

TESSA DUDER

Alex

THE QUARTET

Alex
Alex in Winter
Alessandra: Alex in Rome
Songs for Alex



PROLOGUE

I have always known that in another life I was – or will be – a dolphin. I'm silver and grey, the sleekest thing on fins, with a permanent smile on my face. I leap over and through the waves. I choose a passing yacht to dive under and hear the shouts of the children as I emerge triumphant close to the boat.

Right at this moment, I'd give anything for that freedom. I am a pink human, caught in a net of ambition and years of hard work. In a few minutes I will dive into that artificially turquoise water waiting at my feet. A minute later I'll be either ecstatic or a failure.

I stare at my toes, which are white with fright. How will I ever get my legs going with feet of marble? I step from one foot to the other. My arms describe drunken windmills. I'll need all the oxygen I can get: I breathe in long slow lungfuls. My heart is already pumping away as if it has gone berserk.

I hear 'In lane three, Alexandra Archer' and something else, which is lost in cheers. Automatically I step on the starting-block. 'In lane four, Maggie Benton,' in the lane I wanted to be in, should have been in. Cheers and shouts for her, too. More than for me, or less? I have never been able to tell. What does it matter, anyway? I stand head down. Nothing will make me look at her. Since we hugged goodbye this morning we have avoided each other, carefully not being in the dressing-room at the same time, not meeting in doorways, sitting well apart in the competitors' enclosure. I hope she is feeling as ghastly as me.

We all step down. I walk back to the chair where a woman in a blazer waits to take my track suit. My hands are shaking so much that I can't get my fingers latched on the tab of the zip. She helps me. Yes, I did put my swimsuit on under all this, my most special pair. People haven't, in the past, from nerves.

Then comes the gold chain, bearing my most precious possession in all the world, Andy's pearl, his tear. It goes deep into my track suit pocket, along with his parents' telegram.

I'm cold, so cold ... appalled at what I have to do. I stand tall, centre stage, on the first rung of the starting-block. Under the night sky, I feel almost naked. Just me, the obdurate Alex, fit, ready, dangerous.

A whistle blows somewhere. I climb up to the block, as to a guillotine. Shouts and cheers echo around the packed stands. 'Maggie', 'Alex', 'Come on, Maggie', 'Go Alex'. Then, silence falls like a curtain.

I make a last adjustment to the cap clinging to my ears, a last swing of the arms,

shake of the feet, shrug of the shoulders. I hear the breakers of my nightmares crash on the nearby beach. I need a pee.

'Take your marks.'

I curl my toes carefully around the edge of the block. It's a relief to bend my knees. I crouch down, hearing the wrench of cartilage in knee joints, and look along the fifty-five yards of smooth blue water in front of me. Up and back we'll go, flat out. I feel tired already.

Heads or tails? This throw is for you, Andy.

Beside me someone starts to move.

Bang!

Alex, you're dead.

Maggie's got a flyer on you. A glorious flyer.

You're beaten before you even start.

1

It all began years ago. I'm a veteran at fifteen years and two-and-a-half months, a seasoned campaigner with countless races under my belt, and the subject of much journalistic purple prose, which charts my ups and downs. This last year, it was mostly downs. Those reporters have had a field day with Maggie and me! And how I get it in the neck at school when they write something!

Monday last week was bad, the worst yet. Start of a new term, a new year, everyone at school, frisky with holiday gossip and sizing up the new teachers. A long piece on Maggie and me appeared in the morning paper. I'd biked along to the pool, done my usual training, and come home sodden with pool water, eyes a delicate shade of pink, to peaches and cereal, steaming bacon and eggs with fried potato, four slices of toast, and hot chocolate to drink. Try doing two and a half miles' hard swimming before breakfast and you'd need more than a cup of coffee, too.

Dad waited until I'd finished my last bit of toast, and the others had all been shooed off to get ready for school. 'You'd better have a look at this.'

'Look at what?'

'Remember that reporter from the women's page? Came to see you last week.'

'The orange sack dress, and very high stilettos?'

'That's her. Here's the result.' He handed me the paper. I didn't like the expression in his eyes. 'Did she tell you she was going to see Maggie as well?'

'No, she did not.'

My eyes were still blurred with chlorine. Through the haze I recognized a ghastly photo of myself taken by the photographer who'd sat in the armchair picking his teeth and reading a book, while his wig-wearing mate had asked her silly questions. Then he asked me to sit on the verandah with the family dog in a stupid Hollywood starlet pose, and when I refused, he got all surly and grumpily fired a few flashbulbs. It wasn't a bad picture of the dog, or of the verandah.

Silly questions get silly answers. What had possessed me to answer them? Or had I, indeed? The reporter hadn't been taking shorthand, I'd noticed that much.

'SWIMMERS HAVE FEMININE INTERESTS TOO!' the headline proclaimed. I looked up at Dad. He was studiously marmalading his toast. Over at the bench, both Gran washing dishes and Mum cutting lunches had their backs turned, but I knew they were listening and waiting.

‘Life is not all stop-watches for Auckland’s two brilliant girl swimmers who meet at the national championships in Napier next week to settle which of them goes to the Rome Olympic Games in August.

‘Despite their gruelling training programmes, which mean four hours a day in the pool, fifteen-year-old Maggie Benton and her great rival of many years, Alexandra Archer, retain their interest in more traditional feminine matters.’

(Maggie first, again. Well, that’s fair enough. Maggie’s the famous one, I’m more what you’d call notorious. Nevertheless ...)

A spiel about the pretty, slim Maggie followed, about her dark gamin hair-style, which suits a swimmer’s life as well as being very stylish, her love of nice clothes, her devoted mother and immaculate house full of interesting Eastern curios, her cute younger sister and her father an importer. ‘Maggie wishes she had more time for boyfriends and parties, but enjoys going to the movies, reading, sewing her own dresses, listening to Elvis and Pat Boone records, and reading *Seventeen* magazines.’ Her photo showed her doing just that, with devoted mother (fresh from the hairdresser) peering proudly down from behind. ‘Eventually she wants to do a secretarial course, maybe some modelling, and travel. Maybe she will do something connected with the tourist industry, since she was brought up in Singapore and has travelled with her parents around Asia and Australia.’

Of course, we all want to travel. Now Maggie may be the person I most want to beat in this entire world (perhaps for the equal pleasure of beating her mother), but I actually like her. She’s shy rather than stand-offish, quite funny when she gets going, and certainly not the ‘yes-Mother-no-Mother’ little drip I once thought.

And she’s always been generous on those occasions when I have beaten her, and she’s not nearly that *gormless*.

‘And what about her arch-rival, Alex Archer, who is also vying for the Olympic nomination? “Alex and I get on quite well out of the water,” says Miss Benton. “But I suppose I must have a killer instinct that comes to the fore when we line up for an important race.” (What a load of rubbish. Maggie just swims, she always has. She is more interested in times than beating people. And no one our age talks like that.) Mrs Harold Benton, her attractive youthful mother, listening proudly to her acclaimed daughter, adds, “Maggie has a wonderful race temperament. She is very calm and determined. We are feeling very confident about the championships next week and the Olympic nomination that will follow.”’

The hell it will. With dread, I came to my part. According to the reporter, I live in a comfortable old house where I am the eldest of four children. My mother, Mrs James Archer, a devoted ‘home-maker’, works hard to provide

the extra big meals that I need, lots of steak and vitamin C. (Translation: big girls need feeding up.) My grandmother, Mrs Albert Young, lives in a bed-sitting-room especially built on for her. She tends the large vegetable garden and chicken-run out the back, and sews our clothes. Father works in the Post Office. He was a fine swimmer and tennis player in his day, a backstroke champion. The younger children (James 12, Debbie 9 and Robert 4) are all proud of their famous big sister. My parents are pleased with my achievements, but try to encourage the other children as well, and my activities do not run the entire household. (I'll say!)

The next bit made me choke. 'Besides her swimming prowess, Alex is an outstanding senior student and a prefect at her school. This year she hopes to qualify for university entrance. She represents the school in hockey, and takes a leading role in school theatrical productions as a talented musician and dancer, having passed advanced examinations in piano and ballet. She has temporarily suspended most of her other activities outside school hours to concentrate on her bid for Olympic nomination. Her training regimen includes calisthenics and weights, which she greatly enjoys. She says she has not yet decided on her future, but one possibility is the study of law. Or perhaps she'll "just get married and have lots of children".'

I looked up into Dad's eyes. He'd been waiting for me to get to that bit.

'Just get married! Just get ... what! I never said anything of the sort.'

'You didn't?'

'I most certainly did not.' I tried to remember what I had said. '*She* asked me if I might get married and have children and was I worried about having big shoulders and difficult childbirth after having done so much sport. I said of course not, I'm a fit healthy female, what more did doctors want? And one day I might get married and I might have kids *if* I felt like it. Then I said it was a myth that girl swimmers got big shoulders. They were swimmers because they had strong shoulders in the first place, although not all, you only have to look at Maggie. She's only five foot five, even if she has got hands like paddles and takes two sizes bigger than me in shoes. And both my parents were tall so it was hardly surprising that I was five foot ten and one-quarter and you're quite tall yourself and do people ask you about difficult childbirth all the time. She looked a bit po-faced at that.'

Over at the sink, Gran was chuckling away. 'No wonder she's giving you a hard time,' she said.

But Dad wasn't smiling. 'Alex, I thought you'd have learned by now. The less you say to reporters the better.'

This time I didn't merely choke. I stood up, knocking over the chair, waving the paper with rage. 'Listen to this. "Miss Archer, who is five foot ten and of

Junoesque proportions, says she misses the parties and dances and movie-going that her school contemporaries enjoy. ‘Most of the boys I meet,’ she says, ‘seem rather scared of me.’”

‘You said *that?*’ asked Mum, wiping down the table.

‘It wasn’t. I didn’t. Gran, stop laughing, please. She ... she asked me all those stupid questions and I said yes and no and I suppose so and maybe sometimes. I did not *say* them. Well, I wasn’t going to tell her about Andy, was I, or those other things? Once upon a time, there was a very tall princess who had a very tall boyfriend called Andy ... Heck, Dad, she did all the talking, then she turned it all around. I don’t even know what Junoesque means. I bet it’s something rude.’

‘Junoesque? Tall, stately. Juno was ... who was Juno, Helena?’

‘Roman goddess, consort of Jupiter, the Roman god of victory.’

My mother is a lady of few words, but she knows a lot. It’s all that reading, two hours every night, through stacks of library books piled beside her special armchair. This time I was too angry to be impressed.

‘I couldn’t give a damn who she was.’

‘Alex, I’m *sorry*,’ said Dad. ‘But from the women’s page ... Next time you’ll have to be more careful.’

‘She might have said Amazonian. They were female warriors,’ said Mum. I glared at her.

‘She makes me sound like some sort of freak.’ I read on. It got worse and worse. ‘“Usually talkative and forthright in her opinions, Miss Archer was uncharacteristically tight-lipped when asked about her rival Maggie Benton. ‘I’d rather not say anything about Maggie. We can’t both go to the Games, that’s all.”’ That makes me sound as though I don’t like Maggie, like we have some sort of feud, but I do like her, even if I can’t stand her bloody mother, and that’s just not fair.’ I looked down at the table so that Dad wouldn’t see that my red-rimmed eyes were now brimming over with tears as well as pool water.

‘Well. A subtle hatchet job,’ said Dad. ‘At least there’s an implied compliment. All that space, more than Maggie if it comes to that. The lady might not approve of you, but at least she finds you and your family environment interesting. Laugh it off.’

‘Laugh it off! I’ll be the laughing stock of the school today. And there won’t be a next time. Thanks, Mum,’ I added, as she handed me a neatly-wrapped lunch.

‘Your friends will know it for the artificial nonsense it is,’ she said quietly. ‘Most of them probably won’t even have read it. Allow yourself to be amused, Alex. It’s not important.’

‘It’s important to *me*. This ... this *rubbish* ... That’s *me* she’s talking about.’ And I stomped out of the room and ended up seething on my bed. I thought I had become thick-skinned, but I did not relish the thought of walking into the cloakroom at school, and worse, into morning assembly. It’s not that I’m completely green at seeing my name in print. I’ve had to get used to things being written about me, sometimes by male sports journalists who normally cover rugby or rowing and think swimming is a kid’s sport. Even with the regular swimming reporters, it hasn’t always been flattering, when I’ve had bad patches and Maggie’s had the upper hand – ‘MISS ARCHER BEATEN AGAIN’, ‘DISAPPOINTING SWIM’, ‘ALEX ARCHER DISAPPOINTS’. There have been predictions that Maggie will win this or that race, loads of stuff about the golden girl Maggie and a steadily diminishing few paragraphs about disappointing old me.

Mum was, as usual, right. Most of my friends had not read the paper; those who had, thought it was a hoot. The few staff who mentioned it were scathing. ‘That hypocritical nonsense in the paper this morning. Not one bit like you, Alex,’ said the Head as we walked together along the corridor to History class. Coming from her, this was indeed a small victory from shame.

‘It wasn’t me, Miss Gillies,’ I said. ‘The interviewer did nearly all the talking.’
‘And then put it all into your mouth?’

‘Yes.’

‘A common distortion. Journalists with preconceived ideas, hearing what they want to hear, and inventing the rest. It was a remarkably shallow piece of writing, wasn’t it, especially given your considerable difficulties last year. But tell me, do your male friends quote “seem rather scared of you”, unquote? Your friend Andy, did he, even a little?’

She had stopped in a patch of sun, just outside the classroom door. A long row of school photographs, teams of this and that, stared at me as I got my thoughts together.

‘Andy ... didn’t, no, not at all. The others ... well, I train mostly with boys, just boys in our squad. I’ve had lots of trips away with teams. Andy I’d known for about five years before we, before ... If I wanted to talk to him, I rang him up. Why not? Life’s too short to wait for the phone to ring or some boy to decide he wants to take you out.’

On the rare occasions when Miss Constantia Gillies smiled down from her full six feet two-and-a-half inches, it was as if a lighthouse beamed at you. I got the full treatment.

‘Alex, you remind me of the wild gels of my university days in England, in the twenties. They waited for nobody, least of all men. Today, we seem to

have gone backwards. There's far too much emphasis placed on the skills of self-adornment, and "homemaking", whatever that means, and flirtation.'

'I'm no good at flirting.'

'I can imagine. Neither was I.' Her black gown, about twice as long as any other teacher's in the school, created quite a draught as she swept into the classroom. Before the chatter and scraping of chair legs died away as the class stood, she added cryptically, 'But I was *wonderfully* tall.'

Tallness. I suppose there's such a word. 'The tallness of her,' Gran used to say when I began to grow and kept on ever upwards. 'You poor child' was another sigh, until one day I couldn't stand it any longer and sat Gran in a chair and told her firmly that I liked being tall. She got the message.

Once, it was my shortness and fatness that worried Gran. When I went to my first swimming lesson, it was a round little nine-year-old body that lined up shivering with five others on the side of the pool, my black woollen swimsuit already hanging half-way down my thighs.

Dad had decided that I should be taught to swim. The logical place was the outdoor Olympic Pool, only a two-section tram ride distant from our house. My teacher, and later coach and friend, can remember that first time very well, as he once told a reporter. 'She floated high like a dead fish and within two lessons was going like a Bondi tram. She learnt the breathing technique in one lesson. Some kids take two seasons. She had long arms, even longer legs, a resting pulse around fifty and the urge to win: champion material if I ever saw it. She always had to be first and furthest out from the side of the pool. She was a pain in the neck in that class, so I moved her in with a lot of twelve-year-olds.'

I spent most of those summer holidays at the pool, romping, diving, jumping, swimming for hours on end after my lesson. Mum would bring James and Debbie (Robert wasn't born then) and set herself up with book and picnic basket on the terraces above the pool. I saw older kids training, up and down, up and down. Soon I could do several lengths without stopping, hoping that Mr Jack, a portly and seemingly permanent fixture in baggy shorts, panama hat and grey plastic mac by the side of the pool, noticed me. If he did, nothing was said until the start of the following summer, when I had had my first two lessons in a class of twelve-year-olds. On the way home in the car, Dad asked me if I'd like to go in a race at an inter-club meeting at the indoor pool in town. Mr Jack thought I'd go like a bomb.

It was not a good start. Actually, it was a disaster. Dad virtually had to haul me bodily into the building, I was so nervous. They spelt my name wrongly in the programme. Surrounded by kids in track suits who all seemed to know each

other, I nearly froze to death waiting for my race, wrapped only in a towel. I upset the starter by insisting on diving from the side of the pool rather than from the starting-block. The dive itself was a belly flop. When I finally got going, it was straight into the lane ropes. The water was a thick warm soup of salt and chlorine that stung my eyes. But I untangled myself, and set off again, eyes shut, cheeks aflame, and swam so fast through the wash that I overtook the other seven in the race three feet from the finish and forgot to stop.

They allowed me and Dad home from hospital sometime after midnight. The X-rays showed nothing broken. The hand which had hit the wall at ninety miles an hour was the worst bruised, but I had a good purple egg on my forehead, too. At impact, the pain had been so intense that I must have blacked out for a bit and sunk like a stone. My disappearance from view was long enough to cause two stout female officials to leap into the pool fully dressed, and apparently very nearly banging themselves together like a pair of cymbals as they jumped. By this time I was on my way back up towards air. The middle-aged mermaids landed on top of me, stocking legs and white knife-pleated skirts thrashing around like demented jellyfish. I got hauled to the top. Or maybe we hauled each other.

Dad took charge then, and Mr Jack, and an ambulance person with a black peaked cap and a bag, who felt my pulse and put my arm in a sling in case it was broken. Towels, clothes, and our pale blue Morris Oxford car appeared from nowhere. I remember a nearby official's comment: 'Silly kid, but did you see her go! I've never seen such acceleration.' I remember, too, the baleful looks of my two rescuers, permed hair afrizz, peeling off their heavy wet blazers, and shaking the water from their stop-watches. Through the hum of excitement around the crowded pool came a snigger or two. Make the most of it, I flung silently at them as I was carried out, this is my first and last appearance here. Not until Mum pulled the sheet over my slinged-up arm and turned out the light did I allow myself a tear.

Embarrassment was not an unfamiliar sensation, even then. Something about me always seemed to invite attention: I found myself chosen to be leader of this or that, the class captain, giver of the morning talk, organizer of this team, thanker of that speaker, Alex'll do it, she won't mind. Did they think I had no nerves at all? I seem to be incapable of blending in with the landscape, even less with a crowd.

It's not just my tallness. I only have to look in a mirror to see that mine is not an especially pretty face, with my father's rather large nose, and a pointy chin. There is nothing special about my hair, which is short and wispy and what Gran's magazines call dark blonde (read: mouse). I am, however, regarded as

photogenic. ‘Big smile’ call photographers, not easy when I’ve just lost another race to Maggie. Or there’s this obsession with legs, pin-up stuff like World War Two calendars. As I’ve got older and my legs longer, I’ve refused to stand propped against pool ladders with one leg bent like Betty Grable.

I suppose I did – and do – talk more than most, and my voice, unhappily at times, seems to carry; but aged nine I was no taller than most of my class mates. The tallness came later. In my first few years in ballet class I was even considered a ‘short leg’.

Not long before that fiasco at the pool, there had been another, my first appearance on stage; also my last, I swore at the time. I was supposed to lead a troupe of Daisies on stage for our dance in my ballet teacher’s annual concert. It was very grand. A proper theatre was hired, with a great swishing curtain. Our mothers had to make costumes, and we had proper stage make-up. The seniors pranced around in tutus. Only the tinkling piano and scratchy record-player set up in the orchestra pit spoiled the illusion.

Things began badly, first when Mum made it clear the whole family was coming. Dad was going to run me to the theatre an hour earlier, but by the time he’d discovered a puncture and changed the wheel on the car, I got there with only ten minutes to spare to find Miss de Latour nearly beside herself, and punctures no excuse at all.

What happened was hardly my fault. It wasn’t that the person working the record-player got the wrong record, only that he put the needle down about a quarter of the way through, and with unbelievable ill luck, right at the point where the first theme was repeated. Of course, I would never have started had I heard strange music from the pit. I skipped confidently out; after a few bars I realized that we were well out of phase with the music.

A real pro, as Miss de Latour told me later, would have gone on regardless. We would, she said, have finished the dance well after the music had finished. The father working the record-player might have been able to give us some more music. It would have been messy, but the audience, recognizing adult bungling, would have forgiven us. It was clearly going to take her a while to forgive me taking the law into my own hands. I had stopped in mid-*pas-de-chat*, put hands on hips, and not once, but twice said to the man below in the orchestra pit, ‘You got the music all wrong. Can we start again?’ I nearly brought the house down. At that point Miss de Latour high-heeled her way on to the stage, bundled all the bewildered Daisies off, and made some light-hearted comment to the amused audience. In the dress circle, most of my family were under the seats, except for my darling three-year-old sister, who yelled ‘There’s Alex, she looks funny,’ as I shuffled off.

It was the last straw. Second time round, the dance went okay, but I was sick of the whole thing. Curtseying to the applause at the end, I caught a glance from the record-player man. If looks could kill, I'd have gone down like a Dead Swan. I fled from the stage the wrong way, pushed past a flutter of false eyelashes waiting to go on, and in the empty make-up room plastered my face with greasy cold cream and returned my face to normal. I changed into my clothes, crept out the stage door, and into the spare seats at the very back of the dress circle, where I glowered away alone while the senior students did their Little Swans and Bluebirds and the whole of *Peter and the Wolf*. I envied the girl dancing Peter in Russian peasant breeches and cropped hair, she was very nimble with her red boots. One day I'd be Peter: brave, adventurous and famous.

'I loved the Daisies, dear,' Gran said kindly from the front seat of the car. The rest of us, including Mum, were all squashed into the back in layers. 'You danced very nicely.'

I don't want to dance 'nicely', I fumed inwardly, ignoring the snorts from various quarters. I want to dance like a Bluebird, superbly.

'Mind you,' Gran was going on, 'with those legs, I don't think you'll ever ...'

'What's wrong with my legs?'

'Too long! Not yet, but look at your parents!'

Sabotaged on all fronts, I can remember thinking, 'I don't want to be tall. I don't want to always have to lead the stupid Daisies or whatever. I want, I want ...' but I didn't really know what it was I wanted. Except not to have people laugh at me.

My fingertips slice open the water. Briefly I'm an arrow, piercing the blue with every muscle taut, making the most of the thrust from the block.

I dare not trust my mid-flight ears. I think I heard the whistle for a false start. From bitter experience I know I cannot assume anything.

Legs begin to kick. The first strokes, and then with both relief and disgust I'm pulled up short by the rope. It's like a physical blow, rasping roughly across my arms and sending shock waves juddering down to my feet.

Damn and blast! False starts break the spell, break confidence, break rhythm, everything! One often leads to two, and then we're all in dead trouble.

We swim slowly back, trying to get shattered nerves together. Blast and damn you, Maggie; but at least that's one race you're not going to win with a flyer. In the water, a fair fight.

'If there's a break, go with it. Don't waste energy on getting angry.' Mr Jack's last words, among others. 'Use the time in the water to relax. Get out last. Keep them waiting those few seconds. Maggie will be just as thrown off balance.' So she will; so she is. Maggie hasn't done a false start in years. She's rattled.

I look at no one as I haul myself out last, shaking the water off my arms. The starter, immaculate in white, is already waiting to give his pep talk. Already I can feel the coldness seeping through my feet. A sweet man, but get on with it. We line up the second time.

'Take your marks.' We bend down, and then someone does it again.

Maggie stays poised on the brink, so do I. The rest have gone in. Tears of frustration blur my vision. And fear: break on the third time and you're out, Alex, finish, kaput. A humiliating way to let you down, Andy.

The crowd has nearly gone wild. Again the pep talk, though this time we are allowed to get towels and track suit tops for a laughable attempt at staying warm. 'Take it easy, girls. Next one who breaks is out. I'll hold you till every last one is rock steady. There'll be no flyers here.' I look over to where Mr Jack and Dad are sitting, but there is only a blur of faces, eyes, spotlights. This is the event of these nationals, my long-awaited clash with Maggie, the fight to the death. A capacity house, fanfares, overture and beginners please. Reporters pens dipped in blood. I badly need a pee.

Toes around the block. A dreadful hush. I am cold through and through, literally trembling at the knees, devoid of any thought. I only know that I must not allow myself to break;

neither must I be so cautious I get left behind at the starting post and throw that vital fraction of a second and the race away.

'Take your marks!'

An intolerable silence. There's not a movement. About five hours pass. My ears are out on stalks.

Bang.

We hit the water as one. This time I notice that the water feels warm, a sure sign of creeping coldness.

We're off to see the Wizard ...