

Dear Reader,

In 2012 I was forty years old. I was an author who had topped bestseller lists in six countries, I'd just moved into my dream house and achieved most of my life goals but felt so miserable that I tried to kill myself.

I wound up spending three months in a psychiatric hospital. I met my characters Georgia and Julius there, or at least troubled but brilliant teenagers who were very much like them.

In group therapy I listened to their stories of adult betrayal, crippling academic expectations and, above all else, the way these young adults wanted to be good people but didn't know how.

When I left hospital I wanted to write about my experience and the people I'd met, but it took me five years to figure out how to find a way. The result is Arctic Zoo, a book about two teens who meet in a mental health unit and want to make a difference in a world where there are a lot more questions than answers.

I hope you enjoy reading it!

Robert Muchamore

ROBERT MUCHAMORE ARCTIC ZOO



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1

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PART ONE

Walter J Freeman Adolescent Mental Health Unit – East Grinstead, UK

Georgia Pack tilted on the back legs of a plastic stacking chair, curling socked toes into the therapy room's grungy turquoise carpet. Her eyes scanned the ceiling tiles as she tuned out, letting Henry's voice merge with the rattling air con.

Georgia was fifteen and she'd been on the unit long enough to know things. Like the knack for opening the jammed dryer in the laundry room and that Monday night's Quorn Bolognese was best avoided. On weekdays, patients who weren't psychotic or sedated had group therapy. Georgia shared the circle of chairs with four fellow teens and a slight Indian therapist named Tanvi.

Henry dominated the therapy session. Seventeen and pretty. Floppy hair, stout legs. Canterbury training pants tucked into striped rugby socks. His posh accent and machine-gun laugh were everywhere on the unit, carrying up stairwells and booming in the dining room. Georgia even heard blasts of Henry from the smokers' patio if she opened the window in her room to shift the unit's hot, dead air.

At thirteen, Ross was the youngest patient in the unit. He sat fidgeting with a stick of lip balm and nodding approval at every word out of Henry's mouth. Laura was a shy new arrival, with elastic bandage up the arm she'd gouged when she tried to kill herself three nights earlier. The last patient in the group

was Georgia's friend Alex. Broad-shouldered, with the number nine peeling off the back of an old Newcastle United shirt.

Georgia knew something was up with Alex. She liked to spar with Henry in group, but today her friend had let him grind on, ignoring obvious chances to swat his ego.

'Our au pair drove all the bloody way from Hertfordshire with my Xbox,' Henry ranted, growing more irate with every sentence. 'I set up a death match with my buddies in the rec room. Then Keith the nurse strides in. Sees my HDMI lead going from the Xbox to the telly on the wall and tells us it's too long.

'I know we're not allowed to have long cables so us loons can't neck ourselves. But he wanted to take it right there, with the three of us mid-tournament. I said I'd hand the cable in at the nurses' station when we'd finished playing and get our au pair to bring a shorter cable ...'

Tanvi the therapist made a stop-talking gesture. Then spoke with a lisp that made *sss* come out like *thh*.

'This is where you lost your temper and there was an incident?'

'I hardly *lotht* my temper,' Henry mocked, sitting up defensively and tucking his feet under the chair. 'Keith tried to yank my Xbox cable. I pushed him away and he tripped on the stack of board games. Keith charged back to the nurses' station and made a tiny incident into this huge thing. The night manager came out, saying she was locking the rec room, and made us all go back to our rooms ...'

'Let's pause there,' Tanvi interrupted. 'Henry has issues with impulse control and this is a good opportunity to discuss techniques that could have stopped a situation from escalating.'

Georgia cringed at Tanvi calling Henry's problem impulse control. 'Nasty thug' felt more truthful.

Henry's story was known around the unit. He'd been dumped by his boarding-school girlfriend. A couple of months later, he'd seen her kissing a music student at a house party. Henry sucker-punched the student, shoved him down a flight of stairs and stomped his head into a four-day coma.

Any ordinary brat would have bounced to jail, but Henry's daddy found a fancy lawyer, who paid an even fancier psychiatrist to write a report, claiming that Henry had cognitive issues and had been suffering from depression, which led to his outburst of 'uncharacteristic behaviour'.

So Henry got to spend nine months at the Freeman Unit, bleating about his Xbox getting confiscated, instead of three years in young offenders with lads whose parents didn't own three houses and a sixteen-metre racing yacht.

'What behavioural technique could Henry have used to help control his anger?' Tanvi asked the five patients.

Ross broke a moment's silence. 'That thought, feeling, behaviour, triangle thingy?' he guessed, keen to please.

Tanvi shook her head. 'The cognitive triangle is used to understand how our feelings affect our behaviour. I'm talking about a specific technique that I mentioned earlier in this session...'

Ross blurted when he got it. 'Transposition. Like, when before reacting, you try to put yourself in the other person's shoes.'

'Brilliant, Ross,' Tanvi said brightly. 'Henry, instead of jumping straight to anger, try to imagine Keith's position. When a nurse in a mental health facility walks into a room and sees a length of cable that a patient might use to harm themselves, what might they be thinking?'

'Keith is only a student nurse,' Ross said, lapping up the

therapist's approval. 'He's probably scared about losing his job or getting in trouble with management.'

Georgia nodded supportively. 'The nurses work twelve-hour shifts. Keith was probably wiped by the time he came in and saw Henry playing video games . . .'

Georgia had eight million Instagram followers and a face that had been on magazine covers. Henry couldn't look down on her so focused his resentment on Ross.

'Why are you against me?' Henry growled menacingly.

'Henry,' Tanvi said sternly. Therapists were supposed to stay neutral, but she couldn't completely hide her irritation. 'I'm trying to help you deal with anger issues. Please tell me something Keith might have been thinking during the confrontation?'

Henry didn't want to play. He folded his arms and his voice went high.

'God!' he blurted, knee bouncing and knuckles turning white. 'I feel like everyone in this room is attacking me!'

Tanvi was about to speak, but Alex finally broke the silence.

'You're a total drama queen, Henry,' Alex blurted. 'Your stupid voice has been drilling into my head for most of the last hour. Nothing is *ever* your fault. Your au pair brought the wrong clothes, some of the night staff don't let you have pizza delivered, your Xbox, blah, blah, blah . . . And the second someone disagrees or challenges, you claim we're attacking you.'

Tanvi made a simmer-down gesture to Alex. 'It's good to finally hear you contribute, Alex, but you know the group rules. Remain fully in your seat and make sure comments are constructive, not abusive.'

Alex moaned with exasperation. 'Henry almost stamped a

guy to death. In the six weeks since I got here, I've heard him verbally bully younger patients, like Ross. He's yelled at nurses and lobbed scrambled eggs at kitchen staff. The point of group therapy is to talk through your problems. But how can that work with a person who can't handle the slightest suggestion that something might be his own fault?

Henry looked at Tanvi, clutching his chest like he'd been shot. 'Are you going to let her attack me like that?'

Tanvi paused for a deep breath, stressed but projecting calm. 'Alex's tone could be less aggressive, but she's raised an interesting point about how we need to examine ourselves honestly to benefit from group therapy.'

'I'm stuck in this place, aren't I?' Henry spat. 'I got expelled from one of the best schools in the country. Am I not being punished?'

Alex tutted and grabbed her hair. 'I've been in young offenders. This place is a Holiday Inn by comparison.'

'Why should I justify myself to a girl who smoked crack when she was twelve?' Henry blurted.

Georgia shot up and yelled, 'That's out of order, Henry.'

Tanvi made two sharp claps, asserting herself before her group got out of control.

'Cool heads,' she said firmly. 'Abuse is never acceptable during group work. Settle in your chairs . . . We only have a few minutes of the session left. Let's take out the sting with some breathing exercises.'

'I can't be in a room with that knobhead,' Alex spat, hooking her fingertips inside the wrecked pair of New Balance under her chair and making for the door. 'Sorry . . .'

'We all agreed to abide by the group rules,' Tanvi pleaded. 'That includes staying in the room for the full hour.'

Georgia glowered at Henry, now wearing a triumphant smirk. She didn't want to stay in the therapy room when she heard Alex smash her palm against the vending machine in the lounge outside. But, unlike Henry, the expensive psychiatrist had yet to write her report on Georgia. She had to toe the line if she wanted to stay out of prison . . .

'This session is almost over,' Tanvi said, gesturing Georgia towards the door. 'Alex probably needs you more than we do.'

The deserted lounge area had a dozen sofas arranged in rows. Patients did group or addiction therapy in rooms that branched off either side. The coffee and snack machines were against the wall by the main doors and Alex pounded the machine again as Georgia closed in.

'Henry sucks!' Alex said, eyes glazing as Georgia gave her a hug.

Georgia knew that something more than Henry was bugging her friend.

'You were so quiet in there,' Georgia said.

Alex shrugged as she jabbed the button for hot chocolate. 'You didn't have to run out after me. You've got your sentencing coming up.'

'At least we beat the queue for drinks,' Georgia said.

When the clock hit four, the unit's teenaged patients would stream out of therapy rooms, checking phones and forming a queue for hot drinks, chocolate bars and McCoy's crinkle-cut crisps. The Henry types would sprawl over the lounge, flirting and yapping until the kitchen opened for dinner, while the shy and desperate hid in their rooms.

'My stepdad spoke to his insurance company,' Alex confessed reluctantly as her drink splattered into a cardboard cup. 'They won't extend my stay here beyond forty-five days.'

He can't afford to pay himself. With my drugs and psychiatrist bills, it's a thousand quid a day.'

'Sucks here anyway,' Georgia said, trying to smile but hating that so many kids left the unit when insurance money ran out, instead of when they'd got better. 'What happened to that NHS programme you applied to?'

Alex sighed. 'Dad drove me up for an assessment, but there's eighty people on the waiting list and I'm low priority since I've never tried suicide and I don't present a danger to the public...'

'They'd let you in if you stabbed Henry,' Georgia joked darkly as she pushed the button for a caramel latte.

Before Alex could react, the double doors by the snack machine flew open. One door crashed the wall loudly as a wailing, half-dressed figure burst through.

'I am not to be touched!' the runner shouted desperately.

The runner had evidently been dragged out of school, wearing the bottom half of his PE kit and a deckchair-striped school blazer over a bare chest. As he reached a dead end at the far side of the lounge, a burly Spanish nurse named Carlos and the two green-uniformed paramedics charged through the doors in pursuit.

'Julius, calm down, mate,' one of the paramedics begged in cockney. 'They're all right here.'

'Remember our chat in the ambulance?' the other one added. 'There's nothing to fear.'

Arrivals on the unit were often dramatic. Georgia had seen bodies flopped into their rooms under sedation, sobbers grasping parents, kids withdrawing from heroin wheeled to the addiction ward with puke buckets between their knees. Most common were teens who'd attempted suicide, fresh from the casualty department with neck braces or bloody bandages.

But overpowering the admissions staff and doing a runner was something new. Julius's shocked white eyes contrasted with his sweat-beaded black head, as he glanced frantically for an escape route.

'Move aside,' Julius roared, as Carlos stepped closer. 'I cannot be here.'

Julius decided his best chance was back the way he'd come, hurdling sofas and running along cushions.

Hot chocolate splashed Alex's jeans as she backed up to the wall. Julius's head almost touched the ceiling as he vaulted between sofas, but Carlos had a plan. The burly nurse didn't fancy tackling a giant, so he grabbed the base of a sofa, tilting it enough for Julius to lose balance.

The enormous teenager became a falling tree, and a coffee table splintered under his weight.

While the paramedics moved cautiously between the furniture, Carlos was fearless, straddling the toppled sofa, then sticking a needle through Julius's PE shorts.

Julius still had some fight, despite the sedative in his blood and a gory spear of the coffee table pushed through his cheek.

'Big ones can take another,' the cockney paramedic suggested as he threw Carlos another syringe.

Julius managed a rabbit kick as Carlos pulled down his shorts, but the second needle sent him straight to fairyland.

'I'm not paid enough for this . . .' Carlos moaned, holding his back as he straightened up.

Now they felt safe, Alex and Georgia stepped around the sofas to get a better look. Julius was a beached whale, splayed over the collapsed table, with the syringes in his arse still swaying from side to side.

ONE

One Year Earlier: St Gilda's High School – Akure, Nigeria

The bell had already signalled the end of school. Boys spilled into crisply air-conditioned hallways in white shirts and grey shorts, stripping ties as they headed for home.

Julius Adebisi was a fourteen-year-old in a hurry, but his class remained trapped behind desks. Their form teacher peered over gold-rimmed sunglasses, speaking with the deliberate authority of a former army officer.

‘While I am not averse to members of form 9C using this classroom for study during the lunch period, I do not find it acceptable if I return here to find food wrappings about the place, obscenities on my whiteboard and general disarray of the chairs and tables. If this happens again, my classroom will be locked. Is that understood?’

A lukewarm groan of *yes, sir* swept the room.

Julius jiggled his black shoe as the teacher paused. *Come on, come on, come on...*

‘Class dismissed.’

Chairs grated the floor. Julius hooked an overstuffed

backpack on one shoulder and grabbed the battered shortboard propped against his desk.

‘Coming through. Major hurry!’ Julius shouted.

He was the biggest kid in 9C. But he wasn’t the strongest and at least one tough guy didn’t like being shoved.

‘Sorry!’

Most classes had been dismissed at the bell. But while the hallway had mostly emptied, there was a scrum by the doors at the far end and Julius thought it would be quicker to go out the back way. He almost dropped his board as he barged a door, exiting the school playing fields.

St Gilda’s grounds were immaculate. Bright blue tennis courts and six all-weather pitches, the largest surrounded by an athletics track. Beyond the track was a shaded grandstand with green and orange seats and a podium used for graduations.

But donations from wealthy parents couldn’t control Akure’s air. It was thirty-two degrees and it hadn’t rained for a couple of days. With nothing to flush the open sewers in the city’s slum areas, the afternoon breeze brought a strong kick of garbage and human shit.

Julius jogged through the heat haze around the building housing the school’s diesel generators, then through soccer players walking down from the girls’ school. He thought he’d probably left things too late when he glanced around the school’s main building into a jostling parking lot.

Kids – especially the little green polo shirts from St Gilda’s elementary school – streamed between parked cars. It was all fancy metal, German or Japanese. A few mothers in SUVs, but mostly chauffeurs, who broke the monotony of their jobs by arriving early and leaning on their dark saloons, gossiping as they ignored *No Smoking* signs.

Julius hurried behind a line of giant palms at the back of the lot. His eye caught Simeon, one of the half-dozen driver/bodyguards employed by his mother. Luckily, Simeon faced away, one hand in his jacket, chatting to an older driver in a garishly brocaded shirt.

He had to slow down on a stepped path, dodging green-shirted terrors running the other way. The elementary school was inside St Gilda's original, 1930s schoolhouse. Outside, kids swung and clambered through a play area dominated by two wooden turrets, with a queue for the zip line spanning between them.

'Gabriel,' Julius gasped, relieved to catch his ten-year-old brother before he got to the waiting Mercedes.

Gabe – as he preferred to be called – was still young enough to spend lunch hour tearing around, and had scuffed shoes and dirty knees to prove it.

'Why are you up here?' Gabe asked suspiciously as he backed away from a group of classmates.

Gabe was infuriatingly cool. While Julius loomed over his peers and felt crippled every time a word came out of his mouth, Gabe was a smooth-talker who had half the girls in his year crushing on him. He was the star striker for St Gilda's U11 soccer team, and a cheeky smile or flick of an eyebrow got Gabe out of troubles that would have had Julius grounded for life.

'Need a favour,' Julius said, catching his breath and wary of his old third-form teacher standing in the elementary school's doorway. She was a sweetheart, but he'd never get rid of her if she came to reminisce.

'What's in this for baby brother?' Gabe asked, rubbing his palms.

Julius tutted. 'Tell Simeon that I'm working on an after-

school project. And that he doesn't need to come back and pick me up later, because I've arranged a ride with a friend.'

Gabe looked incredulous. 'You don't have any friends.'

The jab was close enough to the truth to hurt.

'I'm in a rush,' Julius said irritably. 'Can you *please* not be an obstacle for once?'

'Simeon will interrogate me,' Gabe snapped back. 'He's more scared of Mum than we are.'

'Be vague,' Julius explained. 'If I say drama club, or detention, Simeon might try and find me to check before he takes you home. But he can't search every building on campus if he doesn't know where I am.'

'What if he calls you?' Gabe asked.

'I forgot to turn my phone back on after class . . .'

'Ten thousand naira,' Gabe suggested.

Julius tutted. 'You're not getting paid. I've covered your ass a million times.'

'Finally got a girlfriend to sneak around with?' Gabe teased. 'I've had four – you're starting to look bad.'

'You're ten. You wouldn't know what to do with a girl if you got one.'

'Price might rise if you keep that up,' Gabe said. 'And I'm not covering if I don't know what this thing is.'

Julius drummed fingers on his board.

'I know a guy,' he began reluctantly. 'He's taking me to a skating spot he's found. It's supposed to be legendary, with ramps, drops and all sorts.'

Gabe looked wary, moving further from his friends and lowering his voice. 'There's kidnappers *everywhere*. Uncle is state governor. Mum says we've got targets.'

'Mummy says,' Julius squeaked, mocking Gabe's unbroken

voice. 'I've got regular clothes in my bag. I'll just be another kid on the street. And nothing happens any more. When did you last hear of an actual kidnapping?'

'You'd better not get caught,' Gabe warned, smiling devilishly at the prospect. 'Mum will have one of the bodyguards take you in the garage for a beating.'

'That's my problem, brother. Simeon will be up here looking for you soon. Are you going to help me or not?'

'Still got that New York Islanders cap? I always liked that ...'

Julius tutted. 'OK. It's yours, you thief.'

Gabe cracked one of his winning smiles as the brothers sealed the deal with a fist bump. 'And if Mum won't pay your kidnappers, I can have your big bedroom ...'

TWO

Disused Mr Carpet warehouse – Leighton Buzzard, UK

Drone racing used to be fun. Georgia was Daddy's girl, legs swinging off a table, drinking Coke while her crew changed propellers, debated software updates and huddled over her quadcopter like surgeons. Entire days went by, waiting for races that lasted minutes. Georgia would bring her tablet, playing games or churning through entire seasons of *Friends* and *Brooklyn-Nine-Nine*.

Georgia was talented too. UK Open Specification champion at under nine and under ten. Runner-up in the European under-eighteens when she was only eleven. Back then, she practised flying most days after school, and the tournaments gobbled every alternate weekend during the season.

But Georgia was fourteen now, and over it. She hated the kitschy retro bowling shirts the team wore, with *Drone Pack* embroidered on the back. She'd evolved from sitcoms to *Game of Thrones* or *Rick and Morty*, but unlimited screen time no longer compensated for long drives, fast food and trying to do homework in budget hotel rooms while her dad watched football.

The worst thing about drone races was the men. From the geeky boy pilots who eyed Georgia up, to Steve, Drone Pack's

bearded technician. He always knew best, even though she was the team's best pilot and understood the technical stuff as well as he did.

Georgia broke her dad's heart when she'd used starting GCSEs as an excuse to get out of a twelve-round season in the UK Drone Racing League. But he'd talked her into a one-off appearance, at the qualifying rounds of the Rage Cola Classic during half-term week.

Drone racing had grown massively since Georgia had started. The courses she'd raced when she was nine were set up by middle-aged hobbyists, who hired school gyms and car parks and made the gates drones flew through out of garden wire and swimming floats, anchored down with concrete blocks or beer kegs.

Rage Cola had spent big money, filling the disused carpet warehouse with professionally built air gates, lit with coloured LED strips. There were huge banks of lights, a laser tunnel, cameras covering every angle of the course and even smoke machines for the following day's final, which would be live-streamed on the Rage Cola website, with highlights on satellite TV.

'Feelin' the buzz?' Georgia's dad – John Pack – asked, as he sat on a tabletop next to his youngest daughter's outstretched Nikes.

'I guess,' she answered, yawning as she looked up from her phone.

John tapped his watch. 'Fifteen minutes till your final qualifier.'

Georgia was carefully balancing the way she acted around her dad. He'd had a crap year, with Georgia's mum walking out, his older daughter having work and debt problems and his

survey drone company losing its biggest contract.

She'd agreed to fly the Rage Classic because she hoped it would cheer her dad up. But since saying she'd take part, he'd not stopped going on about how the event might rekindle her interest in flying. So, Georgia had to make clear today wasn't her idea of fun, while not being a total shit and spoiling her father's weekend.

'Steve replaced the wiring to the motor that kept dropping in your first qualifier,' John said. 'He's not happy with the power distribution board either. We don't have a spare, so your Uncle Phil is trying to beg or borrow from another team.'

Georgia wasn't concerned. Her quadcopter could go from zero to a hundred kilometres per hour in four seconds. She'd had a big crash in free practice and it would have seemed odder if there wasn't some last-minute mechanical drama.

'Has Steve taken back forward trim, like I asked?' Georgia said.

The more a drone tilted forward in flight, the faster it would go in a straight line, but a flatter profile would make it more stable and manoeuvrable.

John shook his head. 'Steve says . . .'

'He *never* does what I ask,' Georgia interrupted furiously. 'If Steve knows so much about flying, how come *he* didn't make it out of the first qualifying round?'

'He's always been a better technician than a pilot, Georgia.'

'The quad feels horrible in the twisty section through the trucks. I barely scraped into the third qualifying round. My best lap was two-point-three seconds off that Van Hooten bloke.'

'The Dutchman?' John said, laughing. 'He's a former European champion. Just won the \$100,000 prize in the Abu Dhabi Drone Prix. The only reason he's not an automatic entry

for tomorrow's final is his team lost all their ranking points for using illegal battery packs.'

'I know I don't practise any more,' Georgia said, feeling some of the passion of her younger self, who'd sob the whole drive home if she didn't win, 'but I'm not two-point-three seconds slower than *anyone*.'

John cracked a huge smile. 'Cookie, since you're so sure, I'll get him to make the change.'

Georgia smirked. It was ages since her dad had called her Cookie and she found it adorable.

'I know we usually fly with more tilt,' Georgia explained, 'but the motors are zippier than they used to be and the coloured lights we've had to fit for TV coverage alter forward balance.'

Georgia hoped she hadn't shown too much enthusiasm as she watched her dad cross to Steve and the drone, which was surrounded by tools at a folding table a few metres away. She checked the time on her phone and decided she had time to stroll to the ladies'.

Seventy teams and two hundred and fifty-six hopeful pilots had entered the qualifying tournament that morning. Georgia was one of thirty-two who'd survived two qualifying rounds. Only eight would get to join some of the best pilots in the world for the following day's final, where there was a £10,000 prize pool and places in the million-dollar Rage World Classic, held in San Francisco at the end of the year.

There was a lot of empty space and litter around the team concourse, since teams with no pilots left in the competition had already headed home. As she crossed the warehouse, Georgia noticed that most of the remaining teams had fancy rolling tool cabinets, better uniforms and swankier laptops than Drone Pack.

John, Steve and Georgia's Uncle Phil were still arguing over the trim changes when she got back.

'She's two seconds off the top runners,' Phil – a younger version of Georgia's dad – was saying. 'What's the worst that can happen?'

'I say we chance it,' John agreed, not seeing his daughter approach.

'Why is this a debate?' Georgia asked sharply, making her dad jump. 'I bet the best pilots on the other teams get their drones set up how they want.'

Georgia forced herself between Steve and her uncle, then grabbed a laptop, wired to the drone she was due to fly in less than six minutes. She expertly opened a window for the drone's operating software, clicked on a box and started typing numbers into a series of trim-setting boxes.

The three men saw Georgia was close to boiling over. They cast wary glances and feared she'd snap Steve's finger when he jabbed it towards the screen.

'What?' Georgia growled.

'You missed a decimal point,' Steve said. 'Unless you want to fly a spinning top . . .'

'Right . . .' Georgia said, inserting the point, then clicking an upload box to send the revised settings to the drone. 'How am I for time?'

Pilots had to have their drones at the launch line two minutes before the race. Georgia hooked her control set around her neck and grabbed her first-person-view goggles as her dad plugged a battery into the drone.

Georgia was the last of the eight pilots to arrive but was fine because an air gate was being fixed after a crash in the previous race. While John stepped over a low barrier to put his

daughter's quad on the launch line, Georgia had her ID badge scanned by a steward, before going four steps up to a podium.

She was still irritated by the argument over trim changes and tried to get her head in the zone by reciting carefully memorised course directions under her breath.

'Launch, hard forward, gate one – full power, three seconds, gate two – sharp left, laser tunnel, gates three, four – climb and right, gate five, sharp left tilt, through the double doors into loading bay – climb to ceiling, gate six, full power for seven seconds – gate seven . . .'

'Excuse me,' a cameraman interrupted, almost getting Georgia's toes as he filmed Niels van Hooten.

The exuberant Dutch pilot jumped onto the stage, with a smug grin and a bright orange boiler suit covered with sponsor patches. He waved to a crowd of thirty, with his FPV headset balanced atop waves of greying hair.

If Georgia still cared enough to read her dad's issue of *Drone Monthly*, she'd have known Van Hooten and his team's disqualification had been the scandal of the season in the racing community.

'What does it feel like having to go through three qualifying rounds to reach a final your big rivals have qualified for automatically?' a scrawny guy holding a voice recorder in Van Hooten's face asked.

'I practise every day,' Van Hooten told the recorder. His English was confident, but not his first language. 'Racing is the best practice there is.'

'But there's a chance of a crash or a mechanical failure during a qualifier,' the interviewer pointed out.

'I may get struck by lightning when I go jogging,' Van Hooten said dismissively. 'But I live my life. What good is it to lie awake

at night worrying about your own shadow?’

As one of the race stewards hustled the interviewer off stage, a green signal light came on, indicating that the damaged gate was fixed and the course ready to race. As the slowest qualifier, Georgia had to cross the stage to a marked space on the far side. Van Hooten was in her way, shaking hands with another qualifier.

‘Ronnie, you massive vagina!’ Van Hooten tooted. ‘I might let you have second!’

When he saw Georgia, Van Hooten’s booming laugh erupted again. ‘I am aghast! You must be the most beautiful Rage Cola girl I’ve ever seen.’

‘I’m not a . . .’ Georgia said, but tailed off when she figured him out.

The headset and control unit made it obvious Georgia was a pilot. Van Hooten was trying to wind her up.

‘You staying in town tonight, beautiful?’ he continued. ‘Can I buy you a cocktail?’

‘I’m fourteen, pervert,’ Georgia growled, loud enough for plenty of people to hear.

Van Hooten was only flustered for an instant. ‘Hey, Ackroyd,’ he said, smacking another contestant on the back. ‘She’s fourteen, but that doesn’t usually stop you, does it?’

Georgia shuddered. *What a dirtbag . . .* There wasn’t much of a crowd for a qualifying tournament on a weekday, but Georgia still felt self-conscious. The youngest pilot on stage. The only girl. She imagined eyes crawling up her back.

All those creeps looking at my arse.

‘Pilots, one minute,’ a race steward shouted as a bank of red lights began flashing over gate one, twenty metres in front of the launch line.

Georgia realised how skilfully Van Hooten had messed with her head. She hadn't switched on her control unit, or properly adjusted the controller strapped around her neck. She'd forgotten to check the batteries on her FPV goggles and it was now too late to change them if they were low.

Just breathe . . . The meter inside the goggles said they were good for sixty-three minutes, and the race would last less than six. Drone battery was one hundred per cent, video signal a full five bars, no diagnostic warning lights . . .

'Knock 'em dead, Georgia,' John shouted, making her even more embarrassed.

Georgia felt weirdly sentimental about her dad as she pushed down her headset and moved into another world. Now she saw through the drone's eye, face sweating, thumbs on the control sticks. Five red lights about to turn green . . .