

in
ecstasy

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Mia and I had never been in the shop before — it was one of those places you just passed by. We knew there was nothing either of us could afford: it was the kind of stuff you saw in the magazines my mum bought, with price tags in the thousands. Inside, dresses arranged by colour hung on iron rods suspended from the ceiling by invisible wires. It was supposed to look classy, but to me it was contrived and pretentious.

‘Well?’ she looked at me expectantly.

I watched people entering and leaving through a timber-panelled arched doorway — attracted, no doubt, by the tiny SALE sign stuck to the front window. It was weird, but I was nervous. I always was. We were shoppers, we had money — nowhere near enough, but it wasn’t against the law to browse. They couldn’t arrest us for looking, could they? Really though, it had nothing to do with any of that. It was

because I knew we were going in to do the wrong thing.

‘Yeah,’ I said, smiling to hide my nervousness, ‘but remember, you have to try on whatever I give you.’

She grinned wickedly. ‘And that goes for you too.’

Mia headed straight for the rack of orange. Bitch, I thought, until my eyes landed on the purples. I walked past the shop assistants without making eye contact. I figured if I acted like I had every right to be there nobody would say a word.

‘Soph, I’ve found it,’ Mia shouted. ‘It’ll go perfect with your pointy-toed, red patent stilettos.’ The shoes were fictitious of course; this was just Mia’s attempt at embarrassing me totally. In her hand hung an orange dress that I wouldn’t be caught dead in.

‘Yeah, beautiful,’ I said, thrusting a mauve-and-yellow paisley at her, ‘and isn’t this *exactly* the dress you fell in love with in *Vogue*?’

One of the assistants was trying not to hover and I couldn’t help feeling sorry for her. Mia watched her with barely hidden delight. This was part of the dare too — not just who could embarrass the other the most but who could make the biggest impact. In this respect, Mia usually out-performed me.

Flicking the tag on the orange dress made me gasp.

Some sale! No wonder the assistant was trying not to have a heart attack. At half-price it was thirteen hundred dollars. That was as much as my brother's car!

The brocade curtain swung on its wrought iron rod as I slid out of my jeans and T-shirt and wriggled into the dress.

'Is it on?' Mia shouted from behind the other curtain, another of her strategies. Usually she's soft-spoken.

I stifled laughter. 'Yep, it's gorgeous. You?'

'Oh yeah, you're gunna die.'

I ripped open my curtain at the same time she whipped hers back.

'Oh my God, Sophie,' Mia exclaimed, so loudly all heads in the shop turned our way. 'You look like Barbie.'

I looked at my reflection. The dress had given me cartoon-like proportions — my boobs jutted out like pointy cones and the dress hugged me tightly around the waist.

Mia pretended to sound concerned. 'Soph, are you all right? Oh my God, can you breathe?'

I couldn't, because I was laughing so hard. The shiny satin of the paisley dress stopped above her knees, and she'd left her Doc Martens on and hauled her socks up.

The dress was the ugliest thing I'd ever seen in my life. I lost it. I hung onto the curtain laughing so hard I thought I'd split the dress. But Mia wasn't finished.

'Good God girl, you're a danger to society,' she said. 'You could take someone's eye out with those.'

'And you look like someone's grandma on acid,' I said.

We hung onto each other laughing hysterically.

'They're weapons of mass destruction.'

'Shut up,' I choked.

'So, girls, how are you going for sizes?' The assistant's face was clear — she wanted us out.

'Fine,' I said, trying to compose myself.

'Just perfect,' Mia said, and I don't know how she does it but she went from laughter to serious in the blink of an eye. 'So, Sophie, what do you think? Would you wear it to the party tonight?'

'Hmm,' I rubbed my chin. 'It would go with the shoes, but maybe it's too dressy?'

'We'll think about it,' Mia said, going back into her change room.

Mia reckoned I won that one, but I didn't agree. I could've peed my pants — probably would have if I hadn't been wearing orange silk. I could imagine the

sales woman pointing to a sign — ‘If you pee in it, you pay for it.’

We ended up finding some great clothes on sale, real clothes that normal people can afford. And it was fun getting ready for Dom’s party, even though every time I thought about seeing him I felt like throwing up. But Mia was so excited. And when she was dressed, and had made me re-do her hair fifty times, she looked amazing. She knew it too. I could tell by the way she smiled to herself. It was hard not to let her excitement infect me. By the time we walked out the front door of my house I couldn’t wait to get there either.



The music penetrated my shoulder blades through the wall I was leaning against. It was The Prodigy so loud it was vibrating my skull. I couldn't understand the attraction. I just didn't get it. Other girls closed their eyes against the beat and snapped to its rhythm. I closed my eyes too — the pain in my temple was piercing and my heels were raw where my new shoes rubbed.

Where was Sophie? I was fed up and tired. My confidence had evaporated. Soph was my life-ring and she'd vanished. How could she? She knew I was lost without her. We were only here because it was her ex's birthday. Dominic Cimino is totally gorgeous, a genuine year twelve centrefold with a pulse. I think I was more heartbroken than Sophie when she split up with him.

Soph is *that* girl. In year ten she was the girl who always went out with year eleven and twelve guys. She's the chick you see in the canteen talking to guys you'd love to talk to, but don't, because they have no idea who you are. Next to Soph, most girls feel pretty insignificant. She's outgoing and self-confident. Her sideways, under-the-eyebrow look is a

killer. The captain of the footy team dumped his girlfriend for Soph after that look. Everyone in school knows her. And she's the girl with the quiet friend who tags along behind. Yeah, that's me. It's only through Sophie I have any social life at all. Thank God she's my best friend.

I'd been so excited about going to a real party. No parents, and total freedom to do what I liked. Soph and I had hit the shops and I came home with the boho look — a turquoise and brown flowing top over vintage denim jeans. The shoes, which were now causing me extreme agony, were the finishing touch. A lethal stiletto, also in turquoise. I felt like I'd stepped straight off the pages of *Cleo*. I was bursting with self-confidence.

The minute we arrived however, it was another matter. I stood slightly behind Sophie on the street verge clutching a pack of vodka cruisers. The entrance was down the side of the house, a narrow alleyway decorated with party lights. The music was loud from the street, and the closer we got, the harder the beat invaded our bodies. The back yard was bursting with people. Many of them I recognised from school, but they seemed so much older here. I felt pretty intimidated. Everyone was dancing and drinking. I looked at Soph, waiting for instructions. I didn't know what to do. She'd been to plenty of parties like this, as someone's girlfriend.

'Have a drink,' she said, pulling a bottle from its cardboard packaging.

I took it from her, the wet sides slipping in my hand, and twisted it open. I watched Soph surveying the crowd as we both sculled our drinks. I belched loudly, and then covered my mouth, embarrassed.

‘What do you say?’ she asked in a parental voice.

‘Good one,’ I said loudly and we both laughed. I felt myself beginning to relax. Maybe the vodka was working already. We both took another one and shoved the rest of the bottles into a bin full of ice and drinks.

‘Come on,’ she said, leading the way into the crowd. I took a deep breath and followed. She made a beeline for Dominic like a girl on a mission. He was in the games room, standing with his new girlfriend and some mates. It was like hot guy central here. Karen Baxter, the girlfriend, is a year twelve and president of the student council. She’s pretty in an understated way — clear skin, perfectly symmetrical face. She’s the type of girl who can get away with wearing no make-up and her hair is ramrod straight. I watched her face tighten as Soph approached Dominic and kissed him on the cheek, laughing flirtatiously and wishing him happy birthday. He left his hand too long around her waist. Both Karen and I saw it. Dominic still had the hots for Sophie.

Karen leaned in and put her hand on Dominic’s arm. ‘I need a drink,’ she said.

He gave her a smile. ‘Me too,’ he said. ‘Will you get me one while you’re at it?’ He looked at Soph and then me. ‘What about you two, need a drink?’

We both shook our heads and I watched Karen slink off like a kicked dog. Soph acted like she was oblivious to the power she wielded and I stood silently behind her, watching Dominic fall for her all over again.

Where was she? I stood in the games room, watching everyone dancing and laughing in a sea of white smiley teeth. I was shifting my weight from one foot to the other, and finally just had to slide the shoe off the back of my left foot. It was burning hot and already a blister was forming in the red rawness. I was all alone, drinking bourbon out of a plastic cup. Somebody had taken our drinks so I'd stolen someone else's. I figured that was the way it went.

I was watching Karen out in the garden. As the night progressed she'd drunk herself stupid. Now she was fertilising the rose bushes, staggering and holding onto a thorny branch, her long legs pointed inwards at the knees as she swayed and puked. Dominic was nowhere in sight.

'Hey, look who I've found,' Sophie shouted in my ear. Finally, she was back. I turned around and nearly dropped dead. She was hanging onto Lewis Scott's arm.

Lewis Scott is a dream god and I'm not alone in my fantasies about him. His name has been scrawled on toilet walls by hundreds of girls, me included. But now it seemed like Soph had him under her spell, so I'd probably get to know him by default.

'Hi,' I said, smiling and jamming my heel back into my shoe.

'Having a good time?' he asked.

'Fantastic,' I lied, my stomach flipping out from looking up at him. Lewis has to be well over six feet tall — he towered over both Soph and me. He has spiky blonde hair and blue eyes. He's the type of guy you'd expect to see in *Dolly* or on *Home and Away*. He is absolute sex on legs.

'Where've you been, Soph?' I tried not to sound too pissed off.

She ignored my question. 'Lewis has got something for us,' she said, nudging him flirtatiously and giving him that look. 'Go on Lewis, show her.'

Lewis dug into his pocket and looked at Sophie. She nodded her head, laughing coyly. His blue eyes pierced mine as, like a magician, he offered me his fist.

'What?' I asked, trying to get into their light-hearted mood.

He turned his fist over and opened his fingers. In the middle of his palm sat three small round yellow pills. They weren't smooth and perfectly formed like normal pills, the edges were rough and fibrous. And, faintly, in the middle of each was the imprint of a tiny butterfly.

'Shall we?' Sophie shouted in my ear. 'It's an E.' She was smiling and nodding her head. Lewis was also smiling. Everyone was smiling but me. I wanted to be smiling too.

'Okay,' I said. I took one out of his hand and put it straight into my mouth, washing it down with the flat bourbon and coke. I looked at them both like it was no big deal but

internally I stressed about what might happen. Sophie was watching me expectantly.

'It'll take about twenty minutes,' Lewis said as he handed one to Sophie and threw the last one into his mouth.

Thirty minutes later nothing had happened. Sophie saw Dominic go by looking pretty upset and ran outside after him, leaving me alone with Lewis.

'What's up with them?' he asked me.

I shrugged my shoulders. I wanted to say something really clever, something to make him interested in me. 'Dunno.'

'Isn't he with Karen?'

I nodded, resigned to the fact that he wanted to talk about Soph. It was always Sophie. Guys only talked to me because of her. I was a nobody. I tried to think of things to talk to him about.

'Great party,' I offered lamely.

'Yeah,' he agreed, looking off into the crowd, watching the dancers. I stood awkwardly beside him, trying not to move in case I dislodged the thin piece of skin covering my throbbing heel. Outside, Karen was asleep under the rosebush, her white capri pants a mess of spew and grass stains. Not far from her, Soph and Dominic stood together. Soph had a hand on his arm, looking up at him, talking softly. Karen looked like she was snoring. Poor cow.

Lewis hung around for all of five minutes, shifting awkwardly beside me, then said he had to go and see

someone. I watched him walk off. Immediately he seemed to move more freely and started laughing with some of his mates. I was totally cut. I didn't fit in. All the effort I'd put into getting ready had been a waste of time. All my expectations were just wishful thinking. I should've stayed home. I was a total loser.

I went to find Soph. She and Dom were no longer in the garden. The music had got louder and my mood worse. The diehard dancers were still at it, covered in sweat, their faces red and shiny. Nobody looked at me as I slid through the crowd, invisible.

Then I saw her, sitting on the floor next to Craig, which was really weird. Craig's in our class at school and has a reputation for violence — once he ended up doing time in a juvenile detention centre. I've never had anything much to do with him, but he was sitting pretty close to Soph and they were obviously having some kind of deep and meaningful conversation. I didn't want to break into it, but I had to tell her I was going home.

'Soph,' I said softly. Both she and Craig smiled up at me. Even Craig had a warm, friendly smile. It freaked me out.

'Mia. You look so beautiful,' she said, and reached up and touched my face. And it hit me. I was suddenly awash with the most peaceful, tranquil feeling. Her fingers stroked every molecule in my skin. Her touch was like a hundred butterflies fluttering across my face.

'God, Soph, that's amazing.' I dropped from my crouch

into a sitting position next to her. Craig was watching, smiling benignly. I started touching her face like I was a blind person. The contact of her skin against my fingers thrilled me. It was all-consuming. I leaned back against the wall, the rough bricks penetrated my top and prickled my spine in an exquisite way. I moved forwards and backwards and the texture rushed through my veins. Wherever my body contacted another object — the wall, the floor, Sophie, my own clothes — I was saturated by these intense sensations. I'd been so down only seconds before, but Sophie's touch had turned that all around.

I leaned against the wall thinking how much I loved her. I watched the beautiful people around me moving to the beat. I heard the pulse of the universe. Suddenly I understood why we existed. Every breath I took moved the air around me. Atoms and molecules parted as my mouth drew in a wake of air. I watched myself exhale the particles. I reached up and touched them, floating around me.

All my senses were magnified. The lights were vivid and they streaked as I turned my head. The music was beautiful, it became part of my rhythm as I sat breathing in air. The music spoke to me in a way music never has before. It had been like a foreign language but all of a sudden I understood what it meant. I closed my eyes and absorbed the beat.

I felt a hand on my leg. I opened my eyes and Lewis was sitting on the floor next to me, smiling at me. He was so

beautiful. His hand was heavy on my thigh, sending electric shocks up my body. I put my hand on top of his and laced my fingers through his. Then I reached up and touched his face. As I made contact with his skin I realised how much I loved him. I'd always watched him from a distance, too frightened to approach. But now he was here next to me, touching my face in a way that made me shiver in ecstasy. I traced his jaw line. The sensations that shot through my fingertips were electric. It was the most wonderful feeling in the entire world. Nothing had ever felt anything like this. I traced his lips and ran my fingers across his eyelids and eyebrows.

'You're beautiful,' I whispered to him. We sat in the corner touching each other's faces and arms and hands. 'I was so down before,' I said.

'I know.' He kissed my fingertips.

'But you saved me.' His act of generosity, his small gift had helped me feel all this. He'd allowed me to fit in, to really fit in.

I loved everyone. I looked around the room at all these wonderful people, smiling so much my face ached. After a while I went and sat with someone else and we talked about our dreams and hopes. It was so easy. Each person in the room was a friend. I suddenly realised how well I knew them all. I cared about them all so much. I knew the secrets to the universe. I knew how humankind could live together in harmony. It was so obvious that people only wanted happiness. I'd unlocked the door to a hidden world. And it was heaven.



Dom's party seems like the place where everything began to unravel. But it wasn't. It really started long before that, before I even went out with him. It started with a lie and a big mistake. It's hard to even think about it, but maybe things wouldn't have become so awful if I'd never told that lie. It changed my friendship with Mia.

We were best friends. You hear girls say that all the time. 'She's my best friend, blah, blah, blah,' and then next week they've got a new one. But it wasn't like that for us. We'd been friends since kindergarten. All through school, if I needed a partner for something, that would be Mia. Everyone else knew it too, even the teachers. Sometimes it felt like we were treated as one person. And I didn't mind because Mia was the person I liked the best. Our friendship just worked without any effort. She'd make me laugh if I was down, or I'd solve her problems if she was stuck. We talked about everything. There were no secrets.

Once the two of us organised a camping trip in the summer holidays before the start of year ten. We had a small tent, a stove, sleeping bags, kero lamp, supplies in an esky, a pack of cards and some magazines. We loaded everything onto a quad bike and drove it down the bush track to the bottom of my family's holiday place in Augusta. There's five acres of native bush with a clearing in the centre where the house stands, surrounded by mowed lawn and tall scraggly gums and oaks. At the start of each spring Mum carries on about snakes. 'They're most dangerous this time of year,' she warns like she's never said it before, 'just out of hibernation when their venom is most potent.'

We pitched our tent, unrolled our swag and set up our camping stove. Mia was cooking. She shook the pancake mixture in its plastic bottle and poured it into the pan. I sat back and watched — Mia knows exactly how to ham a situation up and put on a show. The pan kept slipping off the stove, it wasn't hot enough, or it was too hot and the pancakes starting burning. She was trying to flip them in the air and ended up picking most of them up out of the dirt. It was dusk by the time she'd finished and we chewed our way through the best parts. I told her how delicious they were, even with unidentifiable crunchy bits.

The grey of dusk deepened to darkness and we turned the kero lamp on and huddled together in the tent. In the stillness outside I listened to the rustling of the bushes. Mia shifted nervously next to me, and when an owl started hooting she almost jumped out of her skin.

There was nothing to be scared of. I had a mobile phone and Dad would've been down there in a shot.

'Do you ever get scared of stuff?' Mia said.

I nodded.

'I do too,' she said. She was quiet for a minute, the shadows cast by the kero light elongating her features until she didn't look like Mia at all. 'I'm scared of almost everything.'

And she was. I'd known her most of her life. She hated change.

'I mean it's like, what's happening next?' she said. 'After school and stuff? What happens if you end up in some crap life?'

I thought she might have been thinking about her mum and dad.

'Yeah, but think of all the other stuff, like travelling the world,' I said. I couldn't wait; I wasn't scared of change at all. All I was scared of were people's perceptions of me. I couldn't stand failure and I hated upsetting people, or letting them down. I liked people

to think I had it together, that I knew where I was going, that I would get what I wanted.

‘But you know what else I’m scared of?’ she said suddenly. ‘What if you and I weren’t friends any more. What if one day we didn’t speak to each other?’

I sat in the strange shadows of the tent. As a possibility it seemed so remote. What could ever stop Mia and me from being friends?

‘It’ll never happen,’ I said easily. ‘We’ll be friends forever.’

I awoke to her high-pitched shriek. My face was pressed against the side of the tent and Mia was practically sitting on me.

‘What is it?’ I asked, wide awake and hoisting her off me in my scramble for the torch.

‘Something touched my leg.’ Her knees were pulled up to her chin. ‘I think it’s a snake.’

I flashed the torch around the tent. The bottom of the flap was unzipped, only about fifteen centimetres or so, but enough to have let something in. I felt like laughing, it was probably a moth or something, but then I saw it. A quick flash of black, poking out from beneath Mia’s crumpled sleeping bag. I swung the torch back quickly, now fearful. Maybe it was a snake. I

mentally assessed our escape route; we were closer to the opening than the snake. We could unzip the flap and scramble out before it realised it was trapped. I knew from my mother's seasonal warnings that you didn't want to trap a snake — they might turn on you.

'Unzip the doorway,' I whispered to Mia, forgetting in my panic that snakes are deaf. Her hands were shaking as she reached across and slowly pulled the zip upwards. I trained my torch back on the last sighting of the snake. There it was again, the tip of its tail, moving. It had to be a tiger snake. I grabbed the mobile with my spare hand. 'Go,' I hissed. She didn't want to put her feet on the floor of the tent, but she didn't want to stay a second longer. In a very ungraceful movement she fell through the doorway with me close behind.

'Shit, shit, shit,' we chorused as we scrambled to our feet.

'What now?' she asked.

'Dunno,' I said, zipping the flap up to keep the snake inside.

I phoned Dad and in minutes he was there.

'Is it still in there?' he asked.

I nodded. 'I wasn't sure what to do. I trapped it.'

'Go over there and sit on the bike,' he ordered.

Mia and I pulled our feet up onto the seat and

watched him open the tent flap and gingerly begin moving the sleeping gear.

‘Crikey,’ he shouted, and Mia’s nails dug into my arm. ‘Will you check out the size of that!’

‘What is it?’ I tried to sound normal, but terror has a funny way of making your voice high pitched.

‘It’s no tiger snake,’ he said, turning his back on the snake still trapped in the tent, ‘it’s not even a tiger — it’s a different genus altogether.’

‘What?’

‘Here’s your snake, Mia,’ Dad said, reaching into the tent and pulling out our black cat, Floyd. ‘Felis catus.’

Floyd stared at us wide eyed. I laughed in relief. But Mia was uncertain. ‘Are you sure that’s all? It touched my leg and it felt scaly, not furry.’

Dad smiled at her determination. ‘That’s all there is Mia. One domesticated house cat. Sorry, no snake!’

She attempted a smile, but she clearly wasn’t one hundred percent convinced. In her mind a snake, not a cat, had invaded the tent. And no one, even in the face of irrefutable evidence, could convince her otherwise. She was so stubborn. But back then I accepted all that about her. She was my best friend.

So, why would I lie to her?