in silence for a few moments. “That’s a very good reason to do karate, Matt. But it comes with some very hard decisions. You’ll need to make these decisions in a fraction of a second. Understand?”

“Hai,” replied Matt, though he was not that sure.

Gary nodded. “Tell me what to do, Matt. I’m walking through town, it’s midnight on a Friday. It’s summer, there has been a lot of drinking going on. I hear a man yelling and a woman screaming. When I get closer I can see a man holding a woman by the hair. They are both drunk. The man is slapping the woman hard, very hard. There are drunk guys standing around and they don’t seem to care. I walk over, ‘Hey, leave her alone.’ I get told to leave, impolitely. A couple of guys step in to block me. I bump them out the way. ‘Let her go,’ I say. There is much anger, yelling and swearing. I am now in the face of the man. I see the woman up close, she has a badly bruised face. He throws a punch at me. I take him to the ground.”

Gary grabbed Ricky and very roughly threw him onto the mat, standing over him. “I’m holding his arm like this.” Gary’s voice was now much louder, his face intense. “He’s screaming and fighting. He says he’s going to kill me. He looks like he means it. The others are circling.” Gary was now dragging Ricky aggressively around on the ground, with one arm poised in a punch above Ricky’s head. Ricky looked scared. “They’re about to attack.” Gary was yelling now. He looked fierce. The hair on Matt’s neck and head stood up, his chest was tight. Matt was scared, what was happening?

“What do I do, Matt? What do I do? QUICKLY, THEY ARE ATTACKING.” Gary was screaming and glaring at Matt.

“HIT HIM,” Matt yelled, “HIT HIM”.

Matt’s eyes were welling up, his breathing was rapid and shallow. Why was Gary being so frightening? Gary nodded. He sat Ricky up and gave him a pat on the back. Matt could see Ricky was shaken too. They were again all kneeling together. Ricky looked down at his knees with a slightly shocked look on his face.

“It’s okay, Matt. It’s okay,” said Gary slowly and calmly. “I did hit him. I hit him very hard and it was the biggest mistake of my life. He died.”

There was silence.

Gary continued. “For me, it was manslaughter, not murder. For the victim, it was a life sentence. For his whanau, it was a life sentence.”

Gary sat quietly looking at Matt. “It changed my life. No more karate in town. No more rugby. I left town, worked overseas for a few years and bought this little farm when I came back. There have been no winners, Matt. Only pain and regret.”

Gary moved closer to Matt and put his hand on his shoulder. “I wanted to be the protector, Matt. Just like you do. But I messed up. Whatever else you learn from me, first learn from this mistake.”

Gary stood up. “Thirty, twenty, ten. Let’s go.” And with that they were off. As hard as Matt tried, there was no way he could keep up with Ricky and Ricky could not keep up with Gary. When the training session was complete. Gary indicated for Matt to stay behind for a few moments.

“Matt, two things. First I want to give Ricky a head start so you don’t feel bad about being left behind. He’s very fast and he has the flashest bike I’ve ever seen a kid with. Secondly, I was wondering if you would like to earn some pocket money and help me out on the farm?”

“Hai,” said Matt immediately, he felt very excited about working on the farm.

“I’ll need to clear this with your father first and by the way, the hai stops the second training stops.”

“Yep,” Matt replied.

Gary stepped forward and put his hands on Matt’s shoulders. “Sorry to give you a fright today. However, this is a very important lesson.” Gary dropped his head a little and looked into Matt’s eyes. “You’re a good kid, Matt. We’re looking out for you.”

Matt nodded. Gary pulled him close and hugged him. “Good, now go try and catch Ricky.”

Matt knew he had no hope of catching Ricky, but he also now knew he could be seen for a while. With this in mind, he pushed hard on the long straight section of road leading away from the farm. There was one thought occupying his mind though. Who was looking out for him, who was the 'we' Gary had referred to?

"Been waiting for ya."

Matt looked up, it was Ricky.

"Thought we could ride back together," he said.

"Cool," replied Matt, "thanks."

# Nine

## Walking Around the Farm

**B**ill made it clear he was not overly keen on the farm work idea. The look on his face, the reluctant ‘I suppose so’, the ‘Don’t complain if you don’t like it.’ However, he had agreed. Matt knew the best strategy from here. Say little about his time at the farm and keep what he did say positive. Dylan, however, had been delighted. “You’ll love it, Matt, and learn so much. I am tempted to come myself.” It was Dylan’s sentiment that Matt chose to focus on as he prepared to leave.

It was a particularly early start and still cool. Cool enough that Matt rode slowly while he warmed up. Being early on a Saturday the roads were clear. So Matt rode down the centre of the lane as if cars did not exist and the roads were made just for boys on bicycles. As was the routine, Matt noted the time he crossed the bridge, he took a big breath and started to pedal harder. The time it took to cycle to the farm had finally started dropping. Each week or two Matt would set a new personal best, which he found very satisfying. Because it was early, cool and there was no wind, this day would be a good day for a fast ride. With this in mind, Matt set about finding his rhythm and holding a steady pace. Dylan had fitted a trip computer to Matt’s bike and Matt had become a bit obsessed with tracking his progress. Matt now knew what speed he had to maintain on each section of the ride

to get a good time. He smiled as he recalled Dylan's words, 'You will never enjoy cycling again, but you'll be faster.' Yes, he would be faster.

Once at the farm Matt put his bicycle in the shed and scuffed his shoes in the gravel. Bess came tearing around the corner of the house, fiercely barking and snarling. She loved her job, to make sure that strangers knew their days were about to come to an end. She also knew this was just for show and her real mission was to alert Gary and Heather to the presence of intruders. So best she put on a mighty show. If Bess met someone she didn't know, she would not approach them. She would stay back at a safe distance, making as much noise and looking as fierce as she could. Bess knew Matt would give her more attention than most. As soon as Bess recognised Matt she would transform herself into a wriggling, welcoming bundle of love. She would bound playfully over to him and push herself sideways into his legs as he knelt. Sometimes Bess would manage to push Matt over, if she did she would take the opportunity to lick his face with great enthusiasm.

This day was no different and Matt knelt while scratching Bess for some time, with one hand behind her ear and the other reached around to her belly. There was no mistaking Bess's gratitude. She gently licked Matt's forearm, encouraging him to keep this up for just a little bit longer.

"Morning, Matt," called Sandra, "come around this way, we're sitting outside."

Bess bounced over to Sandra, a little bit like a rocking horse. Matt followed them to the patio, where Heather, Gary, Sandra and Allicia all sat, seemingly waiting for him.

"Morning, Matt," said Gary, "come and grab a seat and a bite. Your timing's pretty good. Another minute and Sandra would have cleaned this up."

"Still prepared to fight ya for it," said Sandra, while pointing her hand in the shape of a gun at Matt. Unbeknown to Matt though, it was no coincidence. Heather had been patiently looking out the window for him to appear on the final section of road to the farm. Then began another routine.

Gary would load up Matt's plate for him, along with, 'It's just a little bit to get you started.' Though in fact, it would be the biggest meal Matt had seen since his last visit. There was cheerful banter, plans were made for the weekend and following week. After the chatter had started to slow down Gary pushed his plate forward. "Okay, time to go for a walk, Matt. The first thing to do is to show you around and meet the team."

"Thank you for breakfast," said Matt, smiling at Heather.

"No, no, no. Don't thank us, thank the team," said Gary, "we just did a little cooking, some of them made a real commitment. Especially the one who provided the bacon."

"Don't say that," chided Heather, "you will spoil it."

Gary winked at Matt. "I think he knows where his food comes from, Heather." With that said Gary stood up and walked around the table giving each of Heather, Sandra and Allicia a hug.

Gary looked at Matt's shoes. "First stop the shed, we'll find some boots for you." After selecting some gumboots Matt followed Gary around the corner of the main shed and was surprised to see more sheds, many fences, tanks and pens. There was a whole new world that was completely out of sight from the approach to the house.

"We'll start with the chickens," said Gary. "Now these are all layers, just for eggs. We don't have any meat birds, or broilers as they're known. We keep about twenty birds. More than enough for us. That's about one to one and half dozen eggs per day, depending on the time of year and the age of the birds. We get the birds in batches, so these ladies are all the same age. They lay very well for about three years." Gary led Matt down a path between two smallish fenced paddocks. "The chooks reside in 'Feather Mansion' as it's known. It's in the middle of these four fenced areas. The way the doors work means that we can give the chickens access to one area at a time. This way they can always have access to a green zone. I grow veggies in here for us and the chickens. When I am done

with an area I let the chooks loose and they clean it up and finish off the remaining vegetables and all the weeds.”

Gary opened a door to one of the fenced areas and ushered Matt in. “These are sunflowers, the chickens love the seeds. I put about one hundred in each area and collect the heads and store them. That way the chickens can have them all year round. You’ll see silverbeet, broccoli and other things everywhere. We pick what we need and leave the rest to the chickens. You’ll see that each area has a couple of rows of wood rings.” Gary flipped over one of the rings. “See under here? Slaters and worms. Each time we come out, we flip a couple over. The ladies love it.” Gary led Matt over to Feather Mansion, the name was painted on the door. Matt surmised this was from Liam. “If you take a look in here you’ll see it’s clean and dry. One of the jobs is to keep it this way. There are five layer boxes that you can access from outside, without getting amongst the chickens. That’s so Heather doesn’t have to get mucky feet! We keep the pellets and water under the cover there, away from the rain and sun.” Gary looked around to see if there were any other points to make. “What do you reckon?”

Matt looked over at Feather Mansion and back at Gary. “Pretty flash,” he said.

“Yes, it is. Some would say flashier than it needs to be. But I don’t think so. No animal should ever suffer on a farm, Matt. It’s not their choice to be here, it’s ours. It’s not for their benefit, it’s for ours. The contract is simple, they provide for us, we care for them.” Gary put his hands on his hips and looked around. “My goal was to have chicken facilities I would choose if I was a chicken.”

Matt nodded. “If I was a chicken, I would choose here.”

“Good,” said Gary, “you get the picture. Our goal is to make life as good for our animals as we can. Okay, let’s press on.” Gary showed Matt the pig enclosures, ‘Pork Paradise’, and the fields for the sheep. There were

also fruit trees, berries, passionfruit, kiwifruit, grapes and many more plants than Matt could remember.

Then there was Dexter. Dexter was a large white male goat. Although desexed, Gary explained that he was still pretty 'playful'. "Dexter earns his keep by eating. He trims the sides of the drive, eats the grapevines and things back when they start to get a bit ambitious." Gary gave Matt a couple of feijoas from his pocket.

"Hold your hand out flat like this," said Gary, "and he will gently take the fruit."

Matt held his hand out but instinctively retracted it when Dexter came forward.

"He won't hurt you," reassured Gary as he rubbed Dexter's neck.

Matt tried again. This time he let Dexter take the fruit. Indeed he was very gentle. Matt offered Dexter the second feijoa. He was intrigued by Dexter's eyes, they were yellow-brown with horizontal black slots. Dexter sniffed Matt's hands and legs, lifted his head high and looked Matt directly in the eyes.

"Well done, let's take Dexter down behind the shed. There's some nibbling required there."

Gary unclipped Dexter and started leading him back down toward the sheds. As they walked Dexter started to pull ahead, he started walking sideways and tugging on his leash. Dexter walked backwards away from Gary and put his head down before doing a small leap toward Gary. Gary turned to Matt. "Okay, he wants to play. He's probably just wanting to show off to you. He's much worse around girls. A right proper show off then." Gary walked toward Dexter. "Okay, bonehead, show us what ya got."

Dexter slowly walked backwards and reared up on his back legs. He was now taller than Gary. Dexter tipped his head a little to one side and lunged forward. But Gary was quick too. He stepped toward Dexter with a hand held high and caught Dexter's forehead and guided it onto his belly as

Dexter came down. Gary put one foot forward, got into a long low stance and the pushing competition began.

“This is the best way to test your stances,” offered Gary. Gary’s boots slid along the ground as Dexter pushed him backwards. “Dexter always wins though, he’s got four legs.”

Matt could see that Gary was scratching Dexter’s neck with one hand while holding his head against his belly with the other. Dexter was furiously wagging his short tail. After pushing Gary backwards for a couple of metres Dexter strongly shook his head to get free and reared up again. The process was repeated several times before Dexter started trotting down the hill.

“Let’s go, Matt, it’s time for a run.” As Dexter ran he jumped and kicked, he was clearly loving the freedom. When they got to the shed Gary clipped Dexter’s leash onto a loop of wire on a post. “You’ll find loops like this all over the farm,” said Gary, “when you move Dexter just clip him on a loop.”

“When you move Dexter,” thought Matt. “Surely not?”

“If Dexter gets free,” Gary continued, “just run as fast as you can to the house and let me or Heather know. Dexter will be doing the same, only he’ll be heading straight for Heather’s roses. He LOVES roses.” Gary turned to face Matt and looked at him. “If he ever gets too much for you just let him go. He won’t go far. Come and get me and all will be fine.” Gary winked. “First though you need to learn to play his game, we’ll work on that later.” They walked through the sheep paddocks to some trees on a hillside. Gary explained that some trees were for firewood and some for making garden edging, which was the one thing Gary actually made money from. There was also a block of native bush that backed onto the farm. Gary explained that he had trap lines through the bush to control mice, rats, possums and mustelids.

“Now before we sit down, what are you like at jumping fences?”

Matt looked quizzically at Gary, he was not sure what he meant.

Gary pointed at a fence. “See this fence? Neither of us could just run and jump it front on, but if we use an arm it’s easy. Watch this.” Gary walked

over to the fence, put one hand on a post and swung his legs over. “Easy peasy,” he said as he jumped back using the other arm. “When you’re bored give that a go. You have to know how to jump a fence on a farm!” Gary found a log in a shaded place to sit on where he could look over the farm. He stretched his legs out in front of him and looked into the distance. “So,” he began, “you know what a farm is, you now know a little bit about how to run a farm. Do you have any idea why I have a farm?”

Matt looked down across the sheep paddock to Feather Mansion in the distance. “Because it’s fun?” he offered.

Gary smiled and nodded slowly. “Hmmm, that’s probably the best answer I’ve had.” Gary picked up a stick and, starting from one end, began to snap it into small pieces. “I’ll start by telling you what are not the reasons. It’s not to make money, this farm is too small and probably too diverse for that. It’s not because I don’t have anything else to do. I have a profession I could easily return to.” Gary turned around to face Matt. “One of the reasons was to provide the best place to raise my children. One of the reasons was so that Heather and I could spend time together and do things together. One of the reasons was to do something that would allow me to contribute to my community. One of the reasons was to explore a lifestyle that was a bit more meaningful, under my control and allow me some free time.” Gary picked up another stick. “I’ve been very lucky. I have two brothers and we inherited a dairy farm when our father died unexpectedly. The deal was simple, we got the farm but looked after our mum. I had no interest in dairy farming so took a payout. I completed my engineering degree and used the money to buy a house. I soon realised that I could use the money to buy three houses and rent to pay the mortgages. All was looking good until I mucked up, which is what we talked about the other day at training. I headed overseas to get away from it all. I went to Australia and worked in the mines, the pay was good and every time I had another deposit I bought another house. I was lucky. I had no idea the housing market was about to

go nuts. In the end, I was able to sell a couple of houses, buy the farm and mostly live with the rent from the remaining houses.”

Gary whistled loudly. “Bess has come looking for us.”

Matt looked up to see Bess tearing across the sheep paddock toward them. A couple of sheep jumped out the way, but most seemed not to care. Bess ran to Gary and pushed her head onto his knees, she was panting very hard. Gary scratched her on the side of her neck. “Good girl, good girl. So now Heather and I grow food for ourselves and friends. We give food and firewood to community groups to either help people directly or raise funds and we sell a few things. I love it.” Gary turned to Matt and put his hand on his shoulder. “I have the farm because I can’t think of anything that would make me happier. It’s small and not much work. I get much more satisfaction doing what I do than I would trying to earn money on a bigger farm. Very importantly I have time. Time for karate, time for the boat and time for family. This makes me a very wealthy man.” Gary stood up. “Speaking of time, it’s time for lunch.” Matt’s stomach gurgled as he stood up. Gary laughed and slapped him on the back. “My alarm has gone off too.”

As they walked back through the sheep paddock Gary started talking again. “The only reason Heather and I are financially sorted is we don’t want too much. If we decided we needed a new car every year, or overseas holidays, we would be stuffed. We have everything we need because we choose not to need much. Nothing I own is new. Not the house, car, bicycle or boat. The piano was new though. Gotta look after the ladies!” Gary looked over to Matt until he caught his eye. “Understand?”

Matt nodded.

“It’s very important to decide your path early on. If you don’t decide what is enough early on you just might find yourself on a path without a destination. Going nowhere, but getting older. When I worked in the mines I had a simple goal, save every cent. I didn’t drink or party my earnings away. I saved it all. I worked hard and became the safety manager at a big

mine. This meant I earned a bit more and got skills that let me work pretty much anywhere. I was lucky, but when the ball came my way I caught it and ran hard. It's easy to be lucky, you just keep trying till you get lucky." Gary chuckled loudly. "I just love being told I'm lucky."

Matt felt a nip on the back of his leg and jumped in fright. He turned to see Bess crouched ready to attack again.

"Did she nip you?" asked Gary.

Matt nodded.

"You little sausage," said Gary. "She wants a game." Bess jumped backwards and barked as Gary clapped his hands and lunged at her. Gary yelled to Matt, "Run, Matt, run for your life."

Matt ran after Gary. Gary was waving his arms and yelling at Bess. All three of them ran down the paddock toward the house. Once on the lawn behind the house, Gary crouched down and roughly rubbed Bess while pushing her onto her back.

"You funny dog. Fancy biting Matt. What a sausage you are." Bess growled and mouthed Gary's arm while wagging her tail.

"Okay, buddy, we'll eat and have a short nap. Then we can get into some real work."

# Ten

## Working on the Farm

Matt woke, but did not open his eyes, he listened while resting on a wooden bench. He could hear the sound of birds, he also heard Bess take a big breath in and out, she must be lying alongside him. It was warm, even in the shade. Through the wall came a gentle clatter from the kitchen, the sound of dishes being washed and put away, and Heather's muffled voice. Sandra's laughter broke through occasionally, she sounded very happy. Matt heard the sound of the sliding door opening.

"Awake?" asked Gary quietly.

"Yep."

"Great, let's get to it."

Matt sat up. Indeed Bess was alongside him, she rolled onto her back and gently wagged her tail. Matt leaned down and rubbed her chest. Bess stretched out as long as she could and gently jiggled as her muscles tightened up. Gary clapped and Bess leapt up. "Come on, girl, we'll need a hand."

Matt pulled his boots on and followed Gary over to the shed.

"Okay," said Gary while stretching his hands up high. "Our job today is to drop some trees. Six altogether. Well, we'll see how we go. First up we need to sort the gear."

“We’ll take two chainsaws, fuel, chain lube, gloves and some bits and pieces. We should be able to carry that with two of us.” Gary assembled the tools onto a table. “Okay, that’s us. But what comes first?”

“Safety,” replied Matt.

“Yes,” exclaimed Gary as he punched both fists in the air. “Safety comes first, second and third. But why? All we’re doing is dropping some massive trees, with screaming chainsaws and someone who’s never done it before. Seriously, what could go wrong?”

“We could die,” replied Matt with a wry grin.

“Yes, we could die. You are SO right. Fancy doing something that could kill you without taking the time to think it through and be safe. Hard to imagine anyone would do that, isn’t it? The main risks are first getting chopped with a chainsaw, and second, having a tree land on your scone. The solution for those is simple. You stay where I put you until I call you. There are other hazards too, but those are the biggies. We’ll wear gloves, head, ear and eye protection. You carry the small chainsaw and this bucket of bits, I’ll carry the rest.”

Bess ran ahead, stopping to sniff around the sheds and tanks. Occasionally she would run back toward Gary before bounding off again. “She’s working out where the rabbits are and where they forage,” explained Gary, “every now and then she gets one. The trees we are going to fell and prepare are for garden sleepers. A team from Rotary will bring out a portable sawmill next weekend to cut up the logs. You and I will fell the trees and prep them. The Rotary folk will take the sleepers and sell them as a fundraiser, they will take the firewood and mulch as well. We do this each year.”

The sheep looked up as Bess darted around, occasionally a couple of sheep did a short run and startled others nearby. Mostly though they seemed relaxed about the dog and two men walking amongst them.

“Righty ho, Matt,” said Gary, “put your gear over behind that tree. We’ll start with this tree and do one at a time. First, we drop the tree using the

big saw, which is simple with this row, they'll all fall where we want them. Then we'll give them a haircut and take off all the light stuff that will go through the chipper, the small saw is best for that. Once that's done we'll cut the remaining limbs up for firewood. Then we can cut the trunk into sections ready for the mill. Do you know what type of tree this is?"

Matt looked up and down the tree. "It's a very big tree," suggested Matt.

Gary looked up and down the tree, mimicking Matt. "Yes, it is a big tree. A big gum tree, a eucalyptus tree. There are several varieties amongst this stand, some for firewood and some for timber. The ones for timber grow tall and straight. These ones are having their first harvest. So we'll leave a decent stump behind and they will regrow, but faster with the benefit of a decent root system in place." Gary picked up a chainsaw and walked over to the first tree. "We'll start with the bigger saw to drop the tree. First, we'll cut a notch in the trunk on the side we want the tree to fall toward. This will go in about one-third of the way. We don't cut too far in for a couple of reasons, one we don't want our saw to get stuck, and it will if the tree starts to lean and compress the cut. Secondly, we want to leave enough of the centre of the tree to act as a hinge, so the tree falls in a more controlled way. Now you stand over here behind this tree and hold onto Bess's collar while I get started."

Matt crouched down and held Bess's collar tightly.

"Hat, glasses, ears and dog?" asked Gary.

"Yep," Matt replied.

Matt watched as Gary started the chainsaw and looked carefully up the tree and in the direction he wanted it to fall. It took a surprisingly short time to cut the notch. Again Gary looked up and down the tree before stopping the saw and waving Matt over.

"Okay, that looks good," said Gary. "The next step is to put in the cut that will drop the tree. Now the temptation is to put the cut in down here opposite the notch. That will work, but the hinge will be very small and

the tree will drop more suddenly. What we're going to do is put in a few small cuts on the back of the tree above the notch so the timber on this side does not snap and let go with a bang. We will deepen a couple of those cuts until the tree starts to move. That will let the tree hinge down using the heartwood in the centre bent in a big bow. Make sense?"

"Sort of," said Matt. He went back behind the tree and crouched down holding Bess's collar. Gary turned to look at Matt and touched his head, ears and eyes. Matt held out his hand with his thumb up.

Gary started the chainsaw, had another long look at the tree and started making the cuts. As Gary made the final cut the tree top started to move, there was a cracking sound. Gary stopped the saw and walked back behind the next line of trees. The tree fell very slowly at first, before gathering speed and landing with a mighty thump. Gary inspected the stump and waved Matt over.

"This looks good. Now when a tree drops it's still not necessarily safe to be around. The branches at the top can be bent into springs that will flip the tree over as you work on it and the stump could be only loosely attached and ready to let go when you least expect it. However, this looks good. See this big hinge here?" asked Gary pointing to the stump. "This will stop the tree from rolling as we work on it. Okay, time for the small saw and a haircut. Grab the small saw and meet me at the top of the tree."

Matt walked back to where the gear had been placed and picked up the smaller chainsaw. Bess was running back and forth excitedly. She jumped up and sniffed the chainsaw when Matt picked it up. Gary was looking around the top of the tree and pulling some of the branches.

"This looks stable to me, Matt. Should be straight forward. Now see this branch? From here back to the trunk is firewood, the rest is for mulch. So what we'll do is trim all the branches we can easily access, drag them off to one side, then cut some firewood. I'll cut a few branches, when the saw stops come in and help drag them out. Got it?"

“Yep.”

“Don’t worry about Bess for now, she will bark and run around, but she’s all good.”

Matt nodded and walked back a few steps and put his ear muffs on. Gary started the chainsaw and began trimming the branches. Matt was very surprised how quickly this happened. It took less than two seconds to cut each branch and Gary had trimmed all the exposed branches in what seemed like a minute. The saw stopped and Gary waved Matt over.

“Grab one branch in each hand and follow me,” instructed Gary.

Matt did just that, however after a few steps one of the branches stopped moving, he gave it a good tug and it broke free. After another step, it caught for a second time and Matt gave it another good tug, it came free but caught again as soon as he started to drag it. Matt turned around and there was Bess, her jaw firmly clamped on the branch and pulling as hard as she could. Matt heard Gary laughing.

“That’s the real reason you’re here, buddy, so she’ll leave me alone! Try walking backwards and looking at her, she just wants attention.” Matt started walking backwards. Bess growled and shook the branch. Matt pulled and pulled, eventually getting the branches over to the pile.

“We’ll line up all the branches the same way, it makes them easier to put through the chipper. That’s the plan, let’s get it done.” Matt could not keep up with Gary of course, but he tried. He would not have kept up even without Bess’s interference, but there was no chance with it. Each time Matt walked back to the tree Bess was there, barking and wagging her tail, waiting for him to choose a branch. When the cut branches were cleared Gary called Matt over. “The trunk is thick enough from here for a sleeper, everything above is firewood. I’m going to cut the trunk here, then every two metres back to the base. The sleepers will be two metres long. Before we do that though I will cut the exposed branches into firewood. When

that's done we can top the tree and roll the top over to get to those last few branches underneath. So earmuffs and a safe distance."

Again Matt watched as Gary effortlessly cut all the trimmed branches into short sections of firewood. He started from the tips and made a series of cuts back to the trunk.

"Of course we could do this by hand as a training exercise," joked Gary. Matt shook his head.

"Come on, that's what the karate kid would've done, might've even done a couple with his teeth." Gary tied a piece of rope onto one of the remaining branches. "We're going to roll the top over by pulling on this, that way we can keep a safe distance. When the top starts to roll, let go of the rope and jump right. I'll jump left and hopefully not run you over. Okay, on the count of three." Matt pulled as hard as he could, but he could tell that the tree only moved when Gary was pulling. It started to roll over.

"Get ready, RUN," called Gary. There was a rustle of leaves as the top of the tree rolled over. "Righto, exactly the same as before, let's get the branches off and cut this up."

Bess had lost interest in pulling on the branches and Matt was able to clear them quickly. By the time Matt had finished dragging the branches away Gary had reduced the entire treetop to firewood.

"Great, the next step is to start cutting the trunk. In one of the buckets there is a measuring tape, spray can and a piece of framing timber with some pink paint on it. Go grab those please." Matt walked quickly to get the requested items, whilst Gary was not rushing, Matt was aware he did not wish to muck around either.

"What I'll ask you to do is mark the cuts," began Gary, "measure two metres from the end, put the piece of framing timber at the mark, put a dot of paint up against the timber. What have you got after taking the timber away?"

Matt looked down at the semi-circle of paint on the tree. "A straight line."

“Exactly, it makes it very easy to get the cut in the right spot. Each time I complete a cut I’ll step back. Once I am clear of the tree, measure out the next section and put a mark on it. Happy with that?”

“Yep,” replied Matt with enthusiasm, he was starting to feel useful now.

Off they went. The first few cuts went very quickly, but as they got closer to the base and the trunk got thicker the cuts took longer and longer. Gary stepped back from the tree and stopped the chainsaw. “Time for a drink, fuel break and to sharpen the chain.” Gary’s shirt was soaked in sweat and his legs coated with sawdust. He sat down, took off his boots and tapped them against a tree, some small sticks and sawdust fell out. “That should feel better,” said Gary as he handed Matt a water bottle. He leaned back and took a long drink. “It’s getting warm isn’t it.”

“Uh-huh,” replied Matt as he did exactly the same.

Bess pushed her head in between Gary’s legs, she was panting hard. “Would you like a drink too would you?” Gary held out his cupped hand and Bess put her muzzle in it. As he poured water into his hand Bess lapped it up. The water splashed all over Gary’s legs.

“Sorry, Bess, all done. Have you got any spare water, Matt?”

“Yep,” replied Matt as he cupped his hand and held it out.

Bess jumped over Gary’s legs and put her muzzle in Matt’s hand. She pushed down quite hard. Matt could feel the cold water from around her muzzle and the warmth of her lips and tongue as she explored for water. When Matt poured some water into his hand Bess started lapping it up. Her tongue was warm and the whiskers around her mouth tickled the palm of his hand.

“We’ll head down for afternoon tea once we finish this tree,” said Gary, “you can top up with water then.” Gary stood up and fossicked around in one of the buckets. “I’ll show you the basics of how to sharpen a chainsaw. See how I have left a cut in the trunk?” asked Gary. “We can use this to hold the bar steady while we sharpen these teeth,” said Gary while pointing to

the cutting teeth on the chain. “Ideally we would do this in the shed using a vice, but out here this is good enough.” Gary put the chainsaw bar in the cut and lifted the safety bar until it clicked. “Okay, the safety bar locks the chain. See how it’s locked tight,” said Gary as he pulled the chain forward and back. “Now we can get the chain file. I have brought up the filing guide so you can see the angle that each tooth should be cut at. See that?” said Gary as he passed the guide to Matt. “Once you have done it a few times you won’t need the guide, you can just do this,” said Gary as he ran a round file through a couple of teeth. “See how I rotate the file? That keeps the file evenly worn and is faster. I will do these for now, you can have a go with the other saw back in the shed.”

“Yep,” replied Matt. “Gary is really going to let me do that?” he wondered.

Gary finished sharpening the saw and topped it up with fuel. “Let’s finish this in one burst and get some afternoon tea,” he said with a smile. “I’m getting peckish.”

Matt was surprised just how much faster the next cuts went with the sharpened chain. He was looking forward to learning how to do this. When the last section of the trunk was cut Gary set about tidying up the stump.

“Top-up both saws with fuel, Matt and bring the fuel container with us, we’ll need some more for the next tree.” Matt was glad to be having a break. Although he’d not done much work, it was hot and he was tired. He was very pleased once back at the house to be greeted with some baking and cold water. Bess lay down alongside him on the cool concrete, gently panting.

“Lie down for ten minutes, Matt, I’m going to do the same. We’ll then go and knock another tree over, should be a lot quicker now we’ve had some practice.”

Matt nodded and lay down. He listened to Bess panting, then with one big breath, she stopped panting and went to sleep.

Gary watched Matt’s chest gently rise and fall as he slept. He smiled to himself and reflected on when he was that age, trying to keep up with his

father. Gary reached down and gently touched Matt on the shoulder. Matt rolled over and opened his eyes.

“Ready for round two?” asked Gary quietly.

Matt nodded and stretched his arms above his head before sitting up.

“Good. I’ll meet you there. If you take these scraps to the chickens I’ll mix the fuel. Just throw the scraps outside, wherever the chickens are. Bess thinks she is a chicken so watch out,” said Gary as Bess pushed her nose into the scrap bin.

Matt picked up the bin, put it on the seat and gave Bess a rub. Bess wagged her tail hopefully. She decided to follow Matt with the scraps, rather than Gary to the shed

Again she spent some time poking around the tanks where the rabbits had dug their burrows. Matt opened the gate to Feather Mansion, taking care not to let Bess in. He did not fancy trying to coerce her out once the food was on the ground. The chickens were rather wary of Matt and kept their distance with their heads turned sideways so they could keep an eye on him. They stood very still until he emptied the scraps onto the ground. All caution regarding the new face ended at that point, clearly the food was a higher priority than caution.

As Matt turned to leave he saw Sandra and Allicia further down the path. They were walking slowly, holding hands. Matt could see that Sandra was pointing things out to Allicia as they walked. Allicia leaned against Sandra with her head against Sandra’s shoulder. Sandra stopped walking and put her arms around Allica from behind and pulled her close. She leaned forward and kissed Allicia on the neck. Allicia leaned her head backwards and kissed Sandra on the cheek. Matt watched them embrace for a few seconds, turned and walked as quietly as he could to the gate.

Matt dropped the scrap bin back at the house and ran with Bess back up toward the trees. Bess sped ahead, stopped and jumped at Matt as he tried to get past, nipping him on the leg. Matt was getting used to being

nipped, it didn't hurt much. He had come to realise this was just the price of playing with Bess. Gary asked Matt to repeat all of the safety rules and the process that they would follow for felling the next tree. They then set about dropping and cutting up the tree. There was much less talk this time and no breaks. It did, Matt noted, go much more quickly than the first.

"Two trees in an afternoon, that's not bad for beginners," said Gary, smiling. "Let's pack up the gear and call it a day."

Matt filled his bucket back up with the tools and picked up the smaller chain saw. He felt like a real farm worker now and not awkward as he had at the start of the day. This was going to be fun.

"You're thirteen right?" asked Gary as they walked across the sheep paddock. "Well, your brain is going to stop working properly soon and stay that way for a few years. It's called adolescence. Do you know what's coming?"

"Pimples?" offered Matt cheekily.

"Yes, pimples and some other weirdo boy stuff."

Matt laughed, he knew what Gary meant.

"Two big things are, you'll think everyone's mad with you when they aren't and you'll start to feel overwhelming emotions. The good news is probably no one's mad with you at all. The trick with the emotions is to learn to manage them and stay calm, we will cover that during karate training. The other trick with emotions is to learn the golden rule. Do you know what that is?"

"No," Matt replied, he didn't have a clue.

"It's simple enough, just hard to get right," Gary paused. "Never let your emotions become someone else's problem. What might that mean?"

Matt thought for a few moments. "Don't get into fights?"

"Kind of," Gary replied. "It's okay to have emotions, in fact, we can't avoid them. It's okay to share emotions, that's what relationships are all about. But we need to share our emotions in a way that, if they are a problem, they remain our problem. For example, if we're happy, or appreciative, we

can share away, there probably won't be any complaints. But if we are angry or annoyed it's our responsibility to share this in a way that does not require others to manage our emotions for us. We shouldn't make people scared or wishing they never said something. Our emotions are ours. I might get mad, but it can never be that you made me mad. If I'm mad that's my issue and I need to deal with it. Simple, isn't it?"

"I guess so," said Matt slowly.

Gary laughed. "You're onto it, Matt, it might sound simple, but it's one of the hardest things to master. Let's get you fed and watered and on your way. You can think about it while riding home. By the way, would you like to come up the coast on Wednesday? I've got some property maintenance to do."

"Yep."

"Great, ask your father and let me know if he's good with it."

# Eleven

## Heading up the coast with Gary

**M**att made sure he was waiting at the end of his driveway early. The rhythm of the weekday was well underway. There were sounds of banging doors and cars starting. Some people were in a hurry and some relaxed. An occasional cyclist passed by, they never seemed to be in a hurry. Matt watched a cat carefully pick its way through the neighbour's garden toward him. It noticed Matt's gaze and froze. After a few seconds, the cat crouched down and stared. The cat would wait, knowing that Matt would leave.

Gary's ute came into view. This was certainly one of the vehicles which were not in a hurry. Gary drove across to the wrong side of the road alongside Matt.

"You can have an inside seat if you like," joked Gary. He was smiling broadly with his arm hanging out of the window. Matt walked around and climbed into the ute. He noticed quite an assortment of tools on the back including a lawnmower and trimmer. "Had some breakfast?" asked Gary.

"Not really," replied Matt.

"Good answer." Gary reached around to the back seat and opened up a chilly bin. "Here's a bacon bun to get you started." Gary dropped the bun on Matt's knees and reached back again, this time returning with a bottle of water. "There's plenty of food, so tuck in."

“Thanks,” Matt replied. His stomach was already rumbling from the smell of the bacon.

“You should be very pleased to hear the radio doesn’t work,” said Gary, “I suspect my idea of music would have you sitting outside on the tray. Your idea of music might have me stopping to check the engine oil.”

Matt smiled at Gary. He too was pleased the radio was broken.

“I like to think when I drive, or, chat if I have company. So what’s the speed limit here?”

“One hundred,” Matt replied.

“How fast are we going?”

“About... eighty-five,” said Matt as he leaned over to see the dashboard.

“Why would we only be going eighty-five in a one hundred zone? Seriously what sort of old fart would do that?”

Matt laughed and put the last bit of his bun in his mouth. He held out his hands in front of his chest while pulling his best ‘no idea’ face.

“Well, I’m not suggesting there are any particularly good reasons or reasons that anyone else would agree with at least. Otherwise, they’d be doing eighty-five too, right? Clearly, they aren’t, just look at them go. Regardless, here come the reasons. Firstly, if I drive fast all I can think about is driving. If I drive slowly, however, I can ponder other things more easily and pay attention to things along the way. Secondly, I’ve noticed that if I drive slowly I’m more likely to stop, say if I see a roadside stall, or for someone who might need help. Accidents are much more fun at a slow speed, it’s cheaper and better for the environment. But perhaps the biggest reason is to remind me that I’m not in a hurry. Life is to be enjoyed and that starts with being present in the moment. Honestly, I think everyone would do it if they gave it a go. What do you reckon?”

Matt thought long and hard. It was such an unusual idea. Fancy rethinking something as obvious as driving at the speed limit. “I thought you had to drive at the speed limit,” Matt finally offered.

“Well, that’s a reasonable thought. In fact, most things we do seem reasonable if you don’t think too hard. It’s fun sometimes to take a step back and think hard about what we do and why. We might just come up with a better idea. Like not working ourselves to death for example!”

“Yep,” replied Matt. He had already warmed to that idea. Gary seemed to have a pretty good life and Matt loved the farm.

Gary rubbed his chin in thought. “Take driving. It’s obvious why we do it, it’s to get about more conveniently and to take more stuff than we could carry walking or on a bicycle. But should it be the default? Should we still drive when we could walk or cycle? That’s a personal choice. But one thing which is true for all of us is driving is one of the most dangerous things we’ll do. It’s probably the only thing we do each day which could kill someone. In my view, we should think about this each time we put our hands on the steering wheel.”

Matt nodded and looked out the window. “I like going slow,” he said wistfully.

“That’s a good start. With safety in mind though we’ll add a couple more things. Leave a big gap between cars, four seconds on the open road at least and always, I mean always, always, keep your eyes on the road, front and behind. Got it? Now, do you have any goals for the coming year? What’s going to be different next year from this year?”

Matt shuffled in his seat. Was he supposed to have goals? He’d never thought about having goals. “Not sure,” he finally said.

“I don’t think I had any goals at your age, Matt. Now, what do you do on a typical day, a day when it’s just you deciding what to do?”

“Well,” started Matt, “I do my drills.”

Gary reached over and rubbed Matt’s shoulder. “I know, I can tell. Good work.”

Matt continued. “Some days I go and see Jed and we play games. Sometimes I go to Art’s place and meet up with Dylan.”

Gary spent some time telling Matt about his life at thirteen years of age. Working on his parent's farm, raising and selling his own calves, playing rugby and going on bush adventures. It was, they both agreed, very different from being thirteen now. It took about fifty minutes to drive up the coast. They mostly drove in silence, a comfortable silence, punctuated occasionally by a question from Gary and a short discussion. There was plenty of time to think.

"We have three properties to visit today. Just simple things, we'll mow the lawns, trim the edges and pick up any leaves or branches laying about. Maybe pull a few weeds. The goal is no more than one hour at each property, we'll just do all we can in that time. The first stop is Amira and Tama. Let's go."

Matt followed Gary up the driveway to a gate.

"Now keep the gate closed unless you're going through it, you'll see why in a minute."

"Raaaa, raaaa," yelled a young boy. He was wearing a red cape and brandishing a yellow plastic sword as long as himself. He ran toward Gary swinging the sword back and forth. "Raaaa, raaaa."

"Don't chop me up, chop him up," said Gary while pointing at Matt.

The boy paused and looked at Matt. "Raaaa, raaaa," he yelled while running at Matt. He struck Matt as hard as he could on the legs. "Raaaa, raaaa."

"Don't chop his legs off before he's mowed the lawns," said Gary, "otherwise I'll have to mow them."

The boy paused before launching himself at Gary a second time. "Raaaa, raaaa," he yelled.

Gary scooped him up with one hand and removed his sword with the other. "Now let's be polite to our guests. Tama, this is Matt. Matt, this is Tama. How old are you, Tama?"

"I'm free," yelled Tama, while holding up an ever-changing number of fingers.

Gary draped Tama over his shoulder and carried him across the deck. "Come inside, Matt, I need to give Tama a beating."

Matt followed Gary and Tama inside. Tama was beating Gary on the back as hard as he could.

“Amira, meet Matt. Matt, meet Amira. Now please excuse me while I beat this boy.”

Tama had an intense look on his face as he pounded ineffectively on Gary’s back. Gary dropped Tama onto the couch, and with mock fury pounded him with punches, elbow strikes and pokes to eyes. Tama screamed with delight. He fought and kicked as hard as he could. “Ah, no biting,” cautioned Gary, “UFC rules remember.” After a couple of minutes, Gary sat down and held Tama tight against him. Tama squirmed and fought. “Time to settle, Tama,” said Gary softly, “time for a cuddle.” Tama kept struggling, but Matt could see his struggling gradually diminish.

“Matt’s going to help me tidy up, anything, in particular, need doing?” Gary asked.

“No,” replied Amira, “just the usual spring things.”

Matt looked carefully at Amira. She was slightly built with shoulder-length straight hair. She somehow looked a bit uncertain and unconfident. She spoke very softly and slowly.

“That should be fine, I’ll hang onto Tama for you while I show Matt what to do. Enjoy the break.”

“I sure will,” said Amira, “take your time.”

Gary carried Tama across his shoulder with Tama’s head hanging over his back. Tama was grinning and looking at Matt as they walked outside. Gary pulled a rake and large sack off the back of the ute with his free hand.

“Okay, Matt, let’s rake up the leaves and sticks and put them in this sack. Would you like to help, Tama?”

“YEEEEES,” Tama yelled.

“Great. Sit in the middle of the lawn with the sack and anything that Matt rakes up, you put in the sack. Got it?”

“YEEEEES.”

Matt started raking the leaves toward Tama.

“Faster, faster,” Tama yelled.

Gary winked at Matt and smiled. Matt raised his eyebrows back. This boy was clearly hard work. Gary sent Matt and Tama to rake the back lawn while he mowed and trimmed the front. As Gary explained, they could simply not have Tama around power tools. Once the section work was complete Gary and Matt sat down with Amira, who had put out some drinks and biscuits. Tama continued to rake the back lawn. Each time he had made a small pile he would kick it away yelling ‘Raaaa, raaaa.’

Gary turned to Matt. “Tama is normally much more placid and we do embroidery together.”

Amira burst out laughing and put her drink back on the table. “Oh I wish,” she said, “that would be SO nice.”

“Next time, if Matt’s comfortable with the power tools, we can take Tama with us to some other properties for a while and you can have a break. Maybe head out if you need to.”

“For that, I’ll bake you a cake,” exclaimed Amira, “that would be lovely.”

“Matt, how about you load up the ute, I’ll come out in a minute.”

“Yep, thank you for the food,” he said smiling at Amira.

“No problem. Would you like a little brother?” joked Amira back.

As they left Gary tooted the horn and waved at Tama, who was standing on the window sill inside the house and brandishing his sword. Matt did not need to hear to know what he was yelling.

“That boy is a bundle of energy isn’t he?” asked Gary.

Matt nodded. “Yep.”

“The three properties we are visiting today are all specials. Ones that I help the tenants look after and give a special deal to. For example, Amira is single at present, so Heather and I give her cheaper rent. That way she can keep a house for Tama and have some control over her living arrangement. We also drop off some food, which is what was in the chilly bin. Amira has

whanau close by and they are good sorts. So she is fine. The next two are oldies. An old man and an old woman. We really should stick them together eh,” said Gary as he chuckled. “They don’t have family around, so I keep the section tidy, drop off some food and keep an eye on them. What we’ll do though is focus on getting you safe and comfortable with the mower and trimmer. Hopefully, they won’t be attacking us with swords.”

“Do they have walking sticks?” asked Matt.

“Yes, but they can’t hit very hard,” replied Gary.

By the time they got to the final property, Matt had mastered the lawn mowing and almost mastered the trimmer. He couldn’t get the edges as straight as Gary, but it was fun all the same. Once Matt was underway Gary headed inside to talk with the lady. As they were leaving she came out to thank Matt and handed him some scones neatly wrapped in paper.

“Hey, those were supposed to be for me,” joked Gary.

“He’s had plenty, these are for you,” said the lady smiling.

Gary shook his head with fake disappointment. “Oh well,” he said, “Chrissie, meet Matt. Matt, meet Chrissie.”

Gary reversed slowly down the drive, they waved and with a toot of the horn were on their way. “Do you need a drink or a stop,” asked Gary, “otherwise the next stop’s home.”

“All good,” replied Matt.

“Okay, those are great scones, you’ll be pleased to know that I’ve had plenty. Those are all yours.” There was much less talk on the drive home. Gary just tootled along at his own pace, being sure to let others pass when he could. Matt started to doze.

“Hello, what have we got here?”

Matt opened his eyes, the tone in Gary’s voice had gotten Matt’s attention. Matt looked up to see three men on the side of the road and two parked cars, one of the men waved Gary on. But Gary pulled over and reversed until he was across the road from the car parked in front. Gary wound down the passenger window.

“It’s fine mate, all under control,” called one of the men.

“The driver does not look happy,” said Gary quietly to Matt, “you wait here.”

Matt looked at the driver, it was a woman. She had her hands on the steering wheel and was looking straight ahead. Her face was solemn. Matt could see a boy’s face in the back seat, he looked unhappy too.

Matt watched Gary walk over. One of the men approached Gary and stood in between Gary and the car. He started talking but Gary pushed past and bent over to speak to the driver. Matt could see Gary’s head move about as he spoke. The woman stared straight ahead, but he could see she was speaking too. Gary stood up. He put his hand on the roof of the car and drummed his fingers. He turned to the man who had stood in his way, the other two had already walked back to their car.

“Time to go, brother, you’re not welcome here,” said Gary, he stood very still. The man said something back which Matt could not hear. Gary smiled. “Okay,” he said, holding out his hand and taking a step back toward his ute. “Have a good day.”

The man shook Gary’s hand. The instant their hands met Gary stopped smiling, he turned back toward the man and stood very close. They stared at each other, the man glanced down at his hand and winced, his knees buckled slightly and he looked back up at Gary’s face. Gary reached his left arm across the man’s back and pulled him around so they were standing side by side. Gary slowly walked the man back toward the car at the back, with his left arm over the man’s shoulder and his right hand firmly gripped in a handshake. As they approached the car the other two men stepped back, they looked worried. But Gary was smiling and chatting. He let go of the man’s shoulder and kept talking while gently shaking his hand up and down. The man’s mouth was open and his eyes almost closed shut. Matt could see he was in pain. Gary let go of his hand and the man immediately turned and walked to the far side of the car. Gary held out his hand to the other two men and walked toward them, but they kept backing away. Gary held out his hands, then dropped them to his

side. Matt heard him say, 'Oh well.' Gary walked back to the lady and spoke briefly to her. He waved to the boy in the back seat and walked over to Matt.

"The car is broken down and their phone is flat. Pass my phone." Gary looked at his phone before handing it to Matt. "Great, there's plenty of signal and battery. Take this to the lady, be as cheery as you can. She's having a bad day." Gary opened the door and handed Matt the phone. "Chat to the kids in the back."

Matt walked over to the car. "Excuse me," he said while holding out the phone.

"Thanks, kid," she said. But she did not look at him. She dialled a number and waited.

"That dude looks like a robot." It was the boy in the back.

Matt followed his gaze over to Gary. Gary was leaning back on the tray of his ute, staring at the men in their car. His arms were folded, this with his dark glasses and leather jacket made for an uncompromising look.

"Nah, he looks like a dog looking at a cat." Matt looked over and saw a girl in the backseat.

"Nah, a robot," said the boy. He looked straight at Matt with a serious look and asked, "Is your name John Connor?"

The boy and girl laughed uproariously. The woman turned to look and huffed. "Nah, just a man. They're all the same. Wankers."

Matt looked at the woman, he wanted to say something about Gary. That Gary would help her, was helping her. That he would protect her from the other men no matter what risk to himself.

"She's just pissed cause no one's picking up." It was the boy, who had sat back in his seat and resumed his sullen look.

"Those pricks will be drinking, boy, that's why they're not picking up. They'll be pissed, useless." She huffed again. "Men, yeah men."

Gary heard the children's laughter, followed by the anger from the woman. Time to make a move. He whistled and when Matt looked waved him over. "We need to get moving while the sun's up, Matt. Time to give them a tow. I will move the ute over, please tell the lady."

Matt walked over and explained they would tow the car back to town. The woman looked resigned to this and nodded without speaking. Gary parked his ute in front of the car, bent down and attached a tow rope. The car wobbled back and forth as Gary tightened the rope.

“Christ, no need to pull the bumper off,” muttered the woman.

Gary approached the window. “Ever been towed before?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, I will explain how it works.”

“Whatever, man. Just tow.”

Gary looked back at his car for a moment, thinking. He bent down and looked through to the back seat. “Have either of you two driven a car before?”

“Yep,” replied the boy immediately, “mostly stolen ones.”

The girl burst out laughing.

“That would be right,” said the woman in a deadpan voice.

“Driving under pressure, those are good skills,” said Gary, in a matching deadpan voice.

“Are you happy for the lad to drive?” asked Gary.

“Sure am,” she replied, “all yours smart arse.”

Gary smiled at the boy. “What’s your name?”

“Nikau,” he replied.

“I’m Gary, and you?” Gary asked, looking across at the girl.

“Kiana.”

“Nikau, Kiana, this is Matt.

“Nah, he’s John Connor now,” said Nikau as he opened the door.

Gary looked at Matt with a quizzical look.

Gary took Matt and Nikau to the back of the ute. “Okay, gentleman, this is how towing a car works. Once this tow rope pulls tight, it stays tight. The next time it goes loose is when we’re finished. This is important. To achieve this the front car needs to be the engine for both cars and the back car needs to be the brake for both cars. If you let the rope go loose and drive over it,

it will snap and that is that. No more towing. So when it's time for you to brake I will put my hand out like this and you slow us both down. When we start you put your foot gently on the brake so the tow rope stays taught and does not jerk. If I push down with my hand it means more brake, if I push up it means less brake. Got it?"

"Yep," replied Nikau.

Matt could see that he was paying attention and thinking things through.

"Yep, got it," repeated Nikau.

"The first step will be for me to pull the rope tight, you stay on the brake until I give you a hand signal."

Nikau nodded. "Let's go, bro. This is going to be choice."

Gary slowly pulled forward, there was a slight bump as the tow rope pulled tight. "Good to see our friends have given up," Gary said cheerfully. Gary waved at the other car as it did a u-turn and left. He gave a thumbs up to Nikau and slowly pulled away. The towing went remarkably smoothly, it helped of course that Gary drove very slowly. When they were trundling along at a steady pace Gary started to talk.

"Now, Matt, a very important thing happened back there. Those gentlemen behaving badly backed down. They were given the opportunity to engage, but they didn't take it. This is a very important outcome. If they didn't back down, right now they would be spouting all sorts of nonsense and talking themselves into a rematch. Once someone has either done something or said something, in public it's very hard for them to go back on this. Making someone back down like that shuts them up and shuts down future hassle. Do you understand this?"

"I think so," replied Matt.

"Think about it, we'll cover this in training. It's very important."

As they approached the address that Nikau had given them Gary put his hand to his mouth. "You've got to be joking," he said. "Matt, don't get out of the car. I'm going to get the tow rope off and we leave immediately. Don't get out no matter what happens."

As the cars slowed down Gary unclipped his seat belt. The moment the cars stopped he got out and went straight to release the tow rope. Matt noticed he did not stop the engine. Matt looked at the house they had stopped outside. There was loud music playing and a couple of men came out to see who had arrived. They were, Matt could see, unmistakably gang members.

“Cheers guys, have a good day. Very well done, Nikau, don’t steal any more cars,” called Gary as he got back in the ute. Although Gary was smiling, his breathing was strong, his movements quick and focused. “That,” said Gary as they started to drive away, “is a family that’s not very fond of me.”

Once they were around the corner Gary turned to Matt. “So what’s this John Connor business?”

# Twelve

## Taking Bill on Eldie

Bill sat in the kitchen, staring down the driveway. He drummed his fingers on the window sill, occasionally shifting uncomfortably in his seat. Bill did not want to be collected, but Gary had insisted. Bill did not understand why Matt needed to head off early either. Bill took a big breath in and let it out noisily. He glanced at his watch. Then, pretty much exactly on time, Gary's ute came gently down the driveway. Bill promptly got up and walked outside.

"Morning, Bill."

"Good morning to you too," replied Bill as he pulled the ute door shut.

"It's a stunning day to head out, I did a little loop over the hill on the way here to double-check," said Gary, "couldn't see any fish, but here's hoping."

"Good to hear it's calm, I'm not sure about my sea legs, or sea stomach to be more accurate," said Bill with a half-smile.

"Well, Bill. I never say no to someberly," replied Gary.

Bill chuckled. "I really hope I can't help out. By the way thanks for helping Matt out with some work on your farm. He seems to be loving it."

"No problem at all," replied Gary, "he's become an asset very quickly. I'm delighted to have him around to help." Gary drove slowly as usual and particularly so when they entered the marina car park. Bill found this a bit

irritating and controlling. He looked out the window as they drove past empty parks only to end up further away from the boats than necessary.

“Got my lucky park,” said Gary, “we’re going to get some fish today!”

Bill looked out the side window and raised his eyebrows to himself. As they walked along the line of boats Bill saw Matt up ahead, Matt waved. Bill could not help but notice how happy he looked and waved back. Gary passed the things he was carrying over to Matt one by one. Matt put them away, opening and shutting the lockers with confidence. Gary stepped on the boat and turned to Bill. “Pass that here, buddy. When you’re ready, climb aboard.” Gary put his hand on Matt’s shoulder. “All set to go?”

“Yep,” replied Matt, “the motor’s warm and all checks are done. Just need you to let the bowline go.”

“Excellent, take a seat, Bill and we’ll cast off.”

Bill sat down and watched Matt confidently let the stern line go, push the back of the boat off the pile and call Gary to let the bowline go. Matt gently reversed out of the berth, swung the boat around, straightened up and confidently motored out of the marina. Gary stood next to Matt and pointed to a location on the chart. Bill could not hear what was said but saw Matt nod. Gary came and sat next to Bill. “Best autopilot I’ve ever had,” he said.

“I’m impressed, he’s really got the hang of this by the looks.”

“Sure has.”

Bill sat and watched Matt motor down the harbour. Matt was constantly looking about and checking the screens in front of him. He was most surprised to see Matt pick up the radio mic and make a trip report. Meanwhile, Gary had brought out two fishing rods and put them in rod holders, one on each side of the boat. “We’ll start trolling for kahawai as soon as we get out of the harbour,” said Gary, “if we’re burning diesel we may as well be fishing.” As they left the harbour the boat began to gently rise and fall with the motion of the sea.

“Look at this, beautiful, we’re very lucky,” declared Gary as he looked around. “Clear skies and not a spot of wind. Let’s run some lures. If you are comfortable with a rod, you can put that one out.”

Gary made himself comfortable on the side seat where he could see out the back of the boat. He felt the boat turn and looked up to Matt. “See some action?” he asked.

“Yep,” replied Matt, “not much, but worth a visit.”

“You good boy, good spotting,” said Gary. Gary smiled at Bill and gave him a thumbs up.

Bill nodded and stood up. “Hey, look over here.” Matt swung the boat a little further around and Gary stood up to take a look. Fish were breaking the surface of the water and birds flying their way.

“We’re about to be amongst it,” said Matt excitedly.

“Bill, grab that rod and bring it in a bit. Just so we don’t get our lines crossed,” said Gary.

Bill picked up the rod and started to wind it in. “Got one,” he shouted excitedly. Matt pulled back the throttle and put the boat into neutral. He headed to the back of the boat and pulled a landing net out of a locker.

“Once you retrieve that one you can come and get mine,” said Gary as he pulled a kahawai alongside the boat.

Matt leaned over the side as Bill pulled his fish closer. Matt scooped it up and put it into a bin. Bill noticed that Matt had leather gloves on so he could safely hold the fish and retrieve the lure.

“Gosh, you guys are well organised,” said Bill.

Matt threw Bill’s lure back over the side of the boat. “Another fish please.”

“Must be that lucky car park, Matt,” said Gary with a grin.

Matt looked at Gary with a big smile.

“What’s the joke?” asked Bill, aware he was missing something.

“Gary parks somewhere different every time,” replied Matt, “but it’s always the lucky car park.” Once both fish were in the bin Matt scooped up

a bucket of water, washed his hands and hopped back up on the skipper's seat. "Ready to go?" he asked. Gary gave Matt a thumbs up and off they went again. Bill watched Gary expertly fillet the kahawai, wrap the fillets and put the fish frames in a bucket.

"I keep the frames for the chickens," he explained. As fast as the fish appeared they were gone. So Matt put them back on course for the fishing spot Gary had given him.

Bill heard the engine slow down and the gentle clunk of the motor being put into neutral.

"We've arrived," said Matt.

"Okay, Matt. Well done," said Gary as he looked over Matt's shoulder at the various screens.

"I'll drop the grapnel anchor. Meet me there with the berly." Bill watched as Matt retrieved a netting bag from a bucket and carefully carried it over the side of the boat around to the bow where Gary waited. He saw Gary clip the bag to the chain and let the anchor go.

"We won't need to set the anchor, Matt, there's next to no wind. So you can turn the motor off." Gary set about preparing three rods for bottom fishing.

"Anything I can do to help?" asked Bill.

"Yep, pull up some snapper!" joked Gary.

"I'll do my best," replied Bill smiling.

Gary called to Matt, "Hey buddy, would you please put the radio on, just quietly. Then pop out here."

"Make yourself comfortable, Bill and drop this entree when you're ready," said Gary as he passed a rod over.

"Now, Matt please take these fillets, I've cut them up small and buzz them in the pan. Ask your Dad what else he would like on a bun and knock out some fish burgers. Are you good with that?" asked Gary.

"Sure am," smiled Matt.

"Just tomato and lettuce with mine, thanks," said Gary.

“Same for me thank you, Matt,” added Bill.

Gary waited for Matt to walk through to the galley, before turning to face Bill. “He’s a bloody good kid, Bill.”

Bill did not respond, he sat very still, looking at Gary, but with no discernable emotion on his face. Gary continued. “But he seems a bit lost, a bit unsure of himself. Yet, when I spend a bit of time with him he brightens up.”

Bill looked down at his feet, he did not speak. “We’ve both lost children, Bill. Nothing’s harder. Nothing chills the soul like losing a child. But we have to move on and love the ones we’re left with.” “Now there’s something I must tell you.” Gary leaned forward and looked directly at Bill. “You’ve got a fish on.”

Bill turned around, sure enough, his rod was bent over and twitching strongly. Gary sat back as Bill started to lift and wind. “Well, you’ve got the gift today, Bill. That’s a keeper. A good snapper,” Gary observed as he retrieved the fish in the landing net. “There should be just enough time to sort this one out before our lunch is ready.”

Again Bill watched as Gary expertly filleted the fish and cut up the frame. “We’ll bait up after we’ve eaten, lunch tastes better that way,” said Gary with a big smile.

“Lunch is ready,” said Matt. “I forgot which one’s whose”.

“That’s easy to sort,” said Gary, “we’ll each eat half then swap.”

“I’m glad you washed your hands,” said Bill.

They all laughed together as Matt headed back to get his bun.

“Bill,” began Gary, “as an electrician you might be interested to know that I am toying with the idea of making the boat electric drive.”

“Really!”

“Yep, I’m still in the exploratory phase. But this motor is nearing the end of its life and I need to do something. I kinda like the idea of lifting out the motor and diesel tanks and going electric. Range is the issue that defeats boats

like this it seems, but I don't need much range. All I ever do is tootle around the bay and go fishing, and only when the weather is good. Imagine no more diesel or engine maintenance! I could fit a few solar panels on the roof and most weeks that would charge enough for the weekend running about."

"What would the motor look like? Would you switch to an outboard?" asked Bill.

"Probably not an outboard. There are some great looking sail drive options for yachts, something around the five to ten kilowatt output should be fine. Just thinking."

"Wow," said Bill, "that would be quite a project."

"Yep," replied Gary, "and a whole lotta fun. Matt could help me."

"Okay," said Matt excitedly.

"You could learn a lot of engineering with a project like that, Matt. Fancy having that under your belt before you go to university!" said Gary.

"Are you going to university, Matt?" asked Bill in a joking way.

"Yep," replied Matt matter of factly, "I'm going to be a mechatronics engineer."

"Okay," Bill replied in a surprised tone.

"Fantastic lunch, Matt let's get some lines down." With that, Gary set about baiting up three lines. "Last one to hook a fish does the dishes," joked Gary. "Bill's already in the clear."

Matt sat back and listened to Bill and Gary chat. Bill was very interested in the electric drive and he was clearly surprised how much Gary knew about it and how far through the planning he was. But, he did not know Gary was an engineer. Bill was also surprised to hear how many times Matt had been out on the boat and that he was learning to free dive. Gary asked Matt to explain to Bill what he had been doing on the farm. Matt could see from Bill's expression that he was not only surprised, but he was also impressed.

"Gosh," Bill said, "maybe I should ask Matt to do some more around the house!"

“How about a woodshed by the back fence?” asked Gary. “Seems like there’s some space there and plenty of sunlight. We could load it up now so the wood dries over summer. Wouldn’t cost much, we could use timber from the farm.”

“Sure,” said Bill, “if it’s not too much bother.”

“No bother for me, Matt will do it,” said Gary, “it would be a great project for him. What do you reckon, Matt?”

“Sure,” Matt replied excitedly. Matt sat back again and let Bill and Gary talk. This was a very good outcome he thought. He would get to do something useful. He didn’t care that he had no idea how to build a woodshed, Gary would help him. It did not take long to hook some more fish and as usual, Gary explained when enough was enough.

“We’ll pick up the others next time when they are a bit bigger,” he said.

“Matt, it turns out you’re on dishes. I’ll pull up the anchor and we’ll tootle back.”

Again, Matt confidently took charge of starting the motor and driving the boat back toward the marina. Bill and Gary settled down at the back of the boat and enjoyed the warmth of the sun through the cool breeze.

“When our kids are young,” said Gary, “the trick is to live for them, not in spite of them. Once we have kids they’re our life. Our life needs to sit on the bookshelf for a while. As they get older we don’t live for our kids, we live with our kids. But never through our kids. Does that make sense to you?”

Bill was silent. “Where was this going?” he wondered. He nodded.

“Matt’s ready for living with. He’s a delightful young man, and he is a young man. He’s no longer a kid. He’s ready to learn to love life, discover his dreams and to get confidence in his future. He should be waking up every day and jumping out of his skin with joy because life is so full of promise.” Gary paused for a moment, looking out to sea. “When I first met Matt he looked crushed. School was crap for him, he was, possibly still is, being bullied. He had no hope in his life, Bill.” Gary turned to look at Bill.

“He’s a treasure. Just look at what he’s done today. I can be his friend, his karate teacher, his mentor. But I cannot be his father. I know things have been tough since Simon died. It’s not my business to pry and I won’t. But something’s not right at home. If I can help, I will help. But being a father is up to you.”

Bill looked out to sea, he turned to look at Gary and opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. Bill took a couple of short, hurried breaths and looked down. He sobbed gently. Gary moved to sit next to Bill. “Swing your legs around and face out the back, mate,” said Gary quietly. As Bill turned around Gary put his hand over his shoulder. “It’s okay, mate. You’re a good man, things have been tough.”

They sat in silence for a long time. At one stage Matt looked over to see what for him was a most extraordinary sight. One adult man comforting another. Matt could see that Bill’s head was hanging down and he was sobbing. Gary was looking out to sea and just letting things be. As he had once explained to Matt, sometimes this is all you could do.

“The great news, Bill,” began Gary, “is that Matt is getting quite the team around him. There’s Dylan, there’s Art, who’s a teacher at his next school, there’s Ricky who he does karate with sometimes. He’s a couple of years older and is at Matt’s next school. There’s me, Heather of course and all the animals at the farm, especially Bess the dog and Dexter the goat. Matt has a dream now, to be an engineer. There’s a reason to go to school for the first time in his life. Matt’s smart and has a great sense of humour.”

“But home’s crap,” interjected Bill.

“I’m not saying that,” replied Gary.

“Home is crap, Gary. It’s a sad and pathetic fact. Home is crap.”

“I was crap, Bill. Some still think I am and I have to live with this. But I made a change which took a big bucket of determination and persistence. You know the story.”

Bill nodded. “It must have been rough.”

“Yes, it was rough. But it was my own fault. I’m not blaming anyone. Not anymore at least.” Gary rubbed Bill’s shoulder. “Let’s agree to work together to make things as good as we can for Matt. No blame, no recriminations, no looking back. Let’s just focus on how we can work as a team to give him the best chance. Let’s live with him and enjoy the ride.”

Bill nodded.

“I’ll let you think.” Gary walked over to Matt. “How are we going, buddy,” he asked.

“All good, I’m just about to radio in.”

Gary put his hand on Matt’s shoulder and quietly said, “It’s been a very good day, Matt. A very good day.”

Bill watched Matt and Gary berth the boat. Just like before Matt was in charge and very gently nudged the boat into the berth. As soon as the boat was tied up Matt set about doing all the checks and locking up the boat. Indeed, he was a young man.

“We’ll drop some fish off to Art,” said Gary as they walked to the ute. “Won’t take a minute. By the way, we sure picked a lucky parking spot! You better note that one down with the others, Matt.” Matt looked at Bill and smiled. Bill smiled while rolling his eyes. Again Gary drove slowly out of the car park. This time Bill did not feel frustrated. He was coming to see Gary in a very different light. A thinker, a caring adult and not the uncaring brute he had imagined. When they arrived at Art’s house Gary passed Matt two packages from the chilly bin. “Run inside, Matt,” said Gary, “tell Art this one’s snapper and this one’s tarakihi.”

Matt ran in and returned with Art in tow. “Hi, Gary. Thank you so much,” said Art.

“You are most welcome. Art, have you met Bill?” asked Gary.

“No, I have not. Very nice to meet you, Bill,” said Art as they shook hands through the window. “I almost feel the need to apologise for stealing your son.”

“Thank you for having him,” replied Bill, “he clearly loves coming here.”

“No problem at all, catch you again,” said Art.

“Gotta go, Art. Just a drive-by today,” said Gary. Gary gently reversed out of the driveway tooted the horn and slowly drove down the road.

“Just drop us off here, Gary, that will be fine,” offered Bill as they approached the end of the driveway.

“Are you sure?” asked Gary.

“Certainly. Thank you again for a great day, that was the most fun I’ve had in a while.”

“Anytime, Bill, I head out most weeks. Here take these, I am sure Matt will help you eat them.”

“Thank you, Gary,” said Bill as he shook Gary’s hand. “Thank you.”

“Anything, anytime. I mean it,” replied Gary.

Bill nodded. He knew Gary meant it. As Bill and Matt walked down the drive Bill put his hand on Matt’s shoulder. “I’m very proud of you, Matt. You really surprised me today,” said Bill.

Matt said nothing, he did not know what to say, but he smiled. A big smile.

“A mechatronics engineer, well. I had better get you started on some electrical things then.”

“Yep,” replied Matt, “that would be great.”

# Thirteen

## A Step Backwards

**M**att relaxed in the shade, looking over the felled trees, across the farm and valley. The farm seemed organised, with a sense of purpose. Matt took great pleasure in watching the animals going about their routines. They had a great life, they were safe, they were cared for. Matt felt safe too. Bess put a paw on Matt's arm, a gentle reminder that he'd stopped rubbing her belly. Matt looked down at Bess, who stared intently back, slowly wagging her tail in encouragement. Gary was right, it seemed that dogs train their owners just as much as their owners trained them. "You are a silly dog," said Matt quietly, "a lovely, silly dog."

Bess sat up abruptly and stared down at the house. She let out wuff and lifted her head high. Matt followed her gaze and saw two cars coming up the driveway. Gary walked out from the shed and waved. Matt put his arm around Bess and pulled her close to him. "It's alright, Bess, it's alright," he said while rubbing the side of her neck.

People emerged from the cars and one by one shook hands with Gary. One car towing a large trailer started making its way slowly across the yard to the sheep paddock. The others walked behind and together they slowly made their way to where Matt and Bess sat. The wind blew the grass in waves across the paddock. The waves of grass made the wobbling car and

trailer look rather like a boat at sea. As the group got close Bess could no longer contain herself or be contained. She tore toward the approaching group barking and jumping, but taking care not to get too close. One of the group, an older man, bent down and held his hand toward Bess. "Why are you barking at me, dog. Don't you remember me from last time?"

Gary whistled and Bess ran to his side. "I think she does remember you, that's why she's barking," he said.

"Too bloody right," replied the older man, "I was just trying to get close enough to kick her in the teeth!"

The group laughed and Bess, having done her duty, began to circulate amongst them and seek attention.

"Matt," called Gary, "come and meet the team."

The older man approached Matt. "Hi, I'm John," he said while shaking Matt's hand. "Okay everyone let's run around the names." He pointed to each person and called out their name.

Now," began Gary, "John's in charge of this unruly bunch."

"We prefer Rotarians actually," interjected John, "much the same, but makes us feel important."

"Wait a second," said Tony, "if this is a Rotary event, where's the alcohol?"

"Don't worry, the alcohol is sorted," laughed Kristine, "you just need to earn it first."

Gary smiled. "A most honourable collection of community-minded folk. How about that?"

"That'll do," replied John.

"Now I think you've all been here before and John assures me that you've been through the safety talk. It's important. If you're not sure about anything please ask. We need two people on the mulcher. The mulch will go straight onto the trailer. The rest of the team will be on milling and stacking. We will run sleepers down to the shed in groups of twenty and stack them in there. So who's comfortable with the mulcher?"

“I’ll take that,” said Tony.

“Great,” said Gary, “grab a friend and Matt. Matt if you could drag the branches over to the mulcher as they finish the first lot that would be helpful. The mulching should not take too long, we can rotate the stacking of the sleepers, as that can be a bit of hard work.”

“I’m looking forward to this,” said Phil to Matt, “we come each year and it is one of the most enjoyable things we do. I just love this farm.”

Matt nodded, he too was looking forward to seeing how the mulcher and mill worked. It was then on with the gloves, eye protection and earmuffs. Indeed the mulching did not take too long. The branches flew through and were reduced to chip and chopped leaves in a noisy burst, one after the other. Matt was most surprised at what a relatively small pile of mulch was left after all the branches were gone. The next job for Matt was to pick up all the firewood that Gary had previously cut. As the logs went through the mill the discarded edges were cut into more firewood by Gary, faster than Matt could pick it up. Each time a load of sleepers was taken down to the shed Matt went and helped stack them. It was hard work, but everyone knew their role and in a few hours they were done. Bess, of course, ran back and forth from the shed to the trees barking at the vehicles.

“Hey, Matt,” called Gary, “we’re pretty much done here. Could you please have one final look around for any tools, then we’ll head down for a drink.” Matt walked a back and forth carefully over the work area and ran to catch up with Gary and the team.

“Matt, are you coming out with us tonight?” asked Kristine.

Matt looked up and said nothing. “Out where?” he wondered.

Kristine smiled back. “For a drink in town,” she said, “the rest of us are catching up at four.”

“Okay,” said Matt, although he had no idea how he’d fit into this plan.

Heather was waiting for the working party to return and it was no surprise that drinks and baking were waiting. Soon everyone was sitting

around chatting and eating. John, who Matt found out was a retired policeman, spent some time chatting with Matt and asking about his plans. Matt took great pleasure in explaining what mechatronics was and that he and Gary might convert Gary's boat to electric propulsion.

"Sounds like robocop is coming!" joked John, "lucky I'm retired already."

Trevor clapped his hands and got everyone's attention. "I just wanted to say a very big thank you to Gary and Heather for their generous contribution. Of course, we mostly come for the food, however, the fundraising is a most excellent bonus, for which we are very grateful."

"Hear, hear," Noel chimed in.

"You're most welcome," said Gary.

"Now," continued Trevor, "it's drinks at four at the usual. So let's give ourselves time to get organised."

Following a flurry of handshakes and hugs, the team headed for the cars and with a round of horn-tooting went on their way. Gary put his hand on Matt's shoulder. "Good effort, buddy, that was great. Heather and I are going to meet the others in town. Dylan, Jude and Art are coming too. So if you're free be sure to pop along, I'm sure we can accommodate you too. What do you reckon?" Matt nodded before sitting down and giving Bess one last big rub. Bess caught Matt out with a lunge to his face and pushed him over. Gary laughed as Bess gave Matt's face a good licking. "You need a real shower, not a dog wash," laughed Gary, "only sheep shearers settle for a dog wash before going out."

Matt rolled over and stood up. "See ya," he said as he got on his bike and rolled down the drive. He took a big breath in and out before pushing hard on the pedals, this was going to be a fast trip home. Indeed it was a fast trip home, much faster than after karate training. Matt rode very slowly down his driveway to give himself time to get his breath back. He felt good though, no more sore muscles, no more sore backside. He was starting to feel very comfortable on the bike. All of those rides and hill sprints with

Dylan were paying off. Matt lay down to cool off a bit before having a shower. His phone buzzed, it was Jed.

“Catch up?” Jed wrote.

“My house and walk into town?” asked Matt.

“Coming,” replied Jed.

“Sweet.”

Matt jumped up, he would have time for a shower if he was quick. Showers had become an unexpected challenge. Dylan had urged Matt to only have cold showers and they had made a pact. Only cold showers or confess, no cheating. This time would be easy though, Matt was hot and sweaty. Besides he was starting to enjoy the fresh, invigorated feeling that came after a cold shower. Matt had just got back to his room when there was a tap on his door. “Come in,” Matt called.

“It’s Bill,” came the reply. “Gary has called and invited me into town to meet with him and some others. Did you want a ride?”

“Nah, Jed’s coming around, we’ll walk in,” replied Matt.

“Why would Gary invite Bill?” wondered Matt. Though he didn’t care, Dylan and Art would be there too. Matt started walking to meet Jed.

Matt heard Jed whistle and waved. Jed had mastered the art of whistling and Matt was very impressed. He had also noticed Gary could whistle very loudly without using his fingers, something Gary suggested was very useful if you were working with animals. Gary told him, ‘Whistling can taste pretty bad on a farm if you need to use fingers!’ As usual, the discussion went straight to what Matt had been up to. Jed was much more impressed with what Matt had been doing than Matt expected. Even little things like learning to sharpen a chainsaw or prepare the boat. Jed was keen to meet Gary and they agreed that Jed would stay with Matt just long enough to do so.

“I can’t invite you out,” stressed Matt.

“I know, I know,” Jed assured Matt, “just a hello.”

However, unbeknown to Matt and Jed they had been spotted and things were about to go badly.

“Hey, Ru, that’s the dick from school,” said Rooster pointing to Matt. “With his girlfriend.”

“Which one?” asked Ru.

“On the right,” replied Rooster, “it was his mate who hassled me after school.”

Ru pulled the car over. “Let’s see which way they go.”

Matt and Jed turned down a side street, as they always did to get away from the traffic.

“That works,” said Ru, “let’s meet them at the other end.”

Matt and Jed were, as always, lost in conversation. Matt had agreed, to Jed’s enormous joy, to ask if Jed could come to the farm, or go out on the boat. They never saw Rooster and Ru waiting for them.

“Hey,” called Rooster.

As Matt turned to see who had called he felt a heavy whack on the side of his head. It was a large clump of mud thrown by Rooster.

“Just helping with your makeup, bitch,” sneered Rooster.

Matt put his head down and started to walk away. In one moment the joy and confidence of the previous weeks were gone. He was back at school, being bullied. Nothing had changed after all. His stomach felt cold and his legs a little wobbly.

“Where’s your big ass friend now eh?”

Matt kept walking with his head down. But Rooster kicked Matt’s leg, aggressively tripping him.

“Piss off,” yelled Jed.

“Come on. One on one,” said Ru, “let’s see what he’s got.”

Matt got to his feet but kept an eye on Rooster. Rooster walked around in front of Matt, blocking his path. “So what you got, pussy,” sneered Rooster.

Rooster stepped forward to push Matt. But Matt stepped back just as Rooster was about to make contact. Rooster stumbled, regained his balance and more aggressively lunged at Matt. But Matt stepped to his left, brushed Rooster's arm out of the way and lunged forward himself, pushing Rooster as hard as he could. Rooster fell over, but only for a second. He came straight back at Matt with his fists up, there would be no pushing now. Matt could hear Gary's advice, 'If they rush you, then a front kick. Don't try and stop a charge with your fists.' Matt prepared to kick.

WHACK. Matt fell to the ground. He had no idea what had hit him. He tried to get up but fell awkwardly on his side. He got onto his hands and knees, then thump, a kick in his ribs. He could hear Jed screaming for help. Again Matt tried to get up, but he was struggling to find his balance. He turned to look at Jed for help. Rooster took his chance, while Matt was halfway up he stepped forward and punched Matt as hard as he could in the face. Matt fell again. This time he did not try and get up. He rolled over onto his front and lay there.

"Piss off. Piss off, you arseholes," screamed a woman from a nearby house. "I saw that. You hit that kid from behind you coward. Piss off. Hey! Roger, get your dog and put him on these pricks. Go on PISS OFF."

Rooster and Ru started walking back to their car. Jed came over to Matt. "Oh man, oh man," cried Jed. There was blood pouring from Matt's mouth.

"Hey, kid," called the woman, she was close now. "Take their photo, get their number plate."

Jed took out his phone and pointed it at the car. Ru looked at him and shook his head. Jed knew what that meant, but took the photo anyway and held out his hand and gave Ru a long finger. A dog started barking. Matt heard a man's voice.

"Where are they?" he asked.

"In that car," said the woman. Matt heard the dog barking as the man walked to the car. But the car started and roared down the road. Jed and the woman both leaned over Matt.

“Come with me. Come inside and let’s clean things up a bit,” said the woman. Matt was dazed and not sure what to do. But he gladly followed the woman with Jed holding his arm.

“Here, sit on the porch until we get that bleeding sorted.”

Matt looked up. A man was approaching with a dog. It was a big dog which was straining on its leash and breathing heavily. “Sorry I didn’t get there a bit quicker mate,” the man said.

“We know where they live,” Jed replied, “can we borrow your dog?”

“He’s easy to start and hard to stop,” said the man, “maybe not the best option.”

“Sounds perfect actually,” replied Jed.

The woman returned with a bucket of water and some paper towels. “Here, best you clean yourself up, I might make things worse,” said the woman. She turned to Jed. “How about you ring his folks?”

“Dylan,” said Matt, “call Dylan.” He passed his phone to Jed.

Jed looked at the contacts list, Art, Dylan, Gary, Home, Jed. It was Jed mused a very short list.

“Hi, Dylan, it’s Jed. Matt’s been beaten up. Not sure,” Jed turned to the woman, “what’s the address?”

The woman held out her hand. “Pass me the phone.”

Matt looked down into the bucket, the water was now red. He kept dabbing his face and cleaning the blood away. The woman put her hand under his chin and lifted it. “Open your mouth, sweetie,” she said. “Teeth look fine, just split lips I think. Okay, see you soon.”

She handed the phone back to Matt. “That looks a lot better,” she said with a concerned smile. “How I wish my Barry was still around. He was in the army. Woulda beat the crap out of those arseholes in a second.”

“She’s right,” said the man with the dog, “Barry was a right bruiser.”

The woman laughed. “All love at home though,” she added.

Matt nodded. He didn't want to talk. He just wanted to go home and lie down. He heard the familiar sound of Art's car. He looked up, it was Art and Dylan. Dylan walked over to Matt and put his hand gently on the side of his head with his fingers under Matt's chin. He gently lifted Matt's head. Matt looked at Dylan and burst into tears. He didn't want to cry, but the more he tried to stop the more he cried. Dylan knelt and put his arms around Matt. "This is no good, buddy, no good at all," said Dylan gently.

"I tried," said Matt, sobbing. "I really tried."

"Rooster's brother Ru hit him from behind," said Jed loudly.

"That's right," added the woman, "this young fella was going fine until the man slapped his head from behind. Knocked him clean off his feet. The other one gave him a good kicking on the ground. Nothing fair about that."

Dylan looked at Jed. "That right?"

"Yep, he was really wobbly and Rooster punched him in the face while he was trying to get up."

Dylan pulled Matt close and whispered in his ear. Matt nodded.

"Art, please take a look and see if this will stop bleeding," said Dylan.

"Sure," said Art gently, "could we please have some clean water?" Art carefully looked inside Matt's mouth. "Teeth all good?" he asked, "check with your tongue and see if any are wobbly."

"All good," said Matt.

"This is going to hurt for a week or two, Matt," said Art, "but you'll be fine. Do you have a headache?"

"No," replied Matt.

Art turned to Dylan. "He's a bit shocked and we should consider concussion. A trip to the doctor I think."

"Okay," replied Dylan, "first we'll drop by town and let Bill and Gary know." Dylan helped Matt to the car while Art thanked the woman and man repeatedly and commended them on their courage. Dylan drove very

slowly, he seemed deep in thought. He parked the car and turned to Matt and Jed in the back seat. "You guys wait here, be back in a moment."

Matt lay back in the seat. His face was starting to hurt now. He heard footsteps and looked out the window. There was Bill, Gary, Heather, Dylan and Kristine, the woman from this morning. Matt could tell from their faces that he did not look so good.

Bill opened the door. "Oh, Matt, this is terrible."

"Jed," called Dylan, "please come here for a minute." Jed walked to Gary and Dylan. They stood in a huddle and spoke quietly. Matt could see from Jed's movements that he was reenacting what happened. He saw Gary pat Jed on the shoulder and shake his hand. Jed came back to the car and sat next to Matt.

"Gary said I can come to the farm with you next time," said Jed excitedly. Matt gave Jed a thumbs up, it hurt to smile.

Kristine leaned into the car. "Hi, Matt. Remember me?" she asked.

Matt nodded. He was feeling very tired now. "Look at my finger, Matt," she said. Matt tried to look at her finger but was somehow not interested. He just wanted to sleep.

Kristine turned to Bill. "Straight to hospital, Bill."

"Jump in, Bill," said Art, "I'll drive. Jed are you coming?"

Gary came over to the car and bent down to Bill. "Get Matt sorted first. Then call the police," said Gary. He turned to Jed. "You okay with making a statement to the police?"

"Can't wait," replied Jed.

Gary nodded and gave Matt a thumbs up. "I'm proud of you, Matt, stay strong."

"Kristine, thank you so much for taking a look at Matt," said Gary.

"You're welcome," Kristine replied, "he seems such a lovely young man."

"He is," said Dylan. "Gary, can I have a quick word?"

“Sure,” said Gary, then turning to Kristine and Heather he added. “I’ll see you inside in a minute.” Gary watched the ladies walk away before turning to Dylan. “You know where they live?”

Dylan nodded. Gary shook his head. “This fella’s your age right and hit him from behind? Just a promise. Is this clear? The police will be involved so don’t be foolish.”

“Got this,” replied Dylan.

Gary pulled his ute keys from his pocket and patted Dylan on the shoulder. “Don’t be long.”

Dylan drove slowly toward Rooster and Ru’s house. Their car was in the driveway. He parked further along the street by a tall hedge, one that would not allow the houses nearby to see the ute. He walked briskly to the house, straight to the front door and knocked loudly and took a step back.

The door opened, it was Ru, “What the faa,” he started, but he did not finish. BOOM. Dylan kicked the door open right where Ru was holding it and sent him flying backwards. Ru scrambled to his feet as Dylan entered the house. Ru opened his mouth to speak, but before he could speak, woof, all the air was driven from his lungs as Dylan kicked him in the chest. Dylan turned to Rooster, who was half sitting, half crouched on a chair and shook his head. Rooster sat slowly back in the chair. In the background Ru started making wheezing, squeaky sounds. Rather like a small pig.

Dylan walked over to Ru. “So, you hit a kid from behind while he was faced up to your brother, you damn coward.” He turned to Rooster. “And you kicked him while he was on the ground.” Dylan shook his head.

Dylan stared at Ru. “If you or your half-wit brother ever bother or touch Matt again I will return. It’s only you I will be coming for, Ru. That’s a promise.”

Dylan turned and walked out the door.

# Fourteen

## Calm at the Farm

Matt lay on his bed staring at the ceiling, looking at nothing in particular. His ribs hurt, his lips hurt, it hurt to eat, to clean his teeth and to smile. He tried not to think about the incident with Rooster. But he did think about it. He'd been foolish to think that life would be better. It was only a matter of time before he went back to school and things returned to normal. Still, it was good to be home. Certainly much better than the night he spent in the hospital. The policewoman was very kind. But did she know what happened when adults weren't around? Matt had no doubt that Rooster and his mates would be after him just as soon as they could.

The muffled sounds of Jed talking to Bill seeped through the closed door. Matt waited for Jed to finish being polite, he did not want to get up. Dylan was about to arrive too, he was taking Matt and Jed to the farm. But for the first time Matt did not want to go. The bubble had been burst. What would Gary think? Gary wouldn't have been beaten up, Dylan wouldn't have been beaten up. Matt was not one of them and never would be, there was no hiding from this now.

Jed stepped through the door. "Hey, man. Good?"

"Yep," mumbled Matt through sore lips.

Matt felt his phone vibrate and flipped it over. "Dylan's nearly here," he said, "wanna wait out the front?"

Matt waved to Bill as they passed the kitchen window. Bill smiled and waved back. He stood at the window and watched Matt and Jed walk down the drive. Matt was walking slowly, looking down, the spring in his step was gone. Bill felt a pang in his chest.

The two boys waited in silence. Jed wanted to say something but didn't know what to say. He'd never seen Matt sad when it was just the two of them. Art's car rolled around the corner. As it pulled up Jude leaned out of the window, she smiled and waved. "Morning, gentlemen wanna ride?"

"Sure, let's go do some doughnuts," laughed Jed as he ran around the other side of the car.

Matt got in without speaking. Dylan turned around and put his hand on Matt's knee. "Morning, buddy, it's good to see you up and about."

Matt nodded and leaned back in his seat. Dylan kept the conversation rolling without saying anything which required Matt to speak. Not that there was a need for Matt to say anything, Jed was on fire. He was very excited to be heading to Gary's farm and to be part of the team. When they arrived at the farm Bess came tearing out and barked at each car door. Matt took some joy in watching Jed hesitate to get out as he remembered how he'd felt on his first day. "Don't worry, she won't eat much," said Matt quietly.

Dylan turned to face Matt, smiled and pointed his finger at Matt. Matt tried to smile back to acknowledge that yes, he was stealing Dylan's joke. Matt knelt on one knee and let Bess make a huge fuss of him, just like she always did. Jed carefully squatted down next to Matt and tentatively held out his hand to Bess.

"If you're really lucky she'll bite you on the ass," said Matt.

"Whaaaaat! No way, man," laughed Jed.

"Oh yes, man. When you run she jumps up and bites your ass," said Matt.

"I'll just run faster," laughed Jed, while rubbing Bess with growing confidence.

"Yep, you will run faster," replied Matt.

“See you two out the back when you’re ready,” called Dylan as he and Jude walked to the house. Matt nodded and pulled Bess over onto her back between his knees. Bess bit Matt on the arm, holding on just tightly enough that he could not easily pull it free. She looked up at him while swishing her tail in the gravel.

“Whoa! Does that hurt?” asked Jed.

“Not much, it’s part of the game,” replied Matt, “let’s go meet the others.” Bess carefully ran in front of Matt, almost but not quite tripping him up as she tried to get a few more scratches. Jed held his hand out to Bess but she ignored him, she was devoted to getting Matt’s attention and she was very good at it.

Gary stood up and walked to meet Matt and Jed. “Good morning, boys,” he said. Gary shook Jed’s hand, then wrapped his arms around Matt and gently pulled him in close. It was a long, soft hug. Gary put one hand on the back of Matt’s head, pushing it into his chest. Gary held Matt close for a bit longer than usual. It was, Matt knew, a way to show that he cared and understood. Nothing needed to be said.

“Come and get some morning tea,” said Gary.

“Jed, meet Heather, Sandra and Allicia.”

“Hi,” said Jed, looking a little awkward and hesitant.

“Now,” began Gary, “Matt said you don’t eat much, but let’s see what you can do with this.” Gary picked up Jed’s plate and began piling on food. Jed looked at his plate when Gary finally put it down in front of him, then looked at Matt.

“Whoa,” he said with a grin. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“How many brothers and sisters do you have, Jed?” asked Gary.

“One older sister and brother, one younger brother,” replied Jed.

“Great, you will understand competitive eating. Get into it,” said Gary.

Sandra put her hand up to get Jed’s attention. “Around here we have to compete with Dad and the animals, so it’s pretty fierce competition.”

“Funny,” said Gary, “that’s what the animals said about Sandra!”

Jed laughed loudly and everyone joined in laughing with him. Matt watched Jed and thought about his own introduction. How awkward he

had felt and how much a part of the family he felt now. He could see that Jed was going to fit in much more quickly. Matt was quiet during lunch. Mostly because it hurt to eat and also because everyone else was so chatty it was easy for him to stay in the background. When Heather stood up and started collecting the plates Gary turned to Matt. "Matt, would you like to show Jed around the farm?"

"Sure," replied Matt softly.

"Great, there's no rush, lunch will be two hours away. Are you okay with moving Dexter to the tree paddock?"

"Sure."

"Great, pick some fruit on the way there and feed him first," suggested Gary.

"Awesome," exclaimed Jed, "can't wait to play with Dexter!"

Gary winked at Matt and Matt smiled back, well as good as he could with fat lips. They both knew that playing with Dexter was fun, but a bit intimidating the first time. Matt slapped the side of his leg. "C'mon Bess, let's go," he called.

"Hey, Matt," Gary called, "take Jed to the shed and get him some boots." Matt gave Gary a thumbs up and continued walking with Jed. Gary walked inside where the others were doing the dishes and talking amongst themselves.

"Dad, he looks terrible," said Sandra in a sad voice, "not just his face, but he looks so sad. I just want to hug him."

"Then hug him, baby, he won't mind. He needs hugs," replied Gary.

"I hope you bashed that prick, Dylan," said Sandra. "Or do I need to go do it myself," she added while doing a mock kick to Dylan's groin.

Dylan looked at Gary and raised his eyebrows. Gary put his hand up. "The police are involved now, we need to step back and let things take their course. It'll be sorted, Sandra. Matt will be safe."

"Honestly, I nearly cried," said Heather, looking like she might cry now. "Matt was starting to look so much more confident, now he looks crushed."

“He is crushed, honey, but his confidence will be back,” replied Gary, “he’s got two weeks off training and heavy exercise. Once we get back to training he’ll be fine. In the meantime, we need to wrap ourselves around him and make sure there are no more incidents.” Gary put his hands on his head with elbows spread wide and looked up. “The big issue to crack is his home life. I reckon his father’s on board, but what’s the story with his mother? Did your friends come up with anything, Heather?”

Heather folded her arms and leaned back against the kitchen bench. “No, it seems that Jane has dropped out of her friend groups and spends nearly all her time at home.”

Gary looked at Dylan. “Anything to add?”

Dylan shook his head. “Matt has not mentioned his mum once, not a peep. Jed hasn’t even been in the house. It has to be a mental health issue.”

“Was she like this before Simon died?” asked Gary.

“No,” replied Dylan, “she was always a bit quiet and shy, but we talked.”

Gary walked out of the kitchen. “Let’s sit in the lounge,” he said. He sat on a sofa and held out an arm, inviting Heather to sit next to him. He drummed his fingers on the side of the lounge while thinking. “So, Matt lives in a sleep-out attached to the carport and hardly goes inside. Is that right?”

Dylan nodded. “Seems to be the case.”

Gary nodded slowly. “And we don’t know anyone who knows Jane to get a better handle on things?”

“Seems so,” said Heather.

“I’ll have to talk to Bill,” said Gary, “I was hoping not to do that.”

“Why not?” asked Sandra.

Gary thought for a moment. “Because I’m just building trust with Bill. From his perspective, I’m already interfering with Matt.”

There were a few moments of silence before Dylan spoke. “I could try talking to him.”

“Would he give you the time, or listen to you?” asked Gary.

“Not usually, but maybe now,” replied Dylan, “things are a bit shaken up at present.”

Gary nodded. “Okay, if you’re happy to try I’m good with that.” Gary slapped his leg. “Right, that’s a plan. I’m going to check on those boys and see where Dexter’s escaped to.”

“He better not be eating my roses!” exclaimed Heather with mock fury.

Gary winked at Dylan. “You better come and help me.”

Matt encouraged Bess to scout for rabbits as they passed the tanks and sheds. Bess of course obliged by tearing around and around as if she was on the cusp of catching one. Jed laughed and ran with her. “We can collect the eggs on the way back,” said Matt.

“Man, this place is awesome,” said Jed, “if there’s a zombie apocalypse I’m coming here.”

The boys filled their pockets with fruit and headed to get Dexter. Dexter wagged his tail as Matt approached. He got very excited when Matt put his hand into his pocket and pulled out a feijoa. Matt showed Jed how to feed Dexter and they took turns feeding him and rubbing his neck.

“Man,” said Jed, “look at those horns, imagine them getting rammed up your backside.”

“You may not need to imagine it,” said Matt, “I’m going to unclip him and we are going to walk over to those trees.”

“Whaaat, not those ones way over there?” asked Jed.

“Yep,” replied Matt, “and he’s going to run.”

Matt fed Dexter some more fruit as they started to walk, hoping it would keep him calm. Feeding Dexter did keep him calm, for nearly ten whole seconds. Dexter started to pull on the leash raising his head up and down. He turned sideways and did some small jumps. Matt knew what this meant, Dexter wanted to play. Dexter stopped walking and faced Matt, he did a couple of small hops and reared up on his back legs.

“Whoa, Matt! Look out!” called Jed with delight.

Matt stepped forward as Gary had shown him and put up his hand close to Dexter's head. Dexter put his head on Matt's hand and pushed down hard. Matt used his hand to guide Dexter's head onto his belly and pushed as hard as he could. He could see Dexter's tail wagging furiously as he pushed Matt backwards through the grass. Bess started barking and jumping at Dexter. Jed was laughing loudly. Dexter backed off Matt before running hard at Bess with his head down low. Bess ran off as fast as she could, before turning around and barking from a safer distance. Dexter faced Matt again and reared up on his back legs. Again and again Dexter pushed Matt through the grass. Jed was laughing so hard he could barely stand. Without warning, Dexter tore off across the paddock.

"Run, Jed. Run," yelled Matt as he ran after Dexter clinging to the leash. Matt knew from experience that if he stood still Dexter would pull him over. Fortunately Dexter ran toward the trees. Matt just focused on staying on his feet.

"Wait," yelled Jed.

But Matt could not wait, he would need to run until Dexter stopped.

"Arhhhhh," Jed yelled, "Bess bit me on the arse."

Matt started laughing. "Of course Bess bit you on the arse," he thought, "that's just what Bess does."

"Did you see that?" asked Gary. "I think Bess just bit Jed on the backside."

Dylan and Jude were both laughing. "Sure did," replied Dylan, "that's just marvellous. Two boys, a goat and a dog that bites your backside whenever you're not looking. Farm life at its best."

"I had no idea farming was so much fun," added Jude.

Matt started to run at an angle to Dexter to try and steer him toward the gate. Dexter started running sideways, which he was remarkably good at before stopping to face Matt. Matt quickly reached into his pocket to get a piece of fruit to show Dexter. Dexter saw the fruit, started wagging his tail and walked to Matt. "Good boy," said Matt while holding out his hand. Bess came tearing past, followed by Jed.

“Man,” said Jed loudly, “she bites really hard.”

“Only if you’re tasty,” said Matt, recycling one of Gary’s jokes. Dexter seemed to know where they were heading and walked purposely to the gate. Matt opened the gate and unclipped Dexter. Dexter walked toward some weeds and after sniffing a few started to browse.

“Let’s sit in the shade,” said Matt.

“Yeah, I need a rest,” replied Jed. Bess headed off amongst the trees with her nose to the ground, zig-zagging back and forth.

Satisfied that the boys had successfully made it to the tree paddock Gary headed back inside. Matt listened to Jed’s panting. It made him realise just how much fitter he was now. He would have struggled to run across the paddock when he first got to the farm, but now it felt easy. Matt looked across the farm and down the valley. He felt peaceful, the farm was his safe place.

“I love being on the farm,” he said.

“Yeah, it’s awesome,” replied Jed.

“Dexter is crazy, imagine if we took him to school!”

“Bess might be easier,” replied Matt.

“Yeah, but no one would mess with Dexter,” laughed Jed, “imagine him ramming Rooster.”

Matt smiled and lay back on the grass with his eyes closed. Dexter chasing Rooster was a lovely thought indeed. He heard Bess’s footsteps, then felt her breath as she sniffed his face. He put out his arm and scratched her neck, there was a small thump as she fell against him.

“Can’t believe Bess bit my arse,” said Jed quietly as he stretched out.

“She’s a funny, funny dog,” Matt replied, “but you get used to it.” The two boys lay in silence. The leaves rustled gently as puffs of breeze came through. Occasionally they could hear the clump of Dexter’s hoofs, or the tearing of weeds as he browsed. Eventually, Dexter also sat down and made himself comfortable.

Jed sat up. “Maybe we should wander back?”

“Sure,” replied Matt, “come and watch Dexter first. I wanna show you something.” Matt walked over and sat next to Dexter and gently stroked his neck. “Watch his throat, the food goes up and down.”

Jed sat down in front of Dexter. “What do you mean, up and down?”

“Just watch here,” suggested Matt while pointing to the front of Dexter’s neck. “You’ll see it once he has swallowed the bit he’s chewing.” Sure enough Dexter swallowed his mouthful, and a bulge ran up his neck to his mouth and he started chewing again.

“Wow!” exclaimed Jed.

“He chews his food more than once, up and down it goes,” explained Matt.

“Imagine if you could do that in class,” laughed Jed.

“Yeah,” laughed Matt, “the whole class would be doing it.” Matt stood up slowly and stretched. “Let’s go get the eggs and head back.”

Jed gave Dexter one last rub on the head and stood up. Matt slapped his leg. “C’m on Bess, let’s go. Just walk and she won’t nip you.”

Heather watched the two boys walking back with the egg basket. They were chatting and looked happy, as two boys on a farm should. She smiled to herself. “Hi boys. How did you go?”

“All good,” replied Matt holding up the egg basket.

Gary called from inside the house. “I hope you two haven’t been training my dog to bite people on the backside!”

Jed laughed loudly. “Too late, someone’s already done it,” he called back.

Gary got up from the couch and walked outside to meet them. “Lunch is not far away, let’s have a seat,” he said. “Now, we’ve been chatting while you two were out and about. How about the three of us, plus Dylan and Jude head out on the boat tomorrow?” asked Gary.

Jed looked at Matt for approval. “Yeah,” he said excitedly, “that would be awesome.”

“Great,” said Gary, “the last thing before lunch is to show Jed the dojo.”

Jed looked ready to jump in the air. “Cool!”

Gary stood up. "Matt, would you please show Jed the entrance and showers. I'll meet you there."

Jed was suitably impressed when he saw Matt's name on a locker. He chatted excitedly as they cleaned their feet before walking into the dojo. Matt could hear Dylan and Jude talking inside. "Follow me and do what I do," instructed Matt.

The boys bowed and walked onto the mats. Jed jumped up and down, feeling the spongy mats with his feet. "These are really cool," he said.

"You will think they are really, really, extra-specially cool when you land on your head," replied Dylan as he walked to the back of the dojo and picked up a pad. "Here hold this," he said as he threw the pad to Jed. "Put your arms around the pad like this and pull it to your chest."

"Ready?" asked Dylan.

"For what?" said Jed, laughing.

"I'm going to kick you in the guts," replied Dylan as he lifted his knees up and down to warm up.

"Whaaaat?"

"Don't worry, I will start gently and I promise not to hurt myself," replied Dylan. Dylan very gently kicked the bag. Jed massively overreacted as he was expecting something much more violent. "I will slowly up the contact, but you must tell when it's hard enough. Okay?"

"Okay," replied Jed cautiously.

Dylan slowly kicked the bag, then a bit harder and a bit harder still. "That looks like enough I think," said Dylan.

"Yeah, that's enough," laughed Jed.

"Well done." It was Gary, he'd been watching from the front of the dojo. Gary bowed and walked onto the mats. "Pass that pad please, Jed. Now stand next to me and pay attention to the impact. Ready?" he asked while looking at Jed. He turned to Dylan, "Just kick it as hard as you've been kicking Jed." Dylan nodded and kicked the bag. "Couple more."

Dylan tapped the bag two more times. "Righto, Jed. Have you got a feel for that?"

"Yeah," replied Jed in a nervous voice.

Gary nodded at Dylan. "Okay, crank it up over five."

"Hai," said Dylan, looking much more serious. Dylan bounced a couple of times to settle his stance and started kicking the bag. Each time moving more quickly and finally BOOM, hitting the bag as hard as he could.

"Whoa," said Jed excitedly, "that's massive!" Gary looked at Matt and winked. Matt was smiling. He'd told Jed about Dylan and Gary, but seeing them was another thing.

"Well," said Jude, "I will let you guys beat each other up while I help Heather."

"Jed and Matt," said Gary, "if you don't mind, could you please show me exactly what happened the other day." Matt felt a nervous pang in his stomach. But before he could say anything Jed started talking. "Well, they were waiting for us on a side street. We didn't even see them before Rooster threw some mud at Matt." Jed walked behind Matt. "We tried to ignore them and walk away, but Rooster came up behind Matt and kicked his leg like this." Jed did a slow-motion kick to Matt's leg. "And Matt fell down."

"Where was Rooster's brother?" asked Gary.

"He was standing behind Matt," replied Jed. "When Matt got up Rooster came around in front of him and tried to push him over, but Matt was too quick."

Gary looked at Matt. "Did you slip him, Matt?" Matt nodded. Gary walked over and put his hand on Matt's shoulder. "Excellent. Now you wouldn't have done that before starting training, would you?" Matt shook his head. "Well done, Matt. I'm proud of you," said Gary as he rubbed Matt's shoulder. "Well done."

"Then," began Jed, "Rooster went like this, he did it again. But Matt pushed him over."

“You pushed him over?” asked Gary. “How did you do that?”

“I stepped to the side and pushed across his stance,” replied Matt.

“Like this?” asked Gary. “Push me please, Jed.” Jed stepped forward to push Gary, but before his foot touched the ground Gary stepped around and pushed him to the ground. Jed started laughing.

“That was it,” said Jed as he stood up. “It was awesome.”

“Matt, that’s incredible,” said Gary, “I’m very impressed. To do that the first time you are under pressure is fantastic. Then what?”

“Well,” said Matt, “I was getting ready to kick him as he came forward.”

“Which kick?” asked Gary.

“Front kick.”

“Perfect, Matt,” said Gary, “that’s the perfect kick to stop a charge.”

Jed put his hand up and blurted loudly, “But Rooster’s brother smashed Matt from behind, like this.”

Jed demonstrated a big swinging arm. “He smashed Matt in the head and Matt went FLYING.” Jed did a big, theatrical dive to the ground. He was now very excited. “Rooster kicked him and punched him in the face when he was getting up,” said Jed as he demonstrated a monster kick and punch.

Gary walked over to Matt and put his arm around his neck. He spoke slowly and softly. “Matt, two on one would be a handful for any of us. Especially when one is twice our size and attacking from behind. You did very well and I have decided to give you something today that you have earned. Now you would have got this in a few weeks, but you deserve it now. Wait here.”

Gary walked to the edge of the mats, bowed and walked into the house. Matt looked at Dylan for a hint about what was happening, but Dylan just smiled and gave Matt a thumbs up. When Gary returned he was carrying a small bag. He walked over to Matt. “That little old lady who helped you was once married to a man called Barry. Barry was in the military and used to box. He was my boxing instructor when I was young. Barry was a tough

nut, he was called 'the psychologist' due to his enthusiasm for assisting people with changing their behaviour. Now, that lady assures me that you were doing just fine one on one. You have put what you have learned into practice when under pressure. No one can ask for more than that. So here's your first gi." Gary held out his hand and shook Matt's hand firmly. "Matt, look me in the eyes." Matt looked up and Gary leaned forward. "I am proud of you. You have earned this. Your first grading will be in three weeks. That should give you time to get back on your feet."

Matt smiled, it hurt, but he didn't care. Dylan stepped forward and shook Matt's hand. Matt looked up at Dylan and was pretty sure he saw tears in Dylan's eyes. Dylan put his arms around Matt and hugged him. "Good effort, buddy, good effort," he said.

"Jed, you better shake his hand too," said Gary. As Jed and Matt shook hands Gary stepped forward and put a hand on each of their shoulders. "Friendship is important. Looking after each other is important. I know that if I ever needed it Dylan would have my back and he knows that I would be there for him no matter what. The two of you need to look after each other and you need to know how to look after each other. Jed, I think you ought to consider starting karate too."

Jed looked at Matt with his mouth wide open and his eyebrows raised as high as they would go. Gary stepped back and looked at Jed. "First talk to Matt and make sure you know what you're in for, think about it then let me know."

"Yep", replied Jed, "I sure will."

# Fifteen

## Back at Sea

**M**att and Jed sat on the side of Eldie watching small fish swim back and forth. Ripples rolled out from the boat as the motor chugged quietly away. Jed was keen to discuss karate training. Matt made it sound as miserable as he could, but Jed's mind was made up. He was going to train.

"Just look how buff you are now, man. I can't wait," said Jed. Matt gave Jed his signature whatever look. "Seriously, man, you look totally buff. You've even got taller! Bet your trousers don't fit."

Matt laughed. "Dunno, haven't worn trousers in ages."

"We won't need the rack at school man, we'll just smash 'em. Imagine when we are both kicking ass, no one will bother us. It will be AWESOME," said Jed as he put his hands in the air.

"We can't just go smashing people, Jed."

"I know, you have to wait for them to ask," said Jed as he laughed loudly.

There was a thud as a bag hit the floor behind them. "Morning, boys." Matt and Jed turned around to see Gary stepping aboard, with Dylan and Jude close behind. "All set to go, skipper?"

"Yep."

Gary put his hands on his hips. "Let's go, baby. Show Jed how to let the bow go while I help the others aboard."

Jed followed Matt to the front of the boat and listened carefully to Matt's instructions. "No goofing," said Matt, "Gary takes safety very seriously."

"All good," replied Jed. Then with a laugh, "Not at school now."

Matt headed back to let the stern rope go and turned to the others. "Ready?"

"And waiting," replied Dylan, "let her rip, skip."

Gary, Dylan and Jude sat back in the sun while Matt and Jed took control of the boat. Matt carefully drove the boat out of the marina, explaining every step to Jed, including how to make a radio trip report. Gary beamed a big smile to Dylan and held a fist in the air. Matt was back.

It was another quiet day. The sea was glassy with only the slightest rise and fall from a long exhausted swell. Matt and Jed chatted between themselves about the boat controls and the navigation tools. Jed took a great interest in the depth sounder and reported the depth each time it changed. It was, he noted, 'Over our head.' Gary lay down and snoozed, content to listen to the banter from the boys and the chat between Dylan and Jude, who seemed to be circling each other, coming closer and closer. Soon Gary, content that everything was as it should be, drifted asleep.

Matt throttled the motor back. "We've arrived," he called.

Gary rolled his head over to face Matt and stretched his arms above his head. "Reckon you and Jed can safely drop the anchor?"

"Yep."

Gary smiled and gave Matt a thumbs up. "Good, I'll sort the rods. Don't forget the berly!" Gary sat up slowly and looked around, before settling his gaze onto Jude and smiling. "It's your first time on the Eldie, so you should catch the first fish. Let's get you started."

"I'm not sure about that, Gary, I've never fished before."

"Well it's an important tradition, so do your best."

Jude leaned over the side of the boat and looked into the water. "Can't see any," she said. Gary winked at Dylan and Dylan smiled back. Dylan knew the drill, only Jude's hook would have bait on it until she caught a

fish. It was a great trick that worked wonders for making visitors feel useful. Beginners luck ran strongly on Eldie.

Once the rods were set and the lines in the water Gary turned to Matt and Jed. "Would you two like to do some snorkelling?"

"Yep," replied Matt, "sure would."

"Great. Have you snorkelled before, Jed?"

"Nope."

"That's fine, Matt will show you what to do. Give him a compensator, Matt and show him how to use it."

"I felt something!" called Jude.

Dylan reached over and lifted Jude's rod. "Actually, I think you're right, pull it up."

Jude slowly wound the line up while looking over the side. "There it is," she called.

Gary leaned over with the landing net and scooped up the fish. "Well, you hooked the first fish, well done. It's even a snapper, however, it is a wee bit small. This one will be heading back. Anything you wish to tell it first?"

"Sorry," said Jude.

Gary let the fish go and it vanished in a flash, he baited Jude's hook and let the line back down. "Hopefully that fish doesn't post anything too negative on Fishbook."

"Now, boys, all set to go?" asked Gary.

"Yep," they chimed together.

"Good. I'll keep an eye on you. Jed, just practice clearing your snorkel and mask. If you can master that on your first splash you're doing well."

Jed nodded. Both boys sat on the side of the boat with their backs to the sea and looked at each other. A muffled, "Three, two, one," came through Matt's snorkel and they rolled backwards and hit the water with a splash. Gary leaned against the cabin watching the boys swim and practice diving. Each time they surfaced there was a burst of laughter and chatting.

“Can you remember learning to dive?” asked Gary.

“Sure can,” Dylan replied, “thanks for that.”

“You are most welcome, I enjoyed it too.”

“Hey, hey. This is bigger,” called Jude excitedly. Then laughing.  
“MUCH bigger.”

“Indeed it looks so,” said Gary.

The fish was much bigger. Gary clapped his hands together as Dylan scooped the fish out of the water. “Now we’re in business. Dylan, check your line, you’ve probably lost your bait.”

“I suspect you are right,” replied Dylan, “but first I’ll get Jude baited up and back on the job.” Unsurprisingly Dylan’s bait was missing and Jude took great delight in teasing him for not even noticing he’d lost it. Gary smiled to himself and looked out to sea. The water was cold, so it was not too long before the boys were ready to get out and warm up. Gary reached over and lifted them by their arms, casually hoisting them onto the boat.

“Great news, you’ve got some cooking to do, boys.”

“Cool,” said Matt, “I bet it was Jude.”

“How did you know, Matt? It was Jude!” Jude looked over at Gary and Matt trying to work out what they were smiling about. There was a joke going on, but she didn’t know what it was. Matt and Jed made a great team with Jed taking orders and preparing the buns as Matt cooked the fish. Before long they were all sitting in the sun, enjoying a much-appreciated lunch. Once the lunch banter settled down Gary got everyone’s attention.

“Now, there’s a rule at karate. What happens on the mat, stays on the mat. We don’t take any issues from karate outside. If there are scores to settle from training, they get settled in training. Understand?”

Matt and Jed nodded.

“Today there will be another rule, what is said on the boat stays on the boat. Understood?”

Again Matt and Jed nodded.

“That means you don’t even discuss it between yourselves, not a word.” Gary looked at Matt and Jed in silence until they nodded again.

“Okay. Dylan gave Ru a little bump. The bump was to make sure that there is no misunderstanding whatsoever what the consequences will be if things don’t go well.” Gary paused and looked down for a moment. “Ru will never bother you again, I am certain of this. But you need to be sure never to bother him either. If you meet when out and about, ignore him, walk away. Don’t make eye contact, don’t put him in a position where he has to back down, because you cannot deliver on that. I don’t want there to be any further grief with Ru and you need to play your part. Understood?”

Matt and Jed nodded in silence. “Now young Rooster is another story, I have no idea what he’ll do if he sees you. But the same approach is best, just walk away and don’t put him in a position where he has to back down. He’s young and hot-headed, he might just blow up. In the meantime train very hard.” Gary smiled and raised his eyebrows to Matt. “But I think you have that bit sorted already eh.”

Matt smiled and nodded. He had been thinking about Rooster and was no longer scared. If it was just Rooster he was confident he could stay safe.

“Anything to add, Dylan?” asked Gary.

“Actually,” Dylan began, “there’s a little history that should be on the table.”

“Here we go,” said Gary smiling and shaking his head. “A fly in the ointment I didn’t know about!”

Dylan smiled. “It’s only a little fly.”

Jude shook her head. “There always seems to be a little fly.”

“Matt, do you remember what I told you about Simon in the car after training, right at the start?” asked Dylan.

“About the guys hassling Simon and you?”

“Yep. Well, Ru was one of the worst and he was on my list. However, he was a bit hard to track down and by chance when I finally met him...” Dylan paused.

“How do I put this? Have you ever needed to do a poop so bad that you’re sure it’s about to pop out and there seems little chance that you will make it to the toilet?”

Matt and Jed nodded smiling. “So bad that you start sweating and you think maybe if you just slipped a little into your butt cheeks it would relieve the pressure and you could perhaps get a bit further?”

Matt and Jed started to giggle and nodded again. “Well, that was me. I was crossing the car park in town, heading for the toilets. I was thinking any moment I’m just going to crouch down between two cars and let it loose. I’m sure my mouth was wide open, I was probably crying.”

“Please tell me you made it,” said Gary.

“Just then I hear a voice from behind, ‘So I heard you were looking for me’, it was Ru. Now under normal circumstances, this would have been fantastic. But what do I do? I could not throw a single technique without pooping myself and I was wearing shorts, with no undies. So there would be no hiding the evidence. Ru would forever be able to say that I was so scared I pooped myself. The only fight option was a leg sweep, drop my shorts and dump right on his head. But we never trained for that.”

“No,” interjected Gary, “we most certainly don’t train for that.”

Jed put up his hand. “Couldn’t you just poop, slide it down your leg, and flick it in his face?” he suggested as he stood up, demonstrating the technique.

“No and we won’t be training that option either,” said Gary with mock indignation. “You know what I would have said if I saw you do your leg sweep and trouser dropping manoeuvre Dylan?” asked Gary.

Dylan smiled and shook his head.

“I would say your technique was just crap.”

Dylan, Matt and Jed roared with laughter. Jude grinned and shook her head.

“Actually, what happened is I simply turned around and continued to the toilet. Fortunately, I made it, but by the time I got out, things took a while you see, Ru was gone. He told everyone that I backed down from

him, which greatly piddled me off. We never met again, he left school early for some reason.”

Jude put her arms around Dylan and pulled him close. “Well, I am proud of you, honey. For making the more dignified choice.”

Gary leaned forward and looked closely at Matt and Jed. “Just a reminder, not a word once off this boat. Loose lips could really blow this up.” Matt and Jed nodded. Gary stood up and clapped his hands. “Any more flies Dylan?”

“Nope.”

“Righto, thirty minutes to hook a couple more fish and we’ll head back. Let’s get something for you guys to take home.” Gary pulled out another rod. “Okay, boys. You can fish off the bow.”

Dylan put his rod in a rod holder and came and sat next to Jude. He put his arm around her shoulder and kissed her on the cheek. After a period of sitting in silence, Dylan spoke. “It was just one tap,” he said quietly.

Jude turned and looked at Dylan in silence for several seconds. “You know I’m not hanging around boys being boys? I’m over that rubbish.”

Dylan nodded. “Yep, I know. It was for Matt, not me.”

“No mistakes.”

“No mistakes,” replied Dylan as he kissed Jude again and pulled her close.

The chatter from the front of the boat grew more excited. “YEAH,” yelled Jed, “look at this beast!”

“Don’t lift it out of the water Jed, pull it around the side gently,” called Gary as he leaned over with the landing net. “That’s good, just a bit closer, got it. That’s a beauty! Well, Jed, you’ve caught the fish of the day so far.” Gary hoisted the fish over onto the chopping board and put the tip of a knife in the back of its head. “Okay, team. One more and we’re good to go.”

Gary put some fresh bait on Jed’s hook and the boys enthusiastically headed back to the bow. Gary sat down and leaned forward toward Dylan and Jude.

“Just listen to those boys. You don’t even need to know what they’re saying to know they’re happy. Isn’t it great? Makes it all worthwhile.” Gary

leaned back and smiled. "I can remember going fishing and diving with my dad. Some of my best days, now best memories, of my life."

Dylan nodded slowly as he thought. "I guess I never really had a dad, Mum had partners, but they were never fathers to me. I think mum tried to do that bit too. I got closest to Art, but he's more of a friend."

"Yes," said Gary, "that's how it seemed to me. You always seemed a bit wild and unbounded." Gary smiled. "Lots of horsepower, but a bit of trouble staying on the road. Like a 1970s Ford Falcon! Young Matt though is more like a nimble sports car. Cautious, but balanced. Once he lets the handbrake go he'll be hard to catch."

Dylan grinned and nodded. "Matt is great, I love Matt. He so SOOO like Simon but doesn't know it. Simon would have been the most fantastic big brother for Matt."

"Well that's you now, buddy," observed Gary, "you need to be Matt's big brother for a bit."

"Until the start of school, then I need to start my new job."

Gary leaned back and put his hands behind his head. "That's plenty of time Dylan, he'll be on his way by then. We'll make sure school is a positive experience next year." Gary brought both hands down with a slap on his thighs and looked at Jude. "Now, Jude. What's happening in your world?"

Jude smiled a very controlled smile. It was a practised smile. A 'keep moving, everything is fine' smile. "The life plan is to avoid dickhead men. Kinda hoping the next one will be alright."

Gary noticed that Dylan was now looking down and quite uncomfortable. "I recall Heather saying something like that to me once. It was a while ago, I believe I still had hair. Maybe you should have a chat with Heather. She may be quiet, but she's very smart and considered. I do believe she has some of this stuff sorted. Did a world of good for me."

Jude nodded. "I just might do that."

“You know that old saying? Behind every successful man is an astonished woman,” asked Gary.

Jude laughed loudly. “No, but so true.”

“Well,” Gary continued, “behind every good man is a strong woman. Sometimes men need a little kick in the pants.”

Jude put her hand on Dylan’s neck and shook his head gently. “Well, Dylan. Maybe we should try that? So, Gary, do you kick the front or back of the pants?”

Dylan shook his head while Gary laughed. “You’ll have to work that out, I suggest giving both a go and seeing what works best,” said Gary.

“GOT ANOTHER ONE,” yelled Jed.

“You good boy,” Gary called back. “Well, guys. Let’s sort this and start heading back.”

# Sixteen

## Matt Returns Home

Matt held out his hand and rubbed his fingers together, hoping to entice Tac to come and sit on his lap. Tac's tail twitched as he thought, if indeed cats think. Then with absolute certainty, he strode briskly to Matt and climbed onto his lap. Matt lifted his knees slightly to make a small hollow for Tac to settle into. Though, as he was a cat, Tac did not do what Matt wished. Instead, he stood up straight and leaned against Matt's chest with his head stretched upwards. He squeezed his eyes shut as Matt obediently rubbed him under the chin. It was sheltered and warm on Art's patio. The evening sun was gentle and comforting, like a parting hug from the summer's day.

Tac watched Art sit down next to Matt before rolling over with his legs in the air. Matt had learned not to tickle Tac's belly. Tac was still young enough to respond with a playful nip and scratch. Instead, Matt gently rubbed Tac on the top of his head.

"Either you have Tac sorted, or he has you sorted. Not sure which! Bill is coming to visit soon. We're going to have a chat," said Art.

Matt turned and gave Art a quizzical look as Art put his hand on his shoulder and gently said, "Things are going to change for the better. Certainly nothing to worry about." Matt nodded and turned his attention back to Tac. "We can chat over a chocolate mousse," said Art as he got up.

Matt loved Art's chocolate mousse and was learning to make it. It was the most chocolaty dessert he'd ever tasted. Tac curled up tightly in Matt's lap and started to purr as he was gently stroked, he was settled in for a long cuddle. Matt's daydreaming was interrupted by the sound of Art welcoming Bill and asking him to come and sit down. "You're just in time for dessert, Bill. Great timing."

Matt turned slightly, careful not to disturb Tac and called out, "Hey, Bill, come and see Tac." Bill squatted down in front of Matt who gave Tac a slightly faster scratch on the side of his neck to entice him to stretch out and purr more loudly.

"That's one lucky puss," mused Bill.

"Yep," said Matt, "he has a great life."

Art tapped a spoon on a plate to get everyone's attention. "Dessert is served, come when you're ready."

"Or come soon if you want one," added Dylan.

Bill raised his eyebrows. "Come on, let's join the party." Matt slowly lowered his legs and wriggled to let Tac know it was time to go. Tac looked about and jumped off, walking slowly away before sitting down in the sun. There was a short silence as they started eating dessert before Bill put down his spoon and looked at Art. "Art, this is the best mousse I've ever had."

"Thank you, Bill. Matt almost has the recipe sorted. It's a little bit tricky, but I am sure you'll be eating these at home shortly." Bill looked at Matt, raised his eyebrows and smiled. There was a long silence as Art cleared the table. When he sat back down he smiled at Matt before turning to look at Bill.

Bill put his hands together on the table. "Well, Matt. There have been some discussions and we have decided to make a few changes." Bill paused, looked down at his hands and took a couple of quick, short breaths. "As you know, Jane has not been well. It's not an easy situation. But her doctor and I have decided it's time for her to get some different treatment. She will be away from home for a little while and we're thinking of making a few changes during

this time.” Bill looked up at Matt and opened his mouth, but said nothing. He looked down and wiped his eyes. Art reached over and put his hand on Bill’s shoulder. Dylan sat back in his chair and raised his eyebrows at Matt.

Art gave Matt a gentle smile. “What we were thinking was that during this time you could move back into the house. That way we could give your sleep-out a makeover, turn it more into a boys’ den.” Matt looked back in silence, this really was a surprise.

“Actually,” added Bill as he regained his composure, “I was thinking that you could stay in the house and just use your sleep-out for play.” Again, Matt looked back in silence. Bill smiled awkwardly. “We’ll talk to Jane in the morning and make a plan.”

Matt nodded. “Did Jane know about this yet?” he wondered.

Dylan tapped his finger on the table to get Matt’s attention. “So this weekend Art and I will come around and help you move and set up. After going for a cycle and doing your drills of course!”

Matt grinned. “Of course.” When Art stood up and walked to the kitchen Matt took his chance to head back to the patio and look for Tac.

Bill watched Matt make himself comfortable in the sun and reach out to Tac and coax him over for a scratch.

“Well, he took that better than I thought he might.”

“Actually,” replied Dylan, “I think he’s pleased.”

Bill folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. “I hope so, I really hope so. This is going to be a big change.”

Art leaned over the kitchen counter. “A change for the better, Bill. Be positive, we’ll be there for you.”

Bill stood up and looked around without making eye contact. “Yep. Best we get going. Thank you for dessert and your time guys. We need to get an early night.” With that said, Bill walked out to Matt and Tac.

Matt could tell by the quietness he had woken early. He checked the time on his phone. It was still half an hour until Dylan would arrive for

their morning bike ride. He rolled over, closed his eyes for a few seconds before rolling back. He couldn't wait in bed, there was simply too much to think about. How would Jane take the news of the changes? What if she didn't want to leave? Decision made, he would ride to Art's house straight away and wait for Dylan to get up.

Matt heard footsteps near Art's front door followed by the click of the latch.

"Hey, you're keen!" called Dylan when he noticed Matt by the front gate.

"Couldn't sleep."

"Not surprised, it's a big day. Not just for you, but your folks. Won't be a sec, just need to get my bike out." They rode slowly across town to warm up. As they approached the bridge Dylan turned to face Matt. "Fifteen minutes hard, thirty steady, fifteen hard. You take the lead as we leave the bridge."

Matt took a few big breaths and reset his trip computer. They were off. There would be no talking for fifteen minutes, that was the drill. If you could talk then you could pedal faster, so pedal faster instead. The goal was for Matt to get as far as he could in fifteen minutes, get his breath back at a pace set by Dylan. Then if possible match the first fifteen minutes again. Dylan had a range of training patterns and never told Matt which one they were going to do in advance. 'It's just like a fight, you have to face what's put in front of you. There's no choice,' he had told Matt.

Matt pedalled hard. He had been improving a lot recently and each ride was a chance to set a new personal best. Gone were the days of pain and lack of progress. At the start his times had got worse each time he rode, he was just too sore from previous rides. Matt had come to enjoy riding and to his great surprise enjoying the exertion. As promised he felt great all day long after a hard ride.

Dylan whistled to get Matt's attention. "That's fifteen, good effort." Matt stopped pedalling and sat up, breathing hard. Dylan pulled up alongside him. "You're starting to make me work to keep up, buddy." Matt smiled back and shook his head, he was too puffed to talk. "I'll set a fairly gentle pace, focus on your breathing and recovery."

Matt followed Dylan, being sure to be close enough to benefit from slip-streaming. When they started riding Dylan had shown Matt just how effective slipstreaming was and also taught him the golden rule, 'If you are in front and you fart, you have to put your hand up for a count of three.' Matt has long ago learned to keep an eye out for Dylan's hand going up. The balance of the ride was uneventful and Dylan kept the pace high enough that there was little chance to talk. Once back at Art's house Matt discovered his day was well organised. A shower and breakfast, a magnificent breakfast actually, before heading home. When it was time to head back Dylan called Matt over to the dining table where he was sitting with Art. Dylan put his hand on Matt's and leaned forward. "When you get back things might be a bit tense. If it gets uncomfortable, just head back here. If at all possible leave before 9:30 AM. Okay?"

Matt nodded. "Is that when the people come?"

"Yes, it will be a nurse. Bill and the nurse will take Jane to the hospital."

Matt knew by 'hospital' Dylan meant the mental health unit. He also knew that there was a fear, indeed an expectation, that Jane would not want to go. But this did not bother him. Surely they would make Jane better and she would return happy. That would be great. Matt looked at the clock in the kitchen. "Better go, see you soon."

Art, who had been silent and watching Matt closely stood up and held out his arms for a hug. "No matter what, Matt, hug your mum, tell her you love her." Matt nodded as Art patted him on the back. "We love you too, Matt."

Matt squeezed Art before letting go. Dylan waited by the front door as Matt mounted his bike and set off. "See ya soon, buddy. By the way, how many chin-ups are you up to?"

"Twenty," called Matt as he waved and pedalled as fast as he could. After all, he suspected Art and Dylan were still watching.

"Do you think he understands what's happening?" asked Dylan.

Art blew out a slow breath. "I think so actually. I think he's just so disconnected from his parents it doesn't matter to him what happens."

Dylan looked at the clock and put his hands behind his head. "He'll be back in less than an hour, we'll know more then. I'm off to have a lie-down."

As Matt left he turned and looked back at Bill and Jane through the kitchen window. The talk with Jane had gone well, he thought. She seemed accepting, or resigned perhaps, that things were going to change. Matt thought Jane was quite touched when he hugged her, she even smiled when he said he was going to make a chocolate mousse to celebrate her return. It was Bill, Matt thought, who looked more stressed. Like he was making a decision that was not necessarily his to make or might have consequences he could not control. Matt looked at his bike. Should he ride or walk back to Art's place? He decided to walk. His legs still felt a bit funny from the morning ride and a walk would loosen them up.

"Back," called Matt through Art's front door.

"Come in," replied Art, "fatso's in bed, you must have worn him out this morning."

"Nah, that was Jude last night," yelled Dylan from his bedroom.

"Shush you!" Art called back. "Just ignore him, Matt, I'm sure they were just playing cards all night."

Matt smiled and theatrically slapped his forehead as Dylan walked, smiling, from the bedroom. Art, who was now sitting at the dining table drummed his hands. "Come and sit down gentlemen, we need to make a plan. The number one objective is to set Matt up in the house. So we need to clear a room out and move Matt's things in. Once Matt approves we can worry about the sleep-out. Matt, does the room you are moving into have a bed, drawers etc?"

Matt thought for a moment. "Yeah, Simons."

Art nodded, he could see from Matt's face this might be tricky. "Should we put your bed in there?"

Matt shrugged his shoulders. "Dunno."

Art looked at Matt and smiled. "No stress, Matt, we'll sort this out later."

Art pushed his chair back ready to stand up. "Okay, gents, it's time to go. First stop is for some packing boxes to put things in. Goodness, a reason to use the car!"

Matt looked at Art as it occurred to him that this would be the first time Art drove his car since he met him.

"Shame to leave such a stunner in the shed!" joked Dylan.

"You are right, Dylan, people are indeed stunned when they see my car."

As they approached Matt's driveway Jed started waving enthusiastically. "Jed seems pleased to see us," said Art.

"Probably just doesn't want to be run over," mused Dylan.

"Ha ha ha," replied Art dryly.

As Matt and Jed unpacked the car Art stood looking at the house with his hands on his hips.

"All good?" asked Dylan.

"Just reliving some memories... from the 1970s."

Dylan laughed. "Wait until you get inside, buddy. You will feel an urge to get your flares out and dance to Donna Summer."

Art shook his head and walked over to Matt and Jed. "Boys, why don't you put everything in the carport that Matt would like in the house. Dylan and I will start clearing the new room out."

"Yep," chimed both boys.

Art made his way through the house following the sounds of Dylan packing the first of the boxes. "That was a great idea to get Jed around, he's a bright wee thing for sure."

Dylan nodded. "I will pack all the trophies, photos and knick-knacks. Are you okay to do the clothes?"

"Doing it. This room is going to need a decent clean, it's musty. Not as bad as the sleep-out, it's dreadful."

“Oh yeah,” replied Dylan slowly, “not healthy physically or mentally. Let’s smash this out before Bill gets back, might save some debate.”

Art clapped his hands. “Good plan.”

It did not take long for Art and Dylan to clear the room. Art opened the window, and called, “Hey, Matt. How about coming and checking this bed out.”

Matt came running, followed by Jed.

“It looks like a great bed to me, Matt, have a lie-down and tell me what you think.”

Matt lay down. “Pretty good,” he said.

Dylan waved his hand to get Matt’s attention. “Now get up on your hands and knees and go like this,” said Dylan while thrusting his hips. “We need to know if it can take some action.”

Jed laughed loudly. “Yeah, man, give it a doggie!”

Matt smiled and lay still on the bed with his hands together on his belly. “It’s much better than my bed.”

“Then it is your bed,” declared Art.

“Let’s give things a wipe and vacuum. Bring all your bedding inside, we will cherry-pick the best and give it a wash. Where’s the vacuum cleaner?” Matt rolled off the bed and retrieved the vacuum cleaner.

“Gracious,” said Art with a surprised tone, “this looks like a prop from the original Dr Who!”

Art plugged the vacuum cleaner in, turned it on, then put his hand on and off the suction pipe. “I think we’ll concede defeat now. I’ll go and get my vacuum cleaner. Boys, sort the bedding and put what you want to use tonight in the washing machine.”

Matt and Jed ran back to the sleep-out.

“They are loving this,” observed Dylan.

“Yes, it’s a very good start I agree,” replied Art, “the challenge will be to keep up the momentum. See you soon. Call if you need anything else

picked up.” Art saw Bill coming down the driveway and waited while he parked. “Hey, Bill, why don’t you jump in with me. I have a couple of things to pick up, we can chat on the way.”

Bill hesitated, looking at the house. “Sure. Is Matt okay?”

“He’s having a party with Jed. Loving it.”

Bill climbed into Art’s car. “Okay, what do you need?”

“A vacuum cleaner that can frighten dust for starters, we can pick up mine.”

“Really? Did ours fail?”

“Sort of, but that was probably ten years ago. It would help to have a modern one, things have changed a bit in the suction department.”

“Should we just buy a new one?”

“Well you’ll need one in my opinion, but no pressure. We can use mine for now.”

“Let’s get a new one and be done with it.”

“Could we throw in a new broom, dustpan, mop and some wipes too?”

“Sure. I appreciate the help, Art.”

Art laughed and tilted his head toward Bill. “You are more than welcome, I have a cleaning fetish you know.” They both laughed. After all the best jokes were always partly true. Back at the house, Dylan was looking through the sheets and towels. He pulled out his phone and called Art.

“Hey, Art. I’m going to clean the sheets. But they are rags, so are the towels. Any chance of picking up some while you are out? Might need some more washing liquid too.”

“Will run this past Bill, thanks for the heads up.”

Dylan listened to Matt and Jed playing in the sleep-out. There was not much useful work being done. This, he thought, was the very best outcome. The more fun the better today. He walked around the house stopping to look carefully at the furniture and walls. So little had changed, except for the house acquiring a tired look and dank smell. As he went through the rooms he opened the windows and internal doors.

The beeping of the washing machine prompted Dylan to retrieve the washing and head to the clothesline. Dylan wiped the accumulated dust from the clothes basket and picked up the pegs. “Wooden pegs?” thought Dylan. They were mostly broken and weathered.

“Hey, Matt, Jed come here,” called Dylan. “Here’s fifty bucks. Please pedal up to the supermarket and get a couple of packs of clothes pegs. Grab some snacks too.”

“Let’s go,” yelled Jed as he ran to the bikes.

Bill looked down at the sheets, towels and vacuum cleaner loaded into the trolley. “I hope this fits in your car, Art.”

Art laughed. “The one good thing about owning a Mini is that it stops you buying too much in one go!”

“I can see that. Nonetheless, this is the biggest shop I’ve done in a while.”

“Well, it’s a good start, Bill. But if we’re going to make the changes we talked about it may not be the last.”

As Art drove slowly down the driveway he saw Matt and Jed appear in the rear vision mirror. He slowed to a stop. The boys came tearing past, one on each side of the car.

“Thought they might do that,” said Art. “I was such a placid child in comparison.”

“Hey, boys come and give us a hand,” called Art.

Matt and Jed sprinted inside then back to Art and Bill. “Whatcha got?” asked Matt.

“All sorts,” replied Art, “grab everything off the backseat and boot and put it inside please.” As the boys emptied the car Art and Bill walked around to Dylan who was about to hang up the washing. Bill grabbed a handful of pegs.

“See you, gents, inside in a minute. I’ll get the boys started with the vacuuming,” said Art.

“Hey, boys. Reckon you can unpack and assemble the vacuum cleaner? Matt’s new room needs a clean.”

Art walked back out to the clothesline. “Bill, I have some ideas to run past you.”

“Hmmm,” replied Bill cautiously.

“Imagine.” Art waved his arms in a big circle. “That the door and window on this side of the house were replaced with a big sliding door onto a deck. The top level of the deck would run along the side of the house and there could be a lower level that was a big semi-circle coming out here.” Art walked in a big semi-circle. “That way you would have a lovely outdoor sunny area to sit and relax. I can’t see anywhere to sit outside at present.”

Bill put one hand under his chin and the other under his elbow, propping it up. “Gosh, that’s pretty grand thinking.”

“Well, a lot has changed in the last twenty years. Indoor, outdoor flow is the norm now. Perhaps not when this house was built.” Art turned back to look at the house with his hands on his hips. “The goal is to bring Jane back to a fresh environment right? So the same old behaviours aren’t triggered by the same old routines and surroundings. Sitting in the sun in the privacy of your backyard is therapy in itself.”

“Yes, that is the advice,” replied Bill.

“Well it’s your place, so you decide. But a deck is one possibility.”

“Just out of interest, Bill,” said Dylan, “Matt, Jed and I could build the deck. But you would need a builder to put the sliding door in.”

“Really?” asked Bill.

Dylan nodded thoughtfully. “I’m looking for things to do with Matt. This would be a great project and we could easily finish it before I head away. You could get the sliding door put in later, we would just need the builder to confirm the precise deck height.”

“Okay, I’ll think about it,” said Bill, “let’s see how the boys are going.”

Dylan winked at Art as they followed Bill inside. “Progress,” he thought. They could hear the vacuum cleaner starting and excited chatter.

“How is progress boys?”

“Matt sucked in a fly,” said Jed while laughing.

“Jeepers, Matt, you should have used the vacuum cleaner for that,” added Dylan.

Matt gave Dylan his whatever look. Dylan smiled, then threw a theatrical jab at Matt.

“When you’re done, come meet us for a snack. I hope you got something decent!” Bill, Art and Dylan sat at the dining table in silence while waiting for the boys. Each was looking around imagining what could or should change. Bill put his elbows on the table and his face in his hands. After a few moments and some gentle rubbing he looked up and put his hands on the table.

“Okay, let’s put in the deck,” he said.

# Seventeen

## Lola Joins the Team

**M**att rode comfortably up Gary's driveway, it was hard to believe how impossible this had once seemed. As he approached the shed he heard banging noises and looked up, Gary was loading some gardening tools into the back of his ute.

"Good timing, Matt, just about ready. Need a drink or bathroom stop?"

"Nup. All good."

"Jump in, we're off." Gary gave the horn three short toots as they rolled gently down the driveway to let Heather know they were leaving.

"We're off to help an old friend of mine today. He's had some tough news. We'd hoped he'd survived a cancer scare, but things have taken a sad turn." Matt looked briefly at Gary, then turned to stare through the windscreen. Gary was looking rather sombre. They drove in silence, slowly of course. "Here we go," said Gary as he pulled into a rough gravel drive.

They bounced their way along the driveway, very slowly with the ute rocking sideways as they rolled in and out of potholes. At the end of the drive was a plain farmhouse. The lawn was a little overgrown, the gardens were weedy and dry. The paint on the picket fence around the house was peeling and in places, the fence was overgrown with blackberries. Gary

looked around before turning to Matt with his eyebrows raised. “Looks like we’ve got a bit to do! First, come and meet the team.”

Gary knocked then opened the door with the confidence that comes with friendship. “Hello, Mavis, Bo, it’s Gary.”

“Come in, we’re in the lounge,” an elderly female voice called back. Matt followed Gary through the house. It smelled like an old house. Inside was just a little bit cluttered. Not too messy, it was just the way old houses liked to be.

“Thought no one was home. That you two might be out on a run,” said Gary.

“Haha, maybe once I get my other hip done, Gary,” replied the woman.

She stood up very carefully, wobbled to get comfortable and held out her arms for a hug. She was short and stout with a worn floral dress. Gary hugged her, gently and affectionately. “Mavis, Bo, this is Matt.”

“Nice to meet you, Matt,” smiled Mavis, “hope you’re keeping Gary out of trouble.

“What?” asked Gary. “Matt’s job is to find more trouble. I ran out of trouble.”

Bo held out his hand to Matt from his wheelchair. “Giddy, Matt. You’ve got a good friend here in Gary you know.”

Gary knelt and wrapped his arms around Bo. “Not as good as you, buddy, not as good as you.” Gary faced Matt, keeping one arm wrapped around Bo. “When I was your age, Bo taught me to fly fish, whitebait and all sorts. He was my mentor. When Heather and I bought the farm he helped us set it up.”

Bo chuckled. “That was a while ago, Gary.” Bo’s voice was weak and his movements slow. There was a big cylinder sitting next to his wheelchair and a mask on his lap.

Gary leaned forward and kissed Bo on the forehead. “Still grateful though, buddy.”

“Crikey not in front of my wife, Gary!” Mavis chuckled loudly.

Gary gently rubbed Bo’s back and stood up. “I’ll get Matt started outside then pop back in.” Gary whistled and sang quietly as Matt followed him back to the ute. “Where to start, Matt? Maybe we should have brought Dexter! First, mow all the lawns, no catcher, trim along the picket fence. Where there’s space cut in under the fence. All good?”

“Yep.”

“Great. Nothing fancy, prefer speed over finesse. When you’re done come and find me.” Gary patted Matt on the back. The mowing went much more quickly than Matt expected, the grass was wispy and dry and without the catcher he could almost run around. In fact, he did run in parts. It was a similar story with the trimmer, the weeds were so dry they were almost dead. Matt decided to pull all the weeds out of the fence and throw them into the paddock. For a short effort, it looked pretty good. Satisfied, Matt headed back to the house to find Gary.

“Walk around the side, honey, they’re out the back,” called Mavis as Matt approached the door.

Gary and Bo were sitting, looking toward some sheds. Matt could hear dogs barking and saw some chickens scratching around in a scruffy fenced area. “Here he is,” said Bo when he saw Matt approaching. “I’ve got another job for you.”

Matt walked around and stood in front of Bo’s wheelchair. Gary was smiling. It was a bit of a ‘this should fun’ smile. Bo rubbed his hands together and grinned. “Now what I need you to do is lie down on your back and close your eyes. Anywhere here should be fine.”

Matt looked at Gary. Gary nodded, still smiling. “I think that’s a very good idea, Bo. I wonder what will happen?” asked Gary.

“No idea either,” said Bo, “but I’m itching to find out.”

Gary winked at Matt, a ‘you’ll be fine’ wink. Matt raised his eyebrows to Gary and laid down on the grass. “Okay,” asked Matt slowly, “now what?”

“Close your eyes and wait!” said Bo. “Not sure about you, but I’m going to really enjoy this.” Bo had the most mischievous smile Matt had seen. One that led Matt to suspect that he would have been a colourful character in his youth. Matt closed his eyes. He heard Gary stand up and walk across the lawn. There was a click of a gate latch, some rustling, followed by the rush of little feet. Matt heard a frenetic scramble across the lawn then splat something landed on his face. Something with a furious tongue and scratchy toenails. Then there were two, then too many to count. Matt put his hands up to clear his face and sat up. He was covered in puppies. Bo was laughing and coughing. “Just wanted to know if they would bite,” he said through his laughter.

Matt counted the puppies, there were six of them. They were jumping at his face and pulling on his clothes, competing for attention. They did, Matt noted, have very sharp little teeth. “Your job is to pick one,” said Gary, “we’re taking one back to the farm.” Matt reached out and tried patting the puppies, but they were too interested in play fighting with each other and biting Matt. “I’ll take Bo back inside while you choose, have fun.”

“Okay,” said Matt, “I’ll try.”

Matt heard Bo and Gary chuckling and talking quietly as they left. No doubt reliving the great joke they had just played on him. What had seemed like an impossible task, that of choosing one puppy from six turned out to be quite easy. There was one puppy that looked at Matt in the eyes as it bit his hand and it did not bite so hard. It was a little slower, less frenetic than the others. “This,” thought Matt, “is definitely the right puppy.

Matt picked the puppy up and held it close. It was black with a mottled white patch on its chest and small patches of white on its paws. The puppy had deep brown eyes and ears that folded over. He heard the back door click and Gary’s footsteps. Gary sat down next to Matt and held out his hand to the puppies, he was immediately mobbed. Matt laughed as one puppy undid one of Gary’s bootlaces.

“I hope you didn’t pick this one,” said Gary as he gently teased the bootlace from the puppy’s mouth.

“No, this one,” said Matt as he picked up his chosen puppy and handed it to Gary.

“Ah, a little girl,” said Gary. He rolled the puppy over and expertly ran his hands over it. “Looks good to me, Matt. The ladies are going to go nuts.” Gary stood up and walked back to the puppies’ enclosure. “Keep a hold of that one and follow me.” The puppies swarmed around Gary’s feet as he walked. Gary coaxed the puppies inside and locked the gate. Matt held the puppy to his chest and followed Gary back inside the house.

“Thank you so much for the puppy guys, what a cutie,” said Gary.

“You’re most welcome,” replied Mavis, “thanks so much for helping with the lawns.”

“No problem. I’ll drop by a couple of times a week. We’ll get on top of this in no time.” Gary hugged Mavis before kneeling to hug Bo. A long, gently hug. Just the kind of hug you would give a dying man you loved.

Gary held the puppy in front of his face while Matt put his seat belt on, then passed Matt a towel for his lap and the puppy. Matt held the puppy firmly in his lap and stroked its neck. After a few minutes of silence, Gary spoke. “It’s such a shame for Bo and Mavis. Bo’s not going to be able to stay at home for much longer. Mavis can’t look after him, she can hardly look after herself.” Gary gently tapped his thumbs on the steering wheel as they drove slowly back to the farm.

Indeed the ladies did go nuts over the puppy, so did Bess. Bess and the puppy started running and playing immediately, tearing around the lawn. Now and then the puppy would stop to smell something of interest before racing after Bess again. Bess wanted to be chased and the puppy was very happy to do just that.

“Where will she sleep?” asked Sandra.

“With Bess,” said Gary. “They’ll be the best of friends in thirty minutes.”

“Now, Matt,” said Gary as he tapped the table. “I hear you’re building a deck tomorrow.” Matt nodded, though he could scarcely believe it. “Great, I’ll come and help. Please get someone to let me know the start time.” Gary whistled and Bess came tearing to him with the puppy in hot pursuit. “Give the dogs one last scratch then you’d better get on your way, you’ll need to be rested for tomorrow.”

Matt sat down and first patted Bess as he had been instructed. Bess pushed in closely to Matt as the pup jumped up for attention. Once Bess was settled he reached out to the pup. The pup rolled onto its back and bit Matt on the hand. Bess took the chance to yet again sniff the puppy from nose to tail. Sandra sat down and elbowed Matt playfully in the ribs. “Piss off, my turn with the puppy.”

Matt smiled at Sandra. “She bites,” he said as he put the puppy in her lap.

The next morning Matt and Jed sat impatiently at the kitchen table, waiting for Dylan and Bill to return. Jed jumped up and ran outside. “Gary’s here,” he yelled. Gary was reversing down the drive with a trailer full of tools, the most obvious of which was a concrete mixer.

“Morning boys, I have something here for you to look after for me.” Gary reached around to the backseat and fiddled around for a few seconds before opening his door and putting the puppy on the ground.

“Lie down, Jed, lie on your back,” laughed Matt. Jed lay down and the puppy ran full speed at him, jumping on his face. Gary smiled at Matt and shook his head. “Have a good play now, we’ll need to tie her up while we are working. I’ll start unloading.”

Matt ran across the lawn and sat down. “Here girl, here girl.” The puppy ran flat out to Matt, jumped and landed on his lap. Matt rolled backwards and held the puppy against his chest.

“Get the face, get the face,” yelled Jed as he ran to Matt.

Dylan stood with his hands on his hips, smiling. “Hello, who’s this?” he asked loudly. Matt sat up with the puppy in his lap, holding her tight. The puppy looked at Dylan and gave a little woof.

“Oh no, it’s going to attack me!” said Dylan as he crouched down. The pup woofed again and squirmed in Matt’s hands until he let her go. Then, as puppies do, she raced full speed at Dylan. Dylan expertly caught the puppy as she jumped and put her down on her back. He let the puppy bite him while he rubbed her belly.

“What a cutie. Does this little lady have a name yet?”

“Not yet,” said Gary, “this will be decided soon.”

“Hey, boys,” called Dylan, “come and help unload the trailer. We have to take it back. Stack all the timber alongside the hedge.” Back and forth they went carrying and stacking the timber. The puppy ran back and forth with the boys, barking and jumping. When the timber was stacked Gary called everyone together and talked through the process. Gary would dig the holes with Bill, and Dylan would set up the string lines marking the levels for the piles and edges of the decking. It had been decided not to try and build a semicircular deck as imagined by Art, but to have a split level deck in two rectangular sections. Bill would be in charge of making sure the deck was built to standard and followed the plan. After all, explained Gary, it would be his problem if the deck failed an inspection.

“Are you confident with these pile markings, Dylan? I can wait for your string lines if you want.”

“Very confident,” replied Dylan.

“Okay. Let’s rip into it. You may wish to tie the puppy up, there’s some line in the ute.” Gary set about digging the first hole. The ground was soft and Bill confirmed they hit the desired depth in a short time. “I wish it was this easy on the farm,” said Gary as he passed the post hole shovel to Bill. Gary walked over to the puppy, squatted down and gave her a scratch. “How are you going, Dylan? All under control?”

“Looking good, Gary. I think the boys will be able to finish this off.”

“What do you reckon, boys?” asked Gary. “Could you do the other side?”

“Yep,” replied Jed. Matt looked at Jed then Dylan, he was clearly not so certain.

“Good. Well give it a go, there is no harm in getting it wrong. Dylan, could you please take over from Bill so he and I can have a chat?” Actually, Gary was just a little bit worried that Bill would have a heart attack. “Bill, let’s go over those plans,” said Gary as he kicked off his boots and walked inside. Bill sat down opposite Gary, who promptly folded up the plans and put them to one side. “Two things Bill. Firstly I would like the boys to have some time to learn on their own without you or I looking over their shoulder. This is a great opportunity for them, thank you for that.”

Bill nodded. “It is good for all of us, Gary.”

“Indeed. The second thing is I got that puppy for Matt. I don’t particularly mind if the puppy lives at the farm or here. It can always come back to the farm if it does not work out, or you are heading away. It wouldn’t take much to knock up a fence and gate on each side of the house. No pressure, just have a think and let me know what works for you.”

Bill sat back in his chair and smiled. “I thought Jane was going to get a big surprise, but now I think it’s me!”

Gary tapped the table with his hand. “No pressure. Matt knows nothing about this. I’ll leave you to think about it.” Gary walked over to Dylan and tapped him on the shoulder. “Pass me that, buddy.” Gary ripped into digging the holes one after the other. The boys stopped to watch, exchanging smiles. No one could dig holes like Gary. Once the first row of holes was dug Gary paused. “Okay, boys. Run a string line through here for the side of the piles furthest from the house. Dylan and I will show you how to get the first pile straight, you can do the rest while the concrete is mixed.”

Matt and Jed took turns hammering pegs into the ground and screwing the braces in. As soon as it was clear they had the process sorted Gary and Dylan started mixing the concrete. They all worked flat out until all the holes were dug and most of the piles set in concrete.

Art set down his chilly bin on the ground. “My, my. You chaps have been busy and lucky for you so have I. Come on, time for lunch. Hey, who’s this? She’s gorgeous! What’s her name?”

“She hasn’t got a name yet,” said Matt as he walked over.

Art held the puppy’s head in his hands and looked carefully at her. “Yes she does,” said Art, “this is Lola. She just told me.”

“LOLA,” yelled Jed, “yes, LOLA.”

“Hello, Lola,” said Matt while holding out his hand. Lola rolled to her feet and walked to Matt.

“Look, she answers to her name,” declared Art, “that’s settled. Come on, time to eat.”

# Eighteen

## Back to Karate

Matt's stomach twisted and turned. He looked at the clock, there was time for one more drink and one more pee. Despite Dylan's assurance that his first karate grading would just be like normal training, Matt was very nervous. At least he would not need to cycle to the farm though, Bill was taking him. Although this made him nervous too, Bill had never seemed that keen about Matt doing karate. Matt felt confident he was fit enough. The morning cycling and hill sprints with Dylan had made a huge difference. He could run and cycle like never before and it seemed that no matter how hard he trained he never felt sore anymore. He would get tired, but no longer got aching stiff muscles. Watching Jed try and keep up was encouraging too, if anything Jed had been the fitter and stronger of the two of them.

Bill leaned through the door. "Ready, Matt?"

Matt was silent on the drive to the farm. He focussed on remembering his kata and controlling his nerves. Both Gary and Dylan had explained the same thing, nerves were good. Nerves were a way to warm up the engine and get you to peak performance. The goal was to embrace your nerves and let them be positive energy.

Bill parked the car, looked over and put his hand on Matt's shoulder. "You will be fine, Matt. You've trained hard and look sharp. I remember taking Simon to his first grading. He was crapping his pants, but it went fine."

Matt smiled back. Really? Simon was scared? That did not seem possible. Matt looked around the dojo. There were several boys and a girl he did not know. Ricky was there, he smiled at Matt. It was a brief and slight smile. Ricky was focused on his own challenges. Matt felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Hello, Matt. All set?” asked Dylan.

“I think so.”

“I know so,” said Dylan, “warm up. I need to do the same.”

After a few minutes, Gary arrived. All the students stopped their warm-up and turned to bow, Gary bowed back and walked onto the mat. “Line up,” called Gary.

Dylan walked to the front and stood next to Gary. “Two lines, juniors in the front. Rei.” The class bowed and they were off. Dylan called the exercises. Push-ups, sit-ups, squat-jumps, blocks, punches and kicks. Round and round they went, it was relentless. Matt struggled to keep up, but so did others around him. The breathing became louder, some started to gasp. People started to fall off the pace.

“Don’t stop,” called Dylan loudly, “slow down if you have to, but DO NOT STOP!”

Gary clapped his hands. “Last round, give it everything.” Matt took a big breath and launched into the push-ups with renewed vigour. He thought about the bicycle rides, he thought about the hill sprints and he thought about Rooster. To his great surprise, he started to pick up the rate and by the time the sit-ups started he was keeping up again. Matt pushed and pushed. He could do this.

“Well done. Two-minute recovery. Focus on your breathing.” Gary motioned to Dylan to follow him to a corner of the dojo where they discussed what they had seen. Matt could see that it was an intense discussion with much back and forth. They walked back to the front of the class.

“Line up,” called Dylan. The class lined up quickly.

“We will now run through some kata. When we get to a kata you do not know please bow and go to the back of the dojo. Kneel, focus on your breathing and prepare for individual kata. This can be a kata of your choice.”

“HAI,” chimed the class.

Matt was the first to bow out, he only knew two kata. One very simple one and one more complex one. He resolved to do the more complex kata when his time came. One by one more students came and knelt beside Matt. When only two students were left Dylan asked them to sit down. He looked over to the row of seated parents.

“They know too many kata,” he said, “it’s very annoying.” There was quiet laughter as Dylan turned to address the students. “When you are called please walk to the centre of the mat, bow and announce your kata. Perform your kata as you feel it should be done. It’s not a race.”

“HAI.”

Dylan held his hand out, “Matt.”

Matt closed his eyes, took a big breath and let it out slowly. He felt his breathing settle. He imagined himself fluently executing the first four moves of the kata. Matt opened his eyes, bowed his head to the floor before standing up and walking to the centre of the mat. He bowed again and announced his kata. Then with all the focus he could manage went through the moves he had practised so many times. He knew his kata was not perfect, he had felt himself wobble, put his feet in not quite the right places at times. But he was happy with the kicks and punches, they had felt good. There was a small round of applause when Matt did his final bow and turned to sit down. One by one the class performed their kata. The standard clearly improved as the grades got higher. Matt paid particular attention to Ricky, he looked very sharp indeed. When the kata were completed Gary instructed everyone to put their gloves on. Matt and another student were asked to come and get gloves from a box at the side of the dojo.

“Gloves,” thought Matt, “no one had mentioned gloves or fighting.”

Gary explained that the juniors would not fight each other. They would only fight more senior grades to ensure the sparring was controlled. Matt was the first to be asked to stand up, then Ricky was asked to face him. Gary

explained that the fighting would be in two-minute rounds. One where Matt would attack Ricky as hard as he could and Ricky would only defend and show his counters, but with no contact. In the second round, Ricky would attack Matt and Matt would only defend, again Ricky was not to make contact. To Matt's great surprise as soon as the fighting started the entire class started yelling encouragement, exhorting Matt to attack harder and more persistently. Matt was soon running out of breath and made no inroads through Ricky's defences at all. After a short break, the second round began and Matt was soon overwhelmed. Ricky's kicks and punches seemed to be coming from every angle and were constantly touching him. Dylan called for Ricky to ease back and for Matt to focus on blocking just the kicks. At the end of the fight Ricky walked up to Matt and patted him on the back. Matt walked to the back of the class and knelt with the others. He looked down. "Was it meant to go that badly?" he wondered. To his secret delight, Matt soon realised that many others were faring no better than he did. Once all the students had fought, Gary asked Dylan to glove up. Matt looked along the line of students and noted that a couple of them were looking decidedly uncomfortable. This time the fighting was a bit more back and forth. Each fight started gently before Dylan picked up the pace until the student was overwhelmed. There was, Matt was pleased to note, no brutal contact. All the fights ended with a smile and a pat on the back. The last fight was between Dylan and Ricky. Ricky bounced up and down with nervous energy. Gary asked Ricky to bring everything he had, with controlled contact to the head. Dylan and Ricky bowed and touched gloves. Ricky was fierce. Matt was in awe of his speed and intensity. Dylan though, looked remarkably composed. He seemed to be making Ricky miss by the smallest of margins. Occasionally Dylan would tap Ricky back, almost casually.

Before the start of the second round, Gary addressed Dylan and Ricky. "Ricky, that was a good effort. Keep it up. Dylan, apply a bit more pressure now, make him work to keep his composure."

“HAI,” called both Ricky and Dylan.

They touched gloves. Immediately Ricky attacked as in the first round, but this time Dylan slid forward, brushed Ricky’s kick aside and punched him in the chest. It was not a super hard punch, it was more of a stiff arm held out as he came forward. But it caught Ricky off balance and he fell backwards. Ricky smiled and got up. Ricky was much more cautious about attacking now, he held back waiting for an opening. Dylan though was not waiting. He came forward with a jab, but the jab never landed. Instead, he caught Ricky with a kick to his midsection which bent Ricky about the middle, then the jab landed. Again it was not a hard punch, more of a strong push. But it was enough to drive Ricky’s head back and start him stumbling backwards. As Ricky stumbled Dylan dropped low and spun around, an outstretched leg whipped out Ricky’s legs and he fell to the mat. As Dylan had spun he caught Ricky’s outstretched arm. Dylan rolled onto his back and pulled Ricky’s arm to his chest with his legs holding Ricky down. Matt recognised this as the armbar he had just started learning. Ricky tapped Dylan on the leg and Dylan released Ricky’s arm and helped him to his feet. Ricky looked to the row of students at the back of dojo and held out his hands as if asking for understanding. They responded by chanting, “Go, Ricky, go,” over and over again. Dylan smiled, walked over to Ricky and gave him a quick hug before the fighting resumed. This time Dylan was much gentler. He still overwhelmed Ricky, but with very little contact and instead of taking him to the ground would catch him and put him back on his feet. When Gary called time on the fight Dylan held Ricky’s hand in the air. All the students cheered and clapped loudly. Matt looked over at the guests, it was very clear which ones were Ricky’s parents. They had been looking anxious but were now visibly relieved.

Dylan took the class through a warm down and handed them back to Gary. “Well done all of you. I was very impressed with your effort today and effort is indeed the currency of karate. You purchase your skills with effort. There is no question that each of you has made very good progress and I would be

proud to put you up as a student of mine anywhere. One of the objectives of gradings is to get feedback on how we are going. Another objective is to see where we are going next. To look at the grades above us and wonder how we will get there. Ricky may be wondering this right now in fact.”

Ricky looked down at his feet while the class laughed. It was a friendly, encouraging laugh though. “As seniors, we have all been through Ricky’s experience. It is what motivated us to get better. It is what opened our eyes to what we might one day achieve. Each time I have a student grade for the first time.” Gary looked at Matt and smiled. “I make sure to transport myself back to that day. The day I forgot my kata! Matt, your first grading has been much better than mine.”

The class cheered and clapped loudly. “Thank you all for rewarding my effort with yours. Dylan and I will share our thoughts and you will each get your grading result at your next training.”

“LINE UP,” called Dylan loudly, “rei.” The class bowed together. Immediately discussions broke out amongst the students, some ran to parents. Dylan gave Matt a big hug and walked him over to Bill with his arm draped over his shoulder.

Bill held out his arms and hugged Matt. “Well done, Matt, really well done.”

Dylan tapped Matt on the shoulder. “Have a shower and get changed, then meet us around by the house. We will be waiting for you there with Lola!”

Matt smiled, what a lovely thought.

“Follow me, Bill,” said Dylan, “I’ll introduce you to the others before I get changed.”

Matt had a short shower, he was in a hurry to see Lola and Bess. When he opened the gate at the side of the house Bess looked up and sprinted to him with great urgency. Matt knelt and gave her a big hug and scratch. Lola, who was lying by Sandra, noticed Matt with Bess and scrambled to her feet. She ran flat out in awkward puppy style and launched herself at Matt’s face. Matt held one dog in each arm as they leaned on his chest and fought a mock

battle. He noticed that everyone was looking at him as he started to get up. Bess and Lola started to play fight around his feet as he walked. He lifted his feet high taking care not to stand on them as he made his way to the table.

Gary put a chair at the head of the table. "Take a seat here, Matt. What would you like to drink?"

"Water thanks," replied Matt.

"Good answer," replied Gary, "that was part of your grading!"

"Hurry up and tell him," exclaimed Sandra, "I can't stand the suspense."

Gary playfully cuffed Sandra on the back of the head. "Shush you," he said.

"Well, Matt," continued Gary, "we've had a discussion and after absolutely no argument whatsoever have decided that Lola should go home with you today and be your dog." Matt looked at Bill. Bill was smiling and nodded. Matt grinned, he did not know what to say. Gary put his hand up to get Matt's attention. "Tonight she can sleep in your laundry. Tomorrow I'll bring her kennel in when I come to town. Dylan can take you through the training routine."

Sandra leaned forward and looked sternly at Matt. "But, Matt, you have to bring her back for visits! Bess will miss her."

"We'll all miss her," added Heather.

"Yep," replied Matt sheepishly. He had no idea how he could bring her back though.

"Come on," said Gary, "let's get you started with some bedding and biscuits." Matt and Bill followed Gary to the shed while Sandra and Allicia sat on the ground with Bess and Lola. Once the car was loaded up Gary whistled loudly. Bess came rocketing around the corner and ran up to Gary with Lola following in hot pursuit. Gary scooped up Lola in one hand. "Jump in the back, Matt, she can sit by your feet. Sorry, we don't have a leash, Bill, not something we use on a farm!"

"No problem, Gary. Thank you so much for this and for helping Matt in general. I really appreciate it."

“It’s a pleasure,” said Gary. Then leaning into Matt’s window added, “I meant what I said earlier. Your first grading was better than mine. Well done.” Gary tapped his hand on the car roof. “Drive carefully. Remember, no need to do the speed limit. Just leave the gate open, Dylan can shut it.”

Bill drove slowly down the driveway. “Well, Matt,” he began, “it has been a most interesting day.”

“Yep.” Matt was focussed on patting Lola with one hand while she looked him in the eyes and chewed gently on the other.

“That was very impressive today, Matt. You looked very good and I must say Dylan is almost a bit frightening.”

Matt looked up at Bill. “Gary is really, really frightening.”

Bill nodded. “I can believe that, Matt, for sure. I can also see why you want to do karate, it’s very impressive.”

Matt stared at Bill. “I wondered why you built the fence, you said it was to keep Jane in.”

Bill smiled. “It was a pretty dumb reason, but I forgot to think up a better one.”

“Jane will love Lola.”

“I certainly hope so, Matt, I certainly hope so.”

Matt pulled out his phone and sent a text to Jed. “Meet me at my house. MASSIVE news.”

# Nineteen

## Jane Returns

**B**ill put his hands on his hips and nodded with satisfaction. “What do you reckon, Matt?”

Matt surveyed the deck with its new furniture and pot plants. The sliding door was wide open and Lola was looking in. She took one step inside. “Ah,” called Matt loudly. Lola looked at Matt, wagging her tail slowly with her head low and ears pinned back. “I was never going in there,” she seemed to say.

“Jane will love it,” said Matt.

“I hope so. It’s a big day today, she’ll get a mighty surprise when she sees this.” Matt nodded, but he was not worried. Not one little bit. Jane had seemed better each time they visited. On the last two visits, she seemed quite pleased to see him and had spoken enthusiastically about coming home. Matt had secretly told her he had a big surprise and she’d hugged him.

Bill picked up the car keys from the kitchen table. “Okay, Matt, it’s time to go. We’ll leave Lola out the back and shut the doors. When we get home make sure you come outside first, don’t let Lola jump up and startle Jane.”

Matt nodded and knelt. “Lola, get here.” Lola bounded over to Matt and jumped onto his knees. “Good girl, good girl. Don’t you jump on Jane will you!”

Matt wondered what went on in the mental health facility. Bill had explained how it provided a break to give everyone a chance to breathe. It

was also a chance to try a medication change in a safe environment. Matt knew what that meant. To manage the suicide risk, the big unspeakable darkness. While Matt sat in the car waiting for Bill and Jane to emerge he reflected on a conversation with Gary. At the time they were sitting on a hill at the very back of the farm with Dexter. It was, Matt recalled, sunny and warm.

“Does health, fitness and strength happen on its own, Matt?” Gary had asked. “Or do we need to work on it? What about mental health? Maybe we need to work on that too. Think about this, we can discuss it sometime.”

Indeed Matt had thought about it. He guessed that maybe you did need to work on it. Maybe mental health wasn't something you just got. Maybe it was more like physical strength, you could develop it. Another time, while on the boat, Gary talked about listening to your mind. To take note when you were stressed, frightened, overwhelmed or nervous and stop to understand why and to make a plan to address it.

“These are all signals,” he had said. “They are nothing to be worried about themselves. They are hints that you need to stop, breathe and think.”

Maybe Jane needed to think about why she was sad and address that wondered Matt. Matt watched Bill and Jane walk from the building. As they came closer Matt could see that Jane was looking up, looking at him. She smiled and Matt smiled back. It was a lovely smile, a warm smile. Matt felt his chest and stomach relaxing, Jane was happy. Matt opened the car door and stepped back to let Jane sit in the front seat, but she did not get in the car. She wrapped her arms around Matt and held him tight.

“It's so good to see you, Matt, I've missed you so much.” Matt felt Jane take a big, involuntary breath. Just the type of breath you take before crying. He pulled Jane tighter to him, to try and say, ‘I missed you too.’

From a distance, two nurses looked through a window and smiled. “That's great, they're hugging,” said one.

“I am sure she will be fine. Oh no, this job makes eye makeup nearly impossible. I think I’m going to cry.” They both laughed as they turned and walked away.

Matt took his seatbelt off as they drove down the driveway and jumped out as soon as the car stopped. “Don’t look,” said Matt excitedly, “just come with me. Keep your eyes closed.” Matt held Jane’s arm and walked her inside. “Sit here and don’t open your eyes until Bill says so.” Jane heard Matt run outside and some clattering sounds she could not identify. Once Bill was confident that Matt had Lola under control he let Jane know she could open her eyes.

“Oh my goodness! The wall’s gone!” Jane looked out through the new sliding door onto the new deck with furniture and flower pots.

“Come and try the new chairs,” suggested Bill.

Bill opened the sliding door and ushered Jane through. Jane stopped and stared. There was Matt, crouching and holding Lola by the collar. Lola started frantically wiggling, her paws sliding on the deck as she tried to pull herself forward. “Oh my goodness! Do we really have a dog?” exclaimed Jane.

“Sit down and I’ll bring her over,” said Matt with much excitement. “Her name is Lola and she’s REALLY friendly.”

Jane turned a chair around to face Matt and sat down. “Okay, but don’t let her jump.” Matt held Lola’s collar tightly and made his way to Jane. Lola’s excitement grew as they got closer, the scratching of her claws on the deck became more frenetic. Lola sniffed Jane’s legs and tried to jump, but Matt was holding on tightly. Lola rolled onto her back and twisted around catching Matt’s thumb in the collar. Matt reached down to change hands but Lola, sensing a moment of freedom spun onto her feet and leapt onto Jane’s lap. Matt managed to grab her back legs, but it was too late. Lola was licking Jane’s face. Jane gave a startled shriek, her face was screwed shut and head turned to one side. As Matt started to pull Lola back by the legs she started to lick Jane’s neck. Jane reached up, wiped her face with her hand and started to laugh.

“Oh my goodness, Matt, she is friendly.” Jane rolled Lola upside down, wedged securely between her legs. Then with one arm holding Lola firmly, scratched her on the neck.

Matt looked over to Bill who had his hands on his head and his mouth wide open. Bill shook his head slowly and blew a long breath out. Matt mouthed, ‘whoops,’ back. The very thing they were trying to avoid had just happened.

“What a lovely puppy, Matt. What is her name again?”

“Lola,” said Matt, “I’m still training her.”

“Well she is too young to be fully trained yet, but I am very pleased to hear you are training her.” Jane looked around. “I just can’t believe you have done all this in a few weeks.”

“Bill and I built the deck,” said Matt. “With some friends,” he added.

“The idea,” began Bill tentatively, “is that we could spend more time outside, now that it’s summer.”

Jane nodded and took a big breath. “Yes, more time outside will be good. And walking and visiting and having visitors and reading. Change the behaviour, change the outcome.” Jane said the last bit almost musically. It was, Matt guessed, part of what Jane had been learning the last few weeks. “In fact,” said Jane with the certainty and clarity of a freshly arrived idea. “How about we have a garden party?”

“YEAH!” said Matt loudly, “Lola would love that.”

Jane laughed and Matt reflexively looked at Jane. “That was a real laugh,” he thought.

Jane moved her knees apart and let Lola slide gently to the floor. Matt grabbed Lola and pulled her onto his lap. “Okay, gentlemen, let’s see what else you have been up to.”

“I’m taking Lola for a walk,” said Matt, “catch you later.” Lola jumped at the leash and a tug of war began as Matt slowly pulled her toward the gate.

“Make sure to clip her on before opening the gate,” called Bill.

Jane walked inside and stood in the kitchen watching Matt and Lola walk down the driveway. Lola had the leash in her mouth and was tugging furiously, jumping from side to side. "I cannot believe you got a dog, Bill."

"Was not actually my idea. But it has been the best thing for Matt, I've never seen him happier."

Jane nodded. "Yes, it seems so."

Bill put his hand on Jane's shoulder. "And I have not seen you so happy in a long, long time."

Jane put a hand on Bill's. "Yes, I know. I am so sorry, Bill. I don't know how this all came about. But we have a plan." Jane paused and took a big breath. "And some pills. I don't know what to make of it all. It's all been such a blur."

Bill stepped closer and put his arms around Jane. "It's both of us, Jane. Both lost our way and both need to make a change. Change the behaviour, change the outcome was it?"

"Oh yes, that was our thing. I've got a little book of plans, things to do, things not to do and things to do differently. It's very comforting. It almost seems simple when you write it down. Might have to add walking Lola!"

"You will have some competition. I doubt Lola's been walked less than four times a day since we got her," said Bill.

Jane smiled. "Just the way it should be."

"Now this party idea of yours. Who would you like to come?"

Jane chortled. "I have no idea, it was just a whim."

"A very good whim though. We could start with those who helped with the deck and Matt's friends. Come with me, I will show you Matt's new room."

Matt had arranged to meet Jed on his walk and to loop around town. It would make for a long walk, but Lola was very quickly getting used to long walks. After a few minutes of walking, Lola stopped jumping and happily trotted alongside Matt, stopping occasionally to explore an interesting smell.

"Hey, hey."

Matt turned to see if the yelling was for him, it was. Matt recognised the boy from the broken down car. He came running across the road. "Can I pet your dog?"

Matt nodded. "Her name is Lola. Is your name Nikau?"

"Yeah. What's your name?"

Matt smiled. "Not John Conner, it's Matt." They both laughed.

"My mum knows your robot mate. She's pretty weird about it. Which way you going?"

"This way, past the lagoon."

"Choice, can we stop and show my sister your dog?" Matt nodded and they set off on their way. Nikau was very chatty and confident. He pointed out all the houses where he knew someone. Matt recognised the house they had towed the car to. "Wait here, I'll get her." Nikau ran to the house and banged on a window. The window opened a little and after some banter Nikau pointed to Matt and Lola. Matt saw a flash of Kiana running through the house and heard a door slam.

Kiana ran to Lola and knelt. "What a cute puppy!" Lola jumped at Kiana. Kiana laughed, leaned forward and let Lola lick her face.

"Hey, Kiana, you're getting a wash," laughed Nikau, "better open your gob and do your teeth." Kiana rolled onto her back and pulled Lola on top of her. Lola jumped playfully on Kiana's chest and started licking her neck. Matt, Nikau and Kiana all laughed loudly. Lola was having a party.

"What are you kids doing?" came a gruff demand. It was the mum, she was walking briskly toward them.

Kiana sat up with her arms around Lola. "Playing with his puppy."

The mum looked at Matt. He could tell she recognised him. She took in a sharp breath and tightened her lips. "You," she said. "What's that fella's name? The one who towed us."

Matt swallowed, he felt his throat tighten. "Gary," he said quietly but firmly.

"Gary who?"

Matt looked straight into the mum's eyes. He did not want to let Gary down. "It's him," said Matt, "it's the Gary you're thinking of."

The woman stared at Matt. She was thinking, but of what? Was she angry? Would she take it out on Matt? "You know what happened, kid?"

Matt nodded. "Gary told me."

"Told you what?"

Matt refocused his eyes on the woman. "Everything," said Matt, "it was the biggest mistake of his life."

"Mistake?"

Matt nodded.

"That girl, she's my sister. Woulda cut that guy's balls off myself. One of his bros lives here, kid. You better stay away."

Matt nodded and pulled on Lola's leash. "C'mon, Lola, let's go."

"I'll come too," said Nikau.

"Me too," added Kiana.

"Hold on," said the woman, "where do you think you're going?"

"Just around the block," said Matt. He had, of course, no idea how far Nikau and Kiana intended to come.

The woman walked away. Matt let Kiana hold Lola's leash and play the tugging game with her.

"Don't worry about mum," said Nikau, "she's always angry. Where we going?"

"To meet Jed."

"Cool, don't know Jed."

They walked in silence for some minutes before Nikau spoke. "So what did that fella say happened?"

Matt groaned inside. Was he allowed to talk about this? To tell Gary's story? Matt put his hands in his pockets and looked down. "Well," he began, "I'm not sure if I'm supposed to talk about it."

"Yeah," said Kiana in an indignant voice, "we're not going to tell anyone."

"Promise?"

“Totally bro,” said Nikau. Kiana opened her eyes as wide as she could and nodded at Matt.

“Okay. Well, there was this guy hitting a girl...”

“That’s our aunty,” said Kiana.

Matt nodded, then continued. “Gary tried to get him to stop, but a fight broke out. Gary hit him in the head because the other guys were going to join in.”

Again they walked in silence.

“Is that it?” asked Nikau indignantly, “faaa... that’s not what they told us. They said your fella attacked them, wanted to get aunty.”

Matt shook his head. “No, I’m sure that’s not what happened. Gary’s really nice.”

“He’s really big. He’s the terminator all right,” said Nikau buoyantly.

Matt stopped walking and waited for Nikau and Kiana to face him. “Remember when we stopped to help you? He got rid of those dicks for you. He didn’t have to. It was just like that, Gary tried to help your aunty.”

Nikau looked down and shrugged his shoulders. Kiana kicked Nikau in the leg.

“WHAT?”

Kiana opened her eyes wide again and leaned forward a little bit. “Betcha he’s right you know.”

Nikau turned and continued walking. “Maybe, whatever.”

Kiana looked at Matt and rolled her eyes. With the difficult topic out of the way, the conversation moved onto school. Kiana would be in the same year as Matt and Nikau would be one year ahead. Nikau thought he knew Ricky, but could not be certain. Nikau explained that he hung with the ‘bros.’

“Gonna play rugby?” asked Nikau.

“I’ve never played,” replied Matt weakly.

“Soon learn,” said Nikau excitedly, “you just smash em!”

“What’s your favourite sport?” asked Kiana.

“Hmm, probably athletics. I’ve started running with a friend.”

Nikau clapped his hands. "Okay, race ya. From here to the second power pole, the one with the box on it." Nikau crouched down, then glancing at Kiana. "You say when."

"WHEN," yelled Kiana immediately.

Matt took off as fast as he could. He heard Lola yapping excitedly behind him. He could also hear Nikau almost alongside him, but not quite. Matt slowed down and put his hands on his hips after he passed the pole.

"You got a head start," lamented Nikau.

Matt nodded. "It's a draw."

"Nah, Matt won," laughed Kiana as she and Lola caught up.

Lola was barking and jumping with excitement. Matt crouched down and gave Lola a big hug.

# Twenty

## The Garden Party

Dylan picked up Lola and put her in the box on the back of Matt's bike. "Okay, start pedalling while I hold Lola." Matt rode slowly down the driveway while Dylan jogged alongside and Lola looked worriedly over the edge of the box. "Stay," said Dylan while holding Lola down with a firm hand on her back. Back and forth they went until Lola was content to sit in the box while Dylan jogged alongside her. It was Gary's idea to train Lola to ride on the back of Matt's bicycle. The goal was for Matt to be able to bring Lola to the farm with him. Dylan scooped Lola out of the box. "Okay, buddy. That'll do for now, a very successful first effort. Let's rip through those drills one more time."

Matt walked Lola onto the back lawn. "Stay," he commanded, with his index finger held up. Lola sat looking at him intently. Matt slowly backed away. Once across the lawn he repeated the command, turned around then spun back. Lola was sitting still. "Stay," he repeated. Then clapping his hands and squatting down called, "Get here."

Lola raced across the lawn and rolled over at his feet. Matt enthusiastically rubbed Lola's belly. "Good girl, good girl."

"Excellent, Matt, every morning, every night," said Dylan, "hammer those drills." Matt nodded as he scratched Lola.

“Once she’s okay on your bike you should bring her to our hill sprints. I’ll head off and help Art with the shopping. Maybe ask your folks if there’s anything you can do to help.”

Matt looked up. Of course, today was the day of the garden party.

“Are they at home?” asked Dylan.

Matt shook his head. “Out walking. Jane walks every day, sometimes for hours.” He turned his attention back to Lola, who was now tugging on his sock and growling. Matt rolled her over and tickled her until she let go. He was still playing with Lola when he heard Bill and Jane walking up the driveway. “Anything I can do to help?” called Matt as Bill and Jane walked to the front door.

“Not at the moment. How about you and your friends look after the drinks once people arrive?”

“Yep. Oh, Dylan said to put the oven on eighty degrees for when he brings the food from Art.” Matt lay down on his back on the grass. “Lola, Lola.” Lola came bounding across the lawn. They wrestled and rolled on the grass with Lola growling and barking. Eventually, Lola tired and lay alongside Matt gently tugging on his shirt. Her eyes slowly closed then popped open as she strained to stay awake. Matt rolled her onto his belly, stood up and carried her over to her bed.

“Maybe have a shower, Matt,” suggested Jane, “now you’ve finished rolling the lawn.”

Matt smiled. “Yep.”

When Jane heard the bathroom door click shut she turned to Bill. “I still can’t believe he has cold showers.”

Bill raised his eyebrows in reply. “Sure wasn’t my idea!”

As Matt stepped out of the shower he could hear Dylan’s voice in the kitchen. It was a short conversation followed by the clunk of the front door and the distinctive sound of Art’s car. Matt checked his phone, Jed, Nikau and Kiana were on their way. Matt got dressed quickly and headed to the kitchen, which was filling up with bowls of chips, salads and sauces.

“My mates are nearly here,” said Matt as he walked in.

“That’s early,” said Jane while glancing at the clock.

“They’ve come to play with Lola.” Matt headed onto the deck and flopped on a bean bag. He knew the sound would wake Lola and importantly she would join him. Matt stretched his legs out and leaned back with Lola lying alongside him on her back, her legs apart in the air while Matt very gently rubbed her belly. Jane looked out from the kitchen at Matt and Lola. She got Bill’s attention with a wave of a hand.

“I must try that one day. Just look at them. Not a care in the world.”

Matt closed his eyes and focused on his breathing. Feeling himself first sinking into the bean bag, deeper and deeper. Once he was completely relaxed he imagined himself floating in the sky. Lola wuffed loudly and Matt woke with a start. She wriggled free from under Matt’s arm and pranced, growling to the gate.

“Lola, Lola.” It was Jed. Matt heard Lola’s excited whimper and the sound of her jumping about. He sat up as Jed, Nikau and Kiana came around the corner. Kiana waved to Matt and sat on the edge of the deck beckoning to Lola. With great delight, Lola jumped onto Kiana’s back and licked her around the ears. Kiana giggled as she leaned forward, which encouraged Lola all the more.

Bill put two bowls of chips on the outdoor table with an intentional clunk. “Welcome, guys. I’m Bill.”

“Hi, Bill. Thanks for the chips,” replied Jed.

Nikau and Kiana smiled politely.

“This is Nikau and Kiana,” added Matt, “we’re all going to the same school next year.”

“That’s great,” replied Bill, “it’s always good to start with some friends. Help yourself, I know Jed will. Let Matt know what you’d like to drink.”

“I’ll have a beer, Matt, a cold one thanks,” said Nikau. The children all laughed loudly.

“Dylan is in charge of beer,” replied Bill with a grin, “when he arrives you ask him.” Matt looked at Nikau, smiling and shaking his head, a ‘don’t do that’ smile.

“Who’s Dylan?” asked Nikau.

“A friend of my big brother.”

“You got a big brother? What’s his name?”

“Simon, but he’s dead.” There was a brief silence with no one wanting to be the first to speak. Matt stood up. “I’ll get some drinks.”

“Where did you meet your friends?” Bill asked as Matt opened the fridge. Matt knew the tone. Bill did not know what to make of Nikau and Kiana. Particularly Nikau, who was already showing the signs of being not a boy, but a strong young man.

“With Gary, we towed them home when they broke down.”

Bill nodded. “Good on you, that’s a nice thing to do.”

“Yep,” replied Matt as he walked away with some juice and a stack of glasses.

Matt, Jed, Nikau and Kiana sat on the grass in a circle chatting and laughing with Lola in the middle. Lola roamed between them, mock fighting with whoever dared touch her. The sound of tires in gravel caught Lola’s attention. She leapt to her feet, growled and ran slowly and stiffly to the gate. It was Art, Dylan and Jude. Jude crouched down and put her hand through the gate. Lola immediately began wagging her entire body and jumping at Jude. A second vehicle arrived, it was Gary’s ute. Gary, Heather, Sandra and Allicia emerged and made their way through the gate and onto the deck with Lola running and jumping from person to person.

Gary and Dylan walked over to the children on the lawn. “Hello, I recognise you,” said Gary. Then to Nikau with a big smile. “The car salesman. How are sales going?”

Nikau smiled a little awkwardly and looked down. “All right suppose.”

“Car salesman?” asked Dylan.

Kiana excitedly interjected, "Yeah, he steals your car and sells it to someone."

They all laughed and after a couple of attempts to break through the laughter Nikau replied, "Yeah, but not cars like yours. Good ones!" Again laughter broke out.

Gary shook his head. "Well, I'm glad you didn't come to steal our cars. But I do hope you eat all our food."

"Yeah, eat your food. Watch your fights."

Gary rubbed his chin and folded his arms. "Fights? I'm afraid if you want a fight you'll have to start one. What do you reckon, Dylan?"

Dylan nodded. "For sure. In fact, did you see Nikau look at me?"

"Yes," replied Gary, "that was some look."

"Indeed it was. It seems to me that Nikau has already started a fight. What do you think?"

"Well," replied Gary with mock drama, "it looks to me like this fight is already well underway. When does it get to the bit where you take turns knocking each other's teeth out?"

Dylan pretended to look at a watch on his arm. "Gosh, is that the time? Nikau we're late. It's time to start knocking each other's teeth out." Dylan sat down next to Nikau, casually putting his arm around his neck. Dylan smiled at Nikau before rolling backwards pulling Nikau onto the grass alongside him. "Fingers in the eyes, fingers in the eyes," said Dylan as he gently rubbed his fingers in Nikau's eyes. Nikau tried to wriggle away but Dylan casually pulled him back, gently punching him in the ribs. Dylan had his legs wrapped around one of Nikau's legs which stopped him from getting up. Nikau laughed as he squirmed and wriggled with more effort.

"Arhhhh," yelled Nikau, "I'm stuck in a cobweb."

"Wait, wait, wait," said Gary, "why aren't you smashing his ribs?" Gary squatted down and grabbed Nikau's arm. "Here try this." Gary used Nikau's arm to bang Dylan in the ribs. Nikau started pounding Dylan as hard as he could. They were both laughing. Dylan quickly changed positions and

rolled Nikau over. Back and forth they rolled with Dylan locking Nikau up in different ways.

“Okay, I’ve had enough,” said Dylan, “Nikau is the winner.” Matt, Jed and Kiana laughed loudly. Lola barked and pulled while Kiana held her collar.

“Did you see that, Nikau?” asked Dylan. “Jed is laughing.” Dylan quickly rolled over, grabbed Jed and pulled him onto his chest. Dylan wrapped up Jed until he could not move and was just looking up at the others.

“I’m stuck,” he said.

“Release the hounds!” said Dylan. Lola sprung forward as Kiana let her go and started licking Jed’s face. The children laughed uproariously.

Gary bent down and grabbed Matt by the ankles, lifted him and dangled him upside down. “Got another one for ya,” declared Gary.

“Excellent,” said Dylan, “I was really hoping I’d get to work up an appetite. You hold em, while I punch em.” Dylan started punching Matt in the stomach, gently at first then a bit harder once Matt had set. Lola licked Matt’s upside-down face. Jed, Nikau and Kiana wailed with laughter as Dylan pounded Matt while he tried to defend his face from Lola. Gary lowered Matt to the ground.

“Arhhhh,” groaned Matt in mock pain, “I couldn’t breath with Lola.” Matt sat up and pulled Lola onto his knees. “You’re a meanie, Lola.”

Dylan rubbed Matt’s hair then turned to Jed and Nikau, shaking their hands.

“Let us know when you are ready for some more fighting,” said Gary as he smiled and rubbed his hands. “That was great.” Dylan and Gary joked to each other as they walked back to the deck.

“Those dudes are crazy,” said Nikau through laughter. The children again sat in a circle with Lola in the middle, it was just the way she liked it.

“Well, so much for ironing your shirt,” said Jude as Dylan sat next to her.

“Thanks, I really appreciated you doing that.”

Gary laughed loudly and Heather slapped him on the leg. "That was very naughty, Gary. We're visiting."

"It'll give them something to laugh about," said Gary. "Break the ice a bit. That's a mighty shirt you have there Art."

"Yes," said Art looking down at his shirt. It was a floral shirt of the brightest possible colours. "This is my bee stealing shirt. I walk around town with it on, then hang it up by my hives."

"It seems to work best with bumblebees," added Dylan.

"That'll be the blue, they love blue," said Gary.

The sounds of voices heralded the arrival of more guests. Art stood up. "I'm going to see what I can do to help in the kitchen."

"I'll come too," added Jude. "We should let Bill and Jane socialise."

"Just what I was thinking," smiled Art.

Matt briefly watched the adults mingle and chat then turned back to look at Lola. Lola was lying upside down on Kiana's lap, enjoying a gentle tummy rub. Her head was tipped right back and her eyes were closed.

"How do you know those fellas?" asked Nikau, tipping his head in the direction of Gary and Dylan.

Matt picked a blade of grass and rolled it in his fingers. "Well, Dylan went to school with my brother and Gary is his karate teacher."

Nikau gave Gary and Dylan a long look. "Choice. Done any karate?"

"Just started," replied Matt quietly.

"Me too," added Jed excitedly, "but Matt's done heaps."

"Not really," added Matt sheepishly. "What's college like?"

Nikau shrugged his shoulders. "Alright s'pose. Rugby's good! Do you fellas play rugby?" Matt and Jed shook their heads.

"You should sign up anyway. Get some mates."

Matt looked at Nikau in silence. 'Get some mates,' what an interesting idea.

A loud whistle interrupted their discussion. It was Gary, smiling and beckoning. "Food's ready, team. Come and get into it."

Lola yawned and did a long stretch, her back legs jiggling as she lifted her head. “A bit tired, Lola. Time for a sleep,” said Matt.

As they walked over to the deck Gary held out a plate to Nikau, it was piled high with food. “Here you go. Thought I’d get you started, just in case you were shy.”

“Choice,” said Nikau with a big grin.

Gary turned to face Matt, Jed and Kiana. “Now guys, the only reason you were invited was that we had too much food. So please don’t let us down.”

“Okay, but I wasn’t going to eat anything. I’ll do my best though,” joked Jed.

Dylan sat down on the edge of the deck and beckoned Nikau over with a wave. “I need a friend, Nikau, one who doesn’t want to eat my food,” said Dylan while rubbing Lola’s neck with his foot. Lola licked her lips and sat up perfectly straight with her head held high. “Good girl, Lola, good girl,” said Dylan as he held out a small piece of sausage. “Gentle.” Lola very gently took the sausage from Dylan’s hand and wagged her tail.

“Okay, Nikau. Your turn next, but don’t give her much.”

The other children sat down on the side of the deck and Lola made her way back and forth, politely soliciting for food and gently taking what was offered. The adults chatted amongst themselves and the women made plans to walk together and catch up at a cafe every week. Bill watched Jane chat and laugh, “How did things get so bad?” he wondered. However, this was just what the doctor advised, gentle social interactions and a small group of supportive friends.

Gary walked around the yard with Bill and pointed out where some garden sleepers would be helpful. He also reminded Bill they were going to build a woodshed with Matt and Jed. Lola was now sleeping in the shade. She had eaten just the right amount of too much. Matt and Jed showed Nikau and Kiana Matt’s old sleep-out.

Dylan called out, “Hey, guys. Want some dessert?”

“Not if that Gary fella’s dishing up,” said Nikau quietly to Matt and Jed, “think I might burst.”

“Coming,” Matt called back. “Come on, let’s get in first. Then we can take Lola for a walk.”

Kiana jumped up and headed to the house. “Let’s go.”

The adults were sitting quietly, chatting in small groups. The warmth along with full bellies had slowed them to a near standstill. There was no rush to the dessert.

“Man, this chocolate stuff is awesome,” observed Nikau.

“It’s Art’s chocolate mousse,” said Matt. “I helped him make it.”

“Hmmm,” added Jed, “I like it more than salad.” The children laughed.

“Ready to go?” asked Matt.

“Yep,” chimed Nikau and Kiana.

“Okay, I’ll get Lola. Come and say goodbye.”

They wandered outside onto the deck and Matt walked over to Bill and Jane, who were sitting together on a couch. “We’re going to take Lola for a walk.”

Bill stood up and put his hand on Matt’s shoulder. “Okay, catch you later.” Then turning to Jed, Nikau and Kiana. “Have you had enough to eat?”

Nikau laughed. “Yeah, for today and tomorrow. Cheers for the kai.” Kiana smiled and nodded.

“You are most welcome, we look forward to seeing you back again.”

Gary got up and walked over and held out his hand to Nikau. When they shook hands Gary put his hand on Nikau’s back and pulled him in close.

“Good to see you again, Nikau. Be good eh.”

“Or good at it,” laughed Nikau.

Gary smiled and looked at Kiana. “Now remember, your job is to dob him in whenever you can. That way he’ll know you care.”

“Yep,” replied Kiana while looking at Nikau. “Should be able to do that every day.”

Dylan held up his hand and waved. “Cheers, guys, Thanks for the beating.”

Matt slapped his leg and called Lola. She ran across the deck and leapt up at the leash. They were off.

# Twenty One

## Making Friends

**M**att held his bike up against the outdoor table and called Lola, “Up, Lola. Up you get.” Lola jumped onto the table and climbed into the box on the back of Matt’s bike. Lola was very comfortable on the bike now. This was not a surprise since every trip was to have fun after all. Matt clipped Lola’s collar to a short restraint that Dylan had put in the box, just in case Lola had a spontaneous great idea. Matt quietly opened the gate so as not to wake Bill and Jane and set off to meet Jed for their morning hill sprints. They had found a great spot away from the road where Lola could join in and she loved it. The hill sprints plan was very simple, sprint up the hill and walk down slowly. No breaks, use the first five sprints to build up and do the last five flat out. As you got stronger, sprint a bit further. Matt and Jed had worked out a plan. They would stick together for the first five, then Matt would run ahead of Jed as he was much faster now.

Jed was sitting on the grass at the bottom of the hill waiting. Matt waved and turned his bike sideways so Lola could see Jed. Lola started yipping and wriggling in the box. As Matt unclipped Lola Jed started clapping his hands and calling. Jed rolled over on to his back and laughed as Lola jumped on him. Matt lay his bike down and walked over to Jed, they bumped fists and started jogging up the hill. Dylan had been very clear about not wasting

time. ‘Train first, talk later,’ he had said. Lola bounded alongside Matt and Jed. She was getting fast now and could easily outrun Matt. Though Lola was learning to do as she was told, her weakness was still other dogs and children, she would run to them no matter what Matt did. On the eighth sprint Matt was feeling surprisingly good, so he decided to run further up the hill and make the last runs more of a challenge. Weirdly it seemed the further he ran the easier it became. Matt ran to the very top of the hill for the first time. When he turned he could see Jed kneeling.

“Whaaat?” yelled Jed. “What are you doing man? Thought you must have got lost or something.”

Matt grinned. “Just felt like a blast.” Matt pushed himself and ran to the top of the hill for his last two runs. The last run in particular was very slow, but he didn’t mind. Matt knew that these were the bursts that would make him stronger. Matt and Jed lay down on the grass while they got their breath back. Lola walked back and forth between them, jumping on their bellies and trying to lick them in the face. It was marvellous.

Matt turned to Jed. “What are you doing today?”

Jed made a groaning sound. “There is no today. I’m going home, back to bed and getting up tomorrow. Today does not exist.”

Matt giggled. Jed just said the funniest things sometimes. “I’m going to go home, have a cold shower, then take Lola on a long walk.”

“Seriously, do you really have cold showers?” asked Jed. “I was really hoping that bit was a joke. No fizz, no chips, cold showers, get up early. It’s like we’re in the army.” Jed sat up. “Well, I’m not going to join the army unless you get chips.”

“Okay, let’s go. See you tomorrow. Have a good sleep.”

“After a HOT shower,” yelled Jed as he walked away.

Matt rode slowly back. He enjoyed the attention he got with Lola on the back of his bike. Sometimes other children would yell out, or drivers would toot their horns. Once they got chased by another dog and Matt was

hard-pressed to leave it behind. The more Lola barked the more enthusiastic the dog had become about catching them which did not help at all.

Matt saw Bill and Jane having breakfast and waved as he put his bike under the carport, he lifted Lola out of the box and put her gently down. She immediately cantered through the gate and around to the deck. It was time for her breakfast too. By the time Matt made it through the gate Bill and Jane had relocated to the outside table.

“Matt, grab something to eat and sit with us in the sun,” suggested Jane. Matt noticed Jane looking intently at him as he sat down with a large bowl of muesli. “Matt, I think you are getting taller each week.”

Matt nodded while eating. “Gary said you can grow four centimetres in six months if you get enough exercise and good food.”

Bill leaned forward. “In that case, I will be expecting six centimetres!”

Matt grinned, he certainly hoped that he grew six centimetres in six months. “I’m going to meet Art for morning tea. He said there’s a celebration I should come to.”

“Do you know what for?” asked Bill. Matt shrugged his shoulders and ate the rest of his breakfast in silence.

“Dinner will be at six, Matt, a roast. Please be back on time,” requested Jane. Matt nodded. He was about to walk away then turned and hugged Jane from behind as she sat at the table. Jane put a hand on Matt’s and squeezed it.

As Matt stepped out of the shower he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He stopped and held his arms out sideways before reaching high above his head. He was getting bigger. Maybe not quite as buff as Jed seemed to think, but definitely bigger.

Lola tugged strongly on the leash, she too was getting bigger and stronger by the week. It was becoming obvious that Lola was going to be a solid dog and not lean like Bess. The plan at Art’s was to put Lola on the mat inside the front door with her leash firmly tied to the door

handle. That way she could not chase Tac. Lola had become very good about staying on the mat. She had learned that she was allowed inside at home as long as she stayed completely on the mat just inside the door.

Matt had just settled Lola down on Art's mat when Jude and Dylan emerged from the bedroom. "LOLA," sang Jude as she hurried over, "what a gorgeous little girl you are." Jude sat on the mat next to Lola and encouraged Lola onto her lap. Not that Lola needed encouragement.

"How are your hill sprints going with Jed?" asked Dylan.

"Great. You know that hill Jed, I go to? Well, I ran to the top for the last three."

Dylan walked over to Matt with his hand held up for a high five. "Awesome, that is a big hill! How's Jed going?"

"Alright," replied Matt, "he's getting better."

Art clapped his hands. "Attention team, please sit at the table. It's time for the formalities and speeches." Dylan rolled his eyes at Matt as he turned and headed to the table. Art stayed in the kitchen, waiting for everyone to sit up. "Okay, close your eyes." There were sounds of a cupboard door opening and closing, the shuffling of feet and a clunk on the table.

"Open your eyes and be amazed please." Matt opened his eyes to see a large and elaborately decorated cake. Jude and Dylan laughed loudly at the decoration, but Matt didn't understand why.

"Now, Matt," began Art, "what do you think this is?" Art waved his hand over the top of the cake.

Matt leaned forward and looked carefully at the cake. "A butterfly?" Art, Jude and Dylan laughed loudly.

"Fantastic guess," said Art smiling. "No not a butterfly, a pair of lungs. I had to look them up on the Internet. Today is the one month anniversary of Jude stopping smoking!"

Dylan clapped loudly and mouthed 'thank you' to the ceiling. Jude smiled and nodded at Matt.

Art held up a knife. “Now before I cut the cake I think Jude deserves a round of applause.” Jude laughed and looked a little embarrassed as they clapped and Art whistled. Art cut the cake and passed the plates around. “I wonder how we will celebrate when we stop eating cakes?” asked Art.

“We could start eating cakes,” suggested Jude.

“Yes, more cakes,” laughed Art, “that sounds marvellous.”

There was a period of silence as they ate the cake, a lemon cake with very strongly flavoured lemon icing. Dylan looked at Art. “This is a very good cake, Art. What can Jude give up for the next one?”

Jude pointed at Dylan. “Him, farting,” she said with a muffled voice as she ate.

When the laughing settled Art said, “In that case, I think that you’d better make the most of this cake.”

Once they had finished eating Art turned to Matt. “Now, there is a tradition in this house with celebrations. The subject of celebration, today this is Jude, gets to choose a song and we all dance. So up, up, up everyone. Jude, choose away.” Art passed his phone to Jude. Jude looked up and wriggled her lips as she thought. Then with a triumphant smile started typing into the phone. Art grabbed Matt’s arm.

“Quick, quick. Let’s get a good spot,” he said as he dragged Matt to the middle of the lounge.

“Ready?” called Jude.

“Let it rip,” yelled Art.

As soon as the music started Art punched the air. “Enola Gay!” Art, Dylan and Jude all started dancing. It was unbounded, happy, ‘no one is looking’ dancing. Matt tried to join in, but he felt awkward and stilted. Art grabbed his hands and danced with Matt, moving him around gently. Art pulled Matt over to Jude and let go. Jude grabbed Matt’s hands and like Art danced with him, smiling and encouraging. Matt watched Dylan, he was cavorting and spinning with relaxed confidence. ‘Just like his fighting,’

thought Matt. By this time Lola was barking and jumping with excitement. This weirdo dancing business looked like a lot of fun to a puppy. As the song finished Matt walked over to settle Lola by letting her chew and tug on the leash.

Jude sat down next to Matt. "Can I do that, Matt?" Matt nodded and slid out of the way. Lola furiously shook the leash and pulled as hard as she could. "Can you hear her growling?" asked Jude. "So cute."

Matt smiled and patted Lola. "You're a real tough puppy." Lola paused, looking at Matt out the corner of her eyes with her tail wagging. "Yes," she seemed to be saying, "I am one tough pup."

Matt stopped at Art's gate and looked down at Lola. "Which way Lola? The long way or the short way?" Lola looked up at Matt, wagging her tail. "Okay, the long way."

Matt opened the gate and Lola immediately jumped up and bit the leash. It was tug of war time again. Matt decided to walk to the river and make a loop through town on his way home.

It was on his way back through town that he heard someone calling his name. It was Sandra. She was sitting with Allicia at a table in the sun. They both waved, beckoning him over. Lola started pulling on the leash and jumping when Sandra leaned down and clapped her hands. Matt loved the welcome that came with having Lola. After giving Lola a quick rub Sandra shuffled along the bench and pulled Matt's arm. He half sat and half fell alongside her. "Guess what, Matt? It's Allicia's birthday." Matt looked over at Allicia. Sandra put her arm around Matt and pulled him tight against her. "And, we're having a drink." Allicia and Sandra both laughed. Matt suspected this drink was not the first.

"But," Sandra continued, "it feels like my birthday now. I've got a girlfriend," Sandra held up her drink to Allicia who smiled back. "A boyfriend." Sandra put her hand on the side of Matt's head and pulled it down onto her breast. Matt turned his head slightly, so he was not looking

straight into Sandra's cleavage, and looked at Allicia. Allicia was smiling and laughing. Matt smiled back, they both knew he had no choice about his predicament. "And we've got a puppy!" Allicia slapped her hands on her knees and enticed Lola onto the bench alongside her. Lola put one paw onto the table before being pulled onto Allicia's lap, her legs kicking in the air.

Sandra released her grip on Matt's head slightly allowing him to sit up. She dropped her hand to his waist and pulled him in tight again. Matt relaxed and let himself be pulled close. Sandra was very strong, but also soft and warm. He felt a funny, enjoyable feeling in his chest and had an urge to lean his head on Sandra. Instead, he smiled at Allicia. She jiggled her eyebrows at him, which made him smile even more. She knew what he was feeling it seemed. Matt sat next to Sandra, captive and contentedly so, while she chatted with Allicia about their summer plans. Life it seemed was pretty good. Sandra jiggled Matt. "Hey, did you know Dad was taking some stuff to the boat?" Matt shook his head.

"I'll give him a call. You can distract him so he takes longer, that way we can have another drink." Sandra pulled out her phone. "Is that the bald guy?" she laughed. "Drinking? Nah, you must have the wrong number. Matt's here, he is just heading down to meet you. Yeah, we can wait."

Sandra leaned on Matt as she put her phone in her pocket. Instead of sitting up she smiled and kissed him on the cheek, then on the corner of his mouth. Matt felt himself blushing. "See you later, boyfriend." As Matt stood up he felt Sandra's hand slide down his back and across his buttock. Again he felt that funny feeling.

Matt walked briskly along the stopbank thinking about Sandra and the lingering feeling. His thoughts were interrupted by the sight of a group of older boys ahead of him. They were ambling, just killing time. Matt cautiously appraised them for signs of trouble.

"Hey MATT." Matt looked up, yes it was Nikau. Matt smiled and waved as Nikau walked up to him. Lola started yipping and jumping as Nikau squatted down.

“Where you going?” asked Nikau.

“To meet Gary,” replied Matt.

“Cool, I’ll come.” Matt nodded. He had no idea what Gary would think of this. But what else could he say? The others milled around patting Lola and commenting on her big paws, broad head and developing muscles. They were clearly impressed. Matt was very pleased to be introduced as Nikau’s ‘mate’. Walking around town had just become a lot less stressful. Nikau asked a lot about Gary as they walked to the marina. Matt was reluctant to say too much and was grateful that Nikau was not pushy. Matt pointed out Gary’s boat as they got closer.

“Faaaa, man, awesome. I thought it was a rowboat.”

Gary was nowhere to be seen, but the door was open. Matt tapped on the side of the cabin.

“Hi, Gary. It’s Matt and Nikau.”

There were some clunking sounds before Gary’s head appeared in the doorway. “Hey, guys. Good to see you. Climb aboard.” Gary picked up a rag and started wiping his hands. “Just been doing some of the longer-term checks, a bit messy I’m afraid. Come and sit down.” Gary flopped onto one of the side seats and waved his arm inviting Matt and Nikau to sit. Lola walked around the boat carefully sniffing everything.

“So I hear you bumped into the ladies in town. I hope they haven’t been drinking!”

Matt smiled and looked down, “Well...”

Gary laughed. “That’s fine, it’s Allicia’s birthday. Just hope they’re all good for dinner tonight. Heather’s cooking up a feast.” Gary looked at his watch. “I need to pick them up soon anyway.”

Nikau was looking around with interest. “Cool boat.”

“Thank you,” said Gary. “Are you into fishing?”

“Yeah, sort of,” said Nikau with a nervous laugh, “just haven’t been fishing on a boat.”

Gary held out his hands and looked at Matt. “Well, Matt and I can sort that. When do you want to go?”

“True?” asked Nikau as he squirmed in his seat.

Gary nodded and smiled. Nikau looked out the back of the boat and wriggled in his seat before turning to face Gary. “Is it true you used to teach karate? His big brother?”

Gary looked at Matt and smiled, Matt he thought was looking most uncomfortable. “Yes, I sure did. Still do. Matt has started training.”

“Awesome. Can I train too?”

Gary leaned back and folded his arms. “Well, I’m pretty fussy about who I train these days. We’ll see. Without a doubt, before you can be considered for karate you’ll have to come fishing.”

# Twenty Two

## Back at School

Matt sat on the side of the deck with Lola's muzzle in his hands. He could feel the warmth of her lips on his palms as he gently scratched the side of her neck with his fingers. "Bye-bye, Lola. See you soon." It was the first day of college. It had seemed impossibly far away for so long, but now it was time to start walking. A cold feeling seeped through Matt's chest. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the sliding door.

"All set, Matt?" Jane asked quietly.

Matt nodded and stood up. "Can't wait," he said with a gently sarcastic tone.

Jane reached out and wrapped her arms around him. "I was never super enthusiastic about school either, Matt. It's just something we have to do."

Matt nodded. "Better go. I'm meeting some friends." He bent down, giving Lola one last scratch as he picked up his bag. Lola followed Matt to the gate and tried to push her way through, but he held her back with his leg.

"Don't worry about Lola, I'm taking her for a walk," called Jane.

Matt walked slowly with his hands in his pockets. He was aware he had not felt like this since finishing school the previous year. His phone buzzed, it was Kiana, "Hurry up, fatso." Matt picked up the pace and rounded the corner. There was Kiana in the distance. When she saw him she tapped

an imagined watch on her arm and with eyes wide open jiggled her head. Matt smiled, Kiana had the googly eye look totally mastered. Kiana was much more positive about starting college than Matt was. She informed Matt that Nikau was going to be late on the first day back and that when it came to school boys were just stupid. Kiana gave Matt a very satisfied look when they met Jed, who without prompting, explained that the primary reason for going to school was to eat lunch. None of them wanted to walk through the school gates alone on their first day. Though, once they were through the gates, Kiana abandoned them.

“Nothing personal, guys, just need to look after my image.”

Matt and Jed wandered cautiously around looking for friends, but without luck. The time came for the first-year students to meet in the main hall. A few teachers spoke and explained the timetable and some basic rules. Matt was very curious about one rule regarding accountability. If a teacher did not play their part they could be put on detention too, including being on litter duty.

The first class was maths. To Matt’s great joy, Jed and Kiana were in the same class. Matt sat next to Jed and right behind Kiana. The teacher faced them with a big smile and her hands on her hips.

“Well, you must all be SO pleased to have got into maths class!” she exclaimed. “Did you know the biggest problem with maths is getting anyone to leave? Honestly, if we didn’t chase the students out they would stay the night.” There was some muted, nervous laughter. The teacher went on to explain how the assignments and tests could be done on the students’ phones instead of paper. “Let’s start right now. For practice let’s do a quick test. Phones out, please. Anyone need a paper copy?”

Matt looked at Jed and pulled a surprised face. “We get to use phones in class?” he thought.

“Make sure you are connected to the school WiFi, open this link and sign in.” The teacher walked around the classroom handing out paper versions for those who needed one.

“If you have a paper copy please don’t turn it over until I say so and remember to put your name at the top. You will have plenty of time. If you finish early please don’t chat, draw a picture instead. We will look at the pictures at the end. Ready, set GO.”

The teacher punched both hands in the air and smiled at anyone still looking up. “You can use paper as much as you want, even if you are doing the test with a device.”

Matt glanced at Jed, but Jed did not notice as he had his elbows on the table and his face in his hands while he stared at his phone.

At the end of the allotted time, the teacher walked around collecting the paper copies.

“Now,” she said, “you can chat, or draw, while I mark and enter these.”

Matt noticed that Kiana was furiously drawing, he turned to look at Jed. Jed gave a thumbs up, Matt nodded in reply. Jed looked down and started drawing on his pad. Matt glanced around the room, most students were drawing, a few were chatting quietly.

“Okay, team,” the teacher called loudly. “WELL done. I am very happy with the results. It will help me choose what to focus on. One person even got one hundred per cent, woohoo! But don’t stress if this wasn’t you. We are here to learn maths, after all, not to know everything at the start. Now let’s look at those pictures.” The teacher walked around the class and asked the students to stand up, say their name and hold up their picture. When Kiana held up her picture the class burst out laughing. It was a picture of a dog on the back of a bicycle. The dog had an oversized head with a massive tongue and very big eyes, the rider was drawn in exactly the same way. Kiana looked down at Matt and smiled. Matt smiled back before putting his hand on his face in mock shame.

“Okay, class How about we put this one on the wall?” There was a loud cheer of support. Matt shook his head at Kiana with his eyebrows raised. Kiana gave him the googly eye look.

“What’s the go here, guys?” asked the teacher as she looked back and forth between Kiana and Matt.

“It’s him,” someone yelled from the back of the class, “I’ve seen him riding around town.” The class laughed loudly. The teacher smiled at Matt.

“You take your dog for a ride on your bike?”

Matt nodded.

“What’s the dog’s name?”

“Lola.”

“Lola, what a lovely name. What’s your name?”

“Matt.”

“Okay.” Then turning to Kiana. “Please put Matt and Lola on the top and your name on the bottom.” The teacher waited for Kiana to finish then walked over to the sidewall and pinned up her picture.

“Who’s next?”

Jed put up his hand and stood up. “This is Dexter and this is Bess, she is biting me on the ass.” Again the class roared with laughter.

“I think your dog needs more training,” said the teacher.

“It’s not my dog and that IS its training,” replied Jed. “It’s meant to bite you on the ass.” It took some time for the class to settle down before the teacher could speak again.

“Well, that’s another picture for the wall. Please put Dexter and Bess at the top and your name on the bottom.” The teacher spent the rest of the class walking around looking at pictures and talking to the students. When the bell rang the teacher put her hands on her hips and shook her head. “I am so sorry guys, but you really do need to go now.”

Matt caught Kiana’s eye as they walked out. He gave her a half-smile and shook his head again. As expected she gave him her googly eye look. “How did you do on the test?” asked Matt.

Kiana rolled her eyes, pulled out her phone and after a few clicks held it in front of Matt’s face, ‘100%.’

Jed, who was looking over Matt's shoulder exclaimed loudly, "Whoa!"

Kiana put her phone back in her bag and pointed at her foot that was now in front of Matt. "You may kiss my foot, mere peasant." Matt laughed awkwardly, as he came to realise he had misjudged Kiana, both in how smart she was and how sassy she was.

Jed pushed Matt forward slightly. "Go on, man, do it."

Kiana tilted her head to the side and stared at Jed. "You though, you can kiss my..." she said, pointing to her partly turned butt, "but not now, later. I will let you know when I need to fart." With a final open-eyed stare, Kiana turned and walked away. Matt looked at Jed. They were both thinking the same thing, girls would be a long way off.

During interval, Matt and Jed decided to do a walk around their new school. They steered clear of groups of older boys, occasionally they passed others that they knew and waved. What they hoped to find was somewhere safe to eat their lunch and make their own. Matt tapped Jed's arm and stopped walking, they had walked straight into Rooster and a group of his friends. Matt turned to Jed and whispered, "Let's just walk away."

But there would be no walking away. Rooster walked briskly toward them followed by several of his closest allies. "How's the first day of school, ladies?"

Rooster walked right up to Matt, but Matt stood still. He was not backing down this time. Rooster pushed his chest into Matt's forcing him to step back. When Matt stepped back he fell over one of Rooster's allies who had crouched behind him. But making things much worse was that the ally had stood up as Matt began to fall, lifting Matt's legs into the air. Matt managed to turn slightly to avoid hitting his head but still fell heavily onto his shoulder. Matt completed a back roll and stood up. One of the boys was holding Jed by the collar. Matt walked straight up to Rooster and pushed his chest into Rooster's, driving him backwards. Matt stared into Rooster's eyes. He could feel that he was bigger than Rooster now, stronger than Rooster now. As he looked at Rooster he could see Rooster felt this too.

There was the sound of pounding footsteps as other boys arrived, but Matt ignored them. He could tell that Rooster felt overpowered and he wanted him to keep feeling that. He kept pushing. A scuffle broke out behind Matt, followed by the sound of a loud slap. The boy who had tripped Matt came running past, but he only made a few steps before being tripped by another bigger boy.

“One on one,” called a deeper older voice, “come on, one on one.”

Matt raised his eyebrows to Rooster. “I’m good.”

They were interrupted by the unmistakable voice of a male teacher. “Break it up, back away.” Matt took a step back but kept his eyes firmly on Rooster. He smiled, Rooster had backed down, he was defeated. The teacher stepped between them and pushed them further apart.

“Settle down, it’s all over.” Matt looked around at the crowd that had gathered so quickly. He recognised some of the boys he had met with Nikau and raised his head to them. They raised their heads in return. It was them, Matt realised, who had come to his aid. Soon more teachers arrived and Matt, Jed, Rooster, his allies and some witnesses were taken away. Luckily for Matt, Jed’s enthusiastic and colourful account was to some degree backed up by other witnesses and after convincing a teacher that he had not hit his head was allowed to leave. Though by the time Matt and Jed were free it was lunch break and they had missed a class.

Matt and Jed followed the instructions in Ricky’s message to meet them on the sports field. “Hey, guys, all good?” asked Ricky. “You’ve missed some action. Apparently, there’s been a fight already.” Jed looked at Matt to see if he was going to say anything, then having got Ricky’s attention pointed at Matt and nodded.

“What? No way. Matt, have YOU been in a scrap?” asked Ricky.

Matt held up his hands and dropped them by his side. “Not really, it wasn’t my fault.”

“It was ridiculous Rooster,” blurted Jed, “and his hideous henchmen.”

“Are you okay, Matt?” asked Ricky with clear concern.

“Yep. I’m fine,” replied Matt, “I think it’s over with Rooster now.”

Ricky nodded. “Okay, but for goodness sake let me know if it isn’t.”

Matt nodded. “Let’s train.”

Ricky explained lunchtime training. They would use the dead ball area of the rugby field to do a series of sprints. Starting from the side of the field they would sprint to the first post and back, the second post and back, the full width and back, the second and first post again. They would do three complete sets to start with then four, five and so on as they got fitter. Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays. Rain, hail or shine.

“Once you two are nailing this we will add in some squat jumps.”

“Can’t wait,” said Jed with mock enthusiasm.

After school, Matt and Jed waited just inside the school gate for Kiana as they agreed to. Kiana appeared with some of the other girls from their classes.

“Hi guys. Thanks for waiting,” she said as she walked straight past with her friends. The other girls giggled.

Jed shrugged his shoulders to Matt. “Oh well, let’s go,” he said with a ‘why were we waiting’ tone.

“Girls are weird,” said Matt as they set off.

“Are you going to take Lola for a walk?” asked Jed.

“Yep.”

“Can I come?” asked Jed excitedly.

“Sure, we could walk to your place.”

The boys walked briskly, motivated by their desire to see Lola and also a bit excited about the events of the day. Matt was sure the Rooster issue was sorted. He had agreed to let Rooster and his accomplice apologise. But this would be later in the week when things had calmed down. It seemed that Rooster and his accomplice would not be at school for a few days.

Both Matt and Jed were startled when Nikau ran from behind, yelling as he jumped between them. Nikau was hyper-excited about the 'bros' intervening to help Matt.

"You're sweet now, man. Those other fellas won't come near you, like ever."

Matt smiled and nodded. He was very aware of the impact the day's events would have once news of them had spread around the school.

"Where are you guys going?" asked Nikau.

"Walking Lola," replied Jed.

"Cool, I'll come too."

Lola jumped and pulled when she saw Nikau and Jed waiting at the end of the driveway. Matt theatrically stumbled forward, as if he was about to be dragged along the ground.

The three boys chatted happily on their way to Jed's house. Nikau filled Matt and Jed in on his colourful view of school, the various teachers and activities. Of particular interest were the physical assessments each term, with the first one being only two weeks away.

Jed's mum gave Nikau, Matt and Jed two biscuits each with instructions to eat outside. They were homemade biscuits. Fat, crumbly and delicious. Matt loved Jed's mum. She was hardly any bigger than they were, yet very much the boss. What stood out though, was her seemingly endless good humour. It did not seem whatever Jed did, broke, lost or forgot. His mum would always just roll her eyes, maybe playfully pull on his ear and ask him what he was going to do about it. It had never occurred to Matt to ask about the absence of Jed's father. There just wasn't one and that was that.

Once the biscuits were consumed and Jed's very small, cluttered bedroom inspected, Matt and Nikau said their goodbyes and set off. Matt decided to take Lola the long way home via the river.

As Matt approached the river Lola started pulling on the leash. She knew this would mean a swim and being free to run. Matt looked up and down the river. There was a lady with her dog some distance away, but otherwise,

the coast was clear. Matt squatted down next to Lola. “Stay,” instructed Matt. Lola sat down, brushing her tail on the grass. Matt unclipped the leash and ran toward the water, Lola tore past him and jumped in. The water was shallow and Lola ran back and forth, splashing a little more than was necessary, but just enough to have a lot of fun. Lola heard the other dog barking in the distance and immediately turned her attention to it. She started walking toward the dog.

“Get here. Lola, get here,” called Matt urgently. But it was too late. Lola was now running flat out to the other dog. Matt ran after her, calling her back. When Lola got close she slowed down. As soon as the other dog saw her it started confidently trotting toward Lola. Lola stopped, turned and started running back to Matt with her tail between her legs. Weirdly though, Lola ran in a funny, slow way, not flat out like before. The other dog soon caught up and Lola rolled on to her back. Lola lay very still while she was thoroughly sniffed and inspected. By this time the lady had also arrived.

“Good girl, Latte, good girl.” Latte wagged her tail and walked toward the lady who was now squatting down. Seeing this Lola rolled to her feet and ran to the lady wagging her whole body. When Latte approached Lola she again rolled over and tucked her tail between her legs.

“Sorry,” said Matt as he arrived.

“That’s okay,” said the lady. “What’s your puppy’s name?”

“Lola,” Matt replied.

“What a gorgeous pup. This is Latte. She’s very friendly, let’s give them a few minutes to sort things out.”

Latte approached Matt wagging her tail. She was a white and tan dog, about the same size as Lola but very clearly an adult. Latte had a thick tan mark above her right eye which made it look like she was raising an eyebrow. Matt bent over and gave Latte a scratch on the side of her neck. Immediately Lola ran over and tried to push between Matt and Latte. Matt stood up to give the dogs space. Latte jumped back from Lola and waited with her front

paws stretched out in front of her and her belly on the ground. She gave a little bark as if to hurry Lola along. Lola stood up and barked back, she didn't seem quite sure what to do. Latte lunged at Lola only to pull back and start running. Lola took the bait and started chasing. Back and forth they went along the river bank, occasionally running through the water. Lola barked endlessly. Now and then Latte would stop, face Lola and they would both jump into the air snapping at one another before the chase resumed. Matt and the lady laughed and laughed each time one of the dogs fell over or they ran into each other.

"This is great," the lady said, "normally I have to run up and down the river!"

"Me too," Matt replied.

Latte and Lola came trotting back side by side with Lola biting Latte on the neck. Both dogs were panting hard. Matt crouched down and clapped his hands.

"Lola. Get here, Lola," he called. Lola walked slowly over and sat down while Matt clipped her leash on.

"Bye," he said as he stood up and started to walk away.

"Maybe see you two again," said the lady, "we come here every day around this time."

"Yep," said Matt while smiling.

"Bye, Lola. You're very cute."

# Twenty Three

## Music Lessons

**M**att met Kiana and Jed on the way to school. Nothing was said about Kiana burning the boys the day before. Neither did anything need to be said, they all understood that Matt and Jed would choose to walk with Kiana regardless.

The music room was apart from the main classrooms. It was an older building with stairs. It was not possible to walk quietly across the room. If you walked slowly the wooden floor creaked, if more quickly each step returned a clonk. It seemed the room itself was keen to announce the arrival of each nervous student. There was an old, slightly battered looking upright piano tucked into a corner at the front of the room. Alongside was a guitar on a stand. Other instruments were hanging from hooks and sitting on shelves. They all had an appearance of being slightly past their prime. This was somehow inviting for the students. It was as if they were saying ‘come on, give us a go.’ Art sat at his desk. He was looking through some notes, occasionally looking up to smile at a student uncertain of where to sit. Art completely ignored Matt as he said he would. It was important, Art had explained, that there was no hint of friendship or favouritism. When all the students were seated Art stood up, held a finger to his lips and waited for silence. He smiled and nodded.

“Music starts with silence,” he said, “silence is the canvas we paint our music on and,” Art held his hands open and out wide, “music is the soundtrack to our lives.”

Art walked over to the piano at the side of the room and played two high notes, one after the other with a slight gap between them. Art played the two notes back and forth while looking at the class, eyebrows raised. “Is this enough of a tune for a song?” he asked. A few students giggled. It didn’t seem so.

“Let’s form groups, four groups. There are four rows, each row can be a group. Please get together around a desk, any desk at all. Chop, chop.”

The students looked at each other all wondering where to begin. “It’s okay to move the desks around. Everyone stand up, it’s easier that way.” There was a flurry of activity as the students rearranged themselves. Art clapped his hands and smiled at the class. “Excellent, that will do just fine. You have two minutes to learn each other’s names and one thing about each person in your group. There will be a test at the end of class and the ONLY thing you must know are the names of your group members. GO!”

There was an instant burble as everyone spoke at once. Matt wrote the names of his group on a piece of paper and put this in the middle of the desk. Matt suggested taking Lola on his bicycle as the thing they could know about him. The group laughed, they already knew this from maths class.

“Quiet please,” Art called out loudly. “Now the real work begins. I am going to play you a song and I want you to listen to it, talk about it and decide whether the melody I played at the start of the class is key. Or whether you could remove it and the song would be just as good. Here we go, the song is ‘For What It’s Worth’ by Buffalo Springfield. I will play it then we will go around the class and get your thoughts.” When the music stopped Art explained that there was no right or wrong, just opinions. After the discussion Art introduced a new song, this time a song Matt knew, Enola Gay.

“I want you to think about how this song makes you feel. Does it make you want to dance? Or does it make you want to lie down and cry?” The chatter within the groups was louder this time, the students’ confidence was growing. Besides this was fun. When the song ended Art asked, “Who felt like crying? Okay, no takers. Who felt like dancing?”

Most of the class put their hands up. Some of the girls giggled and looked at each other. Art pointed at them, walked over and stood in front of them with a big smile and his hands on his hips. He spoke slowly in a dramatic tone, “I saw this group giggling in their seats. Didn’t I!”

The girls looked at each other grinning, not sure what to say. Art walked back to the front of the class then spun around with an outstretched arm and pointed finger. He swung his finger and gaze across the class making eye contact with each student. “Okay, everybody, stand up. Spread out, put your hands up in the air like this. Now DANCE.” Art played the song again and started dancing. Most of the students looked around. “Really, dance?” they were thinking. Some of the girls started tentatively dancing while looking at each other and giggling. Matt thought about the time he had spent dancing alone at home. He had started dancing by himself since he saw Art, Dylan and Jude dance. It had taken a while, but he now felt fine dancing on his own, but in class? He looked up and caught Art’s eye. Art smiled and gave Matt an encouraging lift of his head. Matt looked at the boy alongside him.

“Come on,” said Matt as he stepped into space in front of the desk and started to dance. Matt looked down, he didn’t want to make any eye contact. He closed his eyes and imagined that he was dancing alone at home with Lola jumping about.

As the song finished Art clapped his hands. “Well done, team, I am SO proud of you. Music is about feelings. It resonates with our feelings, sometimes triggers our feelings. Like wanting to dance for example. Please go back to your desks and write down the songs that you like and a few bullet

points about what you like about them. In particular focus on how a song makes you feel. Is there an emotion that makes you want to play a song?”

As Matt left the classroom some of his group waved and smiled. Matt waved back, he would later find out that Art created new groups at each class. Matt would come to wonder whether the sole purpose of Art’s music class was to have fun and make friends.

When the school day came to a close and Matt walked through the school gates it occurred to him that not only had the day passed without incident, but the school experience had changed entirely in only one day.

Matt and Jed decided to collect Lola and take her for a walk for what, on only their second day, was becoming a routine. The lure of homemade biscuits meant walking to Jed’s house was an uncontested option. This time though Jed’s mum not only had biscuits for the boys but a small treat for Lola. “Oh, so you like me now?” joked Jed’s mum to Lola. “You are just like a teenager! A little bit of food and you’re my best friend.”

Matt did not stay long, he was hoping to loop home via the river and let Lola swim. He was crossing a park when he heard a whistle.

“Oi!” called a loud voice. It was Fuzz and a little girl. Fuzz stood up, waved and while holding the girl’s hand started walking toward Matt and Lola. Lola began wagging her tail and pulling on her leash.

“Hey, Matt. Remember me?” asked Fuzz. Matt nodded.

“Matt meet Lucy and...?”

“Lola,” replied Matt.

Lucy held onto Fuzz’s leg and looked at Matt while she pushed a finger into a corner of her mouth. “Can I pet your dog?” she asked.

Matt sat down and firmly held Lola’s collar. “Yep, but she likes to lick.”

“Perfect,” said Fuzz, “we like being licked.” Fuzz sat down, put Lucy on his lap and held his hand out to Lola. Matt slowly let Lola forward so Fuzz could pat her. Lola wriggled and pulled to get closer to Lucy. Fuzz put Lucy’s hand in his and reached out to Lola. Lucy squealed with delight and

pulled her hand back when Lola licked it. After watching Fuzz rub Lola, Lucy reached out again and let Lola lick her hand.

“What do you reckon, Lucy? Would you like a dog?”

Lucy smiled and squirmed. “Yes,” she said.

“One day we’ll get a dog,” said Fuzz, “maybe one just like Lola.” They sat in comfortable silence while Lola rolled around playing with whoever touched her. Lola was very gentle with Lucy. Lola rolled onto her back and started to chew on Fuzz’s trousers. “Well, maybe we’ll look for a dog that doesn’t eat our clothes.”

Lucy laughed and reached out to touch Lola’s paw. Fuzz gave Lola one last rub. “Thank you, Matt and Lola. We need to keep moving, but I hope we bump into you guys again.” Fuzz scooped up Lucy with one arm and patted Matt on the back with the other as he turned to walk away.

Matt checked the time on his phone and decided to head home via Art’s house. As he opened the gate Art called through a window, “Welcome, welcome, we were just about to have some afternoon tea. Perfect timing.”

Dylan and Jude were on the couch. Jude was half laying on Dylan, who had his arms wrapped around her. Dylan lifted one arm and waved to Matt. “Indeed, we were just about to have afternoon tea.” They all laughed. Whenever anyone arrived they were just about to have morning tea, afternoon tea, a drink or something. It was a game Art loved to play.

Art waved his arms above his head until everyone was looking. “Attention everybody. Today is a momentous day indeed. Today, Matt danced in class. He danced magnificently and at the very front. I AM PROUD of you, Matt.” Matt blushed and looked down as Art strode over and wrapped his arms around him. When Art let go Jude stepped in and hugged Matt.

“All the best boys dance, Matt,” she said.

By this time Dylan had walked over, he put an arm over Matt’s shoulder and turned to face Art and Jude. “Also, Matt got into a dust-up on his VERY FIRST DAY at college.” Dylan looked down at Matt. “Art told me, so I

rang Jed. Good on you, no unnecessary biff. Gary will be very pleased, I'm pleased too."

Jude tipped her head to the side and gave Dylan a wry look. "What!" said Dylan smiling, before adding, "and Jude, of course, is over the moon." Jude waved her hand back and forth in front of her as if she was slapping Dylan.

"But," Art interjected with his eyebrows raised and head tipped to one side. "We are most pleased about the dancing." Art waved toward the table. "Everyone sit up please, food is on the way. Now, this is a bit special, fruit cake."

"Fart cake," exclaimed Dylan. "Eat up, Matt, you are going to be so popular at school."

"Not with the girls though," cautioned Jude.

"Possibly yes," said Art, "we are talking thirteen-year-olds after all!"

Dylan tapped the table to get Matt's attention. "Matt, you can give us the results next week."

"I'm a bit worried I'm going to get the results in music class," lamented Art.

Dylan held up his finger. "Matt, while I have your attention. Gary asked me to catch up with you and Nikau to take him through some basics and suss him out a bit. Find a time that suits the two of you and let me know. Jed can join in if he wants."

The banter and laughter continued, Jude gave Lola a cuddle and small piece of cake while Tac sat cautiously on the deck, keeping a constant eye on Lola. When it came time to go Art handed Matt a small piece of cake, wrapped and ready for school the next day. Art winked at Matt. "Eat it after music, but just before maths."

As Matt opened the door to leave Dylan called out, "Hey, Matt. Bring all your maths and science schoolwork back on the weekend. I will see if I can help at all."

Matt nodded and waved. "See ya."

The next morning Nikau was waiting with Kiana. "Hey, Nikau, good to see you got Kiana out of bed in time for school," joked Matt.

Kiana rolled her eyes. “Whatever,” she said over Nikau’s laughter.

“Nikau,” started Matt, “wanna catch up with Dylan to do some karate stuff?”

“Yeah, course,” said Nikau as if this was the silliest question he’d ever heard.

“When?”

“After school at my house?” asked Matt.

Nikau held up his hand for a high five. “Sorted.”

The school day was very straightforward. He and Jed met with Ricky at lunchtime to do their sprinting drills. Matt could keep up with Ricky for the first few legs of the drill, but after that Ricky left him far behind. Ricky patted Matt on the back after the first set. “Don’t stress, Matt. I’m two years ahead of you on this.”

Matt nodded while breathing deeply, he was too puffed to talk. Jed though was struggling, he was making groaning noises and yelled, “Why, why, why,” during his last sprint. Ricky smiled and winked at Matt. They’d all been there.

It was clear on the walk home Nikau had no idea what karate training would involve. He seemed to think that they would be straight into some hardcore fighting with the skills being sprinkled in along the way. Matt and Jed kept quiet and listened to Nikau’s thoughts.

Dylan was sitting, waiting on the grass at the end of Matt’s driveway. He had somehow befriended the neighbour’s scatty cat. When the cat saw the boys approaching it crouched, before bounding off through the garden. Dylan slowly stood up and smiled. “Good afternoon, gentlemen.”

Lola barked when she heard footsteps on the driveway, this switched to yipping and whining when she saw Matt. Matt opened the gate and crouched down, letting her jump up to his chest. Lola ran forward and back, jumping and spinning as the boys made their way onto the back lawn. Dylan swung his arms around to warm them up. “I understand you boys have your sports clothes with you today. Is that right?”

“Yep,” they all chimed.

“Great, get changed quick smart and get back out here. Grab a quick drink if you need it. Don’t stop to talk, we’re training from now.” The boys hurried to the sleep-out to get changed. When they returned Dylan was properly warmed up and immediately took them through a high pace warm-up routine.

“Great guys. The first thing we are going to practice is launching. We’ll start with just our hands. I’ll start with Nikau. Matt and Jed, you follow along.”

Dylan held his right hand by the side of his face. “Nikau, my hand is your target. Set up for a left jab. Get as far back as you can, but still reach my hand without moving your hips or feet. Try a few slow ones to get the distance and feel.”

“Okay,” Dylan continued, “this is the drill. Nikau and Matt have up to three seconds to strike after my count. You don’t have to strike straight away, the idea is to surprise us, to catch Jed and me napping. You are NOT allowed to feint. You only get one movement. If you feint or creep toward us then POW.” Dylan simulated slapping Nikau. “We get to slap you! I can’t wait personally.”

Nikau shifted uncomfortably on his feet. “Whaaat. Really?”

“Really, really,” replied Dylan, “you must learn to control your reflexes and use them to your advantage. The good news for you is if Jed or I move before you strike then you get to slap us!” The boys laughed cautiously.

“Ready? We will do five on each hand and swap until everybody has been with everybody with both hands. Remember you have up to three seconds after each count to launch. Keep a count of how many out of ten you land for each person. One,” called Dylan.

There was the sound of a gentle slap by Matt. “I can’t wait to go with Jed,” said Dylan.

Nikau laughed then focused on hitting Dylan with his second attempt, having missed on his first. When the drill was completed Dylan faced the boys.

“Hands up who hit someone ten out of ten.” Matt put his hand up and smiled at Jed.

“That’s okay, Jed,” said Dylan. “I promise you, if you practice this drill you’ll start nailing everybody. Did anyone get hit ten out of ten?”

All three boys put their hands up and laughed. Dylan had easily hit them all ten out of ten. “The general rule is if you can’t move your hand fast enough to avoid getting hit, then you certainly won’t be able to move your face fast enough. If someone beats you ten times in a row, don’t start a fight with them.” The boys laughed. As if they would start a fight with Dylan.

“You will learn to be quick, you will learn to launch without telling your opponent you’re about to launch. There are things you need to learn and drills you need to perfect. If you don’t hammer the drills you will not improve.”

Dylan looked at the boys while thinking. “Okay, let’s try some simple movement. It’s a similar drill, but this time you need to move your feet.” Again the boys could not touch Dylan or each other. However, Dylan did point out just how much better Matt was after only a short amount of training.

“So how often do you do your drills, Matt?”

“Twice a day,” Matt replied.

“And how often do you do hill sprints, or go for a training ride?”

“Six days a week,” said Matt.

Dylan nodded approvingly. “Good answer. That’s what it takes guys. If you want to learn karate with Gary and me, you need to match our effort with yours. It is as simple as that. Okay, let’s do a round of conditioning.”

# Twenty Four

## The New Normal

It was Friday and the first week of school was coming to an end. Matt walked quickly, he had left early hoping to be waiting for Kiana and Nikau. So far Kiana had been waiting for him each morning with eye-rolling impatience. Matt smiled to himself when he saw them walking out of the house just as he was arriving. Matt waited until he caught Kiana's eye, then looking at an imaginary watch on his arm, tapped his foot and put his hands on his hips. He waited until Kiana was close before looking up and rolling his eyes. Kiana stuck her tongue out and went cross-eyed.

"Been waiting here all night to do that I suppose," she said. "Had to wait for Nikau to finish doing his nails."

"Whatever," huffed Nikau.

They walked mostly in silence with Kiana busy on her phone. When Matt tried to talk to her, she held up her hand saying, "Sorting out my schedule, fellas."

As they walked through the gates Nikau held out his fist to Matt for a bump. "See you and your mates at lunchtime."

Matt's first class was English. The task was to write down all the things you could remember doing during the holidays and write one sentence about each one, then two or more sentences about the top three. Finally, pick your favourite thing and write one page about it.

Matt looked at his list, it was long. Where should he start? Would it be riding on the motorbike with Dylan, skinny dipping in the lake, working on the farm, starting karate, building the deck, fishing on Gary's boat, learning to snorkel, playing with Dexter, Lola? He sat back in his chair, closed his eyes and thought. To his great surprise writing came easily. Matt wrote as fast as he could, filling page after page. At the end of class when handing his work in, the teacher looked briefly at Matt's work and smiled. "Good effort. Can you write with two hands?" she asked.

Jed looked over at Matt as the bell rang to signal the lunch break. "Gotta go to the loo first," whispered Jed.

"Me too," Matt whispered back. They both laughed. Weirdly whenever they were about to go to karate or training they first had to go to the loo. Dylan had told them though, "If you aren't crapping your pants, you're just not taking this seriously enough!"

Relieved, they ran to meet Ricky. On their way, they passed Nikau, who joined in, along with a number of his mates. When Ricky saw the group of boys approaching he put his hands on his hips and looked at Matt. "Jeepers, is this the rugby team?" he asked. Then clapping his hands. "Let's rip straight in, just follow along for the first one." Back and forth they ran, the excited chatter was soon replaced with heavy breathing then puffing. When the last of the group had finished the drill Ricky gestured for everyone to come around him. "Now just try this part gently. Don't break your neck." Ricky demonstrated a few shoulder rolls. "Make sure you switch from side to side, left shoulder, right shoulder. Matt and Jed, let's see you do a few." Matt immediately dropped low and started rolling, Jed followed behind. "Let's go, team. Twenty, ten each side."

The boys laughed as they struggled to do the rolls and collided with one another. Ricky clapped his hands again. "That's fine for now, you know what you need to practice. Once you have the shoulder rolls sorted you can move onto dive rolls." Ricky did a low, slow dive roll. "Take your time,

don't rush it. Once you have that sussed move onto running, jumping dive rolls. Matt, please bend over and put your hands on your knees." Ricky ran, dived over Matt, did a roll and carried on running. "The goal is to be able to run alongside a mate, do a dive roll, pop up and still be alongside your mate. Understand?" The boys nodded. "Next we can work on walkovers, two hands and one hand. They are sorta like a cartwheel, but going forwards. The idea is to learn balance and control, you probably won't do one in a fight!" Ricky did some walkovers, they looked effortless. "That'll do for today. See you Monday for those who are keen. It's time to eat lunch."

Matt checked his phone and called out to Jed. "Hey, Jed. I'm meeting Gary after school to help chop up a tree."

Jed nodded. "Hill sprints in the morning?"

"Sure," replied Matt, "seven?"

"Thirty," replied Jed, "gotta get over this lot first."

Jed tapped Matt's arm as they walked out of the school gates. "Look, there's Gary," he said excitedly as he waved.

"Okay, gotta go," replied Matt as he jogged over to Gary's ute. "See you in the morning."

Gary leaned out the window, waved to Jed and gave him a thumbs up.

"Good day, buddy?" asked Gary.

"Yep," replied Matt, "we trained with Ricky."

"Good to hear. How's that going?"

Matt thought for a moment. "Alright, I think. Though a heap of Nikau's mates turned up as well." Matt looked at Gary carefully to see what Gary's reaction would be. Gary smiled.

"That's easy," said Gary. He glanced at Matt, "if there are too many people you just train harder until some leave."

"What if the wrong ones leave?" asked Matt.

"No such thing," replied Gary, "those who are keen stay." Gary reached over and gently pulled on Matt's ear. "So did anything interesting happen this week?"

Matt looked at Gary and raised his eyebrows. Of course, Gary knew what had happened. “Well, Rooster wanted a fight. But he backed down.”

“Did you make him back down?” asked Gary.

Matt looked at Gary and nodded. “Yep.”

“Any bullets fired or nonsense said that would trigger a follow-up?”

Matt shook his head. “Nope, it’s over.”

Gary nodded and smiled. “Well done, Matt. You have mastered the most important karate technique of all. I’m very impressed.” As they parked outside Matt’s driveway Gary reached over to shake Matt’s hand. “You have nailed this. It’s a very important lesson to learn. You must now teach Dylan!” Matt smiled as he thought about Dylan’s likely response. “Now rip inside, change your clothes and let your folks know where you’re going. We need to get cracking. We’ll eat on the way home.”

Matt sprinted down the drive, jumped the fence and rubbed Lola. “Sorry, girl, gotta go.”

Gary smiled to himself when he saw Matt come flying over the fence on his way back. “He’s been practising those,” he thought. “Folks okay with you coming?”

“Yep,” puffed Matt. “I’ll just need to text when heading back.”

“Let’s go. Remember Chrissy, the lady who made you the scones? Well, a tree has come down across her driveway and she can’t get out. We’ll clear that, chop up anything useful for firewood and bring the rest back. So we’re in a hurry. What should we do?”

Matt turned to face Gary with a confident grin. “Drive very slowly.”

Gary laughed loudly. “What a great answer. Yes, Matt, we should drive slowly and safely. Being in a hurry doesn’t change a darn thing. Now to drive safely we should drive slowly, but there are some other things we can do. One is to keep a safe distance between cars. Out in the country, a four-second gap between cars is sensible. Another thing is to keep your eyes on the road, never combine driving with sightseeing. That’s a biggie. Also, if

you are in a line of traffic, leave a bigger gap between cars. That way others can enter and exit more easily. Does that sound sensible?”

“Yep,” replied Matt, “very sensible.”

As they reached the open road Gary wriggled in his seat to get comfortable and took a big breath in. “Well, Matt, I’ve made a big decision. I’ve decided to buy an old boat, well actually I have bought it. You’ll see it at the farm when you next visit. It’s a seven-metre trailer sailer. The plan is to rip all the rigging off, put in an electric motor and battery then have a play. Once we’re happy that all systems are go, we can modify Eldie and put the electric gear in her. What do ya reckon?”

Matt looked over at Gary.

“What’s that funny look for, I’m serious!” Gary smiled back. “By the way,” continued Gary, “the trailer sailer was super cheap as the sailing gear is pretty much stuffed and the boat’s been out in the weather. It looks terrible, but the hull is sound and it will look like new once cleaned and touched up. If you’re up for it we can start tomorrow.”

“Yep, that sounds like fun.”

“Fun?” asked Gary. “You must be teasing me. It’s going to be absolutely marvellous. This is going to be the most exciting thing I’ve done in years. I can hardly sleep at the moment.” Gary laughed and smiled. “We need to enjoy life, young Matt and I am going to enjoy this! But first, we need to sort Chrissy’s tree.”

Matt looked out of the car window as Gary reversed the ute onto the front lawn. The tree had split in the middle and one half had fallen across the driveway and onto the fence.

“Looks like the fence has taken a beating,” mused Gary as he opened his door, “let’s get into it. Please get all the tools out, I’ll let Chrissy know we’re here.”

Chrissy though, was waiting for them on the other side of the tree. “Welcome, gentlemen. Thank you so much for coming in a hurry,” she called.

“Hurry?” asked Gary. “We came as slow as we could. Isn’t that right, Matt?” Gary put his hands on his hips and shook his head at Chrissy. “Now, Chrissy. I thought we agreed that you wouldn’t go climbing the trees.”

Chrissy laughed loudly, a raspy cackle. “It wasn’t me, it was all the birds that did it.”

Gary winked at Matt. “Well you might be too young to know about this, but Chrissy is right. Those sparrows sure know how to party in spring!”

“Shoosh you,” said Chrissy, “you sort the tree while I make some scones.”

“Now you’re talking,” said Gary, “if we knew about the scones we would’ve hurried.”

Gary turned to Matt. “This is a right mess. So stay clear while I lop off some of the bigger branches and get it safe. What you can do is use the hand saw to cut up the lighter bits the length of the tray. We’ll want to tie them down very tightly for the trip back with nothing hanging over the back. Got it?”

“Yep,” replied Matt. Then before Gary could speak added, “ear muffs and gloves.”

Gary patted him on the shoulder and smiled. As Matt was now coming to expect Gary spent some time walking around the tree and looking at it carefully, before making a series of cuts. The wood was soft and easy for Matt to cut with the handsaw and it did not take long to have all the light branches on the tray of the ute. Gary showed Matt where to stack the wood. Matt traipsed back and forth with the wheelbarrow as Gary cut the tree limbs into firewood. When the fallen tree was removed Gary explained that they would leave the remainder of the tree for the next trip as there was no more room on the ute. Matt swept the sawdust into the garden while Gary measured the broken fence palings.

“Howdy neighbour.”

Gary looked up and smiled at the old face leaning over the fence. “Sorry about the fence, mate. We’ll get this sorted,” he said.

“You guys are professionals,” said the old face, “would you mind doing me a small favour.”

“We will not leave until it is done. What can we help with?”

“Well, there are some branches that hit my window in the wind. Maybe the young fella could chop them off?”

Gary whistled, waved to Matt, then turned back to the old face. “Actually, young Matt here saw those branches and said he was going to sneak over and cut them off when you weren’t looking! He’s all yours while I tie this load down. We can take the branches too if that helps.”

“Thank you very much,” said the old face.

Gary passed a hand saw to Matt. “See you in a moment, Matt, I will let Chrissy know we are about to go.”

Matt walked around the fence and followed the old face to a tree between the fence and his house. “This branch that hits the window and maybe this one that rubs on the fence,” suggested the old face.

“No problem,” replied Matt as he took to cutting them off.

“Should I take these away?” asked Matt.

“If there is room lad, that would be very helpful.”

Matt nodded. “Done.”

Gary met Matt at the ute, lifted the wheelbarrow on top and tied the load down securely. He hugged Chrissy, thanked her for the scones and jumped in the ute.

“One more stop, Matt. Should be interesting.” The stop was a marine shop where Gary picked up some epoxy resin and paint for the new boat. Most importantly though Gary discussed a range of electric drive options.

“Great news, Matt,” said Gary with obvious excitement as they climbed back into the ute, “we’re going to be able to get a perfect little motor for the boat. Can barely wait. Now, are you hungry yet?”

“Yep,” replied Matt.

“Good answer. There’s a burger bar on the way out of town, we’ll stop there.” The burger bar was indeed on the way out of town, to Matt’s eye they had passed some much better-looking ones before parking outside a somewhat dingy, tired-looking burger bar. Gary had assured Matt that this was the best place to eat and that short of a time machine, this was the best way to experience a little bit of the seventies. He added that the food itself was not leftover from the seventies. There were a few groups of young people milling around, waiting it seemed for the night to get underway.

“Any burger you like, Matt, we’ll share a bag of chips to start with and see how you go. The burgers are pretty big. Not like those silly things they sell in town.” Then looking up at the short, stocky man behind the counter. “Isn’t that right, boss?”

“They don’t sell burgers in town,” replied the short, stocky man, “they wouldn’t know what a burger was.”

Gary placed their order and wandered over to the tables on the grassed area. He approached a table that was crammed with girls chatting amongst themselves.

“Evening ladies. How’s your night going so far?” asked Gary.

“Alright baldy,” replied one of the girls in an alcohol-affected voice, “how bout you?” A few of the girls laughed and turned to take a look at Gary.

“I’m not bald,” replied Gary while rubbing his head. “It just looks like it.”

“Looks like it alright,” replied the girl. “Looks like you’re going bowling.” The girls laughed more confidently, staring, waiting for Gary’s reply.

“No, not bald. Look,” Gary leant forward and pointed to his head. “There’s some hair left around the edges, it’s just slipped down a little bit.”

“Slipped on the floor bro. Got swept up, put in the rubbish!” The girls howled with laughter, their confidence growing. Gary waited with his hands on his hips for them to quieten down.

“No, not all the way to the floor, only halfway,” he replied as he hoisted his shirt up exposing his very hairy belly and chest.

Some of the girls screamed with mock horror. The girl who had been talking with Gary had her head on the table as she laughed. When she lifted her head Matt could see tears streaming down her face. She tried several times to speak before replying.

“Somebody call the zookeeper, the monkey escape.” This reduced the girls to a screaming, laughing wreckage. It was sometime before Gary could reply.

“Good to see you ladies can look after yourselves, so make sure you do just that and stick up for each other. What are you eating?”

“Chips, bro.”

Gary nodded. “Well, I’ll shout you something we all love back at the zoo. Will you wait for it?”

“Yeah, bro. We’ll be here for hours.”

Gary put his hands on his hips while he thought. “Okay, one monkey poo each and something very special,” he said. Gary patted Matt on the shoulder as he walked past. “Back in a second, buddy.” He returned with their burgers and called to the girls, “Dinner is on the way ladies have fun.”

“Yeah, have fun at the zoo party.”

“Can’t wait,” Gary yelled as he opened the ute door, “it’s a waxing party.”

Matt could hear the girls laughing and whistling through the closed window.

“Thanks for the burger,” said Matt. “What did you get them?”

“Some more chips, a sausage each and a deep-fried banana each.”

Matt smiled to himself. “They will love that,” he thought.

# Twenty Five

## A Walk in the Bush

**M**att opened the gate and unclipped Lola who sprang from the back of his bike and raced up the driveway, spraying gravel behind her. Matt heard the dogs barking and playing as he approached the shed, he also saw the back of the new boat and Gary sitting on top of the cabin.

“What do ya reckon?” called Gary with a beaming smile.

“Has potential,” replied Matt.

Gary laughed. “You’re quite right. She’s all potential and no delivery at present. Once we get all the rigging off and slap some paint about we’ll see progress.” Gary climbed down from the boat. “Anyway, let’s walk while it’s cool and look at the boat later. First, we’ll go and say hi to the ladies.”

Lola pushed her way through the gate as Gary opened it and rushed around to the kitchen door. Matt heard muffled sounds of Sandra calling to Lola, then the sound of the sliding door opening. “Morning, gorgeous doggies, how are you?”

Matt rounded the corner to see Sandra sitting cross-legged on the patio with both dogs trying to sit in her lap. She was holding a dog with each hand and tickling them with her fingertips.

“Hello, Matt, all set for your walk? I used to do walks with Dad all the time. You’ll love it.”

Gary reappeared with two backpacks. "You can use this to put your things in, Matt. How are those shoes going?"

"They're great," said Matt as he looked down at his walking shoes. "Thanks for these."

"No problem, buddy. Good shoes make walking a lot more enjoyable. Now head inside and have a big drink and do anything that you need to do before we head off." As Gary put on his boots, hat and backpack Bess started jumping from side to side in front of him. She knew the routine and that a bushwalk was imminent. Lola jumped back and forth with Bess, playfully biting her on the neck.

Gary walked over to a grapevine and pulled off an armful of vines and leaves. "Hold onto these please, Matt, we'll give them to Dexter. Hide the grapes in the middle so Heather can't see them. We'll take Dexter to the very top of the farm and collect him on the way back." Bess and Lola ran ahead, bounding and playing. Now and then Bess would stop and wait for Gary and Matt to catch up before bounding off again. Lola stayed very close to Bess, sniffing everything she sniffed. The grapevines made moving Dexter very easy. Matt walked briskly in front doling out the vines one at a time. Dexter obediently followed along behind Matt, he clearly loved all things grape.

At the top of the farm, there was a long wire running along a fence. Gary clipped Dexter to the wire and gave him a big rub. "See you soon, buddy," he said. Bess skillfully jumped through a gap in the fence while Lola struggled and wriggled. After walking for a few minutes Gary stopped to face Matt. "We're going to climb up a ridge. It's about a seven hundred metre climb, so you'll know about it. We'll do a big loop to our left, slowly descending into a valley. We'll follow a stream back, the dogs will be keen for a swim. Ready?"

Matt nodded.

"You go in front. Take your time, it's not a race, stop whenever you like. I like rests too, you know."

Matt followed the trail through the scrub. It was easy walking to start with, but there was no mistaking when the climbing started, it was steep.

There were parts that Matt could walk up, but a lot of the time he was using his hands as well. Bess and Lola walked carefully up the ridge staying close to Matt and Gary. They panted in the heat and wasted no energy running around. Eventually, Matt needed a rest. Without saying anything he turned and sat down looking back at Gary.

Gary gave Matt a broad smile. "I was hoping you'd need a rest soon. Look how high we have climbed already, must be about halfway."

Matt nodded, it was indeed higher than he expected. He could see the ocean and nearly all of town.

"Once you have your breath back, head off again and take it slow. We'll have a really good break at the top where there's some shade."

Matt had a drink and put some water in his hand for Lola. Lola lapped this up and climbed into Matt's lap. Gary reached over and gave Lola a rub. "I think she's trying to stop you from getting up," he joked.

Matt gave Lola a big rub, and got a surprise at how hot she felt. "Okay," he said, "ready to go." To Matt's delight, the remainder of the climb was not as steep and there was more frequent shade. Bess and Lola started to run ahead again with Bess leading the way and busily sniffing everything. When they got to the top Gary pointed to a patch of dense bush.

"Let's get in here out of the sun," he said. Gary turned and smiled at Matt, "well look at this, someone has made a seat!"

There were a very simple seat and a table made from fallen logs. "Simon and Dylan made the first version of this," said Gary, "they camped up here a few times. All hand cut too." Gary rummaged around in his bag. "Ah, here we go, ladies. Some doggy doughnuts." Bess sat up very straight and licked her lips while Gary pulled a piece of meat from a plastic bag. "Here you go, Bess." Lola shuffled closer to Gary and sat up straight, mimicking Bess. "Very good, Lola, you can have a nibble too." Lola took the offered meat and lay down facing away from Bess and started chewing. Gary reached back into his bag and pulled out a plastic water bowl and a bottle of water. "And you

can wash that down with a bit of this. Now, Matt, let's see what's in here for us!" Gary pulled another bag out. "I hope I didn't give the dogs our food."

Matt smiled and raised his eyebrows at Gary.

Gary passed a package wrapped in paper to Matt. "Here's something that Heather made for us, a nice bit of fruit cake. Just the best for walks." They ate in silence, listening to the birds and the occasional rustling of the trees around them. The dogs carefully sniffed the ground, making sure they had not left any morsel behind before having a drink and lying down.

"Matt," began Gary, "is there anything you would like to talk about for a change?"

Matt thought for a while before turning to Gary. "Why are some people gay?" he asked.

Gary leaned back, sat up straight and put his hands on his head. "Well, that's a doozy. First up though, let's be very clear about a couple of things. There's nothing wrong with being gay. Secondly, it is entirely natural, lots of animals display homosexual behaviour. It's not just humans. Did you know that?" Matt shook his head.

"Well, neither did I at your age. It seems sexual orientation and gender orientation for that matter are a bit like height and hair colour, they come in every combination. You can't choose whether you're a boy or a girl, or a boy who feels like a girl or vice versa. I didn't choose to be a boy and I didn't choose to be attracted to girls. One day girls seemed very interesting and I had no say in this at all. But why are some people gay? That was your question. Fortunately, there's a very good and simple reason and like many good reasons, it's not immediately obvious. It's a bit like Earth being roundish, it's a simple idea but wasn't obvious. We thought Earth was flat for a very long time." Gary leaned slightly closer to Matt and said in a hushed tone, "Some crackpots still do."

He picked up a stick and rolled it between his fingers. "The why. Imagine a hunter-gatherer woman has a partner and a baby, then her partner dies. Can she look after the baby on her own? Maybe, maybe not. However, raising a baby

as a hunter-gatherer without a male around to provide and protect would be hard work and the survival rate of babies without two parents would be much lower. However, what if the mother had a gay brother or sister? They wouldn't have children to worry about and would be able to help the mother. Having an extra adult about would increase the baby's survival chances a lot. So nieces and nephews of gay people had a distinct survival advantage. Because they are related, the genes carried by those nieces and nephews would also at times carry the same genes that play a role in sexual orientation. Does that make sense?"

Matt nodded slowly. "The key thing to understand is that gay people don't need to have babies of their own for the genes to be propagated. They just need to support their families. I think this is the bit that stumps some folks."

Matt looked down and spoke very softly, "Do you think Simon was gay?"

Gary put his hand on Matt's shoulder. "Yes, but I didn't realise this until after he died."

"Do you think he killed himself?"

Gary shuffled a bit closer to Matt. "I can never know for sure, Matt. But if I had to guess I would say yes."

They sat in silence for some time before Gary spoke again. "I've seen how miserable people can be to others, particularly those they see as being a bit different. Sandra was given a pretty rough time too. It's very hard as a parent to witness this. Remember the golden rule, it's not okay to let your emotions become someone else's problem?" Matt nodded, still looking down.

"Well, the same thing applies to our beliefs. It's not okay to let our beliefs become someone else's problem. We can believe what we want, but none of us has the right to impose our beliefs on others, or poke them with pointy sticks because they don't behave the way we think they should." Gary reached out with his foot and gently rubbed Bess. "Simon was one hell of a nice guy, he was a natural protector. You should be very proud of him, I certainly was. If he was here today he would be very proud of you too. If there's one lesson to learn from this tragedy it's that we should talk to one

another. Share our fears, our concerns and support one another. Will you promise me this, Matt? Will you talk to me if things ever get too much to bear?" Matt nodded.

"Thank you, Matt, it means a lot to me." Matt nodded again.

"Righto, let's get walking. If you have any more questions just let me know."

Bess leapt to her feet as Gary stood up. Lola woke up abruptly and ran to Bess. "What's next?" she seemed to be asking.

This time Gary walked in front as the track was a bit hard to follow, or as he pointed out, 'If you didn't know it was there, you wouldn't see it.' Gary stopped occasionally to identify trees and shrubs to Matt. He also pointed out that in some ways the bush, as beautiful as it seemed, was a slow-motion fight to the death. The walk along the top of the valley was easy compared to the climb up the ridge and perhaps, more importantly, it was in the shade. Bess and Lola ran ahead and back again, occasionally running off the side of the track to sniff about. Mostly they walked in silence. This was fine with Matt, he was starting to feel rather tired and his legs still felt heavy from the long climb up the ridge.

"We'll cut down here to the stream and follow that back," said Gary. "It's a fair bit shorter, but means getting your feet wet. The dogs will love it though."

"Cool," replied Matt, shorter seemed like a very good idea right now. The walk down to the stream was steep but easy. There were plenty of trees to hang onto and the ground was soft. Bess and Lola bounded down the hill, sliding and playing in the soft dirt. At the bottom of the hill, there was a flat area covered with ferns. It was delightfully cool and the ground sank beneath their feet. Bess ran ahead to the stream with Lola chasing closely. She walked into the stream, drinking as she went before lying down in the cool water. Lola ran back and forth splashing and drinking before lying next to Bess.

Gary put his pack on a rock and sat down. "When I'm doing a long walk, I wear quick-dry shorts so I can do exactly what the dogs are doing."

Matt nodded. "That sounds like a very good idea."

"We'll have a good rest here and head back in one go. Ready for some more cake?"

Matt nodded, he was more than ready for some cake. They sat in silence and ate, listening mostly to cicadas, but now and then a bird could be heard above the din. Bess and Lola lay panting in the water with Lola occasionally snapping at passing insects. The walk back was easy and Matt found walking in the stream to be quite a lot of fun. When they got close to the farm Gary started collecting some snacks for Dexter, who was very pleased to see them as always. Though he made sure Lola knew not to come too close.

Back at the house they took off their wet boots and socks and hosed down their legs. Matt headed into the dojo bathroom to rinse his face and neck.

"Good work," said Gary, "I think the girls will let us back inside now!" Indeed the girls were keen to see them back.

"Can't believe Mum made us wait for you guys to get back," declared Sandra, "I'm starving."

Heather clapped her hands and pretended to shoo Sandra out of the kitchen. "It's like having chickens inside," she said. Then taking a tray from the fridge. "Please put this outside, lunch is ready to go."

As Sandra sat down at the table she put her arm around Allicia and pulled her close. "Hey, Matt. Allicia and I are going to paint the new boat. We're going to put a big mural down each side." Sandra had a big grin and jiggled her eyebrows. "Dad is going to LOOOVE it."

"Hmmm," said Gary, "sounds like I might need to start taking the boat out at night!"

Sandra giggled. "Come on, Dad, you always loved my pictures."

Gary raised his eyebrows and made a silly face. "Really? I must have been a much better dad than I remembered."

After lunch, Gary and Matt set about removing the rigging from the new boat and with Sandra's help carried the mast behind the shed. They

emptied the boat of everything they could to make it as light as possible. The plan was to push the boat into the shed and hoist it off the trailer, pull the trailer out and set the boat on some stands Gary had made. Firstly, however, Sandra and Allicia would water blast the outside in preparation for painting.

“Let’s head inside, Matt, I’ll show you what we’re going to do,” said Gary as he rubbed his hands together. They sat at the table with some large sheets of paper and Gary hand drew surprisingly accurate outlines of Eldie and the trailer sailer. “If we were just going to convert the trailer sailer to electric I would put an electric outboard on her and change nothing else,” said Gary. “However!” Gary started drawing. “Eldie has a motor here and a shaft with a prop at the end of the skeg.” Gary passed a brochure to Matt with details about the new motor. “We’re going to drop one of these in here, where the prop currently is. We’ll make it so we can lift the drive unit up and down like this.” Gary drew two sketches of the electric motor, one in the up position and one in the down position.

Matt nodded.

“But!” said Gary excitedly, “it’s going to be so much better than the current setup. For starters, the entire system will be a lot lighter than the diesel motor and a tank of diesel. Also, this electric drive unit rotates. So we can turn it sideways and swing the stern from side to side. It will make the boat way easier to dock and control in the marina.” Gary leaned closer to Matt. “Like it?”

“Love it,” replied Matt.

“Let’s go and see how the girls are getting on, then we better let you get on your way. It’s been a long day, Matt, you’ve done well.”

# Twenty Six

## The Reckoning

“So, guys,” said Dylan loudly to get Art and Matt’s attention. “I’ve been working on a poem for Jude’s birthday. What do you think of this?”

Dylan cleared his throat, took a big breath and looked down at his notebook.

“I love you like my motorbike, I want to ride you day and night.”

“NO, NO and NO,” replied Art loudly, “just NO.”

Dylan held out his arms in mock exasperation. “But it rhymes, it took ages to get something that rhymes. What do you reckon, Matt?”

“Well,” said Matt hesitantly, “it is a very nice motorbike.”

Art pretended to hit Matt on the head. “You’re a very bad influence, Dylan.”

Dylan rubbed his chin and held up his hand. “Wait for it, I’ve got the next line.” Again Dylan took a big breath.

“Your soft, brown, flowing hair, reminds me of my favourite beer.”

Art theatrically put his hands in the air and turned around. Dylan grinned at Matt and gave him a thumbs up. Dylan continued.

“I feel the lure of your breasts so womanly, mind you, they are so big it might be gravity.”

Matt smiled as Art bent over and started banging his head on the bench. Art lifted his head and looked at Dylan. “Dylan, I like Jude and you’re going

to chase her away. Just don't give her the poem until she's eaten some cake. Otherwise, she will leave without knowing how good it is."

Dylan shook his head. "Jude will love the poem, you just wait and see. Now I need to have a shower and wrap her present before she comes."

Art looked at Matt and shook his head. "Learn from this, Matt, please learn from it."

Matt smiled and sat down next to Lola, patting her slowly until she relaxed on his lap, gently mouthing his arm. Matt held out an arm to Tac. Tac had been getting braver about Lola and getting closer with each visit. Tac stood staring at Lola, his tail twitching from side to side. He took a few steps closer and waited. Matt rubbed his fingers together, encouraging Tac to come a bit closer. He walked in a circle before carefully making his way along the wall toward Matt, just out of Lola's sight. Matt scratched Tac at arm's length. Slowly, cautiously Tac came closer. He took one or two steps at a time, sniffing and looking. Lola had no idea she was being stalked and happily mouthed Matt's arm. Eventually, Tac got close enough to stretch out and sniff Lola's ear. Lola leaned her head back and looked at Tac, her tail thumping on the floor. Matt held Lola down firmly, but Lola lay still, content to just to look at Tac. Tac turned and walked to the couch, jumped up and started cleaning himself, no doubt to make it clear to Lola he was not afraid.

"Well done, Matt," said Art quietly, "that was good progress."

Dylan emerged from the bedroom and walked over to the dining table. "One beautifully wrapped present and one card, complete with poem. Jude is on her way, so cake, present and card, then we'll head out for dinner."

Art looked over at Matt. "Well, that's the plan. Let's see what happens."

Lola stood up and looked at the door. "Jude must be here," said Dylan, "positions everyone."

"I'll get a box of tissues," said Art.

Lola wriggled and jumped as the door opened. "Hello, gorgeous," said Jude as she bent down to rub Lola.

“Actually, I’m over here,” called Dylan.

Jude rolled her eyes at Dylan. “Maybe if you had a dress on,” she said.

Matt looked at Jude and smiled. She was very smartly dressed with her hair tied up.

“Jude, you look stunning,” exclaimed Art. “Now I know you’re heading out to eat, but we’ve made a cake. So maybe just a nibble now and we will save it for you.”

“Sure,” said Jude, “just a small piece.” They sat quietly around the table as Art served up the cake. Dylan put his arm around Jude and gently pulled her close. Jude smiled back at him and leaned her head on his shoulder. “Thank you, Art, it’s a lovely cake,” said Jude.

“No problem, I’ll give you the recipe one day,” said Art with a cheeky smile.

“Now first the present, then the card,” said Dylan. Jude smiled as she slowly unwrapped the present. It was a cake and dessert cookbook.

“Now you have the recipe for the cake, Jude!” declared Art.

“Thank you guys, that’s lovely.”

“Before you open the card, please be aware that the poem is original,” said Dylan. “Matt helped me write it.” Matt looked at Dylan and tipped his head to one side with his eyebrows raised. Jude opened the card, stared at it for quite a few seconds before putting it down and hugging Dylan.

“That’s so beautiful, Dylan,” she said, then turning to face Matt, “and Matt it seems.” Jude stood up and walked around to Art and hugged him. “Thank you so much for everything, Art, I really appreciate it.”

“You are welcome, Jude,” replied Art. “Now, if it’s okay, may I read the poem?”

“Sure,” said Jude as she passed the card to Art.

Wind and waves  
Summer and sand  
Spring and flowers  
*Jude and Dylan*

Art stared at the card, took a big breath and passed it to Matt. While Matt read the poem Art walked around to Dylan, smiled and held out his hand. When Dylan reached out to shake Art's hand Art quickly cuffed him on the side of the head. "You're a proper snorter, Dylan."

Dylan laughed heartily. "What, don't you like the poem?"

Art theatrically waved Dylan away with his hands. "Be off with you," he said.

By this stage, Matt has walked around the table to face Dylan. Matt swung his finger around and around, indicating that Dylan should turn around. As soon as Dylan started to turn Matt kicked him in the seat of his pants. Dylan was now laughing so hard that tears were running down his cheeks and he struggled to speak. "What's up, guys? Don't you like poetry?" he eventually managed to ask.

Jude was smiling with her hands on her hips. "What on earth is going on?" she asked.

"I'll tell you later," said Dylan. "I think it's time to go."

"NO," Art shouted, "Dylan will never tell you. He will not speak of this evil. Now go and enjoy your dinner this instant!"

Dylan turned and poked his tongue at Art as he walked out the door. Art gave Dylan the middle finger all the way from his knees to above his head. "As I was saying, Matt, learn from this!" Art walked back to the kitchen with the plates, he put them down and stared at the bench. Matt heard the drumming of his fingers.

"You know, Matt," said Art, "it's rather cute watching them fall in love. It reminds me of meeting his mum. Do you know much about his mum?"

Matt shook his head.

"Hmmm, gorgeous, smart, very well educated and frighteningly insightful. I remember telling her I was falling in love and she told me that I was not falling in love with her at all, but instead falling in love with how I felt. She explained all the biology and psychology of attraction and why

I felt the way I did. She reckoned that she was my drug dealer and I was becoming an addict! She was right of course, but I was mortified at the time. She also said that luckily for me she felt the same way and told me this was surprising given how little I had to offer. I always chose to think the last bit was a joke.”

Art chuckled to himself as he reflected on this. “When she became unwell, she was just as matter of fact. ‘Death is for the living’ she used to say, along with, ‘My death will be your problem, not mine.’ Again she was quite right. I think we all live in a bubble most of the time, somehow with the reality of our mortality just out of reach.” Art reached up and wiped his eyes. “So, Matt, I hear you are cooking dinner tonight. What’s on the menu?”

“Nachos,” replied Matt, “Dylan showed me.”

Art laughed. “Oh, THOSE nachos! Yes, that is a very popular recipe. Have fun.”

“Will do. Jed and Nikau are coming.”

Art waved as Matt headed out the door. After giving Matt time to reach the gate he walked over to the window and watched Matt and Lola walking down the road. Lola had the leash in her mouth and was jumping and pulling as hard as she could. He could see Matt talking to Lola before sprinting down the pavement. Lola dropped the leash and ran after him, jumping at his hand held high in the air. Art walked to the couch, slumped down and called Tac. “Come on, Tac, you’re all I’ve got.”

Back at home, Matt inspected the ingredients. Mince, baked beans, cheese and some triangle chips. “Thanks, Jane,” he said after confirming all the ingredients were present.

“That’s fine, Matt. Are you sure you don’t want some onions or tomatoes as well?”

Matt shook his head. “No way, we’re making nachos. I’ll be outside with Lola until the others get here.” As agreed Jed messaged Matt when he and Nikau were close. Matt jumped up, ran to the kitchen and started heating

the pan. The instructions from Dylan were simple and clear, cook the mince with a hot pan, break it into little bits to make sure it was thoroughly cooked, turn the pan down and put the baked beans in. Matt waited until Jed and Nikau were coming down the driveway before adding the baked beans. The timing would be perfect.

Matt tapped on the window. "Meet you on the deck," he yelled. Nikau started to wave back but Lola leapt up and took his attention away. Matt put the triangle chips in a bowl, added copious amounts of mince and grated some cheese on top. He also took a bone out of the fridge for Lola. That way they could sit on the bean bags in peace. Once Lola was settled on the lawn with her bone the boys took their plates outside and sat on the bean bags facing each other.

"Did you know in Germany there is a law that beer can only have four ingredients?" asked Matt. "Dylan told me." Nikau and Jed shook their heads.

"And in Italy, you can only have four ingredients in Nachos," continued Matt. "Italy?" asked Jed, "Nachos sounds like French."

"I'm pretty sure Dylan said Italy," replied Matt. The boys and Lola ate in silence until the plates were licked clean.

"Hmmm," said Nikau, "real good. Dylan got any more recipes?"

"Why?" asked Jed. "What's wrong with this one?"

Nikau shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "Sure, boss."

"Guess what guys?" asked Nikau. Then before they could answer, "My mum wants to meet Gary before I can do karate."

"Have you told Gary?" asked Matt.

Nikau nodded. "Hope Mum doesn't mess it up."

"I told my mum about Gary," said Jed, "she asked if he was single!"

The boys roared with laughter, after which they decided to walk with Lola back to Jed's house, after all, there was the possibility of biscuits. The main topic of conversation along the way was the pending fitness test at school. The highlight of which, according to Nikau, was the beep test, otherwise it was just like the fitness drills at rugby training.

Matt left Jed and Nikau to battle on the gaming console so he had time to take Lola for a long walk home. It was a meandering walk, there was no plan. However, if possible, every walk included a swim in the river for Lola. It was when turning to leave the river that Matt spotted Rooster. He was walking briskly across the park and toward the path that would take him right past Matt and Lola. Matt waited, he was sure if he stayed still Rooster wouldn't see him, there were enough shrubs around to obscure the view. He watched Rooster get closer, he took a big breath and could feel his heart pounding in his chest. What should he do? Then with little thought stood up and walked toward the path. "Hi."

Rooster stopped in his tracks, he looked cautiously to each side of him. Matt walked slowly closer. "I'm on my own." Rooster took a small step backwards, prompting Matt to stop approaching. "I just want to talk."

They stared at each other for a moment. "What?" asked Rooster.

Matt held out his hands slightly before dropping them by his side. "Are we done?"

"Done what?" The defiance was back, but not as confident as in the past.

Matt looked at Rooster, there was no need for him to be scared now and he wasn't scared, not one little bit. He was surprised at how calm and certain he felt. He knew exactly what he was going to do if Rooster did not back down. He had thought of Rooster at every karate class, at every practice session, when learning attack and defence patterns with Dylan.

"If you're not done we're going to finish it right now. Then we'll be done."

Rooster glanced over his shoulder and took a step back. Matt shook his head. "I can run faster than you." He saw Rooster take some fast breaths, he could feel Rooster's panic. He held out his hand. "Are we done?"

Rooster nodded.

"Shake." Matt waited for Rooster to step forward, the hand held out tentatively. Matt reached forward and firmly gripped Rooster's hand. Rooster looked down and tried to pull his hand back, but Matt held on firmly.

“Done is done. Right?” Rooster nodded, barely making eye contact. “Say it.”

“We’re done.”

Matt let Rooster’s hand go. “Probably see you tomorrow.”

Rooster nodded weakly. Matt whistled and Lola came bounding across the grass. “This is Lola,” said Matt, “she’s mostly friendly.”

Rooster stepped back as Lola jumped around him. Matt abruptly turned around and walked away. Lola sprinted past jumping at the leash in his hand. Matt started to grin, he felt great, though his legs felt a weird sort of wobbly and his heart had started to pound. He took in a large breath, held it for a moment and slowly breathed out, he could feel his heart calm down. He was heading straight back to tell Jed and Nikau.

“Shoulda smashed him!” howled Nikau. “Bashed his face.”

Matt rolled his eyes, he knew Nikau was joking.

“Nah,” said Jed, looking down and pulling a face, “just look like this while he wets his pants.” The boys laughed triumphantly.

Matt put his hand up. “No hassling at school, okay. We’ve just gotta let things be.”

Nikau and Jed slapped their hands on Matt’s in agreement before Jed and Nikau’s attention returned to gaming and Matt headed home.

Matt dangled the leash for Lola to play with, he felt like playing too. He was happy, beyond happy. For the first time, he realised how much stress he’d been under. Without a thought as to why Matt started running. He ran as fast as he could for as long as he could. He ran until he was breathless and struggled even to stand. Lola bounded alongside him jumping and barking. Exhausted, he knelt on some grass and held his arms out to Lola, she jumped onto his knees and let Matt pull her over and rub her belly while she pretended to put up a fight. Matt played with Lola until he had his breath back. He looked down at her as she lay on her back mouthing his arm, her tail gently swooshing on the grass. “I’m happy too, Lola,” he said, “I’m happy too.”

They walked home slowly. Once back at home Matt lay on his bed and messaged Dylan. “Things totally sorted with Rooster. All good.”

Dylan messaged back with a thumbs up emoji.

# Twenty Seven

## Matt's Big Day

The chatter grew louder as the throng of students flowed out of the assembly hall, much louder and more excited than usual. It was lunch break at the end of the second week of school and the afternoon was a sports trial. There would be one session indoors and one outdoors with the girls and boys alternating between the two. There would be no winners today or medals, just an insight into what the end of year sports day would involve and a chance to have some fun. Matt and Jed made their way to the lunch spot they had settled on, a place initially chosen for safety, somewhere out of sight. But the fear of lunchtimes had slipped away, it was now just a quiet place to have lunch, somewhere their friends could find them.

“At least we don’t have to train with Ricky today,” joked Jed.

Matt raised his eyebrows. “This might be worse though.”

“Can’t be,” replied Jed, “Ricky’s training makes me puke.”

Matt nodded. “Ready to get changed? Warm up?”

“I supppooooose so,” lamented Jed, “I was kinda hoping that there would be an earthquake or something though.”

The boys saw Ricky with some friends on their way to the sports field and waved. Ricky jogged over. “Hey, guys. All set? Just treat it like training, max effort. Don’t hold anything back. You’ll be fine. Besides we can just

train harder next week if we need to.” Ricky put his arm over Jed’s neck and pulled him close. “Don’t look so worried, Jed. There’s a really good hospital in town.”

“Ha ha ha,” replied Jed dryly as Matt and Ricky laughed.

Matt felt a bit better when he saw groups of nervous-looking boys milling around the sports field. They didn’t know what was going to happen either. The teacher at assembly had assured them the only thing they needed to know was to tie up their shorts securely before running.

A blow of a whistle signalled for the boys to get together by year group. They were divided into smaller groups where a teacher explained that they would be racing three distances, four hundred, two hundred and one hundred metres. After each race, the groups would be divided into two new groups according to their place and these groups would each race again.

“Just to be clear you will run each distance twice. Got it?” asked the teacher to a wall of silence. “Don’t worry if you don’t understand, it doesn’t matter. Just run when you are asked to, or if someone is chasing you!”

Jed looked at Matt and shrugged his shoulders. “Think I’ll wait until someone’s chasing me.”

“Okay, this group line up please,” called the teacher. Then with almost no warning, “Once around the track. Ready, set, GO.”

The group of boys had hardly got going when the next group included Matt was summoned to the start line. The teacher waited until the first group were about one third the way around the track. “Okay, see how many you can overtake. Ready, set, GO.”

Matt soon found himself in the middle of the pack, surrounded and hemmed in. He didn’t try to get past anyone, but by the halfway mark he didn’t have to. Many of the boys started to tire, they had set out too hard and were falling off the pace. It didn’t take long for Matt to find himself in a group of three boys at the front. As they approached the finish line together a teacher held out an arm directing them to the inside of the track. As Matt turned to look back he

saw the teacher directing the tail end of his pack to the outside of the track. He waved to Jed and smiled. Jed did not quite make the first group. When all the year groups had run the first years were summoned again, the first group to race was made up of the slower boys from the outside of the track.

“Okay, team,” yelled the teacher, “you are running for pride. It’s a bigger group this time, please take care not to trip over each other. Ready, set, GO.”

All the onlookers stood up and started yelling. As before most ran too fast and some were walking by the halfway mark. Regardless every boy was clapped and cheered as they finished, a couple of stragglers held up their hands in triumph to great laughter.

Matt’s group was called up. “Okay, team,” began the teacher, “you’re running for glory. Only in your own mind of course, but that’s just fine. Remember there’s no pressure, but half the school’s watching! Ready, set, GO.”

This time Matt did not let himself get hemmed in, he started from the outside and ran just fast enough to beat the blob to the first corner. He found the leaders from the first race and stayed close to them. Again most of the boys fell off the pace by the halfway mark. A much smaller group of boys rounded the last corner together, they spread out as they hit the straight. Matt ran as hard as he could, he could see the boys at the finish line jumping and waving, he could hear them screaming encouragement. He looked down as he crossed the line and put his hands on his hips, he was gassed. A teacher blew their whistle. “Okay, I think we’ll call this a draw.” He walked over to Matt and held his wrist and another boy’s wrist, raising them high. Matt looked at the cheering crowd and caught Ricky’s eye. Ricky gave him a double thumbs up, Matt grinned back. He turned to the boy next to him and shook his hand before walking over to sit with Jed.

Jed held up his hand for a high five. “Awesome man. If you tripped that dude up at the start you would’ve won.”

“Just have to train harder,” replied Matt. He lay down on the grass and closed his eyes. “Let’s get a rest before the next one.”

Jed tapped Matt each time Ricky or Nikau were racing. Ricky all but won his race, the competition in his group was fierce. There were no winners declared for Matt's two hundred and one hundred metre races, the groups were too big and the finish too close. Matt felt good though, he was competitive. When the running was finished the boys were given fifteen minutes to have a drink before heading to the gym for their indoor session.

Matt had only briefly been in the gym as part of his induction tour. It had been made very clear that access to the gym was by invitation only. The boys went in by year group and sat on the floor. There was quiet chatter as they looked around and wondered what was in store for them. When everyone was seated a teacher started explaining the routine. One half of the group would be doing the beep test at one end of the hall and the rest would be doing strength exercises at the other end. And, the students were told, they were very lucky to have an alumnus of the school to take them through the strength exercises. A previous senior sports champion. The teacher held out his hand to welcome someone who was sitting slightly out of view.

“DYLAN,” exclaimed Jed a little too loudly.

Dylan looked over to Matt and Jed. “Hi, Jed,” he said casually.

The teacher sent the three most senior years to start with the beep test and left the two junior years with Dylan. Dylan clapped his hands to get the students attention. “We'll get the hard stuff out of the way then have some fun. First, everyone's favourite, push-ups! Everyone down for five, let's have a look.” Dylan walked around the students as they did their push-ups. “Not bad, not bad at all. You will be delighted to know though that most of you could do better. You, you and you to the front please.” Matt and two other boys walked cautiously to the front.

“Please do a few push-ups, guys. Now see how their backs are straight and they go all the way down? That's what we want to see. Everybody, five more please, give that a go.” Dylan clapped again. “Right, we are ready to go. Groups of three, please. One person does push-ups at a time, the other

two count. Only count the ones with a straight back and going all the way. It's an honesty system today, please remember how many you do. Once your group is done please all stand up so we can see who's finished. GO."

There was a burst of excited chatter as the boys gathered in groups and set about doing their push-ups. There were eruptions of loud debate as to whether some push-ups should be counted or not. When they were all standing Dylan put both arms above his head.

"Listen up, please. Put your hands up if you did ten or more." Most boys put their hands up. "Very good, not bad at all. How about twenty or more? Thirty or more? Forty? Fifty?" Matt left his hand up, he had managed sixty-five. "Okay, you can put your hands down. You guys are great, quite a few of you did fifty or more. I'm impressed. Now at the end of the year, we are only counting push-ups like these."

Dylan casually kicked his legs back and landed in a push-up position. "Listen please." He started doing clapping push-ups. "Nice and loud with the claps. Once you have those sorted try these." He started doing push-ups where both his hands and feet left the floor while clapping. He bounced up with his arms and landed on his feet.

"Okay, please give those a go. No need to count them. It's just for fun." There was a lot of laughter as the boys discovered just how hard the clapping push-ups were. After a few minutes, Dylan called for them to stop. "Now for even more fun, we are going to do chin-ups." A few boys groaned. Dylan waved his arm above his head indicating the boys should follow him over to some bars.

"We've only got two bars and can fit four people per bar. So again get in the same groups. For a chin-up to count your chin must go above the bar on the way up and your shoulder beneath your elbow on the way down. No mucking around, get your chin-ups done and make way for the next group. Remember how many you do." Again there was a burble of chatter and laughter as the boys tried to do chin-ups, many of them for the first

time. Dylan walked from bar to bar offering encouragement and praise. Once finished the boys sat down, exhausted.

“Well, I have to say you guys are WAY better than when I was your age. I am sure in my year at least two guys pooped their pants. Hands up who did five or more? Ten or more? Fifteen or more? Really? Wow. What about twenty or more?” There were gasps as three boys put their hands up. Dylan nodded with approval. “That is tremendous guys. I’m very impressed.”

“Twenty or more, I don’t think I could beat that,” said Dylan as he shook his head. The boys started yelling and exhorting Dylan to do some chin-ups. “Go on, show us what you got,” yelled a boy. Dylan raised his hands above his head. “Okay, okay,” he said before facing the bar. “But I need complete silence. Everyone sit down please.” Dylan turned and put his finger to his mouth. When the murmuring stopped he turned, put his hands on the bar, looked down in concentration and farted loudly.

The boys laughed uproariously, some even rolled over on the floor. Dylan shook his head and put his hands on his face, feigning embarrassment. He waved his arms to quieten the boys. “I just remembered,” he said, “I was one of the boys who pooped his pants. Now count these for me.” He then did thirty chin-ups with seeming ease. “Thought I better stop before my left nipple popped off again,” joked Dylan as he rubbed his chest. “Now some fun stuff. Who can do a handstand for more than five seconds? Great, up the front, please. Now spread out to avoid collisions. GO,” he yelled as he stepped into a handstand.

One by one the boys dropped out. When there was one boy left Dylan called out, “When there are only two left we do this.” Dylan spread his legs far apart and balanced on one arm. The onlookers cheered as the one remaining boy tried but had to drop out. Dylan stood up and shook the boy’s hand and gave him a pat on the back. “At the end of the year, there will be some fun competitions like how long you can do handstands and how far you can walk on your hands. So start practising.”

Dylan turned to the teacher and shook his hand. The teacher blew his whistle. “Okay, boys, well done. Could we please have a big hand for Dylan, he has come in on his holidays. Take a look on the honours board, you will see his name there.” The teacher blew their whistle again. “Five-minute break before we swap over.”

Matt and Jed watched the older boys completing their beep tests. “That looks miserable,” mused Jed. Privately Matt thought it looked like a lot of fun. All of his hard training for karate was paying off and the beep test might be the best proof of this yet. As Matt was looking around he saw Dylan, a teacher and Rooster standing together. Dylan was speaking to Rooster, he smiled and put a hand on Rooster’s shoulder in a comforting way. Rooster looked down and nodded. To Matt’s great surprise Rooster smiled when Dylan shook his hand.

The teacher blew their whistle. “All the juniors to the far end of the gym please.” Again they were divided into year groups and the beep test was explained to them. It seemed easy enough. A teacher came along and counted ten students including Matt.

“You’re up first. Remember there are no awards today but do as well as you can and remember your score to compare with your next attempt. If a teacher taps your shoulder you are out.” Matt looked along the line of boys, there was Rooster. Matt caught his eye and smiled, lifting his head in a sign of goodwill. Rooster smiled weakly back and looked down.

“Wait for the beep then run.” All the boys ran a bit too fast for the first leg, Matt took note of this and slowed down. Back and forth they went, the puffing grew louder. As boys started to fall off the pace the onlookers started to yell encouragement. Soon Matt was struggling too, he thought about his hill sprints and how he always seemed to keep going for longer than he imagined he would. He thought about Gary’s advice to never give up and he imagined being chased by dogs. He took a big breath at each turn and ignored everything around him. The boys either side of him dropped

out, but Matt kept going. He could hear the other boys yelling, he looked down, trying to ignore them. His legs began to tire. "One more run, one more run," he told himself. Then with eyes closed, he stopped and sank to his knees.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up, it was a teacher. "Take your time to get your breath back. Ten, six. That's a very good result." Matt nodded, stood up and went to sit by Jed.

"That was awesome, man," said Jed excitedly, "you were all on your own for ages."

"Thanks," replied Matt between breaths.

Matt watched the rest of his year run back and forth, he cheered for Jed who certainly pulled the best faces and got the most laughs. When the last of the beep tests had been run they were allowed to watch the older students finish up with Dylan. Dylan was standing by the chin-up bar with three students, there was a lot of laughing and cheering. It appeared that three of the students had challenged Dylan to a chin-up competition. A teacher called for the boys to quieten down, he then called out, "Ready." Dylan and the challengers grabbed the bar and the teacher started counting out reps.

The three students and Dylan bounced effortlessly up and down, they passed twenty. Dylan smiled at the onlookers and gave them a wink. The watching students clapped when one boy dropped from the bar, a second was slowing down and dropped shortly later to further applause. Dylan shuffled along the bar as he did his chin-ups until he was next to the remaining boy.

"G'day mate. What are you hanging around here for?" asked Dylan loudly. The students laughed and cheered.

"Wanna shake hands?" asked Dylan as he hung halfway down by one arm, the other outstretched.

"No actually," replied the student to more raucous laughter. The boy dropped from the bar. Dylan immediately dropped as well and held the boy's arm in the air, to much whistling and cheering.

Nikau caught up with Matt and Jed as they left the gym. “What you fellas up to?” he asked.

“We’re going to get our bags and meet Dylan at the gate,” replied Matt.

“Cool, see you there,” said Nikau before running back to his mates.

Nikau and many of his mates were at the gate with Dylan. Matt watched Dylan joke and chat with the boys as he approached. Kiana was standing close by with a group of her friends, they looked like they wanted to join in, but were a bit shy.

“Hi Kiana. Thanks for waiting,” said Matt in a carefree tone as he walked past.

Kiana kicked Matt firmly on the backside.

“HEY,” said Matt as he turned around with his arms held out wide and a big grin.

Kiana replied with a googly-eyed look while gently shaking her head. Matt shrugged his shoulders and walked over to Dylan, who was chuckling. “Good move, Matt. Getting kicked is better than nothing.” Then holding out his arm to Nikau and his friends declared, “I think we have half the rugby team here.”

Nikau pointed to Matt and said, “You should come play rugby, man, you were awesome.” The other boys nodded in agreement.

“Sure,” replied Matt weakly, though he was not sure at all.

“Really good effort today, guys, I’m very impressed. Keep up the training,” said Dylan as he shook hands with Nikau and his friends. “We need to get going.”

Matt watched as the boys smiled and shook Dylan’s hand. Dylan, Matt and Jed walked in silence for a while, once they were clear of the other students Dylan started to speak.

“What a big day guys, you both did very well. Gary wanted me to let you know he’ll be coming to the school on Wednesdays to do a karate class in the gym straight after school. Gary talked to the rugby coach and I expect the entire rugby squad will be there. You two will still train with him on

the weekend, he'll be in touch to sort a time. I expect you'll be training together. Sound like fun?"

Matt and Jed nodded while wondering if training with the rugby team would be fun at all.

"It will be a good challenge for you both. You'll be fine."

After Jed had left to head home Matt asked, "Will Nikau be able to come to karate?"

"Yes, it seems the talk Gary had with his mum was surprisingly productive. The rugby coach is part of her whanau. By the way, Nikau didn't really steal a car, he just took an uncle's car for a joy ride. Lesson learned I understand. Also, his mum's alright. She wants the best for her kids, but things are a bit tough at present."

Matt looked up at Dylan. "Were you there?"

"Yes, but don't say anything please." Matt nodded and looked down his driveway.

"You did very well today, Matt. How many chin-ups?"

"Twenty-five."

Dylan shook his head. "Don't you dare tell anyone, but that's more than I or Simon did at the first trial. It's hard to believe I'm leaving on Sunday, it seems to have come so fast."

Matt looked down and took a big breath. Dylan stepped forward and put his arms around Matt's shoulders, pulling him close.

After a moment of silence, Dylan spoke. "You have one more challenge to consider. This is to make peace with Rooster, I was watching him today and he looked crushed. I know it might sound like a big ask but the power is in your hands now to make things better. If you want to talk about it just let me know."

Matt took a big breath in and out, that was a big ask indeed. "You'll be fine. You've made many friends today, you just don't know it yet. Most importantly you've been kicked up the backside by a girl, that's some

achievement, pal. Things will go well for you I promise. You've got Art and Gary looking out for you too. Of course, we can't forget Lola! Lola loves you heaps. And for sure I'll stay in touch." Dylan pushed Matt out to arm's length and looked him in the eyes. "We're brothers now, big brother and little brother." Matt felt tears streaming down his cheeks as Dylan pulled him in again.

"Those better be tears of joy, Matt," said Dylan softly.

Matt cried and laughed. "You just smell bad," he said.

Dylan laughed and laughed. "Oh, Matt, that's the best thing I've heard from you so far. Now I can be confident that you have learned something from me, bad jokes."

Dylan pushed Matt's face back and forth on his shirt. "There you go, eyes and nose wiped. Hill sprints or bike ride in the morning?"

"Hill sprints, I'll bring Lola."

"Great, seven at Art's." After a rub of Matt's shoulder, Dylan turned and left.

Jane stepped back from the window as Matt walked down the driveway and wiped her eyes. She could feel a strong pang in her chest from watching Dylan hug Matt.

# Twenty Eight

## Farewells and New Beginnings

“Get here, Lola,” called Matt. Lola’s feet made scraping sounds as she struggled to get up to speed on the slippery deck. Matt held the gate open as she tore through, sliding to a stop in the gravel. She wagged her tail and barked, a very clear, “Come on, Matt, hurry up!” Matt heard a tap on the window and turned to see Jane waving to him, he waved back and ran down the driveway with Lola jumping at his side. They were off to Art’s.

Art’s front door was open and Matt could hear laughter, he leaned in the doorway and called out.

“We’re out the back,” replied Art, “bring Lola around the side.” Matt walked Lola around the house and looped her leash over a tap in the shade and joined the others at the table, he noticed that Dylan and Jude were sitting very close together and holding hands. “Well, Matt,” began Art, “we were just talking about what a big summer it’s been for everyone. New friends made and life changes underway. I think I’m missing out! Mind you, Dylan’s put up an exercise plan for me in the kitchen. It’s on the fridge so I’ll think about it every time I go to eat. I hope I still enjoy eating.”

Dylan leaned forward and looked at Matt. “Art might even come with you to do some hill sprints one day.”

Art theatrically coughed and spluttered. "Settle down, settle down now. Matt would have to do a CPR course first." He put both hands on the table. "Let's not waste our time on such fantasy, you guys need to get going or you'll run short on time. Come on, let's get sorted. Matt, we'll meet you and Lola at the car." Art walked to the kitchen and picked up a paper bag and passed it to Jude. "Here are some offerings for morning tea, catch you when you get back."

Lola loved looking out of the car window and with Dylan's encouragement Matt put her leash on and wound the window down. Lola put both front paws on the window sill and leaned as far out as she could. Matt held the leash firmly with his arms around Lola, hugging her tight against his chest. He enjoyed the feeling of her warmth against his body.

As they approached the farm Lola started wriggling and pulling on the leash. Matt opened the gate, set her free and watched her tear up the driveway. She was getting very fast now.

As Matt, Dylan and Jude made their way around to the patio they heard a burst of laughter and excitement as Lola made her enthusiasm to be back clear. Matt sat down to let Bess jump on his knees before rolling her over and rubbing her chest.

"Come and sit up, Matt," called Heather.

"Chop chop," added Sandra as Matt sat down, "we need to eat up and do the unveiling ceremony."

Gary looked at Matt and raised his eyebrows. "The ladies have painted the new boat, Matt, I haven't seen it yet. It's all been very secret."

Sandra and Allicia glanced at each other and smiled. Matt sat and ate quietly, content to listen to the happy, teasing chatter. He learned that Jude was heading away with Dylan and that Sandra and Allicia were looking for work in town as they were going to stay at the farm for a while.

"Come on," said Sandra while drumming her index fingers on the table. "Let's go and reveal the new boat."

"Okay, ladies let's GO," said Gary, "I see you can barely sit still."

Sandra lined everyone up in front of the shed doors. "Are you ready?" "Yes," they all chimed.

Sandra and Allicia each rolled a door back to reveal the boat with one of its sails draped in front. They each went to one end of the sail and with everyone counting loudly to three dropped the sail to the floor.

"WOW," exclaimed Jude, "that looks AMAZING." Everyone else was silent. The mural ran the full length of the boat and was very bold and colourful. At the back were waves, fish and clouds but it was the image at the front which was most striking. It was of two mermaids, one lying afloat on her back looking lovingly down on another mermaid, with eyes closed, in her embrace.

Gary stepped forward and hugged Sandra, pulling her tightly to him. "I will take this boat out with pride, sweetie."

Matt could see Sandra was holding Gary just as tightly with her head buried in his chest. Gary put one hand on the back of Sandra's head, leaned down and kissed her. There was silence as they embraced. When Sandra eventually stepped back, with tears in her eyes, Gary hugged Allicia with as much love. Matt stared at Sandra intently as she watched Gary hugging Allicia. She was smiling and crying.

With a sudden, seemingly impulsive move, Jude walked over to Sandra and hugged her. Dylan followed and put his arms around both of them. Matt looked on in silence trying to make sense of this outpouring of emotion.

"Well," said Heather, "Sandra and Allicia, I think you have done a beautiful mural and I am very proud of you."

"Photo time," said Dylan loudly, "Sandra, Allicia please stand by the boat, next to the mermaids." Allicia giggled as she stood, looking slightly awkward, next to Sandra. "More cuddly please, guys, you're competing with the mermaids you know. Come on, work it, work it," joked Dylan.

Sandra pulled Allicia off balance and held her at an angle across her chest. They both laughed and smiled. Dylan held his phone out for everyone to see one of the photos. It was an action shot, with one of Allicia's feet in

the air. She looked startled but happy, Sandra was smiling and in complete control, casually holding Allicia up with one arm.

Soon it was time to go. Matt squatted down and rubbed Bess and Lola while the adults carefully went through all the possible hugging configurations. He watched Dylan and Sandra with curiosity, Sandra hugged Dylan with genuine affection.

Matt opened the car door and clapped his hands, Lola leapt in and as Matt shut the door and stuck her head out of the window. Gary walked over and scratched Lola while Matt walked to the passenger side of the car.

“Bit more room on that side is there, Matt? It’s a tiny car.”

Matt paused for a moment then shook his head slowly. “Jude doesn’t fart so much,” he said with a deadpan voice.

“EXCUSE ME,” exclaimed Jude loudly, “they’re all Dylan’s, every one of them.”

Matt rolled his eyes as he got in the car prompting some giggling from Sandra and Allicia. He clipped the leash onto Lola and held it tightly. As they turned down the drive Lola looked out the rear window, her tail banging away between the front seats.

“What do you think of the boat, Matt?” asked Dylan with a grin.

“Awesome.”

Jude turned to face Matt. “Me too, it was wow.”

“Indeed,” said Dylan. “Back at school, Sandra used to paint big pictures like that. Always plenty of breast and cuddling women. Certainly got the tut-tut team in a fizz. I think Gary had to twist some arms to get her pictures in the school art show. Nearly every kid voted for her entry as a result, so she won the popular vote at least.”

There was a short silence before Dylan continued. “Now, Matt, I can drop you at home if you like. When Jude and I get back to Art’s we’ll pretty much just jump on the bike and go. We put our bags on the bus this morning and need to be up north to pick them up when the bus arrives.

Matt scratched Lola, who was now lying on the seat, while he thought. “How about dropping me at the pond where we first met? I’ll walk home with Lola.”

Dylan gave Matt a thumbs up. It was now getting too noisy to easily talk. All the windows were down and the engine was roaring in the background. Lola woke with a start when Dylan stopped the car. She jumped up and stood on Matt’s legs looking out the window, her tail thumping on the back seat in approval as she gazed at the pond.

Dylan opened his door. “C’mon let’s find a seat.” Matt sat between Dylan and Jude holding Lola’s leash firmly, she was straining forward, looking at the ducks with great interest. He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked at Dylan.

“I would like to share something with you that my mum told me, probably when I was your age.” Dylan leaned back. “She said, ‘You’re not important you know, none of us is,’ which was just the surprising sort of thing she would say. She went on to explain there was no good reason to think that anyone was any more important or worthy than anyone else. That there was nothing inherently important about a person, or even being a person rather than an animal. What was important was what we did. Some people did things that were more worthy than others and that’s what matters.”

Dylan wriggled a little while he thought. “She said self esteem was worthless and could lead to a sense of entitlement and self importance which helped no one. What was important is self belief. That means knowing if you make an effort you will get a result and you’re in control because only you can control the effort you make.”

He paused to give Matt a chance to reflect on this. “What I hope you’ve learned this summer is if you make an effort you’ll get a result. Just look at what all the karate training, hill sprints, cycling and drills have done for you. You’ve grown heaps, you did super well at the sports trial and you’ve made many friends at school.”

Dylan rubbed Matt's shoulder and pulled him closer. "Now while you may be completely unimportant, just like me by the way, I want you to know that you're valued and you're loved. I've never had a little brother before and I'm very pleased I do now." Matt relaxed a little more and leaned into Dylan.

"Jude and I will stay in touch and we'll definitely catch up with you at the end of the term. I can't wait to see just how much fitter and stronger you are and to hear how school is going. If you make an effort at school it won't be any different to karate or chin-ups, you'll get heaps better." Matt nodded, his head rubbing up and down Dylan's shirt.

"Now Jude and I need to keep moving. Remember, this is not goodbye, it's see you soon."

Dylan rubbed Matt's shoulder again and started to stand up. Matt wrapped his arms around Dylan and hugged him hard. "Do you need to wipe your nose again?" asked Dylan. Matt nodded gently against Dylan's chest. "No problem, go right ahead."

Matt laughed gently and stood back, turned and hugged Jude. "We'll see you soon, Matt," she said and gently kissed him on the forehead.

Matt watched Dylan and Jude walk back to the car and waved as they drove off. Jude leaned out the window and blew him a kiss. She looked, thought Matt, like she might be crying. As the car rounded the corner Matt heard a final toot of the horn, actually, Art's car made more of a squawk. Matt sat down again and invited Lola up onto the seat. Together they watched the ducks preening their feathers in the sun.

"Ducks," thought Matt, "they have a great life. But I'm glad I'm not a duck." He slapped his leg. "C'mon Lola. Go for a walk?"

Lola scrambled off the seat and started pulling hard on the leash. Matt walked briskly allowing himself to be dragged along the path, he would take Lola to the river. As Matt walked he reflected on Dylan's comments. He was getting stronger and fitter fast, this was clear. Could he do better

at school in just the same way? Dylan had encouraged him to spend thirty minutes a day exploring one subject from school, but learning something new about it from the Internet, not from his textbooks. It seemed such a weird idea, to learn something he may not need to know. But the important part was to find something he was interested in, Dylan had been very clear about this.

As they approached the river Matt could see another dog swimming. Was this the dog from the other day? Matt hoped so. Lola had seen the other dog too and was pulling hard in that direction. As they got closer Matt could see the dog's owner sitting on a rock and her unmistakable, shaggy blond hair. Matt instructed Lola to sit as he unclipped her leash. She tore across the grass, first to the lady, furiously wagging her whole body then to Latte who was watching from the river.

The lady turned to look for Matt and waved. "That woke me up!" she said with a hand on her chest.

"Sorry," replied Matt, realising he should have kept Lola on the leash.

"It's alright, she's such a happy puppy."

Matt sat down near the lady and together they watched the dogs race each other back and forth. Again Lola was lured into chasing Latte and again not much luring was required. Matt and the lady laughed as they watched the dogs' play.

"How much do you charge to tire my dog out?" asked the lady. "This is marvellous."

Matt smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "She just runs and runs and runs."

"Well, it's my turn to call time. Latte and I need to get going, though it's been lovely to see you both."

Matt stood up and whistled. Lola froze in her tracks and stared, Matt slapped his leg and whistled again. Lola came sprinting to Matt with Latte in close pursuit.

"Wow, she's getting better. Might need to get you to train Latte too!"

Matt crouched down. "Good girl, Lola, good girl." He clipped her leash on and waved as he turned to walk away. "Yes, Lola," he thought, "you're finally getting better at coming."

"Let's visit Art," said Matt, mostly to himself but Lola did respond to being talked to. She wagged her tail and jumped a couple of times before pulling on the leash.

Matt tentatively knocked on Art's door, he had a moment's hesitation just before knocking. Would it still be okay to drop by now Dylan had gone? He started to hope that Art was not at home. However, he heard footsteps and the door swung open.

"Hello, what a surprise! Come on in." Matt stepped inside and clipped Lola onto the door as usual.

"Now, Matt you know Marie I believe."

Matt turned to look. "Hello," he said politely. It was his maths teacher.

"Now," she said, "is this the lovely puppy that rides on the back of your bicycle?"

"Yes," replied Matt sheepishly, "her name is Lola."

"Lola, now I remember. But this is not the dog that bites you on the backside?"

"No, that's Bess at the farm."

"I think I will like Lola better," said Marie as she stood up from the couch and walked over. "Hello hun, would you like a rub?" Lola wriggled, then rolled over as Marie approached.

"Would you like a drink, Matt," asked Art.

"No thanks, just thought I would say hi on my way home."

Art winked at Matt. "I'm guessing you just wanted to make sure that Dylan left and I don't blame you at all."

Matt nodded. "It smells better already."

Art rubbed Matt's hair and put his arm over his shoulder. "Oh, Matt you are such a joker now. Where's that quiet, shy Matt I met not so long ago?"

Marie turned with a cheeky grin on her face. "I hope you're going to make jokes like that in class, Matt!"

Matt noticed that Art was dressed a bit better than normal and Marie was rather well dressed for a Sunday afternoon too. Perhaps, he wondered, he was interrupting something.

"I need to head home," said Matt, "catch you at school tomorrow."

"Good to see you, Matt. Please drop by whenever you're passing, it's always good to see you. Also, we need to perfect the chocolate mousse making!"

Marie smiled and waved as Matt led Lola through the door. Matt walked home slowly, reflecting on the day's events. One thought kept coming back to him, Gary loved Sandra no matter what.

Once at home Matt topped up Lola's water bucket and biscuits, it had been a big day for her too.

He heard Jane call from the kitchen. "Hi, Matt. How's your day been?"

Matt walked over to Jane. "Alright."

Jane put her arms around him. "It's so good to have you back in the house. My, you have grown so much! Your head hits my chin now."

Matt felt Jane take a couple of big breaths and let them go slowly. "I love you, Matt. You are growing into a lovely young man." They stood still in silence, Matt did not know what to say, so he hugged Jane a little tighter. Jane put a hand on the back of Matt's head.

"I love you too, Jane," he said, surprising himself.

"You can call me mum if you like."

Matt nodded gently.

"Dylan came around earlier and put something on your pillow."

Matt looked up.

"Maybe go and have a look."

Matt tipped his head to the side and gave Jane a quizzical look, but she just smiled back. There was an envelope on Matt's pillow, inside was a note,

‘Train hard and bring your gi,’ with a smiley face and a big ‘D’ underneath. There was also a piece of paper that Matt did not understand, he carried this out to Jane.

“It’s a bus ticket,” said Jane, “you’re off to stay with Dylan during the school holidays.”

Matt looked back at the piece of paper. “Really,” he thought. He had a sudden urge to start training and do his drills. He would discover much later this was exactly what Gary and Dylan expected to happen.

Jane put her hands on Matt’s shoulders, turned him around and hugged him from behind. “Watch Lola.”

Bill was sitting on the side of the deck trying to put his boots on, but Lola was pulling on his laces. She was jumping in and out, wagging her tail. Bill was looking a bit frustrated. He stopped bending down and looked at Lola. Lola sank on her belly and barked. Bill lunged forward feigning an attempt to grab her, she jumped back and ran around the yard in a big circle before coming back to Bill and again lunging at his boots. Bill turned and lifted his boots onto the deck to tie his laces. This was a tactical error, sensing a game and a point of attack, Lola leapt onto the deck behind Bill, jumped on his back and licked him around the ears with great enthusiasm.

Matt and Jane started to laugh as Bill leaned forward and Lola darted around to lick his lowered face. Bill made his second error, he leaned back to avoid Lola but she jumped on his chest and licked him all the more. Bill rolled off the deck onto his hands and knees before standing up and wiping his face.

“Lola won, Lola won,” yelled Matt.

Bill looked up to see Matt in Jane’s embrace, both laughing hard. He wiped his face, shook his head and called back, “Lola always wins.” He was smiling.

Matt put his hands on Jane’s and leaned back into her embrace, she kissed him gently on the side of his head.

# About the Author

Sean Thomas has been a long term mentor with the Big Brothers Big Sisters' programme in New Zealand. He also ran a karate club with a strong focus on providing developmental opportunities for youth. During his career, he provided leadership and communication training to many organisations and hundreds of employees. *One Long Summer* combines the experience Sean gained from both working with youth and his professional life into a story that will inspire and engage.

*One Long Summer* was written in Sean's final months following diagnosis with a terminal illness.

