

**STRIKE 1**



## CHAPTER 1

The headline screamed at him from the grocery store window. Challenging him. Mocking him. The urge to smash his fist through the shopfront glass to the paper it protected swelled inside his chest, where the desire to shatter something had been getting stronger every day since the news had first swept through the small city of Champaign, Illinois, sending its mindless inhabitants into a delirium of patriotic fervour.

He made to take a step forward but was forced to stop almost immediately as an early-morning jogger breezed between the window and his face. The jogger halted in his stride and backtracked. A moment later, the man's reflection appeared in the window next to his, sporting a wide smile.

The jogger's chest rose and fell several times before he spoke. 'Yowsers - it'll be huge! Gonna bring this place to a standstill, huh?'

*You're already standing still, you mindless, shit-licking dumbass.*

The urge came howling back again. He strode forward once more, this time aiming for the shop's open door. Newspapers were stacked on the cashier's counter. Without a word, he

picked up a copy of the *Champaign Chronicle*, paid, and left, the paper rolled up in his fist like a baton.

Once he was home, sitting at his desk, he finally read it. The headline took up half the front page, with an exclamation mark awarded to each of Champaign's favourite daughters. Even though he knew it would just be a rehash of everything he'd heard all week, he read the article from end to end.

### **Champaign CHRONICLE**

May 29th, 2010

## **TRIUMPHANT TRIO TOUCH DOWN TOMORROW!!!**

Kirsten Wells

Champaign's Golden Trio will touch down in style as they get together with former classmates for their tenth school reunion, in collaboration with the school's one hundredth anniversary. The Trio have certainly put Champaign on the map - how many schools can lay claim to an Olympic gold, an imminent Oscar, and a Grammy?

Astonishingly, all three girls are from the same class! 'The proceedings have been planned, right down to the finest details, and we'll all be there to welcome our new-found celebrities,' Principal Josh Templeton stated.

The article ended with the same old drivel about their respective successes: Leigh O'Rielly and her gold medal dominance in Beijing; Gabriella Cantrello and her Oscar

nomination for her performance in *Oceanos Finale*; and, of course, the Grammy award-winner Anastasia Carlyle-Benson, affectionately known as Ana B, about to embark on her European tour after topping all charts in the UK, USA, Europe, South Africa, and Australasia.

He crumpled the *Chronicle* into a ball and hurled it towards his wastepaper basket, watching as it bounced off the rim. He sighed.

His gaze swivelled to the mirror on the wall. He liked what he saw. Everything, apart from his dark, wavy hair, was hard and angular – not an ounce of excess anywhere.

Chiselled? Was that the word the gym rats used? It was a good word. It made him feel dangerous.

*Big, huh? Y'all ain't seen nothin' yet.*

He flexed and smiled.

'Tick-tock, tick-tock. Watch the clock; oh, how it shall rock...'

## CHAPTER 2

Flags and people lined the streets as the stretch limousine glided through the city centre, making Leigh O’Rielly shake her head in wonderment. She glanced across at her two companions, happy to see they were equally stunned by the carnival-like display.

Flying in from Melbourne, she’d been the last to arrive at Champaign’s only airport. Gabriella, arriving from LA, had naturally been the first one home, but it irked Leigh more than she would care to admit that Ana, coming in on the red eye from London, had beaten her to second place. They’d last seen each other in person four years ago, on holiday in Hawaii, but had managed to keep in constant virtual contact. That’s why it’d been such a surprise to discover that Ana had changed to an earlier flight without telling her.

Putting aside her annoyance, Leigh asked the question that had been bothering her since getting into the limo. ‘I thought Marco would be meeting us at the airport?’

‘Don’t you worry about Marco,’ Ana replied. ‘He’s waiting for us at the school.’

Leigh frowned. In her mind – and no doubt Ana’s as well

- the highlight of the whole event was the chance to catch up with their favourite teacher. Early on in their school days, he'd seen something special in all three of them. He had moulded them into the women they'd become, slipping into the role of friend, mentor, and confidante in the process.

Amidst the euphoria of an adoring crowd, the limousine made its way down Belmont Avenue, turned the corner into Oak Street and pulled into the parking lot of Brentwood Park High School. As the limo slowed, the red carpet came into view. It flowed through the grandeur of the school's entrance, towards the magnificent Victorian architecture beyond, winding past sprawling lawns and majestic oak trees. The applause was deafening as they stepped out of the limo.

'Would you have ever imagined this in your wildest dreams, Leigh?' Gabriella asked, clutching her fascinator firmly against the wind.

'Never!'

'Hey, the three musketeers were always destined for fame,' said Ana, with an infectious laugh.

Leigh took her companions by the hands. Together, they walked along the red carpet and ascended the stairs of the administration building, towards the beaming figure of Marco Carrera. He enveloped them in a hug.

'My girls!' he exclaimed, through the cacophony of the crowd. Without further ado, he escorted them to the staffroom, where the principal and most of their former teachers were waiting. His excitement was palpable as he briefed them about the formalities of the day. They were to open the assembly as the school's honoured guests, then the principal would

deliver his address, and the Valedictorian and Salutatorian would give a motivational message and prayer respectively. The afternoon would end in a cocktail party scheduled for 6 p.m. Marco assured them that there would be plenty of time to acclimatise to their celebrity status.

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Shelagh O’Rielly sat in the front row, never taking her eyes off her daughter once throughout the entire ceremony. When the speeches were over, Leigh bounced towards her and wrapped her in a warm embrace.

‘I’ve missed you,’ she said, her face buried in her mother’s shoulder.

‘I’m so proud of you, darling,’ Shelagh said. ‘Seeing you up on that stage... you’ve worked so hard. I’m ecstatic the rest of the world finally gets to see how special you are.’

‘Mind if I cut in?’ a smooth voice drawled. Leigh turned to see the face of her mother’s friend, Kirsten. She was wearing a white Chanel jacket, hair styled in a neat burgundy bob, makeup immaculate. Kirsten had always been Leigh’s style icon; if she’d ever had a bad hair day, Leigh had never seen it.

Kirsten gave her a hug. ‘And how’s my star doing?’ she asked. ‘Never better,’ Leigh said, flashing an electric smile.

‘Think you might have time for an interview before you skip town? I know it’s probably the last thing you want to do now you’re home, but my boss would kill me if I didn’t at least ask.’

‘I always have time for you,’ Leigh said. ‘I’m busy the rest of today, but how about sometime later in the week?’



‘Whatever works for you, sweetheart. Well, I’ll leave you two to catch up. Enjoy your visit.’

‘Oh!’ Leigh said, spinning back to her mother. ‘Speaking of which, I’m catching up with all my old classmates today, but I’m dying to see my other friends as well. What would you say to me having a get-together?’

Shelagh’s soft green-grey eyes glowed, warm and familiar, as she smiled at Leigh. ‘Of course you can, my darling. I’ll get onto it right away.’

‘You’re the best,’ Leigh said. Then, catching the eyes of her friends, she disappeared into the crowd.

Leigh, Gabriella and Ana spent the day reminiscing and cringing over old photos and stories from their teenage years. Some of their old classmates were jealous of their success. Others had never uttered a word to them, but relished in the moment of glory by association, soaking up any hint of the limelight they could. Most of their friends, however, just wanted to spend time with them. It had been so long since they were all together in the same room. The hours slipped away as Leigh, Gabriella and Ana sat among the group, simply enjoying each other’s company.

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Leigh, radiant in summery citrus with a fresh mojito in hand, watched from the sidelines as the school hall swirled with all the glitz and glamour Champaign could muster. Despite what Marco said, she wasn’t sure she would ever acclimatise to this. Gabriella and Ana, obviously both well-accustomed

to the stage, were having far less difficulty. Stella McCartney had whipped up a whimsical bit of deliciousness for Ana and, as usual, Gabriella's asymmetrical style made her look irresistibly elegant.

Leigh smiled. It had been a superb day, capped with an amazing party set to continue for some time yet. Nevertheless, she could use a little air. Setting her mojito down, she quietly made her way backstage, to the spot she'd taken comfort from when she felt pressure at school: her little place of solace.

As she sat down, she heard footsteps. *Could it be him?* she wondered, her heart suddenly racing.

'Leigh? Is that you?' a voice whispered from the shadows behind her. She swivelled and looked up at the unmistakable silhouette of Marco Carrera. He extended his hand to help her off the floor. She took it sheepishly.

'What are you doing here?' he asked.

'Taking a break from all the fuss. To be honest, I'm a little overwhelmed. I don't feel like a celebrity just yet. I'm still the same girl I was at school - the only difference is I've lost my ponytails.'

'Of course you are, but I always believed you'd be famous one day, and look, it's finally happened! I couldn't be prouder of you.'

With that, he put his arm around her. Instinctively, she nestled into the warmth of his coat.

*Oh my God, is this really happening?*

Confirmation followed as his warm, soft lips touched hers. She didn't resist.

'I've wanted to do that for years,' he said, in the sultry,

put-on French accent she remembered so well from her drama days, before launching into another forbidden kiss. This time, she felt his hand circling the contour of her breast.

It felt so right. So tender, so passionate – unlike with Chad, who didn't waste much time on foreplay. At the thought of her boyfriend, she stilled. Reluctantly, she pulled away.

'We'd better get back. Gabriella and Ana will be looking for me by now,' she mumbled, barely hearing her own words above her pulsating heart. She rejoined the party and watched from the corner of her eye as Marco followed a full minute later, blending into the crowd as if nothing had happened.

It was only later, as people started saying their goodbyes, that he slipped a little piece of paper into her hand. Twenty excruciating minutes passed before she was able to excuse herself to the bathroom. Once there, she found a cubicle and locked the door behind her.

Legs suddenly wobbly, she leaned against the wall. The paper shook in her hands as she unfolded it to reveal the message inside.

*'Meet me at 360 Degrees. One hour.'*