



NICK WASILIEV

WHEN
MEN
CRY

A NOVEL

"When Men Cry is a life shaker. Dive into a world which looks shallow — but its depth is infinite." **John Marsden**

Nick Wasiliev was born in Sydney, Australia in 1993 and was raised in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales. Growing up in a family of journalists and authors, he began writing at the age of three, and wrote his first book at the age of seven.

Upon completing a degree in Development Studies and Creative Writing in 2016 at Macquarie University, he became a sports, music and arts journalist specialising in radio, podcasts and in print. His sports journalism saw him published in Green and Gold Rugby, Rugby.com.au and Rugby League *Player Magazine*, while his work on music and culture saw him also published in *Music Feeds*, *Good Intent*, *Hunter and Bligh* and *Music Insight*. He also had short stories published in *The Quarry*.

Today, Nick lives in the leafy Sydney suburb of Lane Cove with his partner, and works in the Australian book industry as Booktopia's Social Media Specialist. He also serves as producer and occasional host for the Green and Gold Rugby sports podcast, and as Marketing Manager from Indigenous NGO, the Bawurra Foundation.

WHEN MEN CRY

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For Mum and Meg

PART



I love the colour of a blood-orange sun on a spring afternoon. It might be hovering over an ugly train line, but a golden sunset can make anything look beautiful.

I walk to the head of the stairs and look down to the concourse. There's Noah, still fucking around at the ticket machine. Classic. He'd better hurry up, it's only three minutes 'til the train and, typical Sydney, there won't be another one for half an hour. I quickly check the board again then look back towards him.

'Oi, dickhead,' I jeer through the hubbub of the crowd. 'Come on!'

He scowls at me, fluffing around with the coins in his waistcoat pocket. Of course he would forget his Opal card.

I scan my eyes along the train line to kill time. Chatswood Station is always packed on a Friday afternoon. You've got the bighead data crunchers in their pressed suits and immaculately ironed shirts; the high school students heading home, their school shirts untucked and ties undone; and then there's a few folk like us, heading out on the town. I see boys dressed up in smart casual and girls (made up to the nth degree) wearing skimpy dresses. Above the smell of hot brakes and engine oil from the train, the energy is overpowering. Every man and his dog going somewhere and everywhere.

I dance along the yellow line, letting my leather jacket flap in the wind. Some people are giving me looks, but stuff them!

They're probably going from their boring job to their boring home and their boring life. I don't care! Life is bloody good and I can't wait to meet the lads and get a buzz—

'Oi!' some chick shouts.

I look around. A station attendant wearing a bright fluoro orange vest is coming towards me, waving her station attendant's flag.

'Watch out mate,' she warns. 'Stay behind the yellow line! You know how many people end up under a train if they're not careful?

I shuffle my feet to the right side.

'Thank you,' the attendant replies irritably then turns tail and heads back down the platform.

Fuck me. I guess she's just doing her job, but still.

I look back up at the display. Two minutes to go. I stick my head out and feel a hot gust of air across my face. There it is: the train, a few hundred metres up the line. I keep looking, ignoring the stare the attendant is giving me.

I hear panting behind me and turn to see Noah's long, lanky legs bounding up the stairs. He comes to a halt, sucking in the big ones and slumping forward, his blonde fringe flopping over his face. He's breathing so hard it looks like his buttoned shirt and waistcoat is about to explode off him, even though he's a bloody twig!

'Bit dramatic, much,' I snort. Classic. He's always been disorganised.

He shakes his head at me, brushing his hair back.

'Cut it a bit fine, but here we are,' he says, still trying to get his breath.

‘Looks like you’re going to have to buy single trip tickets all night,’ I say. I love Noah to bits, but it is a lot of fun to wind him up now and again. He’s always been easy to rib, ever since we met at university college. And he doesn’t seem to mind—at least, I don’t think so.

He rolls his eyes.

‘Come on, Chris, you’ve forgotten something before, haven’t you?’ he says.

‘Yeah, but not an Opal, mate. Nah, nah, that’s on a whole new level,’ I scoff.

He gives me a dirty look then realises I’m being an idiot.

‘Ah, well, at least I need to lose an Opal card to embarrass myself. Embarrassment is pretty much your life in a nutshell, mate,’ he laughs. The train pulls up beside us and my ears scream to be covered as the brakes screech to a halt. The pungent burn of oil fills my nostrils. A few seconds later, the buzzer beeps and the doors open. Folks spill out as everyone around us tries to squish in.

We squeeze ourselves through the door and immediately collide with all the commuters just standing there, trying their best to stay out of the stream of people getting on and off. The carriage is packed and the hot, humid air reeks. We head downstairs, push past five American tourists in tropical shirts blocking the aisle, and finally jump into one of the dusty two-person seats. I breathe a sigh of relief.

It wasn’t like this five years ago. I honestly reckon in a few years we’ll have to do what they do in Japan, and employ those blokes who push people into the trains with a broom. It’s bloody amazing that folks just let them do it, too—they seem happy to

get squashed in like sardines. If you were to try and poke an Aussie with a broom, he'd grab it off you and try to thump you in the face!

'Doors closing,' says the train's loudspeaker in that weird, polite tone. 'Please stand clear.'

The buzzers go off and we hear the click as the doors come together. Seconds later, everyone is shunted forward as the train splutters into life and begins to move. The red sun manages to peek through this crazy mosh pit and catches me off guard. It cheers me up a bit. It's good to be moving.

'Cause I can't stand it when we're not. Even if it's only for five minutes, I'm not happy. I know it drives Noah and the lads crazy, but hey, we've all got stuff that pisses each other off. It happens. Me, I hate standing still.

I look over to see the sun again and Noah's expression catches my eye. He's looking tense as hell.

'You feeling alright, mate?'

'I hate crowds,' he says. 'I just want to get to Wynyard and be at the Metropolitan already with the lads getting a big, massive pint in me. I can taste it.' He licks his lips as we look out at suburbia whizzing by.

Never have wiser words been spoken. A bloody, big, fuck-off pint sounds like just the ticket! I'm glad he's up for it too. It's not very often Noah is in the mindset of getting as plastered as possible. It's always been hard to get him away from study for a bit, especially now in final year. I bloody admire him for it—I'm in the same boat with uni, but I'm at that stage where I don't care anymore.

'It's good that we're all back in the same place for the first

time in forever,' I say.

Noah nods, a big boyish smile spreading across his face.

'Yeah, it is,' he agrees. 'When was it that Logan went off to basic training? Like, a year ago?'

'No bloody way!' I exhale, shaking my head. Time flies.

'Yeah, I think it was. It was the end of second year, remember?' Noah says. 'We were planning to move out together—you, me, Loges and Jock. And we were struggling to find a place to live.'

I join the dots. 'You're right! But come on, since when did we have any hope of getting a place? Four uni students under one roof? Four boys especially? Bet you no real estate agent would want to touch us with a barge pole!'

Noah laughs.

'Ah, well, worked out in the end,' I say, winking. 'Logan went off to join the army, Jock and I moved home, and you keep our legacy going at uni college, eh?'

Noah shakes his head. He's getting sick of college, never been the party type. He's moaned so many times about it full of freshers every year. So much so that it just feels like an extension of school. I don't blame him. I couldn't wait to leave after the second year there. Too much drama.

'God, that first year was good though wasn't it?' I say, thinking back.

'That first week, my God, I don't remember much of it!' says Noah. 'I think I went through nearly three cases of beer. And that was just what *I* drank!' He shakes his head. 'God, too many regrets,' he adds, his face in his hands trying to hold back the laughter.

‘The first night—was that when we all hung out in Jock’s room for the first time?’ I scratch my head. That whole week was a bloody blur.

‘Yeah, I think it was,’ he laughs. ‘Now look at us! Still think you guys are a bunch of weirdos,’ he snorts.

‘God those days were the shit,’ I say. ‘Remember that time we had to run around uni in a G-string as a dare?’

‘That’s the last time I ever want to see Jock’s arse ... nope, never again,’ Noah says. ‘We’re friends, but I don’t want to know him *that* well.’

His eyes light up. He points at me.

‘And you! You were freaking out ‘cause you thought you’d never get a girl ever again. You kept saying we were going to be known as the “thong crew”! You were petrified that whole time. I thought you were going to cry!’

I can feel myself going red. Heads are turning again.

‘Calm your farm,’ I mutter.

‘Some things haven’t changed,’ Noah ribs me. ‘You were a thirsty bugger. We’d take bets, you know? “Will Chris be convinced he’ll find the love of his life tonight?”’

I shake my head, wishing he’d shut up.

‘Yep, still the same old Chris,’ Noah howls with laughter.

Well, at least he isn’t feeling claustrophobic anymore.

As we come up onto the Harbour Bridge, the sunset looks to have come and gone and is now settling in behind the Blue Mountains. I can see the lights of the Sydney coming towards us. Whenever I see the city, I get excited, ‘cause I know it’s time to hit the town and have a couple of beers with the lads.

One of the lights illuminating the sky draws me in—the

new casino at Barangaroo. It sticks out across the skyline, making every other building look mediocre by comparison. Can tell the folks who built that spared no expense. Only opened a few weeks ago, it looks a charm.

The weekly projections for the upcoming races at Randwick have started up on the Opera House too. It's interesting that in the last couple of years, the City of Sydney have let ads be projected on historic buildings like that. Apparently, they've also started doing the sports predictions on the War Memorial in Hyde Park, right down to who will kick the first goal of the weekend. I'm not so sure about them myself—if I'm honest, I think it's a bit of a weird thing to do.

The lights disappear as we head down into the train tunnel, then we finally arrive at a hot, heaving Wynyard Station. I gag as the smell of sweaty folks and burning brakes hits our nostrils the moment the doors open. Now the shitshow begins!

We make our way through the packed station to the concourse. Rush hour is in full swing, so we're forced to move with the herd heading through the gates and out onto York Street.

Outside, it's absolute fucking chaos. People are everywhere. The last few years, the city crowds have gotten a lot worse. Folks move with crazed looks in their eyes, wanting to get to their destination as fast as possible. Any time they're interrupted in transit, they overreact and throw their toys out of the pram.

The more Noah and I try to make our way through the crowd, the more it's pissing me off. It's amazing how much a place can change in five years. At least the trams are working now; I remember when they blocked off half the city—the whole place was effectively a shouting match. Not that it isn't now.

Friday and Saturday nights, when all the uni students, drunkards and city clerks come out to get on the drip in the bars and clubs, there's always a mad rush to get in before the lockout at 1.30.

George Street is chockas when we finally get to it. Everywhere you move, you have to change direction to accommodate someone crossing your path. A group of eighteen-year-olds crosses the road into oncoming traffic, yelling some garbage about the queue outside Frankie's Pizza being good at this time of day. The cars blare at them. Some homeless bloke is shouting at himself ahead of us, poor sod. I do what everyone else is doing when we pass him and look the other way.

I can see Noah is tensing up again.

'Maybe if we go on the other side, it'll be quicker,' he mutters.

I look across the road. It's just as busy. It won't mean jack shit which side we're on. At least we can actually breathe now, especially when the George Street wind tunnel gives you a seriously refreshingly cooling breeze. It's nice for about five minutes until you've stopped sweating, then you pretty much freeze to death.

We finally get along to the Metropolitan. There are only about a dozen folks out the front, but Noah rushes to grab us a spot anyway. It's good he does; by the time I get there, ten other people have joined the queue behind him.

We stand there for a few minutes, then I stick my head out, looking towards the front of the line.

'Why the fuck aren't we moving?' I exhale irritably.

Noah is on his phone.

'Jock and Logan are inside,' he replies, ignoring my

impatience. 'They've managed to get us a table.'

'Ask them if it's busy,' I say.

'I did. It's at capacity.'

That explains it. Eventually, we see two people leaving the bar. Two others get let in, and we move up a bit.

'This is fucking crap!' a slurred, whiney voice shrieks out from the front of the queue. I see a big Islander bouncer with tattoos over one side of his face stare down the owner of the voice. Doesn't look like the kind of guy you want to mess with. Just looking at him makes me shut up and be on my best behaviour.

'We've been out here for over twenty fucking minutes! How fucking hard is it to get a drink around here!'

I can see the bouncer is getting the shits. It's probably the thirtieth bloke tonight who's given him an earful.

'Oi, look at me when I'm talking to you!' yells the whiney bloke. 'I want you to let me in!' he slurs as he tries to brush past the bouncer.

Big mistake.

In a flash, the bouncer rips the bloke away from the door and flings him to the ground, kneels on his shoulder then twists the guy's arms behind his back.

'AHH! WHAT THE FU— YOU FUCKING PIG—,' the whiney bloke gurgles.

Bouncers suddenly come in from all directions, even from the bloody crowd. There are four blokes on this guy—we can't see him anymore. But we can hear blood-curdling screams. I look away, like everyone else.

Unfortunately, most places I go out to these days there'll be some bloke getting stomped on at some point in the night. It's

almost as guaranteed as getting refused entry into a place after midnight if you have a dick.

The four bouncers pick up the whiney fella and shovel him off the path to the side. Looks like his nose is broken; his face is almost totally red with blood. His other mates move out of the line, so we all move up a couple of metres.

At least that's something.

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Fortunately, Noah and I know how to keep our cool and after another twenty minutes or so, we finally get in. The air is moist in the bar, wet from sweat and spilt drinks. Ah, the smell of alcohol mixed with dirty floor dust—you can't miss it! We make our way past the downstairs bar, then up the staircase, which creaks wearily from the other fifty dickheads doing the exact same thing.

We get to the rooftop and there are still bloody people everywhere. Thank bloody God Jock and Logan already have a table. My eyes are drawn to the view of the city: the night has set in and the skyscrapers around us are looking like beacons, shooting light straight up into the clouds above. As we head along to the end of the bar, we catch sight of a hand waving at us from a corner.

Jock and Logan are sitting in a beautiful spot, the glow from the surrounding skyline illuminating their table. We cross the rooftop towards them.

At last, we're here.

Jock is looking fantastic in his classic going-out outfit, his

well-worn but well-cared-for Blue Mountains Rugby Club polo looks like it's always been on him, matching his stumpy, wide rugby-prop build. No matter when we catch up for drinks, it's always the same. Even though he looks good, he's sweating like crazy in the heat of the evening. He looks as parched as an outback lake.

Then my eye goes to Loges. It's been close to a year since I've seen him. The last time was the day before he left for Brisbane to spend time with his family for a month or two before basic training began. He was a bit of a stick back then, but he sure made up for it with his big mouth.

Bloody hell, though, looks like they worked him hard in Brisbane! He's built like a brick shithouse now: he's got muscles in places where I didn't even know you could get muscles! It's almost a cliché, but it looks like his flanno shirt is barely managing to stay on him. When he stands up to greet us, I can almost hear the fabric ripping. Looks like there's even more muscles hiding under there!

'Well, who do I fucking see here?' he says loudly. Yep, still the same old bloke underneath, thank God.

I shake his hand. His grip is a hundred times firmer than it used to be. His red hair has a crisp, clean cut, as though it's been freshly done today. Even the stubble on his face looks well manicured. I feel a bit intimidated by him. Weird, cause he wouldn't hurt a fly.

Wish I had the motivation to get that buff.

Noah looks similarly struck as he gives Loges a big man hug.

'Bloody hell!' he says, letting out a rare expletive as we sit down together. 'You're looking fantastic! I can see the military

put you to work!’

Loges looks down and checks himself out.

‘Yeah, nah, it’s funny man—I didn’t even notice it when I was there. You spend your days training and being pushed to the limit, but you don’t realise how much your body changes.

‘Think it’s nearly convinced Jock to join the military though,’ he nudges Jock, who’s sculling his beer.

Jock’s tummy slams into the table as he brings his glass down hard and wipes his mouth.

‘Can you blame me, mate?’ he says, belching. ‘I’d give my bloody eye teeth to look half as good as you’re looking right now!’

Logan shrugs.

‘Ah, well. Look, it was nuts. But I appreciate the compliments gents,’ he says, nodding. ‘It’s bloody good to be back in Sydney.’

‘What’s been happening in your neck of the woods?’ he tips his smooth, red-haired head at Noah. ‘Still studying?’

‘Yeah, we all are,’ Noah replies. ‘And I’m trying to find somewhere to move to. I’ve got to get out of the uni college.’

Logan nods his head in sympathy.

‘Had any luck so far? I feel for you, man. I was over that place by the end of first year,’ he says.

Noah laughs, though I can tell there’s a bit of pain in it for him. Logan moving to Brisbane put an end to us affording a place together.

‘You’re telling me!’ he scoffs. ‘I wish I was half as lucky as Jock and Chris, getting to move back in with their folks. Too bad mine are in the country. I’ve got no options on that!’

To be honest, I think he shouldn't complain. My Mum is a pain in the arse a lot of the time. She's been like that forever, ever since Dad buggered off. Bloody possessive, every time I'm at home she watches me like a hawk.

'Aw, yeah, nah though, living at home isn't all it's cracked up to be,' Jock interjects, as though he's read my mind.

'Well, my man,' says Logan, leaning forward towards Noah. 'If you're looking for someone to move in with, I might be an option, eh?' he says, cheerfully.

Noah's ears perk up.

'I'm hoping to make the move back here to Sydney permanently,' Logan announces.

Our eyes light up. Hell yes! All the boys back together in one place!

'That's awesome!' Noah cheers. 'You back here with the defence force? Are you going to one of the naval bases or something—'

'That's navy mate, not army reserve,' Logan corrects him. 'And nah, I'm not.'

We look at each other, confused.

'I guess I may as well tell all you lads here and now,' he says. 'I've decided to leave the army. I quit last month.'

The cheerful vibe instantly disappears. Jocko's eyes almost pop out of their sockets, his beer nearly spilling out of his mouth.

'You ... quit?' I squawk in surprise. 'Why? You've been talking about going into the army for years! Literally since uni days. After first year, you were always talking about studying counterterrorism, and then going into the army! You were always on about what life would be like when you got in!'

Logan nods his head, half acknowledging my words, half wanting me to shut up so he can speak.

‘No, I was keen, and I didn’t have any major issues in terms of getting in—’ he said.

‘And you wanted to be closer to your dad in Brisbane, didn’t you? I mean, that was why you went back, he was saying you had to experience it “for real”’ Noah interjects.

Logan flashes him an annoyed I’m-getting-to-it-if-you’d-just-stop-interrupting look.

‘Give the man some space! Let him speak, mate,’ says Jock. ‘Let the fella tell us.’

Logan laughs it off. He looks at us for a moment then over to the bar. There seems to be a brief lull in the crowd.

‘Tell you what lads, you get the next round, and I’ll tell you what I’m up to,’ he says, smiling.

No smarter words have been spoken! I’m bloody parched, so I jump up immediately, only to realise that means I’m getting this round. Jock tries his best not to piss himself with laughter at my blunder. Eventually, he gets up too and we make our way through the crowd.

We might not be able to smell the musky liquor anymore, but we can certainly feel it under foot. Bloody lovely. We wait until a spot becomes available, and squeeze in. Then we have to wait while the five bartenders sift through the hundred people who are at the bar. That’s Sydney: twenty minutes to get in, thirty for a drink.

‘So, ma boi, how is the most eligible bachelor of our group?’ Jock nudges me.

Ah Jesus. Typical bloody Jock, always taking me back to a

time when I was super desperate to get laid in first year. I had my awkward run ins. It happens! Things are different now. I'm a changed man.

'You'll bloody never let me forget that, will you?' I retort.

'Never mate,' Jock winks. 'It's you in a nutshell: tall, dark hair and handsome ... and the thirstiest bloke I know. Been on any Tinder dates lately?'

'Nope. Not for four or five months.'

'Pah, why?' he snorts.

'Just taking a break from girls to be honest, man,' I lie.

Jocko stops the joking and nods.

'Fair enough,' he admits. 'It is a big commitment, best to do it when you know who you are first, eh.'

Funnily enough, that's just what I've been thinking lately. I'm not thirsty. Really, I'm not. I was at uni a bit, the lads never let me forget about it! I've done the whole chronic dating on Tinder and all that, but after a while it felt a bit superficial. Okay, okay, I was thirsty when we were all living at the college. But now I'm more in the mood to meet someone nice. Like a girlfriend. Someone super stunning and hot, but also someone who's funny and stuff. I'm looking, but for something a bit more. Never gonna tell Jocko this though. One little hint about anything and he can spin a rumour out like a spider.

'Why you bringing this crap up again?' I ask, trying to turn the blowtorch back on him.

'Mate, cause there's a girl about three people down who's checking you out,' Jock replies.

At first I think he's just messing with me again, but then he insists he's right. I look down the bar and I see a face look away.

From the one second I saw her she looked cute. Now I can only see the back of her head, but notice she's wearing a dark green top and short skirt. My eyes follow her legs down to a black pair of heels. Oh lord! Hot, but elegant.

I stop myself, though. I've driven myself nuts way too many times spending the night chasing a girl. Ninety-nine per cent of the time, you think a girl's interested but you've read it wrong. And if you come across as desperate, you creep them out and then everything goes sideways. I do get it—guys are bastards generally—but it's not easy getting it right.

Jocko whistles to the bartender, trying to get their attention.

'Oi! Come on mate, I need some sauce!' he yells.

I scowl at him. 'Mate, that's not gonna get them to come over.'

Immediately, one of the bartenders asks me what I want. Urgh, goddamnit. I can sense the smugness seeping out of Jock already. Then I stop thinking about it. After all, the fella got us the bartender's attention. I order a round of four pale ales. I can almost taste that delicious frothy goodness just from looking at the free-flowing beer taps.

Jock nudges me again. 'You absolutely sure she's not interested?'

'Yes!' I say, exasperated. I'm going to lose my shit at him any second now.

'I beg to differ mate,' he winks back.

I look, and she has moved right next to me. I can see her friends have pushed her over, so she's probably not actually into me really. We make eye contact for a moment. I wait for that awkward, sickly, an iron-has-been-dropped-into-my-stomach

feeling to hit me.

But we keep looking at each other for a bit. I'm checking her out; she's checking me out. She's got these adorable dimples either side of her mouth, and really dark brown eyes that almost match her jet-black hair. Quaint is the word I'd use. Yes, quaint. And dainty too.

There we go, now the nervous feeling hits me. Now I like her; now I have something to lose.

'Your friends ... ah ... push you over too?' I murmur, stumbling, trying to start some sort of conversation.

'Yeah ... uh, sorry,' she responds, similarly awkward.

Fuck. I'm talking to a girl. Need something to talk about ... argh! Umm—

She's looking at me weird. I quickly glance over at Jocko. He can barely contain himself. Suddenly I feel like I'm back in first year again. Fuck.

'Sorry about this, but you're over at that nice table overlooking the city, yeah?' she says.

She's been watching me! What?!

'Yeah,' I reply, trying to stay calm.

'My friend, the one with the blonde hair and the pink boob tube, her name's Nicole,' the girl says. I look over to a group of half a dozen girls. Nicole waves back. Bloody hell.

'She really wants the number of the red-headed guy at your table.'

A large belch of a laugh rings out behind me. Urgh! Bloody Jock is never gonna let me live this down.

'Umm, sure. I better ask him first though,' I mumble back. I can barely hear myself above Jocko's roaring laughter.

‘Oh, yeah, absolutely! Don’t want to be a creeper or anything!’ she replies.

I nod, and then look back to see the pale ales being poured.

I can see from the corner of my eye that the girl keeps looking at me. Doesn’t look like she’s done.

‘So, what’s your name?’ she asks.

‘Oh! Umm, Chris ...’ I reply.

‘Weird. I thought you would’ve been a Johnno or something,’ she replies.

Pfft! You what?

‘Do I look like a Johnno?! I’m not from bloody Penrith,’ I scoff.

‘Oh, I am ...’ she says, her face sinking. Shit, well there goes yet another—wait, she bursts into laughter. She’s just fucking with me.

‘You’re fun to mess with,’ she says.

Easy for her to say. I’m getting tied in knots here.

She brushes against me. I think it’s by accident, but I don’t care, all is forgiven. Her friends start catcalling at her. She looks over to them then back at me, rolling her eyes.

‘I’m sorry about them, they’re super embarrassing. Don’t think ill of the messenger, though, okay?’ she begins to turn away.

I’m still starstruck. Part of me is telling me she’s showing some interest, but I don’t know! I’ve got that wrong so many bloody times before. So I take a punt.

‘You got a phone number?’ I blurt out, a bit higher-pitched than I had hoped. I hear Jock snort again. She turns and looks back at me.

‘Huh?’ she asks.

Crap, I’ve got to say it again.

‘Umm, have you got a phone number?’ I squeak, at a slightly lower, hopefully more manly, high pitch.

‘Wow, you are in a hurry, aren’t you bud?’ she laughs.

Jock lets out a big ‘pah!’ again, barely holding back his laughter. I’m almost tempted to turn around and slap him a couple of times. He’s not exactly helping here. He looks at me then gestures towards the girl.

I feel a piece of paper slip into my hand. She steps back and pops her pen back into her handbag.

‘Thanks,’ I say and immediately regret it. I’m not bloody picking up an order at a buffet or something, why the hell am I saying—

‘You’re welcome,’ she says, smiling back. I dunno if she’s serious or not. It’s probably a fake number or something. I didn’t think it would be that easy.

‘A number for a number,’ she laughs, pointing towards our table. ‘Don’t forget!’

She turns and walks off.

I hear a low whistle behind me.

‘That went surprisingly well,’ Jock laughs. ‘That takes me back to many nights watching you try to pick up girls. You looked like a rabbit caught in headlights for three quarters of that. Was beautiful to witness—’

He sees the look on my face then stops. He clears his throat.

‘But yeah, I reckon you’ve done alright there,’ he says, grabbing two beers.

I look down at the piece of paper and open it. Fuck, there is

a phone number on there! Well shit! Jock nudges me to get the last two beers, which I grab off the sticky counter.

‘Could tell she liked a stumbling idiot. Are you sure you’re not a virgin? ‘Cause you sure as hell acted like one,’ he guffaws, turning the jokes right back on again. ‘You had no clue ...’

I want to get annoyed, but it’s Jock—he never means anything by these things.

‘Mate, you know me,’ I shrug. ‘I was born clueless and two decades later, not much has changed.’

Jock roars with laughter, so much so he nearly spills the booze. Looks like there are more folks now; barely anyone can move. My ears are aching from the buzz of the crowd and I nearly slip on the sticky floor. It takes a good five minutes to get back to our table. Logan and Noah are shooing opportunistic revelers off from taking our chairs; they looked relieved when we park the beers on the table. Either that or they’re parched. Probably both.

‘Cheers lads!’ Logan lets out a triumphant roar, and we clink glasses violently together. Finally, my tongue can be satisfied in its search for the succulent refreshment that is a bitter ale. I take an enormous swig; the frothing liquid spills into my mouth and I let it fill every nook and cranny. Ah, now that is bloody lovely!

‘I’m amazed you guys made it back in one piece!’ Noah scoffs, surveying the bedlam around us.

‘We nearly lost Chris over here! Got distracted by a lady, he did,’ Jock nudges me.

Logan’s eyes light up. Oh no, he’s been given a taste. The old Logan is coming out.

‘Story of his life, eh?’ he winks at me. ‘That takes me back

to first year, watching you stuttering trying to talk to girls!’

‘You can laugh all you bloody like, I still got her number!’ I say, trying to shut down the teasing before it begins.

‘Typical Chris, you’ve always been the one who wants to get’s around, eh?’ Logan says as he takes a swig of booze.

‘Well, there’s a girl over there who wants your number too!’ I shoot back.

Logan’s eyebrows launch up his forehead.

‘Me?’ he asks, exasperated.

‘Yeah, the blonde girl over there!’ I point. Logan looks over and sees that Nicole chick waving back at him. She looks quite nice, actually. And she obviously likes him.

‘Yeah, umm, not sure guys,’ he says turning back to us. ‘Dunno if she’s my type, to be honest.’

We all look at him in disbelief.

‘Mate, you could do a lot worse!’ Jock winks at him. ‘She seems pretty cute!’

Logan is looking unconvinced.

‘What’s the worst that can happen?’ I ask. ‘She texts you, and if you don’t like, you don’t respond! No biggie mate.’

Logan’s face softens a bit.

‘Umm, yeah okay. Why not?’ he shrugs, blankly. Probably trying to shut us up, but that’s all the response we need. He doesn’t get up to go over, but it doesn’t matter. I’ll get his number to her somehow.

‘That’s what I’m talking about!’ Jock roars. ‘The army man and the virgin, pulling tonight!’

Urgh, I can never win.

‘So, are you back with us for good now, Logan?’ Noah asks,

changing the subject.

Logan takes a moment, sips his beer.

‘Yeah, man, I’m aiming to be back for good now. Army was great, but it’s time for something else,’ he says.

‘Are you kidding?’ Jock says, ‘After what you told me to-night, I bloody envy you, mate! I’d love to apply for the military at some point. Reckon it’d be worth a shot!’

‘Yeah, well. It’s hard, man, you’ve got to pass basic training first. There’s medical tests, mental tests, everything. They try to find a weakness in you, wear you down. They only take the *strongest*, Jock ...’

His voice trails off.

‘They break your balls,’ he says quietly. ‘That’s what they do to you.’

This is a bit intense for a night like this. The sadistic part of me wants to ask ‘if they only take the strongest, why were you there then?’ but I immediately stop myself; that’s a chicken-shit thing to say.

‘I got past the physical side of things, which was good,’ Logan quickly adds.

‘Why didn’t you kick on with it then?’ Noah asks.

Logan takes a big gulp from his beer.

‘Ah, some medical reason. I don’t really wanna talk about it, to be honest man,’ he replies. ‘You know, the last several months have been a bit of a weird time.’

That’s cool, I totally get it. It’s none of our business.

‘Didn’t your Dad want you to stick around though, seeing as he’s in Brisbane?’ Noah continues.

Logan’s beginning to look a little tense. I can see Noah

means no ill will, but—

Jock jumps in. ‘Well, come on mate,’ he chuckles to Noah. ‘Logan’s back here now, so clearly his dad must be fine with it, eh?’

Noah shrugs. ‘I suppose,’ he adds, ‘Sorry Logan, I was just wondering what happened, considering your dad’s ex-military and all—’

‘Noah, *mate* ... I don’t really want to talk about it, okay?’ snaps Logan.

Woah! Okay! Easy lads, easy. I look over at Noah and gesture towards Logan. It takes Noah a second before he gets it.

‘Sorry, mate,’ he says, holding up his glass. ‘Didn’t mean to pry.’

Logan chinks his glass to Noah’s.

‘All good,’ he responds. ‘No offence given, none taken. My Dad and I didn’t really say goodbye on good terms, that’s all.’ He turns his eyes to the table. ‘It’s still a bit of a sore spot. Not your fault though, so all good.’

An awkward moment passes between us until Jocko, in his usual fashion, downs his bevvy and clunks it hard on the table.

‘Who cares?’ he snorts. ‘Cause you’re back!’

A smile spreads across Logan’s face and he relaxes.

‘When was the last time we had a drink together? Feels like forever!’ I say, quickly changing the subject.

‘I remember!’ Jock replies, just about spitting up half his beer. ‘End of first year! We all finished our last exams on the same day, in the morning. I remember ‘cause we got out at twelve and met up at the uni bar afterwards.’

Logan leans back and puts his hands behind his head.

‘I remember that day,’ he laughs, reminiscing. ‘I’d just been approved to go off to basic. It was starting two or three months later, but I had to leave the following day to go back to Brizzy, for some reason. Can’t remember why now.’

‘All our last exams falling on the exact same day!’ Noah says, smiling. ‘I tell you guys, that was fate! Man, I don’t remember much of what happened after ... I feel like we did something—’

He stops, and looks over at Jock.

‘Was that when we ended up in the pool?’ Noah’s eyes widen. That cheeky smile of Jock’s is getting bigger and bigger.

‘We were about seven pints down each when we got back to college,’ he belches then gestures to Noah. ‘Then we got out the goon sack! You and Chris were worse for wear! I think we sat out on the balcony drinking for a few more hours, too.’

I begin searching through my head. I’m trying to remember something, anything from that night.

‘We could see this new block of flats across the road. They’d gone up literally the week before, remember? We waited until, like, ten, then jumped the fence and went for a dip in their pool!’ Jock quips.

Noah shakes his head. ‘Nope, can’t see it. I must’ve been out of it.’

‘Classic Noah, you always were the one to fall first whenever we consumed a shit-tonne of alcohol,’ Logan laughs.

‘Well, it’s certainly a way to save money!’ says Noah. ‘You get drunk for a lot less!’

Jock rolls his eyes and winces with laughter. ‘To be honest, I was celebrating the fact that I made it through the semester—*hic*—without ever going to one bloody lecture! It’s a record for

me, eh? "Ps make degrees", that's what my old man told me!' he roars.

Finally, something comes back to me. 'That was the night the cops came to the college, wasn't it?' I ask.

Jock's eyes widen with delight. 'Holy crap, it was! Someone at the units complained about trespassers. Fuck me, I forgot about that!'

'I didn't know the fuzz showed up?' says Logan, laughing but exasperated. 'Bloody hell, I would've been in trouble if I'd been caught!'

Fuck me! I burst into laughter as well, so much so my stomach starts to ache.

'What a great night,' Jock wheezes.

'And here's to many more of them!' Noah announces, lifting his empty pint glass.

'Yeah ... and I believe it's your round mate,' says Logan with a grin, gesturing to Noah.

Noah stops smiling for a moment then shrugs.

'All good, mate,' he replies. 'Four of the same, lads?'

We all nod. After all, beer is the great equaliser. Noah jumps up and begins the long and arduous journey back to the bar.