



Six sizzling fun-size chick lit stories

Winter Heat

*Sarah Belle, Samantha Bond, Carla Caruso,
Laura Greaves, Vanessa Stubbs, Belinda Williams*

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SIX SIZZLING CHICK LIT STORIES

SARAH BELLE, SAMANTHA BOND, CARLA CARUSO, LAURA
GREAVES, VANESSA STUBBS, BELINDA WILLIAMS

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Cover design: Daniella Caruso

<http://carusodaniella.wix.com/illustration>

Interior formatting by Rowena Holloway

www.rowenaholloway.com

This anthology was produced with the generous assistance of Romance Writers of Australia's group grants scheme. Our sincere thanks to RWA for your support.

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WISH UPON A STAR

SARAH BELLE

Once upon a time there was a little girl who would run outside at dusk and search the sky for the first star of the night. Then she would say:

*‘Starlight, star bright,
First star I see tonight,
Wish I may, wish I might,
Have this wish I wish tonight.’*

She would scrunch her eyes shut and make a wish. Not any random wish; never for anything as whimsical as pair of sparkly shoes or bobby socks with pink pom poms. Not even for a white pony that farted glitter. No, she was an idealist who had watched many Disney movies featuring princesses who lived happily ever after. Every night, her wish was the same: her very own Prince Charming.

Twenty years later, after a particularly nasty break up with a man who turned out to be the latest in a long line of toads, the twenty-eight year old woman ran outside at dusk and searched the evening sky for the first star. When she found it, she repeated the starlight poem and wished again for Prince Charming to come and sweep her off her feet, mend her broken heart and deliver her a perfect happily ever after.

The next day she met said Prince Charming while queuing for coffee at her local Starbucks. The starry connection was not lost on her; it was fate. The heavens had finally granted her greatest wish. She fell in love with him because his eyes twinkled like a shimmery pond struck by moonlight. The sun’s rays highlighted tones of gold and

brown in his hair. His complexion revealed a commitment to healthy eating and his lips were softer than warmed marshmallows. Kissing him was like falling into a neverending cloud of fairy floss and sparkly love hearts that left her breathless. It even made her bosoms heave. Additionally, he did everything to please her and they never, ever argued. They lived blissfully ever after.

That day was two years ago and recently she'd been asking herself how well Prince Charming – soon to be Husband Charming – and his Princess really knew each other if they'd never cracked a wobbly between them. Didn't a good, old-fashioned screaming match teach one something about one's partner? Surely, in the moments of anger, frustration and passion, a person's true nature was revealed, and shouldn't they each reveal that true nature prior to marriage? Seeing as they'd never argued, she pondered the strength and future of their relationship.

*

Abby and Maya had snaffled the usual booth directly under the heater because it was the middle of winter and they'd just made the three-block pilgrimage to their favourite Irish pub, Molly Molloy's. They'd braved rain and Melbourne's Antarctic wind because the pub next to their nameless government department was full of nameless government employees who insisted on talking about nameless government crap. They both ordered a large Cab Sav. A hot chocolate would, of course, defrost their numb bodies, but important relationship issues were always discussed with alcohol and a side serving of spicy wedges with The Corrs harmonising in the background.

'I think you've got cold feet. It's natural.' Even though Maya was Abby's best friend, she clearly couldn't grasp Abby's problem.

'No, it's more than that. I read an article—'

Maya groaned and thrust her head backwards. 'Oh God! Please

don't Dr Phil me!

Abby was prepared for this reaction. She'd suspected that Maya had a little crush on Xander. God, everyone had a crush on Xander, even his barber.

'I bet he doesn't even have morning breath,' Maya said. 'Does he? Does he have stinky morning breath like the rest of us? You know, when it's all rancid, like you've been incubating yoghurt in your gob overnight?'

'You're missing the point.' Abby was determined to steer this conversation to a place of philosophical discussion and away from acidophilus. 'We've never fought. Not in two years.'

'Never?'

Abby shook her head.

'Not even about him leaving the toilet seat up?'

'Nope.'

'Is that because he puts the seat down?'

Abby laughed. 'As if! I don't make an issue of it because it doesn't seem important. I'm his fiancée, not his mother.'

'You know, most people would see peace as a positive thing.'

'It is, in a way. But here's my issue: we're going to be married in five months. But without ever having had a fight, how well do we really know each other?'

Maya threw her hands up in the air. 'Gee, I don't know. How could you even contemplate marrying a man who mends broken and hurt animals all day, volunteers his veterinary skills to animal shelters free of charge and rushes home to have dinner with you every night when you've never yelled at each other? It's unthinkable.'

Abby wanted to roll her eyes. 'I'd have thought with your Spanish heritage you'd understand the need for a bit of fire.'

‘Jesus! Stereotype me, why don’t you? I inherited my father’s Spanish looks, but my mother’s Malaysian tranquillity. I’m the perfect blend of exotic and serene.’

Abby smiled. Maya certainly was exotically beautiful. In comparison Abby felt pale and conventional with her brown eyes, freckly complexion and light brown hair.

‘Anyway, Xander and I have never been tested. This article said that studies showed couples who argued occasionally were closer than those who didn’t, because the process of arguing, resolving and forgiving enhanced the couple’s knowledge of one another and supported spiritual and emotional growth. Until that happens, I don’t know if he would scream, throw stuff, bottle it up, go silent, storm out, swear, or hold onto a grudge and plot my death while he smiles at me over the risotto.’

‘So you think that having a fight with Xander will make you closer?’

‘Yes, and I think it will help me to know him better. I want us to see the ugly side of each other.’

Maya pondered this theory, took another sip of wine and nodded. She often reached her highest mental acuity on a punished liver.

‘Hmmm, but couldn’t you achieve this without having an argument, maybe a deep conversation instead?’

Abby needed to sell the concept to Maya. She also had to sell it to herself. ‘Picture this: we’re married, we’ve got kids and suddenly an issue comes up that neither one of us can ignore. Suddenly, BOOM! It’s battle stations. But, we don’t know how to argue because we’ve never done it. He overreacts, I overreact. We’re both idiots. It’s ugly and shameful, and seeing as we’ve never been here before, neither one of us knows how to resolve it. We don’t know how to move through the process towards resolution and forgiveness.’

‘What if you two never have an argument in the entire seventy years you’re married. Are you worrying about something that may never

eventuate?’

Maya’s question stumped Abby. She hadn’t considered a fight *never* eventuating. They both took another spicy wedge and finished their wine.

Eventually, Abby had an answer. ‘Surely, no two people can live seventy years together and not fight, especially while raising kids. Life’s not a sitcom.’

Maya took another wedge. ‘Theoretically, I think you’re onto something. It makes sense, in a bizarre kind of way, but how are you going to achieve it?’

‘That’s the hard part. I’m not sure.’

‘Why don’t you start with the argument article? It’s an innocuous enough. No chance of cancelling a wedding over arguing about arguing.’

‘But how do I bring it up? It’s an odd thing to start a discussion about.’

‘I believe you’ve read an article about it?’

Abby signalled to the bartender. ‘You are a genius, Maya. Care for another wine?’

*

Abby waited until after dinner to tackle the argument argument.

‘Abs, that pasta was delicious. Thank you.’ Xander stood, kissed Abby on the forehead, removed their empty plates and loaded the dishwasher.

She sighed as she watched him in their white kitchen; the reflection of light surrounded him like a full-body halo. He truly was a glorious sight: six-foot-two, broad shoulders, tapered waist with slender hips. He absolutely rocked any piece of clothing he wore, jeans, shorts, a suit, even his bathrobe.

‘Are you okay? You seem lost in thought.’ He shut the dishwasher. She could feel his dark green eyes on her. It was like telepathy between them. She could tell, even from across a crowded room, when he was watching her. Secretly, she loved the thought that, even after two years together, he still felt compelled to steal glances. He truly was her Prince Charming.

So why was she trying to incite an argument? Why would she risk their relationship? Because it was an important test, that’s why. The final test.

‘Abby? Sweetheart?’

‘Huh?’

‘Are you okay? Is something bothering you?’

Now or never. Dig deep. Be brave.

She turned to face him. ‘I read an interesting article today that theorised couples who argued occasionally were closer than those who didn’t.’

Xander raised his eyebrows. ‘Really?’

‘Yep. Apparently the process of arguing, resolving and forgiving enhanced the couple’s knowledge of one another and supported spiritual and emotional growth.’

Xander continued wiping the benches. ‘I guess it depends on whether or not they resolved the argument to mutual satisfaction, the context of the argument and whether or not the act of arguing is part of their regular repertoire.’

Abby had been so used to receiving gentle attention from Xander that she occasionally forgot he was a highly intelligent and critical thinker. Acceptance into a Veterinary Science degree was more difficult than medical or law school. If she’d fallen in love with an ordinary man – like most of the toads she’d dated – she’d be confident of winning any argument. But it could be a different story with Xander.

She tried to conjure up some equally scholarly reply to commence their intellectual volley match. ‘Uh, I guess.’

He continued. ‘I mean, it’s in some people’s nature to argue occasionally. Likewise, some couples’ dynamic requires regular, low intensity arguments. Other couples have the opposite – their dynamic requires habitual arguments because that’s the frequency on which they operate. That’s how they sustain their momentum as a couple.’

Abby stared blankly at Xander as he finished cleaning the bench tops. He was so freaking hot. An intelligent, sexy man doing housework. Was there any greater aphrodisiac?

Oh shit! I’m supposed to be getting into an argument. Fark !

But he wasn’t finished. ‘I guess it also depends on the social context in which they’ve developed into adults. Someone who comes from a family that argues, and knows how to resolve the issue and move on, will be able to apply that skill more successfully than a person who has come from an environment where arguments are not resolved to mutual satisfaction and then form the basis of future arguments.’

She could feel her mouth gaping and she’d forgotten to blink for so long her eyes were dry. Right now she realised this entire argument thing was going to be much harder than she’d first imagined. A simple argument about arguments. Pffft! Not with this fella.

‘What do you think?’ he asked.

‘I think you look incredibly sexy doing housework and I need to do rude things to you right now.’

Although she was disgusted at her pathetic participation in the supposed argument, and would no doubt slap herself around in the morning, she was so turned on that nothing, not even loss of pride, was going to stop her from shagging this bloke senseless.

He threw the dishcloth over his shoulder, moved over and swept Abby off her feet without any effort.

‘Your wish is my command, my lady.’

Prince Charming? For sure.

*

Seven days later, Abby had still not tackled the argument argument. She'd chalked that one up as a dismal failure and needed Maya's wine-induced brilliance again, because her own was faltering. They went to Molly Molloy's after work and nestled in the booth with a glass of Cab Sav and a bowl of spicy wedges, their scarves, beanies, gloves and thick coats piled next to them.

Maya sipped her wine. 'Maybe you can do something really annoying that will provoke an argument.'

'I'm sure I do plenty of annoying things, but he's too kind to mention it.'

'How about ewww things? Female body hair is a turn off, right?'

Abby nodded, a sly grin spread across her face. 'So it's time to throw away my razor?'

Maya nonchalantly waved her spicy wedge in the air. 'And maybe cancel your waxing appointments. Nothing says ewww like a furry bush.'

'So then he'll tell me to get rid of the hair and I can say no because it's my hair and I should be able to do what I want with it and then we can argue.'

Maya nodded and drained her wine glass. 'Exactly.'

'Maya, you are brilliant. I think you need more wine.'

*

Ten days later, Abby opened a bottle of Merlot and set the coffee table for their Friday night 'happy hour at home'. She'd bought marinated olives stuffed with feta and peppers, croquetas, fried chorizo and empanadillas from the local Tapas bar. The gas fire was on because,

even though it was only early winter, she felt the cold more than Xander. And seeing as her unshaved legs and armpits were best displayed in a sexy negligee, she needed the extra heat to prevent permafrost. The three kilos she'd lost in the lead up to the wedding – an obligatory bridal commandment – meant that her tall frame was covered in less meat. Less meat meant less insulation against the cold, and that meant winter sucked. Thank God for a spring wedding.

She dimmed the lights just a touch and lit a few candles to exaggerate the feeling of intimacy while still illuminating the room, because the best way to display her non-waxed muff was during foreplay. She skulled a shot of gin to give her the courage to tackle the body hair argument, and primed her brown shoulder-length hair into something resembling sexy. A quick slick of mascara highlighted her gold-brown eyes and a smudge of red lippie enhanced the 'come hither' look. As sexy as she looked, the thought of his fiancée going all Germaine Greer might just provoke Xander into an argument, and then they could move through the process, make up and continue living happily ever after knowing that they'd passed the ugly argument test. Simple.

'Honey, this looks great.' Xander took off his jacket and flopped down on the sofa. 'I've had a crap day. Coming home to this sanctuary makes all the difference.'

Shit! Now she was about to ruin his entire day, but it was for the greater good – their marriage, their children's security. *Be strong, because relationships are not always about similarities, sometimes they're about differences.*

'Here, have a drink, sweetheart.' She shoved a glass in his hand and drained hers, ready for a refill. The gin hadn't quite kicked in yet, and she needed all the Dutch courage she could muster.

'It's a bit hot in here, don't you think?' He reached for the heater remote control, but thinking quickly, Abby took it out of his hand and kissed him like she was auditioning for a porno.

She was glad when he returned the kiss just as passionately as she had given it. If they had sex early the argument could be finished by bedtime. Also, his kisses still took her breath away.

She undid his shirt and slipped it off over his shoulders, then moved onto his pants. As things got going, he picked her up, laid her down on the enormous couch and undid her silky robe.

‘I like this new lingerie, very sexy.’ His eyes roamed all over her body, elevating her to the status of most delectable female in history.

As his broad hands ran along her hairy shinbone, she watched his reaction closely. Even though his eyes were locked on hers, she detected a slight furrowing of his brow and crinkling of his nose. He’d definitely noticed the hair and wasn’t a fan. Abby was sure she could hear each leg hair snap back into position after his hand had run over it. It was a series of little crackles, like static electricity when taking off a pair of stockings.

Just to top it off, she raised her arms above her head, a sexy surrender to his masculinity, and arched her back, allowing him to slip the negligee off over her head. With a look of a man pleased to have an eager naked woman splayed out in front of him, he admired the view, until his eyes reached her armpits. The armpits she had managed to adorn with fake hair. She’d spent days trying to find the pit wigs, and eventually located them at a magic/gag shop. It was tricky to match the colour to her own hair, but she’d settled on a nice rodent brown which seemed to suit her skin tone and create authenticity. She just hoped the double-sided tape would secure the wigs in position; it would be a disaster if one fell off during a moment of passion.

‘That’s... uh... new?’

Abby tried not to laugh as Xander did his best to hide the revulsion on his face. She could only imagine the war that was raging in his head between what he’d like to say and what he should say. Would he make his true feelings known?

‘I read an article that said increased body hair on women is a sign

of fertility and sexuality. Apparently it increases pheromones and results in hotter-than-ever sex.’ She deserved an Oscar for keeping a straight face while delivering this line. She’d practiced it all day and had burst out laughing and snorting each time she’d said it.

‘Really? Well, that’s...’ He looked as though he was trying to swallow a cow’s testicle in a foodie-type dare. He just couldn’t finish that sentence.

‘And did you know that body hair stores life force energy, so the more hair a person has the more life force they create?’ Abby ran her fingers through her armpit hair and groaned pleasurably. Thank god she’d had some dud lovers in her time before Xander; she’d become an expert at faking pleasure with the toads.

Xander looked like he was about to vomit.

‘But darling, I don’t want to talk anymore.’ She grabbed his face and forced it down to hers. She suctioned onto his lips as though her name was Hoover.

Although he seemed reluctant at first, clearly grossed out by her excessive hair, he surrendered and returned to the passion he’d displayed prior to her ape impersonation.

As he kissed and nibbled her breasts and neck, she whispered in the sultriest voice she could manage, ‘Baby, I want you inside me. Now. Please.’

Eager to gratify his beloved, Xander moved his way down to her panties and gently moved them lower and lower until he had revealed a part of her that was pinker than ever. In fact, it was so pink it made him squint, like a pubic eclipse. He pulled back so fast he fell over in between the sofa and the coffee table.

‘Holy Jesus, Abs! That’s... ummm...’

Abby worked harder than ever to remain both serious and sultry.

‘I did it just for you, baby. Do you like it?’

Fake armpit hair wasn't the only thing she'd found. She'd managed to locate fake pink pubic hair – also known as a merkin – that was so true to life she had to double check it wasn't real hair by plucking some of it and setting it on fire. It smelt of singed polyester, so she was safe.

Once again, she ran her nails through her girl carpet. They snagged a couple of times; it was the 'shagpile' of merkins, great for that authentic 70s look with the 80s twist of fluoro pink. It had taken her a while to glue it on properly, but with the assistance of well positioned mirrors, she'd been successful.

Xander was more than pussy whipped. He was totally and utterly flogged to death by the sight of something that he had treasured, licked and kissed so many times being transformed into a retro porn jungle. Life seemed to leave him; Abby could see his will to live flail.

'What... what's... um... new style?' Xander's stammering was hilarious, but Abby could feel he was on the brink of voicing his opinion. This was not time to break out in hysterics now. She had to maintain the act and deliver the Meryl Streep of performances to carry this off.

'They're pubic hair extensions,' she said. 'Aren't they luxurious?'

'They're something, alright.' His eyebrows looked fractured, kinked in all directions.

'Some believe that stroking the pubic hair adds to a woman's sexual pleasure. You can even tweak it between your finger tips for that extra bit of enjoyment.'

'What?'

She had to look away from his face. It was too priceless.

'I want you to do it, baby. Go on, tweak me.' She laid back and indicated towards her lady rug. 'Tweak me good.'

'What?' His voice was rising now. She was so close. Just a bit further and she was sure they'd have their first argument. Then it

would all be over and she could remove the hairpieces and they'd be happy again.

Xander backed further away, obviously trying to create as much distance between himself and the pink fluoro merkin as possible. Who knew, it may spring to life and attack him. Alternatively, it may even have teeth. It did resemble Animal from *The Muppets*.

'Abby, I need to turn the heat down. It's too hot in here.' He moved further away, looking at her as though she was an alien. Sweat ran down his neck.

'Okay.' She tossed the heater remote control at him. 'But hurry back, I want you to share my new life force.'

Xander seemed torn between wanting to please Abby, and needing to run the hell away from this pubic nightmare. He left the room and came back with two large glasses of water.

'Want some?' He offered one to her. 'I figure under all that hair, you'd be hot.'

This was it. The argument was about to happen.

'You don't like my hair?' she asked.

'It's not that—'

She had to get the argument started; before she had time to back out. 'So what is it then? I can't have pubic hair because you prefer me to pour hot wax on my crotch regularly and rip my pubes out by the roots? It hurts, you know. I only do it to please you, because that's what thoughtful women do – torture their bodies for the sake of aesthetics.'

Xander nodded. He even squinted a little, like he was getting ready for a gun fight in a spaghetti western. 'So it's my fault that you spend a fortune to have someone tear your pubes out of your body, is it?'

Holy shit! This is it! It's actually happening.

'In a way, yes. Yes, it is.' Abby felt herself rise to the occasion. All

the talk of patriarchy in her uni English lit days had stirred her emotions; her inner rebel was reigniting. 'What happens in ten years time, when pube fashion changes and the furry bush is back in style, and I'm left with a vulva balder than Bruce Willis's head?'

Xander winced. 'Can we please not refer to your girlie bits as Bruce Willis?'

'The point is, I can't re-grow that hair. The hair follicle is weakened. That means I might be stuck with a hairless girl cave forever.'

'Are you planning on showing people your bald vulva?'

'No, of course not.'

'Then what does it matter if it's furry or bald?'

Abby was stumped. 'Because... because... I ought to have the choice. It's my body and if I want to trip over my own pubic hair or braid it into pigtails, I should be able to.'

Xander squinted harder. Abby tried to stay strong, because now it was in motion, this argument had to move through the entire process. There was no backing down now.

'I'm not changing my mind.' Abby brushed her pit hairs again. 'I'm keeping them. What do you think of that?'

It was infantile, Abby knew, but she had to make her position known.

Xander's eyebrow twitched, as though he was deciding which way to go; whether to fight or surrender. He swallowed another mouthful of water and eyed Abby with care. 'I think you should keep the hair. In fact, I'd love to see you grow your pubes, especially for the wedding and honeymoon.'

Abby nearly fell off the couch. This wasn't the direction Xander was supposed to take. He was supposed to fight her; denounce the ugliness of body hair on a woman so that she could bite back. 'What?'

'You've got five months. Hair grows at approximately two-and-a-

half centimetres per month, which should give you seven-and-a-half centimetres of armpit hair by our wedding day.'

Abby gasped.

'And what better way to make a statement than by showing off three inches of armpit hair in your strapless wedding dress?'

The visual was horrifying.

'Best of all, between the wedding photos and video, there will be a permanent reminder of your body hair, your new life force, for generations to come.'

Why was he agreeing with her? This wasn't how it was meant to flow at all. Now she'd locked herself into a position she didn't want to be in. She had no intention of growing her body hair, she hated it already. How she longed for smooth armpits and a Bruce Willis vulva.

'I think our future granddaughters will be very proud of your courage to ignore beauty conventions in your stance against patriarchy. Don't you?'

Abby visualised the photos and video, and her future offspring's reaction. Her entire body shuddered.

'I can't wait to see the honeymoon photos either. That big furry bush poking out of your bikini might set a new fashion standard in Hawaii. You'll be known as a pube-ista; the woman who recreated pubic fashion for an entire generation. It'll be up there with the mankini.'

'But... I...' Abby's mind-mouth connection was obliterated. She had nowhere to go. Nothing to say.

'So I support your declaration against the eradication of pubic hair. Long live pubes, that's what I say.' He finished his water and rested his empty glass on the coffee table. It was all up to Abby now; just how far was she going to take this argument?

'Xander... I... um.'" Abby looked at her hair patches. They were

ridiculous. This entire argument was ridiculous. ‘Xander, I need to say something. Remember that article I read about couples who argue?’

‘The one that made you desperate with desire for me?’

‘Yep, that one. Well, I think I took it a little too much to heart.’

Xander gave a knowing smile and nod.

‘I thought I could provoke you into an argument and that it would make us closer. I’m so sorry.’ Abby looked at her future husband. God, how could she have been so naive? ‘I was worried because we never fight. I thought that if we had an argument now, before the wedding, then we’d know each other better, and our relationship would be stronger.’

‘I read the article after you mentioned it.’

‘You did?’

Xander smiled. ‘Could you think of anything to argue about?’

‘No. That’s just it. I had to come up with this stupid hair thing to gross you out so you’d tell me to wax it off, and then I’d tell you that was unfair because if I wanted to look like a wookie I should be able to, and then we’d—’

Xander sat down next to her, put his large hand on her bare shin and gently rubbed the whiskery skin.

‘But of course you didn’t disagree with me.’ Abby took a moment to replay the argument in her mind. ‘You agreed. You... ‘

Xander pulled her close to him and started to laugh.

‘You smart arse! You knew what I was doing all along!’ Abby pulled away.

He was now in hysterics. ‘Like I said, I read the article. I didn’t know exactly what you intended to argue about. I didn’t suspect pubic hair, but it was important to you, so we argued.’

‘You were going to let me grow my hair?’

‘I wasn’t a fan, but who am I to tell a woman what to do with her own body hair? Each to their own.’

Abby stared at her crotch. It was blindingly pink, and furrier than any girl cave had the right to be.

‘So you don’t want me to tweak you?’ Xander was still laughing. ‘Tweak you gooooood?’

Abby sank back into the couch. ‘No. Jesus, if you tweaked me you’d pull the adhesive off my skin. It’d be agony.’

‘Have you given any thought as to how you’re going to remove these?’

‘Shit! No.’ Abby couldn’t even think about that.

‘I guess it’s fortunate that your fiancé has surgical experience. I think I can get these off without causing you too much pain. I’ll just get the horse tranquiliser—’

Abby hit Xander in the shoulder.

‘Just kidding. I’ve got some adhesive bandage remover in the car. I’ll go get it.’

Abby smiled. ‘Give me the keys and I’ll get it.’

‘It’s cold out there. It is winter, you know.’

‘I’ve got all these hair-rugs to keep me warm. Besides, there’s something I need to do.’

Xander gave Abby his keys and she walked out to the driveway, looking skyward and hoping to catch the first star of the night. When she found it she said:

*‘Starlight, star bright,
First star I see tonight,
Wish I may, wish I might,
Have this wish I wish tonight.’*

She scrunched her eyes closed and wished for her life to always be filled with such love and humour, and less pubic hair. She didn't need to wish for Prince Charming anymore; she already had one of those.

ABOUT SARAH BELLE

Sarah Belle started her professional life in the hospitality industry, working in some rough hotels in Melbourne in the late 80s, surrounded by drug dealers, prostitutes, pimps, and undercover police. Tiring of the inherent dangers of her working environment, Sarah completed a business degree and went on to work in the Department of Defence and the recruitment industry, where she met and married the man of her dreams. They have four young sons and live on the beautiful Queensland coast, where Sarah's days are spent being a frazzled mum, uni student, writer, Bikram Yoga devotee, and the only girl in a house of five males.

Connect with Sarah at:

https://www.facebook.com/pages/Sarah-Belle-Author/181235018692696?ref=tn_tnmn

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A FRIEND IN NEED BY LAURA
GREAVES



A FRIEND IN NEED

LAURA GREAVES

‘How many days has it been now?’

Ellie closes one eye and bites her lip as she does the mental arithmetic. ‘Six,’ she says finally. ‘Wait, no. Five. Today is the sixth day, but it’s only’ – she glances at the Dior watch on her slender wrist, which looks incongruously fancy teamed with her wintry Saturday uniform of jeans and boots – ‘one o’clock, so he could still call.’

I take a long sip of my shiraz, buying time as I consider whether there’s a non-soul crushing way to say what I know I have to say to my best friend.

There isn’t.

‘Ellie, he’s not going to call.’ I say it as gently as possible, but the words are still inescapably brutal.

Ellie juts her chin and fixes her green-eyed gaze on the weeds pushing up between the paving stones in my tiny courtyard. She pulls her leather biker jacket tighter around her to protect from the harsh winter wind, which snatches tendrils of hair from her sleek blonde ponytail and sends them dancing around her head. ‘How do you know?’ she says, so quietly I have to strain to hear her over the din emanating from the house. What is it with guys and shouting at sport on TV?

‘Because it’s been a week and—’

‘Five days, Megs. Six if you *must* be technical.’

I manage to suppress an eye roll. Ellie is one of the most intelligent

women I know. And as a Crown Prosecutor, she's hands-down the toughest. Which is why her willful naivety when it comes to flaky guys who aren't fit to lick her briefcase is so unbelievably frustrating.

'Five days or fifty days, if he wanted to see you again he wouldn't have been able to wait five minutes to call you. And you shouldn't spend any longer than that thinking about him. He doesn't deserve your mental energy. Case closed, legal eagle.' *Move over, Judge Judy.*

She laughs at last, but her giggles quickly morph into a groan. 'What am I going to do, Megan? I know Byron was kind of a tool, but I was hoping to take him to the Law Society dinner on Friday. Now I'm dateless.'

'Is that really such an awful prospect, considering the alternative was an evening in the company of a man who named his dog YOLO?'

'That's easy for you to say. You and Chris have this perfect relationship. You can't understand how depressingly few decent prospects there are out there.' She pouts like a toddler.

I shiver at the mention of Chris, and not because of the biting late afternoon cold. It's really too chilly to be perched outside on the low retaining wall, but the alternative – holing up in the living room alongside Chris and his raucous rugby-obsessed mates as they hurl obscenities at the televised match – doesn't exactly appeal. I glance through the open French doors at the gaggle of guys, Chris at their centre. He looks like the same man I fell in love with two years ago, with his messy blonde surfer hair grazing his collar and eyes the piercing grey-blue of the ocean in winter. But 'perfect relationship'? Sure, if watching your boyfriend pull away a little more with each passing day, without having a clue as to why or what to do about it, counts as 'perfect.'

When we first met I liked that Chris was a man of few words – it made a nice change from the incessant chatter of clients at my inner city hair salon. He was strong, sexy, and smart; that he was also the taciturn type only added to his allure. Now his refusal to talk to me – to

even acknowledge the growing distance between us – is driving me to distraction. But Ellie will have to ply me with a bucket of Maltesers and a vat of wine before I'm ready to dive down that particular rabbit hole. And besides, she called this crisis meeting, not me.

'Why not take a friend to the dinner?' I suggest. 'Take the pressure of "being on a date" out of the equation entirely and just have fun with a mate who looks good in a tux.'

She looks at me like I've suddenly sprouted a second head. 'I'm a thirty-year-old single woman, Megs. I don't have single male *mates*. All the unattached guys I know are trying to get into my knickers. Most of the attached ones are, too.'

'Who says he has to be single?'

'Of course he'd have to be single,' Ellie exclaims, as if I've asked the most absurd question in history. 'What man in a relationship is going to get a free pass from his wife or girlfriend to spend the evening with a smoking hot single lawyer at a black tie banquet with an open bar?'

She arches an eyebrow, daring me to contradict her 'smoking hot' comment. As if I'd dare. Ellie was a part-time model while she studied for her law degree; her assessment of her aesthetic attributes is no exaggeration. I can understand why she'd struggle to find a guy happy to be 'just friends' with her.

But on behalf of coupled-up women everywhere, I bristle at Ellie's suggestion we're all possessive and insecure. 'You're saying people in relationships can't have friends of the opposite sex?'

'No, I'm saying people in relationships don't have *single* friends of the opposite sex,' she says pointedly. 'You give them up when you fall in love and retreat into your little couple cocoon. It's just biology.'

This time I can't hide the eye roll. 'That is so not true. I have loads of single male friends.'

'Name one.' Ellie crosses her arms.

'Paul Gates,' I reply without missing a beat.

‘Still seeing that kindergarten teacher he met at Easter.’ She smiles smugly. ‘Next.’

‘Oh.’ Wow, I am seriously out of the loop. Maybe I have been in the cocoon too long.

‘Okay then, Adam Rayburn.’ Clocking her blank expression, I add, ‘From work.’

Ellie tuts. ‘He’s gay and you know it.’

‘He’s definitely single though.’

She shakes her head firmly. ‘Try again.’

‘Um...’ I run through my Facebook friends list in my mind. *Nada*. Turning my attention to the mob of blokes that have taken over my house, I realise the pickings are equally slim. Except... maybe...

‘Rye.’

Ellie sets her own glass of red wine next to her on the wall and turns to give Rye Arnott the once-over. I can tell what she’s thinking: *Really? That guy is single?* With his mop of dark curls and amber-flecked hazel eyes, it’s true that Rye has never been short of female admirers. According to Chris, he’s never been shy about getting to know them either. But in all the time I’ve known him, Rye hasn’t had a serious girlfriend.

‘He’s not your friend,’ Ellie declares at last. ‘He’s Chris’s old housemate.’

‘So?’

‘Spend a lot of time together, do you?’

She has a point. I try to recall the last time I actually saw Rye without Chris being there too, and realise I don’t think I’ve *ever* seen Rye without Chris being there. And yet I do think of him as a friend. He’s got a wicked sense of humour, he always makes the effort to ask me about my day – which is more than I can say for Chris a lot of the time – and he’s just easy to be around. He’s as amiable and upbeat as

Chris is reserved and brooding. He didn't even seem to mind when Chris asked him to move out so that I could move in.

But he evidently doesn't fit Ellie's friend criteria, and she's staring expectantly at me.

'Well... Eric then.'

'Eric who?'

'Eric Ashdown.'

She shoots me a withering look and picks up her wine glass. 'Your brother does not count,' she says, and takes a sip. 'Look, I'm not saying it's a bad thing that you don't have guy friends, Megs. It's just what happens when you meet someone. Spending time with other guys isn't a priority because you're no longer looking for a mate. You don't want to risk temptation, and you don't want your partner to feel threatened. It is a truth universally acknowledged that a woman in possession of a boyfriend does not hang out with available dudes. Same goes for men in relationships and single women, hence my problem.'

She shrugs as if none of this is a big deal, but irritation stirs in my belly and my face feels flushed and warm despite the blustery afternoon. When did this conversation become about me anyway? I lift my gaze to the steel grey sky above us and say a quick prayer for a sudden downpour to put an end to it. We were meant to be talking about Bogan Byron and Ellie's disastrous dating life. Instead, I feel weirdly stung by my best friend's matter-of-fact judgment of my relationship – wait, make that *all* relationships.

Meet someone. Looking for a mate. Risk temptation. She makes it sound like I settled for the first guy to cross my path and could just as easily be lured away by any other.

As for Chris feeling threatened... well, he would actually need to notice that I had an eligible bachelor for a friend before he could have a problem with it.

What bugs me the most about Ellie's black-and-white reckoning,

though, is that she's right. I *don't* have any single male friends. Not anymore. Did I really ditch them as callously as she claims? Or maybe the guys I thought were my mates weren't actually friends at all.

'How about this, Ellie,' I say, reaching for the wine bottle to top off our glasses. 'I'll find a guy friend. A single, *straight* guy friend, and I'll fix you up with him.'

She gives me a long look and there's a definite twinkle in her eye. 'You're serious? You really want to be my wingwoman?'

'I want to be your wingwoman *and* make a new friend,' I say. *And also prove that you don't know everything about me*, I silently add.

'Okay then,' she says. 'But you've only got a week. Go forth and get friending.'

*

'Tell me, Justin. Do you like to watch?'

The thirtysomething man seated in front of me looks sharply into the mirror, his reflection a picture of alarm. I guess I can't blame him; that wasn't the standard banal chitchat most people expect from their hairstylist. But I don't have time for going-anywhere-nice-on-holiday pleasantries. I've got a friend to find and only five days to do it.

I offer what I hope is a reassuring smile as I unfasten the nylon cape around Justin's shoulders and brush away the clipped hairs on the back of his neck. 'TV, I mean. What shows are you watching at the moment?'

He visibly relaxes and I try not to imagine what sort of 'watching' he thought I meant. 'Oh,' he says. 'Well, I'm pretty into *Game of Thrones*.'

Sigh. Chris loves that show too, but I just don't see what's so great about it. There are way too many gratuitous boobs and backsides for my taste. Which I guess is probably *precisely* the appeal.

I love my job for a whole range of reasons – daily scalp massages and the fact that I can come to work with my long wavy hair coloured winter-inspired ice blue without anyone batting an eyelash chief among them. But as I survey my busy salon on the rain-soaked Monday morning after I proposed my little challenge, I realise for the first time what a bonanza of potential guy friend talent it is.

I opened my salon on teeming Castlereagh St, in the heart of Sydney's CBD, hoping to capitalise on the corporate market – ladies and gents who need a quick trim in their lunchbreak or a blow-dry before an important meeting – even though the eye-watering rent could have funded a space twice the size in the suburbs. It's paid off, with a steady stream of customers like Justin occupying the six cutting stations from the moment we open at 7am.

Justin, an IT specialist who works at a nearby bank, comes in like clockwork every four weeks. He doesn't wear a wedding ring, has never mentioned a girlfriend – or a boyfriend – and we always have a good chat. So far, he's ticking all the 'potential new friend' boxes.

He's also cute, with deep brown eyes and a heart-shaped face. Not that his attractiveness is one of *my* requirements, but I know Ellie will be hoping her fix-up is handsome.

Time to seal the friendship deal.

'I love *GoT*. That Daenerys is pretty badarse.' I'm sure I've heard Chris mention her. Friendship is built on shared experiences, I reason. I can be a temporary *GoT* fan. 'It's on tonight, right? Maybe we could hang out and watch it.'

Justin's eyes light up. 'Really?' he says, his voice squeaking a little. 'Definitely! That'd be awesome! I mean, you know, if you want.' He tries to look nonchalant as he follows me to the front counter.

He hands me his credit card and I push a notepad and pen towards him as I process his payment. 'Just jot down your address for me and let me know what to bring,' I say.

Justin duly scribbles his details. 'You know, Megan, I don't really need my hair cut every four weeks,' he says.

I blink, surprised. 'Well, that's okay. You don't need to rebook today. Just call whenever you're ready.'

He smiles shyly. 'What I mean is I come in so regularly because...' He takes a deep breath. 'I like spending time with you. I've been trying to work up the guts to ask you out for months. You're obviously a lot braver than I am.'

My heart sinks. 'Oh, wow. Justin, I'm sorry, I'm not asking you out.'

His cheerful expression falters. 'You're not?'

I shake my head, feeling both callous and foolish at the same time. 'No. I have a boyfriend.' I swear he recoils slightly when I drop the bomb. 'But I really enjoy your company too, and I was hoping we could be friends.'

'Friends...' He turns the word over in his mouth, as though he's never said it before – not to a woman, anyway. 'And your boyfriend's okay with that?'

I stiffen. What is this, the 1950s? 'I don't need my boyfriend to approve my friendships,' I say a little coldly.

Justin suddenly snaps his fingers. 'You know what, I just remembered I have a late meeting today, so I won't be home in time for *Game of Thrones* anyway,' he says. He furrows his brow, trying to look apologetic. 'Sorry, Megan. Another time.'

Then he retrieves his credit card and leaves. *Another time*. Yeah, right. I know I won't see him again, but it's not just losing a client that shocks me. Not five minutes ago, Justin said he likes spending time with me, but as soon as I mentioned the f-word he bolted. I feel bad that he was embarrassed, but I'm also pretty annoyed. If he enjoys my company, why wouldn't he want to be my friend? Do I really have no value beyond being a potential notch on his bedpost? And do *all* guys feel this way?

Maybe Ellie is right. Maybe making a male friend will be impossible.

*

My backside buzzes as I step off the train at Summer Hill into darkness and drizzle. I retrieve my phone from my pocket, hoping it will be Chris calling to say he's waiting outside the station in the car to save me the soggy, cold walk home. It's been a long, bruising day. After the Justin debacle, I tried to platonically pick up two more clients. Marty turned out to be married, and assured me his wife would *not* be okay with him having a female friend, attached or otherwise. Tim, on the other hand, was definitely single and didn't even flinch when I explained I was only interested in his friendship. He seemed like a solid prospect and I was excited – until he texted me a picture of his penis half an hour after leaving the salon.

I peer hopefully at my phone. All I want right now is a cup of tea and a friendly face. It is Chris, but it's a text message, not a call.

Out with the boys. Be home later.

Out with the boys? On a Monday night? When he had them all over to our place two days ago? Even for a party-loving guy like Chris, that's pushing it.

Maybe he just doesn't want to see you, my subconscious chimes in as I trudge up the wet street, passing cars helpfully showering me with icy spray. It's not like the possibility that Chris would prefer to be anywhere but at home with me hasn't occurred to me before. It has – plenty of times, especially since he landed his dream job two months ago. When we met he'd been working as a bartender at a city pub close to the salon; now he is head brewer at a small craft brewery and bar and loving it. But it feels like he's more passionate about beer than he is about us. And he won't talk about it – his default response whenever I try to broach any sort of 'relationship discussion' is a grunt, followed by a swift exit to rugby training or to go meet 'the boys.'

I wish I had someone to talk to about it all. I know I could call Ellie, but she's probably not the best sounding board given her hapless dating history. I manage a bitter little laugh as I realise that what I really need is a man – a male friend to give a guy's perspective on the situation; someone to explain why blokes' behaviour can be so baffling. Justin might have been really helpful, if he wasn't such a baby about being friends with women.

'What I want,' I mutter as I stomp up the path to my front door, fumbling in my bag for my house keys, 'is someone in possession of a penis to tell me what's so bloody difficult about just saying what you mean.'

'Err... I'm not sure I'm the one to help you with that,' a resonant voice responds from the darkness.

A scream rises up in my throat and sticks there, so what comes out is a strangled sort of whimper. My feet seem rooted to the spot as a hulking figure looms out of the shadows and advances towards me. So much for the fight-or-flight response. I guess in my case it's more freeze-and-fret.

'Hey, hey, it's okay,' the shadow-creature says as it flips the porch light switch next to the front door. The weak beam illuminates its face and all my breath comes out in a *whoosh*.

'Sorry Megs,' Rye says sheepishly. He gives my trembling arm a squeeze, and even through the thick tweed of my vintage coat his big hand feels warm and reassuring. 'I didn't mean to scare you. I should've put the light on as soon as I got here.'

'What are you doing here anyway?' I ask when my thudding heartbeat finally slows down enough to allow speech. I slip my key into the lock and push the front door open. Inside, the house is still and frigid. Empty. 'Shouldn't you be out with Chris and the boys?'

Rye frowns. Under the dim glow of the single bulb, his deep-set eyes appear darker and more unknowable than usual. 'Ah... I guess I

got my wires crossed,' he says after a pause. 'I thought we were meeting here.'

I shrug. 'I wouldn't know. I didn't even know Chris was going out tonight.' I stride into the dark house, not bothering to say goodbye to Rye or close the door behind me. Tossing my keys and bag on the hall table, I march up the long hallway and into the kitchen, where I turn on the lights and unscrew the cap from the bottle of shiraz Ellie and I didn't finish on Saturday. *Bugger the tea.*

I've gulped down half a glass before I sense that I'm not alone. Sure enough, I turn to see Rye filling the kitchen doorway, his face uncertain. 'Everything okay, Megan?' he asks gently. 'You don't seem your usual sunny self tonight.'

His words make me pause. *He thinks I'm sunny?* 'That's because it's winter,' I mutter gloomily. 'The coldest, loneliest, most miserable season, when most people are at their coldest, loneliest and most miserable.'

A stricken expression crosses Rye's face – a really handsome face, I have to admit now I'm studying him closely. Ellie could do a lot worse as a date for her law dinner. He looks around him as if seeking some guidance on what to do next, and I realise he's debating whether to stay or leave. I feel a little surge of gratitude. *Bless him.* Most guys would have registered my foul mood and not even ventured into the hallway, my boyfriend among them.

'Sorry Rye,' I say. 'I'm being really rude. I had a frustrating day and I'm feeling a bit... Anyway, I know you need to meet Chris, so it's okay if you want to go. I'm just going to sink the rest of this bottle' – I wave the half-empty shiraz at him – 'and watch some bad TV.'

Suddenly, Rye smiles and those inscrutable eyes are warm and kind. The effect is like spying a patch of blue sky after a week of rain. 'I might stay, if that's all right,' he says, plucking the wine bottle from my grasp. 'I could use a night in. Got another glass?'

He doesn't wait for me to reply, but goes to the cupboard above the

sink and retrieves a glass. It feels strangely intimate to see Rye bustling around my kitchen as though it were his – which I guess it was once upon a time.

As I watch him pour himself a drink, I wonder if I should insist he leaves. I'm hardly likely to be good company, and I know Chris will be annoyed with me for keeping Rye from their boys' night out. But there's only four more days until I have to deliver Ellie a date for her Law Society dinner – a date that is also my friend. And hadn't I just wished for an impartial guy to explain the mysteries of men to me?

Bugger it, I think for the second time in less than five minutes. Why shouldn't I enjoy a glass of wine with Rye? It could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

'What do you feel like watching?'

Rye looks up at me with what appears to be delight in his eyes. 'Your call,' he says, carrying both our glasses through to the living room. He sets them on the coffee table, shrugs off his khaki parka and flops down on the couch. I shed my own coat and sit primly next to him, folding my legs underneath me as I grab the remote.

'*Game of Thrones* is on,' I suggest without enthusiasm.

Rye makes a face. 'I'm not a fan. Too many balls and dudes' bare arses for me.'

I raise an eyebrow. 'What about all the breasts and girl-on-girl action?'

He pretends to ponder this. 'If it's for *artistic* purposes I suppose I can cope with it,' he says seriously.

A genuine guffaw bubbles up from deep inside me. Rye laughs too, and the sound is lovely. A man who doesn't like *Game of Thrones* and has a sense of humour? Friend jackpot.

*

‘Stop it! I can’t breathe!’

I’m doubled over on the sofa, struggling to force air into my lungs to replace the oxygen that keeps escaping as hysterical giggles.

But Rye doesn’t stop. He continues his hilarious impersonation of 80s pop starlet Tiffany as he lip synchs to the *I Think We’re Alone Now* music video we’ve found on some obscure late night cable channel. The likeness is uncanny, right down to the red tea towel he’s tied around his head to mimic her long red hair.

‘Having fun?’

My laughter stops abruptly at the sound of Chris’s voice. I turn to see him leaning against the doorframe, eyes narrowed. Rye freezes mid-routine. ‘G’day mate,’ he says thinly.

‘Hi honey,’ I say, jumping up from the sofa to peck Chris on the lips. ‘Did you have a good night?’

‘Not as good as you two by the looks of it,’ he says stiffly, his gaze sweeping the discarded coats, empty glasses and takeaway containers littering the coffee table.

‘Rye got mixed up about where he was supposed to meet you,’ I say hurriedly. ‘He came here by mistake.’

Chris shoots a sharp glance in Rye’s direction. I follow his gaze and see Rye return serve with a cool, steady glare. Something in his expression has shut down. *What’s this all about?*

‘Oh, well, fair enough,’ Chris says. ‘Thanks for keeping her company, mate.’

‘My pleasure,’ Rye says, his voice low and even.

There’s a loaded pause. I look from Chris to Rye and back again, but neither man is giving anything away.

‘I’m going for a piss,’ Chris says at last, and retreats into the hallway.

I turn to Rye and cross my arms. ‘You want to tell me what that

little display of chest-beating was all about?’

He gives me a long look. Finally, he shrugs. ‘Dunno, Megs. It’s late, he’ll have had a few. Guess he wasn’t expecting to come home and find me here.’

I grit my teeth. I know there’s more to it than that, but of course Rye isn’t going to explain it to me. Because that’s what men do – they swallow their words and their feelings instead of communicating them. Even after four solid hours of talking about everything under the sun – from our favourite TV shows to how much Rye loves working as an electrician to comparing notes on our messed-up relationships with our respective parents to 80s popstar impressions, for goodness sake – somehow I’m still not ‘qualified’ to be treated like Rye’s friend.

He pulls the tea towel off his head, leaving his coffee-coloured curls sticking up at odd angles, and picks up his coat. ‘I’ll see you later.’

I follow Rye down the hall, past the closed bathroom door, behind which I can hear Chris urinating like a racehorse. At the front door, Rye smiles and says, ‘I had fun with you tonight, Megs. Thanks.’ He turns to go.

Before I can think about it, I reach out and grab his arm. ‘Listen, Rye. Could you swing by the salon the next time you’re in the city? I need to talk to you about something.’

His eyes widen in surprise. Behind me, I hear the sound of the toilet flushing. Rye casts a glance over my shoulder, then says, ‘Yeah, sure. I’ll be working in town on Wednesday, actually. Lunchtime okay?’

‘Perfect,’ I say with a smile. Sitting Rye down over a cup of coffee and flat out asking him if he wants to be my friend – and take Ellie to Friday’s Law Society dinner to boot – is far from the organic way I’d hoped to befriend my new male pal, but time is not on my side.

It’s only when Rye has almost reached the street that I think to call out, ‘I had fun too!’ He hesitates for a moment, then disappears into the night.

*

‘There,’ I say triumphantly on Friday afternoon. ‘You’re good to go!’

Ellie casts a critical eye at her reflection, then smiles brightly. ‘You’re a true artist, Megs. What do I owe you?’

‘Please,’ I scoff as I direct a final burst of hairspray at Ellie’s chic up-do for good measure. ‘Best friend rates. Now get home and get your glad rags on. Rye’s picking you up at seven.’

Ellie leaps out of her chair and wraps me in a quick, fierce hug. ‘I still can’t believe you managed to find yourself a friend *and* find me a date in the space of a week. Seriously, how did you manage it?’

I frown, unsure how much I should tell her. To say Rye was lukewarm about the prospect of squiring Ellie to the Law Society dinner is an understatement. I’d basically had to badger him into it.

‘That sounds like my worst nightmare,’ he’d said when I first raised the idea of an evening spent in the company of several hundred lawyers. ‘And I barely even know Ellie.’

‘But you know her a bit,’ I’d persisted. ‘And you have to admit she’s hot.’

An odd look had clouded Rye’s expression when I’d said that. ‘I guess,’ he’d mumbled.

What eventually got him over the line was unexpectedly simple. ‘Ellie’s my friend and you’re my friend, Rye. Do a friend a favour?’ It was the first time I’d ‘defined the friendship’ and somehow it did the trick.

I decide to tell Ellie about the ‘making friends’ part and leave out the badgering. ‘We hung out at my place on Monday night, then we had lunch on Wednesday and then I met him for a quick drink after work last night. So I think that means we are bona fide acquaintances.’

‘I think that means you’re dating,’ Ellie shoots back. ‘You’ve seen him three times in four days? You don’t even spend that much time

with Chris!’

Tell me about it. I’d spent most of my time with Rye laughing wildly at his mad stories and talking about Ellie. I hadn’t yet had a chance to force him to level with me on whatever is going on with Chris.

I poke my tongue out at her. ‘We’re *friends*, Ellie. See? I told you it was possible.’

‘Jury’s still out on that one,’ she says as she heads for the salon door. ‘I can’t promise I’ll keep things strictly friendly, though,’ she says with a wink as she leaves. ‘Rye is hot – bet he looks amazing in a tux.’

And then she’s gone and the salon is uncomfortably quiet. The image of Rye in a sharp suit lingers in my mind’s eye just a moment too long. I shake my head to chase the picture away. Rye is my *friend* and friends don’t fantasise about each other in formalwear.

I glance at the clock. Not quite five. I usually stay open until six-thirty on Fridays to catch the ‘need a blow-dry before after-work drinks’ crowd, but it’s been a strange and exhausting week. I need some downtime. The city workers will survive.

For once it’s not a surprise to find the house empty when I arrive home. Friday night is one of the busiest for the brewery’s bar and bottle shop, and Chris won’t be home until late. And I’m glad. I’m actually relishing the prospect of some time to myself; a few precious hours with no oppressive silences or grunted ‘conversation’. A whole evening without seeing my boyfriend recoil every time I touch him. I need time to figure out whether I have the energy to keep fighting for a relationship I’m not sure should be saved. I just don’t know if it’s worth it anymore.

I’m just settling into the sofa with a cup of tea in hand when there’s a knock at the door. With a scowl, I heave myself to my feet and stamp down the hall to answer it. My heart sinks when I see Rye standing on the doorstep in a dinner suit. *Damn.* Ellie was right; he looks unbelievable in a tux.

‘Rye! What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be picking Ellie up in an hour. Did you think you were meeting here?’

Rye doesn’t answer my question. Instead, he says, ‘I have to tell you something’ and pushes past me into the house.

He’s pacing the living room by the time I catch up with him. ‘Rye, what is it? Are you okay?’

‘I can’t be your friend, Megan. I’m sorry.’

His words are like a punch in the stomach, but that’s nothing compared to the pained expression on his face.

‘Monday night,’ Rye goes on. ‘Remember?’

I nod, confused. ‘Of course. I had a blast with you.’

‘Me too, but I didn’t come here to see you that night. I came to see Chris.’

‘I know. You were supposed to go out but you got the wrong—’

Rye shakes his head sharply. ‘No. There was no boys’ night. I came here to have it out with Chris.’

An icy chill unfurls between my shoulder blades and begins to creep up the back of my neck. ‘Tell me,’ I whisper, though all at once I know what he’s going to say.

‘He’s cheating on you, Megs. He’s been having it off with some waitress at the brewery virtually since he started working there.’ His voice is rough, angry.

‘That’s where he was on Monday night?’

Rye nods, watching me closely.

In an instant, it all makes sense. The late nights at work. The all-too-frequent boys’ nights. The sudden distance between Chris and me. His refusal to communicate. I can’t believe it didn’t occur to me sooner.

But maybe it did. Maybe I just didn’t want to admit my relationship

wasn't right for me anymore. And the bizarre thing is, I don't even feel angry. Sad, yes. Embarrassed, sure. But maybe while I've been waiting for Chris to admit that our relationship is over, I've been getting over him.

'How long have you known about this?'

'A few weeks. He promised me he'd end it, and I believed him. Told him I'd give him til last weekend and then I'd tell you myself. I wanted to tell you when I was here last Saturday. I'm sorry.'

Rye shakes his head and stares at the floor. He looks truly disgusted with himself, and I know I should feel disgusted with him, too. But I don't.

'So that's why you can't be my friend?' I say softly. 'Because you think you let me down?'

He looks up then, his gaze boring into mine. 'Not just that. I can't be your friend because I don't have... *friendly* feelings for you.'

'What are you trying to say, Rye?'

He sighs. 'I want to be more than friends. Much more. That's why I've always kept my distance. Being around you and not being able to be with you, standing by while Chris treats you so badly... it's hard.' He rakes a hand through his dark hair. 'But spending time with you this week has been so amazing, and I told myself I could be happy just being your friend. Maybe I even thought I could support you when Chris finally came clean.'

Rye chuckles when he sees my sharp look. 'But I realised, of course, how that would look,' he says bitterly. He takes a step towards me and holds out his hands, palms face up in a gesture of surrender. 'Like I was just waiting for your life to fall apart so I could make a move.'

I reach for his hand and he flinches at my touch. 'I would never think that,' I say, and I mean it. 'I know you're not that man, Rye. We *can* be friends. I want that.'

'I don't,' he says. 'I'm sorry, but I want *you*. I know how selfish that

sounds, but there it is. I want to be with you and I know that can't happen.'

'So you're just going to walk away?' The thought of not having Rye in my life makes panic rise up in my throat like bile. How can the prospect of living without someone who was like part of the furniture just a week ago fill me with such dread?

He shakes his head sadly and pulls his hand from mine. 'What choice do I have, Megs?' He turns to go. 'I hope you can forgive me,' he says, without looking back.

Suddenly I realise it's not just the idea of losing a mate that makes me feel sick to my stomach. It's the thought of losing *Rye*, maybe forever. It's not a risk I'm willing to take. I know with total certainty that I couldn't bear it.

'My feelings for you aren't strictly *friendly* either.' The words come out all in a rush.

Rye stills, but doesn't turn around. 'Please don't say that if you don't mean it.'

'I mean it. I'm going to need some time,' I say to his broad back. 'I'm not making any promises, and I need to take things *very* slowly. But I do mean it, Rye.'

He turns then, and the unabashed hope in his hazel eyes shakes my soul. 'I can give you time, Megs. I've waited two years. What's a little longer?'

'You don't have to wait to kiss me, though.'

The hope is replaced by hunger as Rye gathers me up in one swift motion and presses his lips to mine in a long, stupefying kiss that steals my breath and makes my toes tingle. It is *not* a 'friendly' kiss.

At last, I pull away. 'Right, now go and take my best friend to dinner and call me in the morning.'

ABOUT LAURA GREAVES

Laura Greaves is the author of two romantic comedy novels, *Be My Baby* and *The Ex-Factor*, both published by Penguin Random House. Her first non-fiction book, *Incredible Dog Journeys*, will be published by PRH in December 2016. She's also a (very slow) marathon runner, a 1920s obsessive, a committed crazy dog lady and an *Anne of Green Gables* tragic. Laura lives in Sydney with her family and two incorrigible pooches.

Find out more at www.lauragreaves.com and www.facebook.com/lauragreaveswritesbooks.

You can also find Laura on Twitter (@Laura_Greaves) and Instagram (@lauragreavesauthor).

THE REJECT CLUB BY CARLA CARUSO



THE REJECT CLUB

CARLA CARUSO

– *June (Australia)* –

‘What did you say was in this goop again?’ Maya Kitson asked her friend, Cherrie, as she stared at her reflection in the mirror.

Maya’s short, dark fringe and shoulder-length waves had been swept off her face and the only seemingly identifiable feature amid a sea of radioactive-looking orange was her grey-blue eyes.

‘Turmeric, honey and natural yoghurt,’ Cherrie chirped, running a hand over her freshly shorn white-blonde head — the meditation devotee had recently gone from waist-length locks to virtually zilch on a whim, without even shedding a tear. She was Zen like that.

Cherrie prattled on. ‘Indian brides have been using turmeric beauty masks for eons. Makes your skin glow like you’ve just had tantric sex.’

‘If you say so.’ Maya wrinkled her nose. ‘Cause it *smells* like the Moroccan chickpea and haloumi bake I’m about to pop in the oven.’

The dish was another recipe from her new fave cookbook, Annabel Crabb’s *Special Delivery*, which appealed to the wannabe vegetarian in her.

The doorbell chimed as some of the orangey substance dripped off Maya’s ski-jump (according to her late nanna) nose and onto her indigo blouse. *Sugar*. She reached for a wet wipe and madly scrubbed at the fabric. ‘I’ll get it! I owe Tallena a fright.’

As Cherrie serenely smiled, Maya pushed past, enjoying the creaks and sighs of her nan’s cosy beachfront cottage on the way to the door.

With its rattling windows and marine-themed décor, untouched since her nanna had gone, Maya sometimes imagined herself on a boat. Or a dinghy amid the eye of a storm in this chilly weather.

It was also the perfect place to hibernate part-time every week over winter and work on her seemingly never-to-be-finished screenplay. Maya's mum and big sister — both practical public servants — didn't seem to care if the weekender crumbled into the ocean. In fact, it'd probably make them feel less guilty if it did, freeing them up to promptly put the block on the market for property developers to tussle over. But Maya adored the place.

The hour's drive south from Adelaide was ideal for untangling plot kinks and relaxing her mind, too. And once in the waterside town of Goolwa, she didn't have the usual tempting distractions outside her front door like she did at her semi-detached house in inner-city Unley — umpteen cafés and shops namely. No distractions, that was, until her fellow singleton girlfriends crashed there that Friday night.

Maya opened the wooden front door and got a fright of her own when she clocked her friend, along with a blast of cold air. 'What the hell are you wearing?'

Tallena swished her side ponytail, streaked blonde and brown, over one shoulder. 'I should be asking what the hell is on your face.'

Maya grimaced. 'A turmeric beauty mask. Cherrie's idea. Your turn.'

Tallena put a hand on her hip. She wore a silver zip-front mini dress and thigh-high boots, both trimmed with metallic purple. 'I'm meant to be a sexy intergalactic space girl. I came straight from work; an early shift thankfully. Some promotion for a new drop called Mars Water.'

In between trying to get her acting career off the ground, Tallena worked for a promotional modelling agency.

She strutted past Maya, plucking a bottle of the red, alcopop Mars

Water from her tote. ‘Cool digs. So where’s your grandma’s famous Jacuzzi?’

Maya’s nan, who’d had more partners and jobs than she’d cooked dinners, wasn’t the *usual* kind of grandmother. But Maya understood Nanna’s craziness more than she understood her mum and sister’s conservatism.

‘It’s on the back deck,’ she replied hesitantly. ‘Why?’

Tallena plonked the bottle on the wood dining table and leant to unzip a boot. ‘It’s the start of winter. Gotta make use of it while we still can! I wore my bikinis underneath and all.’

Maya raised her eyebrows, her forehead constrained by the mask. ‘You want to go in *now*? In this freezing weather?’

Tallena shrugged a shoulder. ‘Why not? How long before dinner’s ready?’

‘About twenty minutes, once I put it in the oven.’

‘Perfect. We can warm up before we eat.’

Cherrie emerged from the bathroom with the mask bowl, her face now the same scary orange as Maya’s. ‘We’re jumping in the spa? Excellent. That’ll be just enough time for your beauty mask to work its magic, too, Tal.’

Super. It was how, minutes later, Maya found herself in the hot tub with her best friends, staring over the white picket back fence towards the beach. Her face felt like it was going to crack like cement and the tips of her ears were numb from the cold. Changing into a bikini with the mask on had also been an art-form. Admittedly, the view of the sun fading into the ocean, in a blaze of pink, orange and purple, made it all worthwhile.

‘Say cheese,’ Tallena commanded, whipping her phone off the spa deck. Maya had no choice but to lean in, amid the bubbles, and smile as the camera flashed. As though she wanted photographic evidence of

that moment. Unfortunately, Tallena was a hard person to say no to without looking uptight.

Tallena next reached for the fizzy Mars Water and began filling up plastic flutes. ‘So what are we celebrating or commiserating over tonight?’

Cherrie widened hazel eyes. ‘Commiserating. I had a dud Tinder date. The guy couldn’t stop staring at my scalp. Don’t think he could get over the fact that I looked different from my profile pic.’

‘No wonder the poor bloke was confused with your eighties Sinéad ‘do,’ Tallena teased. ‘I still don’t know why you shaved off your head-warming locks at the start of winter.’

Cherrie shrugged pale, freckled shoulders. ‘It just felt right.’

Tallena glugged from her drink. ‘Well, I’m in your camp. I’m drowning my sorrows after an absolute shocker of a review for that local play I did.’ She stared at Maya, which only made her squirm. ‘Your bloody arty-farty website panned it. And me.’

‘It’s not *my* website,’ Maya hedged. ‘I just work there.’

Film reviews and interviews were her writerly specialty — the perfect part-time job to pay the bills in between trying to take on Hollywood.

She grabbed her flute. ‘Anyway, did they really slam you or the play itself? I recall Showgirl Sal saying in her review that the play’s concept was innovative — you know, telling the story solely through phone conversations, emails etcetera — but the *script* and direction let it down.’

Tallena gazed at Maya, her violet eyes seeming even more vivid amid the radioactive face gunk. ‘You were there opening night. What did you think?’

Cue more squirming on Maya’s behalf. ‘I thought *you* were fabulous, end of story.’ She gulped a mouthful of the vodka-based drink, the liquid roaring down her throat. ‘Anyway, I should be the last

person to say anything about anyone else's script. Remember that first screenplay I wrote about those city-slickers who are secretly fairies? It didn't even make the long-list of that film contest I was excited about. The feedback was,' she made air quotes with her fingers, 'that "rarely did lighter fare contain fantasy elements" and "fairies tended to feel inherently juvenile, so it fell between age ranges."' "

Cherrie pulled a face. 'Fairy-haters.'

'They did make some good points,' Maya conceded. 'Which I'll be keeping in mind while working on the new script down here. But anyway, I'm still an official member of tonight's Reject Club.'

Tallena winced. 'Don't call us *that*. It sounds so... loser-ish. We should be called, I don't know, the Sparkle Club or something.'

Cherrie giggled. 'Darn, forgot to bring my diamante tiara and stuffed unicorn.'

Tallena rolled her eyes but was quickly distracted, pointing towards the horizon. 'Ooh, check him out! Now we know why Maya's really burrowing away here over winter.'

Maya turned to follow her friend's gaze and her stomach immediately dipped. A twenty-something guy, with a mop of brown curls and scruffy five o'clock shadow, was running along the shoreline. His all-black tracksuit highlighted his muscular build and the fact that fitness was obviously a passion. *Of course* she'd noticed him before; she wasn't blind. But too often she'd been distracted from her life goals by boys, and other shiny things. She couldn't allow herself to lose focus this time. There had to be a reason she was subsisting on part-time wages.

With impeccable timing, the oven beeped. Maya shot out of the water and reached for her towel, the evening chill settling around her shoulders. 'Yeah, right. Like winter's the best time for a fling when your skin's all sallow and you're soft around the middle. I'm off to lose the face muck and plate up dinner.'

Tallena only responded by arching an orange-stained eyebrow.

*

The next morning, Maya waited for a butterscotch latte at the front counter of the local beach kiosk. Making the trip there had fast become a daily ritual. She figured a *few* distractions were okay while away from the city.

The weatherboard kiosk, aptly named Waves, was just a short walk from the cottage and had recently been ‘schoozed’ up to appeal to weekend-trippers from the city, with top-notch seafood and wine now on the menu and a blow-in chef. But Maya was glad there was still starfish and netting decorating one wall and sand dusting the floorboards, like when she used to visit with her nan.

She’d seized the chance for some alone time while Tallena was still in bed and Cherrie was busy saluting the sun. Alone time, that was, not counting the other café-goers. Being a Saturday morning, the place was jammed.

‘One butterscotch latte,’ a redhead barista with earlobe gauges chirruped from the counter.

Maya stepped up to grab her order and said thanks. Warming her hands on the yellow mug, she scanned the kiosk for a spare seat. *Score*. A table by the window had just been vacated in the far corner. She wove her way towards it, victoriously plonking onto the rattan chair. Savouring the first sip of her sugary latte, she gazed out the window, the sea view from the clifftop taking her breath away as usual.

‘Excuse me?’

Maya looked up at the sound of the deep voice and stared into ocean-blue eyes. Eyes that were much bluer than her murky, grey-tinged ones and were framed by thick, dark eyebrows that should have been caterpillar-like but perfectly complemented their owner’s face.

The runner from the beach. Who somehow looked even better up-

close, in a dusky-blue knit and faded black jeans

No. Yes. No. Yes. NO!

‘Do you mind sharing a table?’ he carried on. ‘Seems my local’s been invaded.’

‘Sure. It’s a free country.’ *Urgh*, that came out wrong. She forced herself to extend a hand, her silver charm bracelet jangling. ‘I’m Maya.’

‘Garrett.’

His long, tanned fingers felt strong, slightly roughened, in hers, like he spent a lot of time waxing his surfboard. A sure sign they’d have nothing in common. Much as she loved the coastal setting, she couldn’t even tread water in a pool’s deep end.

He settled into the opposite seat with his own mug, flipping sun-lightened curls out of his eyes. ‘What do you reckon they put in these coffees? I’m addicted to the peppermint mocha. Not that I’d ever want my mates in the city to find out.’

Maya took a careful sip of her latte. ‘Thought you said this was your local.’

Garrett shot her an easy smile, which did an even better job of warming up her insides than the latte. Obviously she’d sucked in too much invigorating, salty air. ‘It’s my local now. I’ve been working at a canoe hire and tour place down here the past year. Needed a sea change.’ An indefinable expression flitted across his face, hinting Garrett had mysterious depths just like the deep blue itself. Maybe they were both escaping something. ‘What about you? Are you new to the area? I’ve seen you around before.’

So he’d noticed her, too! She shifted in her seat, telling herself that indicated nothing more than how tiny the town was.

‘I’m only here part-time actually,’ she answered. ‘I’ve been staying at my late grandma’s place half the week. Sounds cliché, but I’m working on a screenplay. My second go at one. Thought some peace and quiet down here would help inspire the muse.’

Garrett's eyes crinkled at the corners. A little too sexily. 'Wow, how cool... Hey, did your grandma have, like, short blonde hair and wear colourful sarongs and beads and stuff? I reckon I know her place. A little sandstone cottage, right?' Maya nodded as he continued. 'She was one cool lady. She used to paint on the beach and was always up for a chat.'

Tears spiking at her eyes, Maya traced the rim of her mug with a finger. 'Yep, that'd be her.'

Garrett sipped from his mocha and kindly changed the topic. 'So tell me about your screenplay.'

'Oh... really?' Warmth flooded Maya's cheeks. She was terrible at verbalising her ideas to other people and far better at just writing stuff. So she rushed through the basics. 'Um, well, it's a movie. About a young woman who goes on this historic walking tour but falls behind and gets lost. She stops at an old manor, needing help with directions back, but quickly discovers she's, in fact, travelled back in time. To the era of the manor she's stopped at. Naturally, she meets a guy from the past and they fall in love, which presents a dilemma about whether to go back to her old life or not.' Oh dear, mentioning the love bit was embarrassing. Maya wrapped her hands around her mug and shrugged. 'I'm still not sure exactly what happens in the end.'

Rather than guffawing into his mocha, Garrett was nodding, his eyes earnest. 'Sounds intriguing. I gather you're a history buff?'

'Well, I do love history. Research. Old things, like my nan's cottage. But the truth is I'm not very good at writing in that solemn, descriptive style that suits historical pieces. So putting a modern-day character in the past — as in, the time travel — means the story can still have a humorous, fast-paced feel and complements my voice.'

Garrett shook his head, his blue eyes electric. 'Wish I had the creative brain to come up with that sort of thing. Half your luck.' The moment was broken as he glanced down at his black sports watch. 'Too bad I can't travel back in time so we could talk more. I'm due at work.'

He gulped down the rest of his mocha and got to his feet. ‘But we’ll have to catch up again.’

‘We should,’ Maya returned shyly.

So much for driving eighty-plus kilometres to avoid distractions.

Garrett paused to gesture at the inside of her left wrist. ‘Nice ink, by the way.’

Maya glanced down at the tiny tattoo, depicting the silhouettes of three seagulls flying. The trio were a part of her now; she barely noticed them. ‘Thanks.’ She twisted her mouth. ‘My nan used to call me “Kaija”. Apparently it means “seagull” in Latvian.’

Whether it was because she was flighty, noisy or a scavenger, always on the hunt for beach curios or story inspiration, she was unsure.

Garrett gifted her another easy smile. ‘Sounds like you belong out here.’

She didn’t tell him ‘Maya’ meant ‘water’ in Arabic, too.

– *July* –

Tallena had been in a funny mood ever since she marched into the cottage for another catch-up. The vibe was totally different to last time. Maya knew it wasn’t just the storm brewing outside, mucking with the atmosphere.

As the trio dined on spaghetti lentilaise — another Annabel Crabb recipe Maya had given a whirl — Tallena finally came out with it.

Setting down her fork, she eyed Maya during a lull in conversation, ever the drama queen. ‘It was you.’

‘Sorry? Oh... I didn’t let off. It’s just the lentil smell.’

A glimmer of a smile crept onto Tallena’s lips before her gaze pierced Maya’s. ‘Not the lentils. That nasty Showgirl Sal review. I know you covered for her that night.’

Maya's fresh forkful of spaghetti hovered at her lips. Noiselessly, she put it down, biding her time. 'Excuse me?'

Tallena threw down her napkin while Cherrie glanced nervously between them from the far end of the table. 'Don't play dumb with me. I spied Sally and her stupid fire engine-red hair at a bar last night. After I'd had a few, I went up to her and cursed her for ripping me to shreds in that review. Then she told me it was *you* who'd written that piece; that she'd been ill that night but they'd still used her byline to appeal to her usual readership. I couldn't believe it. How could you do that to me? I thought we were best friends!'

Goosies that were in no way related to the winter chill lined Maya's arms. Mentally, she called Sally every name under the sun for spilling the beans to Tallena. 'Like I tried to tell you before,' Maya began carefully, 'it was the script, the direction, I felt didn't work. Not you. Your talents were wasted in that play. Plus, the editor later "massaged" my words, so they matched Sal's snarky tone. I'd never be that harsh about a project of yours.'

Not giving an inch, Tallena's eyes glinted like ice shards. 'The play didn't even finish its season, not helped by that review! Bet I lost other job opportunities, too. You poisoned the water.' Tallena slammed her palm on the table. 'And you *lied* to me.'

Maya shook her head, growing weary of Tallena's prima donna act, despite her own guilt. 'What? You mean to tell me you drove eighty-odd kilometres just to lay it on me and ruin my night? You haven't heard of a phone?'

Probably imagining herself in a movie, Tallena levelled her gaze. 'No, I came here because I'm not a coward. I prefer to look people in the eye when I stick the boot in.'

Maya blew out a burst of frustrated air. 'You want to talk about making other people look bad? How about when you put that pic of us in the spa, wearing next to nothing — with orange gunk on our faces — on Facebook? *Without* our permission. Even if it's innocent, pictures of

Jacuzzis make people think of *Jersey Shore* and unprotected sex, you know.'

Cherrie, unhelpfully, remained silent as Tallena leapt to her feet. 'OMG, get over yourself, precious!' She reached for her black leather handbag, shoving the strap over her shoulder. 'I'm going to the pub. You know what the problem with hanging around rejects is? *Real* rejects? They try to bring you down with them. Just because Hollywood hasn't come calling you yet, don't take it out on me.'

'C'mon, calm down. The weather's about to turn,' Maya attempted. Things had speedily got out of hand.

Tallena shot her a subzero look. 'It's not far and I can run.'

As the front door slammed shut, Cherrie scrambled to her feet, too, her expression slightly sheepish. 'Um, I might head off as well, if that's okay. I met a guy at singles yoga and he's not far away in Maslin Beach. I can beat the storm if I jump in my car now. You know I'm not good in a space when there's negative energy in the air...'

Cherrie *had* always been as dependable as a cat.

Maya resignedly waved off her friend. 'Good for you meeting someone. Go.'

All alone again, Maya began clearing away the half-finished plates as the wind howled outside. What a dud of a night. It had gone about as well as her screenplay had lately. She really hadn't meant any harm by Tallena with the review. Her words *had* been twisted. Still, maybe there was something in that saying, 'Those who can't, criticise those who can.'

Maya dumped the last of the dinnerware in the sink as the lights ominously flickered. Then the room was plunged into darkness. *Shit*. Just when she thought the horror night couldn't get any worse... She hoped like hell it was just a fuse.

Wrapping her cream cardigan tighter around her, she ducked outdoors to check the fuse box. A glance towards the horizon revealed

dark, menacing clouds poised overhead like bloated water balloons, and below, waves thrashing against the shore.

Shuffling down the narrow side of the cottage, Maya opened the fuse box and gritted her teeth. All the fuse switches were 'on'. Nothing unusual there. She hurried out onto the street, looking around at the nearby houses; the few that weren't empty holiday homes anyway. Their windows were gloomy.

It was officially a blackout.

And she was all alone at her dead grandma's cottage in Woop Woop, with no idea where any candles or matches were stowed away. If they were at all. From memory, her mobile phone, with its torchlight, was almost flat, too.

Why oh why hadn't she at least waved hello to the few neighbours she had, rather than just holing herself away to write like a hermit, takeaway coffees and beach walks aside? She could hardly front up on anyone's doorstep now, demanding help. But who knew how long the blackout would last?

Rain began thundering down like she really was starring in a Tallena-led movie. Her hair was plastered to her forehead and her clothes drenched as she sprinted to the back door. At least Tallena was smart going to the pub, where there was likely a generator.

Fuck, fuck, fuckityfuck. The door had blown shut, locking itself. Crouching down, Maya scrambled for the spare key under the barbecue. Why didn't her nan's cottage have bigger eaves? Key finally found, she stood to slot it in the hole but it slipped from her wet fingers. An ear-piercing wail of frustration escaped her lips.

'Maya?'

She thought she'd imagined hearing her name shouted over the rain, until it was repeated. She turned towards the sound and saw Garrett holding a red umbrella on the other side of the fence, like her very own *Storm Boy*. They'd bumped into each other a few times at the

kiosk since their first ‘official’ meeting and had shared tables and chatted some more, but she’d never spoken to him outside those walls. ‘Til now.

‘You okay?’ he continued.

She burst into tears, the salty drops melding with the rain.

*

It was Garrett’s bright idea to toast marshmallows on the oven’s gas cooktop later that night. Once Maya had dried her eyes, located tea lights and matches, and changed into fresh clothes.

Garrett, apparently, had been on the beach attempting to get storm pics for the canoe business’s blog before the front hit. His timing had been a little off.

As he held a skewered marshmallow over the flame, Maya glanced his way, dredging up some courage. ‘So... I’ve told you my sorry tale about tonight. Now’s your turn to tell me why you made the sea change.’

He’d only skirted around the issue before. A flash of lightning illuminated Garrett’s face as he raked a hand through his curls. ‘You really want to know?’

Did she? She was alone in a dark house, at the back of beyond, with a guy who could well be on the run from the law.

Yet she didn’t feel afraid.

She shifted her weight to the other foot, nodding.

He handed her the skewer, the marshmallow suitably singed, and spiked another one for toasting. ‘All right.’ Staring into the flames, he let out a breath. ‘So I was married before. To a woman named Kelli.’

Jealousy stabbed at Maya’s gut from out of nowhere. ‘Okay.’ She took a bite of the gooey marshmallow to get herself under control.

‘We ... we met at uni, doing commerce degrees. I actually worked in finance in Adelaide, though it feels a world away now.’

‘Huh,’ Maya whispered, mentally willing him to go on.

‘Um, life was good, you know. We were in love, became Mr and Mrs, bought a house, travelled, all that ... Then we decided to have kids.’ Garrett rubbed his nose, his eyes now oceans of sadness. ‘Unfortunately, Kelli lost our son eight months into the pregnancy. Little Zac. Though she still had to deliver him.’ Garrett’s jaw twitched. ‘He’d be three by now. Everything changed after that. Guess I said all the wrong things about trying again and maybe I reminded Kelli too much of everything we’d lost. Our marriage finally broke down last year and, well, a change of scenery just seemed the best for me.’

Maya rested her skewer on a nearby plate and gingerly reached up to touch Garrett’s broad shoulder. The electricity in the air seemed to channel right through her hand and his fuzzy grey knit to his frame beneath. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Garrett ducked his head. ‘Well... you *did* want to hear my sad tale.’

‘And thanks for trusting me enough to share it,’ Maya breathed, moving to take her hand off his shoulder again. But her wrist was inadvertently tugged back. ‘Oh, god, sorry! My gondola’s stuck. To your jumper.’

Garrett’s eyebrows lifted. ‘Your gondola?’

‘On my charm bracelet,’ Maya explained. ‘I went backpacking around Europe and got a charm in every country I visited. The gondola, naturally, represents Italy.’

Moving carefully, Garrett put down his skewer and turned off the flame. Though, he may as well have turned it right up. His gaze slowly travelled from her eyes down to her lips. Staying there.

‘Maybe, seeing as we’re stuck together, we should...’

He didn’t have to finish the sentence. Maya’s breath hitched, and her heart pounded away like the surf. Of course, the romance of the

occasion hadn't been lost on her either. And it sounded like they both needed a new lease on life. So she gave in as temptation came knocking.

On her tiptoes, she leant forwards, inhaling his oceanic cologne, and savoured the moment as his lips clashed against hers. He tasted like salt, rain... and the future.

Lucky they had the place all to themselves.

– August –

Maya hummed along to Jimmy Cliff's *I Can See Clearly Now* as she sped along the freeway in her soft-top Suzuki Vitara. Almond blossoms en-route and the turquoise-blue of the sky signalled winter was on the way out and spring, woo-hoo, was near.

She glanced in her rear-view mirror while changing lanes, the sight of her coordinated teal suitcases jutting up behind making her smile. Maya had thrown caution to the wind, chucking in her part-time job, and was on her way to make her move to Goolwa permanent. She was more her nan than she was her conservative mum and sister, after all.

She'd once read an interview with *Entourage* screenwriter Cliff Dorfman whose advice to upcoming writers was not to give yourself a safety net, or you'd use it. Still, she was happy to have at least secured a casual gig at the kiosk in between following her dreams.

Rather than a distraction, Garrett had proved an inspiration for her writing already. Just like he hadn't been everything he'd first seemed when they met, she'd changed tack and decided the love interest in her time-travel story wouldn't be either. Instead of actually being from the past, a series of events would just make him seem like he was to the heroine. And then he has to keep up the ruse to keep the heroine hanging around and to try to garner some future tourism interest in his rundown manor. Much hilarity ensues and, naturally, love wins the day.

As had friendship in Maya's real life.

She'd since patched things up with Tallena. Her friend's rage, as was typical, had quickly simmered out. It helped that Tallena had met an indie director at the pub during the storm, which had landed her a role in his upcoming Adelaide film — also starring one of the Hemsworth brothers, who was after some indie cred. Generously, she'd also offered to flick Maya's screenplay under her new director friend's nose.

While Maya wasn't holding her breath that anything would happen, she was glad things were amicable between them again. On the proviso Tallena didn't tag her in any more embarrassing Facebook photos! Actually, once Maya settled in, Tallena and Cherrie were driving down for another catch-up that weekend.

But first...

She turned off the freeway, winding down her window to breathe in the fresh, ocean-scented air and began zigzagging through familiar country lanes. At last, she pulled into the beach cottage's driveway, gravel crunching under her tyres. Garrett, helping with her move, was already out on the doorstep, his eyes shining blue like the sea.

Unable to help grinning from ear to ear, Maya waved and reached for her car door handle. Maybe instead of them having suffered rejections in the past, divorce and otherwise, they'd actually just been redirected to something else. Something better. And now winter was nearly over, the time was ripe for a fresh start.

Cherrie's skin-brightening turmeric face mask

INGREDIENTS

1 teaspoon of turmeric
1 teaspoon of honey
1 teaspoon of milk or natural yoghurt

METHOD

Put the turmeric in a small bowl (your breakfast one will suffice). Add

in the honey and milk/yogurt. Stir, ensuring the paste stays firm, so it'll stick to your cleansed, makeup-free skin.

Apply the mask evenly all over your face. (Be careful what glad-rags you're wearing as the turmeric can stain, so you don't want it dripping onto your fave blouse à la Maya! It can sting the eyes if slathered too close, too...)

Let the mask dry on your skin for about 20 minutes (a dip in the Jacuzzi in the meantime, optional). Then wash it off with cool water. It can leave a yellowish tinge on your skin, so it's best to do it in the evening when you're not planning a night out. The colour will fade by morning.

Repeat the treatment over a few days using any leftover, refrigerated ingredients. And for maintenance, apply the mask every few weeks, according to your complexion's needs!

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, in between writing romantic comedy novels (sometimes with a touch of cosy mystery), she plays mum to twin lads Alessio and Sebastian. Her books include the *Astonvale* rom-com mystery series (kicking off with *A Pretty Mess*), *Catch of the Day*, *Starcrossed*, and *Cityglitter*. She's also an editor of the Romance Writers of Australia journal, *Hearts Talk*, and writes a monthly column for the Australian Romance Readers Association. Plus, she's obsessed with running, horoscopes, fashion, trashy TV, and cats. Visit www.carlacaruso.com.au, 'Carla Caruso Author' on Facebook, @CarlaCaruso79 on Twitter, or her blog: www.theunitalianwife.com.

THE GETAWAY BY VANESSA
STUBBS



THE GETAWAY

VANESSA STUBBS

Dominique pressed her fingertips up against the glass and pulled them away in shock. The landscape was icy; a frozen forest, desolate and wild. The black road snaked through the trees, the tyres squealing on the corners to find traction. A needle of fear worked through her. She hadn't realised their week in a luxury Tasmanian lodge would be this isolated. She'd wanted Vanuatu but Ricky had been adamant. He'd been overseas so much it had been weeks since they'd spent any proper time together.

He grunted beside her as he struggled with the gear stick. At least he'd stopped complaining about not getting the white Audi. He'd actually used the word 'camouflage' when he was complaining to the rental car manager who'd had the audacity to only have a blue Volvo on offer. Something about privacy and being able to just get away with his wife in the middle of nowhere. Why camouflaging with the bleak surrounds had anything to do with it, she had no idea. Despite the illogical nature of Ricky's argument, the manager had looked crestfallen. No one ever wanted to upset Ricky Peters. Of course, the guy mentioned the last goal Ricky had scored in the England match, Ricky's ego was stroked and an autograph was exchanged. How Ricky managed to go from arsehole to adored one in seconds, she would never understand.

'Cold?' He reached over and touched her bare arm. She shivered.

'We could have been swimming right now,' she said, careful to add a lilt of playfulness to her tone so he didn't take it the wrong way.

He adjusted the heating with one sleek, leather-gloved hand, smiling suggestively. 'Just wait 'til we get there. I'll have you warmed up soon enough, baby.'

'They'd better sell some serious cashmere at the gift shop,' she joked, rubbing the gooseflesh on her arms. She felt a blast of warm air on her face and closed her eyes. She tried to relax but her feet were cramping with the cold. What were they going to do for five days in the middle of nowhere in this freezing place? There'd been talk of a romantic getaway for weeks but the truth was that for the past six months they hadn't been in the same house for more than a few days. And during those rare times at home Ricky had media commitments and training. When they Skyped long distance there was always mention of time together, just for them. She'd been craving this for so long, building it up in her head but now they were here nerves flew about inside her like trapped moths.

There was a skid of tyres and Dominique's eyes flew open. Ricky's arms were locked straight. The car slid sideways and then stopped at an angle across the road. Dominique's heart thudded loudly into the silence. A deer stood in front of them, its eyes black with fear and shock. Time seemed suspended. Dominique stared into the animal's eyes. Her breathing felt shallow and the sound of it filled the car.

'Run', she mouthed silently. *Run*. And it did.

'Fucking hell, nearly killed us.' Ricky hit the steering wheel with the palm of his hand. 'And you thought I was being an arsehole with the Audi but the brakes on that wouldn't have locked like this thing.'

Dominique pressed her hand to her chest. 'At least we didn't kill it.' She sat up straight, senses alert. She took off her seatbelt.

'What're you doing?' he said.

She opened the door and felt the ice-sting of the wind on her bare arms and face. It was snowing. 'Just checking it's okay.'

'It's an animal. And it's snowing. You'll freeze. Get back in.'

The road was deserted. Heavy, grey clouds sat low over the spindly trees. She felt her stomach roll with worry and a strange feeling she couldn't place. She hurried back to the car's warmth.

'I have no idea what a snow storm looks like but I'm pretty sure it's that.' She pointed to the bank of weather on the horizon. 'Maybe we should have got chains for the wheels.'

'We'll be fine,' said Ricky, his jaw tensing and his fingers flexing impatiently on the wheel.

That was the thing about Ricky. Everything always was fine. He had a way of making life work for him. Making people work for him. Maybe it was just his confidence. She'd been married to him two years and in that time he'd never exhibited any self-doubt. She, who questioned herself constantly, marvelled at this. She strapped herself into the car and tried to relax. The narrow road began to ascend again. They drove in silence for a while and the trees thickened around them. The air darkened.

'Are you sure we've gone the right way?' she said, trying to mask the panic stretching across her chest. 'I thought the guy said it was only about an hour and a half. It's been longer, hasn't it?'

'Won't be long now. ' He didn't look at her. He took off his sunglasses and placed them carefully in the tray near the gear stick. He rounded a hairpin bend with such speed that she was flattened against the car door.

'Please, could you slow down a bit? We can't see what's coming.'

He took his foot off the accelerator, his voice laced with frustration. 'I'm just trying to get us there before dark, so you don't panic.'

She held her tongue.

'It's going to be at the bottom of this mountain,' he said and she believed him, even though she knew he didn't really know that. Dominique pressed her hands between her thighs to warm her fingers. It's okay, she told herself. It's going to be lovely. There'll be red wine

and a fireplace waiting for us. We'll actually be able to connect properly. No internet. No distractions. Maybe the tension between us will go away.

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The lodge glowed in the distance like a nativity scene. She hugged herself with relief. She leaned over to kiss his cheek.

‘I’m thinking an earthy shiraz and a cheese platter,’ he said, his eyes crinkling in the way she loved.

‘And afterwards, a hot bath. Did we get the one with the outdoor Jacuzzi spa thing in the end?’

He shot her a look that said, ‘What do you think, baby?’ and she laughed, feeling her heart lighten for the first time in days. Her mood buoyed further when they raced through the icy wind into the warm cocoon of the lodge. A fire raged in the elegant lounge and a hostess appeared asking for drink orders while the porters set up their chalet. They sat by the fire and drank mulled wine from richly ornamented goblets while Ricky fed her slabs of runny brie. They were so warm; so far from that lonely, desolate landscape. She chastised herself for her earlier negativity. It was all an adventure. Wasn’t that why she’d married Ricky? He was never going to be the solid, dedicated husband in the suburbs. His energy was too great to be contained. But he was here, now, with her. And it felt like no one else existed when all his focus was on her. He ran his fingers along her back, shoulder tip to shoulder tip, and she shivered with pleasure.

‘Ready for that hot bath about now?’

She nodded and took his hand, smoothed his tanned skin with her fingers. This was what their relationship needed. She loved him. She did. He hadn’t always been so distant. They’d met in a book shop, both buying cook books for their mothers. There was such warmth, such tenderness there at the beginning, as well as spark. And they had been through so much together over the years. She had felt sobs wrack his

body as he wept at his mother's funeral only eight months after that first meeting. That was the Ricky she'd fallen in love with. There was no resentment, no anger. He had let her in. He had always promised her the world, even before he'd been selected for the Australian team. What he didn't seem to understand was that she already had it. She had him. But somehow, the bigger he became, the more things they acquired, the smaller her world had become. There was a way she hoped might expand their world again; might take them back to the beginning, when things were good. She just had to find the right time to raise it.

It was dark outside and the snow was falling diagonally, the wind a soft roar in the pines. Banks of ice had collected at the entrance of the lodge. Dominique felt the inadequacy of her shoes as they took in freezing water, squelching through the slush. Her bare hand found Ricky's gloved one. They were breathless as the porter led them into their chalet. It was beautiful. A fire roared and candles flickered softly on the coffee table. A wall of windows looked onto snow-covered forest. There was a bottle of champagne in a silver bucket and red roses adorned the room. She should have gotten used to this, but she never did. She took off her wet shoes and socks and wriggled her toes into the plush carpet.

Ricky tipped the guy and Dominique poured champagne. She padded through the chalet, running her fingertips over the smooth, polished surfaces and the fine linen on the bed. She found the outside spa steaming into the air, an infinity edge overlooking the pristine forest.

His arms locked around her waist from behind. 'Let's get drunk and go swimming,' he said.

'It must be zero degrees.'

He nuzzled into her neck and she felt her body respond. 'We won't feel it,' he said, taking the glass of champagne from her hand and tipping his head back to drink it.

They moved to the fire and ate roasted almonds while they enjoyed the the rest of the champagne. They talked about what was happening with the team, which WAGs had had plastic surgery and the architecture of the room they sat in. Sometimes she wondered what real marriages were like, when you saw each other all the time. When you moved beyond the niceties. Her head felt pleasantly light, her body numb.

She stripped off behind the heavy glass door and felt him run his hands over her bare hips. She glanced back at him with a cheeky look and pulled open the door. The cold snatched her breath and she whooped into the freezing air. The water was scalding and she submerged herself up to her chin, her whole body tingling. She giggled as he joined her, wrapping her body close.

‘I feel like one of those snow monkeys in Japan,’ she said, running her fingers through her hair and curling her arms around his neck. ‘Should we have a baby?’

His expression changed, his strong brow creasing in the middle, his shoulders tensing beneath her.

‘Sorry,’ she gushed. ‘I don’t know where that came from.’ She was obviously more drunk than she realised.

Relief smoothed his features.

‘But can we maybe talk?’ she said, her heart beating fast.

He shook his head. ‘Isn’t that what we’ve been doing for the past...’ He checked the Rolex on his wrist. ‘Six hours?’

‘No, I mean, *talk* talk.’ She kept her voice light and ran her fingers down his arm. ‘I mean, we don’t have to talk right this second but...’

He moved to the other side of the spa and she felt indignation burn in her chest. The strength of the feeling took her by surprise. This is what always happened. She was always apologising for trying to get closer. How had it gotten this bad? When had he stopped letting her

in? At what point had she started blaming herself? She laughed nervously. 'Is that a no, then? To talking and a baby?'

His voice was loud in the dark. 'Really? Really? You're going to do this now? What do you want from me? I've brought you to the most romantic place. You're always on about how I'm not romantic enough.'

I never say that, she thought. *I wouldn't dare*. 'All I want to do is talk,' she said, ignoring the churning in her gut. 'Just talk about where we're going. Do we want a baby? Are we ready? Are we happy? I just want to... connect with you, baby.' She felt tears prick her eyes and she brushed them away, frustrated with herself.

He rushed towards her through the water then, and for a second she felt relief. But he grabbed her elbow with a force that made her clamp her jaw and tense her whole body.

His voice was low. 'I'll connect with you. Is that what you want? What you're so desperate for?' He pressed his body against hers until all the air was squeezed out of her lungs.

Her heart felt as though it had become too swollen for her chest. She squeezed her eyes closed and tried to breathe. She was stupid for thinking this would be different. 'Please, Ricky. I didn't mean...'

He pushed himself away from her and scraped his fingers down his face. 'This is what you do to me, Dom. You make me into the baddie. I'm just trying to be everything you want. I mean, look at where we are.'

It's not about where we are, she thought. There was nothing she could say now, she knew. He was on the precipice of one of his rages. She pinched the tops of her thighs hard under the water until they hurt. Why couldn't she just have had fun? Kept her mouth shut. Why did she have to go and spoil things?

'Sorry, I just—'

He stood up, steam billowing from his body like an angry God. 'I'm starving. I'm getting room service.' He picked up both towels and went

inside.

Bastard, she thought. *Punishing. Always punishing.* He was like a child. Why was she kidding herself that they could have one together? She pushed the distress to the bottom of her belly and bolted into the chalet. She ran to the master bathroom and stood shivering under the shower until her tears had been washed away.

*

The forest glowed in the soft morning sun. Icicles danced in the trees like delicate prisms of light. She had expected it to be bleak and dull but the world outside looked enchanted. She felt the heavy blanket of sadness lift and she tiptoed out of the bedroom. The fire had burned out overnight and Ricky was asleep on the lounge, an empty bottle of red wine on the coffee table and the scraps of dinner on a plate. The sport channel droned quietly from the flatscreen TV. She dressed quickly. She wasn't going to be here when he woke with a hangover.

It felt like she had on every piece of clothing she'd packed. It felt good to be cocooned against the smarting cold, against the smarting in her chest. She followed the path through ankle-deep snow to the main lodge. The aroma of roasting coffee and bacon warmed the air. She was beginning to salivate when she heard a noise to her right. There was a flash of hind leg as a deer disappeared into the pines. The track forked up towards the lodge or out into the woods. She read the sign.

'Winter Wonderland Walk. Ten minutes return.' She pushed back against the shard of fear that pierced under her ribs. The anger she'd held close to her body all night, alone in bed, blossomed into determination. Coffee could wait.

The track had already been used this morning and she followed in the footprints of the other walkers. Snow laced the branches overhead like a magical canopy. She was breathless by the time the track turned into a wooden walkway beside a rambling stream. The smell of pinecones and soil filled her nostrils and she breathed deeply. Ricky

could spend the whole holiday getting wasted and watching sport, she was going to walk. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been this close to nature. This alone in the wild. There was a flurry of movement and a grey rabbit hopped through the scrub in front of her. She laughed. No, not alone. She picked up a handful of snow and squeezed it until it hardened into ice. She walked further and the landscape opened to a clearing. In the middle stood the deer. Its head was bent and it looked up but then returned to its meal. *It's not frightened*, she thought.

She left the track and gasped as she sunk deep into the snow. She walked several more steps, then yelped as a sharp pain shot through her calf. The deer startled at the sound and fled. She limped back to the track and inspected her leg. There must've been a branch hidden under the snow. The denim of her jeans had protected her but her ankle was exposed. The gash was superficial but there was a lot of blood. She looked around and felt her heart begin to lurch in panic. She tried to stay calm. She must be close to the lodge, she'd been walking for a while and it was a round trip. She wrapped her scarf around her ankle, wincing a little in despair as the pale grey mohair stained red. When had she become such a materialistic wimp? She stood and braced herself against the pain. It wasn't long before she smelt the wood fire smoke from the lodge. She reached the entrance just as a group of guests were leaving. They saw her limping and rushed inside to get help.

She eased herself onto the wooden bench on the verandah and put her leg up. She felt dizzy and she pressed her palms into her eye sockets. Her hands felt like ice blocks.

'I'm Cal.'

She was looking into the face of a man in beanie and a t-shirt. 'Aren't you cold?' she asked, her own teeth chattering.

'Here, come inside and we'll take a look at that,' he said, helping her up off the bench and guiding her through the foyer.

The hostess she recognised from the night before was at her side on the lounge with a glass of water. 'Mrs Peters, shall I get your husband?'

Dominique shook her head and took a sip of the water. The last thing she wanted was the Ricky Show, his false sympathy, but mostly, his atonement for last night. 'No, it's fine, thank you. I'll be fine.'

The man's brow furrowed. 'I'll need to clean and bandage this.' He took some alcohol swabs out of a medical kit.

'Are you a doctor?'

He took off his beanie, unleashing a mop of wavy hair. 'Studied medicine for a few years. Dropped out to come and work in the middle of nowhere and patch up hikers' wounds.' His face creased into a lazy smile. It was a face that had seen the elements. It gave him a warmth that made her feel like she knew him already.

'Sorry, was it Cal?' She gasped as he pressed the swab onto the wound. She stuck out her hand. 'I'm Dominique.'

'Are you from around here, Dominique?'

She laughed. She wasn't quite sure why. Maybe because she felt like such an alien in this place. She couldn't go on a ten-minute walk without injuring herself. Her clothing was pitifully inadequate. She felt totally out of her depth.

'No, Sydney. Apartment by the beach, so quite the opposite.'

'Must be nice to come up into the mountains. Bit of an adventure, eh? We didn't expect it to put on such a snowfall for you. Last night was the biggest we've had in years.'

'It's beautiful. As you can see, I couldn't resist a stroll in it before breakfast.' She shook her head.

'Did you slip?'

'No, I went off the track and there must've been something sharp under the snow. Stupid city girl.'

His eyes crinkled in amusement. 'Well, we can't always stay on the

track, can we?’

She caught the cheekiness in his tone and inspected him closer. He was of that indeterminate age between thirty and forty. There was a boyishness to him and yet his hands were rough, the skin creased and calloused. She returned his smile. ‘No, really, how are you in a t-shirt in this weather?’

‘Don’t worry, I put on a scarf when I go trekking.’ He was teasing her.

‘You wouldn’t have been a very good doctor, you know. You’re not allowed to flirt with the patients.’

His eyes twinkled as they met hers. ‘Aren’t I?’

She became acutely aware of his touch as he wrapped her ankle. His energy was so calm, so solid. He would have been a very good doctor. She was about to tell him this when he spoke.

‘You know, I’m much better at leading tours into the wilderness. Maybe if you join one I can show you how to avoid injury.’

‘You can’t tease patients either,’ she said.

Cal was about to respond when he looked up. She heard Ricky’s voice before she saw him. The irritating thing about her husband was that he never looked hungover. She knew he’d probably still be drunk from the night before but his dark hair was smooth and his clothes were crisp.

‘What the hell happened? Geez babe, I can’t let you go anywhere, can I?’ He gestured to the hostess. ‘Can I get coffees in here?’ The woman nodded and Dominique cringed. Why did he always have to order people around?

‘Nothing too bad,’ said Cal, standing up and packing away the medical kit. She searched his face for signs of adoration as he addressed Ricky, but found none.

Ricky put on his blokey tone; the one he used to buddy up with

other men. 'She likes to play the damsel in distress, my Dom. And how can you resist a face like that, huh?'

Dominique felt a surge of anger and she bit the inside of her lip hard. Sometimes he treated her like she wasn't even there, like she was an object to be possessed and discarded at his will.

Cal's mouth flattened into a line and he patted her ankle. 'A model patient.'

Her eyes met his and something passed between them that made everything go quiet. It was fleeting but the feeling lingered inside her like a song as she hobbled into the breakfast buffet and watched Ricky flirt with a pretty brunette waitress.

Ricky didn't want to go walking. He wanted massages, booze and sex. She obliged, trying to let go of her anger, trying to accept that this was just who he was. He was used to everyone doing what he wanted. He exercised for his job; this was his holiday. And having hot oil rubbed on her back and drinking red wine with slow cooked lamb for lunch wasn't the worst thing to endure, was it? But when he pushed away his plate and breathed in her ear all the things he wanted to do to her, she felt her stomach turn. She was full, she said. She just needed some air. She'd meet him back at the chalet in a little while. He put on his sulky face and flirted extra hard with the waitress when she came to offer them coffee.

The snow had melted in the midday sun. Dominique studied the map of walking tracks around the property. There was a boardwalk around the perimeter that took 15 minutes. She knew she probably shouldn't with her wound but she couldn't explain it, she needed to feel the cold air on her cheeks.

'I hope you're not planning on walking any of those tracks.'

She turned to see Cal carrying a toolbox. He nodded towards her bandaged leg. She raised an eyebrow. 'And what if I was?'

He shrugged. 'Well, with a face like that, how could I refuse you?'

He was mocking Ricky and she felt a spring of joy open inside her. 'How good are you with a hammer?' he asked.

She laughed. 'A what?'

He held up his toolbox. 'The roads are closed because of the snow but I've got permission to go through. Some of the walking track signs were damaged in the snow storm.' He shrugged. 'I might need some assistance.'

She laughed again. Who was this guy who wasn't intimidated by her husband? Who thought she could use a hammer? She looked about for validation, for Ricky, but found only the cool wind on her cheek and the crunch of snow underfoot. She felt a surge of adrenalin spike her system as she made up her mind. 'Okay, sure.'

They drove in silence for a while. The ute smelt like wet animal and the road was bumpy but the sun slanted in the window and Dominique relaxed into its warmth. 'I never do this kind of thing,' she said.

'What kind of thing?'

'Go on car rides into the wilderness with strangers. Ricky would be —' She stopped herself. Ricky would be what? Angry? Jealous? He didn't care what she did when he was overseas doing God knows what with God knows who. Why did she care so much?

'I know who he is,' said Cal. 'Dad's a big soccer fan. Not really my thing.'

'You don't like him, do you?' It was only after the words came out that she realised how intimate and forthcoming she was being with him.

He smiled out of the corner of his mouth but didn't respond.

The truck crested a hill and a lake appeared, nestled into the landscape like a coin, catching the light. Dominique gasped. 'Wow. I had no idea this was up here.'

'Glad you came now?'

‘You mean I don’t have to hammer up sign posts?’

He chuckled and shrugged. ‘Just thought you might like to see what’s really here, you know, beyond all the luxury.’

Beyond all the luxury. She looked at his open face and felt moved by him. She felt seen. He couldn’t possibly know what she’d come from to be Ricky Peters’ wife but it felt like he did and it didn’t matter. She smiled and opened the door. The air was still and fresh. She breathed deeply. He led her up a narrow track to a lookout. The lake spread before them, glassy and vast, reaching into the landscape with shining fingers.

He leaned into the railing. ‘In summer this is crawling with hikers. It’s closed now. We’re the only humans within ten kilometres.’ His words made her body tingle.

He looked at her. ‘Your husband’s right, you know. You are beautiful. But he’ll never see you like this, will he?’

She shivered but her body felt warm, flush with emotion suddenly. ‘Like what?’

He kicked at a clump of snow and lowered his gaze. ‘It’s not really my place.’

She moved closer. ‘No, tell me.’

She followed his gaze as a flock of birds settled on the water. She knew what he meant. Her whole body was at ease here. She wasn’t on tiptoes, she wasn’t scanning her words to choose the right ones. She wasn’t scared.

He shook his head. ‘It’s silly, sorry. I shouldn’t—’

She closed the gap between them. His breath made patterns in the air. She looked into his eyes and where she was used to seeing hardness, she saw openness, vulnerability. She drew his body close and raised her face to kiss him. He tasted clean, like melting snow. His hair was rough against her cheek. It didn’t feel wrong.. It felt simple. It felt real. And when they looked into each other’s eyes, she didn’t say sorry.

‘I—‘

‘Don’t. It’s okay,’ she said, squeezing his hand.

‘Why do you stay with him if he makes you so unhappy?’

Her foot found a tuft of snow and she kicked it. ‘We were in love, once.’ It sounded so tragic saying it in the past tense and her throat constricted. ‘I think I’m still in love with the person he used to be. I can’t let go of the hope that he might still be in there. Every time I try to find that person, he punishes me.’ But it was more than that, she knew. He had changed over the years and she had too. She was afraid to face the person she had become. Dependent, needy, weak.

She saw herself then, in an embrace with a stranger, running like a coward from her unhappy marriage and she felt hot shame flush her cheeks. He was a stranger but he also felt known to her. He was the one she’d promised she’d never end up with. No direction, drifting along. The kind of men her mother always fell for.

She shook her head and took a step back, averting her eyes. ‘I should get back.’ Now she felt sorry. It was all so quick. Maybe the cold had gone to her head. She rubbed her temples. She could feel his eyes on her and she squirmed.

The trip back took longer than she expected. She didn’t know what to say. She didn’t know what she was doing. He didn’t press her about Ricky but instead talked about his life at the lodge. He’d been there a year, lived in bunk bed accommodation with the other staff, ate in the dining room every night before the guests arrived and got the leftovers for dessert. The more he talked the more her head buzzed with confusion. Her husband was yelling and rushing towards them as they pulled in front of the lodge but the crunch of tires on snow drowned him out. He opened the car door before she could. She thought he was angry at her for going with Cal but his words were saying something else.

‘Where the hell have you been? We’ve got to get back. I’ve got a helicopter coming in an hour while the snow holds off. Go pack your

stuff.'

Her body stiffened. 'What?'

He sighed with exasperation. 'Pete and Tally have been caught up in some doping scandal. None of it true, of course. But as captain I need to be there. They're having a press conference first thing tomorrow.'

Cal got out of the truck and moved cautiously behind Ricky.

'But we just got here.'

He grabbed her arm. 'Well, now we're going.'

She knew he didn't really have to go back. He was running. Again. From her. From them. From himself. It would never change. A baby wouldn't change things. Her heart wrenched with the loss of something she hadn't even known she'd wanted so badly. And then she saw it. It wasn't just her that was weak; it was him. Over the years he had closed up and hardened. She had been mistaking his tolerance of her for love. She wrestled her arm free. 'I don't want to leave yet,' she said, stumbling backwards.

His expression was stony. 'What, so you're just going to stay here? You hate the cold.'

She met his gaze and held it. She felt something waver deep inside but she fought it.

He laughed and then the laughter went dry. 'Are you forgetting the prenup, babe?' He kicked at the snow and pointed a finger in her face. 'If you don't get on this fucking helicopter in an hour, it's over. See how you cope without me. See what it feels like having to work for a change. Maybe your mum can teach you a thing or two about scrubbing toilets for a living.'

Sadness washed over her and she hung her head, the ache in her chest moving up into her throat. He had always been so kind to her mum. Their deep affection for their mothers had been the first

connection they'd ever made. It was part of their origin story. This was the lowest blow he could have dealt her.

She shook her head. 'It was never about the money. Not in the beginning. You know that.' Her voice was a whisper. She raised her head and looked into his eyes. 'Or maybe you've forgotten. I was there at the beginning, remember? I'm always trying to get us back there, to when things were good. To when you saw me. To when our lifestyle wasn't the only thing we had in common.'

She looked into his eyes, deep brown with flecks of green, and for a moment she thought she saw recognition. Softness. Sadness, even. Her heart sped in her chest. Maybe this was it. Maybe nearly losing her was what he needed. But then she saw the familiar flash of annoyance skew his features. 'I don't have time for this, woman.'

She thought she would dissolve with disappointment but instead her whole body tensed up, muscle by muscle. How had it taken her so long to see that the man she'd loved was gone? 'No, you never do have the time, Ricky.' The anger that had skirted her edges for so long coalesced inside her. She was sick of being made to feel like she was nothing. She was sick of being empty. All the things they owned, and none of them filled her. None of them touched upon the richness she'd just shared with Cal in the freezing cold in the middle of nowhere. But the funny thing was it didn't feel like nowhere anymore. It felt like standing here, her teeth chattering and her feet damp, she was finally where she needed to be. She bent down, very slowly and picked up some snow. It stung her skin but she didn't care. She watched Ricky's face as she packed it into a hard, icy ball.

'What the fuck are you doing?' he said, his teeth bared.

She straightened and threw it. It hit Ricky square between the eyes. The laughter billowed out of her as she watched him step backwards and splutter, wiping his face with his arm. She glanced at Cal, who was wide-eyed and still. She laughed harder. There was an edge of hysteria that she couldn't suppress. She didn't want to. She felt free. She wasn't

scared of him anymore. But mostly, she wasn't scared of herself. She'd grown up in the country. Not a cold place, like this but a wide, hot, open land. When her father left they'd had to sell the farm. Her mother had worked as a cleaner in the wealthier homes in town to feed her and put her through school. When had she become ashamed of her past? When had she become so weak?

‘What am I doing Ricky? I’m humiliating you just like you’ve humiliated me time and time again, and I’ve had enough.’

He swivelled behind to point at Cal. ‘Who the hell is this guy anyway? Has he got something to do with this?’

She laughed and shook her head. ‘You have absolutely no right. After all your affairs.’

He smiled and she saw how much he was enjoying this. How much he thought he’d still win. ‘You think you’re having some big realisation about your life but you have nothing without me. I’ve closed the villa’s account. How are you going to get back? Where are you going to stay?’

He was doing what he always did. Roping her back in. Frightening her. But as the wind roared in the trees above and the snow flakes collected on her lashes, she realised she wanted to stay right here.

Her eyes met Cal’s. They were clear and cool and she could see all the way into him, like sunlight through ice. ‘You know what Ricky? I’ve heard they’ve got pretty comfy bunk beds here.’

And she turned and walked off into the snow.

ABOUT VANESSA STUBBS

Vanessa Stubbs is a journalist and author. She’s spent more than a decade as a features and entertainment reporter, writing about style, travel, food, health, relationships and celebrity. She’s also worked as a news reporter and medical reporter. She’s written for *The*

Daily Telegraph and *Sunday Telegraph*, *mXNewspaper*, *Sunday Style* and *Mamamia*. Her first novel, *Star Attraction*, is published by Penguin Random House. She lives in Sydney with her husband and daughter. Connect with Vanessa on Twitter: @stubbsvs

BAD THINGS COME IN THREES
BY BELINDA WILLIAMS



BAD THINGS COME IN THREES

BELINDA WILLIAMS

‘Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me.’ Out of sheer desperation I turned the key in the ignition again although I knew it would be futile. The car didn’t even register a pulse this time. On my previous attempts the engine had at least choked out a strangled cough and the dash lights had flashed momentarily. Now the car was silent, like it was no longer talking to me.

‘No, Bessie, no,’ I begged, because despite the hysteria setting in it was completely normal to be having a conversation with my car. ‘Don’t give up on me. *Please.*’

I gripped the steering wheel tighter, clinging to a shred of hope that my reliable Bessie wouldn’t fail me. ‘You can’t stop working now,’ I informed her. ‘We’ve been through too much together and you can’t desert me. Not after Grant, and now this... this *setback* at work. I need you.’

I turned the key again, certain my little pep talk would do the trick, like it always had in the past. This was how our relationship worked. She was all vintage charm and creaking hinges and required lots of love and adoration to stay on the road. Adoration I usually heaped on her in large dollops — and at considerable expense. But the last six months? Not so much. I’d been too busy distracting myself with work.

Bessie didn’t respond. I brought my palms down hard on the steering wheel in frustration, like I was attempting chest compressions on a dying man.

Bessie remained silent, unmoved by my desperation. With a cry of

dismay I shoved open the door and stepped out of the car. The frigid winter wind brutally slapped my face. The multi-level car park was a wind tunnel at the best of times, but this latest mid-winter cold front was something else.

I turned back to the car feeling too betrayed to worry about my numb cheeks. ‘Why, Bessie? Why?’ I demanded. ‘It’s not all about you, you know.’

‘It certainly looks like it’s all about her, if you ask me.’

I squealed and spun around in the direction of an amused male voice, clutching my chest as if I was playing the lead in a pantomime.

The owner of the voice strolled toward me. He was either unaware or choosing graciously to ignore my tendency for the dramatic. I dropped my hands from my chest and shoved them in my pockets because my fingers were going stiff from the cold. I went to open my mouth, but discovered my jaw was frozen in place.

The guy — all right, *man*; he was too sophisticated to be just some guy — stopped near my car. He let out a low whistle, which the howling wind caught and threw wildly around the walls of the car park so it echoed around us.

‘I’ve been wondering who owned this car,’ he said, looking at Bessie’s silver exterior, and not me.

It was just as well his eyes were on my car, because I was staring. And my jaw wasn’t frozen in place after all. My mouth now hung open, slack with surprise at this stranger’s appearance.

He was good looking. There was no getting past that. His tailored navy suit stretched across broad shoulders suggesting a physique that was lithe rather than sturdy. But that wouldn’t stop a girl in her tracks in our office. Well-presented guys in suits were part of the job description.

No, this tall, dark, handsome man had something of the gentleman about him, with his dark brown hair swept away from his forehead in a

subtle wave. The same way Bessie captivated passersby with her yesteryear beauty, this man could have stepped out of a 1940's film.

‘Is she yours? Not your boyfriend’s?’

‘She’s mine,’ I said, finally finding my voice. It came out the same way a six year old might state ownership of her favourite toy.

He grinned and turned to face me, focusing the striking intensity of his blue eyes on me.

I sucked in a sharp breath, but quickly covered it with a forced cough. *Paul Newman*, I thought without meaning to. Or a dark-haired version, anyway. He had that same irreverent twinkle the movie star great had made a career out of.

Or maybe the perpetually flickering fluorescent car park lights were doing it?

He nodded at the car, acting like I wasn’t some socially stunted grown woman who had only managed to utter two words in his presence. ‘Of course she’s yours,’ he agreed. ‘I was only joking. I can tell.’

‘How can you tell?’ I asked, suddenly suspicious of him now I’d had a chance to process his looks. I was acutely aware I was a lone female standing in a near empty car park late on a Tuesday night when most sane people would be at home watching bad reality television.

‘You wouldn’t be talking to her like that if she wasn’t yours,’ he said, oblivious to my concern.

‘I could be talking to her if I was trying to break into her,’ I told him, doing my best to surreptitiously eye the nearest exits in case I needed to sprint for them.

‘Ah, see, there you go again. You called the car “her.” If you were a car thief, you wouldn’t personalise her.’

‘I might,’ I hedged, deciding the emergency exit about twenty metres to my left was probably the safest bet to make a quick exit.

‘You’re pretty well-dressed for a car thief.’ This was the first indication he’d even noticed me. He was still focused on Bessie and reached forward to run a hand gently across the car’s shining silver roof.

‘Fine,’ I said with a sigh, glancing down self-consciously at my conservative black business suit. ‘Her name’s Bessie.’ If he was a mass murderer, at least he liked cars. ‘She’s a 1959 Volkswagen Karmann Ghia,’ I continued, because I already knew it was the next question he would ask.

Bessie always did this. She loved the limelight and even if I’d been a catwalk model — which at five foot two I most certainly was not — I’d still be considered an accessory to my classic car’s beauty.

‘I have to admit, I figured a guy owned her,’ he said, crouching down to peer into Bessie’s interior, which was unashamedly red, exactly the way it would have been when she was manufactured.

I stifled a snort. ‘You’re not the first. I paid to restore her eight years ago and have maintained her ever since.’ I said it with a degree of pride. Most non-car people would consider the amount of money I’d spent on Bessie frivolous. I considered it a community service and a privilege to keep a part of motoring history alive.

The man straightened, his suit tightening on his shoulders in the most distracting way. ‘Until now.’

‘Until now what?’ I asked, not following.

‘She’s not running now.’

‘Oh yeah, that. It would appear so.’

‘You sound calmer about it now than you did a second ago.’

I felt myself redden but hoped the sting of the wind on my cheeks would hide my embarrassment. ‘Yeah, well, I guess they say bad things come in threes, don’t they? I know it’s not the end of the world, but this is just the icing on the cake in my life at the moment.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

I shrugged. ‘Judging by this, I’m pretty sure she’s due for a new engine. The one that’s in there was reconditioned and this is her way of telling me it’s time. And officially my number three bad thing.’

‘It’s a bad thing for me, too.’ He offered me a lopsided grin. ‘I would have liked a ride, if that doesn’t sound too forward.’

‘Not really. She has a way of attracting strangers.’

He stepped back from the car and his blue eyes held mine. ‘I don’t think we’re complete strangers. I’m pretty sure we work for the same company.’

‘You work at the bank?’

‘Only for the last few weeks,’ he said. ‘I’m new.’

I couldn’t help myself and grunted, not caring how it came across or how unladylike it sounded. After the disaster that was Grant, I wasn’t keen to impress good looking male strangers. Although, if I *was* in the market for a boyfriend ... I immediately put a stop to my inappropriate thoughts. Paul Newman here was undoubtedly already taken and I had enough to worry about.

‘What?’ His upper lip quirked, like it was used to finding things amusing.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘You probably shouldn’t talk to me about the bank right now.’ *Or the rest of my life*, I thought, but didn’t say that.

‘Why? Now you’re making me wonder if I should have taken the job.’

I waved a hand at him and walked around to the rear of the car. ‘I haven’t said a word.’ I needed to be careful. I was still coming to terms with today’s news and badmouthing the bank wasn’t going to make things any better.

I opened the boot. The engine in the Karmann Ghia was housed at the back of the car, consistent with the Volkswagens of the time. I

leaned in to make sure it wasn't something as simple as the battery causing issues.

'You didn't need to say anything,' he said. 'I have a feeling you won't be giving me an employee testimonial.'

I looked up at him in shock. 'You don't work in HR, do you?'

His deep laugh was soft, but somehow I felt it in my toes. 'No, don't worry, I'm not in HR.'

I couldn't help myself and grinned back at him. It was possibly the first time I'd done so since I'd stepped foot in the office that morning. And I was intrigued when he didn't elaborate. 'So if you're not in HR, what department do you work in?'

He shook his head and crossed his arms. 'You first. For all I know you could be really senior and important.'

My smile faded. 'Marketing.' The word almost didn't come out, sticking in my throat. 'I'm no one important.'

'Ah, I doubt that. Our many marketing professionals are a formidable team, I hear.'

I attempted a smile, but discovered that was too difficult, so concentrated on the engine again. 'So, where do you work? Sales? IT?'

He laughed softly again. It struck me that I liked his quiet confidence.

'I'll have you know our IT team is very competent,' I told him, deliberately not making any reference to our sales team for reasons he'd soon discover. 'But from your reaction I'll assume you don't work there. It's got to be finance.' It made sense, I thought. He appeared youngish, maybe late twenties like me, or early thirties, but he had the air of someone who was used to being in control.

'Am I that predictable?'

I didn't meet his gaze, focusing hard on the engine. 'Predictable is not a bad thing.'

‘Actually, I disagree.’

I straightened and closed the boot with a thud. In my world, I could do with a whole lot of predictable, but I wasn’t going to argue with him about his unconventional finance methods.

I nodded at Bessie. ‘If you’ll excuse me, I just need to make a phone call. She’s not going anywhere tonight.’

‘Sure. Are you going to call roadside assist?’

I laughed. Loudly. When I’d recovered, I shook my head. ‘Not a chance. Bessie’s too precious for that. She can stay here overnight until I can arrange for my mechanic to pick her up tomorrow.’

‘I’ll give you a lift.’

I blinked at the unexpected offer, then shook my head. ‘No, that’s fine. I can sort it out myself.’

‘Are you sure? It’s freezing tonight. Don’t inconvenience someone. I’m happy to do it.’

I stared at him for a long moment. It would be easy to accept his offer, I realised. His good looks and natural charm were fun to be around, but I’d be stupid to trust him. I didn’t even know his name, for God’s sake. And I only had his word he worked at the same company as me.

‘Look, I appreciate the offer, I really do, but I don’t know you. It’s probably safest if I just call someone.’

‘I’m Marty.’ He held out his hand to me.

‘Oh. Right.’ I stuck out my hand awkwardly and slipped it into his, ignoring the warm tingle the friction created. ‘I’m Wynter. I know, I know,’ I said, registering his surprised expression. ‘Unusual name. That’s with a “y” not an “i”, by the way. And it doesn’t suit me at all.’ As if it wasn’t bad enough that I’d spent my entire life correcting people on the spelling of my name, my red curls were the furthest from a ‘cool’ appearance you could get.

He removed his hand from mine slowly with a funny look on his face.

‘My parents were a little alternative,’ I felt the need to explain. ‘I rebelled by going to university and getting a reliable job in banking.’

That earned me another quirk of his lip. ‘Pretty wild,’ he agreed. ‘Are you sure you won’t let me give you a lift home?’ He glanced over at the dark street through the metal fencing. ‘It’s practically snowing out there now.’

‘Hardly.’ But I pulled my jacket tighter and gave him a wry smile. ‘No, it’s okay. There’s actually someone I don’t mind inconveniencing.’

I wasn’t sure why I had said that. Put it down to the worst day of my life. Okay, that was an exaggeration. The second-worst day of my life.

‘Your partner?’ he asked, and I wondered if he was fishing for information.

‘My soon-to-be ex-husband,’ I said easily, and hid a smile when shock creased fine lines around his eyes and mouth. A divorcee before the age of thirty usually elicited that reaction in people. ‘I’m quite happy to inconvenience him,’ I assured him, not bothering to hide the bitterness in my voice. Grant hadn’t exactly been making our divorce an easy process and an immature part of me relished annoying him in any way I could.

I fished my phone out of my pocket and went to dial, but started when Marty’s fingers touched my wrist.

‘Don’t.’

I dropped my arm away from his touch, clutching my phone. ‘Why not?’

He shrugged, but those blue eyes held mine. ‘You’ve had a bad enough day as it is.’

I took a step back. ‘Why would you say that?’

He nodded at Bessie. ‘Your car’s not working and it’s not going to

be a cheap fix. Don't make it worse by fighting with your ex-husband.'

'How would you know that I'm going to fight with him? We might be on good terms.'

'Or you might not. I'm here. Let me help you.'

I swallowed the wave of emotion that tried to force itself up my windpipe. There was no way he could know how close he was to the truth. He was just being a helpful stranger.

I pushed my stray curls back with my hand. God, it had been such a long day. Provided he wasn't dangerous, what was the harm really? He was right. He was here and he was willing to help. Grant was not. As if that was something I wasn't already painfully aware of.

I narrowed my eyes at him. 'If I'm going to agree to let you give me a lift, I need more details to ensure you're not some sort of crazy guy who waits in car parks stalking women.'

'Nice. How about I go grab my car, then you can decide?'

Without waiting for a reply, he started walking away.

'That's it?' I called. 'Those are your details? Aren't accountants supposed to be good at providing information? No offence.'

'None taken,' he called back. 'Be patient. I'll be back.'

He disappeared around the corner, leaving me standing in the cold. I cast a concerned look at Bessie. What a strange man. He was lovely to look at and easy to talk to. There was something surprisingly gentle about him, too. I just had the strange feeling he was good at convincing people to do things. But not in a boss-you-around sort of way. He was cleverer than that.

Or maybe it was because he was a serial killer? They could be convincing.

I eyed the exits again, contemplating my options. I could grab my handbag and keys and disappear before he got back. It was potentially rude but also a safe option.

Or...

My thoughts stalled when I heard an engine roar to life. I stilled and closed my eyes, listening to the throaty purr reverberating around the car park like a wild animal responding to a mating call.

I opened my eyes, recognising the sound.

Oh hell, this I had to see. I couldn't hear an engine that sweet and not see the car responsible.

I picked up my handbag from inside Bessie and carefully locked the door. By the time I'd done that, a gleaming black 911 Porsche rounded the corner. And not just any Porsche, either. A very expensive vintage one, circa 1960s, by my estimate.

'Down, Bessie, down,' I instructed her, fearing my much-loved car would fall for the sinful Porsche purring our way. Chrome detailing flashed under the harsh lighting, like it was winking at us.

'I'll protect you, don't worry,' I whispered, worried for Bessie's innocence, as well as my own. We were entering dangerous territory. A man who shared my love of classic cars was a rare thing indeed. The only thing my ex had shared when it came to cars was a disdain for the money I used to spend on Bessie. Something told me Marty wouldn't share Grant's view.

The Porsche came to a stop beside me and the driver's side window rolled down. 'Trust me now?' Marty asked, raising a dark eyebrow.

'No,' I retorted, my stomach twisting in knots at the sight of him sitting in his gorgeous car.

His laughter was a deep rumble, crescendoing over the sound of the engine.

'Get in.'

He didn't have to tell me twice.

*

I spent the first five minutes of our drive giving vague directions to Marty, distracted by the immaculate interior of the car. I soaked up the experience of being chauffeured in a classic restored 911 like another woman might indulge in a facial.

‘So you said bad things happen in threes,’ Marty said as we joined the expressway. ‘What else has happened to Bessie?’

‘Huh?’ I glanced over at him, lost for words. You could never underestimate how sexy a man could be when he suited his car. ‘Oh, Bessie’s fine. Just some other stuff, that’s all.’

A slight frown touched his lips. ‘Stuff?’

‘Stuff,’ I repeated, not prepared to go into it.

‘Like getting divorced?’

I dropped my gaze. ‘Maybe.’

‘Which leaves one other thing,’ he surmised accurately.

‘And you still haven’t given me any details,’ I said, to change the subject. ‘Apart from the fact you drive a nice car, I don’t know anything about you.’

He nodded and thought for a while, then patted the steering wheel. ‘One of my bad things is Tara was in an accident a few months back. I just got her back from the repairer.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ I said, meaning it. I understood immediately he was referring to his car by name, which didn’t help to relax my stomach. ‘How bad was it?’

The streetlights flickered across his face, illuminating a hard look in his eyes. ‘Bad.’

So much as a scratch on a vintage car was bad, so it mustn’t have been pretty. ‘Well, I hope that’s the only bad thing to have happened and you avoid a trifecta like me,’ I said hoping to make him feel better.

When he didn't reply I glanced over at him. He was concentrating on the road intently.

'You've got a second bad thing, don't you?' I asked.

He stiffened, like my question surprised him. Or like he'd forgotten I was there. I saw him swallow.

'Sorry, I'm being pushy.' Here he was being a nice guy, giving me a lift in blizzard-like conditions, and I was grilling him. 'Don't worry about it.'

He shook his head slowly. 'No, that's okay. You told me your second bad thing, so fair's fair.' A soft smile touched his lips. 'Well, I guessed your second bad thing anyway.'

'Yes, you did.' When he didn't say anything straight away, I rushed on. 'I'm divorcing my husband because he cheated on me.' I sat back in my seat. Where had that come from? I generally didn't talk about my divorce with anyone. My mother had suggested I see a counsellor to work through my emotions, but I'd found concentrating on work was the best way to deal with it. Or distract myself from it.

That dark look was back on his face. 'I'm sorry. That must have been hard. *Be* hard,' he corrected.

I shrugged. 'He tried to tell me it was because I work too much. Apparently he was lonely. Or at least his dick was.'

Marty coughed, but I thought I saw him smile. 'I'd say he was looking for an excuse.'

'Yeah, or maybe I was,' I admitted. 'There was a reason I worked too much. People who are in love generally want to spend time with each other and have things in common. I can see now we shouldn't have even got married in the first place. So what's your second bad thing?' I'd had enough of talking about mine.

'My wife died of cancer.'

I opened my mouth but no sound came out. He glanced down at my

fingers touching his arm and I removed my hand quickly. I hadn't even realised I'd put them there.

I cleared my throat. 'I'm so sorry.'

He nodded. 'It was a few years ago now. She'd been sick for a long time before that.'

We drove in silence. I bit my lip and turned to look out the window. Well, that served me right for being nosy. Maybe that explained his worldly air. He'd been through more than most people our age. And unlike me, it was clear he'd really loved his partner.

When we neared my turnoff I gave him the directions, glad to have something else to talk about. As we turned into my street I twisted to face him.

'I was made redundant today,' I announced. 'That's my third bad thing. I know it doesn't compare in any way to yours, but that's it. In case you were wondering.'

Marty didn't say anything until he'd found a place to park and pulled on the handbrake. 'That's a bad thing, Wynter. You get to feel bad about that.'

'Really bad.' I sniffed and swiped at my eyes. 'Oh God, I'm sorry. You lost your wife and here I am crying over my job. My *stupid* job.'

'It's not stupid.'

'Yes. It is! So stupid. I'm more upset about my job than my disaster of a marriage, how wrong is that?'

He didn't reply, waiting for me to go on.

'It was my first job out of university,' I barreled on. 'I got sucked into the system and have been working my way up ever since. Doing all those extra hours to get ahead so I could get the next promotion and the next pay rise. And my cheating ex is right: I do work too much. And what have I got to show for it after eight years? No goddamn job and a divorce. Maybe if I hadn't worked so hard in the first place I would

have paid more attention to my relationship and realised I wasn't with the right person. Anyway, they've brought in this new Head of Marketing, who I haven't even met, and he's "restructuring," I said, using my fingers to put air quotes around the last word. 'And stupid me thought when they called me into the office this morning I was going to get that promotion. Joke's on me, huh? All that hard work for nothing.'

After a beat, Marty spoke softly. 'Didn't you get a redundancy package?'

I put my hand to my head and took a deep breath, hoping he wasn't regretting giving the crazy redhead a lift home. 'Yeah, you're right, I will. Financially I'll be fine until I find another job. I should be grateful about that.' I cast an embarrassed glance his way. 'I'm so sorry. I don't know where that rant came from. I'm still in shock obviously. Thank you so much for the lift, Marty. I really appreciate it. I'm truly sorry about your wife and I hope your new job works out well for you, I really do. It's not a bad place to work. Maybe don't work as hard as me though. It's not always worth it.'

Marty nodded. 'It was nice to meet you, Wynter. And Bessie.'

I allowed myself one last look at this intriguing man who drove an especially nice car and who, under different circumstances, I might like to get to know.

'It was nice to meet Tara, too,' I told him.

Then I braved the icy wind and made my way inside to my apartment.

*

'I can't believe it's your last day.' I looked over at my co-worker and closest friend at the bank, Erin, whose blonde hair was tied in its usual high ponytail. Her green eyes were filled with emotion.

‘Well, it is.’ I surveyed my almost tidy desk, which I’d spent the morning clearing out. ‘Soon I’ll be unemployed.’ It didn’t sound so bad a week later, now I’d had the chance to get used to the idea.

‘Not just unemployed, a lady of leisure. I so wish I was coming to Hawaii with you.’

‘Me too. It feels a little strange to be going on a holiday alone.’

‘I’m sure you’ll be able to cope. Meanwhile, I have to hang around here and deal with all the crazy changes they’re making.’

I gave Erin a sympathetic nod. A week ago, if I’d been asked if I was glad to be leaving my job, I would have said definitely not. But now? Now the bank was announcing a lot of radical changes, I almost felt like I was dodging a bullet.

‘Are you going to come to the big meeting?’ Erin asked, interrupting my thoughts.

‘I’ll come along out of curiosity. But unlike you, I don’t have to listen.’ I poked my tongue out at her.

We made our way to the meeting, talking about my holiday plans. We filed into the room with the other marketing staff and I looked around as we entered.

For the last eight years, I’d been part of the bank’s close to one hundred marketing staff. I’d worked in several different sections and held a variety of roles. From tomorrow, along with fifteen others, I would no longer be part of this corporate family. It was going to be a big adjustment.

I felt Erin grab my hand. ‘Oh my God. That must be the new Head of Marketing. I was told he was good looking, but I mean how good looking is management usually? He’s *hot*.’

I cast my gaze to the front of the room then froze, squeezing Erin’s hand tightly.

‘Wynter?’

‘*He’s* the new Head of Marketing?’ I asked, still gripping her hand tightly.

Erin rolled her eyes at me. ‘Wishing you still had your job, huh?’

‘Martin Reynolds,’ I whispered to myself. *Marty*.

When I’d been made redundant, my immediate manager, Stacey, had been the one to break the news. From that point on, I’d paid as little attention to management and company emails as possible.

Erin gave me a strange look. ‘Yeah, that’s him.’

I dropped her hand. ‘I’m going to pass on the meeting,’ I said, not looking at her.

‘Are you sure?’

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. The other staff swarmed around me, starting to take their seats.

I wasn’t sure why I didn’t turn to leave straight away. I should have slipped out, but instead I stood fixed to the spot watching Marty — *Martin* — speak to the CEO of the bank at the front of the meeting room.

After a while a hush settled over the group and Martin and Bob, our CEO, turned to face everyone.

I reddened when I realised I was still standing there and Bob shot me a questioning look. He gestured for me to take a seat. Bob knew me well and knew all about my redundancy. He’d always respected my direct approach to overseeing marketing campaigns and was going to give me a good reference.

Marty turned in my direction and stilled when he noticed me. The easy twinkle in his eye dimmed.

‘Wynter?’ Bob called. ‘You’re welcome to join us.’

I released the fists balled at my side, returning my focus to the CEO. ‘No, it’s okay, Bob. I was just coming to see the new Head of Marketing.’ The room was silent, all the other employees watching our

exchange. I smiled brightly, baring my teeth at Martin. There must have been some malice in it, because he flinched slightly. 'But now I see we've already met.'

I gave Martin a cold glance, reminding me of the bitter wind on the night he drove me home, and walked from the room.

*

When the buzzer to my apartment sounded six hours later, I was comfortably inebriated. With some difficulty, I zigzagged my way to press the button to open the door, by which time it had buzzed again. 'All right, all right,' I complained. 'Coming.'

Erin was joining me for celebratory "I'm unemployed" drinks, so I pressed the button without saying anything and went back and collapsed on the couch.

'It's open,' I called when there was a knock at the front door. Since when did Erin knock?

I heard her footsteps approaching down the hall, so I started pouring another drink. 'You're *waaay* behind me, so drink this and catch up quick,' I called to her.

'No thanks.'

The glass of red wine slipped from my hand, landing with a dull thud on my favourite rug. 'Shit!' I jumped up and almost fell over. 'You!' I pointed at Marty — Martin — whoever the hell he was. 'What are you doing here?' I shook my head as though that would clear it. 'No. Wait. What I mean is *get out!*'

He ignored me and stepped into the nearby kitchen, picking up a towel from the sink and bringing it over to me.

I grabbed it from him and attempted to soak up the mess. 'Fuck,' I hissed. 'Fuck, fuck, fuck.' I looked up and glared at him. 'That's four

fucking bad things now. Thanks for that. Now get out, will you? And before you tell me not to talk to you like that, I can talk to you however I damn well please because I don't work for you anymore, you bastard. Not to mention this is my apartment and you're trespassing.'

He didn't move. 'I know I shouldn't be here and I deserve all of that,' he said softly. 'And probably a lot more.'

'You fucking bet you do.'

'You swear a lot more when you're drunk,' he observed.

'And when I'm angry.'

His lip quirked and if I'd been more sober I would have tried for a smart reply. I threw the stained towel at him instead.

He caught it in one hand. 'I wanted to explain. They told me how capable you are.'

'Who?'

'Everyone at the bank. Management. Co-workers.'

'And you still fired me,' I shot back, trying hard not to pout.

'I didn't fire you. You received a sizeable redundancy package.'

'Yes, I did. Did you come here for a thank you?'

He looked down at his polished shoes, smiling to himself. 'No.' His blue eyes met mine and I felt the need for another wine. 'Under the new structure I'm proposing, we decided you'd be better off elsewhere.'

'Yeah. I got that.'

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. 'What I meant is you're too good for the bank, Wynter. You've been there a long time and it's time to stretch your wings. You'd benefit from something new. Possibly a jump agency-side to round out your experience.'

I wasn't going to admit to him that over the last week, since I'd had time to process things, I kind of agreed with him. Especially since one

of the advertising agencies that worked with the bank had contacted me and shown interest in hiring me as an account manager.

I crossed my arms in front of my chest. 'Don't you think it would have been nice to have that discussion with me first? Possibly even met me before you fired me?'

Something hot flared in his eyes, then it was gone. 'It was a group decision. Lots of other managers were involved.'

'And that's supposed to make me feel better?'

He nodded slowly, like he expected that would be my response. 'I never told you my third bad thing.'

I stared at him. 'Are you serious?' I could feel a drunken headache starting to pound behind my eyes, and that pissed me off, too.

'You were my third bad thing, Wynter.'

I held onto the side of the coffee table, feeling as though I needed something to steady me despite already sitting down. 'Me?'

'Yes.'

'Why? Because you felt bad about firing me?'

'No, because when I realised who you were, I knew if you ever found out who I was and what I'd done, you'd hate me. And that was really bad because you're the first woman I've been interested in since my wife died.'

'Oh.' All the bitterness, all the recriminations, died on my lips.

'I like you,' he said simply. 'That's a big thing for me, by the way. I haven't let myself like anyone for a very long time, which must mean I'm finally ready to move on.'

I allowed myself a furtive glance at those dreamy blue eyes and felt a jolt of electricity course through me, but tried not to show it.

He cleared his throat. 'And making you and all those other people redundant wasn't fun, but it's part of my job and I tried to be as

sensitive about it as I could. That meant letting a manager you know and trust tell you the news instead of some guy you'd never met before.'

'Or maybe you just wimped out?' I joked, because that felt like the safest thing to do while my body stilled buzzed from the connection between us. 'Maybe you were too scared to get to know me? I can be pretty intimidating, in case you were wondering.'

His eyes brightened and he took a step closer to me. 'I'm not scared of you, Wynter. And I'd really like to get to know you, if you'll let me.'

We stared at each other and I could feel my heart thudding loudly in my chest, but it wasn't from anger anymore. I stood slowly, mesmerised by his mischievous gaze just like I'd been that night.

'Well,' I said, eyeing the bottle of wine and the now-empty glass lying on the rug. 'Now that we've shared our three bad things, I think it's time we shared our good things. I'll go first.'

I rescued the glass and started pouring the wine. 'So, I met this cool guy at work. And he owns this really gorgeous car and we seem to have some things in common. Except it never would have come to anything because I discovered he's my boss.'

I handed him the glass.

'Well, it turns out he's a really clever guy, because he fired me. Sorry, he made me redundant,' I corrected, at Marty's raised eyebrow. Then I gave him a big, bright smile. It felt like my first genuine smile in a long time. 'And now I can ask him out.'

ABOUT BELINDA WILLIAMS

Belinda Williams is a marketing communications specialist and copywriter who allowed an addiction to romance to get the better of her. Her other addictions include music and fast cars. Her writing hasn't paid for a Lamborghini just yet, so she'll have to settle for her son's Hot Wheels collection and writing hot male leads with sports

cars. For more information on Belinda or her latest novel, *Wish List*, head to www.belindawilliamsbooks.com.

SONGBIRD BY SAMANTHA
BOND

SONGBIRD

SAMANTHA BOND

George Kostas came to, the alcohol fugue dissipating in the middle of a chorus, slurred words slipping from his lips. He stopped. The karaoke backbeat didn't. What was he doing? He spun around. On a large screen behind him was a 90s music video, an electric tennis ball bouncing to indicate the words he should be singing. He turned again, almost tumbling from the small, dark stage. Before him, twenty or so people sat on tall chairs at high, round tables, and against the far wall, was an oak bar topped with a neon sign. 'George's Karaoke Dreams.' *Must be at work, then.*

Clearing his throat, George shoved the microphone back into the stand. It screeched in protest. Tail between his legs, he ambled down the stairs towards the bar, a few drunks clapping unenthusiastically. He hadn't done this for a while, months at least. He'd tried *those* meetings and knew he wasn't an alcoholic, he could control himself when he wanted to. Problem was, he often didn't want to. Staggering through the crowd of tipsy punters, all seeking solace from the bite of an Adelaide Hills winter night, he racked his foggy brain for what had tipped him off.

'Singin' your old song again, boss?' It was Twain, his nineteen-year-old bartender employee. 'Reckon you should try something from this century.'

'Sure, when this century comes up with something decent.' George slid onto a barstool, stuck his elbows on the bar and rested his head in his hands. Plastic sunglasses squashed into his face — so that was why

everything looked darker than usual. It wasn't the bleakness of winter seeping into his soul, crushing his will to live. 'How long have I been drinking?'

'Dunno, boss. You came in a coupla hours ago and you were pretty cut. In a foul mood, too.'

'Ugh,' George grunted, the taste of stale beer and whisky, his self-pity combination, confirming the likely truth of it.

'So, why were you singing that stinker of a tune, eh?' Twain winked at him.

'Stinker? You kids today don't know quality.' George removed his sunnies and surveyed his business. There were plenty of punters gathered inside, drunk and eager to murder good and bad music alike, despite the Jack Frost. '*Big Love* was number one in six countries and at the top of the charts here—'

'For five months. I know, boss.' Twain gave him another wink. 'Well done, you. But don't you think it's a bit, I dunno, *wanky*, to be up there singing your own nineties hit?'

George reached for a dishcloth sitting behind the bar and threw it at Twain. 'Do something useful, I don't pay you to stand around looking pretty.' Seriously, what did he know? The kid had a shaved undercut and a man-bun for chrissake!

'Sure you do, boss.' Twain cocked his head at a bunch of women entering through the main door. A blast of icy wind followed them in before the door clunked shut. 'Reckon chicks like that would come into your dive if there wasn't better, younger scenery than you?'

George ignored him. The kid was probably right, he knew he was getting on. Not quite gone to seed, but perhaps, like a stale potato, beginning to *sprout*. The group of women traipsed past, pushed a few tables together and took up residency. They were young, pretty, perfumed creatures. One of them was strung-up with sashes and multi-coloured streamers, a plastic crown on her head and purple dildo for a

necklace. Ah, the classy hens do. Excellent for booze sales if not for good karaoke. One of them would be up on that stage, impersonating Beyonce and demanding some bamboozled bloke put a ring on it before the night was out. Why had he let Twain muck with the pre-programmed play list again? It had been perfect when it was limited to pure 70s, 80s and 90s. This century sucked.

As predicted, head hen ordered champers all round and the chicklets took turns gracing the stage. His ears were assaulted by Arianna Grande, Justin Bieber and then, horror of horrors, One Direction. Unable to take it any longer and sure his hangover was about to hit, George rose to unplug the infernal machine, when a young hen took to the stage. The strains of Kylie Minogue's *Locomotion* filled the bar. He stopped, transfixed. The petite, blonde, curly-haired hen could almost *be* Kylie. Not only that, but *early* Kylie. And, holy hell, she could sing!

Something clicked over in George's brain. The reason for his booze binge flooded back— the TV announcement about *Songbird*, and new 'special judge' Zappa Lightning. Rage hit him anew. Zappa Lightning. What a ridiculous name. At least when he, George, had allowed the music moguls to christen him 'Jasper Bolt' – the 'Bolt' part of the duo *Lightning Bolt* – it was just a pseudonym. 'Zappa' had been inflicted by his parents. Perhaps that's why he was such an arsehole — he was angry at his parents, and the world copped it. Or maybe he'd just been an arsehole to George.

He stared up at the singer on stage, a plan beginning to form. Perhaps she was his answer. Perhaps, finally, he'd have his revenge.

*

Catherine sighed and slid down a little further in her chair. Surrounded by all her sister's twenty-something friends, she felt every one of her thirty-eight years. No, actually, she felt far older. The drunk brunette to her left was gabbling inanely to a drunk redhead about

someone called 'Bay.' Nope, not a name, but someone she thought *was* a bay... that couldn't be right. Baby, babe, bagel...? Their conversation had stopped, the brunette looking at Catherine with raised eyebrows. She dropped her gaze, guilty they'd caught her eavesdropping.

Taking a sip of her champagne in an effort to blend in, she gave the pub an eye sweep. It had changed a bit since she'd last been there, but that was years ago. Things changed – she should know. The new owner (still new by Hills standards two years after the change in ownership) had added some modern touches to the place – the chrome chairs, the stupid little high tables that belonged in a seedy nightclub, not a decent Hills pub, and of course the cheesy karaoke system. Still, it had been over eighteen years since she'd drunk wine with her girlfriends standing around the now, cold, unused fireplace. It appeared these days, the pub attracted a different crowd – young, hip, drunk and dying to belt out a tuneless tune. What an affront to a previously classy old dame like the *Hills Tavern*. Nope, not *Hills Tavern* anymore, she noted. The migraine-pink neon sign clearly reflected the classlessness of George and his karaoke dreams.

Catherine took another big gulp of champagne and sought out her sister, Penny, in the group of women who'd decided to kick-on after dinner. Penny was getting married in a week, which was great, except Catherine hadn't been out partying in years. Not since before Annabella came along. But one could hardly miss one's sister's hens, could one? Especially not when one's just-legal daughter had been invited, too. Catherine would have skipped the pub bit, had it not been for Annabella. As if she was about to allow her beautiful baby girl into a place like this without an escort!

'Bae!' someone screeched by her ear. 'There you are, hiding away!'

Catherine started, sloshing champagne over the lip of her glass, and met her sister's drunkenly-glazed eyes. 'Bay?' she repeated.

'Yeah, honey. You're my bae 'cause you so come before anyone else in my life. Like ever.'

‘Before anyone else,’ she repeated, filing the reference away for future use. Penny was eight years younger than her; it might as well have been fifty. ‘What about your fiancé?’

‘Pah!’ Penny waved a hand like she was swatting a fly and landed a big wet kiss on Catherine’s cheek. ‘Fiancé schmoncé! You’s my sista, sister!’ She cracked up, then hauled Catherine to her feet. ‘Let’s dance, you old maid!’

Catherine was about to protest, that she didn’t know any of this teenie-bopper music, when the strains of Kylie’s *Locomotion* started up. She turned toward the stage to see who had the good taste in bad music and warmth flooded her being. Annabella, of course. Her beautiful girl would’ve sensed her mother’s discomfort in this scene, and probably chose the song to draw her out of herself. The poor child was accustomed to Catherine’s *Housework Trax* CDs boasting Kylie, The Pretenders and, of course, her all time favourite, Lightning Bolt.

‘Okay.’ Catherine allowed Penny to drag her onto the small dance floor in front of the stage while Annabella belted out the lyrics. Gosh but her daughter could sing. She’d be at uni on a full music scholarship soon, Catherine just knew it.

As Catherine’s stiletto clad foot (courtesy of her sister’s wardrobe) hit the cork tiles, a man pushed past her. Catching a whiff of his brewery-like odour, Catherine coughed and turned away for fresh air. Her sister’s face was mere inches from hers. Another wet kiss to her check.

‘Come on, Sis!’ Penny yelled over Annabella’s karaoke-backed voice. ‘Get into it.’ She grabbed Catherine’s hips and pushed them vigorously from side to side. ‘Remember back in the day when you were Wild Cat?’ Another snort of laughter. ‘Man, I looked up to her! I wanna see Wild Cat tonight. It’s my last night of freedom!’ She shouted the last in a Scottish-come-Irish accent, one hand stabbing the air in a William Wallace-esque stance. That is, if William Wallace had had a glass of champagne for a weapon.

Catherine ducked to avoid being doused and, as she moved backwards, collided with something tall, solid and alcohol scented. Nope, not something – someone. He didn't seem to notice, standing statue-like in the middle of the dance floor, staring up at the stage. More accurately, he was staring with puppy-eyed adoration at Annabella. This just wouldn't do at all.

Catherine tapped him on his broad shoulder. He towered over her petite frame, even in her borrowed stilettos. 'Excuse me, but you're being gross. That girl is far too young for you.'

Finally, the someone looked down, noticing Catherine's presence. Something twitched in Catherine's chest—he looked alarmingly familiar. Still, this was the Hills. It was a small community. She'd probably seen the lecherous scumbag ogling teenagers at the supermarket.

The tall, dark haired, annoyingly handsome man looked Catherine up and down. 'Too young, eh? You mean I'm too old.' The corners of his lips lifted to a half-smile. No, not a smile; a self-satisfied smirk. He continued to look Catherine over, lingering a second too long on her chest region. 'You're not such a spring chicken yourself, love.' He laughed. He had the actual audacity to laugh.

Catherine bit down on her humiliation. 'Just leave the child alone.'

'That's a direct order is it, ma'am?'

There was a tug on Catherine's arm. 'Come on, Sis. Leave the drunk man alone.'

Catherine shook her off. 'Yes, in fact, that is a direct order. Stop staring at the child, you're making her uncomfortable.'

The man's mouth twisted some more. It was definite smirk territory now. 'Sorry, love. I failed obedience school.' And with that, he strode away from Catherine and horror of horrors, toward the stage and her daughter.

Catherine stood, momentarily dumbfounded as the horrid brute

climbed the stairs and, on the last strain of the song, extended his hand and took Annabella's. He leveraged her close to his vile smelling person, began whispering in her ear and passed her a card — no doubt his number. The sleaze! That was it. If Penny wanted to see Wild Cat, she was about to get her wish.

Storming the stage, Catherine took the stairs two at a time. 'Get away from her!' She shoved the man in the chest, but he barely moved.

'Cat!' came Penny's voice from immediately behind her. 'It's Wild Cat. Woohoo!'

'What are you doing?' came Annabella's reply.

Catherine's brain flooded with frontal lobe red rage. How dare this lecherous old man try and pick up her daughter? And how dare he say Catherine was old? Desperately, she looked around for a weapon, for something to make him back the hell off. A chair perhaps. Nope, her sister was closer. With one hand, she snatched Penny's drink, and with the other, ripped off the dildo necklace.

'Watch out,' she warned her daughter, then threw the champagne in his face, followed by a dildo whack to his forehead.

The man staggered a few steps then stumbled backwards off the stage. He landed with a damp *whump*. Catherine winced, instant regret setting in. It's only a few feet, she told herself. He'll be fine. Peeking over the edge of the stage, angry blue eyes met hers.

'Mum!' yelled Annabella again. 'What have you done?' She held out the card right under Catherine's nose. 'Do you have any idea who that is?'

Catherine's gaze fell to the name on the card. *George Kostas aka 'Jasper Bolt.'* Shutting her eyes tight, she wished someone would knock *her* out with a dildo. No wonder he'd looked familiar. Older, sure, but how had she missed it? Jasper Bolt. Her teen idol. And she'd just assaulted him in his own bar. With a dildo.

Dropping to her haunches, Catherine extended a hand to the

spread-eagled man. ‘Um... sorry.’

‘Jasper Bolt. Cool!’ Penny had also dropped to her haunches. ‘This is my sister, Wild Cat. When she was a teenager, her bedroom was wallpapered with your face. Bet you lost your virginity with this man watching, hey Sis?’

*

In his overcrowded bedsit apartment above the bar, George slumped on his piano stool by the old wooden instrument and pressed an ice-filled tea towel to his forehead. Who knew a plastic donger could pack such a wallop? Oh well, at least the throbbing egg on his face would distract him from his raging, booze-induced hangover. What a crazy woman. Guess that was mothers for you. Still, he hadn’t touched the girl. He wasn’t *that* guy. Picturing her mortified face peering over the stage at him, he smiled a little. Really, he shouldn’t have provoked her. It wasn’t her fault she’d caught him in a bad mood. On any other night, he might have even asked the petite, slightly-too-serious woman out. She had killer legs and despite his jibe about her age (hey, she’d started it), she was real cute. Just his type. Even with the crazy. ‘She hit you with a donger,’ he reminded himself, absently playing a random tune on the piano. ‘Because she thought you were a monster.’ Maybe that could be his comeback hit.

Looking up from the keys, he winced at the jagged crack in his glass-topped coffee table. The offending TV remote lay shattered, bits of plastic littering the carpet. That bloody *Songbird* promo announcement had caught him completely off guard.

‘Back for its fifth, most exciting season yet,’ the announcer had said, *‘singing competition Songbird will have an amazing line-up of judges. Joining the show in 2016 will be Delta Goodman, Marcia Jives, Alice Kooper and international star of stage and screen, Zappa Lightning.’*

It had been the staged screams of a TV audience reacting to news of

Zappa Lightning's inclusion that had caused him to hurl the remote. And the announcement that Zappa was returning to his home state of South Australia to head-up auditions had triggered George's booze binge. Why did he have to show up now, just when George was, more or less, pulling himself together? Twenty-five years was a long time to take to get over something, his therapist had helped him realise, but at least he *was* doing something about it. Better late with a retro-cool karaoke bar, where people could sing for the pure love of it, than never, right?

But the hopelessly attractive stars on the TV and shots of Zappa looking younger and sparklier than he had when he and George were twenty-year-old kids touring the USA had been too much. His artificially whitened smile and wrinkle-free forehead had transported George right back to the day when *Big Love* hit number one in the US of A. Their band's name had flashed in pink neon outside the largest casino in Vegas and he'd cancelled a radio gig to get back to the penthouse early to surprise his fiancé, Fiona. Except it was George who got the surprise. Who would've guessed that with Zappa's ice-blonde (some called it 'lightning blonde') mane, he hid such a dark-haired furry bum in his skin-tight jeans?

George let out a rueful half-chuckle, then banged the piano keys a tad too enthusiastically. He hoped Fiona was happy. He hadn't for the first decade of her marriage to Zappa, but he did now. Zappa, on the other hand, was a different story.

A nervous rap at his door made George jump. With a harrumph, he stood, almost tipping over the piano stool, and crossed the small living room floor to the door. Flinging open the wooden door, its antique hinges squeaking in protest, he froze again. Before him, stood the nutter. Wild Cat

'Come back to finish the job?'

Then from behind her, stepped the daughter. 'We're so sorry, Mr Bolt,' the girl said. 'Me and Mum just came up to make sure you're

alright.'

'I'm fine,' George said in a voice much gruffer than his usual tone.

The woman fluttered her hands, seemingly unable to decide what to do with them. 'I thought you had... *designs* on my daughter.' Catherine's face coloured. 'I don't know what came over me. She's only just turned eighteen and I'm not used to her being out at bars, surrounded by booze and men and—'

'You're her mother.' George took pity on her. 'I can see why you might have thought the worst.' Against his better judgement, he waved them into his apartment.

'Mr Bolt, I told Mum what you said, about helping me get onto *Songbird*. Please, please, pretty please will you still help me?' The girl was so excited she was bouncing from foot to foot, like that Olympic hurdler doing her warm-up. The media machine would love that — he could see it now, them replaying her nervous, sexy fidget over and over as a promo. Milking it for all its worth.

He ushered them to the couch, taking the old piano stool for himself. Looking from Annabella's teenaged face, flushed with nerves and excitement, to Catherine's, flushed with embarrassment or anger (he wasn't sure which), he said, 'Sure. Who am I to let a little champers and assault get in the way of our next Kylie?'

'Oh, thank-you!' Annabella jumped up and gave George a quick, fierce hug. 'Only, could I be Miley? Kylie is a bit...you know, yours and Mum's generation...'

George and Catherine exchanged a look. United in their unsavouriness at last. 'Miley it is. But only if it's okay with your manager.' He gave Catherine an involuntary wink. Either old habits died hard, or he was still slightly drunk.

Catherine turned red again and stared at the broken bits of remote on the floor. 'You actually think you can increase my daughter's chances of getting past auditions for this talent show?'

‘Mum! It’s not a *talent* show. This show makes careers. Participants get *contracts* out of this. I could waste years at uni and never get anywhere, but with *Songbird*...’

George’s gut dropped. The girl’s eyes were shining. He’d seen that look staring back at him from his own mirror before Zappa and the industry had punched its lights out. Perhaps this was a bad idea...

‘Well, only if you’re sure it’s not an imposition,’ Catherine said. ‘I’m sure Mr Bolt has much better things to do with his time. And I want to be around. You’re still my baby and I’m not going to simply let you—’

‘Mum!’ Exasperation flashed in Annabella’s eyes.

‘It’s fine,’ George cut in. ‘Supervise as much as you want, and really, it’s not an imposition...but only if you call me George. “Jasper Bolt” was a stage name from a long time ago.’

Catherine dropped her frown, then even managed a tiny smile. George’s stomach dipped some more. ‘George suits you. Jasper always seemed a little too showy. And, I guess...thanks?’

‘Ah, yeah.’ He fast forwarded over his ill-conceived plan again. Did the girl and her crazy-cute mother really deserve to be fodder in his revenge plan? Then he pulled himself together. Where had softness ever gotten him? Oh, that’s right. It had gotten him dumped by his fiancé and scuppered his internationally successful pop career. It had gotten him an expensive (both financially and physically) booze habit that he’d spent two decades battling with, and at the end of it all, it had gotten him a tiny bar in an isolated Adelaide Hills town and a second-hand, out-of-tune piano.

He met Annabella’s eyes with resolve. ‘Why don’t you come by tomorrow afternoon and we can talk strategy.’

*

‘Tell me again why you chose the middle of winter to get married. In the *Adelaide Hills*.’ Catherine held out the vintage fur bolero her sister

was planning to wear over her wedding dress, and helped Penny's gooseflesh-covered arms into the sleeves. 'Why couldn't you have waited until Spring?'

Penny pulled it on, adjusting it until it fit snugly over her corseted bust. Taking a step closer to the floor-to-ceiling mirrored door of Catherine's wardrobe, she admired herself and ignored Catherine's question. 'Knew I could do it. Only took a month of starving and I've made it fit.'

'Well done. I'll be sure to get you a trophy confirming your Bridezilla status.'

Penny shot her a withering look in the mirror then returned to admiring her gown. 'Don't I look luscious? Gabe's going to go berserk. Should I let him rip it off with his teeth on our wedding night?'

'After what you paid for it? Try to reign in the crazy, Sis. Let him destroy the garter if you must.'

'Crazy?' Penny turned away from her reflection and met Catherine's eyes. 'Wonder where I learnt that from.'

It was suddenly warm in Catherine's unheated, wooden-floored bedroom. So maybe she'd been a little wild in her youth, but since Annabella came along, she'd been responsibility personified. (Minus one recent slip in judgement.)

'Speaking of,' continued Penny with a sly grin. 'How is pop god Jasper Bolt? Annabella tells me he's sponsoring her for *Songbird*. Maybe you could bring him to my wedding as your date?' Penny nudged Catherine with a sharp elbow. 'How romantic would that be?'

Catherine snorted. 'Romantic? Don't be absurd. I'm old. That part of my life is over.'

Penny's face contorted as much as her recent botox jabs would allow. 'My darling, you are thirty-eight years old. There are many women who are yet to meet a partner or have children who are your age. You are far from "over."' She slipped her arm around Catherine's

waist and stared off into the distance. 'Picture it, the gorgeous cobblestone church decorated with perfumed roses, skies filled with white clouds to match my lust-inspiring dress... a crisp chill in the air that makes Jasper slip his tux jacket over your shivering little shoulders and hold you close to his buff, manly chest...'

Catherine wriggled out of the embrace. They'd had versions of this conversation many times over the eighteen years of Annabella's life. Her little sis trying to convince her that Annabella's father running out when he'd learned of the pregnancy didn't make all men pricks. Penny insisting Catherine date, only to watch it end in disaster.

Catherine smiled at her sister. 'I haven't missed out, Pen. Annabella is the love of my life.'

Penny's grin turned to something else. Something almost sad. 'I know, babe. And one day, Annabella will find the love of hers.'

*

George paced up and down behind the bar, waiting for the girl to arrive. He'd closed his business to the public so he could give this his complete attention. A fresh shot of adrenaline coursed through his veins each time he pictured Zappa's too-white smile and heard the *Songbird* theme soundbite in his head.

A gust of cold winter wind swept through the empty bar, signalling the girl's arrival. She grinned and gave him an excited little wave. He peered past her through the front window. The car park was deserted save for his car and one other. In the driver's seat sat Wild Cat, her back ram-rod straight, staring the pub down, defying him to be anything but parental with her daughter. He nodded in acknowledgement, then turned to the girl.

'Thanks again,' Annabella gushed. 'I can't believe you're helping me with this. It's been my lifelong dream to be a professional singer.'

George winced. She was eighteen. What did she know about

lifelong dreams? Instead, he said, ‘Well, from what I heard the other night, you’re good. And with a bit of help, a bit of mentoring, you could even be great.’

She let out a little squeal as she slid onto a barstool and came to George’s eye level. ‘And you think you can do that? In just a week?’

George picked up a dishcloth and began wiping down glasses. ‘Nope. It’s going to take longer than that.’

The excitement drained from her face. ‘But the auditions... they’re next Saturday. Same day as Aunt Penny’s wedding.’

‘And your aunt and mum are going to let you miss that?’ He glanced again towards the car park.

‘Oh, no. The wedding is in the afternoon, auditions are in the morning. If I get there super-early, I can be back in plenty of time. But you just said you couldn’t make me great in a week.’

‘It’s okay, kid. You don’t need to be great to get onto this show. You’ve got a secret weapon.’ He leaned closer, almost tasting the revenge he’d reap on Zappa Lightning. He motioned for her to come even closer, then whispered in her ear, ‘Me.’

For the next hour, George gave Annabella a crash course in the music industry and the media machine that ran shows like *Songbird*. He explained how it was ninety percent story and saleability, and maybe ten percent talent that drove it all. And what he had to offer was the crucial ninety percent. They’d go to the auditions together. He’d pull out an old costume and Jasper Bolt would accompany young Annabella. She’d tell the film crew how Jasper Bolt had been mentoring her and she was his special surprise for old friend, Zappa Lightning. That’s all she needed to make it past auditions — the media machine knew all about the Lightning Bolt split, the bitter rivalry that had filled gossip rags for years; it would choke itself in its haste to eat it up. Oh, the ratings! How she progressed in the comp after that was all up to her.

The girl left in an even bigger state of excitement than when she'd arrived. She was like a blonde mini-tornado. *Just like her mother.* He watched Catherine reverse the car and drive away, then the guilt set in. He hadn't told Annabella the whole story. Hadn't told her how he would use the opportunity to get some air time now he was a sober (at least most of the time), legit business owner. He'd tell the world how Zappa had stolen everything from him while pretending to be his friend, and he'd ride Annabella's coat tails all the way up Comeback Road. Maybe he'd even launch his next big hit right there on Zappa's show. He wondered if Zappa would like the song George had written for Fiona.

It was close to five when, again, a rush of icy wind indicated someone had ignored the 'Closed' sign and entered his bar. George glanced up. Catherine was back: petite, blonde, cute and fearsome. She was wearing a blue knitted beret pulled down over her curls, and a cream trench coat over her jeans. Immediately, George pictured her in naughty lingerie, complete with suspenders and a garter-belt under the coat. Perhaps in leopard print to compliment her Wild Cat nature. Hey, he was a bloke, he'd been conditioned.

Her overly anxious gaze met his as she crossed the floor to the bar. 'I'm not disturbing you, am I?'

George put down his dishcloth. 'Not unless you've brought another phallic instrument to clobber me with.' He grinned to let her know he was joking. She blushed anyway.

'I am so sorry about that.' She hoisted herself onto a barstool so her face was level with his behind the bar. 'However, I will "clobber" you with something far worse than a plastic dildo if you are in any way inappropriate with my daughter.'

George's hackles began to rise. *She's her mother*, he reminded himself. Deliberately, he bent over and took a bottle of red from the wine rack below the bar. *She has every right to be protective.* Standing

with the red in one hand and two glass in the other, he said, ‘Cat, I feel we’ve gotten off to a bad start. Shall we talk?’

Ten minutes later, they sat in stuffed antique armchairs that George dragged out from the storage room (obviously the old decor didn’t go with the new) and placed in front of the fireplace. He’d lit a fire and the bar was now filled with the scent, warmth and sounds of crackling kindling. George swirled the red in his large glass — it was standard drink sized this time, not two serves disguised as one.

‘I have no designs on your daughter.’ Best to make that clear up front. ‘But she’s got a great voice and a great look. That’s all I was checking out. I swear.’

An amused smile played at the corner of Catherine’s lips. ‘That’s *all* you were checking out?’ She dropped her gaze meaningfully to her bosom.

George’s cheeks flushed hot. Busted. ‘In my defence, I was drunk. And in my further defence, have you seen you?’

Catherine blushed too. ‘I must admit, in retrospect it’s nice to know I can still turn a drunk head. I don’t date much these days...’

‘Because of Annabella?’

‘She’s enough for me. In fact, she’s my everything. I don’t like this whole singing, TV nonsense. She’d be so much better going to uni and studying this properly. What if they exploit her? What if they get her hopes up and then break her heart?’

George swirled his wine some more. ‘All those things are possible, Cat. But you’re a good mum. I’m sure Annabella knows you’re her rock no matter what.’

‘I try to be.’

‘It’s also possible great things could happen, or at the very least she’ll have fun and a once-in-a-lifetime experience.’ He fell silent, taking in the pensive woman; she was too young to be this old. ‘And you know what else?’ George stared into Catherine’s stormcloud blue

eyes. 'We all get our heart's broken at some stage. Even the best mother in the world can't stop that.'

Catherine met his gaze steadily. 'Who broke yours?'

'Who didn't?'

'You broke mine once, you know?'

'What, when I stopped inflicting my "music" on teen girls worldwide?' George had received his fair share of distraught fan letters when he and Zappa split. Until he'd dropped off the grid altogether and no one could find him.

'No, before that.' Catherine stared into the flickering flames. 'I was nineteen and after your concert at the Thebarton Theatre, I was all loved-up and lost my virginity in the backseat of my boyfriend's car. He didn't hang around once he found out about Annabella.' She turned her face to his, gave him a wry smile. 'Every time I hear *Big Love* I think about that concert, that night and Lightning Bolt.'

Something contracted in George's chest. The poor woman had been alone all her adult life. Just like him.

'Sounds like you could do with a new song.'

*

'No! No, no, no!' Penny's scream almost pierced Catherine's eardrums.

'Calm down, hon. What's the matter?' Catherine took the phone from her sister's hand. Penny swooned in her meringue dress and flopped onto the bed.

'The band. They can't get through from Paddy's Pond with the truck. That stupid track masquerading as a road is frozen. It's a disaster!' She screamed into the doona and kicked her legs like a toddler throwing a tantrum, white tulle floating in its own little snow storm. 'There'll be no music for my wedding!'

Damn the Hills and their interconnecting roads built for horses, not

modern vehicles, Catherine thought. And damn her silly sister for planning a mid-winter wedding and booking a band from the neighbouring township. Catherine took a deep breath and checked her watch. Eight o'clock. Still early.

'It's okay, Pen, I have an idea.' She raced to Annabella's room, but it was empty. She'd left for the auditions already. No! In a panic, she dialled George's mobile number. It went straight to voicemail. She left a gabbled message explaining the frozen road and truck issue. 'I thought you might be able to help us with the music,' she said before hanging up. What was the use? He'd obviously left already. She'd think of something else. Another shriek reached her ears. If worse came to worst, she'd send one of the groomsmen to sort it out.

Five hours later, Catherine kissed her sister's champagne-warmed cheek (it had taken several glasses to calm her down and convince her the reception wouldn't be a disaster) and pulled her veil over her face. 'Gabe is going to go berserk when he sees you,' she said. 'I think you should totally let him rip the dress off you tonight with his teeth.'

Penny gave her a grateful smile, and then the strains of *Here Comes the Bride* began from inside the church. A car pulled up with a squeal of tyres and out jumped Annabella, dressed in her winter-blue, off the shoulder bridesmaid's gown. She raced over to them.

'Told you I'd make it.' She gave them a flushed-cheeked grin and stepped into line behind her mother. 'And I got a call back!'

Catherine gave her a quick hug, ignoring her urge to ask all about it — it could wait — and lifted her sister's train. They stepped inside the rose-perfumed, stained-glassed venue. It was just as Penny had said it would be: intimate, ornate and romantic. In warmer weather, the tiny venue packed with eighty of Pen's nearest and dearest would be stifling, but on this crisp, brisk winter's day, it was perfect.

The ceremony raced by in a blur of emotions. Catherine spent it looking from her rapt little sis to her wonderful daughter. They looked so happy, both on the cusp of new, great things. Perhaps it was time for

Catherine to embrace something, new, too. Or someone. Involuntarily, her mind wandered to the impetuous, impossibly good looking pop star idol of her teen years.

Stop it she ordered herself.

Hours later, ceremony and photos done, the bridal party arrived at the reception venue. Penny had consumed more champagne during the shoot and her tipsy state seemed to have made her forget about the music issue. Catherine, however, had not and simply hoped that Gabe's best man had found a solution.

'I've got a surprise for you two,' Annabella said as they climbed from the limo, but would say no more.

As they lined up at the door, ready to make their big entrance, a familiar voice reached Catherine's ears.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, please raise your glasses and toast the arrival of Mr and Mrs Slater.'

Catherine did a double take. What was George doing here? Then, as she entered the room, the flashing neon lights of a karaoke machine almost blinded her. Her gaze flew from the machine, to George's beaming face, then to the scruffy little piano in the corner. Regaining her composure, she finished the introductory walk to the bridal table as George began belting out Kylie's *Locomotion*.

At the table, she turned to her daughter. 'I thought George was with you at the auditions. How did he manage all this in time?' Beside her, Penny was doing little whoops of joy.

'He was, but we hadn't gone far when he got your message,' Annabella said. 'George turned around, went back to the bar and organised this. Twain drove me into the auditions.' A dreamy smile settled over her features. 'Mum, his high-bun is so hot.'

'Woot! Sis, this is your music. Are we gonna see Wild Cat tonight?'

Catherine glanced from her sister's tipsy, loved-up face to George. He caught her eye, and gave her a wink.

‘You know, Pen, you just might.’

Hours passed in a surreal blur of toasts, congratulations and speeches. Catherine had stopped fantasising about her own wedding day many moons ago. She’d accepted it would never happen for her. But, looking from the bridal table around the room full of beautifully dressed well wishers, she flashed back to her teen years before Annabella. Back to high school days when she’d had dates and her bedroom had sported posters of big-haired pop-stars. With a cringe, an ancient memory hit her: a fantasy of her, Catherine Hamilton, walking down the aisle to the strains of *Big Love* in a mermaid tail satin gown, finally arriving at the altar beside her adoring fiancé, Jasper Bolt.

Catherine blushed hot at the infantile, clichéd teen fantasy, then almost burnt to a crisp when a deep, sexy voice snapped her from her reverie.

‘You scrub-up alright for an older Sheila.’ George was smiling, his teeth white against his olive complexion. He held a long-stemmed glass of champagne out to her.

She couldn’t suppress her own grin. ‘You’re not too bad for an old has-been, yourself.’ Perhaps she should feel insulted, but it was clearly a joke they were in on together. And besides, being thirty-eight was far from being “over it”. She took the offered glass of bubbly. ‘You’re not having one?’

George gave her a tight lipped smile, cogs turning behind his eyes. ‘Nope, think it’s time I eased up on this stuff for a while. Might make it easier to focus on more important things.’ He let the silence hang for a few seconds, then. ‘May I have this dance?’

Over the sound system, an eighties power ballad blared. ‘Sure, I can dance to this.’ Catherine rose from her elegantly dressed chair, and took George’s hand. It was warm, his skin smooth and slightly calloused on the pressure pads. Perhaps he chopped his own wood for the fire at the tavern?

On the dance floor, George slipped his arms around Catherine’s

waist. A little shiver ran through her and she responded by placing her hands on his shoulders. She'd forgotten how nice it felt to be held.

'You know,' George said softly in her ear, 'I think that daughter of yours might just make it into that song contest.'

'Mmm...' murmured Catherine. 'Should I be worried?'

'Yes, you should. She'll require many, many hours of close supervision by someone experienced in the ways of the industry to steer her on the steady course.'

'And do you know such a person?'

'It just so happens that I do,' said George. 'He'd need to be around the both of you on a regular basis.' His grip on her waist tightened slightly. 'Mother's are an integral part of the mentoring process. Would you be okay with that?'

Catherine tilted her face up towards his. His full, luscious lips were just inches away. If she rose to her tiptoes, her lips would press against them. 'Yes, I think I'd be quite fine with that.'

*

Five months later

'Folks, we're here at the after party for the *Songbird* grand finale where top honours were taken out by Heinrich. But we're much more interested in close runner-up, Annabella Hamilton, who's rumoured to be working on an upcoming album release with legendary 90s popstar, Jasper Bolt. Annabella can you confirm the rumours about your album and that Jasper is dating your mother, Catherine?'

'They're both true. I couldn't have done this without Jasper, though he prefers to go by his real name, George Kostas, these days.'

'And is he really dating your mother? What a lucky woman!'

'They're both lucky and very much in love.' Anabella waved at the camera. 'Hi, Mum! And hi Mum's bae.'

‘And can you comment on the rumours surrounding why show judge, Zappa Lightning, was replaced before the show went to air?’

‘I can’t say much... except that Mr Lightning was a little *too* friendly with some of the young contestants on this show. I know *Songbird* are very interested in George being a judge next season, but I really think he’ll be too busy with his new production company and his own wedding plans.’

‘Well there you have it, folks. A new star for the NINJA generation, a new career for the talented half of Lightning Bolt, and no doubt a beautiful bride not far away.’

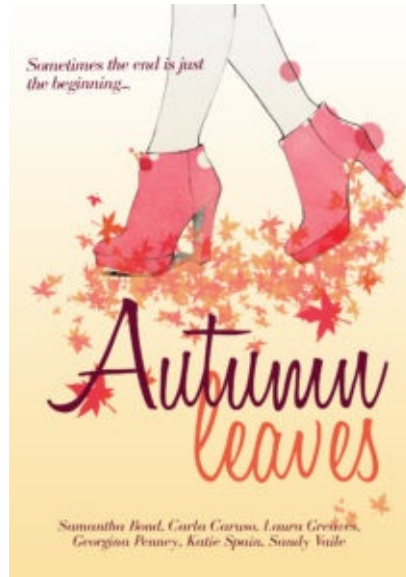
The reporter lowered her mike. ‘Come on guys, we should really talk to this Heinrich dude...’

ABOUT SAMANTHA BOND

Samantha Bond is a reformed corporate lawyer, now writer and public servant. Her creative work has been published in numerous national literary journals, anthologies and magazines. She has an Advanced Diploma of Professional Writing, winning the award for Highest Overall Achievement for her graduating class of 2014, and now tutors in that course. Her first novel, *Just Sleeping*, was short listed for the Olvar Wood Fellowship Award and she is now working on a crime series. Samantha also writes reviews for the *Indaily* and *Glam Adelaide*, and between these two publications has had more than 200 reviews published. Samantha does freelance corporate writing work as well as creative writing mentoring and if you’d like her services, she’s contactable through her website (www.samanthastaceybond.com). Finally, Samantha is a busy mum of two littlies, is an unapologetic chocolate addict, believes that Buffy would so slay Edward (which perhaps shows her age) and is a writers’ festival groupie.

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