

GETTING THE GIRL

Could he steal his brother's girl?



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Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

About the Author

Also by Markus Zusak

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About the Book

Rube never loved any of them. He just wanted each one because she was next, and why not take the next thing if it was better than the last?

Needless to say, Rube and I aren't too much alike when it comes to women.

Cameron and Ruben have always been loyal brothers. That is until Cam falls for Octavia – Rube's latest girlfriend. But she would never go for a guy like Cameron anyway. Would she?

An affecting, heart-felt novel from the author of the international bestseller, *The Book Thief*.

GETTING THE GIRL

MARKUS ZUSAK

RHCP DIGITAL

For Scout and for Mum and Dad

1

It was Rube's girl's idea to make the beer ice-blocks not mine.

Let's start with that.

It just happened to be me who lost out because of it.

See, I'd always thought that at some point I'd grow up, but it hadn't happened yet. It's just the way it was.

In all honesty, I'd wondered if there would ever come a time when Cameron Wolfe (that's me) would pull himself together. I'd seen glimpses of a different me. It was a different me because in those increments of time I thought I actually became a winner.

The truth, however, was painful.

It was a truth that told me with a scratching internal brutality that I was me, and that winning wasn't natural for me. It had to be fought for, in the echoes and trodden footprints of my mind. In a way, I had to scavenge for moment of all-rightness.

I touched myself.

A bit.

OK.

OK.

A lot.

(There are people who've told me you shouldn't admit that sort of thing too early, on account of the fact that people might get offended. Well, all I can say to that is why the hell not? Why not tell the truth? Otherwise there's no bloody point really, is there?

Is there?)

It was just that I wanted to be touched by a girl someday. I wanted her to not look at me as if I was the filthy, torn, half-smiling, half-scowling underdog who was trying to impress her.

Her fingers.

In my mind, they were always soft, falling down my chest to my stomach. Her nails would be on my legs, just nice, handing shivers to my skin. I imagined it all the time, but refused to believe it was purely a matter of lust. The reason I can say this is that in my daydreams, the hands of the girl would always end up at my heart. Every time. I told myself that *that's* where I wanted her to touch me.

There was sex, of course.

Nakedness.

Wall to wall, in and out of my thoughts.

But when it was over it was her whispering voice I craved, and a human curled up in my arms. For me, though, it just wasn't a mouthful of reality. I was swallowing visions, and wallowing in my own mind, and feeling like I could happily drown inside a woman.

God, I wanted to.

I wanted to drown inside a woman in the feeling and drooling of the love I could give her. I wanted her pulse to crush me with its intensity. That's what I wanted. That's what I wanted myself to be.

Yet.

I wasn't.

The only mouthfuls I got were a glance here or there, and my own scattered hopes and visions.

The beer ice-blocks.

Of course.

I knew I was forgetting something.

It had been a warm day for winter, though the wind was still cold. The sun was warm, and kind of throbbing.

We were sitting in the back yard, listening to the Sunday afternoon football coverage, and quite frankly, I was

looking at the legs, hips, face and breasts of my brother's latest girlfriend.

The brother in question is Rube (Ruben Wolfe), and in the winter I'm talking about, he seemed to have a new girlfriend every few weeks or so. I could hear them sometimes when they were in our room - a call or shout or moan or even a whisper of ecstasy. I liked the latest girl from the start, I remember. Her name was nice. Octavia. She was a street performer, and also a nice person, compared with some of the scrubbers Rube had brought home.

We first met her down at the harbour one Saturday afternoon in late autumn. She was playing a harmonica so people would throw money into an old jacket that was sprawled out at her feet. There was a lot of money in it, and Rube and I watched her because she was damn good and could really make that harmonica howl. People would stand around sometimes and clap when she was done. Even Rube and I threw money in at one point, just after an old bloke with a walking stick and just before some Japanese tourists.

Rube looked at her.

She looked at him.

That was usually all it took, because that was Rube. My brother never really had to say or do anything. He just had to stand somewhere or scratch himself or even trip up a gutter and a girl would like him. It was just the way it was, and it was that way with Octavia.

'So where y' livin' these days?' Rube had asked her.

I remember the ocean green of her eyes rising then. 'Down south, in Hurstville.' He had her then already. I could tell 'You?'

And Rube had turned and pointed. 'You know those crappy streets past Central Station?'

She nodded.

'Well, that's us.' Only Rube could make those crappy streets sound like the best place on earth and with those

words, Rube and Octavia had begun.

One of the best things about her was that she actually acknowledged my existence. She didn't look at me as if I was an obstacle stuck between her and Rube. She would always say, 'How's it goin', Cam?'

The truth is.

Rube never loved any of them.

He never cared about them.

He just wanted each one because she was next, and why not take the next thing if it was better than the last?

Needless to say, Rube and I aren't too much alike when it comes to women.

Still.

I'd always liked that Octavia.

I liked it when we went inside that day and opened the fridge to see three-day-old soup, a carrot, a green thing, and one VB beer can sitting inside, All three of us bent down and stared.

'Perfect.'

It was Rube who said it, sarcastically.

'What *is* that?' Octavia asked.

'What?'

'That green thing.'

'I wouldn't have a clue.'

'An avocado?'

'Too big,' I said.

'What the hell *is* it?' Octavia asked again.

'Who cares?' Rube butted in. He had his eye on the VB. Its label was the only green thing he was staring at.

'That's Dad's,' I told him, still looking into the fridge. None of us moved.

'So?'

'So he went with Mum and Sarah to watch Steve's football game. He might want it when he comes home.'

'Yeah, but he might also buy some on the way.'

Octavia's breast brushed my shoulder when she turned and walked away. It felt so nice, it made me quiver.

Immediately, Rube reached in and grabbed the beer. 'It's worth a shot,' he stated. 'The old man's in a good mood these days anyway.'

He was right.

This time last year he was pretty miserable on account of having no work. This year he had plenty of work, and when he asked me to help on the odd Saturday or two, I helped him. So did Rube. My father's a plumber.

Each of us sat at the kitchen table.

Rube.

Octavia.

Me.

And the beer, sitting in the middle of the table, sweating.

'Well?'

Rube asked it.

'Well what?'

'Well what the hell are we gonna do with this beer, you stupid bastard.'

'Settle down, will y'.'

We smiled wryly.

Even Octavia smiled, because she'd grown used to the way Rube and I spoke to each other, or at least, the way Rube spoke to me.

'Do we split it three ways?' Rube continued. 'Or just pass it round.'

That was when Octavia had her great idea.

'How 'bout we make it into ice-blocks?'

'Is that some kind of sick joke?' Rube asked her.

'Of course not.'

'Beer ice-blocks?' Rube shrugged and considered it. 'Well, I s'pose. It's warm enough, ay. Have we got any of those plastic ice-block things? You know, with the stick?'

Octavia was already in the cupboards, and she found what she was after. 'Pay dirt,' she grinned (and she had a

lovely mouth, with straight, white, sexy teeth).

'Right.'

This was serious now.

Rube opened the beer and was about to pour it out, in equal amounts, of course.

Interruption.

Me.

'Shouldn't we wash 'em or somethin'?'

'Why?'

'Well they've prob'ly been in that cupboard for ten years.'

'So what?'

'So they're probably all mouldy and mangy, and—'

'Can I just pour the goddamn beer!?'

We all laughed again, through the tension, and finally, painstakingly, Rube poured three equal portions of beer into the ice-block containers. He fixed the stick on each of them so they were straight down.

'Right,' he said. 'Thank Christ for that,' and he walked slowly to the fridge.

'In the freezer bit,' I told him.

He stopped, mid-walk, turned slowly and care fully back round, and said, 'Do you seriously think I'm pathetic enough to put beer which I just took *from* the fridge and poured into *ice*-blocks back in just the fridge?'

'Y' never know.'

He turned away again and kept walking. 'Octavia, open the freezer, will y'.'

She did it.

'Thanks, love.'

'No worries.'

Then it was just a matter of waiting for them to set.

We sat around in the kitchen for a while, until Octavia spoke, to Rube.

'You feel like doin' something?' she asked him. With most girls, that was my cue to leave. Octavia, though, I wasn't sure. I just cleared out anyway.

'Where y' going?' Rube asked me.

'Not sure.'

I went out of the kitchen, took my jacket for later, and walked onto the front porch. Half out the door, I mentioned, 'Maybe down the dog track. Maybe just out wanderin'.'

'Fair enough.'

'See y' later, Cam.'

With a last look at Rube and a glance at Octavia, I could see desire in each of the eyes I met. Octavia had desire for Rube. Rube just had desire for a girl. Pretty simple, really.

'See y's later,' I said, and walked out.

The flyscreen door slammed behind me.

My feet dragged.

I reached each arm into the jacket.

Warm sleeves.

Crumpled collar.

Hands in pockets.

OK.

I walked.

Soon evening worked its way into the sky, and the city hunched itself down. I knew where I was going. Without knowing, without thinking, I knew. I was going to a girl's place. It was a girl I had met last year at the dog track.

She liked.

She liked.

Not me.

She liked Rube.

She'd even called me a loser once when she was talking to him, and I'd listened in as my brother smacked her down with words and shoved her away.

What I'd been doing lately was standing outside her house, across the road. I stood and stared and watched and hoped. And I left, after the curtains were drawn for a while. Her name was Stephanie.

That night, which I think of now as the beer ice-block night, I stood and stared a bit longer than usual. I stood

and imagined walking home with her and opening the door for her. I imagined it hard, till a reaching pain pulled me inside out.

I stood.

Soul on the outside.

Flesh within.

'Ah well.'

It was a fair walk because she lived in Glebe and I lived closer to Central, on a small street with ragged gutters and the train line just beyond. I was used to it, though - both the distance and the street. In a way, I'm actually proud of where I come from. The small house. The craggy road. The Wolfe family.

Many minutes shuffled forward as I walked home, and when I saw my dad's panel van on our street, I even smiled.

Things had actually been OK for everyone lately.

Steve, my other brother.

Sarah, my sister.

Mrs Wolfe - the resilient Mrs Wolfe, my mother, who cleans houses and at the hospital for a living.

Rube.

Dad.

And me.

For some reason that night when I walked home, I felt peaceful. I felt happy for all of my family, because things really did seem to be going OK for them. All of them.

A train rushed past, and I felt like I could hear the whole city in it.

It came to me and then glided away.

Things always seem to glide away.

They come to you, stay a moment, then leave again.

That train seemed like a friend that day, and when it was gone, I felt like something in me tripped. I was alone on the street, and although I was still peaceful, the brief happiness left and a sadness tore me open very slowly and

deliberately. City lights shone across the air, reaching their arms out to me, but I knew they'd never quite make it.

I composed myself and made my way onto the front porch. Inside they were talking about the ice-blocks and the missing beer. I was actually looking forward to eating my share of it, even though I can never finish a full can or bottle of beer. (I just stop being thirsty, to which Rube once said, 'So do I, mate, but I still keep drinkin' it.')

In this case, the ice-block idea was at least halfway interesting, so I was ready to go in and give it a shot.

'I was planning on drinking that beer when we got home.'

I could hear my father talking just before I went inside. There was an element of bastardry in his voice as he continued. 'And whose brilliant idea was it to make ice-blocks out of *my* beer, sorry, my *last* beer, anyway? Who was it?'

There was a pause.

A long one.

Silent.

Then, finally, 'Mine,' came the answer, just as I walked into the house.

The only question is, who said it?

Was it Rube?

Octavia?

No.

It was me.

Don't ask me why, but I just didn't want Octavia to cop a bit of a battering (verbally, of course) from Clifford Wolfe, my father. The odds were that he'd be all nice to her about it, but still, it wasn't worth the risk. Much better for him to think it was me. He was used to me doing ridiculous things.

'Why aren't I surprised?' he asked, turning to face me. He was holding the ice-blocks in question in his hands.

He smiled.

A good thing, trust me.

Then he laughed and said, 'Well, Cameron, you won't mind if I eat yours then, will y'?'

'Of course not.' You always say 'of course not' in that situation because you figure out pretty quick that your old man's really asking, 'Will I take the ice-block or will I make you suffer in a hundred different other ways?' Naturally, you play it safe.

The ice-blocks were handed out, and a small smile was exchanged between Octavia and me, then Rube and me.

Rube held his ice-block out to me. 'Bite?' he asked, but I declined.

I left the room, hearing my father say, 'Pretty good, actually.'

The bastard.

'Where'd y' go before?' Rube asked me later in our room, after Octavia had left. Each of us lay on our bed, talking across the room.

'Just around a bit.'

'Down Glebe way?'

I looked over. 'What's that mean?'

'It means,' Rube sighed, 'that Octavia and I followed you once, just out of interest. We saw y' outside a house, starin' into the window. You're a bit of a lonely bastard, aren't y'?'

Moments twisted and curled then, and off in the distance I could hear traffic, roaring almost silently. Far from all this. Far from Cameron and Ruben Wolfe discussing what in the hell I was doing outside the house of a girl who cared nothing for me.

I swallowed, breathed in, and answered my brother.

'Yeah,' I said. 'I guess I am.'

There was nothing else I could say. Nothing to cover it up. There was only a slight moment of waiting, truth and feeling, then a crack, and I said more. 'It's that Stephanie girl.'

'The bitch,' Rube spat.

'I know but—'