

*Sometimes the end is just
the beginning...*



Autumn leaves

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Autumn Leaves

Anthology of Australian Chick-lit

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“You’ve been drinking for an hour.”

“Yeah, so what?” I shove past Kate and grab another beer from the fridge.

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough?”

“Nope.” The crack of the cap is deafening and I stand glugging, defiant, in front of the love of my life.

“Mark! What’s your problem?” Her hands are on her hips, lips a tight, straight line.

I wait until her glare wavers, melts from anger to uncertainty, a flicker creasing between her eyebrows. Only then do I turn my back.

“Why don’t you tell me?” I toss it over my shoulder, not looking at her, as I head for the couch.

I drain the rest of my beer in one long chug that hurts my throat. It’s the last of my six pack, my second in an hour. I am bloated and uncomfortable. I’ve pissed more tonight than I have all week and I’m not nearly numb enough. I should have bought whisky or vodka or something more medicinal than hops, water and sugar. Next time I’ll know better.

She stops whatever she’s doing in the kitchen and appears, hovering in my periphery. It takes all I’ve got not to turn towards her. I remain stoic. My empty beer has all my attention.

I rise from the couch to take another piss, my feet painful as I walk. You see the problem is, my heart has descended from my chest, slippery-dipped to my pelvis, split on a sharp bone and each half has fallen to the bottom of a foot. With every step away from her, I’m walking on my broken heart.

I met her in a bar where suits and pretty-boy football players congregated of a Friday night. She was a friend of a friend of a friend and told me her name was Kate. Like a doofus, I asked, “Any relation to Princess Kate?”

She laughed, pulled a goof-ball face and gave a blonde strand an

exaggerated twirl. “Definitely. Just ask my parents.”

And my heart was no longer my own.

From that first meeting, all I could think of was Friday night when I knew we’d both end up at Strats. We fell into a pattern: I’d be with my group of mates and she’d be in over-animated conversation with hers. We’d be pretending not to look at each other. Me pretending I wasn’t worshipping from afar, and her, that she hadn’t seen me at all until I was at the bar beside her.

“Mark!” With feigned surprise. “So nice to see you. Having a good night?”

And if I hadn’t been, I was now.

There were conversations, flirtations, but I could never seal the deal. According to Robb and Qai and Millsy, I was a soft cock. Probably not an unfair assessment. I spent my days crunching numbers, writing up complex documents for important people, turning grey from lack of sunlight in an office populated by similarly grey, vitamin-B deficient number crunchers. She shone. She radiated so bright it hurt to look.

“She sees money, you know?” Tanya was Robb’s girlfriend and she hated Kate. “She sees your suits and your shiny shoes and car, not you.”

Kate and I had been dancing around each other for six weeks and I’d spent yet another evening racking my brain for an offer she just couldn’t refuse. I had nothing.

“Only way that chick’s ever gonna make your kind of money is to shack-up with it.”

“The suit’s company policy,” I said. I knew I wasn’t in Kate’s league. I couldn’t compete with the football heroes who bought her drinks all night. But as if you say that to your mate’s drunk girlfriend. “And at least she sees something, right?” I nudged her in the ribs as I said it, all jovial-like. Tanya sculled her whisky. “She’s a prick-tease player.” Then she looked at me like I disgusted her or there was just no talking to me, or something. She wandered off for more booze, not bothering to ask if I wanted another.

I stood on my own, watching Kate from across the crowded bar. She was laughing at something one muscle-bound Tarzan had said, smiled politely at another, then coyly dipped her gaze and flipped her hair over one shoulder. She looked up and caught me staring. Our gazes locked and eventually she mouthed “Hi”.

“*Player,*” Tanya’s voice echoed in my head. Still, I couldn’t look away. I smoothed the front of my jacket, the fine material silky under my fingers. So I didn’t have bulging biceps, but perhaps I could compete in other ways. I didn’t care what she saw in me, so long as she saw.

Tanya reappeared, wobbling as she stopped and leaned against my side. I stiffened, but didn’t move away in case she fell.

She looked over at Kate again. “She’s a slut tease, baby.” Her slurred breath was hot in my ear. “She’ll only sleep with you once she knows she can hurt you. *I’d* never treat a guy like that.” Then she’d propelled herself forward, planted both hands on my arse and squeezed my cheeks. “Let’s go to the toilets to fuck where Robb won’t catch us.” Whisky breath slurred from her pudgy face, her pores oozed a mix of make-up and oil. “I’ll make you come *real* hard.”

I pushed her off, no longer caring if she fell. I strode to Kate’s side, interrupted her conversation and kissed her. Genuine surprise looked different to her feigned surprise. After a few seconds, she pulled away, looked me over and a smile settled on her lips.

“About bloody time.”

I stumble back from the toilet down the corridor and pass her in our bedroom. She’s scraping her hair back from her face into a band. Her eyes refuse to meet mine in the mirror. I hope she cracks it and gets seven years of bad luck.

To her, that would probably mean seven years stuck with me.

“Where are you going?” I ask it before the message can get from my brain to my mouth that there’s a communication security lock-down being enforced.

“Yoga. It’s Thursday.”

This minutia of conversation has ruined everything and my resolve is gone. “Couldn’t you skip it tonight? I hardly see you anymore.” I slide my hand under her T-shirt, feel her familiar creamy skin, so pliable and soft. I am lost as I pull her to me and kiss her ferociously, fumbling to unhook her bra.

“Don’t, Mark!” She pushes me off. “You’re drunk and the girls are waiting for me. We can do this any old time.” It’s a slap in the face. A kick to the groin. The girls? *The girls* are waiting? It’s an ember to my faded anger.

“But I want to do it now.” I don’t let her go. “I want to do you right this second.” I pull up her top, attempting to get it over her head. “I want to bend you over the bed and...”

“Mark, I *said NO!*” And for a second, I think she’s going to slug me. Then there’s stillness, quietness and the flicker is back between her eyes. My hands fall uselessly to my sides. She stares at me a second longer, then scoops up her gym bag and exits with long, purposeful strides.

From the hallway, she yells, “Why are you so frickin’ drunk anyway?”

Words float somewhere between my head and mouth, but it appears the security lock-down is back on. I’ll have to fire the guardsman because I so badly want to tell her that I know. I want to beg her not to leave, but the little fucker won’t let me. The words flow soundlessly out of my brain and float around the room in unspoken thought bubbles. I move out into the hall, a mute, sloppy drunkard.

She stares at me, waiting for an answer. “You know you’re spoiling everything?”

“*That’s the idea,*” says a silent cartoon bubble.

She glares a moment longer, then steps out the door and slams it behind her.

After I’ve been staring at the door for a long time, I realise I can’t see it anymore and that the reason for this is that my eyes are chock full of tears. I watch a fly swimming on the wall. I imagine what she’s doing at yoga. I

imagine his hands all over her. Then I imagine *my* hands wrapped around his throat.

We'd been dating about a month when we chanced upon the house during a night-time stroll. I felt the drag of her grip on my hand as her pace slowed before the 'For Lease' sign.

"Oh." It was more a breath than a word. "Just look at it."

"Nice," I agreed, appraising the retro cream townhouse. It had been recently renovated, according to the sign. I pressed her hand between my two, trying to ensure she was warm enough in the cool, autumn evening.

"I've always wanted to live in this place."

"You mean in a place like this?"

"No, this one. Exactly this one. I dreamt about it."

"Really?" I gave her my most sceptical look. "Then what's it like inside?" I covered her eyes with my hand. "And no peeking."

"It has jarrah floors and the original fireplaces. The kitchen has been renovated, but the developers are nostalgic and the bathroom still has the original claw-footed bathtub from the twenties. And the best bit," she peeled my hand away, "is the antique birdbath in the backyard."

"You're a psycho nut," I grinned, "and I'm not entirely sure I'm safe in your company."

"You don't believe me?" She took up my hand again. "Come see," and she pushed open the small, wooden front gate.

"Hold on." I dug my heels into the pavement. "You appear to be suggesting we commit trespass."

She wagged a finger at me. "So technical, so by-the-book. Think of it as an adventure. We're exploring. It's called being *spontaneous*."

"What's in it for me?" I was playing as if I wasn't going with her.

"You'll get to see the birdbath." She smiled her angelic smile at me. "It's

beautiful.”

I followed her through the small front yard and down a paved walkway.

At the back was a courtyard, and although it was dark, moonlight and muted streetlight illuminated a row of rose bushes against the back fence. Several trees just beginning to drop their leaves onto the recently mown lawn lined the side fence, and smack-bang in the middle of the yard, was an ornate, concrete birdbath.

She let out a little squeal. “Isn’t it gorgeous, Mark? Isn’t this just like fairyland?” She spread her arms wide and turned full circles, taking in the secret garden that belonged in a child’s nursery book. “Can’t you just see us living here? Having babies and growing old together?” Her voice trailed off. Clearly, she felt she’d said too much too early in our fledgling relationship.

“I can definitely see all of that.” I hugged her, looked into her deep blue eyes and gently kissed her. “I could see all of that before you’d even told me your name.” She wrapped her arms around my neck and we kissed and kissed and kissed. We sank to the grass and I didn’t care that it was damp or that we were trespassing and likely to get arrested. I just cared about this magic, angel girl who was sitting astride me, her golden hair curtaining our heads. She unbuttoned my shirt and ran her fingers over my chest, traced my collarbone, then cupped my face in both her hands before kissing me again. The pressure of her against my hard groin was ecstasy. I slid my hand under her silk dress, over her firm thighs and abdomen, searching for her breasts. She was braless and my thumb grazed an erect nipple, eliciting a moan. She rolled onto the grass, her long legs wrapped around my waist forcing me to the top. While I supported my weight, she unzipped my jeans, took off my belt, and slipped her hand into my jocks. This time I moaned. I wrestled her dress over her head, threw it aside and we collapsed together, skin on skin, unable to get close enough.

“I want you,” she whispered. “Is it too soon?”

I responded with a kiss and a shake of my head. I couldn’t talk. Slowly, we began to make love. I concentrated on my breath, trying desperately not to get too excited. I watched her face, the arch of her back and neck, until she

got close, then I sped up, ground my hardness into her until the wave overtook us both and we collapsed in the night-shadow of the birdbath.

We lay, side-by-side, panting. She stared at the canopy of stars above us while I stared at her. Slowly, she turned her face toward me, grinning, grass stuck to one cheek.

“See the benefits of spontaneity now?”

A week later I signed a lease on the house, on our magic fairyland garden. We moved in and lived happily ever after. Or for at least a year.

I must have passed out. There’s a piece chopped from the film reel between the swimming fly and the now of coming-to in our bed. She is asleep beside me. I didn’t hear her come home. The clock on my bedside table flashes one am. My mouth tastes like rubbish and tongue feels like sandpaper. I need water, but I can’t drag myself away. I sit up and watch her, the rise and fall of her chest, the apparent peace on her face. She reaches across the bed, feeling for me in a way I’m so familiar with. I can’t help but slide back under the sheets as she curls into me, entwining me in her limbs. I lie there and pretend it’s real. That she still loves me.

And then she mumbles a name in her sleep. One that isn’t mine.

I kick off the blankets, run to the garden, collapsing on the doorstep. Our magical fairy garden mocks me. I stare at the birdbath. I’d once pictured us being married beside it. Now all I want is to topple and smash it until it is nothing but rubble.

Stephen came into my life six months ago. An ex-real estate mogul turned corporate bigwig sent from the head company to streamline processes and increase profits. In other words, to sack people and make those left standing do twice the work. I was one of those left standing and overnight I became an eighty-hour-a-week guy. Kate hated it, said she missed me, hated going to bed without me.

“I have no choice,” I told her, bleary-eyed and sick from lack of sleep and

too much coffee.

“There’s always a choice.”

I took Kate to the end-of-financial-year bash that the company put on. A reward designed to distract us from the time they’d stolen from our lives. Stephen was toasting everyone, a puffed-up, boastful tool. But then, he was a puffed-up boastful tool with the power to fire me. I introduced them and the sleaze kissed her hand. After removing his lips from my girlfriend, he slapped me on the back. Kate excused herself to get a glass of wine.

“Love your work, man. Howdya pull that one?” He was almost drooling as she walked away, her ass more perfect than that royal chick’s sister in her long, clingy dress.

“Don’t know, mate. Guess she just recognises quality when she meets it.”

“As I said, howdya pull that one?” He laughed. “If I’d seen her first, you wouldna stood a chance.” Stupidly, I thought he was wrong. He might earn more, might be higher up the career ladder, but the stink of real-estate bluffery still clung to him and Kate loved me. He was just a cashed-up bogan.

Later, she came back with cigarettes, a sure sign she’d downed a few in her absence and was well on her way to tipsy-town.

“Got a light, babe?”

Of course I didn’t.

“Here I’ve got one, Uma,” Stephen said.

“Uma?”

“Sorry luv,” Stephen winked, “Just reckon you could pass for Uma Thurman’s better-looking younger sister is all.” I tried not to gag. No way she’d fall for lines that shite. But then he pulled out his lighter, leaned across me to light her cigarette, and for a second I was pushed to the background and it was just the two of them.

I rise from the step, my limbs stiff and cold, and trudge back to the bedroom. She is still asleep, so I pick up her phone that’s charging on her bedside, but

there are no messages, no new pieces of evidence. It doesn't matter anyway; I know what's going on. Tomorrow is the day she plans to upgrade.

In the bathroom, I splash my face with water, half-heartedly gargle mouthwash. The mirror confirms my shirt is rumpled, my jeans stained with pizza I don't remember eating. I grab my car keys knowing I could get done for DUI, but I don't give a fuck. From the doorway, I allow myself one last look at her. A shudder runs through me, threatening to burst out of my chest as a howl, but I force it away. If nothing else, I am in control of this.

Head high, shoulders back, I leave our house. Strats will still be kicking on and I need more booze.

Two weeks ago, I sat in the pub nursing the same glass of beer for an hour while I watched her yoga studio. It was a converted church in the middle of a restaurant and shopping district, an easy place to find somewhere with a good view of the door. Trendy wanna-be Buddhists with rolled up mats under their arms floated through the wooden archway, but I never saw him go in. After a while, I began to feel stupid. Maybe it was all in my mind, I'd somehow misconstrued things. Just because his text had called her Uma. Just because she'd never mentioned him being in her yoga class, and *he* hadn't said anything to me at work. Just because they were texting one another when, to my knowledge, they'd only ever met the once. None of it *necessarily* meant anything was going on.

An hour and twenty after she entered, she left the building alone, her face red and sweaty. She took a few steps down the street and I began to relax. I half-thought about jogging out to meet her, sweeping her into my arms and breathing in the musky scent of her recently exerted body. My being here was a coincidence, I'd say, and we'd go and have dinner and she'd tell me how she'd nearly perfected a full backbend and I'd suggest she could demonstrate in private later. But then she stopped, waited a beat, and *he* was by her side. The two of them fell into step, didn't touch, but the way their bodies aligned, her slight tilt towards him, his gaze on only her — it was almost worse.

I didn't notice how hard I was squeezing the glass until it catapulted from

my fist and smashed on the floor.

Security at Strats gives me a cursory once-over before ushering me inside with an almost imperceptible nod of a meaty head. Squaring my shoulders, I concentrate on the careful placement of each step until I'm out of bouncer-boy's sight. The bar is, as I'd predicted, still going strong. Bad nineties music blares over the sound system, and men and women dressed like they've come from the office fill the small space. Her face flashes before me as I glance at the place by the bar where we first kissed. I want to vomit and immediately I know I should have gone elsewhere.

Desperation for relief grips me and I push through the drunken crowd, not caring now how crookedly I walk. At the bar I slam down my plastic, order a shot of whiskey, down it and order two more.

"Watch it!" A woman whacks me with her purse and I stumble sideways, colliding with a brick of a man on my other side. He looks me up and down, considering what sort of action should be taken. I puff up my chest, clench my fists by my side hoping he'll belt the crap out of me. Maybe that, unlike the booze, will get her out of my mind.

The brick raises a hairy-knuckled hand and I squeeze my eyes shut, waiting for the blow. But there is no punch. Instead, there's a solid connection with my sternum that again causes me to stumble back. I have an image of one of those heavy-bottomed toy clowns designed for children to pummel that won't topple over but instead wobbles from side to side, leering at its aggressor. The clown makes me laugh, I can't keep it in.

The brick scowls; I guess I'm supposed to cower before him. But before I can tell him how funny it is that I'm a toy clown, there's a steady arm around my shoulders.

"Mark! There you are, baby." Tanya sticks her pudgy face between me and the brick. "So sorry," she says to him. "He's a bit drunk. We'll get out of your way."

The brick is apparently appeased and I let Tanya lead me away because it

seems that I can't think for myself anymore.

"You dick!" She pulls out a chair at a small table by the far wall and shoves me into it. "You could've gotten your pretty face smashed in."

"Yeah," I flash my toy-clown grin at her. "But you fucked that up, didn't you?"

"Mark..." She reaches across the table and takes my hand. "What's going on?"

"Where's Robb?" I counter, scanning the crowd for my colleague, but all the faces are a blur.

"Gone home," she says. "We fought. Again." She drops her gaze and my hand. For the first time, I see some vulnerability there, and for that second, I forget to hate her.

"Must be the night for it." I let out a loud belly laugh, which doesn't feel like a laugh at all.

"Figured as much," she says. "What happened with you and Princess Kate?"

I sigh and look away. Every blurry face now has her blonde head, her baby blues, her kissable mouth. Perhaps because I'm drunk, or perhaps because I need some relief from this secret that's stabbing me to death from the inside, making me haemorrhage hate and violence and pain, I pull out my phone and show her.

"I found this two weeks ago," I say, and show her the first offending text. "It's from Stephen."

Her eyebrows shoot skywards. "What the...?"

Then I show her the others I've managed to forward from Kate's phone. I'd been in the process of researching how to install some kind of spyware on it that would automatically send them all to me when I found the one he'd sent this morning, and I knew there was no point.

"Hey Uma, you're still OK with tomorrow being 'D' day?"

"Yep, we'll tell him together, right? You'll come to the house?"

“Right after work, babe.”

“That’s such a relief. I can’t keep a straight face around him anymore. I’m such a bad liar. He’s going to work it out.”

“Nah, you’re doing great, hot stuff! We’ll tell him tomorrow.”

“Thx. You’re the best. x”

I’d read the exchange over and over. Each time it made me feel sicker.

“I need another drink,” I say and rise unsteadily from my chair.

“Me too,” says Tanya and hooks her arm through mine.

“So, she’s planning on leaving you tomorrow?” There’s a glint of ‘I told you so’ in her small, mean eyes. But fair call, she did tell me so.

“Yeah,” I reply. I regard Tanya and there’s pain in her eyes too. “But maybe I’ll leave her first.” With a tilt of my head, my lips are on hers. Immediately, she’s kissing me back. There’s teeth involved and I think she’s going to draw blood, maybe bite off my tongue. I hope she devours me. I hope she swallows me whole and there’s nothing left to feel this horrible, horrible relentless pain of losing Princess Kate.

I’ve lost time. I don’t know where I am when I open my eyes. My heart is banging, galloping on the adrenaline that for some reason has just shot through my body. Then I realise I’m at home in bed and Kate is asleep beside me. My heartbeat begins to calm, more air gets into my lungs, but something is wrong.

Light pours through a gap in the curtains, illuminating the lump under the doona that is too big to be Kate. With a gasp, I sit bolt upright, the sudden movement causing Tanya to open her eyes.

“Hey, lover.” She stretches out one hand, reaches for my crotch. Instinctively, I scuttle away.

“What’s going on?” I say it even as bits from the previous night begin hurtling back. Me and Tanya at the bar. Me and Tanya drinking until they kick

us out. Me and Tanya in the back of my car. Me and Tanya at her place, then mid-morning back here...

“Wasn’t this the plan?” There is accusation in her eyes. “Wasn’t it the plan that she comes home with lover boy all ready to dump your arse but instead you show *her* what’s what?”

“Yeah...” The discussion is coming back. It felt like genius not so long ago, but now I just feel sick. The bedside clock flashes 4.45pm. I have lost an entire day. I grab for my phone. There are missed calls and texts from work. There’s several from Kate:

“Mark, where are you? Did you get up and go to work early?”

“Baby, I’m worried about you? Can you let me know you’re all right, please?”

“Mark! I’m really, really worried. Where are you?!”

My heart contracts. Is she acting, just playing the part of ‘loving partner’? Why would she do that so close to ‘dumping my arse’? A seed of doubt begins to sprout.

“Mark?” Tanya is sitting up now, the sheet only covering her from the waist down. I avert my gaze.

“You have to go.”

“What?” she says. “No way! Don’t pussy-out now. That bitch is gonna get what’s coming to her.”

“You have to go,” I repeat, getting out of bed and fumbling for my jocks. Something squelches under my foot. A used condom. I run to the bathroom and vomit.

I’m still in there, retching up my guts, wishing I could vomit out whatever I’d done with Tanya along with all the bile when I hear a key in the front door.

There is the clack of Kate’s stilettos, then “Mark? Are you home, baby?”

My heart stops. I go cold all over.

“Hey, Marky-Mark?” It’s Stephen.

Shrugging into my bathrobe, I step out into the hallway to face them because there’s nothing else I can do.

“Oh, thank god.” Kate runs to me and throws her arms around my neck. “You’ve been home sick and didn’t hear my messages?”

Tentatively I hug her back. Why is she behaving this way in front of her new lover?

“Look, I’ll tell you off for being inconsiderate later.” She grabs my hand and begins to lead me towards the lounge room. “But I can’t keep this in anymore. We have something to tell you.”

She is excited, like a little kid and the bits just aren’t adding up. Dread is building like a rock in my gut. Tanya is naked in our bedroom and my girlfriend isn’t acting like she’s about to dump me.

“What are you doing here?” I direct it at my boss.

He adjusts his tie that looked perfect in the first place. “Ah, mate. I’ll let Kate here, tell you.”

We all sit on the couch, my head and heart pounding.

“Baby,” she takes my hand, presses it between hers the way I used to. “You’ve taken such good care of me and been such a wonderful partner.” Here it comes, I think. Here comes the felling blow. “I never felt I could do much for you but seeing you so happy in this place,” she motions at the four walls, “gave me an idea.”

Stephen pulls an A4 envelope from the inside of his jacket and places it on the coffee table.

“Open it,” says Kate.

With shaking fingers, I tear open the envelope and official-looking documents slide out.

“It’s ours,” she says. “If you want it to be.” She points at a place in the document requiring a signature. Her signature already appears. “I found out the owners were going to sell, and I wanted to surprise you, so Steven helped

me with the bank and drawing up the documents and he's been so great." She is beaming, looking from me to him and back again.

"Ah, shucks," he says, with a wave of his hand. "It was nothing. Consider it a reward for the past six months of hell I've put you through." He is grinning too.

I look at the documents, the reality of the situation beginning to settle in. "So... you're not leaving me?"

Kate's bemused frown appears. "Leaving you? What on earth are you talking about? I love you, Mark!"

Something leaves my body, like a possessing demon being exorcised. "I love you too, Kate. I love you so, so much." I hug her, pressing her to my body with everything I've got.

"So, I've done the right thing? You want to buy the house with me?"

"Of course," I say. "Of course I do. This is amazing. You're amazing."

She places the gentlest of kisses on my lips. "Phew! You need to brush your teeth." She grins again like it's not important, that I can do that later in *our* bathroom. Not as tenants, but as owners. "Right then, sign your life away! Stephen will be our witness."

I take the pen from her, feeling lighter and happier than I have in weeks. A door creaks open. I look up past Kate's smiling face into Tanya's unsmiling one. The wheels in my head turn and tumble and crash. White panic blocks out everything. The smile on Kate's face has vanished. She looks from me to Tanya and back again. No-one moves, no-one speaks, but I see the terrible pain I've felt for weeks materialise in Kate's eyes.

Black silence hangs in the air.

Stolen Kisses by Carla Caruso

In one day she'd be leaving him. Their paths were unlikely to cross again.

It seemed almost impossible after they'd sat side-by-side for over a week in his navy-blue Holden Commodore SS, through repeats of radio songs trilling about American Apparel underwear and Starbucks lovers, waiting for something to happen. Something *more*.

Misty Welbourne had dreaded this assignment, both the monotony and terror of it, and yet now... now she'd gladly steal back more hours in the day.

Rust-orange and yellow-gold leaves nestled against the car's dormant windscreen wipers, a curse of the tree-lined street they frequented. He was right in not bothering to sweep the foliage away. Maybe once the assignment was over, he'd go the whole hog and get his car fully detailed. She'd never know.

He was jogging his denim-clad knee against the upholstery now, like he always did when he was impatient. She'd only known him eight days but already felt familiar with his every quirk. He preferred iced honeycomb-flavoured milk to coffee, and didn't try to hide it. He often put the air-conditioner on when it wasn't even warm. He favoured radio station Triple J, though switched back to Nova FM whenever she returned to the car. He'd muss up his naturally blonde-tipped hair in searching for the right words and scratch the mole on his left wrist when the weather changed. Frustration made him rub the bridge of his long, straight nose. A nose that was much prettier than hers.

So many little things she knew about him, but still she wanted to know more. Bigger things. Pieces of his heart.

He turned to her, his eyes reminding her of dark chocolate, enhanced by his slate-grey V-neck tee. Jesse Ramage, freelance photographer extraordinaire. Her breath caught.

Was he thinking what she was thinking? That they only had hours left together and that he couldn't bear the thought of her leaving? That it was time

to throw caution to the wind and shrug off their professional facades? Bubbles of hope rose inside her, like the pretty pink ones on her phone's lock screen.

"They're here."

She'd leant in, actually *leant* in, before her brain registered his words. The pink bubbles of hope burst.

"Oh... right. Of course."

Lurching back, she clambered to unclip her seatbelt and threw it off. What was she thinking? Guys like him never went for nervous, slightly dishevelled girls like her. His caramel-kissed arm was already reaching for his door handle. Of course his tan would last until autumn when she couldn't even muster one up in summer. Her freckles never quite joined together for an all-over tan like she'd hoped for when young.

Jesse climbed from the car, his spiffy camera banging against his side, and she scrambled to follow suit. At the last minute, she grabbed her blue-spotted notepad as though it was necessary, feeling, as always, like she was play-acting as a reporter. She could barely make small talk at the checkout and she was meant to ask important people the hard questions? Like people would take a girl with woolly strawberry-blonde hair seriously! Writing was the only part of her job that came naturally. At least she'd been saved from much in the way of interviewing that week, with the objects of her focus not giving her half a chance.

Two TV cameramen and another newspaper photographer already hovered near the recording studio's automatic gate, along with the twenty or so fans that also made the daily pilgrimage. The latter were there for the love not the money. And perhaps Misty now was, too, though her adoration was being channelled in an entirely different direction — one now huddled with the rest of the media pack.

The groupies, meanwhile, were a real mixed bag, from a middle-aged couple in concert T-shirts to a wheelchair-bound woman, and a young blonde mum with her look-alike daughter. Fifty years of rock music had built up a loyal following for The Stolen, even if the stir the four-piece UK band created these days was a little less frenzied than yesteryear.

Misty hung back, behind the hordes. Jesse was the one who needed to get close to the action. Professionally at least. He'd made it clear he wasn't impressed by celebrities.

The first of the big black Audis pulled up and out climbed bassist Lonnie Kirk, wearing Wayfarers that looked too young for him and sneakers that were too bright. Following him, in separate vehicles, came the chain-smoking, headband-wearing guitarist, Wolfgang Allen, the straight-laced, silver-haired drummer, Curtis Leonard, and finally the lead, Billyo Duane, known for his strut and oversized chops. Rumour had it Billyo and Lonnie, once childhood friends, no longer talked, which possibly explained the different vehicles. Or perhaps it was to have enough room for all their egos.

Some of the band waved to the fans, others stopped for autographs, and Billyo covered his face with a satchel to hide from the flashing cameras. Maybe he was having a bad hair day. Then the gate clanged shut, and in seconds, the studio's tinted glass doors had swallowed up the members once more. It was all over red rover for another day.

The Stolen had made the same trek from their hotel to the studio and back again since landing in little ol' Adelaide, Australia, and rehearsing for the first date of their world tour. Getting an exclusive shot of them doing something out of the ordinary was near impossible. The band members were virtually museum pieces. Probably went to bed at half-past nine after downing mugs of warm milk. Their days of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll were well over. Misty didn't know what her editor was expecting.

Would they start rehearsals that late afternoon with the showstopper, *Bricks and Clicks*, or the more reflective *Catbird*? One other thing she had the assignment to thank for was a new appreciation of the band's catchy tunes.

"Misty?"

She looked up and found Jesse's chocolate-brown eyes upon her again. She hadn't even heard him approach amid the other cameramen packing up their equipment. Only the editor of the trashy online newspaper Misty worked for, back in Sydney, would make them stick around even after they'd gotten

shots of the band's arrival. Jesse had his phone clutched in his hand and a frown pinched his brow.

He cursed, though it sounded like sweet nothings to Misty's prejudiced ears. "The night photographer can't make it. I have to do overtime tonight."

"Oh, crap. That's too bad."

As a full-time, on-staff journalist, she did overtime every day and probably got paid about half as much as him. Okay, so she didn't *really* need to start as early in the morning as Jesse, she just chose to, for obvious reasons. But, anyway, none of that was a concern for her right then.

She bit her lip in feigned sympathy, though inside she was doing a fist-pump at getting to spend more time by his side, at the eleventh hour. Maybe being cooped up together had affected her like Stockholm syndrome, hence why she'd fallen so hard.

She drew in a breath, marshalling up some courage. "You know, the band leaves rehearsals every night around seven-thirty. Never changes. W-we could duck out for dinner before then if you're hungry. I went to a dumpling joint nearby with the other tog last night. The decor wasn't too flash, but the dumplings were to die for. Seriously."

It'd be a cinch to type up the story on her phone, padding it out with the usual details about what the ageing rock stars had worn. Besides, she couldn't bear to watch another hotel movie alone when she knew Jesse was still out there, on the clock, within reach.

He blinked at her — once, twice — then the dimple in his right cheek popped up to say hello. "I like dumplings."

Misty shyly returned his smile. "Sounds like it's a plan then."

Back in Sydney, it would be a long cold winter for Misty, sharing an office cubicle with her usual cohort with the bulletproof fringe and laughing eyes by day, and her draughty Zetland flat with her cat, terrarium and the TV remote by night.

But autumn wasn't over just yet, and for the moment, that warmed her.

Jesse was so used to clocking Misty's side-profile in the car, it was a little strange observing her straight on. She sat opposite him in the quiet, shadowy eatery, sipping on Chinese beer and fiddling with her chopsticks.

Her wild curls reminded him of both autumn leaves, turning from orange at the top to wisps of gold, and sheep wool, bizarrely. The curls softened her slightly large nose while their hue clashed with her bright pink lipstick. At least she'd gotten rid of the rainbow-striped scarf, which had hidden her rather appealing swanlike neck.

When work had called and said they were flying in a Sydney reporter to accompany him, Misty wasn't the type he'd been expecting. A spray-tan would have turned her pale skin orange. Her nails were real and bitten to the quick. And she had none of the big-city arrogance he'd imagined. Instead she was quiet, slightly bohemian, anxious, and klutzy. An accident waiting to happen. It was endearing and dangerous all at once.

As if on cue, she knocked her camel-fringed handbag, hanging from the back of her chair, to the floor. Magazines spilled onto the maroon patterned carpet at the side of their table.

He reached to grab the books at the same time as she did, not missing the blush tinting her cheeks as their fingers grazed. The sudden colour made her look even prettier. But he didn't need to ruin another fragile bird's life.

Okay, so he'd earlier noted her long, Bambi-esque legs and wondered how it'd feel to have them wrapped around his frame, as tightly as that scarf of hers. But it was a momentary lapse.

He lifted the magazines back up onto the table as she propped her handbag strap on her chair again. One of the publications she'd dropped was *Adelaide Coast*, a free street magazine on beach living. Sheer boredom must have made her pick it up along her travels. The other, well, it actually wasn't a magazine at all. It looked like a sketch pad, bent back to a page depicting a colourful, intricate illustration of a lioness.

He handed it back, tapping on the page. "Wow, did you draw that?"

Her blush deepened and she shook her head, stuffing the books back in her bag. “Just coloured in the picture actually. It’s an adult colouring-in book. Apparently they outsell cookbooks in France. They’re good for stress relief. I like doodling in them when watching reality shows that don’t require much brainpower.”

“Huh. Who’d have thunk it? That lioness looks good enough to frame.”

He could just imagine her, too, sitting cross-legged at some artfully messy coffee table, her tongue out to one side as she shaded in a picture, a cat probably curled up nearby. The image made a smile tug at the corners of his lips.

He nudged his mind back on track. “So are you Sydney born and bred?”

“No, no. I’m originally from Shoalhaven Heads, a tranquil sort of beach resort town in New South Wales.” Her gaze turned mock-accusatory. “You’re nodding. As though that makes perfect sense. Like you could never have pictured me as a bona fide Sydneysider!”

The beer, as they waited for their dumplings, appeared to have brought out a little of her feisty side. He liked it.

He held up both hands. “Well, it does make sense. In a good way. You’re more down-to-earth than the Sydney-slickers I’ve met.”

Her shoulders visibly relaxed. “Adelaide actually reminds me a little of my hometown, being not far from the sea or countryside. Along with the cruiser traffic, people walking slower, and all that. I feel comfortable here. Shoalhaven’s too small to go back to, but somewhere like this,” she shrugged. “I could feel at home.”

Jesse nodded, toying with the label on his beer bottle, unsure why her declaration sparked a flicker of happiness in his belly. “If you don’t mind me saying, you also don’t seem like the typical newspaper reporter.”

Misty snorted, then covered her nose in embarrassment at the faux pas. Recovering, she said, “My mistake in going down the journalism path was I like to write and that’s not a good reason to become a reporter. In truth, I’m more of a features writer, suited to magazines, than a hard news type, but I

never seem to get beyond the interviews in the glossy world. Guess I don't fit the mould." She tugged at a strawberry-blonde strand. "I blame the hair. It defies straighteners."

Jesse grinned. "I like your hair. It's... unique."

Misty returned the smile and darned if it didn't warm the cockles of his heart. "I've heard worse. They used to call me Strawberry Shortcake at school, and not in a nice way."

A waiter arrived, setting down a bamboo basket full of dumplings. They'd ordered a mix of chicken, prawn, and pork varieties. Jesse's stomach readied itself for the feast as the waiter disappeared again. Still, he did the gentlemanly thing of gesturing for Misty to help herself first, then he reached for his chopsticks to do the same.

She eyed him as she dipped a steamed dumpling in soy sauce. "So now I've told you my story, what's yours? Have you been freelance for long? And have you always lived in Adelaide?"

It felt strange to talk to her about more than just the trashy rag she worked for, *The Stolen*, or other trivial stuff. Strange but *nice*.

He raised an eyebrow. "I can't say I really chose the freelance path. It chose me. I was a staff photographer at a daily newspaper here, covering anything and everything. Natural disasters overseas, local politics, crime, you name it. I went away to work in Melbourne for a change of scene, then came back to the paper here as a casual. But," he let out a sigh. "I had a blow-up with the new boss and was sent packing. Being a newsman in a one-paper town, freelance became my only option, especially as I wasn't up to switching cities again. Still, playing paparazzo to ageing rock stars isn't exactly my dream gig, not to be rude."

She offered him another serene smile. Most of her lipstick had been eaten away but the remnants clung to her lip-line. "You mean to tell me after hearing *Catbird* on repeat, *The Stolen* still haven't gotten under your skin?"

Jesse shook his head with a scowl. "Ah, they're like cockroaches. Those guys would survive a nuclear explosion, despite the trail of destruction

they've left in their wake — lovers broken-hearted by their philandering, dejected ex-band members, dumped managers."

"I suppose we all have our histories," Misty said quietly. "What was your blow-up at the daily paper about, if you don't mind me asking? With your boss?"

Jesse set down his red chopsticks, the colour suiting his mood right then. "I can't even remember to be honest. Some bullshit. I can have a short fuse, but the guy could be a real cocky bastard. And he didn't pick the best day to have a showdown with me."

"Oh?"

Jesse hadn't wanted to venture into this territory — in fact, he never did — but that was where he'd found himself regardless. Backed into a corner. "To be frank, I'd just found out my ex-girlfriend had died. In a car accident. Reckless driving. My head wasn't exactly in the right place."

Misty put a hand to her throat, her eyes wide. "H-how terrible. That must have been such a shock... Maybe y-you should have explained things to your boss, later on. Surely he would have understood."

Jesse tightened his jaw. "Or maybe it was my punishment. For leaving her when she was in a bad way. For always putting work first. Who knows?" Distractedly Jesse pushed up a shirtsleeve and frowned. "We'd better get a move on anyway or we'll miss The Stolen leaving."

Misty nodded, still wide-eyed, and they finished the rest of the meal in silence.

Somehow, following the rehearsals, Misty had convinced Jesse back to the hotel bar for a drink. Her desire to cheer him up and take his mind off things had given her the shot in the arm needed to pose the question.

Work had put Misty up in the same hotel as the band and there *was* the minute possibility the performers would come lurking and Jesse could sneak an exclusive shot. At any rate, she didn't really care what his reasoning was for being there, so long as he was. The pain of soon departing felt like a blunt

razor being dragged over her skin. She'd jump through a fire hoop to prolong the inevitable.

Jesse's earlier revelation about his ex hadn't scared Misty off at all. In fact, it had only deepened her interest in him. Helped explain why he closed himself off. Telling him not to blame himself for what happened, of course, would be futile.

He was lounging in an armchair opposite, his eyes on the drinks menu. Frank Sinatra's *Autumn in New York* softly played in the background and the city lights twinkled beguilingly through the floor-to-ceiling window beside them. For a moment Misty enjoyed imagining them as just another of the glamorously-attired couples scattered about the plush surrounds.

Jesse glanced up, an eyebrow quirked. "Some of these cocktails sound pretty lavish. Emerald Bijou, Diamond Fizz..."

Misty waved a hand in the air. "I've never been the type of girl attracted to sparkle. Colour, yes, but not sparkle. Which is why I'm going to go for the Double Rainbow!"

Jesse grinned. "Nice. Hope I'm not being too much of a party-pooper, but think I'll just go another beer."

She returned the smile. "Fine with me."

A cocktail waitress with a blue-tipped French manicure drifted over to take their orders, then headed back to the bar.

Reflexively Misty hid her too-short nails as Jesse eyed her again. "So," he said. "We've spent the past eight days together, but I feel like I've barely scratched the surface in getting to know you. Tell me something new about yourself."

Perhaps his earlier beer and the dark of night had finally helped him to relax, let his guard down.

"Like what?" she asked coyly.

He shrugged a shoulder. "Something, I don't know, I'd be surprised to find out about you. That no-one else knows. We'll probably never see each

other again after tomorrow, so what's the harm?"

Tell her something she didn't know. She was more than aware how soon they'd be exiting each other's lives if she didn't act fast.

"All right." She sat forward in her chair, her pulse suddenly sprinting along. "But if I'm going to do this, you need to play along, too. A truth for every one of mine."

Jesse smiled as he reclined again in his chair, his sprawling frame seeming to take up every inch of the dark leather. "Fair's fair."

"All right." She twisted her mouth, gathering up some nerve, her aim to keep a smile on his face. To make up for earlier. "Sometimes I'm too lazy to shut the blinds when I'm getting changed. And I live in a crowded apartment complex."

His brown eyes glittered. "I'm trying hard not to get a visual." Her blush deepened. "Okay, my turn, I guess... I've been told, on several occasions, that I snore — loudly — when I'm really tired."

By several *women* was the obvious implication, though Misty was determined not to get bogged down in the minor details. She nodded with a smile. "I'm obsessed with Googling whether stars are gay or not."

Jesse's cheek dimpled. "Ariana Grande songs make me want to dance. Badly. Even though I pretend I don't know who she is."

Misty was laughing now. "I sometimes think I'm super-human because whenever I return to the lounge, after grabbing a snack or something, my internet TV errors."

Jesse shook his head with a grin. "I once checked my dog's horoscope because he seemed down in the dumps."

"Really?" Misty covered her mouth to stem her giggles, even if the prospect of a depressed canine was actually quite sad. "Okay, this one's not so secret, but anyway... I drive a green Barina with a windscreen sticker that says, "Powered by fairy dust" and seat covers that are hot pink."

"You're kidding me? Puts my Commodore, ahem, to shame. Um... The

sound of the ice-cream van used to scare the bejesus out of me as a kid.”

Misty giggled. “Blowing raspberries makes me cringe.”

“I check Facebook on my phone like a reflex.”

It was her turn again. She racked her brain, thoroughly enjoying herself. “I got carpet burn under my right eye after attempting a cartwheel indoors. I still have a faint scar.”

“I don’t mind watching *Revenge*.”

That had her laughing with her mouth open wide. “Oh dear! Um... I often sleep without a pillow, like a weirdo, because it feels better for my neck. Actually, no, no, I’ve got a better one.” She pushed down the shoulder of her dark purple top and perched on the low table, with her back to him. “I got a tattoo of that lioness’s face in my colouring book, because I liked the picture so much.”

When Misty turned to check his reaction, Jesse was looking at her with hooded, unreadable eyes, something seeming to crackle in the air between them. And it had nothing to do with the bar’s sound system. “Wow, I reckon you win.”

Her voice was assured, quiet, not her own. “Maybe, for one night, we could pretend we’re other people entirely. Not a cat lady with colouring-in books or a guy who can’t forgive himself for his ex going off the rails.”

Jesse was nodding, not appearing to hate her for the latter comment. “And how do you intend we do that?”

“I have an idea. But we’ll have to make a break for it before the cocktail waitress comes back, expecting payment.”

“All right.”

Misty’s heart fluttered at her sudden confidence and what might unfold. Perhaps she hadn’t left things too late after all.

Jesse watched Misty from the other side of the hotel pool, the night lighting making the water twinkle like the stars in the sky.

“You’re really going to do this?” he asked again as she grabbed the hem of her purple top, making her pause mid-action. The bar music from a floor down floated upwards.

A small smile brightened her features. “Uh-huh! There’s no one around but us. I know it’s not an entirely original idea, but why not make the most of autumn before it’s over and it’s too cold? It’ll be fun.”

“It’s cold enough,” he argued, but she was already peeling off her top, drowning him out, revealing a pale blue, slightly faded bra underneath — each cup modestly filled — and a generous dose of milky-white skin.

He averted his gaze but not quick enough to miss the straight-leg jeans coming off next and her black sports briefs getting an airing. Wow. He couldn’t help peeking through lowered lashes. She had an unexpectedly fit, taut body. Misty was a real surprise package. Exactly the opposite to the type of woman who caked on make-up, scaring him with a bare face the morning after. And tonight, since they’d gotten better acquainted, she seemed bolder, more comfortable in her own skin. Not such a fragile bird who’d need looking after.

With a gracefulness he hadn’t witnessed from her before, she sashayed towards the pool’s edge, stretched out her arms, and dived into the deep end. The lioness tattoo flashed once again before his eyes. It was as though she was a mermaid, better suited to water. She finally resurfaced at his end of the pool, bending an arm over the paved edge. It was probably a good thing she hadn’t yet gone the full monty. Her hair, now in a ponytail, looked like liquid copper wet.

“You’re quite the swimmer,” he said, finally.

“Pilates keeps me in shape,” she returned. “Are you coming in?”

Shit. He hadn’t really thought she’d do it, assumed she was just joking around even coming up here. And yet... suddenly he was wrestling with his belt buckle and toeing off his Tiger sneakers. Luckily he wasn’t the type to go commando and kept his boxer brief collection in good nick.

She’d drifted back to the deep end by the time he’d jumped in,

discovering, gratefully, the water was heated.

“Are you going to remove the rest now?” he teased from across the water, his voice husky, knowing he was in deep. For fuck’s sake, they weren’t there for a synchronised swimming class. He’d seen the gleam in her eye.

Her look was coy. “I’d rather give you the honours.”

Christ. He hadn’t misread the signals. The truth was he wanted her climbing all over him like a Thai masseuse. For the first time in a long time he felt like he was living in vibrant colour. He performed a freestyle stroke worthy of Ian Thorpe to get to her side.

As he came up for air, bobbing just inches away from her, she tilted her head and pressed a finger to his lips. For some reason she was frowning. “Can you hear that?”

His heart thundering in his chest like a freight train? The blood rushing in his ears? Uh, yes! He settled for the rather ineloquent “What?”

Then he heard it, too. The unmistakable sound of Billyo Duane doing a karaoke *Bricks and Clicks* in the hotel bar. It could only have been him. No-one could do a cover that good. A few cheers and whistles drifted upwards.

Misty’s eyes appeared all pupils as their gazes again locked, hers seeming to ask Jesse the same question he was asking himself: should he try to sneak a shot downstairs through the glass, finish the job he’d started, impress the boss?

“Ah, fuck it, someone will have an iPhone. The editor won’t know I’m here.”

Misty seemed to be in agreement because, all of a sudden, she grabbed hold of his shoulders and slanted her head, her lips clashing with his. He drowned in her mermaid kisses.

The first bars of The Stolen’s *Charm Offensive* cranked from the speakers of the near empty stadium. Misty felt her heart bouncing around in her chest like a kid at a trampoline playground.

Then there they were. The famous foursome she'd stalked for over a week, strutting forwards and hamming it up for the cameras, in a set-up media shoot, just hours before their concert.

It was a little weird not to have security guards obstructing her view for once or to see the band actually looking happy to have lenses directed their way. But that was showbiz. Her rag hadn't been on the original invite list for the press call, but she'd found out about it through a contact and wangled her and Jesse's way in. Her editor had been super-happy about it, too.

Misty watched Jesse busily snapping frames of the band alongside the other photographers and TV cameramen and her chest twinged. Last night with him had been wonderful. Unexpected. She'd surprised herself with what she'd helped propel into action.

But her wheeled suitcase was mere metres away, ready for taking to the airport right after the press call. Unlike Jesse, she wasn't staying for the concert. Did it mean the final curtain for them forever? Was it back to her cat, terrarium, and a job that made her sick with nerves, without even a Skype call to brighten her day?

The shoot was over in a paltry eight minutes, the rockers quickly disappearing back into their shiny black Audis. But it didn't stop Jesse from looking exhilarated as he approached her, the rest of the media making small-talk and heading off around them.

"Wow, those blokes defy their age," Jesse exclaimed, appearing for once like a little tacker at a candy store in the band's afterglow. "That was fantastic. I think I finally got it, seeing them like that. You know, what the big deal is."

"Sounds like you might even *enjoy* shooting a few of their songs at the concert tonight then."

"Yeah. Think I actually might. Funny that." Jesse paused, shooting her a *Revenge*-worthy meaningful stare, and then they both spoke at once.

"I was just thinking — there's probably a lot more freelancing work in Sydney..."

"*Adelaide Coast*'s looking for an assistant editor. I'm considering

applying...”

They both paused, gawping at each other, then laughed. Self-consciously and happily.

Finally, Misty cleared her throat. “You know, Katy Perry’s doing her first tour date in Adelaide next month. I could ask to cover it and put in a request for you.” She shrugged, her mouth twisting. “We could take it from there. See what happens.”

Discreetly, he reached for her hand, just about making her knees knock. “That’d be nice. *And* appropriate, seeing as Perry has a song called *Roar*,” he winked, “and you’re quite the lioness.”

“I thought you only knew Ariana Grande songs,” Misty teased back.

He grinned, drawing circles on her palm with his thumb. “Need a lift to the airport?”

This time *he* was buying more time.

“I’d love one.”

Then she leant in, stealing a peck on the lips. Who knew? Maybe *Charm Offensive* would even be ‘their’ song, which they’d one day tell the grandkids about. Stranger things had happened...

Run to You by Laura Greaves

This isn't autumn. It can't be. There must be some mistake.

"There must be some mistake," I say to the man next to me. But I can tell immediately that he'll be of no use. He looks perfectly comfortable, which seems improbable given his only defence against the cold is a pair of Lycra running tights and a thin windbreaker. No gloves. No hat atop his sandy blonde hair. *No sense*. He even manages to arrange his handsome (but surely benumbed) face into a smile. A *warm* smile.

"What's that?" he says cheerily, removing one of his earbuds. The tinny sound of Guns N' Roses bursts into the frosty air.

"Oh, forget it," I say, scowling behind my scarf as I turn away. The guy is clearly part polar bear. He couldn't possibly know how it feels to be a guitar solo away from hypothermia.

America has lied to me. I'm offended by this frankly ridiculous excuse for an autumn morning. Where I'm from, autumn is balmy blue-sky days and crisp, starlit evenings. It's relishing sleeping under a quilt again after a summer of clammy sheets and listless ceiling fans. Autumn is the ivy on the back fence turning a slightly hysterical shade of pink, and the wisteria over the pergola drifting languidly to the ground.

This is decidedly not that. This is an arctic wind so icy it should be served with vodka. It's a sagging slate-coloured sky that I'm sure I could touch if I was wearing my customary four-inch heels instead of my running shoes. This twisted version of autumn brings with it a promise, according to this morning's forecast, of sleet right around the time I'll be hitting the halfway point.

Not just rain. Sleet. Mushy snow. What kind of city has *sleet* in the middle of autumn?

And what am I doing preparing to run headlong into it?

"Well, giddy mate!"

The narrow field of vision between the bottom of my beanie and the top of my scarf is abruptly filled by a shiny camera lens and an even shinier set of

white teeth. Instinctively, I take a step back, which allows the owner of the teeth to loom fully into view. She's a reporter, if the *NY1* logo on her coat and the cameraman at her side are anything to go by. The hairsprayed helmet of blonde hair, as tall as the skyscrapers dotting the distant Manhattan skyline, is a bit of a giveaway, too.

"Throw another shrimp on the Barbie!" she crows. Even amid the dull roar of tens of thousands of excited runners, the woman's voice is about a hundred decibels too loud.

I frown at her, not that she'll be able to tell from the sliver of my face that's visible amid my many layers of clothing. Hopefully my hazel eyes are doing a reasonable job of conveying my deep abhorrence of shouty Americans and appalling attempts at an Australian accent first thing in the morning in sub-zero temperatures.

"Hi there," Choppers continues jovially, unabashed by my glare. She leans over the barrier corralling my start group into its cramped corner of the staging area and thrusts a microphone at me. I knew I should have pushed my way deeper into the crowd of runners, where it's both warmer *and* free of perky journalists hungry for human-interest stories. Once again, sitting on – or in this case, standing near – the fence comes back to bite me.

"Janine Janowitz, NY1 News. You're a long way from home, Melissa! Tell me, how does an Aww-see find herself running the world's greatest marathon?"

I'm momentarily disoriented by her familiar use of my name, and the fact that she knows I'm Australian. Then I spy the enormous green-and-gold M E L I S S A and Boxing Kangaroo transfers Amber insisted on ironing onto all my running gear. *You have to let the crowd know who you are and where you're from*, my little sister had said. *So they can yell their support!* I'm as bewildered by the concept now as I was when she did it. None of the yelling directed my way recently has been of the supportive variety.

Janine Janowitz is smiling at me in an earnest and faintly panicked way, and I suddenly realise I'm on live television. A hush descends on the corral and my fellow runners watch me with open curiosity. Mr Polar Bear has

removed both of his earbuds now, no doubt in order to hear which charity the dumbstruck girl dressed like Kenny from *South Park* is running for.

“Well, Janine,” I say, yanking my scarf away from my face so that my own comically broad Aussie twang can be heard in all its glory. “I love running, and I love New York City, so I thought why not kill two birds with one stone and have a crack at the marathon?”

I’ve never said “have a crack” in my life before now. I feel faintly ashamed.

Janine, however, looks thrilled. “It’s our coldest November day in a decade. I guess our chilly fall weather will be a challenge for you, given the sun always shines *Down Unda?*”

“Yeah, it’s brass monkeys!” Never said that before either. I don’t think I even know what it means. But if this pushy Noo Yawka wants an Aww-see, I’ll give her an Aww-see. “I’m planning to run pretty fast though, so I’ll warm up quick. I had lots of practice doing my training at home in the bush, running away from snakes and drop bears and stuff.”

Next to me, Mr Polar Bear says, “Ha!”

“Well, good luck with that, Melissa!” Janine says, looking slightly confused. “Have a great race!”

She melts into the crowd, no doubt in search of someone with a more compelling “Why are you running the marathon?” tale to tell. It’s a good thing I didn’t unload my real story on her; she’d have been here for *days*.

In the distance, a faint cheer goes up. I look at my lurid green Garmin running watch and my heart rate instantly doubles. It’s over an hour since the starter’s pistol went off and the marathon officially began. That cheer can mean only one thing: my wave of runners is finally, mercifully about to cross the start line. In an event with this many participants, it takes an age to actually get running. There’s a lot of standing around, fidgeting. Another reason why this allegedly autumnal chill is so irritating.

Ahead, I can just see the top of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge that will take me from Staten Island across New York Bay and into Brooklyn. Just in

the nick of time; the insidious cold is creeping up through my shoes and I'm gradually losing the feeling in my feet.

"Let's get this show on the road," I mutter, removing my scarf all together and draping it over the barrier. The frigid morning air hits my face like a slap and I watch my anxious breaths unfurl like fern fronds. I jog on the spot, trying to loosen up my frozen muscles as my group inches towards the start.

Then, all of a sudden, the pack in front of me picks up its collective pace and we're running. *I'm running the New York City Marathon*. I'm going to run as fast and as far as I can and I'm going to pray that, twenty-six-and-a-bit miles from now, it will finally be far enough.

"Drop bears, huh?"

It's Mr Polar Bear. He's behind me, which is confusing. He can't possibly be catching me up. He took off like a cheetah the moment we crossed the start line and left me in his dust, struggling red-faced through the unexpectedly uphill first mile with all the other slowpokes. Although, admittedly, the view of his retreating backside did make the going slightly easier.

Now, nine miles in, I've hit my stride, but surely not enough to close the gap on Speedy Gonzales.

"How are you behind me?" I'm surprised to find I don't sound especially breathless. In fact, I'm feeling pretty good. *That's what happens when you pace yourself*, my smug internal running coach reminds me. I've shed my beanie and sweatshirt, though the air is still sharp and the sky remains leaden. The strands of my auburn hair that have escaped their tight plait are plastered against my face. My legs feel strong; my feet light. And there's no sign of the forecast sleet yet.

So I can't really complain. About my performance, anyway. My uninvited running buddy is another matter.

Mr Polar Bear smiles sheepishly. It's a nice smile. A sincere smile. Not the shark-like grin so many New York men seem to brandish like a weapon.

"I may have, uh, gone out a bit quick," he says. "I decided to throttle back

a little through Brooklyn. And then I saw you go bounding by and that seemed like an extra incentive to take it slow.”

That’s a backhanded compliment if ever I’ve heard one. *You run like a sloth, so I thought I’d try my luck.*

“Lucky me.” I dig in and quicken my pace. Just because I have the ability to carry on a conversation, doesn’t mean I have the inclination.

And besides, I’m having what I like to call an Ephron Moment, and he’s ruining it. The streets of Brooklyn’s Fort Greene neighbourhood are lined with gorgeous brownstone houses, just like the classic New York streetscapes in my favourite romantic comedies, *When Harry Met Sally*, written by Nora Ephron, and *You’ve Got Mail*, written by Nora and her sister, Delia. I’m half expecting to see Tom Hanks being adorable on the next street corner.

The Ephron sisters and their storybook New York are basically the reason I came to the Big Apple in the first place five years ago. Which I guess means that, technically, they’re to blame for the mess I’ve made of things since. *Thanks, ladies.*

He catches up to me again as I approach Clermont Avenue, where the Bishop Loughlin Memorial High School Band is playing a rollicking brass version of the theme song from *Rocky*.

“So, tell me more about these drop bears,” he says.

“They’re enormous, vicious, carnivorous bears that drop from trees onto unsuspecting tourists,” I say matter-of-factly. “They’re responsible for more deaths in Australia than anything else.”

“No, they’re not.”

“How would you know?”

“I’ve been to Australia, and survived.”

“Ah, so you’re the American with the passport.”

He gives another loud, “Ha!” But then he frowns. “You’re mean when you marathon, Melissa.”

I shrug and reach within for another burst of speed, pulling away from

him as Fort Greene melds into the Hasidic Jewish community of South Williamsburg. I don't risk a glance over my shoulder, but I really hope he takes the hint. If I keep running at this speed I'm going to hit the infamous Wall before I even get into double-digit mileage. I'm not about to risk failing to finish the marathon. I refuse to let another man hold me back.

It's a shame, really. On any other day I might enjoy a bit of harmless flirting with a cute American. Especially one with the impressive, running-honed physique Mr Polar Bear appears to possess under that Lycra. But today is not that day. Today is about leaving my problems in my wake, not running like a madwoman straight at another complication.

Sixteen miles down. Queens is behind me, soggy with the sleet that arrived like clockwork as I hit mile thirteen. I'm soaked through and trembling with cold, which is annoying not only because I'm freezing, but also because shivering is sucking up valuable energy – and at this point, I really don't have any to spare.

My feet pound the Queensboro Bridge across the East River from Long Island City. Ahead of me, at last, lies Manhattan, and then there's only ten miles to go. But this part of the course is a slog. Spectators aren't allowed on the bridge, and it's eerily quiet. I hadn't realised how much I'd been buoyed by the chatter of the crowd until they disappeared. With only my plodding footsteps and the grunts and sighs of nearby runners as my soundtrack, it's a whole lot harder to ignore that voice in my head cataloguing my mistakes and failings on an endless loop.

“Hey, Melissa!”

Even before I turn around I know it's him. Mr Bolar Bear, ambling up behind me like he's out for a Sunday stroll in Central Park. The guy doesn't look like he's even broken a sweat yet. I don't buy his story about going too hard, too fast, for a second.

“Are you following me?”

Another “Ha!” Then that goofy grin again. “I don't know if you've

noticed, but this is a marathon. There's thirty thousand people following you."

For a moment, I feel a swell of pride at his assessment of my place in the field, then I realise he's just being kind. Over 50,000 runners start this race; there's no way more than half of them are still behind me. But even though I know he's only trying to flatter me, I feel myself soften a little.

"How are you doing?" he says.

"Great," I reply through chattering teeth, wishing I'd tied my sweater around my waist instead of leaving it on the pavement beside a Polish butcher shop in Greenpoint.

"Oh wow, you're frozen," he says. He unzips his wind jacket and peels it off. The high-tech racing tank he's wearing underneath clings to his defined pecs in a way that does nothing to help slow my heart rate. He holds the jacket out to me. "Here."

I shake my head firmly. "Thanks, but I'm fine."

"Take it. You could do some serious damage running when you're cold. Do you want to risk that at this point?"

He's right. *Damn him.* I can't afford an injury. Without stopping, I take the jacket and shrug it on. The immediate warmth provided by the paper-thin fabric might as well be an open fire and a mug of hot chocolate.

"Thanks. But how will I get it back to you? You can obviously run faster than this." *I'm on to you, buddy.*

"I can," he affirms, with another flash of that cheeky smile. "But I'd rather run with you, if you don't mind. I'll get it at the finish line."

I do mind. I mind a lot. This marathon is supposed to be my catharsis, my phoenix-rising-from-the-ashes moment. It's *not* supposed to be a first date.

But the hush on the bridge is unnerving, and my muscles are starting to protest the punishment I'm inflicting on them. I guess being distracted by some friendly conversation for a little while wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

“Okay,” I say hesitantly.

“Great! So, why don’t you tell me the story of your life?”

“The story of my life?”

“Sure. We’ve still got ten miles to go.”

“The story of my life isn’t even going to get us out of Chicago,” I say without thinking.

Most people would be confused by this, considering that a) we’re in New York and not Illinois, and b) not many twenty-eight-year-old women pepper their conversation with obscure quotes from movies made in 1989.

But Mr Polar Bear laughs and says, “So you’re a *When Harry Met Sally* fan?”

I stare at him, not bothering to conceal my surprise. “Are *you*? I thought only women were allowed to love that movie.”

“I’m a big Billy Crystal fan,” he says. “He’s a Long Island boy, like me. I’ve seen all his movies about a thousand times each. Wait, next you’re going to tell me you came to New York so something could happen to you, right?”

If only you knew. “Something like that.”

There’s a bottleneck of runners as the bridge leads into First Avenue and we’re forced to slow to a brisk walk. At the same time, the virtual silence of the last mile is swallowed up by the hubbub of hordes of onlookers welcoming us to Manhattan’s East Side. And amid that hubbub, one voice cuts through like a police siren in the dead of night.

“Melly! Over here! Melly! Yaaaaaay! Gooooooooo Melleeeeeeeee!”

I’d know that high-pitched shriek anywhere. I scan the crowd and spot my sister jammed up against the barrier, bedecked in green and gold and waving an Australian flag. My heart soars at the sight of her. Trust Amber to have staked out such a prime vantage point, and to have proclaimed it Little Sydney.

“Hi!” I nearly crash into half a dozen runners as I break away from Mr Polar Bear and sprint to my sister. From the corner of my eye, I see him stop

and crouch down to re-tie his shoelaces.

She wraps me in a tight hug. “Just *who* is *that*?” she says into my left ear. I pull back and follow her gaze to my running mate.

“Oh, he’s just... some guy.” I realise I don’t even know his name. “He loaned me his jacket. I got wet.”

“I bet you did, you filthy bitch.”

“Amber!” I punch her arm a little harder than is strictly necessary. “We’re just running together. He’s kind of a pain, to be honest.”

My sister grips my shoulders. “You listen to me, Melissa Burnley, and you listen good. That’s” – she jabs her index finger towards Mr Polar Bear – “the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen. And he’s built like Usain Bolt, which means he clearly doesn’t need to be shuffling along at the back of the pack with the likes of you. If you don’t tear his clothes off the second you cross the finish line I’ll... I’ll confiscate your medal!”

I narrow my eyes at her. “You wouldn’t dare.”

She narrows hers right back. “You know I would.” She glances over my shoulder at the object of her affection. “He’s been tying his shoelaces for five minutes, Melly. No one’s that OCD. Let me spell it out: this guy is I-N-T-O Y-O-U.”

“I think that might be overstating it.” I’m quite sure Mr Polar Bear *is* hitting on me, but he probably would’ve tried it on with whoever he’d found himself standing next to at the start. That’s what attractive men do. “Guys generally aren’t too fussy.”

“Guys generally aren’t pathological liars, either,” she fires back, quick as a flash. “I know you think all men are like Eddie, but they’re really not.”

The mention of his name winds me a little. That’s Amber – she cuts right to the heart of the matter, blood loss be damned. I feel the chill starting to creep in again, but this time I don’t think it’s the weather.

“I need to keep going. My muscles are starting to get cold.” I jog on the spot as if to prove that I am, in fact, in the middle of a marathon.

“No one’s saying you have to marry the guy, Melly. At least ask him what his name is,” she instructs.

“I’ve been thinking of him as Mr Polar Bear, because he doesn’t seem to notice how insanely cold it is.” And neither does my sister, apparently – I suddenly realise she’s wearing only a mini skirt and cropped T-shirt with G O M E L L Y ! printed on the front and C O M E O N A U S S I E on the back.

“Cute. Mr Polar Bear. PB.” Amber lifts an eyebrow. “Personal best.”

I roll my eyes and peck her on the cheek before loping back to where PB is stretching and trying to appear nonchalant. But I still don’t ask him what his name is. Instead, as we push on towards East Harlem, I say, “Is this your first marathon?”

“Nope,” he replies. “It’s my eighty-fifth.”

“Oh, come on. Nobody’s crazy enough to run eighty-five marathons.”

“You might be right. So far I’ve only managed eight-four-and-a-half. I’ve done three in Australia, actually.”

I cast a sidelong glance at him and once again I’m struck by all the muscles. Seriously, he looks like he’s been hewn out of rock. I’m forced to admit he could indeed be the sort of person who’d run – I do the maths in my head – more than 3500km *for the hell of it*.

“Why would you do that? Are you insane?”

“My ex-girlfriend would say yes.” He chuckles wryly, and I mentally chastise myself for feeling fleetingly thrilled that he’s single. “I like to keep fit. I guess I’m pretty competitive. I’m a firefighter.”

My stomach does a little flip-flop. There is not a woman on earth who doesn’t fancy firemen. It’s just biology.

“But the main reason is I’m raising money,” he goes on. “I’m trying to raise a hundred thousand bucks by running a hundred marathons.”

“Wow. That’s really...”

“Nuts?”

“I was going to say amazing, but sure, let’s go with your thing. Which charity are you raising money for?”

“It’s actually not a charity. It’s my nephew, Mikey. He was starved of oxygen at birth and now has brain damage and cerebral palsy. There’s a treatment that may be able to help him – it’s called stem cell therapy – but it’s crazy expensive. So I’m just trying to help out my brother and his wife.”

Thank God Amber isn’t here to hear this. She’d be chaining me to this man until I promised to love him forever.

We run on until I feel PB’s blue-eyes on me and realise I haven’t said anything for a few minutes.

“Cheesy, right?” he says.

“No! Not at all. I just...” My throat feels weirdly constricted. “I just think it’s a really wonderful thing you’re doing.” I hope he doesn’t notice the slight wobble in my voice.

He shrugs. “What about you? Did you really do your training in the bush?”

I’m momentarily confused, until I remember the fantastical story I spun for Janine Janowitz earlier. “No,” I admit. “I’ve lived on the Upper West Side for the last five years.”

“You’re almost a full-fledged New Yorker then.”

“Almost?”

“It takes a decade,” he says assuredly.

“If you say so.”

We pass the 20-mile marker and run in companionable silence for a while as we trundle through the vibrant El Barrio Latino district. My lower back is stiff and achy, and I’m starting to feel like there’s lead weights strapped to my ankles. *Six miles to go. Just six miles to go.*

PB clears his throat. “So, Melissa,” he says. “Why are you really running the marathon?”

I look up to see him regarding me with a steady gaze and I know at once he hasn't bought any of my glib fables. I take a deep breath. What have I got to lose?

"I'm running away from a man."

PB smiles kindly, as if he'd known this all along. Then he says, "No offence, but you might want to run a little faster."

I gasp in mock outrage. "Wow. You're mean when you marathon."

"I guess that makes us even."

"What I mean is I left him. A man. My *fiancé*." It feels faintly absurd saying it aloud. "And now I guess I'm trying to prove to myself that I did the right thing."

"By running until you want to die? That seems sensible."

"He always used to tell me I'm too indecisive, that I couldn't make up my mind if my life depended on it. He's a runner, too – he tried to get me to do the marathon, but I'd always umm and ahh until I inevitably missed the registration cut-off. But I decided to leave him, and then I decided to run the marathon, and if I can finish it then I'll know he was wrong about me. Do you know what I mean?"

"Not at all, and completely."

It's the perfect answer.

"Why'd you leave him?"

I hesitate and my heart thuds painfully in my chest. Can I tell him? Should I reveal what mayhem I've caused? I sigh. *In for a penny and all that...*

"He cheated on me."

"Ouch." PB winces. "For how long?"

"Four-and-a-half years."

His jaw drops and now it's his turn to do the mental arithmetic. "But you said..."

I nod. “I met Eddie the week I arrived in New York and started working at his family’s law firm. I’m a lawyer, by the way. He was my boss. He swept me off my feet, but he was never faithful to me. Not even at the beginning.”

“You knew all along?”

“Yeah. He was never blatant about it, but he was careless. And I loved him. I couldn’t decide if I should stay or if I should go. So I just sort of... waited.” I shake my head. Even now, six months on, I’m still so angry at myself for giving Eddie carte blanche to treat me like shit for so long.

“A year ago, he proposed,” I continue. “I thought that meant he’d changed, so I said yes. It still didn’t feel right, though. But our engagement was in the *Times* and his parents spent an *obscene* amount of money planning this ludicrous Hamptons wedding and it all just took on a life of its own.”

I sneak another peek at PB, sure he must be either bored to tears by my tale of woe, or repulsed by what a weakling I am. But he’s listening intently. He even looks, I’m pleased to note, a little bit aggrieved.

“This hurts,” I tell him.

He nods sympathetically. “We’re at mile 21. You’re hitting The Wall.”

But I’m not talking about the marathon.

“I left him the morning of the wedding.”

PB gives a low whistle.

“All hell broke loose, of course. Eddie’s parents called me every name under the sun, threatened me with legal action. Then they fired me.”

He stops dead, eliciting a stream of expletives from the two runners behind us as they’re forced to swerve sharply to avoid colliding with him. “They did *not*.”

“They did. So then *I* took legal action and sued them for wrongful dismissal. That was six months ago, and it’s still being dragged through the courts now.”

Every day I think about dropping the case. Even now, I’m still trying to *decide* if I’m justified in demanding some kind of recompense for what that

family has put me through. I'm exhausted, and not just because I've been running for nearly five hours. I feel like my insides have been hollowed out.

PB doesn't say anything as we hit the Madison Avenue Bridge and head out of the Bronx, crossing the Harlem River back into Manhattan. Amber will be furious. Not only have I still not asked the beautiful man his name, I've talked his ear off and revealed myself to be a money-grubbing harridan into the bargain. *Go, Melly.*

He still hasn't said a word two miles later, as we enter Central Park and the sight of the abundant fall foliage takes what's left of my breath away. It's an artist's palette of electric copper and burnished gold against a silver sky. And people, people everywhere, filling every available vantage point and cheering until they're hoarse.

"Just over a mile to go," PB says at last. "You're nearly there, Melissa."

You're nearly there. Not *we*, just *me*. I'm nearly there. I'm almost done. I've almost won.

Then he says, "You know, these leaves are the same colour as your hair", and streaks ahead of me.

A second later, he's swallowed up by the crowd.

"Where is he, Melly? Where is the beautiful man?!"

Amber is hanging precariously over the side of the grandstand seating at the finish line, shouting over the din of thousands of jubilant marathoners.

I don't respond. I can't, and not just because I'm doubled over, dry heaving, after sprinting the last mile in pursuit of my personal best. Every muscle, every joint, every *cell* in my body is on fire. I don't just feel pain at this point; I *am* pain.

But it's not just the unrelenting physical agony that's preventing me from answering my sister. I don't know where the beautiful man is. He vanished so quickly it's as though he was never there to begin with. I feel I must have conjured him.

I allow myself to be swept through the finish chute and disgorged into the park proper, where Amber immediately propels herself at me and unleashes another fierce hug.

“You bloody did it, Melissa! You only went and ran the New York bloody marathon!”

I manage a weak smile. I know I should be elated, but I feel strangely bereft. And pretty pissed, actually. How *dare* some guy run off with my marathon high? After I bared my soul to him for 26.2 miles. How dare he disappear without so much as a goodbye?

How dare he reveal himself to be a completely adorable, nephew-doting, Billy Crystal-loving, sexy-as-hell fireman and then not even have the decency to kiss me?

“Did you find out his name? Did you get his number?” Amber prattles on. “You’re still wearing his jacket. Are you meeting him somewhere?”

That’s right, I *am* still wearing his jacket. And it gives me an idea. I march off in the direction of the winners’ dais.

“Attention runners,” a thick Queens accent booms over the public address system a moment later. “Would Brooks from Long Island please meet Melissa from Australia at the southwest corner of West 65th Street. That’s Brooks from Long Island, please meet Melissa at West 65th.”

Somehow, I find the wherewithal to put one foot in front of the other and shuffle through the masses, out of the park and onto the street. Amber trots along beside me.

“Melly, his name isn’t Brooks! That’s the brand name of the jacket! You’ll never find him!”

That’s what I’d thought, too, the first time PB passed me and I read the word emblazoned on the back of the windbreaker I’m now wearing. It hadn’t occurred to me then that a huge athletic brand like Brooks would be unlikely to spell out its name on its gear with wonky, stars-and-stripes patterned iron-on letters.

Plus, the name on the front of the jacket says Adidas.

“His name is Brooks,” I tell my sister. “You’ll see.”

And then I see. Him. Standing on the corner clutching a bouquet of electric copper and burnished gold autumn leaves. My personal best.

Rebound by Georgina Penney

It's not every day a woman finds herself having break-up sex with her soon-to-be-history boyfriend in her mum's pastel pink Smart Car but Samantha Plimpton had never done things the easy way.

Right now that involved bracing her hands on the roof to stop her backside sliding too far out of reach of Dylan's pneumatic penis as his hips thrust wildly, his face contorted into the constipated chipmunk orgasm expression that until now she'd told herself was cute.

She winced as Dylan aimed a little wildly and hit something in her nether parts that didn't like being prodded at high velocity.

She shouldn't have read that stupid magazine article when she'd got her hair cut last week. *Cosmo* lied. Breakup sex wasn't the best sex she'd ever had. Right now all she wanted was for it to be over so she could go home and mope over why she never got any of this stuff right.

Here she'd been thinking Dylan's trip all this way up the coast had been because he'd missed her. Instead he'd come because he'd wanted to end their relationship of two years in order to have a guilt-free fling with an undergrad in his Australian History class.

And just wait, she didn't have a home of her own to mope in anymore. She was temporarily living with her mother, a woman who could teach neurotic to a Chihuahua.

Samantha tried to do a clenchy Kegal thing to hurry Dylan along and felt a surge of relief so great when he started making little gasping nearly-there noises that she groaned out loud. *Finally*.

Dylan let out a little squeaky sigh, his head collapsing on her shoulder.

Now all she'd have to do was wait a couple of seconds for the awkwardness to set in and it would all be over. The worst of it was, the breakup sex had been her idea. Reading that stupid article had made her think she could at least get *something* out of today.

She was snapped out of her brood by the sound of crunching tyres, followed in short order by Dylan disengaging and pulling off the condom

he'd conveniently had on him before he hiked up his pants, his knuckles clumsily ramming into Samantha's nether regions.

She'd only just registered what was happening when he pushed the car door open and scrambled out, turning back to look at her, his expression harried, features flushed. "Thanks for being so understanding Sam. I can walk back to the B&B so I probably won't see you before I leave. Have a good life."

Samantha stayed sprawled in the car, knickers hanging off one ankle, staring at Dylan's retreating back in amazement. "Thanks for being understanding? *Understanding?*" She shook her head to clear it. This definitely wasn't how she'd seen the afternoon playing out.

There was the sound of a car door closing and she quickly tried to push down her new black pencil skirt, the one she'd worn to an interview at a car dealership in Byron Bay this morning. She'd thought she'd be a shoe-in for the job but the guy interviewing her had taken one look at the Smart Car before shaking his head as if recently bereaved. He'd still interviewed her but they'd both known it was a flop.

Women with PhDs in contemporary feminist discourse who drive Smart Cars aren't really the people you want selling V6 utes to farmers and surfers.

Funny that.

The skirt wasn't co-operating and she realised she needed to get out of her seat, which she did, only to see that the car pulled up behind hers was a police car and a cop was leaning against it, looking out over the sea in the distance as if he had all the time in the world. She knew that wasn't the case. For one thing, his mouth was twitching at the side. For another this was Craig Lawson. Ever since they'd been five years old he'd never passed up an opportunity to give her hell. It had to be some sort of genetic imprint. An amoeba ancestor of Samantha's must have pissed off an amoeba ancestor of Craig's in the primordial ooze and the vendetta had started.

"You right there?" She went for snarky but the affect was killed by the fact that she was still trying to push her skirt down her legs.

He nodded, running a hand over his jaw. Probably to show off the chin dimple, or how he was a walking cliché of the big Anzac. Craig had always known how good he looked, even when he'd been five. But then, didn't a lot of serial killers look all right? Okay, so he was the only policeman in Peaceful Bay but still, you never knew. Samantha read enough true crime novels to know cops could be crooked too.

"Yeah, I'm doin' fine. Just thought I'd come out here to have my lunch. Didn't expect to see you in town. Didn't expect to get such an eyeful either."

She desperately tried to work out if he was referring to the anticlimax with Dylan or the fact her skirt was resisting all efforts to go lower than mid-thigh. The sales girl had said it would be slimming. What the girl had neglected to say that the slimming was to be applied Samantha's ego, not her love handles.

She remembered she was supposed to be coming back with something smart-arsed and gave it her best shot, cursing the way her voice sounded more squeaky than cool and collected. "Eyeful? So you looked in the rear view mirror and admired yourself for the past five minutes then?"

His mouth twitched at the corner. "Nah. I was too busy watching you and the Energiser Bunny. I could book you, you know. Public indecency. Exposure..." His eyes dropped lower to around ankle level and Samantha felt her face flush lava hot at the realisation she had a fluro-green-knicker ankle bracelet.

Knowing that braving this one out was the only way to go, she bent over, collected her undies and threw them onto the car. "If you're going to book me for indecency, let me enjoy doing something indecent first. It's the least you can do given I've just been dumped." She gave an internal wince. Okay, so her tone of voice sounded more dejected than diabolical but it would have to do.

Craig let out a big booming laugh that startled a couple of seagulls perched on the edge of a nearby rubbish bin. "If you need to. How long are you in town?"

"Long enough," she said. "You going to book me or what?"

Craig shrugged. “Nah. It’s my lunch break.”

“In that case, I hope I don’t see you around.” Samantha got into her mum’s car and got the hell out of there, trying not to look in the rear view. Seeing Craig’s smarmy smile was the last thing she needed.

If there was anything more embarrassing than being caught by your childhood nemesis mid-coitus with your ex-boyfriend, it was coming home to the teenage bedroom your OCD mother had kept like a shrine for the past twelve years. “Mum, I took all this stuff down this morning! Why’s it all back up again?” Samantha turned full circle, her eyes wide with disbelief as she took in the walls full of posters and angsty poetry scrawled on A2 paper. What was worse, the poetry was hers, the result of a late teen infatuation with E. E. Cummings. Punctuation optional, hormones maximum.

“Mum?!”

“It’s back there because you didn’t ask me if you could take it down in the first place.” Samantha’s mum appeared in the doorway to the small room, her hair pulled back into a tight salt and pepper bun, her plump figure — the very one Samantha had inherited, thank you genetics — encased in a pair of leopard-print leggings and a long black T-shirt with a wolf howling at the moon on it.

“It’s *my* stuff!”

“Not after you left. You left them up on the wall. I like them on the wall. They stay on the wall.”

“What? Possession is nine tenths or something?”

“Something.” Her mum whisked off into the depths of the small weatherboard beach-front bungalow she’d brought when Samantha was five. “Dinner’s at six. If you’re not at the table, I’m throwing it out.”

Samantha felt her insides getting all crampy. “I’ll be out.”

The only answer was a pointed silence.

“But thank you anyway,” she called out, glancing at a poster of Nick Cave

looking young and anaemic. She'd been into him as well back then, too. It was one of the things the kids in high school used to make fun of her for. While they'd all been listening to The Living End and Limp Bizkit, she'd been brooding to the Smiths and Nick Cave. That should have been the first sign life wouldn't quite work out as planned. She'd always been that little bit out of step. Like, a decade-and-a-half out of step.

Oh well, not anymore. She began pulling the posters down but then thought better of it. Her mum would just put them up again. The entire house hadn't changed since Samantha's dad had left in 1998. It was a mausoleum of old Tupperware, comfortable worn-in black fake leather furniture and ancient VHS tapes with scribbled writing on the spines saying things like *Police Academy 5* and *Friends Season 2*.

Her mum reappeared. "Job interview?"

"Epic fail." Samantha put her hands on her hips, grimacing. "Can I at least clean out these drawers? What did you do, go down the op shop and buy all my old clothes back after I donated them?"

When she got no reply, her eyes widened. "Mum! You didn't?!"

That earned her a tight-lipped obstinate expression. "Where are you going to be for dinner?"

"You didn't buy my clothes back, did you?"

"I donated to charity."

"By buying my old clothes back?! I'm never going to wear them again. Ever! I wouldn't *fit* into them again ever."

"They belong in those drawers."

Samantha looked skywards. "I'm going insane."

"Well at least you're going somewhere. From what I understand it's better than being unemployed and homeless." Her mum said tartly and disappeared again.

There wasn't a comeback to that. At least not now. Instead Samantha picked up her phone, deciding then and there to find herself somewhere to

rent by the end of the day. Even something temporary had to be better than this. She looked at the screen, saw zero reception and groaned. There was no Wi-Fi in this house and the mobile service at this end of the town was patchy at best.

“Come on. Give me one bar... one bar!” The surf was gently lapping on the shore, momentarily chasing the odd tiny translucent crab away from its dinner. The sun was a big red ball setting low on the horizon. It would have been a truly spectacular sight if Samantha wasn’t scurrying from spot to spot trying to find the best phone signal to make a call and check her email. She was pretty sure she looked like an idiot to the people living in the twenty or so houses that faced the beach but she didn’t care. She wouldn’t be in town that long and when *hadn’t* the people around here thought she was an idiot?

“Two!” She looked down at her phone screen, breath held as she quickly selected a contact and called. It nearly rang out before a sleepy voice answered.

“H’low.”

“Gemma?”

“Yeah...” There was a scuffling noise, as if the phone at the other end had been dropped before the voice spoke again. “Samantha? Hey. Uhm. Hey.”

“Hey,” Samantha squeezed her eyes shut. She knew this call wasn’t going to be easy but it had to happen. “Hi... I’m calling you...”

“How’s it going?”

“Yeah. That’s why I’m calling you. You know that money I loaned you...”

Her words were met with dead silence.

“Well, it’s been a year now and I could really do with some of it back.”

“Oh. Ah, well. How much do you need?”

Samantha wanted to yell “All of it!” But instead kept her cool. Back last year when she’d still been optimistic, had a career and thought she had good friends she’d loaned Gemma the entirety of her savings, all of ten thousand

dollars. Even now she felt like kicking herself for being so gullible and believing Gemma would pay her back. What Samantha hadn't factored in was losing her job and over a decade of friendship apparently meaning as little to Gemma as the paper their loan agreement had been informally written on. The phone crackled a little and she cautiously stepped an inch sideways, hoping the reception wouldn't give out. "However much you can spare for starters?"

"I'll have to look at my bank account. There's been a bit of stuff that's come up this month. You know what it's like. And with the reshuffle at work..."

Samantha wanted to bite at that one. Gemma had managed to keep her job within the Communication and Cultural Studies department. Samantha, however had had her contract terminated early with no explanation and a big fat suspicion that Gemma had gotten her fired. There wasn't really any other explanation. Especially since Samantha had just brought in a massive private grant from a big mining company to study media representations of their industry. It was the same grant Gemma had taken over once Samantha had gotten fired. "Any chance you could check to see if there are any internal jobs going then? I'll still be able to apply for the next six months and I'd really appreciate it."

There was more silence. "Yeah, I'll see what I can do."

Samantha felt a stomach-dropping sensation, knowing deep down that she was never going to see those funds or any job at her old university again. She wanted to openly ask Gemma if she'd gotten her fired but the thought was too painful to contemplate right now, so instead she kept quiet.

"Okay, gotta go. Bye," Gemma's said.

"Bye." Samantha hung up the call, feeling tears sting her eyes but refusing to let them fall just in case someone had telescopic vision and could see. Instead she inhaled a deep breath that was interrupted by her stomach rumbling so loudly it startled a nearby seagull.

The wind changed at that moment long enough for her to catch the aroma of frying fish and chips from Bernie's Fish Palace and Take Away and she put her hand in her pocket to see if she had any spare change.

It turned out she had a fiver. More than enough for a deep-fried Mars Bar. Maybe her day was looking up.

“You know those things are the equivalent of at least thirty heart attacks.”

Samantha was sitting on a weathered wooden bench taking in the last of a spectacular red and purple autumn sunset when a deep voice spoke behind her. Since she recognised it, she ignored it. Instead she kept her eyes resolutely facing forward and took a nibble of battered Mars Bar heaven. “Isn’t this police harassment?”

The bench juddered as Craig sat down, stretching long legs out in front of him. He’d changed out of his cop uniform and was now wearing white boardies and a black T-shirt. “Nope, it’s a community service announcement.”

Samantha took another bite and felt herself getting closer to orgasm than she’d been in months. This tasted *good*. “Go announce to some other community. This one’s fine with having a heart attack. At least I’d die happy.”

That got her a snorted laugh and she looked sideways to find Police Constable Perfect looking thoughtfully out to sea.

“Don’t you have better stuff to do?”

He shook his head. “Nah. Not really. Just finished work and was coming back from a walk on the beach. Saw you and decided to be friendly.”

“Friendly? Since when?”

He shrugged. “Since the RSPCA closed for the night. If I can’t look at the homeless little dogs and cats, might as well look at you.”

She scowled. “Arsehole.”

He half smiled. “It’s true though isn’t it? You’re living back at your mum’s?”

“Only temporarily.”

That got her a knowing silence and she decided to fill it by chomping loudly on her dinner.

“So, you looking for somewhere to rent?”

She turned to face him, suspicion radiating from her pores. “Why?”

“Because I might have somewhere.”

Any other time, she would have told him to shove it but instead she swallowed her pride, which was made easier because she was also swallowing the last of her Mars Bar. “Where?”

Instead of answering he stood up, looking down at her with a smug smile. “Come by the station tomorrow and I’ll give you the details.”

“Why not now?”

“Because I like to see you pissed off.” He strode off whistling while Samantha looked down at the crumpled oil-soaked paper bag that had held her dinner, debating whether the littering charge for throwing it at Craig’s rude head would be worth it.

It was six in the morning when Samantha woke up the next day. Or at least, got up. She’d been awake for hours trying to work out some kind of plan for the next couple of months. She had already notified everyone she could at the nearby colleges about her availability to teach classes next semester and the TAFE in Byron Bay had sounded like a good prospect. That was all fine, but it still left her with months to kill before the next semester started. She needed work.

She pushed past the growly feeling in her chest she always felt when she thought about her own naivety in loaning out her life savings and got to the other side where cold hard fact remained. Firstly, she couldn’t stay here with her mum more than another couple of days. They’d murder each other. Secondly, she couldn’t move out without some kind of temporary job. Thirdly, she was going to have to say goodbye to her pride and take any job she could get. She remembered seeing a help-wanted sign at the fish and chip shop. While her first impulse was to reject it and try for something like office temping, there was always the prospect of as many deep-fried Mars Bars as she could eat. No, her pants didn’t fit properly as it was and it wasn’t like she had the money to buy more right now. Fish shop was out. As for the house,

there had been that conversation with Craig the night before. Had he been serious? She huffed out a breath. Even if he hadn't been serious, she still had to go check.

"You want me to what?" Samantha looked at the man in front of her like he had just grown devil horns.

"Move in with me." Craig shrugged. He was wearing his police uniform again and the way he turned his chin and the sunlight caught his blond hair, anyone would think he was secretly shooting a Chesty Bonds commercial. "I need a housemate. You need somewhere to stay..."

"Why? Why do you need a housemate? What about your sister? Wasn't she living with you?"

His expression changed, turning more serious. "Yeah, didn't you hear about that?"

"No. What happened?"

"Accident. She's lost the use of her legs and has moved to Byron to a place that's better set up for a wheelchair. I would have set up my place but we both decided that the sooner she feels independent, the better she'll be."

Samantha felt about two inches tall. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

That earned her a strange look. "How could you? You haven't been back in town for over a decade."

"Yes I have."

"What? One day a year to see your mum?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't count."

"Yes it does!" She shook her head to clear it. "ANYWAY, that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about why you want me to move in with you. Why do you need a housemate? You own your house don't you? Why do you need *me* living with you. You hate me."

He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "You're alright."

"Bullshit! What's going on?"

"Nothing. Look, do you want somewhere to live or not? I heard your mum went and brought back all the stuff you took to the op shop when you left."

Samantha felt her face flush red. "I don't know about that..."

"And if you agreed to sort out the cleaning and the gardening we can come to some kind of rent-free deal for the first bit." Craig grimaced. "I hate gardening."

Samantha didn't know the first thing about it either. "This isn't some kind of slave thing is it? I'm not going to walk through the front door of your place and find myself locked up for the next fifty years am I?"

He looked thoughtful for a minute or two. "Nah, you'd cost too much to feed."

That's when she punched him.

"Where are you going?" Samantha's mum watched her fold up the last of the washing she'd just pulled off the line and neatly pack it in her case. There was an urgency to the question but Samantha ignored it. It wasn't that she was heartless, it was just that she knew her mum would keep her in this room, pretending she was the same as she'd been in 1998 when everything had gone awry. If she didn't leave now, she'd never get away and soon this place would be turned into a museum and she'd be the main exhibit.

"I'm moving out Mum. I told you last night. I've found a place of my own." She picked up the pencil skirt she'd worn the day before and gave it a glare before putting it back on the bed. She'd never be able to wear it again without thinking of Darryl, and after his parting shot about her having a good life, she was thinking about burning it.

"Where?"

This was the tough one. "Craig Lawson's."

That earned her a stunned silence. "But you hate him."

“I know,” she sighed.

“What happened to your hand?”

Samantha looked down at her bruised knuckles. “I assaulted a police officer.”

“*What?!*”

“He deserved it,” she glowered. It had taken all of her internal fortitude not to tell Craig to shove his offer of sharing house up his arse after that crack about her eating habits but then she’d thought about this room and there had been no contest. Rent-free accommodation away from the crazy house in return for a bit of gardening? Who cares if her housemate was an egotistical tosser?

Samantha stood on the doorstep of a weatherboard cottage around the same size as her mum’s but with a coat of fresh white paint and a much neater garden. Craig was either a liar about hating gardening or the trimmed hedging and weeded flowerbeds attested to a previous gardening slave that he’d no doubt buried somewhere beneath the roses.

She looked up at the sky. It was uncharacteristically bright for late autumn with puffy white clouds chugging towards the horizon in happy cloudland. There was no ominous glow, no sign of thunderbolts or the Second Coming. There should be. This was probably the stupidest thing she’d ever done in her life. Oh just wait, that had been loaning Gemma the money. She’d gotten a five-dollar deposit in her bank account this morning. While a part of her wanted to wail and gnash, another part of her had felt optimistic. At five dollars a month, who knew, maybe she’d get it all back by the time she was ninety!

The front door swung open before she could knock and she took a reflexive step back. He was naked! Her eyes dropped down. Okay, he was wearing shorts but his chest was naked and that was unexpected. She felt a kind of squirrely happy tingle and frowned. That couldn’t be right. Yeah,

Craig was hot, but he was still going to make her life hell. Less hell than her mum could, but hell nonetheless.

“Something happen to your face?” She raised a brow, crossing her arms over her chest.

He reached up and tapped the bruise on his chin. “What, this? Nah. It’s nothing.” He turned, leading the way down the hallway, his feet thudding over the floorboards.

“What do you mean, nothing? I got you fair and square!” Samantha looked around, seeing comfortable couches, rustic wood furniture and a couple of driftwood pieces on the walls before Craig pointed to a doorway. “Your palace Madame.”

She walked past him, setting her case next to the wall and looked around at a white-framed brass bed, simple white cover and a pine chest of drawers. A window showed a view out over the garden with a hint of the ocean in the distance. “Nice. This is really nice.” She momentarily forgot that she was supposed to be wary in the presence of this guy and turned around with a big smile. “Thanks.”

That earned her a long, kind of funny look. “Yeah. Anyway, I’ll show you the kitchen and the bathroom. There’s only one and I’m warning you, I get dibs on first shower in the morning. And my bedroom’s across the hall, so if you snore, I’m gonna hear it, record it and put it up on YouTube.”

For some reason Samantha didn’t feel the need to bite like she normally would. There was something so calm about the house, she was actually enjoying herself and feeling better than she had in ages. Maybe punching Craig had been some form of catharsis.

“Same here. You probably talk in your sleep. I bet you say things like ‘Oh my gawd, I’m so good looking’ over and over again.”

“You think I’m good looking?” That got her another smile that wasn’t quite as barbed as she’d expected. In fact, he kind of looked happy.

“Yeah, but so does everyone else. Idiot.” She walked past him to a light, airy old-fashioned kitchen with a recycled pine table, a couple of ladder-back

chairs and white painted wooden cupboards. “Where’s the cleaning stuff? I might as well know, since I’m entering into domestic servitude to pay for my rent.”

“In the laundry with the whips and chains.”

“Doesn’t surprise me.”

“Gemma, hey. I got that deposit you put in. Uhm, I know you said you were tight for money but is there any chance you can go to the bank and borrow what you owe me? Ten thousand shouldn’t be that hard to get. I don’t want to be a pain but I really need...” Samantha looked up and abruptly ended the call to Gemma’s answering machine, stomach roiling as she saw Craig leaning against the lounge room doorframe wearing his cop uniform, holding a take-away coffee.

“Ten grand?” He asked without preamble, his features screwed up in a frown. “Someone owes you ten grand and they haven’t paid you back? Is that why you moved back to town?”

Samantha was about to protest or tell him to mind his own business but the past week had been surprisingly relaxed and other than making the odd dig at each other, they’d gotten on pretty well, really well if she was honest. In fact, she’d been starting to catch herself checking out his arse as he walked out the door dressed in his cop uniform every morning. It wasn’t something she was proud of but it wasn’t something she was about to stop doing any time soon. She huffed a sigh. “Yeah.”

“Why’d you loan someone that much?”

“Because I thought they were a friend.” She gave him a bitter half-smile. “Turns out they just wanted to walk away with my job and a bunch of cash instead.”

That earned her a long, steady look. “If they haven’t paid you back, that’s theft.”

“Yeah and it goes on every day.”

“What’s this person’s number?”

“Why?”

“Because there’s nothing like getting a call from a cop to loosen people up.”

Five minutes later Samantha was watching with awe as Craig called up her old work, got Gemma on the line and was getting her to transfer the money she owed into Samantha’s bank account. Ending the call he gave Samantha a smug smile. “See, wasn’t hard.”

“She said she didn’t have the money!”

He shrugged. “Yeah. People lie. You’ve always been pretty shit at picking it.”

“And she had it all the time. What was she doing with it, sitting on it hoping it would hatch into baby money so she’d have more?!” Samantha exclaimed and then Craig’s words registered. “What? What do you mean I’m pretty shit at picking when people are lying? How would you know?”

“Because.”

“Because what?”

He wandered over to the window, hands behind his back, studying the view. “Because you’ve gotta be pretty shit at picking a liar if you believed I’d give you a room in my house if I didn’t like you.”

Samantha felt like she’d been sucker punched. “You like me?”

He gave her a look that said she was plainly lacking intelligence. “Well, yeah.”

“But... but what am I supposed to do about that?”

He rolled his eyes. “Do you like me?”

She thought about it. Given she’d spent more time around Craig than anyone else since she’d come back to town and that she’d kind of enjoyed most of that time... Yeah, maybe. But what are we gonna do about it?”

His grin was Aussie golden boy wicked. “Well, I’ve got a couple of ideas.

They involve borrowing your mum's Smart Car, your knickers around your ankles and being *very* indecent in public."

Just Friends by Katie Spain

It took my new husband exactly 45 minutes to cheat on me.

That's 2,700 seconds. Less time than it takes to bake a cake for God's sake.

Maybe I should give him credit. It's a fine effort by anyone's standards and surely worthy of a place in the *Guinness Book of Records*. "Time taken to cheat on new wife goes to Nathan from Adelaide, Australia." I can see it there, nestled between World's Biggest Biceps (64.77cm) and The Tallest Living Dog (Zeus the Great Dane, a rollicking 1.118 metres tall).

I'll have to leave him here. Leave him to his illicit dance-floor dalliance and the not-so-subtle snog with a stranger who probably won't remember his name in the morning. Maybe it's because I didn't wear white. I've never been one for virginal ways. Or maybe we simply weren't meant to be.

An hour earlier we'd blubbed, smooched and canoodled our way through wedding proceedings. There was nothing traditional about it. No white meringue dress, no 'til death do us part, no stupid cutting of a tasteless fruitcake. Just us, a spur of the moment decision and a healthy dash of the absurd. Cue The King.

We chose a fat Elvis impersonator to guide us through the nuptials. The heaving, white silk-encased monstrosity led me through the kitsch church towards the man of my dreams.

Even the rings were ridiculous. His, a diamante-studded cockroach, mine an Egyptian goddess with a heaving bosom and nipples pert with excitement that matched our own. I found the rings in a second-hand store. They were perfect. Like us.

I didn't invite family, nor did he. Instead we asked a handful of friends to turn up at a mystery location and dress to impress. They didn't know they were attending a wedding. Not even the groomsmen who stood beside the pews in perfectly ironed shirts, sailor shoes and shorts cut just above the knees. Confusion rocked their freshly shaven faces but it didn't take them long to realise what was going on. Looking back, they say they were

expecting it. They couldn't have predicted obese Elvis though. He was as ridiculous as it gets... just the way we've always liked it. A perfect, imperfect, glorious match.

I dressed for the occasion in a leopard-print dress, a ring of faux white daisies in my hair and curls teased by humidity. He wore his trademark bow tie and a smile. The promise of autumn toyed with the dwindling dregs of summer and Nathan's eyes matched the burnt copper leaves outside.

We laughed when Elvis raised his arms to reveal sweat patches you could swim in and wiggled his ample hips with Mr Whippy-inspired gusto. Onlookers clapped, wiped tears from their eyes and toasted young love with plastic champagne flutes.

My soulmate twirled me across the altar, hands entwined, and we gazed into each other's eyes with love as pure as the day we met.

"You may now kiss your bride. Thank you very much."

As we left the church he scooped me up in his arms. "I love you baby," he whispered. "My wife, my life."

I first met Nathan at a corporate football event. One of those wanky social gatherings held in honour of the number of goals kicked during the AFL season. As the new journo in town I'd been advised to go to the opening of an envelope, at least until I started recognising faces and remembering names.

I endured hose races, long business lunches, sports car launches and champagne-fuelled fashion parades. Only art exhibition openings and degustation dinners really gave me joy. Ogling brush strokes, chewing through decadent courses and downing oodles of bubbles gave me an excuse to avoid talking to strangers. Small talk was never my strong point and the seclusion of the loos was often an ally after walking into a room full of alien faces.

The events were always the same; awkward table tennis matches of air kisses and false compliments. "Mwah, mwah! Daaaahling, so good to see you! You look ah-maaaaaaazing." Kill me, kill me now.

I expected the night of football banter to be more of the same and it was. Until he arrived.

There's a certain ripple a man's muscles make beneath a well-tailored suit. That's the first thing I noticed about Nathan. The second was his obvious disinterest in football. The shindig was held at an upmarket pub full of fluoro lighting and girls in short skirts. I felt like a stumpy, pale English pastry floating in a sea of fake tan slathered legs. My stockings looked out of place. Static nipped at my hands as I self-consciously rubbed the black 40-denier fabric, tempted to make another trip to the bathroom to peel them off.

He spoke first, flashing a smile that simultaneously melted the heart, soul and loins.

"I like the green butterflies in your hair. They look real. You look different. Let me guess... you're not on the prowl for a jock." He didn't wait for an answer. "I knew it. Your skirt is too long. Want a drink?"

And so it began. We sat together, pretending to be interested as the MC tallied Brownlow votes. "What the hell is a Brownlow anyway?" he mused.

We slapped tasteless butter across rock-hard bread rolls and swapped life stories.

"I'm from Brisbane," he said, describing life in the PR fast lane. "I moved to Adelaide for a step up on the career ladder. I also plan to find the love of my life." He winked. What a freaking cutie. Dark hair, hazel eyes, laugh lines and the beginnings of a beard. I twisted my own dark locks around my fingers.

What a flirt. Christ girl, stop it. What are you... 15?

I too, came to Adelaide for work. A former radio girl lured home from London by a job with the local rag. Gone were the days of exotic accents and well-dressed Europeans. Globetrotting bedmates were a thing of the past. My new life was all about newspaper deadlines and magazine production. After a string of failed relationships and long distance disasters, love (especially with an Aussie) wasn't on the agenda, but for this fine specimen I could probably make an exception.

We drank too much, launched a running commentary on badly dressed guests and threw shapes on the dance floor until bar staff kicked us out. Not so bad for a corporate shindig. Friendship was sealed and I left with a new wingman and a crush the size of Adelaide Oval.

“We need to see each other again,” he said. “Friday, lunch. We’ll say it’s a work meeting... I’ll pick you up at 12.30 out the front of your work.” He kissed my cheek. “Bye babe.”

He arrived in a white ute by the name of Brutus. A beast of a vehicle with a trailer full of dirt, work boots and tools. “I thought you said you’re in PR,” I said, bemused.

“That’s my landscape gardening stuff. I do it on the weekends for a bit of extra cash.” That explained the tanned arms then. His crisp white shirt was rolled to the elbows, exposing a kaleidoscope of fish scales that flexed as if swimming upstream. Just one of many tattoos I discovered as months passed and trips to the beach became routine.

We chose a booth at a local pub packed with businessmen and dim lighting. Notepads on the table for show, we turned to more important matters. “Red or white?”

It didn’t take long to work out that Nathan is the kind of guy who turns heads and hearts. Our waitress batted her lashes and dwindled longer than necessary after taking our order. Her adoration was obvious. Not that he noticed. He didn’t realise the power of his smile and the gleam in his eye. Boys wanted to be him, girls wanted to do him.

I’m not sure why but that day he chose me as his ‘girl’ and over schnitzel, salad and a love of vino we vowed to tackle life on our new turf together. We skipped straight to best-mate status without a second thought.

Friendship was swift. Perhaps too swift. When it comes to men, women, sexual chemistry or ‘just friends’ there’s a window of opportunity that closes just as quickly as it opens.

Long movie nights, countless hours consuming wine and cheese, heartfelt conversations about life, love and dreams and introductions to friends and

family followed.

He had an insatiable thirst for pop culture, likened most life scenarios to movie scenes, tolerated it when I listened to Katy Perry albums on repeat and answered my questions with honesty.

“Does my bum look big in this?”

“Yes.”

“Kim Kardashian big or Beyonce big?”

“Beyonce babe – you’re rocking it.”

We dated other people, debriefing in detail after every sweaty encounter.

“That guy isn’t right for you,” he’d say after meeting the latest conquest. “Too old, too sensitive, too crazy, bad fashion sense. Face it, no-one will ever be as good as me.”

Meanwhile I watched on as he dabbled with online dating apps, fell in lust, fell in love and fell out of it just as quickly. Most of them were horror encounters and when things went wrong we picked up the phone.

“Babe, you won’t believe what happened last night. They looked so good on their profile. Great almost. I was home alone and drunk, you weren’t picking up your phone so what’s a boy to do? I jumped on Tindr, we got chatting and next thing I know we’ve arranged a date.

Great... ’til they turn up 20 kilos heavier than they looked in their picture and at least 15 years older. Seriously, shouldn’t there be laws against that? Some type of... I don’t know... rule that you can’t post a photo more than 12 months after you’ve taken it.”

He was an animated storyteller and prone to exaggeration but his dramatic dilemmas made me giggle.

“It’s not funny babe! So, there we are, making small talk and they’re really in to me but I’m not feeling it. Want to know what I did? I’m embarrassed to admit it. I went in to my phone settings and played my ring tone, pretended it was Dad calling and had a one-sided conversation about an

emergency he needed me to help out with. Then I kicked them out of the house. Am I shallow? I'm shallow aren't I? I'm such a bad guy."

It would go on like this for hours. "Right, I'm coming over. I need to see your face. Don't judge me though."

I never did. He'd arrive, arms outstretched, customary greeting on his lips. "Hello my little butternut pumpkin, sparkle pants!"

I'd never experienced friendship like it. It was unnerving. Intoxicating. Addictive. I smiled when he dialled, did a double take when he walked by, got butterflies when he texted.

Even my family liked him, which was rare when it came to my choice of male company.

"Nathan seems lovely," said Mum over dinner one night. I played coy, pushing potatoes across my plate. Butter dripped off the fork, naughty but nice like unfettered desire. "Don't get your hopes up – we're more platonic than the Pope."

Chaste as the friendship was, flashes of sexual tension and heart flutters played havoc with common sense. My internal dialogue was a tumble dryer of confusion and mixed messages. *Don't ruin it by getting intense or putting all your happiness in one boy*, I'd think when his name flashed on my mobile or he hugged me a few seconds longer than normal.

It wasn't just me though. Others read more into the connection too.

"Get a room," they'd say when we hit the dance floor beneath flashing lights at our favourite inner-city hangout. "Who is your gorgeous new boyfriend?" international pals would pry after seeing our doe-eyed photos on Facebook. "Friends. Just friends."

Then we shared a bed and everything changed.

It happened after my high school reunion, an event I had no intention of going to until Nathan noticed the invite.

"Babe, what's that?" Inquisitive fingers ripped it off the fridge before I had time to hide it. "You have to go. No, we have to go. I've always wanted

to be the hot guy on the arm of a girl at one of those things.”

He gnawed on the idea like a bulldog would an old bone, ridiculous scenarios rolling off his tongue. “It’ll be like *Romy and Michele’s High School Reunion*, just with better looking cast members.”

Once he started he wouldn’t let it go.

“Please... please! C’mon... show me off to all those country folk. I’ll match my bow tie and braces so that everyone knows we’re together.” I smiled internally. Men with an aptitude for fashion were rare in the town I grew up in. I could imagine the shock on rural faces.

“Nathan, you just want to go so you can pick up one of my old school friends. No.”

“That’s ridiculous. You know I’m not into farm dwellers. Besides, I’m your date. Imagine the scene... you and me, throwing shapes on a dance floor in a basketball hall. It’ll be like *Dirty Dancing* – minus the watermelon. Those footy jocks that used to ignore you will be flabby fathers-of-five-and-counting by now. We’ll rock it babe. Please! Let’s have our movie moment.”

I couldn’t deny him.

We made a weekend of it, piled the car high with cheese and vodka and took my childhood friends Simone and Tom along for the ride. With wheels pointed towards the small town I grew up in, we reassured ourselves that if the reunion sucked at least our private little after-party for four would go down in history.

The reunion was a droll affair, the highlight of which was platters piled with nostalgia-inducing kabana sticks and smiley fritz. A cover band set the beat to a barrage of questions from old school teachers and classmates.

“Married the man of your dreams yet?”

“What, no babies?”

“What happened to the shy dairy girl we knew and loved?”

“I thought you’d be pulling udders for the rest of your life.”

“City girl now hey? Who woulda thought.”

We left as soon as the punch ran out.

Things got heavy when we returned to our lake-side holiday house. I remember a spa, bubbles, flashes of nipple and heads heavy with tequila slammers.

“I feel like I’m in a scene from *The Hangover*,” yelled Nathan over the stereo system. “Come here you... dance with me. Be the Julia Roberts to my Richard Gere.”

There was no *Pretty Woman* or Beverly Wilshire Hotel about our actions. The four of us gyrated on the heavy oak table, toasted friendship, youth, careers and our invincibility. “We... (hic) are gonna be (hic) ... best friends (hic) ... forever (hic)... is there any more tequila?” Then we passed out.

Nathan’s hand was on my bottom when I stirred from the haze. “Holy shit. No. Oh no.”

His nose was pressed against mine, his breath heavy with hedonism, breaking like waves against my cheek. I tentatively prised his fingers from my bare cheeks. The warmth left behind by his manly palm as heavy as my confusion.

We’d chosen a room with two single beds. We always did. But why the flipping hell had I woken in his? I snuck a furtive look under the covers, scared of what I might find beneath the cotton garden of Eden. Oh dear God he’s naked too.

He stirred. “Hello sunshine, butternut pumpkin, toffee apple, glitter bug,” he said with a smile. “How’s the head?”

To be honest, neither of us know what happened that night. We never will. Awkward wasn’t in our vocabulary so we laughed it off and lamented what could have been the best naked wrestling session of our life... if only we could remember it. It was highly unlikely we’d rubbed naughty bits but not impossible. I berated myself for an opportunity and big-O missed.

“You two are really something else,” said Simone over a greasy fry-up. “Can’t say I’m surprised. I hope you used protection.”

Our conversations changed after that. They turned serious, domestic even.

“Do you want kids one day babe?” he asked a few weeks later over coffee, with furrowed brow. “Because I do and if it’s going to be with anyone I want it to be you.”

“Hold your horses Fabio!” I laughed. “You cop a feel and suddenly you want to fertilise my eggs?”

I wasn’t the type to develop stupid crushes, let alone have children. I planned to be forever single, sacrificing companionship for a relationship with the keyboard and the solitude of a writer and her art. We’d spoken of it often and he knew small, messy, wailing humans weren’t on my radar but looked forlorn anyway. “I’m serious... it’s been on my mind. Imagine how cute our kid would be. We’re best friends, we love each other, why not?”

“You’ll have to marry me first,” I said, with faux-seriousness. He smiled, kissed my forehead and said. “Leave it with me. If we’re not married to anyone else by the time we’re 30 I’ll make an honest woman out of you. Then we’ll have a mini-me. That kid will have the best wardrobe in town. Imagine the shoes we can buy it.”

“Happy Birthday to you. Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday dear Nathan, Happy Birthday to you.

As the man of the moment blew 30 flickering flames into submission his gran wrapped wrinkled fingers around my wrist and pulled me aside.

The party was held on the balcony of an inner city watering hole. Friends and relatives flew in from the far corners of Australia and I had been tasked with making a speech. It was a big deal. Words of adoration tumbled through my brain and the old lady’s disruption was a welcome distraction from my public speaking jitters.

“Darling, I’ve been meaning to talk to you.” I liked his gran. She rocked a funky white hairdo and said it how it was. “You and Nathan... it’s time to get serious. The family wants you to be together and this baby business he keeps talking about... It’s not so crazy. We see the way you two look at each other. It’s been five years now since you met and his grandfather and I really think

you're the one for him. We'd even be willing to babysit." She took a swig of champagne, gaining momentum. Fuelled by cheap fizz and geriatric determination she ploughed on. "You're 30 now dear, that basket of yours won't be full of eggs forever and you know how much his mum would love a grandchild. He's her only hope."

Nathan's mother Donna took the opportunity to verbally tackle me from the side. "Sweetie, don't wait. Have you considered freezing your eggs? The clock is ticking for both of you."

Oh, the pressure.

I smiled, hugged the old dear, gave Donna a kiss and reassured them that if Nathan asked, I'd say yes. "But first, let's eat cake."

He laughed when I told him about the encounter. "Oh Gran. She gets like that with every girl I meet. She's particularly enamoured by you though." He paused, thoughtful. "They've always wanted me to find a nice girl and settle down. I probably won't ever marry though. Not anytime soon... I just can't." Both Nathan and I had parents who split when we were young. Our views on marriage and commitment were as deep and complex as the scars divorce wreaks upon innocent young bystanders. I didn't push it. "I'm serious about the baby though."

I cried that night. Big, heavy, salty imposters marched rivulets of mascara down my pale face. I cried for the unfairness of it all, thinking back to the promise we swapped years earlier. "If we're not married by the time we're 30..."

Determined to talk more, I marked the passing of three decades by hiring a small vintage caravan by the beach. The sweet little blue and white 1950s beast was decked out with all the retro trimmings. Button mushroom-like in shape she looked out over sand dunes and aquamarine West Beach views. Space inside the van was limited so we set up deck chairs and laid out a feast of soggy fish and chips on the grass. I took his hand as the sun nose-dived seamlessly toward the horizon. My palms were sweaty. His palms were too. I had a question to ask and he sensed it.

Why shouldn't a girl make the first brazen move? Screw society, to hell

with expectations and antiquated rules made to suit the needs and whims of others.

My internal pep talk was ballsy. In reality I was terrified of rejection. I feared he'd laugh at what I planned to say. "If we're going to do this, really going to do this, we need to do it properly," the words fell from lips laced with vinegar and sea salt.

"I know it's a bit of fun to daydream about but if you want to have a child one day we need to get serious. We need to talk money, stability, morals, plans..."

I had his full attention now. Seagulls played tug of war with the remnants of our meal. Beaks clashed, feathers flew and one dominant diva fluffed her breast feathers and snapped up the last juicy morsel. Squawk!

Wow, that bird has guts.

"So..."

I took a deep breath. Turned towards him, lifting the black cap from his head so that I could clearly see his eyes.

"Will you marry me?"

"Babe... get out of psycho town. Are you for real?"

"Yes. Well no. Well, kind of."

This wasn't as straightforward as I'd hoped. I had some explaining to do.

Two weeks earlier, while rifling through the Adelaide Fringe guide I'd circled must-see performances with a thick red marker. As always, the arts festival program was full of oddball experiences but one in particular made me look twice.

Chapel of Love – an immersive comedy show that lets you marry anything you like. Your phone, your cat, your best friend. Just turn up and let Elvis do the rest.

"I booked tickets immediately," I said with a flourish. His eyes widened. Confusion turned to excitement.

“I can’t get married for real,” he said, ruminating on the idea. “It’s not legal here yet. Screw it. Why not? If I can’t marry the man of my dreams I may as well give it a whirl with my best friend. Lovers come and go, but just friends, babe — that stuff is forever.”

So here we are now, the ‘wedding’ after party is in full swing. We chose the Fringe Club as our reception venue. Performers, musicians, circus acts and glitter-encrusted drag queens pulsate on the sweaty open-air dance-floor. It’s quite fitting really, this smorgasbord of colourful characters celebrating life and love.

He did the gallant thing by carrying me through the gates and past the bouncers like a real-life bride but when I saw him making eyes at a hot man behind the bar, I knew my chances of a romantic first dance were cactus. He’s out there now, burning up the dance floor. The chemistry is electric. Coloured fairy lights dance in the trees and through the crowd I see them bounce off Nathan’s glistening wedding ring. I guess that’s the way it goes with a fake wedding. You can’t expect too much, especially in the fidelity stakes.

Nathan was never going to be mine. Not in a religious vow-swapping sense or even as a casual ‘fling and miss’. It didn’t take long to work out he preferred men to women. The I-prefer-penis-to-vagina penny dropped during our inaugural lunch. The waitress didn’t stand a chance. The waiter, however, got his number. His gran of course, was serious in her dream to see us united in holy matrimony but the ‘phase’ his grandparents speak of is nothing of the sort. This is no flash in the pan of sexual preferences. One day my best friend will marry the man of his dreams and the ring on his finger will be real. The DJ turns up the volume as Katy Perry’s *Teenage Dream* fills the air. My request.

You think I’m pretty without any make - up on. You think I’m funny when I tell the punchline wrong. I know you get me so I let my walls come down.

Bodies move to the beat. He’s in the arms of the dark stranger now. I watch and cry. Little wet rivulets of joy.

It’s our song. He looks over. “You okay?” he mouths. I watch the two men sway, spin and laugh. The handsome chap looks a bit like Wolverine. I’m

impressed.

“Couldn’t be better,” I mouth back.

Let’s go all the way tonight. No regrets, just love. We can dance, until we die. You and I will be young forever.

“Go for it.” I give him the silent thumbs up across the pulsating mass. He winks. He’s happy. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him quite this elated. “I love you,” he mouths back. “My wife, my life.”

I turn my back on my faux husband and lock eyes with a cute guitarist I noticed on the way in. He’s noticed me too. “Come here,” he beckons. I always was a sucker for a man who is good with his hands. I adjust my daisy crown and step into the lights, vowing to call Nathan first thing in the morning. This may be our best debrief yet.

I can hear it already. “Hello little sparkle, pants, glitter bomb, chocolate tart. You’ll never guess what happened last night... ”

I hope the stranger remembers his name in the morning, I hope the sex is explosive and the love enduring and real. I hope one day he can swap vows with the man of his dreams. Here, on home turf, just the way he wants it. Legally. My hubby deserves the real deal and when it happens, I want the fathers of my child to be a perfect match. A perfect, imperfect, glorious match.

Deluge by Sandy Vaile

Before I made it to the lobby, I already knew I would leave the city and everything I had worked so hard for. A career, apartment, money, it was all meaningless if there was no-one to share it with.

How had I strayed so far from what was important in life?

I hurried through the foyer, shoved open the double glass doors and stepped into the worst storm of the year. The streetscape was grey with oil-slicked puddles and drab people scuttling towards cheerless buildings. I hesitated on the portico. If I stepped out from its protective cover, life would never be the same.

Who was I kidding? My life sucked anyway.

Sleeting rain prickled my face, which was a blessing, because I could let my tears flow too. Wind gusted my hair into a slick, brown tangle that clawed at my throat and caught on my eyelashes. I nearly came a cropper on the mess of rotting leaves on the footpath, and by the time I'd thrown myself into my little red Kia, I was drenched.

I swiped the back of my hand across my eyes and the blur beyond the windscreen refocused. There was no city streetscape and no rain. The Cockatoo Flat Primary School oval was abuzz as people pushed wheel barrows full of soil, shovelled mulch, brandished paint brushes like intoxicated Picassos, dug holes and gently placed plants in them. Half the town had turned out for the working bee.

The sky was darker than the black lagoon. That must have been what brought on the painful memory of the day my world splintered.

A shudder shook me hard and it wasn't just the cold that ripped through me and wrung my insides. Mum had been so calm when she phoned and explained her diagnosis that day.

"Honey, I don't want you to make a big deal of it, but I have the big C. I'm starting chemotherapy next month and might need someone to help out around the place for a while. I don't like to ask, but..."

How could she even think I wouldn't come? Maybe because it had been a

decade since I left Cockatoo Flat, and the love of my life. At the time I didn't have much choice other than to take the highest paying job I could find. Once my high school sweetheart had made it clear that he didn't want me back, well, there wasn't any reason to return.

So there I was, with a trendy apartment in the CBD, a lucrative job in marketing, and a bunch of gal-pals to go clubbing with on the weekends. Sounded ideal. Only it wasn't. I also had a whopping mortgage, worked like dog, and not one of those gals had bothered to phone and see how I was doing since moving home.

How easily that one phone call from Mum had clarified what I wanted out of life. Now all I had to do was make it happen.

A tap on the car window made me flinch.

Mirandah waved, a concerned frown in place. "Carly, are you okay?" she called through the glass.

I sniffed and wiped my eyes with the back of my hand; what an idiot I must look. I got out of the car.

"I'm good, thanks," I lied.

Mirandah and I had gone to the same kindergarten, primary and high schools. We'd played netball for the same team and sold cakes at the same fetes. She was just one of many who'd welcomed me back into the community as though I'd only been away for a weekend.

Mum acted like nothing had changed either, still refusing to discuss the upcoming chemo. Well, if that's the way she wanted to play it, I would go along. This was her show and I would make the most of every minute we had left together.

A large drop of rain landed smack in the middle of my forehead. I scanned the oval for Mum and finally spotted her sitting on the tailgate of a ute with a plastic cup of cordial in one hand and the other punctuating her, no doubt lively, banter.

Now in her early sixties, Jean Shaw looked fabulous. Her long slate-grey hair was tied loosely at the nape of her neck and her felt Akubra hat added

authenticity to the moleskin pants and ankle boots.

If only she weren't chatting to Elliot Fraser.

I'd expended significant effort to avoid my ex-teenage sweetheart since moving home. It had been a decade since I'd laid eyes, or hands, on him, and turning thirty didn't appear to have done him any harm, although the moustache was new.

Don't get me wrong, I had nothing against his rugged stubble or mess of blond hair, and I didn't mind the way his T-shirt clung to the planes of his chest, or how his faded jeans did the same to firm buttocks. But I hated the way my heart knocked on the door of my libido at just the sight of him. I needed to rein in these long dormant feelings and act cool. No need to pant after a man who'd made it clear he wouldn't forgive me for breaking his heart — ever.

After a fortifying breath, I plastered a smile on my face and walked over to them.

"Are you still gas-bagging, Mum? I thought you wanted to hurry home." I tugged one end of her violet scarf and kissed her cheek.

Elliot stiffened as he laid eyes on me, but manners forced an obligatory handshake. I intended to keep it brief, but his long fingers were warm and sent a tingle through the marrow of my bones.

Our gazes met.

"It's nice to see you again, Carly," he said in a familiar soft, yet commanding voice.

Vertigo swelled through me and I was in real danger of toppling forward onto his alluring lips. I averted my eyes.

"You're looking well. Still managing the family farm, I hear."

He gave a stiff nod. Damn, I'd forgotten that was a sore subject. Everything about the summer after we had finished high school was awkward. We'd both put our families before our own happiness, the difference was he'd gotten to stay with his.

“Carly has been redecorating my house, you know,” Mum said, “and she’s done a marvellous job, but I might have to get you over to quote for fixing the carport trellis.”

“I’m sure I can manage, Mum.” Like I needed Elliot hanging around the house, giving me the evil eye on a daily basis.

“Honey, you’re talented and capable, but you’re not a builder.”

“I don’t want to get in anyone’s way,” Elliot said. Looking for a way out, no doubt.

“Mum, I don’t need to be an expert to replace a few beams.” Although I had a sneaking suspicion I knew where this plan of hers was headed.

Mum shook her head. “I’m sure there’s plenty of work to keep you both busy. Honestly, sometimes you’re as stubborn as mule, Carly. I don’t know where you get it from.”

Elliot spluttered, eyes twinkling, lips twisted with the effort of suppressing his amusement.

“Fine.” I leant against the ute and seethed silently.

“Little Carly Shaw?” My old school principal, Mr Sully, appeared beside Elliot. “I hope you’re home for good. The community can use all the young families it can attract to justify keeping these wonderful facilities.” He waved his arm to encompass the school.

“Oh, she doesn’t have a family yet,” Mum said.

Curse her for liberating that gem in front of Elliot; who was making a concerted effort to study his boots.

“I haven’t found the right person yet,” I mumbled. *Ground swallow me now.*

It wasn’t anyone’s business that every man I’d dated, since Elliot, had turned out to be either selfish or clingy. After all these years I was convinced there weren’t any decent single men left.

Thankfully someone called Mr Sully away to supervise the location of a herb garden.

A spray of raindrops fell, as though cast from a shaking dog. Dark clouds promised violence as gum leaves swirled around my feet.

“I’ve decided to drive myself home,” Mum announced. “You should stay and help pack up, though.”

“Then I’ll be stranded.”

She raised a sun-spotted hand to my cheek and smiled with her whole face. The kind of grin that let me know I was exactly where I should be, my earlier misery erased. Her apple-green eyes blazed with mischief and she nodded at the blond Adonis beside me.

“I’m sure Elliot will give you a lift.”

Elliot blanched at the suggestion. Seriously, was I so bad that he couldn’t spend fifteen minutes in a car with me? It made me sad that he hadn’t let go of his resentment. Okay, I’ll admit to fantasising about him when I first came home. What a fool I’d been to think there was a chance we’d get back together.

Apparently recovering his manners, he said, “Sure. I can drop you home. I just have to find Amy.”

Thunder growled overhead and people pointed at the fast approaching haze of rain. A gust of wind caught Mum’s hat and Elliot chased it across the oval. He always was the type to rally to the aid of a damsel in distress.

“He remarried?” I couldn’t help the tone of disbelief. Why was Mum trying to set us up, if he was married?

She shook her head. “There hasn’t been anyone since he divorced. Amy is his daughter and he shares custody.”

“Oh.” So, he hadn’t found anyone else. I often wondered if we got it wrong all those years ago. We’d been so in love as teenagers. Sure, there’d been other relationships since, but nothing durable, and neither of us had managed to find our happily ever after.

“It might do you two good to spend some time together.”

“You never miss a chance, do you?” I shook my head, but Mum only

grinned.

Since I'd moved in with her, she'd tried to set me up with a dairy farmer, the hardware store owner and a farrier. She wasn't fussy when it came to marrying me off, but I guess she just wanted to see me happy before her time was up. And it wasn't so much that I would mind being married, but the likelihood of finding a second soulmate was slim.

The drizzle turned to a resolute shower.

"You win." I tossed the car keys to Mum and hugged her goodbye.

"Carly, don't give up on him." She flicked her head in Elliot's direction. "I've lived enough years to know you shouldn't spend them alone."

I couldn't respond around the lump in my throat. Mum hustled into the Kia and it bumped along the track around the oval. Obviously I hadn't hidden my feelings well enough.

"You're getting wet," a tiny voice squeaked from the canteen verandah.

Hell, it was really coming down now and I was standing in it like an idiot. I jogged over to an adorable four-year-old with blond hair tied into two neat plaits, and crouched down to her level. If I'd been in any doubt about whose daughter she was, Elliot's familiar beige eyes laid it to rest. The intensity of them plucked at my heartstrings.

My biologic clock had been ticking for a while now, but since I'd moved away from all my single party-hard city friends, and reconnected with the Cockatoo Flat locals, who spent their days driving children to appointments and baking for fundraisers, it had been more like a gong. Elliot was so lucky.

"I'm Amy. Are you Jean's friend?"

"Yes, I'm her daughter, Carly. Are you helping with the working-bee too?"

"No silly, I too small. I made stuff to sell at the market next weekend." Amy proudly held up two iceblock sticks that were glued in a cross, with multicoloured wool woven around them.

"That's fantastic."

“I sure wish I could do some painting with Jean. She’s got the best colours and doesn’t mind if I make a mess.”

“Is that right? It sounds like you’ve painted with her before.”

“I used to go to Jean’s house all the time, but I’m not allowed now.”

“Oh?” The little girl hadn’t visited since *I’d* been living there. Maybe Mum had stopped giving art lessons now that she was sick. Nah, she wouldn’t let a little thing like cancer keep her down.

“Amy, that’s enough.”

I flinched at the rumble of Elliot’s deep voice behind me.

He tucked the little girl protectively under his arm. “Amy, don’t forget you’re staying at your mum’s house tonight. We’d better get your bag out of the ute and go find her.”

“Yay!”

Hang on a minute, I was still stuck on Amy’s comment about painting. “I’m confused,” I told Elliot. “If Amy used to visit all the time, then why doesn’t she still? I know Mum would love the company.”

“I thought Jean had enough company at the moment, without chasing after this little monkey.” He patted his daughter tenderly on the head.

“But I like painting with Jean,” Amy complained.

“I know you do, honey. I’ll tell you what, tomorrow I’ll buy some new paints and paper and we’ll make some new pictures for your bedroom wall.”

“Okay.”

She had one small fist on her hip. What a cutie. This pocket rocket was going to be quite the handful as she grew up.

“I’m going to find Mum,” she announced.

“I saw her in the gardening shed,” Elliot encouraged.

Amy skipped along the verandah and then sprinted through the rain to the shed. Elliot and I stood awkwardly, with a whirlwind of weather and activity

around us.

Someone had to break the stalemate, so it might as well be me. “Amy’s a beauty. You must be so proud of her.”

“Yeah, I love her to bits.”

He handed over Mum’s Akubra and his glance alighted on my chest. After a deep breath, he squeezed his eyes shut, as though in pain. I didn’t need to look down to feel my nipples harden beneath my wet blouse. Traitors! Colour rose up his throat, but I doubt he was as mortified as me.

Then he lowered his voice. “Um, I don’t want you to take offence.” He raked stiff fingers through his damp hair, causing it to spike haphazardly. “But I’m not keen on Amy spending time with you, when you’ll be leaving town soon.”

Wow, what part of that did he expect me *not* to take offence to? He didn’t want me near his daughter, because I was temporary.

A flare of burning indignation shot to my clenched jaw, but I bit down on my cheeky retort. Had there ever been anyone as judgemental as Elliot bloody Fraser?

Be calm. He only wants to protect his daughter.

I could understand that, although he ought to know I would never hurt anyone deliberately. I never meant to hurt him either. Didn’t he realise leaving hurt me too? But I there had been no other choice. I’d only done what I had to for my mum.

Well, if he wanted me out of the way, then I could oblige.

The wind was playing havoc with a stack of serviettes, so I darted towards the catering contingent. As I pounced on a toppled stack of plastic cups, I snuck a look over my shoulder. Elliot was still watching, so I got busy packing up the barbeque supplies.

Damn the heat in my cheeks. Damn him for getting under my skin. All the energy I’d expended trying to erase him from my heart, only to find that the imprint hadn’t faded at all.

It was suddenly clear why I'd never found a lasting relationship. I'd already met my true love. It was a pity he didn't feel the same way.

An hour later I was in Elliot's ute, as he joined the procession of cars headed for the oval exit. Rain pelted the roof of as loud as hammers and trees were bent almost horizontal by the wind.

"I hope Jean's got everything battened down at the house," he said. "This storm's a doozy."

I wasn't inclined to make small talk after the verbal backhander he'd given me earlier, so just nodded and kept my face turned to stare out of the side window. When I did eventually chance a glance, his lush lips were turned down. What I wouldn't give to know what he was thinking. Then again, I was probably better off not knowing.

The muscles in his tanned arms flexed as he wrestled the vehicle along the potholed road, with the wind trying to push it onto the verge. He flicked the heater on to demist the windscreen. The wipers flicked water double-time, and the aroma of timber and soil coming off his damp skin built to a crescendo in the cab.

I cracked the window open a smidgeon.

Elliot sighed. "Carly, I know you've been avoiding me. I guess I've been doing the same, but I don't want it to be awkward between us. I don't blame you for making the decisions you did when you were eighteen. Anyway, I'm glad you're here to take care of Jean at this difficult time."

"What do you mean you don't blame me? It's obvious you do, although I can't fathom why when you did exactly the same thing. We *both* put our families before our relationship."

"Come on, I didn't have a choice. Dad was sick and it was my responsibility to take over the farm."

"Like I had a choice!" My voice screeched in the compact cab. "You knew why I had to go, but you made it all about you."

“You wanted a lifestyle Cockatoo Flat couldn’t give you,” he said flatly.

I turned, planning to scald him with my death ray or something, but he stayed focused on the road.

“If you really think that’s why I left, then you didn’t know me at all, and you certainly didn’t deserve me.”

“You could have found a job nearby, stayed here, with me, but you didn’t.”

“That wasn’t an option. I told you my good-for-nothing father left behind debts. If I didn’t find a way to earn big money fast, then Mum would’ve lost the house. The job in the city was too good to pass up.” I had a white knuckled grip on the edge of the vinyl seat.

He frowned. “I didn’t realise it was that bad. You never mentioned losing the house.”

“Mum didn’t want anyone to know.” With my arms crossed over my chest, I turned my back on him. It was as far as I could flee in the confines of the vehicle, and I didn’t want him to see my eyes moisten.

“I wasn’t just anyone, Carly. Was I?”

It wasn’t fair for him to ask for confirmation now. We were in love. He should have paid closer attention. “It’s too late to start listening now,” I told him.

Spending time with Elliot was a bad idea. Today had been a bumper-car ride of painful emotions that I didn’t want to repeat. If I didn’t see him, then I wouldn’t pine for what I’d lost. From now on I’d keep my distance.

By the time the ute bumped up Mum’s long driveway, the rain had eased. The ancient oak tree was the first thing to materialise from the gloom. It dwarfed the duck-egg blue house spectacularly, with leaves that had turned scarlet in the crisp autumn air.

On the other side of the house, my car was parked safely under the canopy of mauve stars the clematis-covered carport provided. Thank goodness Mum was home safe.

Elliot slowed as the tyres caught in ruts cut by the torrential rain. And then a terrible metallic ripping as loud as a clap of the thunder, and as violent as a car crash crack, made me cringe.

Only the sound wasn't from the sky.

One side of the oak tree tilted, gained momentum and spliced the corrugated roof of Mum's cottage, right where the kitchen was.

My heart squeezed with the force of a defibrillator shock.

"Mum! God no."

Even staring at the source, it was hard to believe what had just happened, but the destruction was bona fide. The kitchen was gone. I'd only just finished painting the walls sunshine yellow, to make Mum smile every time she walked into the room. There was still too much I needed to say to her, and if Mum was making a cup of tea... It wasn't Mum's time yet.

Instinctively I grabbed Elliot's arm. His leg extended and the ute leapt forward.

The massive bough was wedged in the roof, its girth easily as wide as the car, with jagged barbs where it had broken away from the trunk. Fist-sized red splinters littered the lawn. My heart thrashed desperately inside my ribs.

At the foot of the verandah, Elliot braked sharply.

I flung the car door open and stumbled towards the house. The front door was still intact, but what if...

Elliot stepped in front of me and placed two large palms on my shoulders.

"You should wait here."

"I need to help her." My voice was breathless and I hated the way it made me sound fragile. Mum needed me.

I knocked his arms aside and tried to push past, but it was like pushing against a boulder. His hands were on my shoulders again, anchoring me to the ground, when in reality it felt like I might be sucked into the abyss of the sky.

"We can't dash in there. It might not be safe."

“I don’t care! Mum’s in there.”

“Will you at least let me go first?”

I nodded and followed his broad back as he jogged up the front steps and pushed open the door.

Elliot turned back to me. “Please, wait here while I make sure...”

He didn’t clarify if he had to make sure the building was safe, or Mum was alive, or both. I held my breath as he stepped across the threshold.

Branches that were still attached to the oak tree scraped claws along the roof with a squeal. The hairs on my arms stood to attention.

Each second was an eternity as I stared at the front door, picturing Mum under the branch. With a stiff back and faltering steps, I went inside.

Elliot called out, “She’s in here.”

I couldn’t tell if his voice came from the kitchen or not, and he didn’t say Mum was unhurt. Then he appeared in the hallway with Mum cradled in his strong arms. A saviour in denim.

“She’s all right,” he called over the din of the storm, but I was already running.

“Mum!” I took her face between my hands and kissed it. “I thought... I couldn’t...”

“Everything’s okay, honey.” Mum stroked my hair. “Houses can be mended.”

“Are you hurt?”

Mum laughed. “No honey. The noise frightened me, so I sat on the bathroom floor and covered my head. Elliot rushed in and swept me into his arms like a knight of the round table.”

Colour tinted Elliot’s cheeks and he cautiously placed Jean down, feet first.

“I’m fine,” she assured them.

She looked okay, but I wasn't ever letting her out of my sight again. I wrapped an arm around her waist and guided her towards the front door.

"Take her out the back way." Elliot suggested.

Of course, it wouldn't be a good idea for Mum to see the destruction first hand.

The storm had backed off to mere annoyance levels, now that it had done it's job and ripped my home apart.

Mum and I sat in the ute, me holding her hand in my lap, while Elliot inspected the structural damage more closely.

"He knows what he's doing, honey."

When he reappeared, his brows were knitted together. I wound the car window down.

"The kitchen is a shambles," Elliot said, "but the tree mostly damaged the wall. The rest of the roof is sound. You can come into the lounge while I put a tarp over the hole, if you like. When I'm done, I think you two ought to grab a few things and stay at my place until the damage is fixed."

Mum was stretched on the three-seater lounge like Lady Muck. She looked shaken, but didn't have a scratch on her. In fact, I reckon she was enjoying all the excitement. Still, I insisted she rest up.

"Can you grab me another blanket, honey?"

Elliot beat me to it. He tucked the crocheted wool around Mum and propped a pillow behind her back. He had transformed from cool-headed superhero, to tender carer. Was there anything this man couldn't handle — aside from me?

"I've called the emergency services," he said, "but there's damage all over the district, so they're going to take a while to get here. The wind's eased, but I'd better get that tarpaulin up, to minimise the rain damage."

Mum smiled at him in a way that would melt reinforced steel. "You've been such a dear, but don't do anything dangerous. I don't want you sliding

off the roof.”

“I’m a builder, Jean. I’ve got better beam balance than a ballerina.” He grinned.

Some kind of morose sense of curiosity compelled me to look at the kitchen, so I headed for the hall.

“Where are you going?” Elliot touched my arm.

“I need to see it.”

He lowered his voice. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

I shook my head and continued into the hallway, tucking my trembling hands into my pockets.

“Okay,” Elliot said from behind. “But don’t go into the room, just look. I’ll be back shortly.”

It was brighter than it should be in the hallway and wind whipped around my legs, no thanks to the now alfresco kitchen. I straightened photo frames that were skew-whiff on the wall, and righted a vase on the hall table. Then I took a deep breath and stepped up to the doorway.

The chaos in the kitchen was breathtaking, the room barely recognisable. A thick branch protruded through the side of the house, surrounded by mangled, sunshine-yellow wall cladding and jagged glass. A gaping hole in the roof showed the angry sky, which leaked rain onto the timber floorboards, where a dark stain had spread. A confetti of five-pronged red leaves covered the floor and the little square table was snapped in two.

The ping of raindrops on the stainless steel sink made the whole scene fade into a surreal haze. My chest tightened and I squeezed my eyes shut to keep tears in check. Thank goodness Mum hadn’t been in here.

I flinched at the shrill chime from my mobile phone, snatched it from my pocket and pressed it to my ear. Big mistake not to check the caller ID. I knew the voice well.

“Jason, we don’t have anything more to discuss.” I’d been polite to my ex-boss for as long as I could, but he took persistence to an irritating level.

“You haven’t heard the offer yet.”

“I don’t need to—”

“Hang on a minute, you were brilliant at your job and we need you back. My final offer is ninety-five thousand a year and a parking space. You’ll never get another opportunity like this.”

“That really is generous, and I’m flattered. I know you gave me a job when I needed the money, but it’s not what I want anymore. I’m sure you’ll find another suitable candidate.”

“Come on, Carly. You can’t tell me living in Cocky Vale, or wherever you are, floats your boat.”

I drew in a deep breath and huffed it out slowly. “You’re not hearing me, Jason. I have no desire to live in the city ever again. I did it because I had to, but my life is here. Please don’t phone me again.”

I ended the call and rested my head on the doorjamb, eyes closed. It amazed me how little I missed my old life.

A floorboard creaked and I spun around.

Elliot stood in the hall, rain glistening on his skin, his fawn-coloured eyes giving analysing me.

“I forgot my gloves,” he explained, but didn’t move to get them from the lounge.

Hell, my fingers itched to stroke the silk of taut flesh over his labourer’s muscles. He chewed his bottom lip, as though in contemplation. The lines beside his eyes deepened as the corners of his lips curved upwards, and his expression softened.

I didn’t understand what I was seeing on his face. Surely I was mistaken. It looked like... adoration. That couldn’t be meant for me.

Slowly he stepped towards me, head tilted to one side.

“You never left *me*, did you?”

I had to clear my throat to get any sound out. Even then it was a whisper.

“I told you I had to take the job in the city for the money.”

He took another step and extended an arm across the void between us. “I thought it was because I couldn’t give you the lifestyle you wanted.”

“All the riches I ever wanted were right here.”

His weight shifted onto the balls of his feet and I felt my body do the same, willing him to close the distance. My breathing was shallow, pulse racing.

“Carly.” He sighed. “I let you down.”

I was afraid to blink, least it break the spell conjured in the room.

All of a sudden, he stepped again, took my face between his large hands and brought his lips to mine. Our mouths melded together in a familiar way; as comfortable as fluffy slippers and snuggling by an open fire. There wasn’t time to think this through. I needed him with a physical force that couldn’t be denied. We clung to each another, explored a decade of changes to our bodies and drank solace from one another’s mouths.

It might have been one minute or many before our lips parted. All I knew was that Elliot didn’t relax his arms around me. Our bodies were pressed tight and he rested his forehead against mine, breathing heavily.

“I can’t believe I ever let you go. Seeing you today... it was like I was breaking apart all over again. As though you’d only just left.”

My heart galloped so fast that it scraped its hooves on hedge-topped hurdles. If what he was saying was true, it would mean all of my dreams come true. If I believed it — he’d told me he couldn’t live without me once before.

I swallowed the blossoming hope. “I never wanted to hurt you. Mum needed me, that’s all.”

“Family is everything, but it shouldn’t have come at the expense of our own happiness. God I missed you.” He rested his mouth on my shoulder, skated soft lips up the side of my neck, then pulled back to look me in the eye.

“This is going to sound crazy, seeing as I haven’t seen you in, forever, but I love you, Carly. It was always you, it still is, and I’m not going to let you out of my sight ever again.”

That was it; tears spilled down my cheeks and caught on my upturned lips. He needed me as I needed him.

Autumn would no longer be a sign of loss. Now it was a new beginning.

About Samantha Bond

Samantha Bond is a reformed corporate lawyer, now writer and public servant. She's been published in *Girlfriend* magazine, *Page Seventeen*, *Goodnight, Goodnight* anthology, *Positive Words*, *Perilous Adventures* and writes reviews for Adelaide's *Indaily*. Her first novel, *Just Sleeping*, was shortlisted for the Olvar Wood Fellowship Award. She has equal addictions to chocolate and aerobics (surely one cancels out the other, leading to perfect equilibrium?), believes that Buffy would so slay Edward, and is a writers' festival groupie. Find out more at www.samanthastaceybond.com.

About Carla Caruso

Carla Caruso was born in Adelaide, Australia, and only ‘escaped’ for three years to work as a magazine journalist and stylist in Sydney. Previously, she was a gossip columnist and fashion editor at Adelaide’s daily newspaper, *The Advertiser*. She has since freelanced for titles including *Woman’s Day* and *Shop Til You Drop*. These days, she writes romantic comedy novels in between playing mum to one-year-old twin boys Alessio and Sebastian with husband James. Her books include *Catch of the Day*, *Cityglitter*, *Second Chance*, the ‘Astonvale’ rom-com mystery series starting with *A Pretty Mess*, and more. Visit www.carlacaruso.com.au, ‘[Carla Caruso Author](#)’ on Facebook, or [@CarlaCaruso79](#) on Twitter.

About Laura Greaves

Laura Greaves's first romantic comedy novel, *Be My Baby*, was published by Penguin in 2014, and her second, *The Ex-Factor*, followed in March 2015. Laura is also an award-winning journalist with 17 years' experience writing for and editing newspapers and magazines in several countries. For the past five years she has freelanced for leading titles including *Marie Claire*, *Woman's Day* and *Sunday Style*. She lives in Sydney. You can find Laura at her website (www.lauragreaves.com), on Facebook (www.facebook.com/lauragreaveswritesbooks) and on Twitter (@Laura_Greaves).

About Georgina Penney

Georgina Penney first discovered romance novels when she was eleven and has been a fan of the genre ever since. It took her another eighteen years to finally sit in front of a keyboard and get something down on the page, but that's alright – she was busy doing other things until then. Today she lives with her wonderful husband, Tony, in a cozy steading in the Scottish countryside. When she's not swearing at her characters and trying to cram them into her plot, she can be found traipsing over fields, gazing at hairy coos and imagining buff medieval Scotsmen in kilts (who have access to shower facilities and deodorant) living behind every bramble hedge. Connect with Georgina at www.georginapenney.com and www.steamypuddings.com, or on Twitter ([@georginapenney](https://twitter.com/georginapenney)) or Facebook (www.facebook.com/GeorginaPenneyAuthor)

About Katie Spain

Katie Spain is a journalist and features writer for *The Advertiser* newspaper and *SA Weekend* magazine. She grew up on a dairy farm in South Australia but found her writing groove (and a serious shoe addiction) in London, where she worked in digital music and West End theatre journalism. She dabbled in commercial radio in Sydney before heading back to Adelaide to concentrate on accumulating keyboard strokes. Mostly, she writes about ordinary folk with extraordinary lives, but also has a thing for food, wine, good times and the odd creative side project involving wet paint. A travel bug at heart, she scours the globe for ultimate writers' retreats and her very own bestseller. She likes wearing glitter, strange hats and ridiculously bright clothes and will continue to do so until she's old and grey. Find out more at www.thelittlelocal.com, or on Twitter ([@katie_spain](https://twitter.com/katie_spain)) or Instagram ([@spaink](https://www.instagram.com/spaink)).

About Sandy Vaile

Sandy Vaile is a motorbike-riding daredevil who isn't content with a story unless there's a courageous heroine in it. She loves reading, writing, speed and adventure. Home is amongst the vineyards in South Australia with a rambunctious Hungarian Vizsla dog. By day she's a quality coordinator (read: list-making word nerd) and in her spare time she enjoys motorbike riding, cooking (read: eating) decadent desserts, and devising horrible things to do to fictional characters. Be the first to hear about new releases and behind the scenes gossip at www.sandyvaile.com.

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