

# The Rings

JENNY PAUSACKER

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There were three of us.

Mary Macartney, Alice Nguyen, Sarah Lavender.

Mary Macartney had red-brown hair. Fox-coloured hair, except that it wasn't smooth like a fox's coat - it frizzed out in an enormous halo round her pointy, freckled face. Mary had fox-green eyes. She had skinny brown arms and legs. She could run faster than anyone else in our year and when she put on her in-line skates, the wind couldn't catch her. Mary's skates were covered with stickers - glitter stars, Mickey Mouse, advertising slogans. So many of them, plastered one on top of the other, that you couldn't tell the colour of the skates any more.

Okay, that's Mary.

Alice next.

Alice Nguyen had straight, shiny, black hair. A smile tucked away at the corners of her eyes. A voice that sounded like music - small bells, maybe, or the notes in the middle of a piano. Alice always looked neat and tidy. She never forgot to do her homework; she answered all the hardest questions in class. And she had a wild imagination, wild like a jungle. Her stories were the best ever, ghosts and computers, fox-girls and aliens from outer space, all jumbled up together. Truly wild.

Mary and Alice.

Plus Sarah makes three.

Sarah Lavender - that's me. It isn't easy to describe yourself, much harder than describing your friends, but I'll have a try. I've got yellow hair, with straight bits that go curly and curly bits that go straight, a real mess. Blue eyes or grey eyes, depending on the weather and my mood. Crooked teeth. Little plump hands, when I wanted long thin hands like Mary. I had a cuddly black-and-white dog called Wedge and I knew the words to every rap song on the radio.

So that's how it was.

Always had been and always would be.

The three of us.  
Mary. Alice. Sarah.  
Friends forever.

We met at the front gate on the first day of primary school. My mum knew Alice's mum from the library, and Mary's dad and my mum had handed out voting cards together at the last election, so the three of them told the three of us to look after each other.

Secretly I thought Mary looked weird and Alice looked too good to be true. (And I found out afterwards that they both thought I looked really sulky.) Still, we decided to stick together, for one day at least, because we knew our parents would check up on us later. We didn't realise that if we sat next to each other on the first day, we'd have to sit next to each other for the rest of the year.

We didn't realise we were going to be friends forever.

Then Alice started telling stories, and Mary taught us how to stand on our hands, and I - well, actually I can't remember doing anything special but the others must've decided that they liked me too. Because pretty soon we were sharing our school lunches and going to each other's houses after school. We swapped jumpers. We lent our favourite books. We whispered secrets. (Alice was scared of ghosts, I was scared of blood and Mary was scared of the dark.)

On the day after we finished primary school, the three of us went to a street fair, just down the road from Mary's house. Stalls full of pot plants and wind chimes and plaited wristbands. A woman in a baggy purple suit, breathing fire and juggling alarm clocks. People flattened against the sides of the Thriller Spiller, screaming with excitement as it whirled them round and round and round.

'What are you two going to spend your money on?' Alice asked, when we'd been wandering up and down for half an hour.

I said, 'A hot dog and one of the rides,' but Mary said, 'No, hold on. We're going to a new school next year and we don't know what it'll be like. I reckon we ought to get something special today - something to remind us that we'll be friends forever.'

It was a good idea. (Even though I would've *really* liked a hot dog.) We went back and started to sort through all the stalls again. Alice suggested three china clowns and I thought we could plant three banksia seedlings.

But then Mary found the rings.

There were three of them, on a stall run by a tall thin guy with a stubby ponytail. They had plain silver bands and big sparkly stones. A white sparkle, a red sparkle and a green sparkle. The minute we saw them we knew they were exactly right, but when we counted our money, we were two dollars short.

‘Oh no,’ wailed Alice. ‘Not fair.’

She started to count again, stacking twenty-cent pieces in piles of five along the edge of the stall. The ponytail guy laughed. ‘Hey, that’ll be fine,’ he told us and he scooped up the coins and tipped them into a leather bag without even bothering to check. Then he polished the rings on his sleeve and held them out to us.

‘Now, which of these is for which of you girls?’

White sparkle, red sparkle, green sparkle. We looked at them, we looked each other. Before Alice and I could say anything, Mary took the rings and tucked them into her pocket.

‘I know what to do,’ she said confidently. ‘Come on.’

We followed her along the main road and into a tangle of back lanes. It was getting dark by now. When I looked back, I could see a golden glow in the sky: the lights of the street fair, reflected onto the clouds.

But inside Mary’s house, the shadows were so thick that I kept tripping over them. She led us down the corridor and into her room.

‘Wait here,’ she said and disappeared, leaving us alone with the shadows. When she came back she was carrying three fat velvet cushions and a fat white candle on a saucer. She told us to sit down on the cushions; she told us to shut our eyes and hold out our hands. The candlelight made rosy patterns on my eyelids. I waited for a few seconds and then something cool and round bounced across my palm.

‘Take the ring,’ Mary said, ‘and pass it on.’

We passed the ring around the circle: once, twice, three times. I was just getting into the rhythm of it when Mary told us to stop and put on the rings we were holding. ‘But don’t open your eyes just yet,’ she added.

I slid the ring onto my finger, wondering which one it was. I wanted to open my eyes just a fraction and peek, but I stopped myself just in time.

‘Now,’ said Mary, ‘join hands in the middle of the circle and repeat these words after me.’

I reached out into darkness and for the first time I felt scared. As though I was reaching into a black pit, or a cave full of snakes. But Alice’s hand slid under mine and Mary’s hand closed over mine, warm and gentle and comforting, and all of a sudden I wasn’t scared any more.

‘By the power of these rings,’ Mary began, and Alice and I joined in, as if we knew what she was going to say. ‘By the power of these rings we are friends forever.’

Secondary school was a whole new world. New kids, new classrooms, new groups, new rules. In class I sat next to Nelia Gavarra, who had the biggest laugh ever and a collection of terrible jokes. But Mary and Alice and I met up every lunchtime and we always travelled home together on the train.

At school, the girls and boys usually avoided each other. After school, everything changed. The platform at the railway station was like a social club, with messages passing back and forth, girls posing in front of the boys they liked, boys teasing the girls they liked.

Alice and I mostly watched from the sidelines, trying to make sense of all this boy-girl stuff. Mary was right in the middle of it, though. Garen Alexander, the biggest spunk in the school, would've done just about anything to get Mary's attention. He showed off. He clowned around. He snapped her bra strap. He stood next to us, talking loudly about the movie he was planning to see at the weekend, as if he hoped that Mary would suddenly say, 'Oh Garen, please, can I come too?'

Mary kept insisting that she didn't like him but Alice and I didn't know whether to believe her. After all, Garen looked exactly like Jasper Jaxxon from *X-Rated* and Mary had had a crush on Jasper Jaxxon for years. And besides, all the girls pretended that they didn't like boys. It seemed to be part of the game.

So, when Garen sneaked up to tweak Mary's frizzy hair, we both stood back and waited to see what would happen. Mary spun around and glared at him.

'What do you think you're doing?'

Garen made his eyes go big and round. 'Just trying to get you to notice me,' he said, and Mary couldn't help grinning.

'Okay, I noticed. Does that make you feel better?'

This time Garen tried a sexy leer. 'Wanna know what'd make me feel *really* good?'

But he'd gone too far. Mary sighed loudly and turned her back on him, which might've been the end of it, except that some of the kids behind us started to giggle. Garen got mad. He grabbed Mary's in-line skates, which were slung over her shoulder, and sent them swinging into her ribs.

'Big mistake,' Alice whispered and I agreed. Nobody, but *nobody*, was allowed to mess with Mary's skates. She pushed Garen away but he just laughed and yelled, 'Look, she can't keep her hands off me.' So she shoved him again, even harder, and the skates flew out and slammed against his wrist.

Then two things happened at once. The bells on the railway crossing started to clang - on and on and on, like music in the exciting part of a film. And Garen sucked his wrist, stared at Mary, snatched the skates and hurled them onto the train tracks.

They wedged against one of the rails, wheels spinning, transfers ripped and curling. Mary's hair frizzed out like the fur of an angry cat. 'I'll get you, Garen Alexander,' she said and then she darted to the edge of the platform.

'Hey!' said Alice, running after her.

'Hey!' I said, close behind Alice.

'Relax,' Mary told us. 'The bells have only just started. There's always a few minutes before the train comes along.'

She jumped.

Stones crunched under her feet.

She bent to pick up her skates.

She grinned at us over her shoulder and ...



Who screamed?

I'd really like to know.

It could've been anyone. Mary or Alice or me. Even Garen or Nelia Gavarra. The bunch of kids behind us were still screaming when the train ground to a halt, so I suppose they could've been the ones I heard. I can't remember.

I only remember the silver front of the train ramming down the tracks. A noise of wind and thunder and then the scream, jagged as a flash of lightning. Then Alice and I, swaying and shaking, side by side on the edge of the platform. The windows of the train were close enough to touch. People looked out at us through the glass, their mouths opening and shutting like fish in an aquarium.

'Where's Mary?' I asked. 'Where's Mary?'

I grabbed Alice's arm to steady myself and tried to peer down at the tracks. Alice pulled back, dragging me with her.

She said, 'Don't look.'

We lost our balance and wobbled to and fro. I hung onto Alice. Alice wrapped her arms round my waist. We stood there together on the platform, her head burrowed into my shoulder, my face hidden in her hair. I could hear her breathing, harsh and fast. That was all I could hear.

We didn't move. Couldn't move. Someone must've come over to us after a while; when I look back, I seem to remember hands, tugging and trying to separate us. But I wouldn't let myself feel the hands and I wouldn't let myself hear the voices all around us. Not until a voice said, 'Alice', and Alice let go of me at last and collapsed into her father's arms.

Mr Nguyen drove to my house and waited till Mum got home. While he was talking to her, I sneaked off to my room, where I crawled under the doona, shut my eyes and slept. The deepest sleep ever. No dreams, nothing but darkness and silence.

And, once or twice, a voice calling, 'Sarah, Sarah,' and a hand tugging at my sleeve to get my attention.

I don't remember much about the next few weeks. Just flashes, here and there.

I remember the funeral, of course. The coffin, heaped with flowers. Lilies, chrysanthemums, carnations, banksias, roses. The minute I saw the roses, red as Mary's ring, I started to cry. I cried so hard that I couldn't see anything else, except maybe a blurred glimpse of Alice's face on the opposite side of the church.

I remember the worn patch in the school counsellor's carpet, too. I remember sitting there and staring at the patch while the counsellor asked me question after question after question, until I finally cracked and told her that I couldn't stop thinking about how Mary was scared of the dark and how it would always be dark for her now. I felt a bit better after that. (I mean, I could see it was a stupid idea once I said it out loud, even though it'd seemed really terrible while I was keeping it to myself.)

And I remember lying on the grass at lunchtime with Nelia Gavarra and her friends, Voula and Cathy, the day they got brave enough to start asking me questions.

'So what really happened?'

'Why did Mary jump down onto the tracks?'

'How do you feel?'

'And did you see her?' Cathy asked after a while. 'When she was - y'know?'

They all leaned forward, holding their breath. The silence buzzed like a cloud of flies. I stared back at them and shrugged.

'Nah,' I said, 'I didn't see a thing. Alice told me not to look.'

'I would've looked,' boasted Cathy. 'No matter what anyone told me. I would've *had* to look.'

'Not me,' Voula shuddered. 'No way. They reckon the train wheels cut her into half a dozen pieces. Blood all over the place - you could still see it the next day.'

They squealed and grabbed each other, going, 'Oh, gross,' and 'You're sick.' Nelia glanced at me and said, 'Shut up, you lot', but I didn't mind. They sounded like they were talking about the latest horror movie from the video

shop. Not about Mary, who'd been a real person and my friend.

That's all I can remember about the weeks after Mary died. Basically, I just went around in a daze. Then one day I woke up.

I was walking across the yard after school and Garen Alexander was walking towards me. I thought he was going to walk straight past but all of a sudden - well, I'm not quite sure what happened. Maybe his mouth went tight or his shoulders twitched or maybe he gave some other kind of invisible signal. Anyhow, I realised he was planning to stop and say something to me.

So I made my eyes go grey and my face go stony. Garen hesitated. He opened his mouth, shut it again and went on walking.

Good, I thought. You got the message.

But next minute my heart started to bang like a jackhammer. I wanted to spin round and call Garen back. I wanted to punch him and bite him and push him over and kick him, one kick for every thump of my heart.

Because it was his fault. He'd thrown Mary's skates onto the tracks. He'd killed her, as surely as if he'd pushed her under the train on purpose. We were going to be friends forever but I'd lost her forever instead.

And it was Garen Alexander's fault.

After that I began to watch Garen all the time. In class, at lunchtime, after school on the railway platform. The more I watched him, the more I hated him.

I even bought a new notebook, so I could keep a list of all the bad things that happened to him. Like the time when Mr Meiklejohn stood over him in English and said, 'Garen Alexander, why aren't you copying the essay topic from the blackboard? Don't you intend to do any homework for me this weekend?'

'Sorry,' Garen mumbled. 'I lost my pen.'

The teacher sighed. 'Again? You must've lost at least a dozen pens this week. Oh, all right, I'll lend you mine - but make sure you give it back at the end of the lesson.'

Mr Meiklejohn's pen was silver and shiny. When Garen finished writing and put it down on his desk, I stared at it, hard. If only I could zap it with my eyes and make it vanish! That'd really get Garen into trouble.

The teacher went on talking and Garen made a show of listening.

So I was the only person who noticed the little white animal with the big red eye. It scuffled across the floor and ran up the side of Garen's desk,

climbing as quickly as a spider. Snatched up the pen and disappeared in a white blur.

I sat quietly in my chair, hardly breathing. I watched while Garen hunted everywhere for the pen. I hung around after the class ended, until Mr Meiklejohn came striding over and Garen had to tell him that he'd lost his pen as well.

Mr Meiklejohn was furious.

I was rapt.

There's one other thing that I haven't mentioned yet. The very worst thing of all. I was ashamed of myself; I kept trying to pretend it wasn't happening. But the truth was, I couldn't remember Mary's face. Or the exact colour of her red hair. Or the sound of her voice. Or the stickers on her in-line skates. Or the things that we used to do together.

She'd been my best friend - her and Alice - and yet I couldn't remember her.

But I could remember exactly how Garen had looked when he teased Mary and grabbed her skates and threw them on the tracks. I remembered it perfectly and I hated him a bit more every day.

So I kept watching him and I kept hoping that more bad things would happen to him. It didn't take long. On Monday our maths teacher was away sick and the principal, Ms Isaacs, took over the class.

If Mr Meiklejohn hates it when kids lose things, Ms Isaacs goes spare when kids fidget. It seemed like a good time for Garen to get into trouble again. I aimed my special laser stare at the back of his neck. 'Go on, Garen,' I said under my breath. 'Fidget. Wriggle around. Scratch yourself. Drop your pen.'

But Garen didn't move a muscle, and after a while I gave up. I was frowning at a page full of figures, puzzling over a really tricky sum, when Ms Isaacs said sharply, 'Garen, stop wriggling.'

I lifted my head straight away and saw a blur of white, speeding from Garen's right shoulder to his left. The little animal again. As I watched, Garen flung his hand up, made a grab at it and missed.

Ms Isaacs said, 'Oh, for goodness sake. When I told you to stop wriggling, I didn't expect you to start scratching instead.' Her voice sounded even crosser this time.

I was rapt. Fixing my laser stare on the little white animal, I started whispering to it in my mind. *Do something else now. Please. Just one more trick, something that'll send Ms Isaacs right over the edge.*

A red eye sparkled. The little animal crouched low on Garen's shoulder and lifted two legs, waving them around like an insect's feelers. It caught hold of a piece of hair and tugged.

Garen made a startled noise. He swivelled and snatched and flailed and banged his knee against the desk. His pen rolled off and clattered onto the floor. Ms Isaacs gave him a double detention and sent him out of the room.

I was beyond rapt.

And, best of all, as the little white animal scuttled away, it stole Garen's new pen.

That night I went home and wrote everything down in my notebook. I read back over the whole list and smiled. Garen was getting into some mega-trouble these days and the little white animal wasn't making things any easier for him.

The little white animal. Now that it had turned up for the second time, I was beginning to wonder about it. Like, what sort of animal was it? Not a white guinea pig, because its legs were too long and it moved too fast. Not a white rabbit, because it was smaller even than a baby rabbit. A white rat, maybe ... and yet somehow it didn't look quite like a rat either.

I turned to the back of my notebook and started doodling. Two legs like an insect's feelers, I remembered them really clearly. Short, plump body. Wide, square backside. The big red eye - well, two eyes, probably, but I'd only ever seen one at a time. (Funny, when I tried to draw the eye, it seemed to be in the middle of its back.) And the rest of the legs, one, two, and - wait a minute - three. Making five legs in all.

I scribbled and rubbed things out and copied the sketch again. Then I sat and stared down at what I'd drawn. Five white legs, all different lengths, and a red eye in the middle of the back.

It looked like a hand. A hand with a red ring on its middle finger.



For some reason I stopped watching Garen after that. Well, I tried to stop watching him, at any rate, but I couldn't help sneaking a look every now and then, out of the corner of my eye.

I was glancing sideways at him one day in the science lab when I saw the little white animal again, creeping along the bench towards the Bunsen burner, right beside Garen's elbow. I dropped the test tube I was holding and started to shake.

Before I could decide what to do, Garen reached out across the bench. A flame shot up from the Bunsen burner, tall and blue and hissing. There was a shout from the kids nearby and a smell of scorched wool. I turned my head away.

All the other kids in the lab went racing over to Garen. Except for Alice. She was standing very still on the opposite side of the lab, one hand tugging at her shiny black hair. From the look in her eyes, I could tell she felt exactly the same as me. She wasn't sure whether she hoped Garen had escaped ... or whether she hoped he'd been burnt.

When I turned back, Garen was pulling off his jumper and rubbing at the scorched patch on the sleeve. The other kids crowded around, telling him how lucky he was. But somehow Garen didn't look as though he was feeling lucky.

He looked haunted.

I still don't understand why I couldn't talk to Alice after Mary died. You'd think we would've stuck together and comforted each other. We didn't, though. Whenever I saw Alice coming down the corridor at school, I swung round and went the other way. And Alice always pretended not to notice.

But that afternoon we went speeding across the schoolyard towards each other, as if we were being pulled by twin magnets. We fell into step together as we walked through the gate. Side by side we marched down the road and into the station.

Garen was there on the platform already, off in a far corner by himself. Without saying a word, Alice and I headed straight over to him. He backed away. We followed. He backed further. We followed again. And we kept on following until we'd edged him down to the exact spot where Mary had been standing, just before she jumped.

'You think you're smart, don't you?' Alice said and she pushed him. 'Teasing people. Throwing people's skates onto the train tracks.'

'Yeah, you're a real hero,' I sneered. 'Just like in the movies. Anyone who tries to cross you ends up dead,' and I pushed him too.

Garen was twice as big as Alice and a lot bigger than me but he didn't do anything to defend himself. He just stood on the edge of the platform, swaying to and fro as we pushed him around. I couldn't see anything except his haunted eyes. I couldn't hear anything except the harsh sound of his breathing.

But I heard the train, when it came ramming down the tracks with a noise of wind and thunder. And I saw the little animal, as it came scuttling between our feet. It crouched down and sprang at Garen's throat in a blur of white. He flinched and started to topple backwards.

Falling.

Onto the tracks.

Just like Mary.

'No, I yelled and flung my hand out to grab his wrist. I clung tight and hauled hard. But Garen was too heavy for me, so he would've fallen anyway. Except that Alice was hauling hard on his other arm.

For a moment the three of us hung there on the edge of the platform,

perfectly balanced. Then Mr Meiklejohn shoved through the crowd of kids and caught Garen around the waist.

'Good work,' he gasped to Alice and me, as he dragged Garen to safety. He looked down at the top of Garen's head and added, 'Oh, mate, why on earth did you have to go and do that?'

He seemed to think Garen had been trying to throw himself under the train. I was going to tell him the truth but then I realised that Garen seemed to be agreeing with him. He slumped against Mr Meiklejohn's shoulder and started sobbing, right out loud, in front of all the other kids.

'I didn't mean to hurt her,' he wept. 'She said, "I'll get you for that, Garen Alexander", but she needn't have bothered. I couldn't feel any worse than I feel now. I -'

I couldn't hear him properly by then, because he was crying too hard. But if he hadn't been Garen Alexander, the biggest spunk in the school, I would've thought he said, 'I loved her.'

All of this happened in a couple of minutes. The train was still waiting at the platform, its doors still wide open. Alice and I looked at each other for the first time, nodded and ducked into the nearest carriage.

We didn't say anything for the whole of the journey. But as we were getting out of the train, I turned and said, 'Alice, you have to tell me what you saw, the day Mary died. I keep wondering about it. I've got to know.'

And Alice said, 'I saw Mary's hand, lying on the gravel. Just her hand, that's all, with the red ring on her middle finger.'

'Oh,' I said. 'Thanks. I'm glad you told me not to look.'

After that we went back to being silent but it was a better kind of silence this time. No more secrets; we could start to be friends again. We walked along, side by side, thinking our own thoughts, and I didn't realise where we were headed until we stopped in front of Mary's house.

Mr Macartney was pruning his roses in the front garden. He looked old and tired and lined but he smiled when he saw us. 'I've been meaning to get in touch with you two,' he said. 'I wanted to give you something to remember Mary by. Why don't you have a look around her room and see what you'd like?'

I didn't really want to go into Mary's room but I couldn't bear to wreck Mr Macartney's smile. So I took a deep breath, walked into the house and pushed open Mary's door. There was a jumper hanging over her chair and the in-line skates were lying at the foot of her bed. My eyes blurred with tears.

When I blinked the tears away, Alice was standing in front of me with three fat velvet cushions in her arms. She dropped them on the floor and nudged them into a circle with her foot. I went and got the fat white candle from Mary's dressing table. We sat down on the cushions, shut our eyes and held out our hands.

The candlelight made rosy patterns on my eyelids. I could feel Alice's fingers, warm against mine. And gradually my other hand started to feel warm as well, a steady, gentle, comforting warmth. I sat there for a while, letting the warmth spread through my whole body, and then Alice whispered, 'Sarah, what would Mary say if she was here?'

I wanted to say, 'Hey, don't ask me,' but all of a sudden I realised I knew

the answer. 'She'd say it wasn't Garen's fault, after all,' I told Alice. 'She'd say that he meant to throw her skates on the tracks but he couldn't have guessed that she'd jump down after them. She'd say she's forgiven him now and we ought to forgive him too.'

Alice sighed. 'Yes,' she agreed. 'That's what Mary'd say, for sure.'

She squeezed my hand and at the same moment I felt (I swear I did) warm fingers close around my other hand and hold tight. Then the gentle pressure vanished. There was a rattling, tinkling sound and when I opened my eyes, I saw a ring rolling across the polished floorboards. A ring with a red stone. Red as blood. Red as the headlight of a train. Red as roses.

Alice and I reached out together and, as our hands touched the silver band, I was drawn into a circle of memories. Mary with her fox-red hair. Mary with her fox-green eyes. Mary wearing my jumper and listening to Alice's stories and teaching us to stand on our hands. Mary running faster than anyone. Mary skating faster than the wind. A circle of memories that could never be broken.

And someone ...

I'm not sure who it was ...

It could have been Alice or me or ...

At any rate, somebody there in that room whispered softly, 'Friends forever.'