

Prelude

It was mid-coitus, with one arm uncomfortably wedged behind her head in an attempt to appear coquettishly sexy, that it occurred to Addilyn she may have made a critical error in judgement. Admittedly now wasn't the best time for revelations. Based on previous encounters with her present sexual partner she was no less than four minutes away from being able to politely remove herself from the hotel bed, but revelations rarely reveal themselves in opportune moments. A more suitable time for such a bolt from above as had just now occurred would perhaps have been when she saw the first girl exiting the hotel room within which she herself was now ensconced. Or frankly, much earlier. However, she wasn't particularly blessed with the gift of foresight and was stubborn as they come, refusing to alter her preconceived perception of a person even in the face of incontrovertible truths. She let slip an audible sigh, which her companion evidently heard. Fortunately, he seemed to interpret the exhalation as one borne of pleasure and upped the tempo of his rhythmic thrusting in response.

Oh, well. She could wait the now two minutes and fortyish seconds until she could extricate herself from the deep waters she'd inadvertently waded into. As Addilyn looked up at the slightly weathered but still handsome features of cult film director Josh Courtney, she wondered at her sudden and overwhelming feelings of dismay and regret. Not too long ago, this – the demonstrative 'this' referring to clandestine lovemaking in an expensive New York City hotel, with revered Josh 'Jolly' Courtney – would have been the culmination of all of her most unfathomable fantasies come to life. It was, in fact, a scenario she'd envisioned many times, ever since she first saw Josh's debut movie, the indie sensation and beloved feminist sci-fi *Scarlett Fever*.

Admittedly, she hadn't factored an increasingly numb left arm into her fantasies. Not to mention that she'd always pictured herself wearing titular character Scarlett's trademark low-slung bootcut PVC trousers and camo-print spaghetti strap crop top. She had lustily imagined Josh painstakingly peeling the tight pants off her quivering, supplicating legs. It would be painstaking as well as painful, because unless body oil is liberally applied beforehand, skintight PVC clings to the body like a sous vide chicken wing. And so, in reality she'd worn a fairly ordinary blouse and skinny jeans to the hotel room. Forget PVC, she hadn't gone near a pair of bootcut pants since the nineties. Still, apart from those minor details it was much as she'd envisioned it to be as a sixteen year old girl living continents apart from her older idol. Now fourteen years older, although still sixteen years younger

than Josh, here she was across the ocean and underneath the body of the man of her steamiest sci fi dreams. With less than one minute to blastoff he increased to faster than light speed, and Addilyn increasingly felt that some fan fiction was best left unwritten. She let out another sigh and shrugged the one shoulder that still had sensation. Josh grunted before rolling off her and collapsing onto the crisp white sheets.

He grinned roguishly at her. It was a grin that would once have sent her crashing to her knees. ‘*Vulpes fulva*,’ she’d thought upon meeting him, ignorant to any dramatic irony concerning the cunning guile of the silver fox. Crashing to her knees in front of him was what had landed her here come to think of it, and was a decision she was now, obviously, beginning to regret. Less like a silver fox and more akin to a silverback, Josh pummeled his torso with his fists, stretched, and lumbered out of bed. She watched his bare bottom, only slightly sagging and lily-white against his otherwise golden L.A. tan, as he walked languidly into the ensuite. To the sound of urine splashing against and, she knew from recent experience, around the porcelain bowl, she pinched her arm. As pins and needles set in, she climbed out of bed and dressed, waiting until she heard the sound of running water before slipping out of the hotel suite quietly. With any luck, he wouldn’t even notice she’d left.

As she neared the elevator, the doors opened to a woman wearing hip-hugging, shiny leather trousers and an army-green crop top. She avoided eye contact with Addilyn as she hurriedly exited the lift and turned the corner in the direction of Josh’s room. Pressing the button for the ground floor, Addilyn allowed herself to sigh once more. It wasn’t quite as bad as when earlier in the week she’d seen someone leaving his room dressed as a Venutian Voidoid, the seven feet tall, fur-covered aliens from the planet Venutia in *Scarlett Fever*. She’d read and written enough R-rated fan fic to picture *exactly* what had been transpiring behind the closed door of Room 14 on that particular day.

One

‘Addilyn Acker’s a frigid cow! Knows nothin’ ’bout sex, not any no-how!’

30 year old Addilyn remembered the insipid laughter emanating from the gaggle of sixteen year girls as clearly as if she’d travelled back in time. Likewise, the unbidden mental imagery of the girls forming an inescapable ring around her was as clear as if she were really there. She could even see the harsh fluorescent lights glinting off the safety pins which lifted their pleated sports skirts so high that they barely brushed their outer labia. All

the better to show off gangling legs, smooth and sparkling from the liberal application of body glitter.

Despite knowing it was merely a vivid remembrance, present-day Addilyn had to resist the urge to self-consciously pull the hem of her own skirt, itself lowered to a respectable length, down to cover her lightly-stubbed knees. Back in the hallucination, the self-nominated leader of the pack, snorted, 'I'm betting she's never even *seen* a dick,' at which her enraptured audience giggled sycophantly.

Addilyn avoided the eyes of her own personal lynch mob.

'I have,' she lied unconvincingly in a timorous whisper.

'You what? Speak up!' ordered the group's leader. 'You've seen one have ya? Walking in your parents doing it don't count, Acker.'

Addilyn was silent, fearing the merest intake of breath would engender another biting comment. *Doesn't* count, she thought. *It doesn't* count.

As though privy to her internal anal retention, the leader's eyes narrowed.

'Oh wait, I forgot. Your dad's dead, isn't he?'

Addilyn bowed her head, her fringe falling in a greasy sheet over her eyes. She stared mutely at the polished cement floor, praying, albeit atheistically as she did not subscribe to a higher power, that it would open up and swallow her whole. Addilyn did not know, incidentally, if she would have been an atheist had her dad not died. It was something she'd never contemplated before his death, but once he left she became convinced that no god would sign off on such a loss. And there was nothing in the years following his death to suggest her father remained on some otherworldly plain of existence, watching over her. No trace of him remained.

Getting back to the hole she was non-religiously praying for, she thought that it would probably choke on her, because she wasn't a size four like the tower of bitchy giraffes encircling her. The girls were still laughing, if now a little uncomfortably. Even by the barometer of adolescent bullies, dead dad jokes are on an entirely other level. She was spared further humiliation by the P.E. teacher finally arriving to blow the whistle. The girls dispersed, and her teenage self, that is to say her dreary, drab, never even *seen* a dick self, dissipated from within the mind of her older self.

There was no two ways about it: adolescence had been a resolutely bleak time. But what her hurting younger self couldn't have known was that it was that very same night that she would stumble upon something which would alter the course of her life forever. She was about to see *Scarlett Fever* for the very first time. Ever after, no matter how much verbal

excrement was hurled her way, and no matter how profoundly she ached, she could retreat into herself. There she would enter The Outlands, the vast galaxy containing Venutia and Earth2. More importantly, The Outlands was home to heroine of her entire heart. Scarlett. Part of Addilyn, the outside part, would be in the gym, evading literal and figurative dodgeballs. But the inside part of her would be hurtling through space, deflector shield rendering her utterly impregnable to Venutian laser attacks and everything external that they metaphorised. Even while eating microwave meals at home with her depressive and increasingly stern mother Melanie, she was able to transport herself to Kalliope Cantina where she would drink wine harvested from the rivers of planet Hyperion. From the moment she first saw Scarlett, Addilyn had known she wasn't alone. She wasn't even Addilyn, at least not entirely. She was Scarlett, and Scarlett's middle name was *tough*. Well, actually, according to an interview with Josh Courtney in *Hyperion Magazine*, Scarlett's middle name was Annie, so named after Josh's mother, 'the strongest woman I know. She had to be, to put up with me growing up!' But still.

Addilyn opened her eyes in the present day and shook herself out of the tragic reverie she'd been mired in for the past several moments. Stretching out her tight neck and shoulders, she looked up at the ceiling above her. She may have escaped the high school gymnasium of her youth and its associated terrors including impossible fitness tests, body dysmorphia-inducing changing rooms, and netball-skirted tormentors. However, she hadn't managed to leave the harsh fluorescent lights beloved by corporate offices and sports facilities alike behind her. Addilyn idly touched a finger to the pimple that was just now making its presence known on the dead centre of her chin. As if her chin, or more precisely the lack thereof, weren't bad enough without a mountainous pimple erupting upon its surface. At least it would give what she considered to be a preternaturally weak jawline some much needed definition, she supposed resignedly. As almost all of us are, Addilyn was her own harshest critic. As a young girl she'd read *My Brilliant Career*, *Anne of Green Gables*, and *Jane Eyre*, each classic novel featuring protagonists who repeatedly espoused their own supposed ugliness or plainness. Addilyn had accepted as objective truth the heroines' respective self-appraisals. Some girls weren't born swans, and weren't even born ugly ducklings with swan destinies. Addilyn didn't see herself as ugly, per se. She was just a wallflower, without any perks thereof.

In contrast, she thought of her mother Melanie's sharp chin, an acute triangle set determinedly in an arrowhead and pointing directions to her equally obtuse breasts. Melanie's body complemented her severe personality, one so sharp even her body failed to

disguise it with the usual soft edges effectuated by middle age. Addilyn had a round face, short legs, and waist-length brown hair that erupted into a frizzy halo in the humidity. Her complexion was creamy with a dusting of light brown freckles, and cheeks that flushed flamingo pink when she was stressed or embarrassed. A Renaissance painter may have replaced her business-casual attire with something more flattering, but he nonetheless would have paid to paint her portrait.

Still, to Addilyn's mind, with nobody to tell her differently, she was plain. She could accept that, but wished that she wasn't so... borderless. Despite her best intentions, her belly overlapped the border of her waistbands, her hair fell out of scraped-back buns, and her emotion betrayed itself via her flushing cheeks. She felt she could have contained her mother within herself, folding her slender limbs into a compact shape to reside within her own diaphanous frame. Addilyn had once seen a painting by the artist John Currin called *Skinny Woman*, showing an anonymous older woman with elongated limbs and silver hair. The woman in the painting stood with a hand cocked on her hip like a model. Her eyes were huge and dark. Melanie wouldn't stand in so languid a pose, and her eyes were small and steel grey. But there was something about the figure's downturned mouth, the way she resolutely avoided the viewer's gaze, and the way she occupied her space so decisively that made Addilyn start when she first saw it. She had always felt that Melanie disapproved of her daughter's blurred edges. Indeed, she frequently scolded her to 'speak up, please, and *enunciate* your words,' her proud chin jutting as she demonstrated pitch-perfect articulation.

Addilyn had been thinking of her mother of late, if not with fondness then with frequency. Perhaps this was because their monthly scheduled dinner was fast approaching. Although you would be hard-pressed to get her to admit it even to herself, her unchecked ruminations and reminiscences may have been equally prompted by the swiftly-approaching anniversary of her father's death. He had chosen Addilyn's name, which was German for *noble* and was frequently mistaken for Allison, Addison, Adeline, and any other near-rhyming variations one could conjure. When he was alive her father had repeatedly told her she was his princess, to which Melanie would retort teasingly that Addilyn should 'come back down to earth with us humble peasants.' It wasn't until years later had the teasing metamorphosed into a more vicious form of scolding.

Addilyn's head wasn't in the clouds today, but the shadow of grief was decidedly clouding her vision. She chose to think about her next call rather than further indulge dangerous nostalgia. She worked in the monochromatic offices of Synergy Solutions™, a call centre on the first floor of a building whose other occupants numbered only a private

tuition college and a small accounting firm. Operating out of a windowless space in a run-down building shoved away in Sydney's outermost Western suburbs, the call centre was comprised of only two staff and one manager. Twenty year old business school graduate Eric was the most recent manager, but before him had been a revolving cast of Bachelors. The appellation was privately given by Addilyn in reference to their recent undergraduate studies more so than their marital status. Who hired them, Addilyn did not know. She herself had been brought on board some ten years ago by a twenty-one year old who had resigned a week after she began. Eventually they all moved on, once they became aware that Synergy Solutions wasn't destined to land them on the front cover of Money Magazine. Her only other co-worker was an octogenarian named Maude, who typically sat in the corner and bemoaned having to use a headset when a good old fashioned rotary handset would work just as well.

The skeleton staff, near-subterranean accommodations, and rotating cast of barely pubescent managers all roused Addilyn's suspicions that Synergy Solutions was not entirely above board. She didn't think it was overly conspiratorial to assume that with each stay-at-home parent she convinced to change to more expensive energy providers, and each elderly dementia patient she coerced into subscribing to overpriced meal kit delivery services, money changed hands in a decidedly dirty fashion. That said, she had never bothered to investigate her mild suspicions. She was a direct marketer of goods and services, not a private eye in a film noir. Nonetheless, Addilyn's inkling that her workplace was involved in dubious deeds was equally aroused by her weekly hand-delivery of an envelope of cash to their upstairs neighbour and mustachioed landlord, John. Eric assured her that this was simply a more efficient way of paying rent.

'Now, big smiles and let's pop on upstairs to deliver that rent money, shall we?' Eric, who favoured the plural 'we' despite never joining her in the journey upstairs, would enthuse every second Friday. He was frightened of John, as suggested by the sweaty fingerprints he would always leave on the cash-stuffed envelopes. Eric loved to repeat 'Synergy smiles and Synergy dials!' every time he passed by her desk. The motto, which was grammatically and logically nonsensical, not least of all because those the customers whom Addilyn was dialing patently could not see whether or not she was smiling, would ring in her ears all the way home and through the nights. Sometimes it filtered into her dreams, causing her to wake up with a decidedly non-Synergistic frown etched into her face.

Still staring up at the ceiling, she jumped as Eric walked by and made a ‘tsking’ sound. Standing over six feet tall with comically oversized feet and hands, he incongruously also had the plump face of a teenager. The cumulative effect was an overall impression of a baby foal.

‘A minute not workin’ is a minute Synergy’s hurtin’!’ Eric chortled at this most recent witticism and straightened his tie. Distracted by his self-congratulatory amusement, he was oblivious to a drop of pipe water falling into his coffee cup. Addilyn neglected to point it out to him, instead putting her headset back on and punching in the number for her seventeenth call of the day. So far she had been hung up on five times, yelled at for privacy invasion another five, and been greeted by a busy tone the remaining six.

‘Hi, is this Mrs. Jones of 22 Manor Lane? This is Addilyn calling from Synergy Solutions. Do you have a moment to talk about your current electricity plan?’

‘Do you know what time it is? What, are you calling from India? You people have no respect for a person’s privacy...’

She marked another line in her mental tally.

Two

At precisely ten minutes past six, Addilyn turned the key in her front door. She removed her shoes and placed them on the rack positioned by the door. Attaching her keys to the magnetic strip to the left of the coat rack, she hung up her sensible woolen coat and sturdy handbag.

Changing into a crisp, freshly laundered grey sweatsuit, she poured herself a small glass of cabernet sauvignon and arranged a plate of cheese and crackers, as well as a single carrot on the side. Picking up her pet rabbit Jolly, she sat down wearily in front of her computer. She felt that if she were to look in the mirror, Maude’s etched face would look back at her. Synergy Solutions was as monotonous as it was ethically dubious, and despite the name, it didn’t seem to provide any tangible solutions to any problem. Addilyn had started working there years before, just after disenrolling from university. She’d only ever studied for a term, enrolling in a Bachelor of Creative Industries with a minor in film studies. She’d especially loved Film 1010. The lecturer, a middle-aged man with a patchy beard who insisted his students just call him Tim, would gesticulate with such gusto whilst enthusing about the oeuvres of his favourite directors that his cappuccino would splash out of his Styrofoam cup. The names he mentioned – Tarantino, Scorsese, Lynch, Kubrick – were as

white and male as the literary canon Addilyn was acquainting herself with in a Literary Studies elective, but she was too excited to be free from high school to really question it.

And Tim's fervor was infectious. He would lean on the edge of his desk and let them in on some piece of cinematic lore, like that Alfred Hitchcock suffered from ovophobia, a fear of eggs, or that Roman Polanski had once or twice trained under Bruce Lee's tutelage. A girl with a nose piercing and a buzzcut sitting next to her had once interrupted Tim during this latter piece of trivia to say, 'Forget about martial arts, what about Polanski's sex crimes?' Tim frowned and after a beat said, 'Today's lecture is on turning points and action lines, not the broader context of a director's personal life.' Buzzcut stormed out, and Addilyn wrote down, 'Turning points and action lines.' She felt queasy and didn't finish her cappuccino, which she had purchased in a self-conscious imitation of Tim's sophisticated coffee order.

Addilyn had kept to herself throughout the term, but did feel herself teetering on the threshold of opening up as the weeks went by. Once, a boy asked her what she thought of Ingmar Bergman. Thinking he was asking about the actress Ingrid Bergman, she replied simply, 'Stunning.' Happily, the answer worked just as well as superlative toward the director, and the boy nodded approvingly. The fleeting interaction made Addilyn blush, and she covered her face with her hair.

The major assessment was an essay justifying why a film of the student's choosing was, to their mind, the cinematic *crème de la crème*. Addilyn, of course, wrote about *Scarlett Fever*. She had thought that Tim would recognise her passion and taste and in doing so award her top marks. She received a scraping pass, with the single line of feedback that the assignment was intended to discuss sophisticated art, not fantasy movies for kids. Addilyn read the feedback in a daze, and looked at the ground on her way out of the lecture hall. With her eyes downcast, she took a wrong turn on her way to the bus, and found herself in front of an imposing building. A notice taped to the front door advertised an opening.

At dinner that evening, Melanie expressed again her disapproval at Addilyn's 'fanciful studies' and without thinking, Addilyn told her she would be applying for a job in telecommunications the next day. Melanie smiled cursorily and tightly, and said, 'Well. Good girl.' That was all it took. The very next day, Addilyn disenrolled from uni, and applied at Synergy Solutions. She was hired immediately. She quickly earned enough to move out of home, and the relentless drudgery of the job occupied her enough that she didn't have the energy to really regret her decision.

She never could fully accept her old lecturer's derisive disapproval of *Scarlett Fever*, though. On her first paycheck, she bought a VHS player so that she could watch it on video. After all, Tim had said in their first lecture that 'The analog experience is the most authentic. It's gritty. It's *real*.' But watching *Scarlett* on video felt anathema to gritty realism. It felt escapist, and Addilyn had just enough gumption to recognise she needed to cling on to that. She could accept working in a banal job if it pacified Melanie, and she could give up film studies as an unrealistic fantasy. Just so long as she could come home to Scarlett.