


Girlfriend *fiction*

STEP UP AND DANCE

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ALLEN & UNWIN

CHAPTER 1

It was the letter of my dreams – a Valentine’s letter, wrapped in a blood-red envelope, leaning against the soy sauce on our kitchen table.

I picked up the envelope, flipped it over and dropped it beside my plate because just then I was more interested in the soy sauce. Mum’s sushi rolls after a late dance class are *to die for*, like Tim Tams at the right time of the month.

‘Don’t get that sauce on your tights,’ Mum scolded as I tucked in to my third roll. She hovered behind one of the chairs, eyes twinkling so that her crow’s feet were almost beautiful. ‘Well, Saph, who’s it from?’

‘It’ll just be from Summer,’ I sighed, mouth full, pulling my tights away from a blister on my big toe.

My best friend Summer is the kind of person who hands out millions of cards on February 13 in the hope that she’ll receive just as many back the next day. Last year she made

all the cards herself and decorated them with her own red lipstick kisses. (A tad corny if you ask me.) When I gave her a hard time about spreading her love so far (fourteen cards and forty-two kisses!) she just shrugged and said, ‘Well, practice makes perfect.’ That’s my Summer.

It’s not every day that a girl receives a Valentine, even from her best friend. But I was putting off opening it because right up until the moment when I opened the envelope and actually saw Summer’s name scribbled at the bottom of the card, I could hang onto the hope – microscopic, amoeba-sized, but still a sweet sparkle of hope – that it could perhaps be . . . *from him*.

When I finally slid my finger into that red envelope and pulled out the paper inside, Mum had given up waiting for me to open it and was watching TV with Dad.

I could hear the hum of the dishwasher and the quiet ting of glasses inside. The letter felt cool in my hands. Carefully, I unfolded it.

The first thing I noticed was the number of words – way more than the *Love your work!* that Summer might write. It was typed and printed on a plain A4 page. Not Summer’s style *at all*.

I skimmed down the page until my eyes fell on the only handwritten words. And there it was. His beautiful, bold, sporty name – *Damien Rowsthorn*.

Damien, Damien, Damien . . . When I saw those words my heart seemed to stop and then begin again to the beat of his magnificent name.

No one has any idea what Damien means to me. To most

people he's just an NBL basketball player. But to me . . . well, seeing his name written carefully, lovingly, at the bottom of a heartfelt letter was better than receiving a bunch of red roses from Orlando Bloom. It was like Minnie Mouse getting a giant cheese-wheel from Mickey. Damien, without a doubt, was the man of my dreams. His handwriting wasn't too bad either.

He had signed his full name. How cute! *It's not like I don't know who you are, Damien!* (I never sign emails Sapho Thespina Giannopoulos, life's too short for a start.) And he'd typed *from your secret admirer* at the bottom of the letter, as if he'd had to work up the courage to sign his name. Damien was so confident on the basketball court, I couldn't believe he was sweet and shy in real life!

I ran to my room, shut the door, and fell into his words – reading backwards and upwards and all the wrong ways, trying to read them before they disappeared like a daydream, starting to believe that this really was a letter from Damien to me.

To Saph,

I have watched you dancing for a year. The things you do with your legs! And your body. You dance like a goddess. I can't get you out of my mind. Do you ever notice me?

Happy Valentine's Day from your secret admirer.

Damien Rowsthorn.

Ah, my dear sweet Damien. He clearly had brains as well as supremely sexy legs. He'd work out a way to get around the ban.

Last year, one of the girls in our cheerleading troupe went to a nightclub with a basketballer after the game. A photographer caught them pashing on the dancefloor and a newspaper ran the headline Sports Star and Cheerleader in Drunken Embrace. Very bad for the family image of the Magic Charms. (Not to mention the number of calories in three lemon vodkas and a cocktail with a name that made even Lesley's cheeks go pink.) Lesley is our choreographer, and jeez was she furious. After that, two big rules were introduced for all Magic Charms – guys and girls.

1. NO DRINKING IN PUBLIC.

(Fine with me – I'm underage anyway.)

2. NO SOCIALISING WITH BASKETBALL PLAYERS.

(*Not remotely* fine. I mean, stopping basketballers and cheerleaders from going out? That's against the laws of nature.)

Sometimes kids at school ask me for gossip about the Magic players, as if we're all sitting around together before each game, sharing game plans and heat rub. But in reality, the players have nothing to do with the cheerleaders. Their job is the game, and ours starts when a time-out is called. We don't even train at the same time.

So you can see how clever it was for Damien to send me a *secret* letter – *all* our time together would have to be secret. He'd even gone to the trouble of finding my address, which

was just short of amazing since we're not listed. Brains, wit and a sweet hook shot – clearly the perfect man.

I lay on my bed, chin in hand, smiling at the back of my closed door. Damien stared back at me – light bushy hair, well-muscled shoulders, broad cheeks, even his eyebrows were cute. If he was going to be my boyfriend I'd probably have to take his poster off my wall – he might think it was a bit weird.

So, Damien, we were meant to be together after all.

I rested my head on my arm, closed my eyes and let the daydreams come thick and fast. Hiding in the back seat of Damien's car as he drives me to the games. A wink or secret signal between us each time he scores a basket. Fussing over him after a hard game, smoothing heat rub over his sore shoulders . . .

My eyes flew open. *Omigod, the next time I saw him we'd actually speak to each other!*

Yes, Damien of my dreams, I do notice you. Every game, you're all that I see – you and your gorgeous legs.



'See you at ten-thirty,' said Dad, after I had kissed him on the cheek and winced at his gross spiky beard.

He was gripping the steering wheel with both hands even though we were safely parked in the loading bay of the basketball stadium. Drop-off time is always a nervous moment for Dad. When I had first asked if I could join the

Magic Charms cheer squad, Dad stared at me as if I'd asked to become a stripper. (*Jeez, thanks, Dad.*)

Then the lecturing had begun. *No daughter of mine . . . You're too good for that, Saph . . .* and a heap of other phrases that made me think he had time-travelled from the 1950s with the sole purpose of torturing me.

Of course, I hadn't given up that easily. It had taken three weeks of *Basketball's a family game . . .* and *This is a dream chance for any dancer . . .* from me and Mum before we wore him down to a growling *Okay then*. But somehow I still felt like I was letting him down each time I went to a game.

'Actually, we'll be finished half an hour later tonight,' I said, smiling as if it was no big deal. Before he had time to stop me, I slid out of the front seat, grabbing my pompoms, costume and make-up bag. (It takes a lot of stuff to look like a Charm.)

'Wait, Saph! Why?' Dad's voice had a deep growl to it – calm, but not for long.

With arms full, I leaned back into the car. 'There's this . . . ah . . . peewee basketball demonstration before the main game. You know, the little kids?' I said with my eyebrows raised. 'They're really cute, on the big basketball court and all.' I shrugged. 'Anyway, that's going to push the main game back half an hour. Maybe more!'

To be honest, I had never lied to Dad before. I mean, I'd stretched the truth about Summer's birthday party last year, and forgotten to mention the flasher at the Harrison St bus stop, but I'd never told a bold bad lie like this one. There was

a good chance he would see straight through me. After all, he was *my dad* – my stubborn, overprotective, devoted Greek dad. Maybe he had already spotted the pile of nonsense as it came out of my mouth.

I held my breath, trying to look like a little girl begging for a new doll, but feeling more like I was auditioning for the role of Izzy from *Neighbours*, or as some other TV bad girl.

Dad's face was in shadow so I couldn't see his expression. But finally he just sighed and shrugged at the steering wheel.

I started breathing again. He'd bought it!

'Do you want me to catch a lift back with Megan?' I asked, not wanting to keep him out of bed any longer than I had to. 'She keeps offering.'

'No, Saph. I'll pick you up.' Then Dad actually took one hand off the steering wheel and blew me a clumsy kiss.

I wanted to crawl back into the car and throw my arms around his neck, like I used to when I was little. *Daddy I love you . . . I love you . . . I love you . . .* But this was just a normal goodbye, like any other. Or at least, that's how it had to *seem*. So I only let my voice soften a bit. 'Thanks, Dad.'

After one last glance at the station wagon as it drove away, I pushed open the heavy delivery door, ran down the corridor and banged up the stairs. I stopped off in the change-rooms just long enough to drop my stuff and change into dancing shoes. It was bright in there, warm and messy with eight other sets of pompom bags and performance stuff. I was clearly the last of the troupe to arrive.

More heavy doors, another wide corridor, and then I burst into the massive, empty heart of the building, the main basketball stadium.

Dotted along one long side of the court were eight bodies stretching like cats in the afternoon sun. As always, Gino and Andrew were laughing together about something. Megan was my only real friend in the troupe, but I knew the bodies of the other dancers like I know my own. We had spent so much time together – pushing and pulling, matching position, puffing and sweating.

I didn't know what most of them did during the day (only that Megan worked in a bank), but I knew the shape of each thigh, the strength of each set of stomach muscles and the extension of each leg. They were my dancing comrades, my body brothers and sisters.

'How's the ankle?' I asked Megan as I slid onto the floor next to her and started reaching to the side. It felt good to stretch out the past few days, and wake my muscles for work.

'Ankle's okay, but my calves are killing.' She made a crazy face that didn't match her perfect make-up. Then she reached over her leg, revealing the lovely curve down her side. Megan is gorgeous.

'Tell me about it.' I pulled my feet back, feeling the pang of week-old pain. 'That new half-time routine –'

'Speaking of which,' Megan butted in. She nodded towards the rustling and bluster coming from behind me.

I didn't have to turn around to know what was coming. Lesley was here. My peaceful warm-up was over.

‘Right, people! Hope you’re all warm and toasty,’ Lesley called. Her CD player and a collection of bags landed by the side of the court with a dull thump. Then she straightened up, holding her back as if she were pregnant. ‘We’re starting right into the half-time number, then I want to run through the time-outs in order. No time for chatting, people. Up, up, up!’

We all ran to the side, in perfect order and position for the start of the half-time routine. I managed to fit in some extra stretches and warm-up moves, the bare minimum to get through. But I didn’t have time for much else. No more talking, no more thinking, just the routine.

As I leapt and kicked, taking care to be perfectly in line, I felt a quickening in my chest, a secret dance in my heart. I just had to get through rehearsal and the game itself, then I would finally get to talk to Damien.



‘Ooooooh yeeeeeeah!’ The cry echoed through the packed stadium.

A three pointer from Damien! I jumped up, kicking and shaking my pompoms with the girls, while Gino and Andrew did back flips. We were minutes away from a win.

I kept my eyes on Damien as I kicked and jumped, hoping for a secret look between us. Had he guessed that I planned to find him after the game? *Would he try to find me?* But he was busy doing high-fives with his team-mates and shaking a victory fist at the crowd, so he didn’t look my way.

Soon the cheers calmed and I sat cross-legged again, feeling the faint vibrations in the floorboards as the players ran back to their starting positions. Being a shortie, like Megan, I'm in the front, which can have its advantages. Trust me. Who wants luscious long legs like the other dancers when they get stuck up the back, leaving us shorties with the best view?

And what a view it was.

By now, the players were sweating. *Oh Damien . . .* I sighed and smiled, feeling closer to him than ever before. Back came the ball to our end and my eyes wandered up the length of Damien's legs.

But I had to be careful not to let myself stare at him too much. When you're sitting in front of a packed house, you never know who might be watching. Besides, I had to keep my mind on the job. A time-out could be called any minute.

Like right now! In a flash the music started and the troupe sprang into life. The nine of us fanned out and took control of the basketball court. In this dance we were a line leaping forward up the court, folding in on itself in swirls and patterns.

It felt awesome, like being a petal in a moving, growing flower.



As the final siren blared, I jumped and screamed with the crowd.

‘Magic! Magic! Magic!’

My heart was racing and my throat was strained, but I wasn’t just cheering for the win. After two days of planning, I was *heart-stoppingly* close to speaking to the man of my dreams.

Back in the changerooms, I slipped into my clothes – black pants and a wraparound top, plus black high heels.

‘Want a lift?’ asked Megan, just like always.

And, just like always, I shook my head and shrugged. ‘No thanks, Megan. Dad keeps saying no.’

Megan blew me a kiss as she walked out.

After she had gone, I walked out the delivery entrance and hid my bags behind a skip. I pulled a piece of paper and pen from the side pocket of my make-up bag, then I dashed back inside.

Now for the tricky part. I knew that the players often had drinks in the bar after the game. But would Damien be there tonight? For all I knew, he might be wandering around the stadium corridors, trying to find me! *Ah Damien . . .* But the bar was the smartest place to start. I sneaked through a back corridor, not wanting to bump into anyone on the way.

At the bottom of the steps leading up to the bar, I stopped and clutched the cold rail. My throat was suddenly tight. My heart pounded in my chest. I had planned this moment so carefully – but now I was terrified.

I took a big breath. Then another. And started up the stairs.

‘Saph? What are you doing here!’

I froze. Then forced myself to breathe. ‘Oh. Hi, Lesley,’ I said, as if this was a normal place for me to be.

Lesley glanced at my high heels and frowned. ‘What are you *doing* here?’ she said again, serious this time.

I held up the piece of paper and pen. ‘An autograph,’ I said quickly. ‘My friend wants an autograph.’

Lesley tilted her head to one side, studying my face. She was wearing a flowing black dress that seemed to float about her and make her look bigger than she really was.

I smiled and raised my eyebrows hopefully.

Then Lesley nodded. ‘Okay, but don’t you DARE tell your father I let you come into the bar!’

‘Thanks, Lesley!’ I gave her a quick hug and bounded up the stairs. I could hear her thumping up behind me. Was she going to keep an *eye on me*?

As soon I pushed through the bar door, the hot smell of alcohol hit me. For a moment I just stood there, surprised at the sights and sounds of this strange world. Then Lesley came up behind me.

‘Whose autograph do you want?’ she asked, slinging her arm over my shoulders.

‘Um, Damien Rowsthorn?’ I answered, strangely glad to have Lesley with me.

For a moment she scanned the room, then pointed. ‘There.’

And there he was. So tall. So beautiful. So close to being mine.

With Lesley close behind me, I made my way across the

crowded room. Everyone in here was tall – adult-sized and more. Sometimes it was difficult just pushing past them, as if they were too big to even see me.

Then, at last, I was standing in front of the man of my dreams. He was drinking a beer and chatting to a tall woman in a long, backless dress. I glanced back at Lesley, who had stopped to talk to someone. Somehow she already had a glass of wine in her hand. She smiled and winked.

I turned back to Damien, feeling tiny. He was even taller than he seemed from the side of the court. *Hugs are going to be awkward*, I thought. But hugs suddenly seemed a long way away. I just stood there like a puppy dog, waiting for Damien to notice me.

After an embarrassing eternity, he glanced away from the tall woman.

Our eyes met.

I waited for the moment . . . the connection between us that I had dreamed of. But Damien just raised a bushy eyebrow and tilted his gorgeous head to one side.

‘Can I help you?’ he said.

A rush of fire burned on my neck. ‘Um . . .’ I held out the piece of paper and pen, wishing I could turn and run.

‘Autograph hunter, eh?’ said the tall woman beside Damien. She was almost as tall as he was. Even their shoulders seemed to match.

‘Who should I make it out to?’ asked Damien. His voice was higher than I expected. As he took the paper and pen, our fingers didn’t even touch.

‘Um . . . Saph,’ I managed to whisper.

Part of me still hoped he was acting, pretending not to know me. *Maybe he would write a secret message on the paper, or just his phone number – anything to prove that the letter really had been from him.*

But when the paper came back all it had was *Cheers, Saph! Damien Rowsthorn*, scrawled across it in messy handwriting. Handwriting that I had never seen before.

‘Thanks,’ I managed. Then turned with my head down and my lips pressed tight. *Don’t cry in here. Not here, Saph. Just get out.*

I lost Lesley then, dodging the bodies and brushing past a fat man in a way that would normally make me squirm. I made it out the door before a sob escaped my throat. The first meaningful relationship in my life had begun and ended in the time it took to raise an eyebrow.

I ran down the bar steps and out to the back entrance of the stadium, hoping that Dad would already be waiting for me.

But the loading bay was empty and dark.

I pulled my bags from their hiding place and stood in the shadows, tears sliding down my cheeks. *Where are you, Dad?*

After a while, my tears slowed and the night breeze cooled my cheeks. Then I frowned, suddenly thinking of another question – the real question of the night.

If the Valentine’s letter wasn’t from Damien, then who *had* sent it?

CHAPTER 2

All through the next day I was either slapping myself on the thigh or sobbing with shame. At least, that's what I was doing on the inside. On the outside, I lay on the couch with one leg hooked over the back, watching car racing with Dad.

Even though Dad had no idea anything was wrong, it still felt good to be with him. And I didn't have to do much either. A skid from one of the cars required a grunt. A proper crash required a gasp. In extreme cases, maybe a pile-up or a possible injury, Dad would say, 'That was a bad one.' And I would say, 'Mmmm,' or if I was feeling particularly talkative, 'Really bad.'

Most of the time I had no idea what was happening with the cars, it was my mind that was racing. *How dumb can one girl be? To get excited about a forged letter was one thing. But to actually lie and sneak around in order to speak to someone who didn't even know my name, that was stupendously stupid!*

After nearly two hours of roaring engines, Dad's grunts turned into snores and I couldn't pretend anymore that everything was normal. I shut myself in my room and pulled the blood-red envelope from its hiding place inside my German dictionary. I held it in two hands and sat on my rug, not wanting to look at it while lying on my bed.

For two wonderful days, this envelope had granted my most secret wish. Now it had become something altogether different.

For the hundredth time, I slid out the letter.

Parts of it now seemed sleazy and fake, like the fact that his full name had been signed, and that the words *from your secret admirer* had been typed just above his signature. If only I had realised what it all really meant!

But who on earth could have written the letter? And worse, why did they want to hurt me?

Sentences that had once melted my heart now made my skin crawl. This person had been watching me for a year, peering at me from the stands like a gross Peeping Tom. *Bleugh!* I felt sick just thinking about it. But they also knew how I felt about Damien. That was the part that didn't make sense.

Summer knew that I thought Damien was the cutest on the team. But she had no idea *how much* I loved him. My dreams of Damien had always been so private, so close to my heart, that I had never really gushed about him like other kids do about their crushes. Still, someone had worked it out. But who, and how?

Late in the afternoon my mobile beeped. A text from Summer: OK 2 CALL?

I called her straight back.

‘So how was the date with lover boy?’ she asked. It felt good to hear her calm voice.

‘I...’ A lump formed in my throat. ‘The letter wasn’t from him.’

There was silence at the other end, not usual for Summer. Then she said quietly, ‘Omigod . . . you’re kidding.’

I started crying then, blubbering like an idiot, trying to talk, but not getting anything out. Of course the letter hadn’t been from Damien. Of course he wouldn’t write a letter like that to someone who was five years younger than him. Of course!

But the letter had been so surprisingly wonderful that I had wanted to believe it was true. I had wanted it so much that I had let myself believe.

‘Hey, it’s okay. Don’t cry, Saph,’ came Summer’s voice, soft and worried.

‘I feel like such a fool!’ I blurted out.

‘It’s not your fault,’ said Summer. ‘Someone just played a dumb trick. That’s all.’

‘But whoooooo?’ I wailed.

‘I don’t know,’ said Summer with anger in her voice. ‘But we’re going to find out.’



‘Wunderbar, wunderbar! Schön, schön . . .

‘Wunderbar, wunderbar! Schön, schön.’

On the screen at the front of the room, a German rock band wiggled and made faces at the camera.

Tittering spread through the class, but Mr Kissinger didn’t seem to care. He stood to one side, tapping his toes and nodding his head. Normally, you wouldn’t expect the words ‘cool’ and ‘teacher’ to fit in the same sentence, but Mr Kissinger was cool. His latest thing was to bring in German rock videos for us to hear pronunciation and see modern German culture. Well, almost modern. This band was clearly straight out of the 1980s. But you can’t blame the man for trying.

I stared at the crumpled page in front of me, doodling a pattern up the side. The band was off its tree, but I was only half-listening. The other half of my mind was occupied by the list that Summer and I had scribbled over a lunch of deep discussion. It was headed *Top Suspects in the Case of the Mean and Awful Valentine’s Letter from Hell*. On the list was everyone who knew both me and Damien Rowsthorn. Problem was I couldn’t believe that any of them would have done it.

All the dancers in the Magic Charms were on the list. They had seen me dance, of course, and might have guessed that I had a crush on Damien. But no self-respecting dancer would write ‘the things you do with your legs’, even as a joke.

Next came Lesley, but the letter was way too childish for her. And surely there was no way she would have let me walk up to Damien on Saturday night if she knew why I was

really there. Lesley's pretty tough when we're training, but she's not too bad the rest of the time.

After that came the basketballers themselves, their manager and one of their fans who just seems to hang around all the time. But none of them really seemed to fit. And I couldn't answer the big questions for any of them. Why on earth did this icky, sleazy person want to trick me like that, and how had they found out my address?

'Saph, what do you think?'

Suddenly I realised that the rock video had finished minutes ago. 'Um . . . what was the question, Sir?' I bluffed.

'What do you think of the song, Saph?' Mr Kissinger was smiling. He knew he had caught me out.

'Well, they think life's wonderful . . . and pretty?' I tried.

Mr Kissinger raised his eyebrows at me, meaning *I'll let you get away with it this time*. 'Anyone else?'

Jay, sitting across from me, put up his hand. Normally, you wouldn't expect a sporty kid to make it to Year 10 German. At least, not a boy. But Jay was different from all the other jocks at school. For a start he had brains, and he used them. Last term he did an amazing talk about the politics of soccer in Germany.

'They're being ironic,' Jay said. 'Like, everyone's so fake, just say it's wonderful, even if it isn't.'

'*Wunderbar!*' clapped Mr Kissinger. 'Anything else?'

I unzipped my pencil case, and slid the crumpled list inside. Time to pay attention. German is not one of the classes that I can bluff my way through. Then I froze.

Scrawled across one corner of my pencil case was the end of a conversation between Summer and me. It was from the year before, when I had first started cheerleading. On our way into home group Summer had asked me about the players. Like any decent conversation interrupted by school, we had finished it in writing, up the back of the room.

Who has the best body? Summer had scrawled in the corner.

And there was my answer, right on my pencil case for anyone to read.

Damien Rowsthorn has the best EVERYTHING!!!!

Suddenly I knew where I had been going wrong. I'd been trying to think of someone from basketball who knew about Damien Rowsthorn and could have found out my address. But that was back to front. The writer of the letter could be someone who *already knew my address* and had *found out about Damien Rowsthorn*. Like maybe someone from school? The bus I caught stopped right outside my house!

Now all I had to do was work out who from school might be a basketball fan. Lots of kids, that's who. But this person knew that I had been cheerleading for a year – *they must regularly go to watch Magic play*.

If Summer had been in my German class, I would have written her a note right away. I needed her to do a bit of asking around for me. But I wouldn't see her until home time.

'Hast du etwas Zeit für mich ...' Another rock video started up.

I settled back in my chair, trying to focus on the video. Across from me, Jay was tapping one foot under the table.

Jay plays basketball . . .

I kept staring at him, deep in thought. His long legs were folded like a cricket's, cramped under the desk. Before long Jay shifted self-consciously and sat straight in his chair.

I smiled vaguely and looked back to the video. Maybe I could get Jay to ask around for me? Doing German together meant that I knew him pretty well. I would *almost* count him as a friend. At least I knew he would ask around for me without being an idiot about it.

'Neun und neunzig Luftballons . . .'

This had been a very useful German class. I was hot on the scent of my enemy . . .



'Jay! Wait up!'

When the bell rang for the end of German, Jay was packed up and out the door before I could stop him. I wasn't sure why he was in such a hurry. We were both headed to the same class – English, with dizzy Miss Ingleby. Miss Ingleby is always late and in a tizz. I think they had to schedule all her classes near the end of the day just so that she would make it in time.

The flow of traffic in the corridor was slow, just as it always is near the end of the day.

'Jay, wait!' I tried again. But he had disappeared in front of four Year 12 boys – a moving wall as far as I was concerned. But slow school traffic can always be beaten, as long as you

know the right shortcuts. I nipped through the office foyer, taking care to shut the doors carefully behind me. Students aren't meant to go in there, but I walked straight through as if I was running an important errand. None of the office ladies even looked up.

When Jay finally came out of the senior school building, I was waiting at the bottom of the steps. I rested my hip on the brick pillar, and smoothed a bit of hair that had fallen out of my ponytail.

'Hey, how did you get there?' asked Jay as he came down the steps to me.

'I'm a magician,' I said with a shrug.

'Clearly,' Jay laughed. He lifted his baseball cap and put it on again backwards. 'Are you using your powers to stalk me?'

I liked the way he looked at me, calm and direct. We headed up the path to the English portables, walking side by side. It was a narrow path, with a wall on one side and a thick hedge on the other, so we had to walk unusually close. I kept my arms tucked tight around my books.

'Actually, I need to ask a favour,' I said.

'Fire away,' said Jay, kicking a stone. It skimmed the wall and landed on the path a few metres ahead.

'I got a letter, see ...' I started. 'But it was forged,' I explained. 'I don't know who it was from.'

'Secret admirer, hey?' said Jay, grinning.

Secret admirer! My eyes narrowed. 'Do you know anything about it?'

Jay rubbed his chin, ‘Hmmm . . . Let me think . . .’

I stopped walking. It must have been one of his basketball friends. ‘Who was it, Jay?’ I asked quickly. ‘Tell me!’

Jay stopped a few paces ahead and turned. ‘Tell me if you liked the letter, and I’ll tell you who wrote it,’ he said, still grinning.

‘I absolutely *hated* it,’ I said slowly, and added in some swearing just to make it clear exactly how I felt about the stupid letter. I didn’t want Jay reporting to his friends that I was okay about this.

Jay’s smile disappeared and his forehead wrinkled. He grabbed his baseball cap and swung it around the right way, so that his face was in shadow again.

A group of junior school kids walked past whispering and giggling.

‘But . . . I thought you liked Damien Rowsthorn,’ Jay said once they had passed.

Damien Rowsthorn . . . My mouth fell open as my brain went into overdrive.

‘You did it? It was you, wasn’t it!’ Even as I said it, I couldn’t believe it was true.

‘Well . . .’ Jay kicked at the path with his shoe. ‘What’s so good about Damien Rowsthorn anyway?’

I shook my head, feeling a bubbling rage start to form inside me. ‘He’s . . . he’s *Damien Rowsthorn* for heavens sake!’ I gestured with my free hand, angrily searching for words. ‘He’s gorgeous!’

‘Gorgeous is he? That’s all that matters is it, Saph?’ Jay had

a bitter tone to his voice. ‘Just as long as the pretty people stick together.’

Pretty people! What was Jay’s problem? He had sent me a cruel, forged letter and now *he* was having a go at *me!* What had I done to deserve this? I pushed past him, nearly shoving a Year 7 into the hedge as I went.

I kept walking, not looking back, glad to leave Jay behind me.

In a way I should have been glad that the letter was from him. Jay was better than some geriatric basketball weirdo or a child molester. But I hated the things he had just said to me . . . pretty people? It was as if he thought I deserved to have been tricked.

When I got to the portable steps, I stomped straight up and into class, determined not to let Jay catch up with me.

Miss Ingleby jumped up as if an elephant had charged in, which in some ways it had.

‘Oh, Saph!’ said Miss Ingleby, smoothing her hair and sitting back down.

‘Sorry, Miss Ingleby,’ I said. ‘I was in a bit of a rush.’

The rest of the class wandered in. I pretended to be busy with my books and pens. But my heart was pounding and my hands were almost shaking. *Why did Jay play such a cruel trick?* I couldn’t let it end there.



‘Jay? You’re kidding!’ Summer screeched, when I told her at the bus stop. ‘Did he say *why?*’

I hitched my bag higher on one shoulder and shrugged with the other one. ‘He . . . well . . .’ *He thinks I’m a superficial bimbo.* ‘Um, not really,’ I finished.

‘I would never have guessed,’ Summer said, and gave my arm a quick rub. ‘You okay?’

‘I dunno. I suppose . . .’ A breeze blew a strand of hair in my face and I pushed it away.

Summer put her hands on her hips and kicked at her school bag. ‘Jeez, that boils me up.’

I swapped my bag to the other shoulder but I didn’t say anything. I could tell she was working up to a ‘Summer moment’. She didn’t have long, her bus was due any minute. Then I would walk up the street to catch another bus to the dance studio.

‘Who does he think he is?’ Summer crossed her arms, and her nostrils flared. ‘He thinks he can treat girls like dirt.’ A bus pulled around the corner and started up the road, but Summer wasn’t finished yet. ‘Well, he can’t. I won’t let him.’

I laughed and shook my head. ‘He didn’t count on the wrath of Summer, did he?’

‘We *have* to get him back.’ Summer picked up her bag. ‘We have to make him understand how *crap* that letter was.’

I was still laughing as the bus stopped with a squeak and a hiss. It felt good to have Summer on my side, sticking up for me. The letter and the talk with Jay had left me feeling naked, as though Jay had X-ray eyes.

‘We’ll get him back!’ Summer kissed me on the cheek and winked.

I smiled and winked back. 'Revenge of the nerds!'

'Speak for yourself,' said Summer and flicked her blonde hair as she walked to the waiting bus.

'Revenge of the female sex!' I called after her.

'That's better,' called Summer as she disappeared up the bus steps.

I hitched up my bag and started up the street. This was just the beginning – revenge of the broken-hearted girl.