



# READY WHEN YOU ARE

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**PUSH**



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# ONE

The white boys stare at us from the pub. It's Ethan and his mates. They sit on stools behind the railing of the packed pub and sip their beers from schooner glasses, keeping their eyes on us. Next to me, Kalyn stares back at them from behind the steering wheel, his mouth tucked at one corner and his eyebrows scrunched, while Jarny lights a cigarette in the back seat.

“What you bastards lookin’ at?” Jarny shouts. They just stare, then they laugh. And I just look to my lap, because there's a cop car facing us, stopped on the other side of this red light. I know they're watching us—the pickup with all the black faces inside. My throat is drying, but I don't want to drink from my bottle of Coke, in case the coppers think it's a beer and pull us over.

The white boys go back to their drinks and banter as the light turns green and Kalyn eases off the brakes. I expect him to put his foot to the floor and spin the tires, but he must spot the coppers too. We drive steadily past them, blasting our music, and start up the mountain out of town. In the side-view mirror I see the police car slow, then spin around. Now they're coming,

speeding up behind us. It's Constable Rogers driving. I'd recognize those big ears of his anywhere.

"No sudden movements, lads," Kalyn jokes as he watches the rearview mirror. Jarny ashes his cigarette on the interior armrest of the door. The cops' lights come on and spray red and blue into the car. Kalyn flicks on his blinker with a sigh and pulls over. My heart is pounding.

The doors of the police car open as Kalyn turns off the engine. Constable Rogers comes to Kalyn's window with his breathalyzer in hand. He peeks inside.

"Kalyn, Jackson, and Jarny," he says, with such dissatisfaction. "What are you boys doing? Mouthing off at the fellas in the pub?"

"Nah," Kalyn tells him. "Just saying hello."

"Is that right?" Constable Rogers says, his voice dropping an octave. "Seemed a bit to me like youse were trying to start trouble."

"Nope. No trouble," Kalyn replies.

The other copper approaches my side of the truck, red-faced, walking slow, eyes searching through the open windows until he stops by me, staring me down. Constable Rogers holds up his breathalyzer to Kalyn. Kalyn breathes into it before the breathalyzer beeps.

"Looks like you're all good."

I feel such a relief come over my body, even though I know Kalyn hasn't been drinking.

"Have a safe drive, boys."

The coppers walk back to their car. Kalyn starts the truck and we're back on the road.

“Turn it up,” Jarny shouts, as “Hypnotize” by Biggie Smalls starts through the speakers. I do, and we bob our heads in rhythm. Jarny raps along with it, of course, while he rolls himself another cigarette. He’s always rapping. I couldn’t count the number of raps he’s written and made me listen to. And it’s just as well Constable Rogers didn’t decide to give the pickup a random drug search or anything, because we have a case of beer under a cover in the back, which Kalyn bought using his older brother’s ID.

We reach the turnoff and head onto the highway. It’s a few hundred meters along the road that we take the turn towards the Mish. Kalyn doesn’t even brake when he takes the corner. We drift around. He accelerates and the tires scream as we head onto the main street, past the houses lining each side. The dogs of the Mish laze on the road, unmoving for any car.

We pass the empty community center and the toilet block, which sits on its own little field with long grass growing through like heavy pubic hair. Down the hill, we make a turn onto Abby’s dirt driveway, following it around the house and through the broken gate into the backyard.

We turn off Biggie Smalls and, no surprise, there’s more Biggie Smalls roaring from the house. All the mob is in the backyard. I see Tesha, my girlfriend. She’s standing with her best mate, Abby, on the back veranda, drinking the vodka-thing she likes and wearing her white top and black jean shorts, which I like because they highlight her brown thighs.

Jarny carries the case of beer over his shoulder. We head past the fire barrels towards the house. A couple of the boys are piling wood into a heap and offer us a wave.

“Ladies,” Kalyn teases as he passes the girls, which is typical of Kalyn. He’s always trying to get some. Jarny’s more interested in the beer—he’s inside already. I place my hand on Tesha’s hip and plant a kiss on her cheek.

“Fuck off, you’ll ruin my makeup,” she says, pressing her elbow to my chest. The jab of pain makes me laugh, and I head inside with Kalyn. Jarny’s placed the case on the kitchen bench, and the three of us each rip a beer out of the box like we haven’t had anything to drink for days. I notice a few of the girls are helping Abby’s sister decorate the Christmas tree. They string fairy lights along the wall and tape them there.

“Jackson, come dance!” Abby calls as she walks through the back door. Abby is the real party girl of the Mish. She’s always finding some excuse to get drunk and dance. We weren’t really friends before I started going out with Tesha, and now she acts like she’s my bestie too—which is pretty annoying, to be honest.

“After a few more,” I say, holding up my almost full beer. I throw the cap into the bin by the sink and take a sip.

“Don’t be boring,” she calls back.

“You know those whitefellas at the pub?” Jarny interrupts.

“Yeah, they were a couple years above me and Kalyn,” I say, but I can hardly hear myself talk. I walk back out to the veranda, and Jarny follows me. “The lad with the beard’s name is Ethan. He’s a bit of a redneck.”

The sun bears down on us from the afternoon sky. Every day this summer has entailed a selection of loose clothing and sweat—it must be the hottest summer ever. Through the bushes, we can see the tourists driving past with their trailers

and caravans. They're headed farther down the hill to the camping ground by the lake, just like they do every summer.

We head into the backyard and I help Jarny unstack some chairs near the sticks and branches the boys are piling up. The sun goes down past the trees and the shade cools us.

"You thought about next year?" Jarny asks.

"Yeah. Stuff school. Reckon I'll just find a job somewhere."

"Me and Kal will still be there, but."

"Yeah, but you're in Year Ten and Kalyn's smart. I just wanna get a job to make some money, get out of the Mish."

Jarny finishes his beer. "Why? Where you wanna go?"

"I dunno. Somewhere else," I say.

"Cheers to that, then." Jarny taps his empty bottle against mine and I follow him back inside. Tesha's talking with Abby on the couch. They look really deep into it, like they just found out some juicy gossip. I get another beer and spot Kalyn chatting to one of Abby's visiting cousins in the kitchen. He has one hand resting on the bench, with his head tilted just enough to look interested in what she's saying. I know he's trying to pick her up.

I take a sip and turn my attention back to Tesha. Whenever she's gossiping, she always sits forward and uses her hand to express what she's saying—which is exactly what I am seeing right now. Her nails are kept long. Tonight they're glossed with a shiny purple. I should go over there, be a good boyfriend and pretend I'm interested in whatever they're talking about.

Jarny grabs the blasting speaker, carrying it past me and out to the backyard. He doesn't stop despite all the protests from the drunken girls inside.

I'm a little drunk when night comes. Tesha finds me in the backyard and sits on my lap. She smells like the perfume I bought her last month. It's sexy, like a tangy tiger. The backyard is filled with other teenagers from the Mish, and I've been watching Kalyn move from girl to girl, trying his luck.

"He must be horny as hell tonight," I whisper to Tesha. She giggles and starts to kiss me hard, gripping my hair as she does so. I guess Kalyn's not the only horny one tonight.

We leave the backyard and then we're alone in Abby's bedroom. Tesha crawls onto the bed and I crawl on top of her. She pulls my shirt, brings my mouth to hers.

My shirt comes off, then my pants. I unbutton Tesha's shorts and slide them off her legs, drop them to the floor, and kiss her ankles. I take my time and make my way back to her thighs, then to her stomach. She's gripping my hair again. I find her mouth and kiss her. She holds my face against hers. I move my hand from her bare breast to between her legs. She gasps when I touch her. I just keep kissing.

She pulls me onto her body and wraps her legs around my waist. I'm out of breath, but I still kiss her. And it's so hot in this bedroom, my sweat is probably dripping from my skin onto hers.

She kisses me hard again and pulls me against her. She tightens her legs around my waist. I focus. I focus on what I'm doing.

*Come on, I think. Just do it.*

I feel her. I think about feeling her. I think about what she wants me to do, and how much I want to do it. But fuck me, I just can't get hard. I try to breathe slower. Concentrate. I take my hand and try to work it up, as she kisses my forehead and showers me with the warmth of her breath.

“Hurry up,” she whispers. And her voice sounds so sexy, I’m almost straining. I look down to her breasts. My hand is getting sore and now I’m just tired. I roll off her and lie beside her on the bed.

“Sorry,” I say, almost gasping for air. “I’m too fucking drunk.”

“You’re always *too fucking drunk*.”

I find my breath and can feel the disappointment filling the room. I could laugh at myself. Like, really laugh at myself.

*Pathetic.*

*What sort of a man are you?*

“You think I’m ugly or something?” she asks. I can sense a snap in her voice, which pierces me in small stabs.

“No, I’m just drunk.” I want to fall into the mattress, let myself go deep into the blackness and never come back. “Do you want to try again, later?”

“No. Forget it.”

She stands and puts her clothes back on. I just lie there, naked. I wait for the door to close before I sit up. I know I’m not *too fucking drunk*. I’m tipsy at best. And she isn’t ugly. I think she’s beautiful. Maybe my body is just broken, or maybe I’m destined to be an abstinent priest or something.

I get dressed and find my way back to the party. Jarny is making out with one of Abby’s cousins on the couch, and Kid Cudi is playing now. I watch as Jarny’s hand squeezes her hip. It only looks gentle, but I bet it feels nice. I search for Kalyn inside, but I don’t see him. I’d half expected it would be him on the couch, with Abby’s other cousin.

The lights are dimmed, and the music is way too loud. It must be getting late. I head through the back door and into the

backyard, where the music's even louder. Tesha's doing shots with Abby on the grass. She's probably sick of me by now. In all our five months of being together, and two months prior of messing around, I haven't been able to get hard once, not when it's counted. At first I thought I was just nervous. I mean, I was at first. Then I thought it was her—that maybe I just wasn't as attracted to her as I'd thought. But I'm looking at her now as she holds a shot glass filled with vodka, whips it to her mouth, and I know she's beautiful. It isn't her. It's me. I just can't do it.

I leave back through the broken gate and head up the main street of the Mish. Drake is blasting from the speakers now. I can hear him from here. I just hum along to the words as I walk.

I open my front door with caution. It creaks as I close it behind me. I take off my shoes and walk across the wooden floor in my socks, looking to the lounge room as I pass. It's empty as ever, with its couch and chair and television. I savor the image, because I know tomorrow Aunty Pam will be arriving and, just like every Christmas, the house will be filled with little kids—cousins from Sydney.

I walk up the stairs to my bedroom, drop all my clothes to the floor, lie naked on my bed. I toss the blanket away because I won't need it. I feel my penis. It's so useless right now. A let-down. Maybe it just doesn't work at all.

A car horn honks over and over, waking me. It's Christmas Eve, and the morning sun is blinding when I open my eyes. I forgot to pull the fucking curtain across when I went to bed, and now I'm paying for it. Mum's big body booms on the hallway floor, followed by Henry's little rushing feet. As they creak down the

stairs, he's asking her if his cousins are here and she's saying yes. I stagger to my clothes, pick them up off the floor, and slide them on.

"Jackson!" I hear Mum call. I start downstairs. Aunty Pam is just inside the doorway, bags in her hands, wearing a purple top and shorts. All the kids run in from behind her, hugging Henry and cheering and yelling as loudly as they can.

"My little sand-eater," Aunty Pam says. I go down to give her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "How's your art going?"

"I don't really paint so much anymore," I say, looking to my feet.

"Oh. Well, I got a boy who needs to do some art. You can help him out," she says, like I have no say in the matter, like she didn't hear what I just said about not painting so much anymore. "Jackson, this is Tomas. He's living with me for a little while."

She turns to her side to reveal a black boy carrying more bags from her station wagon. He has messy curly hair that looks almost like dreads, like he's never brushed it in his life. His skin is lighter brown than mine, but he has that Koori nose.

"We'll put Henry down here with the boys and you can take Henry's room," Mum says to Aunty Pam. "And we'll put the good mattress in Jackson's room, so Tomas can sleep upstairs away from the kids."

"Who's that?" Henry asks behind me.

"That's Tommy. He just got out of jail," little cousin Bobby whispers, and I feel the strength of my eyebrows as they raise themselves. All the kids barge past Mum and me and race into the house.

Tomas lugs the bags to the doorway and places them on the floor. I extend my hand and Tomas takes it.