

## Chapter One

# The First Attack

My family live in a modest home in Oak Park, next door to a mansion once owned by John Pascoe Fawcner, co-founder of Melbourne. My older brothers use those acres of land as their playground, and I'm petrified by their stories of 'the old man in the big house who chases kids with an axe dripping with blood'! But as soon as I am old enough to be released from my mother's constant watchful eye, they lift me over the large paling fence into the forest to play Cowboys and Indians.

Of course I'm always the Indian, to be hunted through the forest and captured. Cap guns holstered, this game inevitably ends with me tied to a tree. The rope, taken from Dad's shed, is looped around the hundred-year-old oak trunk, secured with whichever Scout knot the boys have recently learnt. The location has been carefully chosen: the tree is far enough from our kitchen window that any call for help will go unanswered. They leave me here for ages, sometimes because it's fun to do that to your little sister, and sometimes because they get bored with the game and want to play at a friend's house without me.

Tied to that tree, patience quickly becomes my companion. Instead of struggling I begin to search for ways to comfort myself. The shadows cast by the tree limbs, which my brothers told me are ghosts, become a transfixing meld of patterns that I learn to turn into puppies and horses. And the jagged, stiff tree trunk that I am tied to becomes a support for my small body. The rough rope pulling across my legs and arms – well,

that just hurts. My mission is to survive, to prove that they can't make me cry.

Of course all of this is made easier by the fact that the tree, unbeknown to my brothers, is in the direct line of sight of Mr Hutchison whenever he sits at his library desk on the first floor. Mr Hutchison can always be relied on to rescue me. He laughs as he undoes the childish knots. As we walk through the undergrowth he points out plants and insects, teaching me their botanical names, and pretty soon I can proudly repeat them. Well, most of them. Sometimes I'm invited into the mansion's front parlour for afternoon tea with Mrs Hutchison: aromatic, imported tea in Royal Albert china and cucumber sandwiches. My ears hunger for the stories of their travels to other countries and cultures beyond my imagination.

So many life lessons are learnt in that forest, and from the benevolence of this refined, loving couple. They taught me that life could be as big as I chose, and that kindness and humility will enhance my journey. The hours spent tied to the tree will stoke my inner strength and resilience, which will support and guide me through the years ahead.

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My teenage years are spent at an Anglican grammar school, a scholastic factory producing 'prim and proper ladies'. The curriculum is filled with deportment, speech and divinity classes, which means we have to learn life's real lessons on the streets. Compulsory hats, gloves and stockings are our chains, and we're determined to break free from them. By Year Nine all we think about is boys; we meet them after school and wag classes to spend time with the local grammar boys and the rival Catholic lads, all fair game.

The only thing better than boys is running, fast. I live to run like the wind, especially over 400 metres. The moment the race gun goes off I bolt from the starting blocks. My running spikes grip the turf as I round the first bend, and down the back straight my arms pump exhilaration through my muscular body. The last bend is the most exciting. Competitors are mowed down, and others, still ahead, feed my determination. I can get to them, my lean legs stretch further with each step like a lion chasing down its foe. I'm passing them in the last 20 metres and then I lunge for the finish line. I've won! Nothing is more exhilarating.

I don't always win, of course, especially at the age of sixteen when I'm running with adults in Division 1. Many of them are state, national and international runners. Debbie Flintoff is one of my fiercest young rivals. She's also great at hurdles and has recently started training for the 400 metre hurdles, which they say will be introduced for women at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. So my coaches, who are both ex-Olympian hurdlers, decide that I too would be suited to this gruelling event. My hurdling might need a lot of work, but I can leap. I recently won the Victorian School Girls Long Jump, and they say that ability will hold me in good stead – I doubt I'll ever be as good as Debbie, but I'll try.

Dad is so proud when I beat Jenny Orr in a 200 metre race. By this time she's twenty-one years old and has already competed in the 800 and 1500 metres at the Munich Olympics: the first Olympian I've ever beaten. I run more and more, partly because my dream to run at the Olympics feels possible, but mostly because it makes me feel free.

Paradoxically, while I am a disciplined athlete, the labels 'party girl' and 'rebel' are also fitting. I'm a teenager; I'm bulletproof. I lie to my conservative parents so I can party with my school friends at every opportunity. I drink a lot, but I never get so wasted I can't walk. I don't like feeling out of control.

That desire to stay in control becomes a personal rule after I visit a friend, Jason, who is recovering in hospital after busting his leg in a car crash. One of his mates has brought a bag of hash and dope to cheer him up – surely a joint’s no worse than the cigarettes that patients are allowed to smoke on the balconies. I take a drag and my head spins.

‘Take it easy, Sue, you’ve never had hash before, it’s much stronger,’ my friend Cheyenne whispers as she passes it to me for another drag.

But I’m not listening. Maybe it’s the adrenalin rush of doing this in a hospital, or because I feel part of this inner sanctum of cool kids, so I take two more drags. The sun is so warm, and the ants meandering up the balcony pole look incredibly happy.

On my next drag, my brain falls out the back of my head. I can feel the world going black, but I have no arms to stop me falling. It’s the worst feeling I’ve ever had, and I swear that I will never, ever do anything that will make me lose control of myself. I may still drink and smoke weed, but only sensibly. And I stick to that promise.

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One summer’s night in 1976, just after my seventeenth birthday, I have a nightmare.

I’ve been feeling unwell for weeks and have missed a lot of training. I don’t have the energy to run. Even the act of chewing and swallowing my favourite foods makes me increasingly nauseated. So I stop eating. My mother tries everything in her arsenal of nurturing to help: small portions, vitamised soup, endless baking of my favourite apple crumble.

When my weight loss becomes obvious I’m taken to the local doctor, who throws glances of pity at me. He whispers ‘anorexia’ and ‘psychiatric hospital’ into my horrified mother’s ear. ‘You must force

her to eat, Mrs Malcom, or I will have to admit her to a psychiatric unit,' he says without emotion.

That night I sit, staring at my dinner as the table is cleared around me. I only manage three mouthfuls before I run to the toilet gagging and vomiting. My parents take my food to the outdoor wooden table, sit me down and then go inside, locking the door behind them. I'm not allowed back in until my plate is empty. I try, I really try, but after one mouthful of mashed potato mixed with smashed peas and tiny slices of chicken I can't bear to look at the plate. I turn my listless frame to our laden apricot tree. Its scent used to make me want to gorge until my belly ached; now it makes me gag.

I press my hands over my eyes and nose until Dad finally comes back outside. He gives my untouched food to the dogs and folds me in his arms, trying to hug his love and vitality into me. Dad is my protector, my ally, and he shields me from Mum's frustration. 'What's wrong, Sue? What can I do? Tell me, I'll do anything. Don't you want to get better?'

'Yes, of course,' I answer. 'I'm trying, Dad, truly. I just feel so sick. If I didn't want to eat I'd have given it to the dogs myself. But I want to. I don't want to lose weight; I want to be strong enough to run. Dad, you've got to believe me.'

'Oh, baby, just try. Promise me that tomorrow you'll try.'

I don't want him to stop hugging me. I want to be his little girl again, pretending to be asleep during a car ride home so I'll be scooped up close to his chest and carried to bed. Feeling his strength, his breath, his heartbeat always made me feel loved and safe. Why can't my daddy make this better?

When the dizziness and unsteadiness begins I assume that my weight loss is the cause. I can barely get out of bed now without falling over, and I cry at the clumps of hair on my pillow each morning. I don't want to talk to anyone, and I guess no one wants to talk to me. Friends

stop calling in and my boyfriend, Ethan, recoils from me in anger. He berates me for doing this to myself.

My athlete's body, which could run 400 metres in under a minute, is now just an ugly bag of bones. I used to dream of running at the Olympics. Now my medals and trophies mock me from the dressing table across the room, the one that I can't even walk to anymore. I can't be anorexic, because I don't *want* to be skinny.

In February my mother takes me back to the local doctor. This GP who had fixed my childhood cuts and fevers is way out of his depth as he examines my now skeletal frame, trying to diagnose my inability to stand up. He stared at the bald patches on my scalp as he asks me why I'm behaving this way.

I attempt to explain to him that I desperately want to swallow something warm and nourishing, but every time I do, I vomit. I tell him that I have tried a thousand times to walk properly, but my legs, like limp pasta, always fail me. He makes a call. His face remains dour as he silently hands my mother the address of a facility.

And so, barely three months into my seventeenth year, I am taken by my parents to an adult psychiatric ward and left there. I weigh less than 40 kilograms. Anorexia nervosa is the diagnosis – meaning 'nervous loss of appetite' – and my nightmare has become my reality.

The nurses and security guard try to remove me from Dad's arms. Our tears combine as he tells me how much he loves me, that this is the best place for me. How he has tried to understand why his princess, who had the world at her feet, is throwing it all away.

Why is he letting this happen? I just want to go home.

I kick and beg and scream as men in white uniforms tear me away. A large metal door clangs shut behind us as they carry me into their world: a cold, white room. My sobs echo against the silence of its sterility.

Stripped naked, weighed and measured all over like a piece of meat, I hardly notice the rules being shouted at me. A gown made of harsh fabric is tied tightly down my back, and I'm wheeled into a huge room containing twenty-five beds.

My back is pressing against the white metal rods at the head of my hospital bed as I clutch the single pillow against my chest for protection. My only privacy is an ill-fitting blue curtain that I close with trembling hands. If I can shut out the room around me, maybe I can convince myself that I'm safe.

Now I am not only alone but beyond scared shitless. The sound of screaming startles me; the nurses are struggling to contain the racket of a man desperately shrieking and raining violence on those around him. The screaming eventually quietens, and my mind tries to take me somewhere far away. I fill my mind with images of Ethan teaching me to surf at Anglesea, kissing out our teenage passions as the waves crash over us; bustling out of the school gate with my friends, laughing as we hitch up our uniforms and stuff our school hats into our bags, then run to meet the boys' bus at the train station.

A tapping sound breaks into my brief reprieve. Fat, dirty fingers are drumming on the thin rail that supports my bed's curtain. A pair of hairy legs are planted on the linoleum below. I can't remember what the nurse told me to do if I needed her. Is she still here? Something about a call button; my hands rush over the pillow towards the metal bedside table. Where's the bloody call button gone? I try to yell but my voice is beaten back by waves of nausea.

Then a rumbling deep voice enters my safe place. 'I am the devil and you are my prey. I am the devil and you are my prey.'

I stop breathing. Fear stops time.

'I am the devil and you are my prey. I am the devil and your sins must be atoned.'

One dirty hand leaves the curtain rail, reaching ...

‘Come on, Bob, Bob, come back to bed, don’t scare the new patient on her first night,’ a nurse whispers as she ushers him away. She doesn’t check on me.

Each of the following thirty days rolls over the next like waves lapping the shoreline of the Dead Sea: doctors, weigh-ins, strip searches, group sessions with society’s outcasts, more doctors and agonisingly boring evenings spent with my fellow inmates, who all seem hell-bent on perfecting the art of dying. I’m the only patient under the age of twenty. How could my parents keep me here? I’ve never been violent, I’ve never hurt anyone and there are no other patients here with anorexia nervosa.

After two weeks of relentless testing, the treating psychiatric team can’t find a psychological reason for my symptoms. They agree that I don’t have anorexia. (An enormous relief – I am sane!) But now they want to investigate me for a physical cause. I’ve had my mind raped and pillaged for thirteen days. Now it’s scans, blood tests, X-rays – five different physical investigations a day.

I still can’t walk far or eat much, but I’m managing to keep most of the vitamised food down. Mysteriously, my symptoms have improved since I was admitted and stopped taking the pill and my acne tablets. But still they keep me here, in the adult psychiatric unit, like some sort of oddity. The doctors tell me nothing; the nurses just tell me to ask the doctor.

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On my fifteenth day a new girl is admitted: Pattie. She’s twenty-three but looks like she’s wearing an older woman’s skin. Drinking cleaning fluid will do that. Her gullet’s now so scarred that nothing but slops will get through.

Pattie and I have our daily weigh-ins together. She doesn't care at all about stripping off naked in front of me, or in front of the creepy matron who eyeballs our nakedness more than the scale reading. Pattie just jumps on the scales and starts jiggling her tits and arse at the matron, who quickly gets flustered and angry. I'm loving it. I wish I was that gutsy. Pattie makes me laugh for the first time since I've been here.

'Hey Pattie, that was so cool! You really got that old bitch. She's been staring at me like that for weeks,' I say as we walk back to our beds.

'That's nothing, hon, I'll look after you. I'm going to get my meds then I'll meet you in the showers. Watch out for the devil,' she jokes as I head off with my toilet bag. The devil is still after his prey, but I've learnt to ignore his crazy rants. Anyway, recently he's been snoring like a steam train, too drugged to bother me.

I step out of the cubicle, my poor excuse for a towel barely covering my butt, and wrap another towel around my wet hair. Then I look up: he's in front of me, leaning against the basin five steps away, saliva dribbling down his chin, his cock in his hand. 'I am the devil and ...'

The bathroom is filled with his rumbling voice and the clatter of my soap container hitting the ground. The noise makes it out into the hallway and fires Pattie into action. She opens the bathroom door, grabs the closest thing to her – a fire extinguisher – and throws it at the devil, just missing his head. He barely flinches.

'Piss off, you fucking bastard,' Pattie screams. The extinguisher bounces over the concrete floor, the sound echoing like a machine gun, its detached nozzle spraying foam crazily across the bathroom and all over me, Pattie and the devil.

Two burley male nurses rush in and tackle the devil to the ground. Pattie spits defiantly at him as she wraps towels and her arms around me. The devil is face-down in a puddle of foam, spluttering. One nurse is sitting on his back and the other has his legs in a wrestling hold. Only

the devil's arms are free, but useless, as he smacks them into the foam like a toddler in a tantrum.

'Hey, Bob, you tryin' to make snow angels now? Not so fucking tough now are ya?' the nurse is laughing.

'Told ya the other day you're on your last chance, Bobby boy! We're gonna shackle you to the bars in the treatment room till the doctor transfers you to a real hell, you bastard,' the other nurse shouts into Bob's ear. He wipes the foam from his own face and turns to Pattie, 'Go, Pattie girl, thanks, we knew you still had some spunk in ya.'

Pattie and I become besties; we talk and laugh and cry as one. She tells me about how she once met a drummer at a music festival who scooped her up and gave her everything she needed to fly. For years he loved her and kept her safe, that is until he found another eager baby – that's what made her drink the cleaning fluid. My life so far looks bland compared to hers, but we're bound by the emptiness of abandonment.

I don't feel scared of the other crazies anymore either. I know all of their names now, and I know that they are all either going through withdrawals or pumped so full of tranquilisers that their eyes and brains have melted.

I'm the only patient here who doesn't have to take meds, but I still stand by and watch as the nurses inspect each empty mouth for unswallowed pills. Pattie's found a way around it: she makes herself vomit up her lunchtime dose. 'I've been a zombie for long enough,' she says. 'So now I dictate how much of that shit gets inside of me.'

'But why don't you throw up all of them?'

'I'm not that stupid, hon. I know I need calmers, but not the amount they want me to take. Never let doctors wipe you out, just take what you need from them. It's the only way to survive the system with your brain intact.'

'What system?' I ask.

Pattie just rolls her eyes at me and takes my hand. ‘Will you write in my journal, Susie?’ She asks this as we sit in furthest corner of the sun-filled enclosed veranda. It’s the lumpiest sofa, but we’ve claimed it because it’s furthest from the TV and all the other patients gathered around it. I understand what a privilege it is to be asked to write in this, her leather-bound journal with ‘Real Love’ spelled out on the cover in letters cut from newspaper headlines. So I wait.

The page she opens to has the words, ‘My dad proved he loves me by ...’ written across the top. Pattie places her favourite pen in my hand and her eyes tell me the rest. She needs my words on the page to seep into her heart. The previous tear-stained pages attest to their importance. I don’t know what brand of tears they are, but I sit there for ages trying to reconstruct memories so my friend can know another slice of love.

I start cautiously, then the words flow. When I was young I loved being in the shed with my Dad; he gave me knots to unravel while he worked. Easy knots in the dogs’ leads at first then progressively harder tangles in his fishing lines. I struggled with the mess, intoxicated by the smell of the leather that he stretched, cut and formed it into belts and shoes. Any triumph was rewarded with his gentle bear hug; failures were never scolded. Instead he would stop working and guide my hands through the secret of undoing knots, one small loop at a time.

‘There’s always an answer, my girl. Just work with what you can do, keep at it and don’t get angry, and before you know it the tangled clump is a fishing line again with a renewed purpose – see!’ I proudly hold up the untangled length. ‘Life and people are like that, Susie: complicated and messy. But if you try hard and take care, one knot at a time, the problem will undo, and what’s left no longer needs to be discarded. Never give up on anyone or anything that’s worth fighting for. Just keep at it, one knot at a time.’

I hand Pattie her journal. I don’t know what made me write that, is

it for her or for me? I walk back to my bed to cry. A little while later, while I'm asleep, Pattie slips a folded piece of paper under my pillow. It's an exquisite sketch of a father's hands entwined with a girl's. The words 'I love your dad' are written below.

Pattie's discharged ten days into my physical tests. She tells me she's going to stay at a friend's place but doesn't want to tell me where. She doesn't want my home phone number either. 'Your dad's coming to visit tonight, you'll be fine,' she says when we've finished hugging. She walks away without looking back; I crawl onto my bed and sob. I thought that we would be best friends forever. I need her.

Dad has visited me every week, which is as much as they'll allow. My mum is too upset to come – at least that's what the nurse told me. Ethan visited once in my first week here and we had a big fight. He told me he didn't want to go out with a crazy girl, threw the chain I'd given him onto my bed and stomped off. My friends came with lots of lollies and magazines, and eventually they made me laugh. My older cousin Max also sent a letter telling me he knows how scared I must be, but that everything will be okay, and I read it every day. It means so much more than the stack of 'Get Well Soon' cards containing little more than signatures. Since I opened them they've sat untouched on my bedside locker beside a bunch of faded carnations.

With Pattie gone, Dad cradles me until I stop howling. He wipes his own tears as I sit up to talk. But when I brighten enough to start chattering about Pattie and all the awesome stuff she's done in her life, he leaves my side and sits in the chair. He's got that worried look.

'I can't stay for long, Sue. I have to speak to the nurse before I go.'

Why has he pulled back like this? Does he think I'm destined to become like Pattie? I feel stung.

'Dad, if you knew half of the fucking shit that goes on in here you ...'

'Susan-Jane do not swear like that.'

‘What? Dad, you left me here with all these crazies, what do you think I’ve been doing, fucking elocution classes?’

The furrow in his brow becomes a chasm and his eyes shine with fresh tears. ‘I just wanted my little girl back, my Susie healthy and smiling. I’m sorry, I’ve really got to go.’

His hug is as strong and loving as always, but different. I don’t understand why he’s being so mean – and now he’s walking away.

‘Dad, Daddy come back, come back, please!’

But he’s gone.

I hate the world; I hate my mum and dad.

A day later the staff allow me to go outside on my own for the first time. My spaghetti legs gain some strength, and each day I can walk a few hundred metres further away from the hospital. The next sunny morning I make it two blocks to a big department store. I’m so proud of myself. The colour and pace of life surrounds me, suited businessmen rush to catch a tram as smartly dressed ladies stroll past chatting. A group of kids my age lounge against the rubbish bin, dragging on smokes, laughing and pointing – wait, are they laughing at me?

I glance at my reflection in the store window: I look like a freak. My hair is growing back in patches and my bony body disgusts me – even a big red shirt will not hide its ugliness. My sunken eyes and pale, pockmarked face looks like a vampire’s; the hospital wristband is the only sign that I’m human.

I’m hit by a wave of dizziness. All I can do is cling to the glass, to the image I’ve become. It takes me twenty minutes to slide myself along the entire building and find a bench to sit on until my head stops spinning. I eventually make it ‘home’ to my hospital bed, cursing myself for thinking that I could ever be part of the real world again.

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In the last days of my captivity, after the results of the physical tests all return negative, my diagnosis is turned to a psychological one again: 'It's some sort of "adolescent crisis", and we'll be discharging you back to your GP's care.'

'Adolescent crisis' doesn't speak any truth to me. It only sticks because my battery of physical tests was seen as all-encompassing. So the doctors and my family presume that if a physical cause hasn't been found, then my symptoms must be psychological.

Then the weirdest thing happens.

Some nuns are going from bed to bed in the ward offering prayers, gentle words and warm hugs. I'll take anything they have to offer, such is the hollowness in my heart.

A pretty nun sits on my bed, and I'm embarrassed at my skinny ugliness. She just wraps her arms around me, cradling me. I stiffen a little to avoid wrinkling her habit, but she just pulls me closer into her murmuring, 'Shh, shh, it's okay.' She recites prayers of love and empathy, and I pray hungrily with her until she's called to leave. A tiny ray of peace settles in my body.

As I nuzzle back into my pillow and watch her glide away, she suddenly spins around on her sensible shoes and returns. Her last words to me are said quietly, with an authority that penetrates my soul. 'The answer may not come right now. It may not come for ten years. But with faith, it will come.'