

STAGES

a Sophie Walker Novella

Episode One

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CHAPTER ONE

The room, draped in black plastic, reminded Sophie of a scene from an episode of *Dexter*. But the shiny covering wasn't there to protect the walls from blood and tissue, but from the orange smears of fake tan. Sophie shivered as Pip painted the last coat of brown on her body, feeling the cold liquid run in dribbles down the back of her thighs. In the florescent light of the dressing room, the tanning solution made her skin seem dirty, as though she had bathed in a muddy creek. The colour had caked around the outside edges of her nails and tinted her French manicure a pale yellow, making her fingers look like those of a pack-a-day smoker.

'Turn around,' said Pip, 'I'll fix your suit.'

Pip drew two lines of glue along the edges of Sophie's backside and pressed the green lycra of Sophie's bikini against the trail of sticky liquid.

'Face me and let's have a proper look at you,' said Pip. She stood back and surveyed Sophie's body. She bit her lip. 'Have you got tape?'

'In my bag,' said Sophie.

'Fold over the skin on your belly,' said Pip, 'I'll tape it down.'

Sophie pinched together the papery thin skin on her belly, until it resembled a puckered appendix scar. Pip covered the seam of flesh with a line of brown Elastoplast and glued the front of Sophie's bikini pants over the top. A mess of white stretch marks intersected across Sophie's hips. Fake tan couldn't

completely cover everything.

Sophie looked around for a clock on the wall, but if there had been one, it was now covered by black plastic. The only thing visible was a wall of mirrors, currently obscured by a cluster of girls admiring their reflection. She tried to determine who else might be in the Master's division, but the lack of fat on the other women's faces made them all look older than their years.

'How long do we have?' she asked.

Pip looked at her watch. 'About fifteen minutes,' she said. 'It's time to pump up.' She handed Sophie two eight-kilo dumbbells. 'Lots of reps.'

As Sophie curled the dumbbells, her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. All she wanted in that moment was a cold can of Diet Coke but she hadn't been able to drink any for the past four days. The carbonated beverage had been eliminated to prevent bloating. Instead of Diet Coke, Sophie had been drinking water — a litre every hour for the past two days. She was glad she had taken time off work because she had been permanently in the bathroom. Yesterday, when she had caught a train to Burwood to register for the competition, she had needed to pee at the train station. The women's toilets were busy so she had been forced to use the men's. A water-loaded bladder waited for no one. Eight hours ago Sophie had stopped drinking anything at all. Dehydration was essential for maximum definition. At least being this parched reduced the need to go to the toilet before she went on stage. She was looking forward to a drink.

'Any word from Megan?' she asked.

'She hasn't called since this morning,' said Pip. 'You'll be fine. We've done everything on the list.'

Megan, Sophie's coach, had left Sophie a list of what to take and what to

avoid. Sodium depletion to reduce cellular fluid, potassium tablets to prevent cramping, and carbohydrates to swell her muscles. Sophie had even had colonic irrigation the day before to guarantee a flat stomach. Megan hadn't been able to make the competition because she was attending her niece's christening. Although Sophie felt a little deserted by her coach, she was glad to have Pip, an Italian beauty, dark haired and perfectly proportioned, who had won the Queensland title the year before.

A loud clear voice cut through the river of chatter. 'Masters Figure Ladies,' the young woman announced, 'please line up at the bottom of the stairs.'

Sophie took a moment to consider the woman running the show. Normally, it was Sophie who was in charge so it felt disconcerting to be on the other side. She had never sought out the lime-light, preferring to stay in the darkness on the side of the stage, calling instructions like an orchestral conductor to her reclusive lighting, sound and staging operators. It struck her, not for the first time, how agreeing to stand on stage in nothing more than a crystal encrusted bikini, like some faded pageant queen, was totally out of character. But a body-building competition was the ultimate challenge. Once she had told everyone at work she was going to be competing and had engaged a trainer, there was no turning back. The early morning ninety minute sessions in the gym, the six meals a day, the tuna, the chicken breasts, the protein powder, the steamed green vegetables had all been worth it. The pain of forcing her body to lift heavier and heavier weights, running kilometres on the treadmill and the ever present irritation of hunger were easier to bear than the shame of failure. In four months, she had lost six kilos, gram by gram, and had reduced her body fat to twelve percent. All her efforts had led her to this morning when she had stood on the

scales and seen the smallest number she had ever seen. Now, here in some sports centre in a suburb she had never heard of, her hard work and discipline would be displayed for the world to see.

Six women gathered at the base of the stairs, all taller, leaner and prettier than Sophie. Tears welled up in Sophie's eyes.

'Oh my God,' she whispered. 'I don't have a chance.'

'Stop worrying about them,' said Pip. 'This is about you. You've worked hard and you look amazing.' Pip safety-pinned a badge showing a large number five to the right-hand side of Sophie's bikini.

Sophie put the dumbbells down and bent over to put on her shoes.

'Stripper shoes' is what Pip called them — silver and plastic platform mules with six inch stiletto heels. Sophie had worn them around the house for months so she could walk in them with any kind of skill. The years of wearing work boots every day had made her arches and ankles unfamiliar with anything with a heel.

'Are these the right shoes?' asked Sophie. Panic gnawed at her growling stomach. 'They don't fit.'

'Your feet have shrunk,' said Pip, laughing. 'It's the dehydration.'

Pip held up a small hand mirror. Sophie checked her teeth for lipstick and ran her fingers through her short blond hair. The false eyelashes felt heavy and prickly on her eyes.

'Off you go,' said Pip. 'You look beautiful.'

Sophie's legs started to shake as soon as she walked up the stairs and continued to tremble as she stood in the wings.

'Competitor number five,' said the man standing at the podium. 'Sophie Walker.'

Sophie walked out onto the stage, pressing her feet into her shoes to prevent them from slipping. The applause was thin and weak. She smiled the exaggerated smile of a performer, showing her freshly whitened teeth to the few hundred people in the audience. A couple of people in the front two rows looked up at her, but a large percentage of the audience didn't stop talking, eating, moving between the seats, or checking the schedule. In the front row, a trestle-table had been set up, and behind it sat three judges. The first was a male body-builder, his steroid-enhanced shoulders and biceps bulging from underneath his singlet. He leaned back in his chair and yawned. The second judge was a peroxide blond woman with hard round breasts and diamonds on her fingers. The third man wore a suit and had his head bowed over a notebook in which he wrote furiously.

Sophie stood with one hand on her hip, her weight on one leg. At posing class they had called it 'relaxed pose'. She didn't feel relaxed.

The female judge picked up a microphone. 'Symmetry round,' she said.

Sophie placed her feet together, her arms at her sides and faced the front. She clenched her muscles and sucked in her stomach.

'Turn to the right ... to the back ... to the left ... back to the front.'

The lights bearing down on Sophie were hot and bright, bleaching the colour from her skin and the striations from her limbs. Whoever had designed the lights had no idea how to flatter the human body. Dancers were never lit from above, but instead from the side, where the beams of cross-light left deep shadows, which separated muscle from bone, veins from flesh. Sweat started to bead on Sophie's top lip.

'Compulsory poses,' said the judge. 'Front double bicep.'

Sophie struck each pose as it was called. Side chest, side triceps, rear double bicep, abdomen and thighs. Her left calf muscle cramped into a hard knot of pain. She pushed down on her heel trying to find relief, but the pain spread down to her toes. She smiled harder to cover the discomfort.

‘Number nineteen, thirty-two and eight,’ said the blond woman. Three girls walked to the front of the stage. As they posed again for the judges to determine who would win first, second and third, Sophie watched, envying the finalists their perfect shape. They all had wide shoulders with deltoid caps, sinewed thighs and roped calves. Sophie had none of those things.

She had anticipated that standing on stage would bring with it a profound sense of pride and accomplishment but all she felt was foolish. It was ridiculous to believe she had any chance of winning a place in this competition. Her natural shape was curved and round, and even at her leanest, her hips and thighs were more suited to child-bearing than the cover of *Oxygen* magazine. She had been deluded to imagine she could outrun her genetic inheritance.

A man in a t-shirt with *Australian Natural Body Building* printed on the chest stood in front the judge’s table and handed around a box of pizza. The smell of grilled cheese and caramelised onion drifted up onto the stage causing Sophie’s stomach to lurch with hunger. The two men took a slice each but the blond woman waved it away. She handed a slip of paper to the compere who returned to his position behind the podium.

‘First place goes to ... competitor number eight,’ said the compere, after he had announced number nineteen had placed third. A pocket of people on the left side of the auditorium erupted into cheers. Number eight, a tall, olive-skinned woman in a blue bikini, smiled and flexed her biceps. Number thirty-two looked

disappointed to have only managed second place.

The compere handed the winner a plastic trophy and a tub of protein powder. As she walked off stage, she flipped her dark hair over her shoulder. 'I'm fifty-two,' she said to no one in particular. 'Fifty-two.'

Sophie was forty-five. She felt much older.

Back in the dressing room, Pip's eyes were glowing.

'I took some great photos,' she said. She held the digital camera so Sophie could see the small LCD screen on the back. 'Look.'

'Later,' said Sophie. She kicked off her shoes. 'First, get this outfit off me.'

Sophie stood in the shower and watched the stained brown water flow over the bottom of the bathtub and disappear down the drain. She pulled the band of Elastoplast from her belly and watched her skin expand. A dark bruise had formed over the creased skin, as though someone had punched her in the stomach. The house was silent and still. She hadn't known what time she would be home so she couldn't expect Michael to be waiting for her. She considered phoning him, but decided against it. She didn't want him to think she was checking up on him.

After her shower, she dressed in a pair of tracksuit pants and a sweatshirt, and headed to the kitchen. A portion of grilled chicken breast sat dry and tinged with grey in the refrigerator. She fought the urge to pick up the phone and order pizza. Both Megan and Pip had warned her about post-competition binging. Sixteen weeks of hard work could be undone in a matter of days, especially now she had stopped taking diuretics. She heated the chicken in the microwave and ate it in front of the computer. Izzy, Sophie and Michael's tortoiseshell cat,

curled into a ball at her feet.

I didn't win, but I had a good time, she wrote on Facebook and posted one of the photos Pip had emailed through, but not before she had photoshopped the cellulite from her thighs and the dark smudges from around her eyes.

The responses flooded in. *Congratulations. You look awesome*, the messages read. She clicked LIKE as each one appeared below her photo. No one would say anything else, would they?

In the bathroom, she slid the scales over to their optimum spot on the tiles (two squares out from the toilet and four squares in from the bathtub.) As she took off her sweatshirt, Izzy sauntered into the bathroom and looked up at Sophie with yellow eyes full of expectation. Sophie opened the back door and let the cat out.

Back in the bathroom, Sophie stripped off, leaving all her clothes on the floor. The scales lay waiting to pronounce their verdict. The digital readout danced momentarily before settling on 0.0. She stepped on and held her breath as the numbers counted up, wavered for a moment as if seeking some outside guidance, and then settled on the number that would determine how the next day would proceed.

Two kilos heavier than this morning. Two fucking kilos. Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. Something must be wrong with the scales. She stepped off, adjusted their position, pushed the reset button, and waited for zero. She stepped on again, easing her weight onto the scales as gently as she could. The exact same number. Losing weight was like trying to contain a rabid dog — as soon as you turned your back, the animal would escape. She pushed the scales back into the corner and went to bed. After a few pages of her novel, her eyelids

grew heavy.

The sound of Michael fumbling around in the dark trying to find the switch for the fan woke Sophie up. He couldn't sleep without the whirring noise in the background. The bed shifted underneath his weight as he lay down. Sophie smelled beer on his breath and stale sweat on his body. He settled with his back towards her, as far away from his wife as possible in the queen-sized bed.

'Aren't you going to ask me how I went?' Sophie asked, after a few minutes of silence.

Michael sighed. 'Did you win?'

Sophie rolled over to face the wall. Light from the street painted narrow strips of yellow around the edges of the blind.

'No,' she said.

'So you weren't good enough.'

'It was my first time and most of the women in the Masters' division have been training their whole lives. It takes years to get that kind of muscle size. Next time I'll have to build more muscle and get leaner.'

'I wouldn't bother if I were you,' said Michael, 'I prefer it when you're fat.'

Sophie felt her face grow hot, the flush travelling down her neck. In the silence she heard his breath thicken as he fell asleep. Only then did she allow the tears to spill onto her cheeks. When had Michael thought she was fat? When she had met him seventeen years ago, she was only a size twelve. It wasn't until her forties that she had started to need a size fourteen. When she could no longer zip up her jeans, she had gone on a diet. The same diet that had eventually led her to competing. When was it that she was the kind of fat Michael preferred? Was it during their courtship, or perhaps their early days of marriage? He didn't seem to

enjoy this tiny, streamlined version of herself — he hadn't touched her in months. Longer than months. But they weren't any different from any other couple who had been married for years. It was normal that passion died. To be honest, she didn't even miss it. It might have had something to do with not menstruating any longer, but she didn't give it much thought. She was simply glad to be rid of the monthly inconvenience and the sensation of Michael's damp sweaty hands on her skin.

Sophie arrived first for the six a.m. Monday morning spin class wearing a grey baseball cap to disguise her dishevelled hair. After draping her towel over the handlebars of a bike in the front row and placing her water bottle in the cradle, she went to the bathroom. She put her arm underneath the tap and scrubbed at a stripe of dark brown tanning solution that ran the length of her forearm.

By the time the class was finished, her top was soaked through with sweat. Her backside ached where her tail bone had pressed against the hard bicycle seat. In the change room, she wrapped herself in an over-sized jumper and a big woollen overcoat to protect her from the cold outside. Spring seemed reluctant to arrive that year. It was October, but the mornings were still chilly. She sometimes thought she only had enough energy to make it home because of the bottle of energy drink she bought on the way out. Sophie believed in cardio on an empty stomach. She couldn't have breakfast until she had earned it.

Sophie put a dessert bowl on the kitchen scales and reset the dial to zero. She spooned in 50g of rolled oats and tipped them into a pot of boiling water. Then she measured out 30g of protein powder and 30g of psyllium husk, ready to add to her porridge once it had cooked. As the pot of oats simmered on the stove,

Sophie went to the computer under the window in the lounge room and checked her emails. Outside, as the dawn nudged the darkness from the sky, she noticed the garden looked different. Where once were empty stretches of soil, there were now small bushes and larger shrubs. There was even her favourite tree, a frangipani, planted in the corner. The pavers had been swept clean and the loose bricks stacked into an orderly pile.

Sophie crept into the bedroom. ‘Sweetheart,’ she said, touching her husband on the shoulder. ‘Have you been gardening?’

Michael propped himself up on one elbow, blinking sleepiness from his eyes. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I did it while you were away yesterday.’

‘It looks incredible,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t notice sooner. Thank you.’

‘It was meant to be a present for making it to the competition. But it looks like shit.’

‘No it doesn’t, it looks so much better than it did before. I love it.’

‘Don’t get carried away,’ he said. ‘It’s just a few plants jammed into the dirt.’

She kissed him on the forehead, his skin damp against her lips. ‘Thank you.’

He shifted away from her and laid down. ‘Shut the door on the way out,’ he said. He pulled the pillow over his head.

‘I’ll be leaving in an hour,’ she said. ‘I’ll see you in a couple of weeks.’

‘Bye. Now shut the door.’

CHAPTER TWO

A good-looking man opened an old wooden door and held out his hand.

‘I’m James,’ he said. ‘Production manager. Can I help you with your case?’ His voice had an American accent. A dark mole showed through the salt-and-pepper stubble on his upper lip.

‘No, it’s fine,’ said Sophie, as she shook his hand. ‘Just show me where I can leave it until tonight.’

With the suitcase stowed in the corner of the kitchen, James led Sophie into the rehearsal room. It was a large room with a scuffed timber floor and posters of old theatre productions on the walls. There were racks of costumes on one side of the room and a props table covered in papers, guns and crockery on the other. At a long trestle table near the door, sat the director. He stood up, revealing a tall, thin frame. His hands were soft with polished fingernails, his handshake limp and yielding.

‘Thanks for coming at such short notice,’ he said. ‘Our last stage manager...’

‘...had to go back to Malaysia unexpectedly,’ said James. The director gazed at him and then nodded.

‘I’m Kim Chen,’ the director continued, ‘and this is my assistant Marco.’ A small muscled youth smiled at Sophie with white teeth. ‘The cast should be here in a minute,’ said Kim Chen, ‘then we’ll get started.’

Sophie had read the script on the plane on the way down so she knew the

production had a cast of only three — two males and a female. *Fault Lines*, imported from Malaysia for the Melbourne Festival, was a combination of dance, theatre and video. Technically challenging at the best of times, it would be almost impossible to learn in just a week. When the Festival organisers had rung to ask Sophie to recommend a stage manager to fill in at the last minute, she couldn't think of anyone available who would be up to the task. Sophie's boss, Greg, a great supporter of professional development, had agreed for Sophie to come down at short notice.

By the end of the day, Sophie's brain was filled with strains of discordant music and images of Gobo, a Japanese man, dressed as a traditional Geisha, his feet covered in white tabi inside wooden sandals. Julian, a blond Scandinavian, had rehearsed in nothing more than khaki canvas pants in the chilly hall, and had danced without ever tiring from what seemed to be a well of primal energy fuelled by the unrelenting beat of drums. Lissa, an exotic African American, provided the connection between the two worlds with her poetic monologues and interaction with the archival video footage. The show seemed to be about war, and memory, and gender, and bodies. Sophie didn't understand entirely what it meant but didn't have to. More than once she had been moved to tears during the day. It was a work which should be felt rather than analysed.

'I'll take you to the hotel,' said James, once they had tidied the rehearsal room and everyone else had left for the day. 'You're on the same floor as me.'

James insisted he wheel her suitcase during the five minute walk to the hotel. She was too tired to argue.

'I'm from Texas,' he told her. 'I met Kim Chen at an after party in New York.' He pushed open the door to her room and deposited the suitcase in the

bedroom. 'This is my first time in Australia.'

Sophie was pleased to discover she had an apartment with a self-contained kitchen and a balcony overlooking the street. James stood in the entrance way, his hands in his pockets.

'What are you doing for dinner?' he asked.

'I'll grab something from the supermarket,' she said. 'I'm too tired to go out.'

James frowned for a moment before his face dissolved into a smile, his brown eyes dancing in the lamp light. 'I'm in Apartment 36 if you need anything,' he said. 'Just down the corridor.'

The supermarket was a small IGA with narrow aisles and two checkouts. The front of the store was filled with alcohol. Sophie hadn't drunk anything for a long time. Too many empty calories in a glass of wine. She inspected the trays of chicken in the fridge, the meat slimy and uninviting. She was away from home, just one day out from competing, surely she deserved the night off?

Hoping no one would pay attention to what she was buying, Sophie filled her basket with all the things she had denied herself for the past four months. She started with a packet of six croissants, some ham and cheese, and then added a family block of caramello chocolate and a tub of vanilla ice cream. To be sure she had more than one thing to choose from for dessert, she also selected a bag of licorice and a bag of marshmallows from the lolly aisle. The loaf of bread and the tub of butter were for breakfast. She was sick of porridge.

Back in the apartment, Sophie only intended to eat two croissants and a small scoop of ice cream with a few squares of chocolate and a couple of marshmallows. She put everything else in the fridge, hoping if she couldn't see it

on the bench she wouldn't be tempted.

The first bite of buttery pastry, salty ham and sharp cheese set her taste buds reeling. A strange wave of sensuality coated her brain, dissipating the anxiety left over from her day. The sensation felt like sliding naked into a bed of smooth satin sheets, relieving an ache that emanated not from a single location in her body but from the entire space around her. If she had believed in auras, she might have expected hers to have gone from the colour of bitumen to deep pulsing red. Nothing else felt this good.

She had heard of people starting to eat and waking up hours later surrounded by dirty dishes and empty wrappers, but Sophie never zoned out. She knew what she was doing. She ignored the voice in her head that kept screaming for her to stop. The sensation in her stomach that signalled she was full had been left dormant for so long that she no longer recognised it. She kept on eating until all the croissants were gone, until the bags of lollies were empty. When the squares of chocolate grew too sweet, she switched to raisin toast with butter. She stopped when she realised another mouthful would make her vomit. She had never gone that far. Only bulimics threw up.

When she looked down at her stomach bulging out over the top of her trousers she felt disgusted. This was the last time she would binge. Starting tomorrow she would go back to her diet, recording the calorie content of everything she put in her mouth. She set her alarm for five a.m. and laid out her leggings, sports bra, heart rate monitor and sneakers for the morning. Thank goodness the apartment complex had its own gym. She hoped there wouldn't be anyone there to witness her swollen legs and puffed face. If she couldn't take the laxatives she usually relied on in times like these because she couldn't afford to be

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