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Spring Pung

Six mini chick lit tales

SPRING FLING



SIX MINI CHICK LIT TALES

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Cover design: Daniella Caruso

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CONTENTS

SOCIAL BEA BY CARLA CARUSO

BLAZING HEARTS BY SAMANTHA BOND

SECOND CHANCES BY LAURA GREAVES

SCHRÖDINGER'S CATFISH BY SARAH BELLE

THE ETERNAL BLOOM BY VANESSA STUBBS

THE SPRING CLEAN BY BELINDA WILLIAMS

MORE IN THIS SERIES...

Autumn Leaves

Summer Daze

Winter Heat

SOCIAL BEA BY CARLA CARUSO



SOCIAL BEA

CARLA CARUSO

Bea Ormond aimed her phone's camera at the party invite balanced on her lap. She snapped away against the backdrop of horseracing commentary spilling from the hire car driver's one dangling earbud and the jazz on the main radio he'd tried to cover up the noise with.

With a smile, she selected the best shot from her picture gallery. Granted the backseat of a black BMW at night wasn't the most ideal setting for a social media snap, but at least the purple floral fabric of her new dress added something. And anyway, for once, it was more about the words — the *invite's* words — than the image.

Not just anyone could get their hot little hands on a ticket to the infamous Spring Fling. The annual bash was put on by a luxe champagne house to mark the first day of spring and always held in a secret location. Only the who's who of Adelaide were invited, including Bea. A perk of being the director of her very own social scene site, Social Bea.

Once she'd added a filter to the phone pic, plus a suitably humble but humorous caption, she hit 'share' on Instagram. The shot would follow her getting-ready selfie, taken in the salon chair right after her blonde bob had been artfully tousled.

The car door on the opposite side screeched open, making Bea jump and bringing in a gust of blossom-scented air. She'd been so absorbed in what she was doing that she hadn't even noticed the BMW was still stationary.

A tall guy, maybe a little younger than her thirty years, sank into

the leather seat beside her. Bea blinked at him. He was handsome, yes, in a rugged muso sort of way, with a Heath Ledger-like square jaw and a light brown man bun. But he was so not dressed for the Spring Fling. His all-black getup, faded denim jacket aside, comprised an oversized tee and ripped skinny jeans tucked into combat boots.

This was what happened when she let her pink-haired assistant, Tessica, jump in the car ahead so she could flirt with a visiting gameshow host. Mr Man Bun had obviously seen the empty seat and thought this was just a regular non-branded taxi ride.

Dropping her phone, Bea scooped up her invite and waved it at the stranger. Surely soon he'd realise his mistake. 'Uh, are you off to the Spring Fling?'

Hmm. Maybe that wasn't such a good idea. The guy might take advantage and abandon his own plans, knowing it was the hottest ticket in town.

Instead he surprised her by digging a hand into his back pocket and pulling out a matching invite, albeit a bent one. His long-lashed, olive green gaze held hers. 'Snap.'

Huh. Maybe he was part of the entertainment act for the night.

'Brilliant ... Er, do we need to wait? Will anyone else be joining you?'

Looking ahead, she noticed the rest of the black chauffeured hire cars parked outside the theatre—the designated meeting spot—had gone. Trust her to pick the slowest-moving driver on the block.

'Nope, I'm travelling solo,' her new comrade said as he belted up. 'Well, aside from you being here.'

With another strained smile, she turned towards the balding driver. 'We're right to go, please.'

The driver lifted his eyebrows at her in the rear-view mirror, almost as though he was peeved at being distracted from the horseracing. The champagne company officials, who'd paid for the ride, wouldn't be too

happy if they knew about his unprofessionalism. Luckily Bea was in a good mood. After eleven months' slog on her website, she was off to the party of the year.

'The Spring Fling,' she reminded the driver, just in case he'd somehow forgotten.

The Beemer finally lurched into the city traffic, making the contents of her lap fly floor-wards. She leant down to rescue her phone and invite and stuff them back in her teeny-tiny rose gold clutch. Then she turned to her travelling companion with a raised eyebrow, we're-in-it-together-with-this-crazy-driver kind of look. But the guy was too busy drumming his knees along to the jazz music and staring out the window.

She cleared her throat. 'I'm Bea, by the way. From the Social Bea website.'

Her fellow passenger looked back, the reflections of passing streetlights streaking his face but not one glimmer of recognition evident. 'Cool. Um, my mates call me Perry. And if we're talking about what we do, I'm a drummer. A freelance one.'

Rugged muso. Bingo!

'You're playing tonight?'

'Me? Nah. I got the invite through my sister.' *A-ha.* 'She works at an ad agency and gets invited to a lot of swanky dos, but hardly ever goes now she has kids. She thought I could make some'—Perry made air quotes—"important connections" tonight. Don't tell her, but it was really the free booze and food that did it. That and I wasn't working.'

'Nice.' After issuing a polite smile, Bea made a show of pulling out her phone to check her social media feeds.

Despite Perry's rugged charm, he was no one important, and she had enough male friends—those that came *with benefits*—to keep her busy. Not that Perry would have been interested in her anyway; he was

surely only into grunge girls who could pull off neck tattoos and undercuts because of their model faces and figures.

Ooh. She'd already racked up seventy-nine likes for her invite photo and one-hundred-and-eight for her salon selfie. Gotta love the site's fans! With twitchy fingers, she next clicked on her competitor's Instagram account, Solely Trinity. Bea's good mood dissipated.

Trinity, famed for her dark China doll bob, had notched up a-hundred-and-sixteen likes for a close-up of her en-route, clutching her invite with floral-painted fingertips. In her other hand was a glass of pink moscato. Now Bea's lap shot seemed uninspired. Determinedly, she added a few more hash-tags to the post, then got lost in the rabbit hole of scrolling her feed.

Only Perry's voice brought her back to the non-virtual world. 'Hey, I thought this party was meant to be kinda exclusive. We heading in the right direction?'

Bea glanced around, taking in her surroundings for the first time in a while. They were in a dodgy end of Adelaide, complete with graffiti-covered businesses, overflowing bins and, to her left, a creepy-looking park. Just gritty enough to be Perry's scene, really.

She sniffed. 'Apparently the event was held in a disused warehouse last year.' Back when she was working in marketing for a department store and a website of her own was still a pipedream. She wanted to be invited to parties, not pray other people turned up to ones she'd planned; that was as depressing as high school. Bea shifted in her seat. 'The year before that the bash was at an old ice rink. It's a wonder what the event stylists can do. I'd say we're getting close.'

As if on cue, the driver pulled to an abrupt stop. Bea peeked past Perry and up at a seedy two-storey motel, painted a urine-yellow. *Hmm.* Maybe they were about to be directed to a secret alleyway? The driver loudly stated the fare total.

Bea leant forwards, clearing her throat again. 'The party organisers are meant to be covering the trip. Charlize Champagne.'

The driver frowned at her in the rear-view. But at least he had the courtesy to take out his other earphone this time. 'I don't know anything about that. The fare will have to be paid now.'

Perry squinted out the glass. 'This is *definitely* the right place?'

The furrows in the driver's brow deepened in the mirror. 'You said the Spring Inn?'

A coldness swept through Bea like she'd just downed a frozen margarita. 'The Spring Fling. I said the *Spring Fling*.'

'That's what I assumed you two were up to.' The driver waggled bushy eyebrows. 'A fling at the inn. Doing some couples' role play.'

Nausea gripped Bea. 'You're *not* part of the Charlize Champagne fleet?'

'I have no idea who this "Charlize" is you keep mentioning,' the driver protested, waving his hands about. 'All I know is I saw all the hire cars and people outside the theatre and figured a show had just finished. I didn't have any bookings, so I joined the rank.'

Perry pulled a scuffed leather wallet from his back pocket and began counting notes. 'It's our mistake. No problems.'

Bea's heartbeat doubled, the horror of the situation sinking in. 'I don't have any cash or cards on me! My clutch is too small to fit a purse. Plus, I was expecting everything to be laid on!'

Perry winked. 'You'll find a way to make it up to me, honey.'

He was making a joke about the couples' role play thing. Like this was a time for humour! Bea leapt out of the car, slamming the door. This was so not how she'd envisaged her first night of spring kicking off. The hire car driver had taken advantage! And Mr Man Bun wasn't helping.

Seconds later, Perry joined her on the footpath, where she'd dejectedly dropped her phone to her side. Gawd, he looked tall against the mauve sky, though she had been called a 'pocket rocket' before.

Her bottom lip protruded as she spoke. 'My assistant's not answering her phone. Must be too busy having a good time. And I'm embarrassed to ring anyone else and tell them my predicament.'

Perry slowly nodded, as though taking it all in. 'Well, unfortunately, I don't know anyone at the party. But I do know there's a pub around the corner. The Stinker. We could maybe go there for a quick drink until your assistant rings back?' His pale green eyes glinted. 'Guess it's that or the motel bistro.'

Bea's nose wrinkled. 'The *Stinker*?'

A corner of his mouth curved upwards. 'It's short for The Stintley Hotel, not literal.'

Somehow Bea didn't feel soothed, but Perry was her only lifeline right now. Pity things didn't improve as they weaved through the crowded grunge bar with its retro beer posters, pool tables, and past the archways, a noise-polluting live band.

Bea tugged at the asymmetrical hem of her dress as she sat on a stool at the front bar. She had never felt more out of place. Darn. Moisture seeped through the floaty fabric to her butt. Beer probably. Lovely.

Perry plonked down beside her, rubbing his chiselled jaw. 'Sorry, must be their metal night. It wasn't this full-on last time I played here, I swear.'

Bea hid a grimace. No wonder all the male patrons had hair longer than hers. It was a very different scene from the beautiful crowd she was used to.

'What do you want to drink?' Perry prompted her.

'Do they have a cocktail list?' she dared ask.

That prompted a throaty laugh from him. A rich, sexy sort of sound, which no doubt would have Taylor Momsen types in a lather. 'Doubtful.'

‘Wine?’

‘Probably only house stuff that’d taste like cat piss.’ *Oh dear.* He eyeballed her. ‘Tell me, what did you like to drink when you were eighteen and new to going out?’

She twisted her mouth. ‘Kahlua and milk.’

The laughter was back in his eyes. ‘Really?’

‘Really.’

‘All right, I’ll get two then. So you won’t feel alone.’

But before they’d been organised by the Axl Rose lookalike behind the bar, Perry announced he had to duck outside. Maybe he’d tired of her haughtiness and was going to abandon her in this living hell. Perhaps next she’d be mugged for her spangly statement cuff—or worse. She really should have reined herself in.

Bea stared at her phone, willing it to ring over the heavy metal din. As a distraction, she scrolled through her Instagram feed again. Of course Trinity was one of the first at the Spring Fling venue. Some chic space, overtaken by a purple haze of flowers. Not that Trinity mentioned exactly where it was—

‘Thought I’d tizzy up our drinks a bit,’ Perry’s distinct gravelly voice resounded in Bea’s ear. ‘Didn’t want you to feel like you were missing out too much on the party action.’

Bea looked back at the bar top, finding that their drinks had been prepared, plus garnished—by Perry, apparently—with a twig of pink blossoms each.

‘Oh ... wow.’

Perry hooked his thumbs in his belt loops and shrugged. ‘There’s an almond tree in the beer garden.’

Feeling recharged, Bea began rearranging the tumblers and the angle of the blossom twigs. Actually the grungy drink coasters underneath could really go—

‘You’re taking a photo?’ Perry queried, sinking back onto his stool.

‘Planning to. For Instagram. I’ll say I’ve stopped off for a tippie en-route; it’ll just look like we’re getting in the spirit. No one will be any the wiser.’

Trinity would be kicking herself that she hadn’t thought to be more blasé about the event. Or fashionably late!

Perry’s eyes crinkled at the corners. ‘You can’t just commit the image to memory?’

‘What? You’re above social media now?’

Man, he had a way of making her feel OTT.

Perry ditched the straw from his drink and took a sip, ruining her picture. ‘Not above it, just not on it. I’m more of a face-to-face guy.’

The happy snap now a lost cause, she swiped at her drink. ‘You mean not *at all*? Not Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, anything?’

His head kept shaking. ‘Nope. Nothing. I don’t even have a website.’

‘No wonder you have to steal your sister’s invites!’ Bea huffed. ‘How do you even get work? I thought you were a freelancer.’

Perry shifted on his barstool, his jean-clad thigh inadvertently bumping hers and causing an electrical current to zip through her leg. It was obviously just a primitive female reflex to bad boys.

‘I get by,’ he said easily. ‘People know me in the scene. Plus, I do a bit of teaching on the side. Recently, though, I had a full-time drumming gig touring with an international circus, so that filled up my diary.’

‘The circus? How cool,’ she conceded.

‘Yeah, it was a good way to see the world.’ Perry pushed up a jacket sleeve, revealing a tanned, muscular forearm. ‘Though eventually you crave normality. A home base. Can’t stay on the move forever. But anyway, tell me about this website of yours.’

So she did. About the types of A-list parties she'd been fortunate to attend, the calibre of celebrities she'd hobnobbed with and the lavish freebies she'd been gifted—all in the name of work. Her own business at that.

Perry raised his eyebrows and nodded in all the right places, but it seemed a little forced. Finally he said, 'Guess all the parties must be a drag after a while, though. Like being in the circus. Makes a night in with pizza and Netflix look good.'

That was all he had to say?

'So you've heard of Netflix,' she muttered darkly. Her phone's screen flashed, saving her. *Tessica! Hallelujah.* After excusing herself, she pressed the device to her ear, straining to hear over the metal racket.

'Where are you?' Tessica exclaimed down the line.

Bea briefly explained her dilemma, imagining her porcelain-skinned assistant slouching in a corner like a shrinking violet. The poor love.

'Oh, man,' Tessica sympathised. 'Look, I don't know the party's address unfortunately. Just quietly I was a little distracted by Gameshow Guy having his tongue down my throat on the way.' *Okay, not such a shrinking violet then.* 'But I will find Charlize's PR manager and get the details to you ASAP. You won't believe this place when you see it.'

Relief cascaded over Bea. The night wasn't a bust yet. 'Thanks, Tess.' She played with the blossom twig in her drink. 'Uh, maybe you could post a few party pics, too. So people won't wise up to the fact I'm not there yet?'

There was a beat of silence. 'You're sure?' Tessica squeaked. 'D-do you want to give me an idea of the kinds of shots you want?'

Ordinarily Bea had creative control over every last online detail, but tonight she needed to loosen her grip. 'It's hard to know what I want

when I'm not there. Besides, I have faith in you.' Too bad her voice wavered at the end. She rang off.

After another Kahlua-and-milk and more banter with Perry, Bea's stomach grumbled loudly enough to be heard over the metal band. Well, it was during a quieter bit, in between the wailing guitars. Her phone, meanwhile, remained stoically silent.

Perry glanced at her with a grin. 'Want to get a bite to eat?' Her nose must have wrinkled again because he quickly added, 'Not the pub grub here. There's a good tapas place nearby, open late. A real hidden gem and I've eaten all over Spain.' Perry patted his flat-as-a-board stomach. 'I could do with something myself.'

Feeling reckless, Bea kicked out her strappy, purple, bow-adorned heels. 'Could I walk there in these?'

Hey, they could always abandon their dinner if she got a call in the meantime. There'd be plenty of food at the Fling.

'Sure. It's only a block away.'

Bea reached for her miniscule clutch, climbing off the stool. 'Sounds like a plan. Besides, the music here is giving me a headache.'

'You know, in the music world, heavy metal is generally considered more complex and intelligent than pop songs.'

She put up her free hand before turning on her heel. 'Save it, Drummer Boy.'



'How hard can drumming really be?' Bea teased Perry at the cosy tapas bar they were huddled in, too many glasses of sangria and portions of deep-fried whitebait later. A flamenco guitarist strummed away in the background. 'I mean, it's not like you're playing a piano and have to hit certain keys or anything. Drumming seems a lot easier.'

Maybe it was a result of her mixing drinks that night, or succumbing to garlic and fat, or simply accepting her fate, but Bea had since relaxed *a lot*. That or she'd lost her mind. The last time she'd

trying ringing Tessica, it had uselessly gone straight to voicemail like she'd dropped out of range, though her assistant had posted some envy-inducing party pics earlier.

Perry wiggled his eyebrows at Bea in response to her drumming rant. 'You know, there's a set of bongo drums over there. Why don't you give it a go and find out for yourself?'

All right, she hadn't loosened up *that* much tonight. 'Very funny. I was just sayin—'

Sugar. He'd actually got out of his seat and was gesturing for her to do the same. 'C'mon, if my three-year-old nephew can give it a whirl ...'

Her adrenalin spiking, she watched as Perry headed over to the guitarist and whispered in the old guy's ear. *Fuck.* Perry was waving her over now, his handsome face overtaken by a huge grin. Why-oh-why did she stick her purple heel in it?

Although she could just leave. She wasn't obligated to Perry in any way. In all likelihood she'd never see him again. Yet somehow she found herself standing up and brushing off her beer-stained derriere. With her head held high, she squeezed through the packed little tables, heading for the shadowy corner.

Gawd. Even up close the bongo drums looked scary. The guitarist simply smiled at her, revealing he was missing a front tooth, and continued to strum away.

Showing some compassion, Perry waved her towards him. 'Here, I'll help you.'

Which was how she found herself on a stool, the small twin drums on her lap, Perry's hands guiding hers from behind, no drumsticks required. After some tentative, quiet taps, she shrugged Perry away, despite how good his strong arms and broad chest felt surrounding her, and let herself go. Actually *let herself go*. The sound reverberating in her ears, she worked up a sweat, amazing herself with her hand-eye coordination and rhythm. If the punters were more interested in eating

and looking into each other's eyes, it didn't matter. She was in her element! And she'd never even signed up for tribal drumming classes for exercise! Actual disappointment plunged through her when the song ended. A smattering of applause followed.

Perry nudged her, encouraging her off the stool. Giving in, she blew a kiss to the slightly startled guitarist and let Perry lead her back to their table. Feeling emboldened, a few steps in, she grabbed hold of his hand and twirled against his chest, whispering, 'How good was I?'

Perry raised both eyebrows as he peered down at her. 'If it made you feel good then that's what matters most.'

Clearly he just didn't like being shown up.

Tessica called as soon as they sat down and Bea answered, still aglow. Some of the wind was taken out of her sails, though, when Tessica told her the party's address: it was on the opposite side of town. There was no way she and Perry would make it before last drinks. It was all over. Ringing off, Bea told him the cruddy news.

Slowly, he nodded. 'Thought it might be getting a bit late. No problems. I'll call us a taxi.'

Disappointment made Bea's heart sink again. After surviving a long winter with fewer parties, this was *it*? Her first night of spring had finished before eleven p.m.? Just as she was about to suggest heading back to The Stinker for one last drink—she was *that* desperate—Perry came up with a better idea.

'There's a little lookout up the hill.' He shrugged a shoulder. 'We could walk there while we wait for the taxi if you want. I did it last time. It's a pretty neat view. A cab will take a while around here anyway, plus you'll see it coming down the road.'

Bea got to her feet, never feeling more trusting of a guy she'd just met. 'Yes!'



Bea tingled all over as she stared out at the grid of lights and little Pac

Man-like cars from the hilltop. Despite the bitumen cooling her patootie, it was a ripper of a spring night. Beside her, Perry suddenly peeled off his denim jacket and draped it over her shoulders. She couldn't imagine any of her 'friends with benefits' being so gallant.

'You didn't like my dress?' she jested. Humour was her last line of defence.

Perry shot her a crooked grin. 'It makes you look like a butterfly. A *social* butterfly. Just thought you might be cold.'

'Nice description,' she said, although his comment reminded her of her website's name and then how limited their time together that night had become. Making use of the last bit of alcohol circulating her system, she turned to him, holding onto his jacket collar with both hands. 'Can I ask you something?'

He nodded, his eyes pistachio green in the night.

'Are you single?'

It was the one conversation topic they *hadn't* broached that night.

His gaze met hers, then flicked away again, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed. 'Who'd be able to pin me down?'

It was enough of an answer for her. Kneeling, she leant forwards, cupped his jaw and pressed her lips against his. And they were moist, totally kissable, and perfect. Just as quickly, she pulled away again, clapping a hand to her mouth. 'Sorry, I had garlic ... I hope that was okay.'

After seeming dazed for a moment, a grinning Perry pulled her to him with one arm. 'More than okay.'

Then he was kissing her back, tongue and all. His jacket fell away, and time fell away, and it was totally horny. She—the school dork who'd been dubbed 'Boring Bea', and worse, 'BO' courtesy of her unfortunate initials—was pashing the bad boy. And she'd made the first move!

Suddenly, Perry broke away. ‘Far out, think that’s our taxi. Actually *taxis*. Two have turned up.’

Her stomach sunk as twin white vehicles drifted down the street. There went her idea of a nightcap.

‘Oh, right.’ She got to her feet, brushing off her behind as Perry scooped up his jacket, and they took off down the hill. Nicely, he grabbed her hand halfway.

They stopped outside the tapas bar as the taxis pulled up. She glanced at Perry, biting the inside of her cheek. ‘So, um, I owe you something for all the drinks, food etcetera tonight. Maybe I could make it up to you sometime?’

He swung her hand in his. ‘It’s cool. Tonight was payment enough. I had fun.’

Her stomach clenched. There was an evasiveness to his gaze now. All of a sudden things felt wrong, like when she accidentally shampooed twice rather than ending with conditioner. ‘So, that’s it then?’

He looked away. ‘Tonight was special. It’s just, you know ... we’re from different worlds.’

Bea dropped his hand like a hot potato chip. Despite her slick website and bulging social calendar, the boy from the back row, it seemed, was still out of her reach. One hot kiss had been enough for him. In fact, he probably thought it lukewarm.

Turning, she strode towards the first taxi, calling over her shoulder, ‘Bye, Drummer Boy.’



A week later, Bea stood in the powder room at another glam long lunch, spritzing herself with the freebie lilac-scented perfume. Anything to relieve the boredom.

Tessica burst in, her pink crop particularly vivid that day, reminding Bea of fairy floss. Her face, meanwhile, was scrunched up

with concern. ‘Erm, I think you might have uploaded something to Instagram in error.’

Tessica held out her phone to Bea. Onscreen was the bathroom selfie she’d just taken—no filter, *nada*—and captioned, ‘Another day, another party, coffee imperative’.

‘I meant to upload that,’ Bea nonchalantly replied.

Tessica bit her glossy lower lip. ‘Oh, right.’

Bea’s assistant had also anxiously texted her after she’d uploaded a pic of a night in with pizza and Netflix, track pants in shot. They were Lululemon trackies, though.

All right, so she might have been spiralling. Maybe this was what happened when young celebs posted cryptic, misspelled rants on social media after their ‘people’ had clocked off for the night. Bea *had* tried hard to forget about Perry and their amazing evening together, especially after his end-of-the-night brush off. But somehow their meeting had metamorphosed her, like a butterfly.

With him, she’d experienced life *sans* airbrushing and there was no going back. She’d tried hunting him down on the internet to sate herself. But, true to his word, online searches for ‘Adelaide drummer Perry’—and then ‘advertising agency Perry’ for his sister, out of sheer desperation—came up with nothing. Not even a gig pic, posted by a pub, had popped up. It was like Perry existed only in her imagination. She didn’t even have a pic of their blossom drinks to remember him by

‘There was something else,’ Tessica broke into her thoughts.

Bea glanced up to find Tessica flicking through her phone’s screens again. ‘Yes?’

‘Someone called “drummerboy_88” has posted, like, this giant Instagram pic, over six tiles, of a butterfly on a blossom tree and hashtagged “Social Bea”. Don’t know if you noticed?’ Tessica’s eyebrows drew together as Bea’s heart leapt into her throat. ‘The caption says

something about the guy thinking it time he joined the 21st century and turned over a new leaf. Want me to report him? Could be some kind of innuendo.'

Bea lunged for the phone, assessing the online pic. Warmth flooded her chest. The shot was slightly out of focus and Perry hadn't yet worked out the '@' feature, but she didn't care. He'd reached out to her, put himself on the line. Also, his full profile name read 'Ferris Perryman', which explained why her online searches for him had been fruitless. Madly typing, she DMed him her number, then handed the mobile back to Tessica.

'Don't do anything, sorry. That's someone I've been waiting to hear from. Meanwhile, I was wondering ... what would you think about becoming a co-director of Social Bea? Doubling the site's pulling power? It'd probably mean a brand name change.' Hey, she wasn't a narcissist like Trinity. 'But that also lends itself to a cool relaunch party and more column inches in the paper. Did I mention your coverage of the Spring Fling was amazing?'

Tessica's eyes were almost the size of her hoop earrings. 'Me? As a co-director? You're serious?'

'As a tumour. It'd also be good to build up a contributor team, I reckon. Divvy up the nights out a bit more.'

A few nights in per week wouldn't turn her back into Boring Bea. And anyway, she didn't need to prove herself anymore to the mean girls from high school, who'd snickered over her lack of a social life, friends.

As Tessica gulped air like a blue tang fish, Bea's phone trilled in her handbag. 'Hold that thought.' Plucking out her mobile, she checked the screen and didn't recognise the digits. A good thing. She pressed it to her ear, her heart flutter. 'Hello?'

Perry's gravelly voice, as expected, echoed down the line. 'Hey, it's me, of course. Um, I was wondering if there were any upcoming glitzy parties you needed a plus-one for? Just wanted to make amends after

acting like a dumb-arse the other night. Guess I was so busy trying to convince myself you were some narrow-minded partygoer, I didn't realise I was the one really acting that way. That I'd closed myself off to something special, something different.' He paused to cough. 'Stupid, though, 'cause I haven't been able to stop thinking about you.'

The bad boy had asked her out! Who would have thunk it? *Both* of them had needed to break down preconceptions that night, it seemed.

Bea flicked her nails on her free hand together. 'Actually ... I saw The Stinker was having another metal night tonight and thought of you. Could be a goer?'

The smile resonated in his voice. 'It's a date.'

Spring had officially—and rather noisily, considering the heavy metal—sprung.



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.

BLAZING HEARTS BY
SAMANTHA BOND



BLAZING HEARTS

SAMANTHA BOND

‘Blaze?’

‘Yup.’

‘Your name is Blaze and you’re a firefighter? That’s hilarious!’

Blaze bit her bottom lip. As if she didn’t hear this a million times a week. ‘Firefighter-in-training,’ she corrected. ‘I work at a station in the Hills in an admin role, but I’m hoping to join the active team soon.’

‘My, my.’ Blaze’s balding, middle-aged date leaned back in his velvet-upholstered chair, laced his fingers together and appraised her with a new sparkle in his faded blue eyes. ‘Don’t you think that’s a little dangerous, you know, for a—’

‘For a woman?’ Blaze finished for him. ‘No more so than for a man.’ Another stereotype she’d encountered from almost everyone she knew when she told them she wanted to be a firey.

‘Of course not.’ Richard, her blind date selected by her best friend, Anna, blushed. ‘I didn’t mean ...’

Awkward silence hung between the two. Around them, other couples and groups were in animated conversations or simply enjoying the ambience of the posh French restaurant that Richard had chosen.

‘So, ah, Blaze,’ he said, clearing his throat. ‘It’s still a very unusual name. Any reason your parents chose it?’

She should go easy on him. It was hardly his fault that Anna had to play matchmaker and that Blaze couldn’t say no to her. ‘My guess

would be because of my hair.'

Richard's uncomfortable expression turned to confusion. 'But it's not red. What would you call it ...light brown? Dark blonde?'

Blaze grinned. '*Ash* blonde.'

Richard's face cracked open with a loud guffaw, revealing yellow-stained teeth as he laughed. 'Wow, Anna didn't tell me you were so funny.'

Blaze half-heartedly smiled back and resisted the urge to wipe away the spittle that had landed on her cheek. Then she'd be rude as well as funny. Thankfully, the waiter arrived and began running through the specials. Blaze tuned out. She'd said the magic word—*Ash*—and if the date hadn't been a waste of time before, it was now.

Asher Vaughn, second-in command at Mount Ridley Fire Station, was never far from her mind. Asher was Hebrew for "happiness" or "blessed", and she knew she'd be both if she could make the hunky fireman see her the same way she saw him.

'Blaze?' Richard's voice snapped her back. 'Would you like me to order for you?'

Blaze nodded her assent. She didn't care what she ate. The only bits of her life she relished were when she was at training—pushing her body to go harder, faster, stronger—and those stolen moments at work when she got to be around Asher.

Everything else, and every other guy, was just bland.



The phone rang as Blaze slid into her driver's seat. Anna. 'Hi, sweet,' she answered before switching to hands-free mode and starting the engine.

'So, how did it go?' Anna's voice was sing-songy. It gave away her poorly concealed hope that, finally, she'd found a match for her overly picky friend.

‘He was perfectly lovely,’ Blaze said in a measured tone, pulling out of the restaurant car park into the city traffic. It was the heaviest she’d seen it at night in months—the recent blast of spring weather seemed to be bringing everyone out of hibernation.

Anna let out a sigh. ‘Oh, hon. You’re not going to see him again, are you?’

Blaze was rescued from the need to answer by a shrieking toddler in the background. Which one, she wasn’t sure.

‘Henry!’ Anna screeched. ‘Put that down and stop hitting your brother. I mean it, mister. I’m going to count to three and if you haven’t put it down ...one, two ...’

The noise stopped, replaced with the sound of tiny feet running away from their mother.

‘Hey, hon, if this is a bad time, I can call back.’

‘No, no,’ Anna said. ‘You know what it’s like around here. When is it ever a good time?’

‘Hmm, yeah.’ Blaze was used to the chaos that was now Anna’s life with three-year-old twin boys. Once they’d been gym partners and shopping pals, and cocktails at a bar on a Saturday night had been their regular thing. Then Anna had met Stu, was married and pregnant in under a year, and in place of Blaze’s elegant best friend was a frazzled, time-poor but ecstatically happy mother and wife.

‘Thanks for trying, sweet.’ Blaze truly was touched by Anna’s good intentions.

Anna sighed again. ‘You’re sure you didn’t like Richard?’

‘He was fine.’ Dull was another word that sprang to mind, not that she’d say this out loud. ‘There was just no spark.’

‘Blaze,’ Anna said. ‘You work alongside the most unrealistically beautiful man on earth. You have to stop comparing every poor bloke to him. You know what Mr Wonderful is probably out doing right now?’

He's at a club, surrounded by barely legal women in Lycra or hot pants or whatever they wear these days. And they're all wiggling their booties at him while he decides which one gets to take him home for the night.'

'Twerking,' said Blaze.

'Huh?'

'It's called twerking now, you married old fart.'

'That's my point exactly! Mr October is hardly the marrying kind, is he?'

'Maybe I don't want the marrying kind,' Blaze lied. She slouched in her seat, glared at the oncoming traffic. Anna was right. Asher was a complete chick magnet. He likely *was* at a city club taking his pick of all the perky, pretty young thangs.

'It's the uniform, isn't it?' Anna said. 'You're powerless against a man in a uniform.'

'It doesn't hurt,' Blaze agreed. 'But it's not the uniform *per se*, it's what it symbolises.'

'Heroism? Pur-lease! Marriage will knock those ridiculous notions of chivalry right out of your romantic head. It's just a job, Blaze. Let me know when you're over Mr October and I'll revisit my list of *appropriate* eligible men.'

'I'm sure you will.' Anna was nothing if not persistent and, at least for the moment, Blaze was over discussing the reality of her loveless love life. 'I'll talk to you later, babe,' she said and they ended the call.

It was time to get home and relax into an Asher fantasy—shake off the blues and replace them with a little red-hot self-soothing. Perhaps a fantasy of Asher grooving at the club would do it. Blaze pictured his six-foot-three, perfectly muscled frame towering above Blaze's petite five-six as they danced close together. In her fantasy, Asher's chocolate-drop eyes gazed knowingly into hers until, unable to stand the tension any longer, Blaze reached up, tangled her fingers in the thick dark hair at the nape of his neck and pulled his mouth down to

hers. They kissed intently and then, as in every other fantasy she'd ever had about him, Asher swept her up into his powerful arms and crushed her against his perfect pecs and chest.

God, the man was a walking wet dream. The fact that he risked his life every day to save others, well, that almost made it unfair.

Anna was right. How was any regular man supposed to compete with that?



Theo tugged the sleeves of his black hoodie down until half his palms were covered. It was unnecessary, a stupid habit of overcompensating—the scars were on his forearms, triceps and chest, nowhere near his hands. But whenever he was nervous, Theo tried to cover up as much as possible. And on this bright spring Sunday morning, sitting in old Mrs Washington's lounge room, Theo was perspiring with nerves. It had to be nerves. While the sunshine was lovely, it was hardly blazing. He coughed, physically choking on the word “blazing” and tugged his sleeves almost off.

It had been a decade since Theo—or Teddy, as he was known back then—had been at his mum's elderly neighbour's house. Ten years since he'd harboured the hope that Mrs Washington's granddaughter, his old babysitter, Blaze, might walk through the door.

‘It's just so wonderful having my Theo home,’ his mum said, giving him yet another hug and laying the side of her cheek on his shoulder. She hadn't stopped doing that all week.

‘Of course it is,’ Mrs Washington said. ‘Children should never move away from their parents.’ She wagged a long, knobbled finger at him. ‘Breaks their heart, don't you know young man? I hope you've finally come to your senses and you're back here to marry my Blaze.’ There was a twinkle in the mischievous old woman's eyes.

Heat rushed up Theo's chest, neck and cheeks. She knew. How could she know? ‘That's exactly why I'm here, Mrs Washington.’ It was

always better to meet a joke with a joke. Even if neither was *entirely* a joke.

‘My Blaze is so wonderful. She comes almost every day and visits me each Sunday without fail,’ Mrs Washington continued. ‘How many young career women do that nowadays, you tell me?’

This one does, Theo wanted to reply. While he’d never had the guts to reach out to her, he’d followed Blaze’s social media posts about her regular Sunday visits to Grandma’s house for some time now. In her publicly viewable pictures, Blaze had smiled back at Theo with her cupid-bow lips that made him want to touch his index finger to their perfect peak. Her jade eyes that reminded him of the sea were as vibrant as when she was seventeen and he thirteen, and she still wore her hair long and straight. It hung over her shoulders, caressing her breasts. Theo envied that hair. Her image conjured up memories of a teenaged Blaze helping him with his homework, unaware he could see the white lace of her bra through her t-shirt’s neckline when she leaned forward. He shivered at the memory.

‘You’re very lucky, Helen,’ his mum said, snapping him out of his reverie. ‘Perhaps she can convince my boy that it’s time to come home for good, to be around his family and let us take care of him properly. After all,’ she said, nodding at her son, ‘Blaze took such good care of you when you were younger.’

Theo gave her a half smile and again tugged at his sleeves. If Blaze wanted him to stay, he’d do it in a heartbeat. He doubted, however, that would be the case. Ten years ago, as a shy eighteen year old, he’d tried to tell her how he felt. But he’d blown it, too tangled up with nerves to get the words out. Then he’d left Mount Ridley to pursue his career and he hadn’t seen her since.

He was different now; life had hardened him up in plenty of ways. But still, why would his gorgeous, sexy, funny former babysitter want him now? He’d also seen pictures of the men she worked with. They were fit, undamaged specimens—unlike him.



Blaze was late. She'd overslept, too engrossed in a dream featuring Asher rescuing her from a burning nightclub to realise the alarm going off by her head was her actual alarm and not the fictitious fire alarm of her fictitious nightclub. Grandma Helen would be pissed.

Skipping the shower, Blaze threw on sweat pants, a sports bra and t-shirt. She'd run the few kilometres to her grandma's place and work on improving her time for the beep test in a month. That was one of the great things about living in Mount Ridley: everything was so close. It was the largest Hills town and the only one with a dedicated professional fire station and not just the Country Fire Service volunteers, but it was still basically a country town. The only reason it had its own station was its central location to the other townships and farming stations it serviced in the fire-prone rural area. Being geographically small was good as far as Blaze was concerned; it meant she could always get to Grandma's place super quick in case of an emergency. The old lady was far too fond of irreverently racing her chair up and down the stair lift—she was going to come a cropper one of these days.

She arrived twenty minutes later, dripping with sweat and out of breath. Voices floated through the screen of the open front door. Visitors? Ye gads! Hopefully it was just one of her elderly neighbours who wouldn't hold Blaze's appearance or, ahem, smell, against her.

'Hello?' Blaze called tentatively pushing open the door. 'Grandma?'

'In here, pumpkin.'

Blaze followed the sound through to the lounge room.

'Darling!' Helen opened her arms for a hug as Blaze entered the room.

Blaze stopped dead. On her grandma's incredibly well-preserved couch was her middle-aged neighbour and a man she didn't know. Quite a good looking man, too. He had short, dark-brown hair cut in a harsh, military style, but his face was softened by remarkably blue eyes

and fulsome lips. Immediately, Blaze was much more self-conscious about her scruffy appearance.

‘Hi, Grandma.’ Blaze crossed to her side, hugged her and placed a kiss on the paper-thin skin of her gran’s cheek.

‘You remember Lesley and Theodore, don’t you, darling?’

Blaze looked from the middle-aged woman to the younger (perhaps a few years younger than her?) man and his expectant, slightly worried face. His vibrant blue eyes blinked rapidly several times before he dropped his gaze to his feet. There was something quite familiar about him, but who was he?

‘Sure, Lesley. It’s been a while.’ Blaze plopped into the armchair beside her grandma. ‘And Theodore, was it?’

‘Yes, Theodore. Theo. I mean, it’s Theo now.’ Bright spots blossomed on his cheeks. ‘Oh, you’re all wet.’

What? Who was this creep? Instinctively, Blaze crossed her arms over her chest. Thank goodness she hadn’t worn white.

‘Teddy!’ Lesley smacked her son’s forehead lightly. ‘What’s gotten into you?’

‘Ah, I’m sorry. I meant, you’ve been running. You’re sweating ...’ The poor man looked like he was in agony.

‘And sweating is something you know a lot about, isn’t it?’ Helen raised her eyebrows at Teddy as though she were privy to some inside joke. An evil twinkle sparkled in her eyes, and the corners of her lips turned up just that little bit. She turned to Blaze. ‘*Teddy* here is undertaking his own fitness regimen while he’s on sabbatical.’

Blaze relaxed her defensive pose. Teddy? Of course! He’d always been an odd sort of boy. So nervous and shy.

‘Teddy, my gosh you’ve changed so much. Look at you, all grown up.’ Blaze recalled the chubby kid she’d babysat a lifetime ago. The puppy fat was definitely gone now. Although not in Asher’s league, it

seemed he was quite svelte and muscular under all his layers of clothing. 'What has it been? Eight, nine years since you left?'

'Ten,' Teddy said, shooting Helen a look of gratitude.

'And now, he's taking a well-earned break.' Helen grinned back at him. 'You know, you two should team up. My beautiful granddaughter is training to be a fire-fighter and Theo, it's some kind of marathon you're preparing for, isn't it?'

'Something like that.' Theo looked slightly less tortured but the rosebuds on his cheeks still bloomed away.

'You two could catch up on old times,' Helen persisted.

'Ha!' Blaze blurted, as a particularly memorable incident resurfaced. 'Teddy, do you remember that time I left you alone in your mum's kitchen to make your own after-school snack?'

Theo closed his eyes and groaned, dropping his head to his hands.

'I came back just as you were about to shove an unopened tin of baked beans in the microwave!' Blaze cracked up. 'Can you imagine if I hadn't caught you?'

Theo peeked up at her from between his fingers. 'Yes, unfortunately I do remember that.'

'Guess it's a good thing I know how to handle fires if we're going to train together.' Blaze couldn't help giving him a wink. The poor guy. He'd come home for a holiday and a gaggle of older women immediately bring up embarrassing childhood memories.

'Wonderful,' said Helen. 'If I were a decade younger, I'd join the both of you. Perhaps we could do relay runs up and down my staircase? The stair lift is a blast, just wish I could supe the thing up a bit.'



At seven thirty Monday morning, Blaze considered her meagre lipstick collection. With a tentative, then more certain hand, she selected the

Fire Engine Red shade Grandma Helen had bestowed upon her when she started work at the station. After the dismal date and trip down memory lane of the weekend past, it was definitely time to pull out the big guns—Asher would have to be suffering from smoke-induced blindness not to notice her now. But just to be sure, after donning a charcoal pencil skirt with a thigh split, kitten heels and fitted white blouse, she undid one extra shirt button. The Wonderbra could only be a good thing, too. It could serve as a preview to the many romantic nights they'd share together in future as they got to know each other properly and fell in love.

She surveyed herself in the mirror. Was it too much? Perhaps just a *leetle* bit, but she was over making up fantasies. It was time for the real deal.

At work, the rostered team were arriving in dribs and drabs. Some, nodded a hello on their way through Blaze's admin territory to the kitchen beyond to make their morning brew. The rumble of truck engines in the garage rose and fell as drivers tested all was good to go at a second's notice.

The team who'd had the overnight shift filtered out, and then Blaze knew, even without looking up from her computer screen, that he was there. It was like a seismic change in the atmosphere as super-charged pheromones that magnetised to hers rippled through the air. She could just *sense* him.

'Ash,' some of the guys called to him from the kitchen. Even *they* could feel his arrival.

Blaze sat up straighter, pulled her shoulders back and hoped the undone button and Wonderbra were giving her pathetic bosoms at least the illusion of cleavage.

'Good morning, Asher.' Blaze beamed at the hunk entering the room. He was wearing vintage jeans, a grey t-shirt that strained slightly over his broad chest, and biker boots. A modern James Dean. Swoon.

He nodded hello, flashed her one of his charming smiles and began heading toward the kitchen. Abruptly, he turned around.

‘Well, Miss Washington.’ Asher stopped directly in front of her desk and tucked his motorcycle helmet under one arm. Blaze was suddenly very aware of her pulse thumping in her neck. ‘You look different today. You’ve got ... a glow. Big weekend, was it?’ Asher narrowed his eyes at her. ‘Are you in *lurve*? Who’s the lucky man?’

‘Ah, er ...’ Blaze stuttered. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. He was supposed to just get it that this was all for him. ‘Um—’

‘Well, he sounds extra special.’ Asher threw back his head and laughed. ‘Don’t let him get away.’ Then he swivelled in his buckled black boots and made his way to the kitchen, leaving Blaze feeling like the biggest fool on earth.

‘I blew it,’ she wailed to Anna over the phone on her lunch break. It had been an actionless morning and Blaze had sat there pretending to be busy while burning with humiliation.

‘I’m sure you didn’t,’ Anna said.

‘I did! I was all like, “Uh, ah ... words, what are those?” I was as bad as Teddy yesterday.’

‘Teddy? That kid you used to babysit?’

‘Yeah, he’s back home visiting his mum.’

‘Oh, *I see* ...’

Blaze picked up on Anna’s tone and was about to tell her not to get any stupid ideas when, true to form, Anna shrieked.

‘Miller! Put that bowl of spaghetti down right this second, mister. No! Not on your brother’s head!’

‘This sounds like a bad time.’

‘Sorry, babe. This time it actually is. I’d better go and rescue Henry. Think I’ll just take him out the back and hose him off.’

‘Good luck.’ Blaze hung up, feeling worse than when she’d called. It wasn’t that she resented her bestie for no longer being available 24/7, but it did highlight just how alone Blaze was these days. Thank goodness for Grandma Helen or she’d have no one left in her life. She thought about the previous day and the unexpected long-lost visitor. Grandma was probably joking about them training together, but perhaps he could use a friend while he was in town, and a bit of company for herself wouldn’t be such a bad thing either.

Scrolling through her contacts, Blaze found the number Teddy had entered and typed a quick text: *‘The oval at 5.30. You up for a training session?’*

He’d know the one. There was only one footy oval in Mount Ridley.



Theo bounced from one foot to the other, humming *Eye of the Tiger*. Dry grass brushed his bare ankles and late afternoon sunshine cast a golden glow over his childhood footy field. He was early. It would give him time to psych himself up, be prepared this time and try to rectify the damage he’d caused yesterday. If in fact, there was any coming back from that ridiculous spectacle. From the look on Blaze’s face when he’d said she was all wet, she’d obviously thought he was a creep. This was it: his last chance to show the girl he’d loved forever that he wasn’t a character from Radiohead’s song of the same name and that he was also no longer “Teddy”. Yep, time to man up.

A small blue hatchback pulled up in the car park and Blaze emerged in grey running shorts and a bright pink crop-top that left her perfectly toned midriff exposed. Theo’s newfound courage dipped. *Suck it up*, he ordered himself. He knocked out a few *Rocky*-style air punches and jogged over to greet Blaze.

‘Hi,’ he said, feigning confidence. ‘Great evening for a run.’ And it was. With daylight savings starting in October, it meant there was at least two hours of natural light left in the clear spring sky.

‘Sure makes it easier,’ Blaze said, giving his outfit a sceptical once-

over. 'Aren't you hot?' In contrast to Blaze's skimpy outfit, Theo was again covered in a long-sleeved hoodie and track pants.

For a second, he thought about explaining. 'It's all good,' he said instead. 'Helps to get up a decent sweat.'

'Hmm, you're probably right. I need to be doing more cardio with heavier gear on. Not as though I'll be dressed like this when I'm out on the job, is it?'

'Probably not advisable.'

Blaze bent double and began to stretch her hamstrings. 'Thanks for coming,' she said from somewhere between her knees. Then, 'Oh, shoot!'

'A problem?' Theo likewise began to limber up.

'I forgot my sunscreen.' Blaze straightened. 'It's in my bathroom cabinet. I can picture it.'

'No worries, I have some. Wait here and I'll be right back.' Theo jogged to his car and came back with a tube, which he handed to Blaze.

'Extra-sensitive sunscreen,' she said regarding the tube in her hand. 'Why? Does it get upset easily?'

Theo chuckled and felt gooey all over. No wonder his crush had endured this long.

Theo followed Blaze's lead. She began with a few laps around the kilometre-long circumference of the oval to warm up, then they moved into interval training: sixty-second sprints followed by a thirty-second recovery. Theo's fitness was on the rise, but she still had him. When they collapsed in the evening-cool grass to do core work, it was almost a relief.

'You do this all the time?' Theo panted between crunches.

'I have to,' Blaze said. 'That is, if I want to be accepted into the government fire-fighter trainee program. It's brutal. They only take the

best of the best. I have to be quick enough to get in and out of a burning property, and strong enough to carry anyone who needs it.'

'I suppose you do.' Memories of his own encounter with flames raced at him and he unconsciously touched his chest where he'd been burnt the worse. 'Do you know what you're in for?'

'More than most,' Blaze said. 'I deal with the calls every day, talk to the fire-fighters at work, see what they deal with. With the weather heating up and everything so dry up here, the callouts have increased and it's not even summer yet.' Her eyes clouded over. 'There was this one little girl about six months ago. Our people got her and her family out of their house, but she ran back for her favourite doll while the adults were too busy panicking.'

'Was she ... did she ... *die*?'

'Yes.' Tears formed in Blaze's eyes. 'The mother blamed herself. She'll never be the same again. You can replace things. You can't replace people.' Blaze stared over Theo's head and went quiet. 'That could have been my best friend's child. I just want to do what I can to help and that means I have to be the fittest, strongest, toughest version of me that I can possibly be.' Blaze jutted her chin, determination shining through her entire being.

A sense of falling, like being knocked over by a wave, washed over Theo and something clicked. He'd been in love with a childhood memory for so long, but now he was falling for *this* Blaze. He had to make the night last longer.

'You know what?' He jumped up and extended his hand. 'It's no good doing all this training without the right fuel. What do you say to a dirty big parmy at the Slug 'n Lettuce?'

Blaze's attention snapped back to him. 'But I'm filthy.' She eyed off the grass stains on her shorts and the sweat patches all over her.

Theo grinned. 'The parmy won't feel out of place then, will it?'

Blaze grinned back and allowed Theo to haul her to her feet.



The Slug ‘n Lettuce pub was full of families and casual couples out for a quick counter meal. Theo ordered drinks before spotting a free table in the far corner, slightly removed from the white noise of conversation around them.

‘So,’ said Blaze, sliding into the chair and taking a sip of her white wine. She’d put a loose-fitting t-shirt of the same vibrant pink over the crop top, which only emphasised the bareness of her tanned, toned legs. ‘What’s been going on in your life?’

Theo cleared his throat. Where should he start? ‘The short version? I finished my chef’s apprenticeship, got a crappy job, moved on to a much better job, then had a bit of an accident.’ He tried not to flinch at the memory of his sous chef on fire, Theo throwing himself on top and smothering the flames with his body. He’d had oven mitts on, which had saved his hands, but his arms and chest had copped it.

‘Oh, that’s too bad,’ Blaze said. ‘Was it a serious accident?’

‘I guess you could say that.’ He pictured the burns unit that had been his home for weeks, followed by months of treatment as an outpatient. ‘I’m taking some time now to decide if I want to go back to that job or not.’ He’d been offered a payout if he wanted it—that’s what happened when you got fried at work due to poor kitchen equipment maintenance. You got paid out to disappear.

‘So Grandma Helen says you’re in training for a marathon?’

‘It’s what I tell people,’ Theo said. ‘It draws fewer questions than when I tell them I’m trying to recover fitness lost through an accident.’

Blaze regarded him with concern in her eyes. ‘Questions suck,’ she agreed, reaching for his hand. ‘You need some cheering up. Let’s dance.’

‘What?’ he asked, but Blaze had thrown back the last of her wine and was already dragging him toward the beer garden where a local band was playing covers to a small group. Outside, the sun was setting,

casting purple and crimson arcs across the evening sky, and as they made their way onto the brick-paved dance floor the band switched from a rock number to Jordin Sparks's *No Air*.

This is it, Theo told himself and tentatively slipped his arms around Blaze's waist. She responded, wrapping her arms around his neck, her cheek resting against his chest. It was the best balm for his wounded flesh he could have imagined.

The evening breeze picked up, causing Blaze's scent to waft up his nostrils. 'Mmm,' he said dreamily. 'You smell like coconut.'

He could feel her face scrunch to a grin against his chest before she looked up at him with those jade eyes.

'Don't tell the sunscreen. It thinks it's Tropical Punch.'



Blaze awoke with a gasp. Something had jolted her out of her sleep. What was it? The dream she'd been enjoying—featuring Asher's pecs and eight-pack—slipped away, back to the Land of Nod. No matter, she'd see the real deal soon. And for some reason, today she felt more confident. She wasn't sure why, or when her subconscious had made the decision for her, but today she was going to be direct and ask Asher out. If he blatantly rejected her, she only had a month to endure before (hopefully) commencing at the training school. And once she'd finished that, he would have forgotten all about the pathetic woman who'd thrown herself at him.

At ten to nine, Blaze was at her desk when again she felt the seismic atmosphere change that announced Asher's arrival. She looked up, pasted on what she hoped was her most winning smile, and called out as he swaggered through the door.

'Morning, Asher.' Blaze injected as much confidence as she could into her voice. 'Can I have a quick word with you, please?'

'What can I do for you, Miss Washington?' Amusement played at the corner of his eyes and lips. Probably recalling their last interaction.

Blaze ignored it.

‘Actually, I was hoping you could help me. You may have heard that I’ve applied to the training school so I can join you guys on the real job.’

His thick eyebrows shot up. ‘Really?’

Finally, some interest. ‘Really,’ she confirmed. ‘And I was hoping that maybe you could take me out on the truck to a job one day, let me experience what you do.’

There was definite amusement on his face now, but also definite interest. Why hadn’t she tried this approach before?

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘Always happy to help such an eager beaver. Why don’t we take the truck for a spin now?’

‘Now? But no jobs have come in.’

Asher dropped his gaze from her face to the low-cut neckline of her fitted black knit top. ‘Does that *really* matter?’

Blaze’s breath caught. This was what she’d been wanting for so long, but something felt off. ‘What if a job *does* come in?’

‘We won’t go far, we can have the truck back at a moment’s notice. Promise.’ He gave her another head-to-breast eye sweep. ‘I’m sure it will be highly beneficial to your *studies*.’

In the garage that housed three shining red fire trucks, Asher, still dressed in his civvies, had a private word with a driver on stand-by, then climbed into the back of a truck and hauled Blaze in after him. The driver gunned the engine, remotely opened the roller door, then shot the two a smirk over his shoulder before pulling the beast out onto the road.

Clicking her seatbelt in, Blaze appraised Asher. The truck’s cabin held several bench seats, some forward facing like in a normal vehicle, others backward facing to maximise seating capacity. Asher sat

opposite her. Their knees almost touched. It was getting hard to breathe. She'd never been this close to him before.

‘So, Miss Washington, what makes you think you’ve got what it takes to do what I do?’ He leant forward, staring deep into her eyes. ‘Or was that just an excuse to ride my *truck*?’

Blaze swallowed hard, vaguely aware of the central Mount Ridley streets zipping past the window. ‘I, I think what you do is amazing,’ she babbled, suddenly hot all over. ‘And I’m training really hard so I can do it, too. You guys, you don’t think about your own safety. You do what others can’t. You’re basically superheroes ...’ Blaze cringed at the words tumbling from her mouth.

Asher laughed, undid his seatbelt and leaned forward, placing his hand on her upper thigh. Blaze choked, spluttering on a particularly large lump of nothing. Asher laughed at her again, and his hand slid further up her leg.

In an instant, she felt sixteen again, like she’d never been alone with a man. Well, she’d never been alone with one *this* hot. ‘I’ve applied to the schoo—’

But Asher silenced her with a kiss. If you could call it that. It was more like he was trying to devour her mouth with his. It hurt. Then, he was squatting in front of her, pressing his torso against hers. In one quick, obviously well-practiced motion, he removed her top, then his. Asher’s amazing, rock-hard—no, make that *diamond-hard*—abs were pressed against her flesh. She should be in heaven. Why wasn’t she?

Then it happened.

The dream that had startled Blaze awake flooded back. In it, she’d been experiencing some version of this, but when the fireman hottie removed his mask, instead of Asher’s face it was Teddy’s. Blaze gasped and broke away.

What was going on? Why was she thinking of Teddy, when her fantasy man was finally all over her?

‘Asher.’ She placed her palm on his chest, steadying his advances. ‘You’ve paid no attention to me, like ever, and now you’re making out with me?’

One of his eyebrows rose, giving him a quizzical expression. ‘Isn’t this what you’re after?’ He motioned with one hand toward his groin. ‘You *did* drop the screw bait.’

‘The what now?’ Blaze’s posture straightened, indignation swallowing her whole. ‘The *screw bait*?’

‘Ash,’ the driver called. ‘Usual spot?’

‘Yessiree,’ Asher called back.

Blaze looked from her (rapidly fading) crush to his obvious accomplice. ‘*Usual place*?’

‘You asked to come for a ride in my truck.’ His tone was one of calm patience that Blaze had heard Anna use when her children were being particularly clueless. ‘Everyone knows that’s screw bait. You basically said, “Take me out for a midday quickie. Make my pathetic fantasies of fucking in a fire truck come true.”’

Blaze’s phone rang. She ignored it. ‘No, I told you I’d applied to the fire-training school and asked for your help as a colleague.’ Amazing how months of fantasies could be wiped out by ten minutes of reality. How had she not seen what a self-obsessed sleazebag the man was?

The truck slowed and came to a stop under the shade of a group of trees. Blaze glanced out the window. They were at the far end of the car park by the oval where she trained. This was his “usual spot”? Of course it was; fate was laughing at her for being such an idiot.

‘You know what?’ she began, but was interrupted by the ringing of another phone.

‘Fire at 28 Risdale Street, Ash,’ the driver called out. ‘Better get back to HQ.’

‘No!’ Blaze’s blood turned to ice. ‘Go straight there. That’s my

grandma's house!'

Asher slipped his t-shirt back on. 'I know you're only an applicant to the training school and all, Miss Washington, but do you notice something missing?' He pointed at his casual attire. 'Might need some protective gear, doncha think?'

The truck was in reverse, pulling out of the oval that was so close to Grandma Helen's place it was nonsensical to waste time going back to the station. 'No, you have to go straight there,' she yelled again.

'Tell you what, why don't you hop out and run to Grandma, Little Red Riding Hood? Then the big men will come back and rescue the two of you.' The truck halted and Blaze jumped out. If she cut through the back streets, she'd be there in mere minutes.

'Just try not to make things worse,' Asher said from the truck. 'I don't want to deal with the paperwork.'

Blaze shot her former crush one last look as the truck took off again. 'Do you even know my first name?' she yelled at him, then found she didn't care enough to hang around for the answer. Turning swiftly, she ran towards Grandma's house.



It was Theo's worst nightmare. Fire. Yet here he was, standing at Helen Washington's front door trying to find a way into the locked, burning house. He'd called emergency services the moment he'd smelt the smoke and realised where it was coming from. But before official help arrived, a figure appeared at the end of the street and began belting towards him. It was Blaze. He didn't have time to wonder how she'd found out before she'd skidded to a halt beside him.

'Teddy! What's happened? How bad is it?'

'I'm not sure.' He forced himself to focus on the danger Helen Washington was in, not his own bubbling anxiety. 'I was in Mum's kitchen when I smelled smoke, saw it was coming from here and called

for help. The door is locked.’ He pulled on the handle a few times to demonstrate.

Blaze took a deep breath and visibly steadied herself. ‘I have a key, but opening the door could fuel the fire. It depends where it is.’ She reached into her handbag and pulled out her phone. ‘There’s a missed call from Grandma.’ It must have been her a few minutes ago—and Blaze had ignored the call to make out with Asher. ‘And there’s a text. *Stuck upstairs. The chairlift won’t work. Kitchen is on fire.*’ Blaze hit redial. ‘Come on, Grandma. Pick up!’ But the call rang out.

‘Right,’ Teddy said. Afraid or not, Helen could die if they didn’t act. ‘Is there a ladder somewhere? Can we get in through a window?’

‘In the garden shed.’ Blaze took off down the side of the house, through a gate, pulled out a set of keys and undid the padlock on the tin shed. Together, they dragged a rickety ladder out onto the lawn.

‘That’s Grandma’s bedroom.’ Blaze pointed to a window above them. ‘It’s likely locked, we’ll need to smash it.’

Theo hunted in the shed for a hammer while Blaze extended the ladder and laid it against the brick facade under the bedroom window. She was a few rungs up when he emerged with one.

‘Here,’ he said, reaching the tool up and handing it to her. ‘Do you want me to do it?’

‘Nope, I’m fine,’ she said. But her voice didn’t sound fine.

Wisps of white-grey smoke were now penetrating through the back windows of the house, the fumes hitting the back of his throat. What if it was already too late for the lovely old woman? Squashing down the memories of his own scorched flesh, Theo placed one foot on the bottom rung. ‘I’m coming up after you.’

He was halfway up the ladder when Blaze called out a warning, then swung the hammer, shattering the glass. Shards sprayed over Theo’s head and shoulders. Black smoke whumped out of the broken window, making them both cough and splutter.

‘I can see her,’ Blaze yelled between coughs. ‘She’s slumped on the bed. I don’t know if she’s breathing. Grandma! Can you hear me?’ Blaze reached through, undid the lock, pushed the whole pane in and disappeared into the room.

Theo concentrated on bringing his elevated breathing back down, placed the hand that he hadn’t noticed had flown to his chest back on the ladder, and climbed the last few rungs to the window. Looking inside, Theo froze. Blaze was mere metres from him, but he could only just make out her outline bending over the bed. Visibility was as bad as a foggy winter’s day on the freeway.

‘I can’t lift her, she’s a dead weight.’

Theo ripped off the metaphorical Band-Aid and hoisted himself through the window. The room was like an oven. He could hear flames crackling in the hallway behind the closed bedroom door. Theo fought for air as the smoke filled his lungs and he forged to Blaze’s side.

Blaze shook the limp body. ‘Grandma!’

‘Here,’ Theo said, scooping Helen into his arms. ‘Go back to the ladder. We’ll get her out through the window.’

Blaze did as she was told. Theo crossed the floor with the old lady cradled against him and together they manipulated her out the window and onto her granddaughter’s shoulder in a firey’s hold.

The blaring of fire engine sirens reached Theo’s ears a split second before a pop, followed by an explosion. The bedroom door burst open, a wall of angry, orange flames behind it. They licked at the wooden door frame, shot sparks into the room, set the carpet alight. The fire was coming for him. It was coming and he couldn’t move. His throat constricted, his breaths short, ineffectual grunts. There was a crack, like the splitting of wood, and a piece of burning debris fell on his shoulder. He was on fire. His shirt was on fire! A guttural sound left him. He ripped off his shirt, blind panic threatening to render him useless.

‘Teddy, get out of there!’ Blaze’s voice sounded very far away, but it was enough to snap him back.

Somehow he managed to grab the top of the ladder and clamber out the window. Blaze had made it down a few rungs, a couple more and he’d follow her.

‘Teddy!’ Blaze was imploring him with her eyes. He focused on them, the eyes of the girl who’d looked after him when he was a kid, now the eyes of the woman he loved. Pushing away the terror that wanted to immobilise him, he slowly, steadily, made his way down.



In the aftermath of ambulances and fire engines, sirens and great squirting hoses, Blaze had caught only a brief glance of Teddy standing shirtless by an ambulance before a paramedic wrapped him in a blanket and bundled him into the vehicle. It was only now that she was at the hospital, sitting by her sleeping grandma, that the horror of his freshly scarred torso hit her. The poor man. He’d downplayed his accident so much she’d never have guessed. His chest was striped with pink, puckered flesh, streaked white at the edges. He’d obviously suffered a lot, probably to a degree Blaze couldn’t even imagine, and yet he’d still raced to her aid.

Without any equipment.

There was a knock at the door. Blaze looked up and broke into a grin. ‘Teddy!’ She let go of Helen’s hand, raced to his side and engulfed him in a hug. Then just as quickly, she let go. ‘Oh, God. I didn’t hurt you, did I?’

Theo grinned back at her. ‘No, I’m fine. And don’t you think it’s about time you called me Theo?’

Blaze stared up into his face. His handsome, caring, heroic face. ‘You’re right, it is time.’

Theo placed his hands on Blaze’s shoulders, slid them down her arms and tentatively took hold of her hands. She squeezed back gently.

Theo nodded over her shoulder at Helen. ‘They told me your grandma will be okay.’

‘Yes, she’s a tough old nut. Thankfully the only damage is some smoke inhalation. They’re keeping her here for a while for monitoring, but I should be able to take her home with me in a day or two.’

‘You saved her,’ said Theo, taking a step closer to Blaze. His body heat radiated into her and she gulped.

‘Yep, I’m a regular superhero.’ His hands dwarfed her smaller ones. ‘Besides, you’re one to talk. Racing into that burning house after what you’ve been through.’

‘My wounds are healing,’ he said, his eyes revealing he wasn’t just talking about his physical scars.

Blaze gulped again.

‘You know, there’s something I’ve been wanting to do for a while now,’ he whispered into her hair.

Blaze tilted her head back, looked into his electric-blue eyes. ‘How long is a while?’

‘Only since I was thirteen.’

‘You know, I learnt a good lesson today,’ Blaze said. ‘Life is too short for fantasies.’

‘I agree,’ Theo said, then brought his lips down to meet hers in a soft kiss. Blaze melted, the kiss becoming more passionate. And then, just like in her fantasies, Theo held her close against him, cradled her in his arms, pressing her against his imperfectly perfect chest.

After a while, Theo pulled back and cupped Blaze’s face. His thumb traced her jaw. ‘Could I take you out for dinner sometime?’

‘That would be lovely,’ Blaze said. Then, unable to suppress her grin, ‘But perhaps stay away from those dangerous cans of baked beans.’



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.

SECOND CHANCES BY LAURA
GREAVES



SECOND CHANCES

LAURA GREAVES

‘An orgasm saved my life.’

I’m surprised the shrink doesn’t give herself whiplash as she swivels her head away from the window to face me. There’s a hungry curiosity in her dark eyes, magnified by her tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses, but she’s trying to appear impassive. *Finally*, she’s blatantly thinking, *something worth listening to*. Guess she skipped lectures the day they covered Poker Face 101.

I can hardly blame her. This is my third session and so far all I’ve offered the fortysomething psychologist with the severe bob is whining about being depressed, unemployed and so anxious I can barely dress myself without having a panic attack.

I haven’t told her *why*. I still haven’t told her about the Big Thing.

‘Mm-hmm,’ she says coolly. ‘Is that something you’d like to explore?’

I stifle a giggle, then swallow the wave of disgust that follows it. It’s the absurdity of her question I want to laugh at, not the situation it refers to, but I mentally chastise myself for allowing even a hint of levity. There is nothing funny about any of this. I have no right to so much as a chuckle.

‘Well ...’ Now it’s my turn to gaze through the tall sash windows to the vivid blue sky beyond. From the cosy fifth-floor eyrie that serves as Dr Corcoran’s office, I can see the tops of eucalypts swaying gently in the fragrant spring breeze. The trees’ languid choreography strikes me

as a metaphor for the carefree life I once had. Flowers will be blooming soon, I suppose. If I'd planted the crocus and jonquil bulbs in my little garden in autumn like I usually do, there would be soft purple and lemon-yellow petals unfurling any day. But I'd been distracted in autumn—and every day since.

New beginnings are everywhere this time of year. What a beautiful day to sit in an airless room and talk about endings.

'It's okay, Amy. You're in a safe space here. No judgement,' Dr Corcoran says. She's practically panting, so poorly disguised is her thirst for juicy drama. And obviously I *do* want to tell her or I wouldn't have opened with such a tantalising tidbit.

'I was ... with someone. A man. We were ... you know.' God, what's with the sudden modesty? I've already said 'orgasm'. There's no point pretending I have any class now.

'You were making love.'

Ha! Of all the words to describe what Daniel and I were doing that day, that's the last one I'd choose.

'Not exactly. I was having desperate break-up sex in an airport toilet with a married man and because of that I missed my flight. Flight nineteen.'

The colour drains from her face. 'Oh.'

Oh. That's what everyone says when I tell them I was booked on the doomed flight. Because I guess 'gee, fucking another woman's husband sure worked out well for you that day' would be inappropriate. Not that I've told many people exactly *why* I wasn't on that plane. I can't bear the moral outrage; their looks of revulsion. I've been doing a pretty good job of heaping that stuff on myself for the past six months—I don't need it from anyone else.

Everyone at work knew the truth about us, of course. There were already whispers about our closeness. When news broke, after the initial panic that I'd been on the plane, word quickly spread that I'd

never left the terminal. And they all knew that good ol' Daniel had made a point of driving me to the airport to travel to the conference. *What a great boss*, they must have thought. *What a stand-up guy*. Until they put two-and-two together.

‘So when you say that an orgasm saved your life ...’

‘Yes. I mean it literally. I was having an orgasm, I didn’t hear my boarding call, and I missed the flight.’

That it had been the *last* orgasm was immaterial. I didn’t have the energy to explain to the shrink—just as I hadn’t bothered trying to tell my colleagues—that I’d ended it that day. I’d gazed into Daniel’s eyes, the deep green of new spring foliage, and told him it was over. I’d said I couldn’t do it anymore, despite his tears, his entreaties to stay with him. Despite his kisses, his whispered declarations of a love he swore would never diminish.

Despite the fact that I adored him so intensely I could barely breathe.

There was no point trying to justify to anyone why we’d been together in that grotty bathroom. Once we were exposed, nothing could have stopped the gossip juggernaut. And so it kept rolling, right up to Daniel’s wife’s front door.

The good doctor purses her lips. I cast a furtive glance at her left hand and see a sizeable sparkler on her ring finger. I can practically hear the gears grinding in her brain as she weighs up how to handle this. She wants to appear professional, but she also undoubtedly wants to tell me I’m a whore and a homewrecker.

As if I don’t already know that.

‘Tell me, Amy,’ Dr Corcoran says at last. ‘What’s brought you here today? What are you struggling with?’

I frown and rake my hands through my ash blonde curls. *What am I struggling with?* I thought it was pretty obvious. I’m a total mess; I’m

struggling with anything and everything. Did the woman get her degree from an internet university?

‘What I’m asking is this,’ she continues. ‘Do you think your ongoing feelings of anxiety and sadness are due to the fact that you narrowly escaped a tragedy or because you were involved with a married man?’ She leans forward in her overstuffed armchair. ‘Because Post Traumatic Stress Disorder—you might have heard it called “Survivor Guilt”—is a very real, very manageable condition, and one I can help you with. But trying to shoulder the blame for a grown man’s poor decisions is not a thing we’re going to dwell on.’

Her words are like a punch to the gut. I actually recoil. ‘Excuse me?’

‘This guy—what was his name?’

‘Daniel.’ *Daniel Rafferty*. How I used to love rolling those words around in my mouth like a toffee. At work everybody called him ‘DR’ or ‘Dan’. But he was always Daniel to me, even though he laughed whenever I said it and told me it reminded him of being chastised by his mother. I kept saying it, because I was the only one who did, and there were so few parts of him that belonged to me and me alone.

‘Daniel was married. Correct?’

‘I think we’ve established that. Still is, as far as I know.’

‘And you were single?’

I nod. That’s still true, too.

‘As a single woman, you are entitled to sleep with whomever you choose. Daniel’s marriage was not your responsibility. You made no vows. It was not up to you to ensure he kept his—that’s *his* job.’

In half a year, this thought has literally never crossed my mind. She can’t be right, can she? It seems like a technicality at best. Surely I can’t be absolved of what I did so easily.

‘But his wife ...’ I mumble. I point to Dr Corcoran’s engagement ring. ‘What if your fiancé cheated? Would you feel so *kumbaya* about

the other woman?’

She slides the ring off her finger and drops it into the glass of water on the coffee table in front of her. My distorted reflection in the glass reveals the circles around my hazel eyes are deeper and darker than they were yesterday. Sleeping isn’t something I do a lot of these days.

‘That thing is plastic,’ she shrugs. ‘I wear it because it’s not uncommon for patients to develop romantic feelings for their therapist. It’s called transference.’

My breath comes out in a *whoosh*. I didn’t even realise I’d been holding it; wasn’t aware I’d been expecting this woman—a stranger—to write me off as a Bad Person, even though it’s her job to be impartial. And I was fully prepared to accept that assessment, too. Suddenly I feel lighter.

‘For six months I’ve been waiting for the other shoe to drop,’ I tell her. ‘I was supposed to be punished that day, but somehow I got away with it. I can’t move forward because I’m always looking over my shoulder, sure that fate is about to catch up with me. I’m still waiting to get what I deserve.’

The psychologist’s face softens. ‘Oh, Amy,’ she says, her voice gentle. ‘Nobody on flight nineteen was being punished. It was a tragic accident.’ She reaches across the coffee table and grasps my hand. ‘You loved Daniel.’

It’s not a question. Tears prick at my eyes and I nod miserably. ‘Still do.’

She smiles. ‘Don’t you think that’s punishment enough?’

‘So what should I do?’ I ask, sniffing pathetically. ‘I’ve quit my job. I’ve cut myself off from all my friends. I barely leave my house except to work in my garden.’

‘Well, I think we should continue to work together,’ Dr Corcoran says. ‘And beyond that, I think you should *live*. Whether you think

yourself worthy of it or not, you've been given a second chance. Make the most of it. Doctor's orders.'



The phrase 'flogging a dead horse' drifts through my mind as I yank the stubborn roots from the soil. I know the crocuses won't flower. The jonquils won't either. I was way too late planting them. The temperate spring days are slowly but surely being swallowed by the sticky heat of approaching summer and the soil is drying out.

But plant them I did, and tend them I shall, because Elsa—three months of twice-weekly psych sessions have earned me first-name privileges—told me to *live*. What better way to do that than stick bulbs in the dirt and will them to come to life?

Unfortunately the only thing flourishing in my garden is the weeds. I dig my trowel into the soil and prise up another clump of roots. It's really a shame weeds get such a bad rap; they're incredibly hardy and tenacious. If they were nice to look at people would cultivate rather than kill them. I can't help but admire their persistence—their single-minded refusal to divert from their goal of basking in the spring sunshine—even in the face of universal loathing.

Wow. Did I just find meaning in weeds? I chuckle to myself. That's scraping the bottom of the barrel, even for me—and I see symbolism everywhere these days. I make a mental note to tell Elsa about it at tomorrow's session as I sit back on my haunches and admire my handiwork.

It's just a patch of dirt, really. There won't be much to see until the tomatoes, capsicums and rhubarb are ready to harvest in midsummer. But it's somehow comforting to know so much is going on under the surface. Things are growing, changing, slowly becoming what they're supposed to be. Getting stronger with each passing day.

And there I go again with the symbolism.

'You always did love to garden.'

The sound of his voice is a shockwave. It knocks me off balance and I tumble onto the grass. I look up, half expecting to see buildings razed and trees felled by the force of those six words, but there's just him.

Daniel.

Standing on the footpath outside my garden gate.

'Hello, Amy,' he says. He smiles and it's beautiful and devastating at the same time.

I scramble to my feet, wiping my damp brow with the back of my soil-covered hand. A million words rush to the tip of my tongue. *Say the perfect thing!* But what comes out is, 'It's you.'

Daniel laughs. How I've missed that laugh. 'It is,' he says. 'I'm glad you haven't forgotten me. It's been a long time.'

Nine months, I want to scream at him. *Where have you been?* But I can't say that, of course. I know where Daniel has been. He's been with his wife, which is where he should have been all those times he was with me.

I can almost hear Elsa's words. *'No, Amy. Daniel chose to be with you. His choices are his responsibility, not yours.'*

Then why does the mere sight of his tall, broad frame, standing at my gate in a navy polo shirt and dark denim jeans, his skin as tanned and glowing as ever, make my face flush with shame? Not just because of what we did—but also because of the feeling of longing churning deep in my belly that tells me I want to do it all over again.

'What do you want, Daniel?'

He hesitates, his big hand resting on top of the gatepost. His left hand, I notice, and he's not wearing his wedding ring. 'Could I come in?' he says at last.

I feel myself nodding before I've even thought about it. By the time my brain catches up, he's already standing in front of me. He smiles

again and I see the dimple in his right cheek. God, I'd forgotten about the dimple.

'You're dirty,' he says.

'Excuse me?'

A horrified expression scuds across his handsome face. 'No! That came out wrong,' he says, looking stricken. 'I mean you have soil on your face. From the garden. Here.'

He reaches out and softly brushes my right temple with the pads of his fingers. The touch of his skin on mine feels like electricity. I imagine a livid red burn marking the place where our bodies connected.

Then I imagine our bodies entwined in a far less innocent way and it knocks the wind out of me.

'You need to leave,' I say. To my own ears, my voice sounds strangled. 'You can't just turn up like this. I'm trying to move on. I'm trying to live.'

Without you.

Daniel's hand drops to his side. 'I'm sorry,' he says quietly. 'I just wanted to see you. I needed to know that you're okay.'

Suddenly, I feel angry. It's easier than letting his sadness into my soul. 'Why now? Will that make you feel better about what we did?'

He laughs bitterly and there's a flash of steel in his moss green eyes. 'Nothing will make me feel better about losing you, Amy. Not ever. But I'll never regret *what we did*'—he hisses the words—'because it kept you from getting on that plane.'

Then he turns around and walks away.



'I hadn't thought about it like that,' I confess in Elsa's office the next day.

‘Like what?’ she presses. Damn her insistence on specificity. She steadfastly refuses to read between the lines; always makes me say the tough stuff out loud.

‘That maybe Daniel is glad it happened. Glad I missed my flight, even though it meant we got caught.’

Elsa regards me thoughtfully. ‘Why does that surprise you?’

‘Well, I guess I just assumed he would regret it—all of it—because it ended so badly for him. By not getting on that plane, I made everything in his life fall apart.’

‘Now Amy,’ Elsa says patiently. ‘We’ve talked about this.’

I roll my eyes. ‘Yes, yes, I know. *He* made his life fall apart because of *his* decisions. But you can’t deny I was complicit in it. You *can’t*,’ I say when I see her dubious expression. ‘I always imagined he would blame me for it, at least a little bit.’

‘By not getting on that plane, you lived. Perhaps he was grateful for that because he loved you.’ Elsa says this with a small shrug, as though it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

I consider this. Sure, Daniel had often said he loved me. But that’s page one of the *Adulterer’s Handbook*, isn’t it? Tell her you love her so she’ll keep coming back. I’d never really let myself believe it, though I’d known I loved him from day one. *Moment* one.

But if Elsa believes Daniel really loved me—impartial, inscrutable Elsa—perhaps it could be true. The possibility that maybe he didn’t wish for the ability to erase me—erase *us*—from his life is both wonderful and heartbreaking.

‘Then why wait nine months to see me? He hasn’t so much as called since that day at the airport.’

‘I can’t answer that,’ Elsa says. ‘Only Daniel can. And you should ask him.’

‘*What?*’ Has she gone mad? ‘I can’t see Daniel again. I just can’t.’

‘What I keep coming back to,’ she says, deftly ignoring my panic, ‘is this notion of a second chance. You got one that day at the airport. Maybe there’s another one to be had.’

‘Are you telling me to go after a married man? Can you even do that? Isn’t it against the psychologists’ code or something? First, do no harm. Second, destroy no marriages?’

She offers an enigmatic smile. ‘I’m not telling you to do anything, Amy. I’m asking you to decide how much you want answers to your questions. I’m asking you how you plan to live your life going forward.’

‘Can you be more specific?’

Elsa shakes her head. ‘I’m afraid not,’ she says. ‘The specifics, as always, are up to you.’



My hands are shaking as I dial Daniel’s number. I’ve never called him before. In all the months we were together—if that’s what you can call it—I never heard his voice at the end of a telephone line. I was always too afraid of discovery to risk my name appearing in his call list, and anyway, working together meant we could make our clandestine plans face to face. He often poked fun at my cloak-and-dagger antics. Funny how I always seemed more frightened of being found out than he did.

He answers on the first ring. ‘Amy?’

My heart flip-flops a little as it registers the hope in his voice. ‘Hi,’ I say. Then, ‘I’m sorry.’

There’s a pause. ‘What for?’

Where to begin? ‘Everything. I’d like to see you if that’s okay.’

I expect another pause. Despite what Elsa may think, I can’t quite bring myself to believe there could be a chance for Daniel and me. I did something terrible—*we* did something terrible—and then I escaped something even worse. The universe doesn’t reward people like me. The universe sends catastrophe as payback. I’ve been waiting for it for three-quarters of a year. It’s exhausting.

Perhaps that's what I'm hoping for: certainty. Incontrovertible proof that there's no hope for us; that I will be handed a sad fate after all. If Daniel laughs at me or slams down the phone, the world will have been put back on its axis. Balance will have been restored.

I'll be miserable, obviously. But I figure I deserve that.

But Daniel answers immediately. 'I'd like to see you, too. Very much. Shall I come to you?'

'No!' I'm surprised by my own vehemence. But the thought of him in my house—the air filled with the intoxicating scent of him, never to be erased no matter how much I try—is too much. 'Your house?' That way, I can be the one to leave.

'Of course. Let me give you my new address.'

He gives me directions to an apartment complex on the fringe of the inner city—it's on the opposite side of town to where he and his wife once lived. There's another loaded pause as he waits for me to ask.

'Are you alone now?' *Are you alone always?*

'I am,' he replies.

'I'll be right over.'

When I end the call, I'm shaking more than ever.



The ultra-modern apartment is at odds with the neat suburban house Daniel lived in nine months ago. Not that I ever went inside that place; I had occasionally picked him up or dropped him off there, but I steadfastly refused to step foot inside his marital home.

In hindsight, it seems ludicrous to have prided myself on such a trivial point. Whether in a seedy motel or his king-size bed, I was still sleeping with another woman's husband.

He opens the door wearing jeans and a black v-neck knit. His bare feet sink into the plush charcoal grey carpet. He's freshly shaven and his dark hair is damp from the shower. There's still no sign of his

wedding ring. I want to wrap my arms around his neck, trail kisses along his smooth jawline, and never let go.

But I steel myself. I'm here for answers, for closure. I'm here so I can *live*.

'I'm so glad you came,' Daniel says and my resolve crumbles a little. He pushes the door open further. 'Come in.'

As I follow him down the hall I peek into open doorways for signs of a female presence, but there are none. The only hint of another occupant is the chewed dog basket at the foot of Daniel's unmade bed. I smile at that. He always was a dog person.

The apartment's décor is decidedly masculine—all black, grey and navy—and there are no photographs on display. In fact, the only artwork is a large, colourful painting of spring blooms hanging above the leather sofa in the living room. It reminds me of my garden. I wonder if that's what it reminds Daniel of, too.

He gestures for me to take a seat on the couch then he hovers by my elbow, bouncing on the balls of his feet. 'Can I get you anything?' he says, the words tumbling out a little too quickly. He's nervous, I realise. 'Coffee? Water? Hard liquor?'

I laugh and feel some of the tension dissipate. 'I'm fine. I really just want to talk. I don't want to take up too much of your time.'

'Too much of my...?' Daniel frowns. Then understanding dawns. 'Amy, nobody's coming home. I live alone. Take all the time you need.' He smiles down at me a little wistfully. 'Take forever.'

My stomach lurches. 'You live alone? You mean you're...?'

'Divorced? Yes.'

It's as if all the oxygen has been sucked out of the room. 'For how long?' My voice is barely a whisper.

'Officially for three months, but we separated nine months ago.' Daniel's gaze is intense, as though he's willing me to understand.

‘But *we* last saw each other nine months ago. At the airport. The day I ...’

‘The day you missed your plane,’ he says matter-of-factly. ‘The day you left me. The day I ended my marriage.’

My head starts to spin as I try to make sense of it all. Suddenly I feel as if I’m suffocating. ‘I think I could use some water after all.’

‘Of course.’ Daniel hurries out of the room. When he returns moments later he hands me a tall glass of water and sits down next to me.

I take a long drink. ‘Why would you separate when we were no longer together?’ I’m surprised word of his newly single status never reached me. I guess I cut myself off from my former workplace more completely than I’d thought. Although chances are nobody there knew he was divorced either. Daniel always kept his private life on the down low at work; he’d had to.

Daniel sighs. ‘That was what you never understood, Amy,’ he begins. ‘You thought I looked at our time together as nothing more than a fling. You expected me to tire of you and go back to my marriage until the next girl came along. Because that’s what guys who cheat on their wives do, right?’

I stare at my lap. ‘Am I wrong?’

‘Maybe not for all men, but for me, yes,’ he says. ‘My marriage had been over for a long time before I fell for you, Amy. I married young. She’s an excellent person, but we simply grew in different directions. It happens, not that that’s any excuse for my being unfaithful. Life is never black and white.’

I almost laugh. ‘You’re telling me about grey areas? My entire *life* is a grey area, Daniel. When we were together I felt like I was permanently skulking around in the shadows. I couldn’t live like that anymore. That’s why I ended it, not because I wanted to break up your marriage.’

Sadness clouds his expression. ‘I know. I ended my marriage because when I met you I felt like I was finally facing the sun,’ he says. ‘I should have already been single when we met, Amy, but I was weak and lazy and it had seemed easier to maintain the status quo. I never expected to meet my soul mate *after* I married. And because of that you never understood how much you meant to me. You carried so much guilt because of *my* actions that you didn’t believe me when I said I loved you.’

Ha. Elsa is going to love it when I tell her she was right about everything. I look up then and the expression on Daniel’s face—so hopeful, yet so uncertain—makes my breath catch in my throat. *But I loved you*, I want to shout. *I loved you in spite of all that!* But I didn’t say it then, and the words still won’t come now.

‘Why didn’t you tell me all this nine months ago? Why did you wait so long?’ The thought of all that wasted time is overwhelming.

Daniel moves closer to me on the sofa and takes my hand in his. His gaze bores into mine and I know he’s asking to be heard—*really* heard. ‘That day in the airport was one of the worst of my life,’ he says. He speaks quietly, but there’s a fiery intensity in his tone. ‘Not only because you left me, but because I knew I wasn’t worthy of the second chance you got that day. You deserved someone who would be one hundred per cent yours.’ Suddenly, he looks away. ‘When I think about how close you came to boarding that flight ...’ he says, almost to himself, and there’s genuine anguish on his face.

‘So, what, you’re telling me you stayed away for my own good?’

‘Well, you did *tell* me to stay away,’ he says, a hint of a cheeky smile playing across his full lips.

I can’t help but smile myself. He’s right. After that last, life-saving orgasm, I had instructed him in no uncertain terms to lose my number. Permanently.

And what if he had stayed? There was no way I was ready to be in a *real* relationship with Daniel nine months ago. I was so consumed by

the shame of being ‘the other woman’ and guilt about not being onboard flight nineteen, about somehow dodging my rightful destiny. I didn’t want anything good in my life because I didn’t think I deserved it. I believed I owed a debt I could never hope to repay. Daniel being by my side wouldn’t have helped me process any of it. I would have destroyed us in spite of my love for him, my *need* for him. I had to dig deep and tend to myself and grow in spite of everything. I could only heal alone.

‘But then I realised that your second chance was mine, too,’ Daniel continues. ‘And I wanted to earn it. I wanted to come back to you as the single, trustworthy man I should have been all along. I wanted to be able to tell you I love you and know that you’d have no reason to doubt me.’ He takes a deep breath. ‘So here I am. I can’t change the way we met, but we can change our future if you want to.’

What do you want, Amy? Elsa’s voice echoes in my brain. And at last I have the answer. I want Daniel Rafferty. Forever. I didn’t deserve his second chance nine months ago any more than he deserved mine.

But maybe I do now.

‘Tell me you love me again,’ I instruct him with a smile, ‘and see what happens this time.’



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 November 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.

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SCHRÖDINGER'S CATFISH BY
SARAH BELLE



SCHRÖDINGER'S CATFISH

SARAH BELLE

Ellen popped the second bottle of Grant Burge Brut Cuvee and topped up everyone's glasses; the latest girls' sleepover was underway. She filled the empty plates with homemade lasagne and pulled the garlic ciabatta from the foil. Her distressed-wood dining table groaned under the mountain of food and the place smelt like carb-heaven; the aroma carried though the house by the fresh spring breeze. The days had lengthened in recent weeks and Ellen's acreage property was filled with the chirps of baby magpies and the scent of blossoming almond wattles. Spring was such a magical time of year; the time of fresh beginnings, new life and regrowth after the chill of a bleak winter.

'God, I love it when you host, Ellen.' Callie gently wiped bread crumbs off her glossy lips. 'It's the only time I get to eat real food.'

'Callie, your IQ is not dependent on your weight. You know that, right?' Anna said. As a psychiatric nurse, everyone in the group took her word on all things medical as gospel.

Callie sighed. 'Try telling my clients that. You can't sell luxury real estate in ballet flats or a real woman's body. Believe me, I've tried. And I'm not selling renovators' delights in suburbs with *potential* again.'

'I'm glad I work in a hospital. Not a heel in sight,' Anna said.

'Oh, stop bragging!' Callie said. 'Anyway, time for the miracle minute. Who's going first?'

Anna started. 'I have no life until my unit manager returns from leave and I can stop covering her shifts. Sam's at a medical conference

in Singapore until next week, so there's nuthin' to see here.' Anna's long chestnut ponytail swished as she shook her head. She rested her eyes on Callie. 'What's your miracle this week?'

Callie smiled. 'Well, Dominic has approved the property division, so the divorce is on track.' Everyone cheered. 'And we're sharing the boys week-on-week-off.'

'That's fantastic news!' Ellen squeezed Callie's hand. 'What a relief.'

Callie nodded. 'Seeing their dad two days a fortnight isn't enough; they need him, especially now they've entered the teenage-alien phase.'

Ellen laughed. 'I agree, especially about teen-alien thing. I often wonder what happened to my sweet little girls.'

'They turn into hormonally rampant, insecure, self-obsessed creatures displaying sociopathic tendencies during puberty,' Anna said. 'Part of the reason I'm childless. I get enough of that shit at work.'

Callie and Ellen laughed.

'Besides, there's got to be an upside to being single at forty, doesn't there?' Callie asked.

'Forty is the new thirty,' Ellen said. 'Or so all the twenty-five-year-old magazine editors keep telling us.'

'Your turn, Ellen. What's your miracle this week?' Callie asked.

Ellen tried to not smile, but the girly excitement was too much.

Callie cheered. 'Ooooh! She's met someone!'

'Who, when, where, how?' Anna asked. 'And most importantly, tell me he melts your panties.'

Ellen continued to smile. 'We met at a children's literacy event last week. His agency was behind the advertising, and I was a guest speaker.'

'He owns the agency?' Callie asked. 'Ohh! That's very nice!'

Ellen smiled. 'Not that his bank account or professional status

matters, but yes, he owns it.'

'And who said the life of an author wasn't glamorous?' Callie said. 'See, it's not all about spending time with your fictional friends.'

Anna interrupted. 'You haven't answered the most important question. What does he look like?'

'Oh! Well, he's ... ah...' Ellen's smile returned, bigger than before. Even thinking about him left her warm and fuzzy. 'His name's Andrew Dunfrey and he's got dark brown hair, chocolate-coloured eyes, sort of an olive complexion—maybe Spanish or Italian heritage.'

'A Mediterranean lover! Very hot.' Callie pouted and flicked her satiny black hair seductress-style.

'Tall, short?' Anna asked.

'He's about six foot, slim build, looks great in an expensive suit and he has the warmest smile I've seen in a long time.' Ellen felt herself drift off, picturing his face, his voice, his gentle laugh, the warmth of his hand on her forearm.

'And?' Callie asked, jolting Ellen out of her daydream.

'And what?'

'Tell us everything,' Callie said.

Ellen shook her head and closed her eyes for a moment. 'I sound like a love-starved desperado, but he seemed so familiar. We went for a drink afterwards and talked for over four hours straight.'

Callie held Ellen's hand. 'About time you met someone nice. It's been too long.'

'There's hardly an abundance of decent guys out there,' Ellen said.

'Hallelujah sister!' Callie offered Ellen her palm and received a high-five. 'Anna, you've no idea how fortunate you are to be in a loving, stable relationship. Think yourself lucky you don't have to navigate the turbulent waters of dating.'

Anna finished her lasagne and smiled. 'Sam's the best, I know it. I just don't want to rub it in, that's all.'

Callie scrunched her napkin up and threw it at Anna's head. 'Bragging again! So Ellen, when are you seeing him?'

'Tomorrow night. We've arranged to meet for dinner,' Ellen said, wishing she could return to her daydream.

'Have you Googled him?' Callie withdrew her mobile from her bag and started tapping away.

'No, why would I do that?' Ellen asked.

'Oh, please! Anna, help educate our Luddite friend would you?' Callie said.

Anna placed her hands in surrender position. 'This is way out of my depth. I'll wash the dishes. You two rewrite the rules of dating.'

'Ellen, it's for research purposes,' Callie said. 'It's perfectly normal.'

'I'm not convinced.' Ellen tore off another chunk of garlic bread.

'You don't think he's Googled you? You reckon he hasn't done his homework to see who you are, what people are saying about you?'

'I'm a forty-two-year-old single mum who writes and illustrates books for three to seven year olds. There's nothing salacious about me. I almost wish there was. I'm very boring.'

'We know you're Mary Poppins, but what about him? What if he's a serial dater, a playboy, a misogynist? Has he been married, divorced, kids, bankrupt? Does he have any slanderous exes coming out of the woods, any online sex tapes?'

'Stop it!' Ellen laughed. 'He's mid-forties, divorced, one kid, not a bankrupt or sex addict that I know of, and he seemed really nice and very normal. I'm sure there's nothing scary about him.'

'Maybe he's catfishing you,' Callie said.

'What-fishing?'

‘When someone presents a fake persona on social media.’

Ellen shook her head. ‘That’s ridiculous. Besides, I’ve already met him in person.’

Callie finished her champagne. ‘Put it this way: if you were in the market for a property, would you do an online inspection prior to seeing it for yourself?’

‘Probably. If it saved time, I guess.’

‘So what’s the difference between a man and a property?’ Callie raised her stencilled eyebrow into a questioning arch that challenged the very foundation upon which Ellen had accepted this date.

‘Ummm ... I guess nothing?’ Ellen’s mind was numb. Callie’s suggestion seemed more like espionage than dating.

Anna piped up from the kitchen, her hands covered in suds. ‘Callie, the idea is to encourage Ellen, not terrify her. Let them meet so she can decide for herself. You know, the way dinosaurs used to meet and fall in love.’

The voice of reason had spoken. Anna’s sage words didn’t deter Callie. ‘It’s practical dating advice. Come on, let me Google him.’

Ellen pondered the thought. She’d met her ex-husband at university and they’d not had the supposed ‘benefit’ of dating in the information age. She took a chance, got to know him as a human being and fell in love with him, faults and all. But at least she hadn’t held any preconceived ideas as to who he was. Nothing informed her opinion of him other than her own gut instinct and they’d lived happily for nearly twenty years. They’d split because they had grown in different directions since their early meeting and a shared history hadn’t been enough to bridge that gap. What impact would Googling have on her opinion of Andrew, and how credible was the information anyway?

‘Don’t you want to know his romantic history?’ Callie asked. ‘God, that’s usually the first thing I check.’

‘Surely his romantic CV isn’t available?’ Ellen asked.

‘He’s in advertising. Those guys step in front of a camera every chance they get. It’s part of the job. Let’s see who was on his arm when the photos were taken.’ Callie waved her phone in Ellen’s direction.

‘Personally, I think that’s crossing a line in regards to privacy.’ Anna had made her way back to the table and was topping up all three champagne flutes. ‘If he were to offer the information voluntarily then that would be one thing, but snooping around and making assumptions is inviting trouble.’

‘We’re just looking at photos. What do you say, Ellen?’ Callie’s occupation required her to have extraordinary skills of persuasion. Her twelve pairs of Louboutins, impressive property portfolio and a beauty budget in excess of Fiji’s GDP were testament to those skills.

The problem was that the internet allowed voyeurism on an unprecedented level. Ellen was a little curious. Who wouldn’t be? Andrew was an attractive, single man. Maybe he had a type. Blondes or brunettes, skinny or curvier figures, young or older women—and how did she compare to any of them? Could she compete in his romantic hall of fame or would her photo be found in the ‘what was he thinking’ section?

‘It’s a Schrödinger’s cat scenario,’ Anna said, bringing Ellen back to reality.

‘Whose cat?’ Callie asked.

Anna took a deep breath. ‘It was a thought experiment that involved the superposition that a cat enclosed in a box could be thought of as simultaneously dead and alive until the box was opened, conclusively answering the question ...’ Anna stopped when Callie winced in intellectual pain.

‘That’s awful!’ Callie said.

Ellen picked up where Anna left off. ‘She means that until I Google Andrew, he can be thought of as both a saint and a sinner. The only way to be sure—to have the question answered definitively—is to

Google him, metaphorically open that box and see if the cat is dead or alive.'

'Just say the word, Ellen.' Callie was still clutching her phone.

Ellen looked to Anna and back to Callie. They had both made good points, but what if there was something she didn't *want* to know, or something that was untrue? It could derail the relationship before it even started, and for no good reason.

On the other hand, she was a single mother with two teenage girls on the cusp of dating. She had to lead by example.

Callie waved the phone again.

'Go with your gut, Ellen. It's never let you down before.' Anna sat back and finished her champagne with a quiet confidence that was incongruent with Callie's teenage-like enthusiasm.

Ellen took another sip of champagne and let the bubbles pop on her tongue. 'I am curious, of course. I felt something ... a connection with him. I don't know if I'm being romantic or stupid, but I'm not going to Google him. The cat is both dead and alive until I decide for myself.' Callie opened her mouth to object, but Ellen continued. 'So let's change the subject. Which movie are we watching tonight?'



It was 5.28 a.m. and Ellen was still awake. Her laptop had called to her all night, seducing her like a siren of the sea because it was the mechanism by which her curiosity about Andrew would be satisfied.

Ellen had imagined every possible scenario: Andrew was a sex addict who left an endless line of broken hearts queuing up at STD clinics around the globe.

Andrew was married with four kids.

Andrew was really a woman.

Not once did she imagine Andrew as the kind, normal guy who had asked her out for dinner and made her feel special. It was easier to

focus on the negative stuff.

The first full moon of spring filtered through the sheer drapes. She hadn't pulled the blind down because the moon's illumination gave the bedroom a magical glow and she was all for magic. Despite the warmer weather of spring, the air was still crisp at night and carried the scent of Native Jasmine, mixed with the earthy aroma of gum trees, into her room. Calmed by the Australian bush potpourri, she snuggled under her doona and turned her back on the wooing laptop.

I will not succumb to this. Her sub-conscious had other ideas.

But then again, what if he's a horror? What if he's a psycho and you invite him into the lives of your daughters?

But surely the Children's Literacy Foundation wouldn't allow anyone like that to promote their cause?

What about all the other women? He may be a serial dater.

He's hardly going to be a middle aged virgin saving himself for me, is he? No, I won't do it.

Just a little peek. Just one little snippet of information to provide clarity.

No, I can't. It's wrong.

I know you're curious. Otherwise we wouldn't be having this conversation. You'd be asleep.

Please, stop!

Just one little look. No need to tell anyone. It can be our little secret.

Lalalalalalalalala.

No one will ever know.

Really? Are you sure?

I'm sure. Go on. No one's watching.

Well ... maybe. Perhaps a quick look. Just for peace of mind, nothing more. I'm not a stalker.

Wise choice! Better safe than sorry.

Ellen threw back the doona and padded her way to the laptop, hating her subconscious for taking advantage of her weakened will. She unplugged the laptop from the charger and brought it back to bed, balancing it on her legs. She opened it up, like the box in which Schrödinger's cat existed in a perpetually metaphorical state, and sought a definitive answer.

She only looked away from the laptop when Anna knocked on her door at 8.00 to advise that breakfast was ready. But by that stage, Ellen was irretrievably damaged.



Callie was grooving around the table, arranging plump, ruby-red strawberries on freshly cooked pancakes and drizzling maple syrup in swirly patterns on top. She looked up at Ellen. 'Holy shit! You look awful. Hangover?'

Ellen hadn't looked in the mirror before leaving her room, but Callie was always so perfectly groomed that anyone whose nail varnished was chipped looked dreadful to her.

'I didn't sleep well, if that's what you're asking.' Ellen placed the laptop on the table and inspected her reflection in the mirror. It looked as though she'd lived in the garden for a month and had a family of rodents nesting in her hair.

'Go have a shower. You'll feel better. I'll keep breakfast warm til you get back,' Callie said.

'Unless the shower is full of a magical, wrinkle erasing, breast lifting, cellulite reducing, lip plumping, thigh toning, abdomen flattening elixir it's not going to make one iota of difference.' Ellen slumped into a chair at the table and stabbed her pancakes with a fork. 'I hope you made plenty of pancakes. I feel like carb-loading today.'

Callie's eyes widened. 'Oooo-kay. What's up—' She answered her own question by looking at the open laptop. 'Oh. Shit.'

'Shit's a bit of an understatement,' Ellen said, pancake hanging out her mouth. 'I think fuckety-fuck-fuck-poo-hum-dick-shit-piss is more appropriate. Pass the maple syrup, please. I need waaay more sugar.'

'What's up bitches?' Anna emerged from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her hair.

'She Googled,' Callie said.

'No! You Googled?' Anna eyes sprung wide open.

'I more than Googled. I Facebooked, Instagrammed, Pinterested, LinkedIn-ed, Twittered, Yahooed and even Binged, just to be sure.' She shovelled more pancake into her mouth. 'Mmmm, these are delicious. I bet those skinny lingerie/swimsuit models Andrew usually dates have never tasted a pancake. I mean, why would they, seeing as they don't eat.'

Callie eased into the chair next to Ellen. 'Uh-huh.'

Anna moved the laptop around so she could see what Ellen had found. 'Wow! Those girls are hot—'

'Anna!' Callie hissed.

Ellen impaled a strawberry with her fork. 'It must take a lot of work to maintain that level of emaciation. Those girls don't even have a crease under their arse cheek; it just joins the back of their thigh. What's up with that?'

Callie shook her head. 'I'm not sure.'

'It's called a gluteal fold,' Anna said.

Ellen groaned. 'Well, my gluteal has more folds than an origami crane. Perhaps I misunderstood his invitation. Maybe I am to chaperone his date with a much younger, cellulite-free model.'

'Ellen, you're being too hard on yourself.' Anna sat down at the table and inhaled a strawberry. 'You could pass for a woman in her

early-thirties, you're the same size you were in high school and most women would kill to have your curly hair. Look at it! It bounces when you walk and reminds me of all my favourite lollies: milk chocolate, butterscotch, caramel and toffee.'

Anna looked to Callie to bolster Ellen's waning confidence. 'I have to say that I've been envious of your olive complexion for years. I've even tried to re-create it with a spray tan, but ... it's just too natural to fake.'

Ellen gave a little smile. 'I know you're trying to make me feel better. Thank you.'

Callie took Ellen's hand. 'You're not only every bit as beautiful on the outside as these models, but you've got something they'll never, ever have.'

'Natural breasts?' Ellen said. 'My original teeth?'

'I was going to say Anna and I behind you, but sure. Let's go with natural breasts and teeth,' Callie said.

'Are you *really* sure it's him?' Anna asked, reaching for the laptop. 'Let's do another search.'

"Oh, yeah. There's no mistaking Andrew for anyone else. Short of a DNA test, which I also Googled, it's absolutely him. Not that he goes by the name Andrew in his life of dating supermodels. He's Marcus Dunfrey, founder of Lush Advertising. Andrew must be his middle name, or an alias.'

'Maybe he has a twin?' Anna said.

'What are the chances of a fertilised egg that handsome splitting in two and giving womankind such a gift?' Ellen said.

'Medically speaking, about one in three hundred,' Anna answered.

Ellen ignored Anna's medi-fact. 'Besides, I thought of that, but found nothing to suggest there are two of them. I think he Fatfished me.'

‘Catfished,’ Callie corrected.

‘Ooooh, my lawdy.’ Anna shoved the laptop over to Callie. ‘Check him out!’

Callie took the laptop. ‘It’s Michael Fassbender meets Ricky Martin!’

Ellen ignored the girls’ swooning. ‘My brain just wouldn’t shut up about it. It went on and on all night until I opened the laptop and found Schrödinger’s cat slaughtered all over the screen.’

‘Okay, so we’ve got a hot man who usually dates models,’ Anna said, taking control of the situation.

‘Not just models. *Lingerie* models. The hottest of the hot,’ said Ellen. ‘Fantasy-hot.’

Anna continued. ‘But he asked *you* out, Ellen. He talked with you for hours and made the conscious decision to ask you on a date.’

‘So?’ Ellen said.

‘So what’s the fucking problem?’ Callie threw her hands up in a dramatic display of confusion. ‘Who gives a shit that he usually dates skeletons with a sheath of skin. If I were you I’d throw myself into this, just so I could cross “shag a stupidly hot guy senseless” off my bucket list.’

‘If I was into guys, I’d shag him senseless, too,’ Anna said.

Ellen stopped eating and rested her fork on her plate. ‘But I’m mutton and he dates spring lambs.’

‘You are not! And if you’re feeling insecure about it, we can give you a little makeover. I’m a whizz with this facial contouring bizzo,’ Callie said. ‘I could give French cheekbones to a bowling ball.’

Ellen stared at Callie and started to laugh.

‘Not that she’s saying you’ve a face like a bowling ball.’ Anna flicked Callie on the arm.

‘By the time I’m finished, you’ll have all the confidence in the world to go forth and make this bloke beg for another date.’ Callie’s smile was comforting.

‘Sometimes makeup does save the day, particularly if it gives you courage. Kind of like pretty alcohol,’ Anna said.

Ellen considered the offer. A new haircut and outfit always gave her a lift. Perhaps a makeover would propel her sky high. And he was soooooo gorgeous. She couldn’t deny the attraction. ‘Okay, if you think it will work.’



Callie wheeled a small suitcase up the driveway and into the house. She heaved as she placed it on the kitchen table.

‘You brought half your wardrobe for a one-night sleepover?’ Anna asked.

‘Don’t be silly.’ Callie laughed. ‘This is just my makeup.’

‘Bloody hell!’ Anna choked on her coffee.

‘That’s a bit excessive, isn’t it?’ Ellen eyed the suitcase in horror.

‘Rules of modern glamour, girls: you can never have too many little black dresses, heels too high or too much makeup. Now, watch this Instagram tutorial so you’ll understand what I’m about to do to you.’ Callie handed her phone to Ellen. ‘I’m going to—’

‘Smother you to death under your own body weight of foundation. It’s external embalming,’ Anna said and then burst out laughing.

Ellen would have laughed as well if she wasn’t so scared.

‘Thank you, Anna, but I think you’ll find the finished product is outstanding. I’m giving you the “no makeup look”, okay?’

Ellen nodded and watched the tutorial. She lost count of how many layers of makeup were applied to the young woman. She was either the new spokesperson for the walking dead or hadn’t slept in months, but by the end of the session she was catwalk ready with flawless skin, a

thinner nose and sharp cheekbones. The artistry was truly transformative, although there was a certain irony to applying three tonnes of makeup to achieve a 'no-makeup look'.

'Wow! I can look that good?' Ellen asked.

'Sorry to be a party pooper, but isn't that make up for photographic sessions?' Anna asked.

'It used to be, but it's been modified for everyday use,' Callie said.

'So I won't look like drag queen?' Ellen asked.

'You will look stunning, just like the girls he usually dates.' Callie organised everything into the order in which it would be used.

'Except twenty years older, with small boobs and a tendency to fall asleep shortly after nine p.m,' Ellen said.

'Before you slather her with crap that was undoubtedly tested on innocent bunny rabbits,' Anna interrupted, 'Ellen, do you really want to do this? I mean, you didn't look like this when he asked you out and maybe that's your point of difference?'

Ellen thought for a moment. 'The room was kind of dark so maybe he thought I was younger or more attractive. If he wasn't so hot, and our connection so strong, I wouldn't bother, but I need intravenous confidence.'

Anna put her hand on Ellen's shoulder. 'Then you have my blessing.'



Callie worked for three hours applying eye makeup then grooming and stencilling Ellen's eyebrows into a Geordie Shore arch. This was followed by various shades of contouring cream, powder, foundation, more contouring creams, spritz sprays, highlighters, low lighters, definers and more concealer than Ellen had used in seven years of high school. Callie's brush collection was larger than Michelangelo's. She used sponges, wedges, spray bottles, microfibre towels and blunt latexy things with surgical precision to blend Ellen's new face into her

hairline. The final touch was a pair of fake eyelashes whose weight made it difficult to keep her eyes open.

After that, her hair was tortured with a GHD and then sprayed with glossing serum that smelt like bubblegum. The final step was dressing, and Callie had chosen a strapless black dress from her own collection at home—retrieved by Anna—to be worn with red Louboutin heels and a sheer red Bolero jacket. Perfect for a spring-evening date. Chicken fillet boobie enhancers finished the outfit; her small cleavage spilling out of the dress.

‘Holy shit! Check out your knockers!’ Anna said.

Callie cleared her throat and nudged Anna in the ribs. ‘You look amazing! Are you ready?’

‘Yes. No. Yes. No. I don’t know! Am I ready?’

‘You look stunning. You’re ready.’ Anna said.

‘You’re ready grrrrrlfriend. Go get that hot man!’ Callie cheered.



Callie wrapped the bolero around her shoulders. The glory of a spring day had evaporated into a cooler night. She entered *La'Berto's* tugging at her dress to ensure her boobs hadn't extended beyond its boundaries. All the envy she'd had for girls with D cups had evaporated when faced with the realities of the situation.

She looked around the restaurant, and spotted Andrew sitting at the bar looking at his phone. He was so handsome in his navy suit and pale blue shirt, made casual by the lack of a tie. He hadn't seen her yet; there was still a chance turn and run. In the time it took her to seriously ponder that option, all the confidence she'd gained from the makeover vanished.

How on earth could she pull this off? She was old enough to be those models' mother, for God's sake. She was left bare and stupid in too much makeup and shoes she struggled to walk in; a mid-fortyish woman desperate to impress a man to whom she would normally be

invisible. What a colossal mistake she'd made in coming. What a fool she'd made of herself—not that he'd ever get to see it because she'd be out of here by the time he noticed she was late. So much for spring being a time of regrowth. She'd quite happily remain home in her pyjamas each night if regrowth was this stressful.

In that instant, he looked up from his phone, directly at her. His brow furrowed a little, clearly disappointed in what he saw. She shrunk, damning herself for staying so long.

Andrew stood and walked towards her, a confused smile on his face. She felt herself flatten against the wall, wishing for a trap door into which she could escape.

‘Ellen? Is that you?’ He stood in front of her and tilted his head to the side. ‘Ellen, you look so ...’

Ellen's bubble burst. She'd been caught in this ridiculous guise; a large serving of mutton for his dinner. ‘I ... I ...’

He leant forwards and kissed her on the cheek. It was everything she'd imagined it to be, except for the large smear of makeup left on his lightly stubbled face after their close encounter. His eyes darted to her cheek, now left with only half a tonne of makeup on it. ‘You look beautiful. Have you done your hair differently?’

She was unable to speak and would have burst into tears if she'd not thought it inappropriate. She gave a little nod in response.

The silence between them lasted just a tad too long. He broke it with, ‘Anyway, our table's ready. Let's sit down, shall we? This is my favourite restaurant. The pasta is handmade, just melts in the mouth.’

His small talk did nothing to provide any kind of comfort. She was insanely overdone and was sure everyone else in the restaurant noticed it, too.

At last she spoke. ‘Andrew, Marcus, whoever. I've made a mistake coming here. I'm sorry, but I have to leave.’

Ellen didn't wait for him to answer, she simply turned and

staggered toward the door, wanting to burst into flames of humiliation when she heard his quiet snigger. She wanted to confront him, but she also wanted to be on the other side of that door.

‘Ellen, wait!’ Andrew grabbed her by the hand. ‘Wait, please. I think there’s been a mistake.’

Ellen continued walking away. ‘Yes, there certainly has been. I’m sorry to have wasted your time,’ she said over her shoulder.

‘No, you don’t understand! Wait up, please.’

Reluctantly she stopped and turned around, hoping he wouldn’t see the tears brimming in her eyes.

‘Can I ask you a personal question?’ he said.

Here it comes, the final embarrassment. Ellen nodded and braced for impact.

‘Did you Google me?’

The world dropped away from Ellen’s feet. How the hell did he know? Can Google searches be traced? Did she leave a cyber-stalking footprint?

‘I ... ahhh ...’

‘The reason I ask is ...’ he looked at the ground and around the restaurant towards their table. Each second he was silent seemed like an hour. ‘Because you called me Marcus.’

‘That is your name, isn’t it?’ God, how she wanted this to be over, even if she had to be rude about it.

He laughed again. ‘No, I’m Andrew.’

‘Really?’ *Likely story.*

‘Marcus is my brother.’

‘Uh-huh.’ *Sure he is.*

‘My *identical twin* brother.’

The world fell further away from Ellen. She needed to sit down but there wasn't a chair in sight. 'What?'

Andrew nodded. 'My brother is the face of the agency. I'm the silent partner in the background. Way, way in the background. So far in the background most people don't know I exist.'

'Oh.'

'Marcus loves the spotlight and all the ... trappings of glamour. But I'm a quieter person. That's why I connected with you last week. I got the feeling you're the same.'

Ellen's gaze fell to the floor. If she felt humiliated before, she was mortified now. Anna's words came back to her: '*Snooping around and making assumptions is inviting trouble.*'

'Shit. I'm such an idiot. Look at me, a two-bob hooker.'

Andrew laughed. 'Firstly, you're gorgeous. And secondly, you're not the first person to confuse us. Even our mum got it wrong at times.' He was still holding onto her fingertips. 'You do look beautiful, just a different kind of beautiful to when we met.'

Ellen really needed to sit down—the Louboutins were killing her. 'When I saw the photos, I thought that you ... I got carried away with all this hair and makeup and these ridiculous shoes,' she said, still unable to lift her gaze from the ground.

He put a finger under her chin and lifted her face to his. 'I'm very flattered you went to all this trouble. Can we start this date again?'

Ellen smiled and felt her makeup crack. 'I need to go to the ladies and ...' *jackhammer this shit off my skin.*

'Take your time. I'll be at our table.'

Finally he let go of her hand and watched as she teetered to the ladies, clutching the wall in case she fell over on the way.

Ellen emerged five minutes later, skin red and tingling after a micro-dermabrasion from wet paper towels. She applied Band-Aids to

her bare, blistered feet, but left the chicken fillet boobie enhancers in place. No need to go totally *au naturel*. She joined Andrew at their table, where they spent the rest of the spring evening getting to know each other the old fashioned way—Schrödinger's cat finally released from its box.

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.

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THE ETERNAL BLOOM BY
VANESSA STUBBS



THE ETERNAL BLOOM

VANESSA STUBBS

We met in the springtime. The cherry blossoms were ripe and the air was drunk with their smell. If only I had known that such meetings were rare. If only I had breathed him in, accepted him, felt the simple, astonishing beauty of the yoking of two hearts, the changing of the seasons. But I did not know.

If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven't you told them yet?

I want you to think about this question because I didn't think about it, even though I had my whole life to do so, and now I will never get to tell him how I felt.

I remember exactly what I was wearing because it was the first dress I had worn since March. It was pale and floral, with a dusty pink cardigan. The wind was warm on my bare legs. I had cultivated a very specific image: 'smart girl nostalgia'. He was wearing tracksuit pants.

I still remember the look on his face as he approached me. He was carrying a very large box, straining against its weight but trying to look cool despite nearly breaking his back.

'Books,' he said and I looked up, 'are very heavy.'

I laughed and put down the book I was reading behind the counter. 'But they lighten the soul, don't you think?' I said.

He put the box down with a thump and laughed. 'Nice shop,' he said, straightening and stretching his shoulders. There was a line of

sweat rimming both underarms. He smelled like deodorant and summer coming.

‘It’s my aunt’s actually. I’m just here for the staff discounts.’

‘What about your soul?’ he said, running his fingers along the spines on the shelf nearby.

It was my turn to laugh. I felt my heart quicken a little and realised my hands were damp.

‘Do you want me to unpack them?’ he asked. ‘The books?’ As though there was anything else to unpack.

I frowned. ‘You don’t have to do that.’ I hesitated. ‘Are you a book lover?’ My words came out breathy.

He shrugged. ‘Reckon I could have been. They’ve always, you know, fascinated me. I loved stories as a kid. But ...’ He rubbed the back of his head and laughed self-consciously. ‘I wasn’t the best student.’

My nerdish self was determined to uncover any remnant of book-love this handsome stranger might have harboured and reignite it. ‘What kinds of stories do you like?’ I was acutely aware of how close he was standing to me.

A blush crept up his stubbled jawline. ‘Cool ones.’

I laughed, feeling a tingle down my spine at the challenge of introducing someone to a book they’d love. ‘Come with me.’

He followed me into the Fantasy area. ‘Let me guess,’ I said. ‘You read Harry Potter as an adult?’ He nodded sheepishly but I shook my head. ‘It wasn’t a criticism.’ I found the book I was looking for, *The Shadow of the Wind*. ‘I think you’ll enjoy this.’

His hands were rough and large and he loomed over me as he smoothed the shiny cover. I felt the pull of him. Even after only minutes. His physicality was overwhelming. But it was something about the openness of his heart, too.

I didn’t want to charge him full price for the book but he insisted,

pulling a battered wallet out of his pocket. He paid for it in cash. Our fingers brushed and I swear I felt the earth shift beneath me. I was relieved to have the distraction of the phone ringing on the counter. I said goodbye to him. My heart squeezed for reasons I had no logical explanation for. He held the book against his chest and smiled back at me. I waved soundlessly as he turned his back and I picked up the phone.

Life hands you such things. Such good and such bad. Sometimes at the same time.

My uncle's voice was more stoic than usual. My head began to spin. My aunty had been diagnosed with breast cancer two months before. She was undergoing chemo. They had said her prognosis was very good. They had caught it early. When he said the words 'We've lost her,' his voice wavered in a way I had never heard it do before and my legs gave way. I felt the coldness of the floor against my bare knees. Everything spun and I struggled to keep my ear pressed to the phone.

This man, whose name I didn't even know, was by my side, the book I had just sold him tucked under the crook of his arm. He sat down on that cold floor next to me and held my hand as I babbled words of shock. My body felt numb. All I remember was his eyes, fixed on mine. Willing me to stay calm.

I told him the story of my life as though it was me who was about to die. My aunt, Geraldine, had been like a mother to me. I went to live with her when I was 13, during my parents' messy divorce. My mother left for London with her new husband and his children when I was 16. My father had remarried too, and I saw him on birthdays and holidays. Aunt G had been the calm, continuous person that I had been craving my whole childhood. How could it be that she could be gone, too?

A man with a deep voice and a fluoro vest came to tell him to get back to work, that there were more deliveries to be made, but he shook his head and told them to go without him even though the expression

on his co-worker's face said 'trouble'. He brought me tea in a paper cup and turned the sign on the door to *closed*, to stop customers coming in.

When Aiden arrived to take me home I remember asking this man, 'What's your name? I don't even know your name.'

Aiden glanced between the two of us. Perhaps he sensed back then that there was something, some frisson between his fiancé and this stranger. Or perhaps not. Aiden was not prone to sensing emotional subtlety.

His name was John.

When someone you love dearly dies, there is a time when nothing fits together. Not the mornings into the afternoons or the food into your mouth. Just breathing hurts. John was there in the months after my aunty's death. He called me a lot to check I was okay. He drove me to the beach one weekday afternoon when he could hear the heaviness in my voice and said I didn't sound okay at all. It had been six months but I was still struggling.

I remember there being a moment that day on the sand. He had just broken up with a girl, a hairdresser called Amy who was one of the prettiest people I'd ever seen. But she blew hot and cold and eventually John couldn't stand being fooled around anymore.

Aiden was fussing over the cost of the wine for our wedding and it was driving me crazy. All I could think was what Aunt G would have said to this man I was about to marry. *'Drink the goddamn wine while you have the chance. Hell, order the best wine on the menu.'*

But to his credit, Aiden and I were doing it tough. We were living in a tiny studio apartment in Paddington, struggling to pay the rent. He was an academic and a writer who had published one book. I was trying to keep Aunt G's bookshop going, having inherited it and all its mounting debts. I was a dreamer and bookworm trying to run a business and keep my beautiful aunty's legacy alive. I was also having doubts about Aiden. I never told him when I spent time with John.

The beach that day was salt-addled, hazy. It was a Monday, early evening, and the sting of the sun had gone. John and I nursed our takeaway coffees and dug our toes into the sand.

‘If it was your wedding, would halving the amount of wine for your guests be the way you saved money?’ I asked John. He shifted beside me, one large hand going to his jaw. Physically, he was one-and-a-half times my size. To look at him was to know that he worked with his body. He had been a courier, a removalist, a boxer. Looking back, it seems odd that he and I got in the car and drove to the beach to sit and talk. It was the kind of thing lovers or best buddies would do. He was neither. But he was something else. He had been there when I’d been at my most vulnerable. He felt like a link to the moment when my whole life fell away. I guess, in a way, maybe his stability was what I needed after I’d lost the most reliable person in my life. In those early days, he was my strength. I wanted to reach out and take his hand or rest my head on his shoulder. It took all my resolve not to.

‘Is this Aiden?’ he asked in his calm, soothing voice. They had met only once, at the bookshop.

I rolled my eyes. ‘He thinks it’s reasonable to have our guests start buying their own wine halfway through the night.’

His forehead creased. Where another man might have taken this moment for his advantage, he said softly: ‘Aiden seems like a good bloke.’ And he looked at me with his honey brown eyes. He had the kind of eyes that really *saw* you. They somehow listened to you. I felt, not for the first time, like kissing him. But we were discussing my husband-to-be.

‘You know...’ He hesitated. ‘Chloe...’ My name sounded soft in his mouth. His hands went to his head and he rubbed the back of his hair self-consciously. ‘I... you know how I feel about you, right?’

My body flushed with fullness. Every particle of my being was sensitised to his body next to mine. I could feel the pounding of the

waves in my chest. I could smell his earthy scent, mixed with salt. How could I have confused this feeling? How could I have dismissed it?

I swallowed and pulled my hair behind my head, fixing it into a ponytail, giving my hands a task. I should have pulled him towards me and kissed him hard but instead I said, 'Thank you for being such a great friend. You've been so wonderful to me.' I hugged his arm briefly and then busied myself with disposing of our coffees in a nearby bin.

When I returned confusion creased his brow. He bit his lip. 'Maybe you need to just work out what's important to you,' he said, his eyes avoiding mine and following the surfers cresting the waves. He paused. 'I mean with the wine situation.'

Of course, it was never really about the wine.

If only I had known then what was important. When I was young I thought a man like John was not for me. I had convinced myself that I would only find happiness with an intellectual and that men with brilliant minds were somehow superior. My mother told me when she was drunk at my cousin's wedding that she regretted marrying my father because he was not as intelligent as her. 'It's about respect,' she said.

I absorbed this piece of information into my young mind as a cautionary tale. I was about to marry an academic and author. He was stingy and could be annoying but god, was he smart. And smart, I was sure, was what would bring me future happiness. I had seen up close what had happened to my clever mother and my father. I could not trust that this would not happen to me. And so I chose the path my mother had always wished for herself.

But avoiding unhappiness is not the same as happiness.

John was at the wedding with a new girlfriend when Aiden and I married later that year. We had two boys, twins, two years after that. I sold the bookshop and glossy apartments sprang up in its place almost overnight. It hurt my heart, but Aiden convinced me it was time. I told

myself there would be another bookshop in my life. I told myself that John would always be in my life.

But he wasn't good at emailing, or texting and he never used his Facebook account. He was an in-person kind of friend. And those friends became difficult to sustain with two young children. I spent several years of my life trying to hold every day together on three hours sleep. But John didn't go away. He came back to me in my dreams and echoed in the hollows of my bones. He visited the cave of my 3am loneliness. Some piece of me knew what I had done, what I had given up, and it haunted me. But John met a tanned, leggy backpacker at a Bondi bar and posted a rare picture to social media. She wore a simple white slip. His smile said it all. They eloped on a beach in Thailand. My world slowed the moment I saw it and my blood ran thick with regret but I resolved to put more into my own family. I took sleeping pills so I was too tired to wake and think.



And then we met again in the springtime. This time it was a French spring. The cafes of Aix-en-Provence had just started putting their tables *al fresco* after a long, cold winter. The in-season fruits were changing; citrus made way for berries and the first of the grapes appeared.

I will never forget his face across the sea of strangers. My heart felt like it stopped. He didn't see me at first. He was giving a tall boy with dark hair an apple. I knew immediately it was his son and this information made tears come to my eyes. They were not tears of sadness but of joy.

I was alone, my boys with their father in our little villa just out of town. We had only just moved to France for Aiden's international exchange at the region's university. I was giddy with love for the French countryside but felt isolated by the language barrier. I approached John slowly, as though in a dream, as though watching myself from the outside. Willing my heart to beat again.

‘Bonjour,’ I said in my bad French accent.

He looked up and it took him a second. ‘Chloe.’ His voice was like the low bells that tolled every morning here. It was like no time had passed at all. I felt myself reaching for him and we were hugging. He still smelt the same, like musk and cinnamon.

We spent a few moments laughing in disbelief. He shook his head. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I could ask you the same thing.’

‘Buying apples,’ said his son and we laughed again. Etienne was his name.

‘How old are you, Etienne?’ I asked.

‘Six.’

‘My boys are seven,’ I said, shaking my head. The boy had his father’s eyes.

‘Are they going to the local school?’ he asked and I felt my body buzz in the way it does sometimes when it knows something before my mind does.

‘They’re starting next week. We’ve just arrived, I don’t know, three weeks ago?’

‘They might be in the same class as me,’ Etienne said.

I shook my head. ‘This is so weird. Of all the hundreds of French towns ...’

It felt like fate. It felt big. I was so lonely.

We had dinner with them at their farmhouse a week later. John’s wife, Genevieve, made a herb-laden pasta and we ate outside, the night soft around our bare shoulders. We drank red wine out of vintage glasses and the boys played soccer on the grass. The wine made my body languid. As the sun melted behind golden clouds I felt that sense of complete joy that sometimes alights on the heart. It’s so rare and yet it has such simple origins. Perhaps it is gratitude. I had found John

again. I was in this beautiful place. My boys were shouting, happy, before me, already fast friends with his son.

Genevieve was a high school teacher and Aiden was learning the ropes of the French education system, so conversation flowed freely.

Genevieve complimented Aiden on his accent and he began to recite a Rimbaud poem in French. I felt myself cringe and I shifted my body away from him, towards John, who was yelling encouragement to the boys.

‘So what do you do, Chloe?’ Genevieve asked, her voice warm with the wine.

It was an innocent enough question but it cut to my core. I was a mother. I was a former business owner who had given up her dream to allow her husband to pursue his.

I swirled the wine in my glass and took a sip. ‘Well, I owned a bookshop for many years.’

‘It wasn’t really “many” years. A year or two. Her aunt left it to her,’ Aiden said.

I felt the small hairs on the back of my neck rise and my heartbeat accelerated. Wine made it more difficult to hide my resentment for Aiden’s condescension.

I had been running so hard from becoming my mother, I had actually become my father; constantly belittled by an intellectual superior.

Perhaps Genevieve felt the tension between Aiden and I in the air because she said: ‘John told me that’s how you two met. In the bookshop the day your aunt died.’

I smiled, the memory bittersweet. ‘It was a strange way to meet. You have a very caring husband.’ I had to hold back the tiny beads of moisture behind my eyes that threatened to become tears.

Genevieve kicked John under the table with her foot. ‘Hey, you.

Stop playing coach. Let them make their own rules.’ She laughed. ‘Sometimes I think he would rather be playing soccer with the kids than at the adult’s table.’

John poked his tongue out at her playfully and reached for the cheese platter.

I thought about my own father. How much my mother had wanted him to be at the table, drinking the wine, impressing everyone with witty remarks. I looked at Aiden who—after ten years of marriage I knew instinctively—was trying to think of another poem to recite. I felt ill.

‘So Chloe is going to open a weekend market stall selling English language novels,’ John said through a mouthful of blue cheese. ‘Isn’t that great?’

There had been a secondhand book stall at the boys’ school that week and it had sparked my imagination. John had been beside me buying *The Little Prince* when the idea came to me.

‘We’re in France.’ Aiden’s expression was deadpan and I had the all-consuming urge to slap his face.

‘Oh, *mon dieu*. The students around here will love it. They’re all studying English,’ Genevieve said, her eyes dancing with enthusiasm.

I felt my face grow hot. I hadn’t yet spoken to Aiden about this idea.

‘You know they can just order online,’ Aiden said, carefully pasting a cracker with quince jam before balancing a slice of cheese on top.

I realised in this second that everything my husband did, and many things he said, annoyed me. It took all of my resolve not to shout it out loud.

‘The markets are a sensual kind of experience though,’ I said, my hands curling into balls in my lap. ‘Books are old school now. It’s not about online. People are craving to touch and feel things more than ever.’

Genevieve nodded. ‘Oh yes, you know, I agree completely. John, don’t you think? I adore going to the markets. I will buy a book a week at your stall and so will all my friends. It’s so great. You can wrap them in brown paper and string. People will love it. French people are very much about this kind of sensuality.’

I felt like crying. Genevieve and John were so supportive in the face of Aiden’s indifference. ‘Well, we’ve got a little money set aside from my aunty and I think ...’ I had to pause to cover the waver in my voice. ‘This would be how she’d love me to use it.’

I tried to catch Aiden’s eye. To get some kind of recognition, support. But he was studying the wine bottle, his mouth sounding out the French words.



I opened my market stall with two wobbly trestle tables and a roll of brown paper. I sourced many of the books secondhand and Aiden was right: I did not sell all that many. But I loved the sense of community those Saturday mornings in the town square afforded me. I traded battered paperbacks for coffee and punnets of fresh strawberries and stilted English/French conversation. I began to feel I was part of things.

The twins started school and I saw John at pick up most days. Sometimes Etienne would come home with us and I’d make the boys crepes before they would play outside in the lingering evening light. Etienne and Toby, my firstborn by two minutes, became inseparable. I saw between them the same ease and big-hearted connection that John and I had. Jack was different. He was like his father: he lived inside his head, seemingly oblivious to the emotions going on around him. I resented Aiden more for making me resent my own son.

And so it was that Aiden saw and felt nothing as I fell more and more in love with John. I fought it. I loved Genevieve and I loved her son. I vowed I would never act upon my feelings. I knew they were intensified by the hole in my own marriage, by my emotional isolation.

I vowed I would avoid John as much as I could but our lives were intertwined with theirs.

It was a year after we arrived. The night started innocently with a barbeque at our neighbour's. I still remember the adorable way Carol, my gorgeous French friend, pronounced 'barbeque'. It was just warm enough to swim and the kids were in the pool. Gen and John arrived late because of Etienne's Saturday sport.

John and I found ourselves alone. We were never alone—I made sure of it. One of the children had cut himself in the pool and John and I were closest. There was quite a bit of blood and without thinking I ripped my blouse off and wrapped it around the boy's leg. I'd had two or three glasses of wine and my inhibitions were well and truly switched off.

John found the boy's mother inside and all the children got freaked out by the blood and realised they were freezing. I watched Toby and Etienne, arms slung around each other's dripping shoulders, as they headed to the family room to watch a movie with the other kids. When the adrenalin subsided I realised I was sitting by the pool in my bra with a bloodied blouse and an empty wine glass next to me.

John was by my side. He took off his t-shirt and handed it to me. It was warm. I held it to my chest and breathed in the smell of him. I slipped it over my head and when I opened my eyes he was kissing me. I had no defence, my hands pressed up against his bare chest. I imagined I could feel his heartbeat. There had been kisses in my life but nothing prepared me for this. Every part of my body felt lit with the warmth of his mouth. It felt like a compulsion and my body responded even as my mind screamed at me to stop. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders. They felt so different to Aiden's. They were so solid, so wide. There was so much hunger between us it made me breathless, and when I pulled back I searched his eyes for reasoning, for logic, but found only lust. I began to shake.

'You're cold,' he said and took my hands in his and pressed his

warmth into me.

It was late spring and the heat of the day lingered in the air. It smelled like lavender and barbequed meat.

‘I’m not cold. It’s not the cold.’ I began to cry, the tears hot on my face. He wiped them away with his thumbs with such tenderness that I wept some more.

I realised in that moment the gravity of the mistake I had made. This man had been handed to me many years ago and I had ignored what he meant. What he was. And now it was too late. Our families, the people we loved and who loved us, were metres away. Guilt gripped my gut and I pressed my hand to my stomach.

‘Why?’ I said, my voice a whisper. ‘Why is this happening?’

‘Because I love you and Aiden doesn’t.’ His words sliced through my chest as though he’d used a blade. I stared at him mutely. His mouth was pulled down at the corners and his eyes were large. I knew he was right but my brain refused to absorb what he was telling me. I shook my head.

‘What about Genevieve? You and her ...’ I was going to say *are beautiful together*.

He hung his head and shook it. ‘I never told you. It didn’t seem right because it was something between her and I ...we were trying to work out.’ His voice dropped. ‘Genevieve had an affair six months ago. Saw messages on her phone.’

‘What?’ I put my hand on his arm. I wanted to hold him, absorb his hurt. This changed everything. The whole world opened up to me and I felt a shot of joy, pure and strong, punch me in the chest. ‘What happened?’

‘It was very short. With a fellow teacher. She’s a passionate woman, you know?’ He hugged his knees to his chest. ‘She got swept up in his attention. Said I wasn’t giving her the sexual attention she was craving.

She said she just felt like a mother at home with us. But it's all over. It was just a ... mistake.'

'Oh, no.' I felt the irony of my sympathy, given what I was doing to Aiden. Given I knew exactly how Genevieve felt.

'I'm trying to trust her again, Chlo. I really am, but I'm struggling. And you're just here. Always here.' He pressed a fist against his bare chest.

I grabbed both his hands in mine. I felt galvanised. We were both desperately unhappy in our marriages. I was in love with him. He was in love with me. It felt like a super power. Nothing else mattered. We would be okay as long as we were together.

I was about to say this out loud. I was about to change the course of both of our lives forever when I heard my child's voice behind me.

'Hey Mum, Jack's not letting us watch the movie we want to watch.' Toby's voice rung through my body and I stiffened. I felt my face flush with panic. I hoped he hadn't seen our kiss. He stood by the pool, little body wrapped in a huge towel, his hair still damp. My heart squeezed with fierce love for him.

'Oh, okay honey. I'll be there in a sec.' I hesitated, feeling my stomach churn with the lie. 'We're just cleaning up out here.'

If it had been my other son, he would have left then, but Toby hesitated, waiting. I wondered if he could sense something in the air, some shift in his mother's world. As his cold little hand curled around mine I lost my courage. I felt my whole body slow. The energy, the joy, drained from me. I stood up and everything spun. An image flashed before me of my own mother leaving our family home for the last time. Of the fear that took over my small body. Of the nights I cried myself to sleep.

I knew that I could not do it to them. I could not make them go through a divorce. My parents' had crushed me. I looked down at John, this man I loved, and I had to put my hand over my mouth to

stifle the pain that bubbled up inside me. It felt like my heart tore in two. I drew my son close to warm him and as he led me inside I turned.

‘I’ll be back,’ I said to John. But I never went back.

I thought it was better to live not hurting the people you love than to follow the truth of your own heart.

John tried to contact me the next day, and the one after that, but I made excuses not to see him. Aiden’s tenure in France was nearly up.

That was many years ago now. Half my lifetime ago. I remember thinking on that spring night, the buzz of John’s kiss still on my lips, Toby’s small, cool hand in mine, that it was too late to shift the trajectory of my life. But how long life is. I was still so young.

A lifetime of beauty surrounds me and for that I am grateful. My grandchildren are grown and visit me in the nursing home. Aiden left me in our 50s for a woman he met on the train and things opened up for me. I have not seen John since that South of France spring.

And now my lungs, which once breathed that blossom-soaked air so effortlessly, only inflate with the help of a machine. I can no longer talk on my own and I know it is nearly time to leave.

The nurse has told me I have a visitor coming today. I am so tired but one last tiny scrap of something inside me is hoping.

I hear him before I see him. His voice is the same. The sound of church bells over the marketplace comes back to me. The smell of lavender fields. I open my eyes to his smile. His eyes are framed by time’s deep etchings but they are the same eyes.

‘How did you find me?’ I want to ask him, but I cannot.

‘I followed the trail of your books,’ he says as though he’s heard me. I wrote my first novel at the age of 45. My second at 50 and my third at 63. Each book was the same book. Each book was about John. ‘Your agent told me where you were. I had to bribe her with two cases of wine before she relented.’

I want to laugh. I want to cry. I want to reach up and cup his face in my hands, press our foreheads together and absorb a lifetime of thoughts.

The sterile beep of the breathing machine is loud in the room.

If only I could talk. If only I could tell him how I feel. How I've always felt. I wish I could say that all my life he's been with me. I close my eyes and feel hot tears run down my cheeks. He bends down and wipes them away with his thumbs.

I am taken back to the bookshop on that warm spring day. To the gentle touch of his hand on my face, my arm. To his kind eyes telling me that everything will be okay.

My body is so weak but something inside me unfurls. I push through the haze of drugs, the heaviness of my flesh, and I reach for him. He takes my hand in his. It is so warm. He is carrying a walking stick and he places it carefully beside my bed. He bends down and takes off his shoes and socks. And then he lies down next to me on the bed. He still smells like cinnamon and summer coming. I muster the last of my energy and roll towards him.

Our foreheads touch. And then our lips.



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*, *mX Newspaper*, *Sunday Style* and *Mamamia*. Vanessa currently works for [news.com.au](https://www.news.com.au) and is Weekend Editor for Kidspot. 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

THE SPRING CLEAN BY
BELINDA WILLIAMS



THE SPRING CLEAN

BELINDA WILLIAMS

‘Why would anyone choose to do this in spring?’ I complained.

Cara dumped another handful of clothes onto the growing pile on the floor. ‘It’s as good a time a year as any to do it.’

My sister’s dependable logic was not what I wanted right now. ‘But look at the weather! It’s warm. We shouldn’t be in here going through all this old stuff, we should be out there enjoying it.’

‘You usually work Saturdays.’

‘Not always.’

‘You have lately.’

‘Perhaps, but this is the sort of weather that would inspire me not to.’

‘Face it, Cassie. You just don’t want to be here.’ Cara wasn’t looking at me. She’d started pulling boxes and other random items down from the top of my bedroom wardrobe. ‘Here.’ She shoved an old shoebox at me without turning around. ‘I’m assuming this is yours.’

I sighed and took the box. She was right. I didn’t want to be here. ‘I just don’t get why Mum and Dad have to do this now.’

‘What? Put the house on the market? Spring is the ideal place to sell the house. The gardens will be at their best.’

‘No, I get that. I don’t understand why they have to move at all.’

‘Did you expect them to live here forever?’

I resisted another sigh. It was always like this with Cara and I. She was the older, sensible sister, an accomplished lawyer who could reason her way through any situation. I was the dreamy one who would contemplate possibilities endlessly.

I tossed the shoebox onto the bed behind me and the lid popped off, the contents tipping onto the bed.

‘I don’t expect them to be here forever,’ I said, ignoring the mess and turning back to face her. ‘But a little bit longer would have been nice.’

‘What? If they wait too long they’ll be too old to do anything exciting. Now is the perfect time for them to sell up and head overseas.’

‘Yes, but they’re not just heading overseas for a sightseeing trip like most baby boomers do, they’re going to live there.’

‘So?’

‘So, they weren’t really thinking about us, were they?’

Cara threw her head back and laughed liked I’d just said something exceptionally funny. When she’d recovered, she stepped over the pile of old clothes littering the floor between us and came to sit next to me on the bed.

‘Cassie, Mum and Dad have thought about us for the last thirty years. I think it’s time they did something for themselves for a change.’

‘Maybe,’ I admitted. ‘But what if we still need them? What happens when we decide to start families?’

‘If you’re about to give birth, then I’m sure Mum will be here with bells on, but come on, we’re both focused on our careers right now anyway. Matt and I aren’t planning on having kids right away and you don’t even have a man at the moment. They were only talking about it being a three to five year plan. Besides, you still have me.’

That was true. Apart from my best friend, Ruby, Cara was my closest confidant.

‘I know. It’s going to be weird without them, don’t you think?’

‘Yes, but after Dad’s cancer, I think it’s important Mum and Dad enjoy their lives.’ Cara reached across and squeezed my hand.

Watching our father beat prostate cancer had been extremely difficult. I gestured to the mess that was strewn across the floor of my childhood bedroom. ‘I hate doing this.’

‘Cleaning? Yeah, I know. You’re allergic to it.’

My more relaxed attitude to household cleanliness had always been a source of contention between us growing up. Especially when I’d borrowed Cara’s clothing and it disappeared into my room, never to be found again. Most of the time it wasn’t deliberate. Except for that silver top of hers I’d coveted. I’d never owned up to that one.

‘I’m not sure I’m ready to throw away this stuff yet,’ I said, starting to half-heartedly pick through the contents of the shoebox.

‘Cassie, you’re twenty-eight and you haven’t used any of it in about ten years.’

‘But I might need it ... someday.’

‘This doesn’t look very useful.’ Cara picked up a bunch of papers from the bed.

I pointed. ‘Oh, look! That’s the card Jenny gave me for my eighteenth birthday.’

Cara shook her head. ‘I can’t believe you’ve kept all this.’

‘They’re called mementos.’

‘Junk, Cassie. It’s called junk. Wait. What are these? Letters? Ooh. Anything juicy?’

It took me less than a second to recognise the sheet of loose leaf paper that had been folded again and again from re-reading. ‘Give me that!’ I dived for the letter Cara held in her hand.

Cara snatched it away and shot me a suspicious look. ‘Oh my

goodness, have you been holding out on me?’ She jumped up and raced to the window, opening the A4 sheet of paper as she did so.

“*Dear Josh. How do you tell someone who thinks they know you that they don’t really know you at all?*’ Josh?’ Cara said. ‘As in, goofy Josh Ward, your old best friend and the tech start up success story?’”

Cute, tall guy, I wanted to correct her, but I had bigger problems to deal with. I rushed to her side and held my hand out. ‘Give it back. Please.’

Cara twisted to face the window so the letter was out of my reach and continued reading. “*Sure you know the obvious: that I’m shy around people, good at English, embarrassingly bad at sports. You even know some of the not-so-obvious stuff: how I’m not as good at maths as everyone thinks I am, what I would say to the mean girls if I ever had the courage to stand up for myself, and that I secretly don’t mind being too tall.*”

For a brief moment I was transported back in time to the night I wrote the letter. I remembered the way my hand shook as I put down on paper what I’d been too scared to say in words. I recalled the feeling of my heart almost bursting in my chest with the pain of keeping those feelings locked inside. At the sound of Cara’s shocked inhalation I was brought back to the present.

‘Give it back!’ I demanded.

‘Not a chance.’ Cara shoved me gently so I fell backwards onto the bed. “*But what you don’t know is the one thing I feel is the most obvious: that I’m in love with you. I feel as if it’s written on my forehead every time we’re together, like a tattoo I’d never be brave enough to get. Every time I look at you the love I have for you pierces my heart like the blade of a knife ...*” Ugh. This is terrible, Cassie. It’s a wonder you ever got published with prose like this.’

I sat up and glared at her. ‘I write crime fiction, not romance.’

‘And I can see why. Actually, once again you’ve delivered a rather

surprising twist. I've got to say I never saw this one coming.'

'Well, this twist has been and gone. It's ancient history. Now please give me the letter back.'

Cara studied me thoughtfully as she walked over and handed it to me. 'You never gave this to him, did you?'

The tightness in my chest eased when my fingers touched the paper. 'No, thank God.'

'Why "thank God"? If you were prepared to get a tattoo for the guy, it doesn't sound like it was a passing infatuation. Although I am disturbed I knew nothing of this. I thought you told me everything.'

'No one knew anything about it except me.' And Ruby, but I didn't want to hurt Cara's feelings. 'I was a teenager. Feelings of unrequited love are always dramatic at that age. I can assure you, I'm well and truly over it.'

'Well, that's good, because you'll be seeing him next week.'

'What?'

Cara smirked. 'Your ten-year school reunion, remember?'

'I hadn't forgotten about it, but I didn't think he was coming.' I may or may not have already made extra sure Josh wasn't attending. This may or may not have involved some late night wine consumption, Facebook stalking and scouring the dedicated school reunion Facebook closed group to ensure he hadn't accepted before I RSVP'd.

'He's coming,' Cara informed me, the smirk approaching something close to glee.

'How would you know?'

'Everyone knows, stupid. He's Josh Ward.'

'You say it like he's famous.'

Cara shrugged. 'He kind of is, isn't he? I mean he's only the most successful Aussie tech entrepreneur after he started Gaggle.'

I still found it hard to reconcile the Josh I knew with the multi-million dollar success of the social networking service he'd developed. Aimed at connecting groups of women like school mums and sporting teams, rather than individuals, it had caught on fast. 'I suppose.'

'That doesn't sound like the words of his one true love.'

I threw a pillow at her. 'Grow up, will you? Seriously, are you sure he's going to be there?'

Cara caught the pillow. 'It was in the local paper. Mum showed me.'

I let out a long breath. Our mother was notorious for cutting out articles of interest. She didn't seem to understand that any news worth knowing was available digitally, a fact I protested vehemently upon being forced to read a recent cutting about our retired school principal's award-winning camellia collection.

'I must have missed that one,' I said, aware of the painful irony.

'Well, he's coming. Why don't you take the letter? You could give it to him.'

I pushed the letter into my pocket and stuffed the rest of the shoebox's contents roughly away. I'd take the box home and go through it in the privacy of my apartment.

'Ha, ha, very funny. Like I said, my feelings for Josh are ancient history. He's not the sort of person I'd even want to be friends with now.'

'Why? Because he's successful and approaching good looking? If you like that sort of skinny-guy-hipster look. I've never understood your aversion to success, you know. Or your tendency to go out with casually dressed men in need of a shampoo. You're successful and good looking.'

'I am not!'

'Yes, you are. You're a published author and you're not awkward anymore.'

‘Being a published author doesn’t pay millions like Josh’s job, and not being awkward anymore doesn’t mean I’m beautiful.’ I could accept that my big brown eyes were no longer too big for my face, and the same for my wide mouth. I’d matured into my height too and occasionally even felt graceful instead of clumsy. Recently I’d cut my long, straight, light brown hair into a neat bob and was excited to realise it made me feel sophisticated.

‘Don’t get a big head. I didn’t say you were beautiful.’ She grinned and tossed the pillow back to me. ‘Come on. Stop procrastinating. We need to finish this.’

Setting the box on my bedside table, I let Cara organise me for the rest of the afternoon. I even let her toss out some things I would usually have tried to keep because I was still reeling from the discovery of the letter.

I’d long ago accepted my feelings for Josh were destined to be unrequited. I also genuinely thought I’d moved on. Holding the letter in my hands again and hearing my own words from a decade ago come back to haunt me suddenly made me feel uncertain about both of those things.

It was hardly the sort of revelation you wanted to have the week before your school reunion where you were going to see your high school crush again.



Run.

Despite the mild spring evening, and the fragrant scent of jasmine in the air, that was the word that kept going through my head as I surveyed the crowd of people.

The night of our school formal a decade ago had been just like this one. At the time I’d let myself be buoyed by thoughts of love blossoming and hope for the future. Ten years later I was older and wiser and the presence of spring wasn’t making me feel quite so optimistic.

Why had I agreed to attend my school reunion?

The answer to that question bounded towards me and I smiled in spite of myself. Ruby grinned at me as she approached, two glasses of wine sloshing dangerously. At fourteen she'd been the girl in our year with the big mouth and the loud laugh. At twenty-eight she was a woman with her own successful PR company.

'Here.'

I took the glass and gulped a big mouthful of the white wine.

'Whoa. Steady on. You haven't seen Josh yet.'

My eyes widened and I choked.

'Sorry. Poor choice of words.' Ruby patted me on the back sympathetically.

I coughed and finally the wine seemed to go down properly. 'How do you keep your clients again?' It still amazed me that Ruby's tendency to put her foot in her mouth hadn't lost her more clients.

'It's my charm, of course.'

I shook my head. That was much was true. Ruby was the sort of person people naturally gravitated towards. It wasn't just her personality that was larger than life—Ruby's fiery hair and dancing, bright blue eyes were captivating.

In this situation, Ruby's charisma was good and bad. It was good because the people attending our school reunion all wanted to talk to Ruby, which meant all I had to do was stand beside her and look interested. It was bad because there were plenty of people I didn't want to talk to.

'I can't believe so many people haven't changed,' she said, sipping her wine.

'What do you mean? Some have families, plenty are married, and a few have successful companies like you,' I pointed out.

She waved a hand at me. 'That's all surface stuff. Take a look at

Dave. He was an idiot in high school. Just because he runs his own hardware business and has kids doesn't mean he's not an idiot anymore. Did you see the way he ignored you?'

'Sort of.' I'd been trying to forget.

'He didn't even speak to you! Like he's still the cool kid and you're the shy, nerdy one. It was disgusting.'

'I am still shy. And I write books.'

'You're successful.'

'Maybe,' I muttered.

'Oh, please don't do that writerly guilt thing on me again, will you? You've written five books. You're published.'

'And I still have to work a part-time job to make ends meet.'

'And I had to work eighty-hour weeks for three years to get my company up and running. Such is life.'

I smiled again. A good dose of no-nonsense Ruby was as essential to my writing career as the hours of hard work I put in writing on weekends and at night.

'Holy crap. And there he is.'

I followed Ruby's gaze and ended up tipping my wine glass so some of the liquid sloshed over the edge.

'Maybe some of us *have* changed,' she added.

I nodded, too transfixed to speak. Who would have thought ten years could disappear in an instant? But they had and I stood staring at my old friend and high school crush like a deer caught in the headlights.

His dark hair was cropped shorter than when we'd been in school but it still had enough length left at the front for it to fall over his eyes. I'd experienced many agonising hours forcing myself not to reach out

and brush the stray lock away so I could gaze into his piercing blue eyes.

‘Looks like he can dress now,’ Ruby observed.

Absently I took in his dark denim jeans and the navy shirt that clung in all the right places. It had never been about his clothes. His tall, lanky frame had matured, just like I’d known it would. Now he was a man with presence, broad-shouldered and exhibiting a masculine elegance.

‘I guess earning millions of dollars can change a man,’ Ruby added.

‘I thought you said that was all surface stuff?’

Ruby finally looked at me, a thoughtful expression on her face. ‘Good point. I think we need to find out.’

‘What? Ruby, *no—*’

But it was already too late. She’d grabbed my arm and was dragging me across the room toward the boy—*man*—I’d spent most of my entire adult life trying to forget.

It wasn’t that I was still in love with Josh, exactly. It was more that I hadn’t found anyone who came close. Like Ben. We’d had great chemistry but, during the two years we were together, I found myself longing for the in-depth conversations Josh and I used to have about movies, books, and life. Or Gavin, the university English professor. The year we’d dated had been filled with fascinating discussions about all things literary. Somehow I could never imagine settling down with him though, on account of him preferring a good book to good sex (I wasn’t *that* literary).

To my relief, when we came closer to Josh a group of people had already gathered around him and we were forced to stand back and listen.

‘Josh, man. Way to go with the whole Giggle thing, huh?’

Ruby rolled her eyes at me as Dave slapped Josh on the back.

Josh's opinion of Dave in high school hadn't been much better than mine.

Instead of stepping away like I expected him to, Josh put an arm around Dave's shoulders. 'Yeah, mate. It's Gaggle, actually. But thanks.'

Dave puffed out his chest a bit. 'Yeah, Gaggle. Google. Hard to keep up, but I guess that's why they pay you the big bucks.' He started laughing at his joke and I saw a few other people around us murmur and shake their heads.

'Idiot,' whispered Ruby.

My gaze remained fixed on Josh. He was different. A lot different. It was in the self-assured way he held himself. Like he was comfortable in front of people. And he was talking easily with those around him. He'd never done that in high school. Like me, he'd actively avoided interaction with others. We used to joke that conversation was the enemy and we'd spent hours in each other's company reading and studying.

Now instead of the reclusive boy was a man who appeared to be able to hold others enthralled. He was telling a story about something to do with his company, but I was finding it hard to listen. My head felt like it was filled with static. I didn't know if it was from the shock of seeing him again or the very average wine they were serving.

Ruby glanced over at me and bit her lip when she saw my pale face. 'God, I'm sorry, Cassie. Let's go.' She tugged my arm and I let myself follow her.

Dave's raucous laughter cut through the white noise in my head. 'Hey, tell me you've had more luck with women since high school? Who was that chick you took to the formal? Katie? Casey?'

I stopped, my back to them and stiffened. It was hard enough seeing Josh again without being forced to relive the school formal. Josh and I had gone as 'friends'. I'd spent the entire night wishing our

relationship could be something more, but of course hadn't had the courage to do anything about it.

After a beat of silence, I heard Josh say, 'It was Cassie.'

'That's right! Cassie. Man, she was so straight-laced. Everything about her was straight, hey? No tits, no hips, it was no wonder she never smiled. I met her earlier. She's writing books now or something. Figures.'

I felt Ruby's fingernails dig into my arm. 'Fucking loser,' she hissed.

She was right. On the bright side, I now had a new character who would be meeting a grisly death in my next book.

'She's a good writer,' Josh said.

'Yeah, well she'd need to be.'

'And you're a *dickhead*.'

Oh wait, that was *me*.

Ruby stared open-mouthed at me. Maybe I was having an out of body experience, because I seemed to be walking toward them instead of in the other direction like I'd been planning to a moment ago.

The group of people parted like the Red Sea and I came to stand in front of Dave. 'Do you think I care about what you think of me?' I asked him.

Dave blinked and looked up at me. He wasn't particularly tall and barely came up to my shoulder, and I was angry enough to enjoy it. He just stared at me.

'Well, I don't care what you think. I never did. And maybe I never smiled around you because you're an idiot. Did you ever consider that?'

Dave gaped at me, his mouth working overtime but no sound coming out.

'Thought so,' I said. The anger ebbing away as quickly as it came, I

looked up and met Josh's eyes. Feeling suddenly shy, I opened my mouth again, but all that came out was a quiet, 'Hi.'

He grinned at me. 'Hi.'

I bit my lip then figured *to hell with it*. 'You've changed,' I said.

His grin intensified. 'So have you.'

I shifted self-consciously in my uncomfortable heels. I was pretty sure he wasn't referring to my appearance. I was still tall, still without hips and my push-up bra wasn't that good. 'I guess murdering people on a regular basis does that to you.'

'It suits you.'

I laughed before I could catch myself and was surprised to find it felt good.

Josh's gaze dropped to my lips. 'Does that mean I'm not a dickhead?'

I glanced over at Dave, who was watching us with a shocked expression.

'If you ditch this guy, I might be convinced.'



The bar area was dimly lit and I was starting to feel like a character out of one of my crime novels. I was definitely having an out of body experience. Who was that person before? It sure as hell hadn't been me. I didn't go around putting people in their place or inviting my old high school crush to have a drink with me.

Except, apparently, I did.

Josh put two glasses of wine on the table and sat down opposite me. 'I wasn't sure if you'd come tonight.'

'Yeah, I did think about not coming to the reunion but, you know, Ruby.'

Josh laughed softly and I could feel it in my fingers and toes. 'You

two are an odd pair.'

'We are.'

So much for the long conversations we used to have. I was finding it difficult to think, let alone talk in Josh's presence.

'I've read all your books,' he said.

'You have?'

'Yeah. I really enjoyed them.'

I smiled and dropped my gaze to my lap. It was stupid that the compliment affected me so much, but it did. 'I've never used Gaggles.'

Josh's laughter was louder this time and so was the warmth in my feet. 'Why doesn't that surprise me? You wouldn't even accept my friend request on Facebook.'

I reluctantly met his gaze. 'I think you contacted me when my dad was sick and I was distracted.' It wasn't entirely a lie. Dad had been sick but I hadn't missed his friend request. I'd had many sleepless nights over it. I looked away again, sure his blue eyes could see everything I didn't want him to.

'It's OK,' he said. 'Why did we lose touch in the first place anyway?'

Because I was in love with you. I forced myself to shrug but the movement felt tight. 'You moved away for university, remember? And I took that crazy cadetship with that newspaper and never had a life.'

The truth was, I'd wanted to lose touch. I knew I'd never have the courage to tell him how I felt, so I thought if I put some distance between us it would get easier. Eventually it had and somehow life had moved on.

'Yeah. That all feels like a long time ago now, huh? So apart from being a published author, what's new? Boyfriend? Husband? Kids?'

I straightened in my seat, too surprised by his line of questioning to be dishonest. 'Um, no, no and no. You?' I finished, because that seemed like the polite thing to ask.

I watched as he toyed with the cardboard coaster. ‘There might be a special someone,’ he said eventually, not looking at me. ‘But it’s top secret for now.’

‘Oh.’ *Oh*. Well, what had I expected? Josh wasn’t simply Josh Ward anymore. He was a multi-millionaire entrepreneur. Of course he’d have a girlfriend, and by the sound of it he was trying to keep it low key so the papers didn’t get hold of it. I didn’t blame whoever she was. I’m not sure how I’d feel about the media attention. ‘That’s exciting,’ I said, trying my best to sound like it while inside my stomach was churning. ‘And I promise I won’t say a word.’

He asked me about my books again, obviously not keen to share more information than that. I did my best to follow the thread of conversation.

I lasted another half hour before I finally made some lame excuse about sharing a ride home with Ruby.



‘He’s got a girlfriend?’ said Cara the next day at Mum and Dad’s, where we were continuing to clear out the rest of our stuff.

‘Yup.’

‘Oh.’

Ignoring the fact that I’d said the same thing to Josh, I shrugged. ‘It’s not like I’ve been waiting for the last ten years to be reunited with him. I was the one who deliberately lost contact.’

‘Because you’re a scaredy cat.’

‘So? It’s all in the past anyway.’ Or at least it was going to be if I had anything to do with it. Last night’s trip down memory lane had proved two very painful things: 1) Not all feelings go away with time, and 2) Josh and I were never meant to be.

‘So you wouldn’t like a chance with Josh now he’s a successful, rich businessman?’

‘Nope.’

‘Liar.’

I sighed and stopped rifling through the pile of clothes I’d been sorting. ‘What’s your point?’

‘No point. Just wondering. Might make it easier to read this then.’ She tossed a folded up piece of paper at me.

It landed on my lap and I eyed it suspiciously. Unlike last time, no bolt of recognition coursed through me. ‘What’s this?’

‘It’s for you. I found it yesterday while you were at your reunion.’

I slowly unfolded it. When I saw the blue words scrawled across the lined surface, my hand shook. It was Josh’s handwriting. I’d always loved his writing. Teachers used to complain it was messy, but they didn’t understand Josh. He was always in a rush. His head was so full of ideas that his sloped, elongated letters were already in a hurry to get to the next thing.



THE COOLEST GIRL IN SCHOOL

*The coolest girl in school doesn't even know she's cool
She's too busy making plans
Dreaming dreams
Until the stupid gaggle of girls who giggle and gossip
Hurt her feelings with their snide remarks
But the coolest girl in school ignores them
Even though it hurts
She could come up with a smart reply
In the blink of an eye
But she doesn't even try
She keeps her cool
The coolest girl in school
So beautiful
Thoughtful brown eyes
Long brown hair I want to run my fingers through*

*The grace of a swan
And the most beautiful thing of all?
She doesn't try to be someone she's not
The coolest girl in school
Doesn't even know she's cool
Doesn't know I love everything about her
Doesn't know that when she's dreaming her dreams
I'm dreaming of the coolest girl I know.*

‘Where did you find this?’ My voice came out a whisper.

‘In an old pencil case. It was tucked into the pocket at the front.’

‘The red one?’

‘Yeah, I think so.’

I blinked and looked at the paper again, words like ‘beautiful’ and ‘grace’ and ‘cool’ jumping off the page at me.

‘Who’s it from?’ Cara demanded.

‘It’s from him,’ I managed, my eyes drawn to a particular word again.

Gaggle.

‘Him? Do you mean *Josh*?’ Cara’s voice rose an octave on the last word.

‘Yeah,’ I breathed.

Oh my God. Did the name Gaggle have something to with me? Was the group social networking service he’d made millions of dollars out of somehow paying a clever tribute to the teasing we’d endured during our high school days?

My mind reeling, I finally met Cara’s gaze. ‘This is the first time I’ve read this,’ I told her. ‘We used to leave each other stupid notes in our pencil cases for the classes we weren’t in together. They were funny mostly, to make each other laugh and combat the boredom.’

‘That’s a love note, Cassie.’

My hands were still clinging to the paper and it took all my strength to place it on the bed. ‘Hardly. But it’s sweet. It was a long time ago.’

‘Don’t you see?’ Cara cried, picking it up and waving it at me. ‘He was in love with you, too!’

I inhaled unsteadily. ‘But he’s not now. He has a girlfriend.’

‘Screw the girlfriend! You need to tell him.’

I stared at her. My practical, logical sister. ‘I think all the dust has gotten to you.’

‘Where is it? The note you wrote him.’

I continued to stare at her while she rifled through the scattered papers on the bed.

‘It’s not here.’

‘Tell me you didn’t throw it out.’ Cara’s brown eyes, so like my own, were rounded in something approaching horror.

‘No. I took it home. It’s at my apartment.’

‘Then send it to him!’

‘Cara,’ I started. ‘I don’t think that’s a good idea—’

She grabbed my arms and squeezed them tight, making me wince. ‘You don’t get it, do you? This was meant to be! You have to send it to him.’

‘It’s the cleaning products, isn’t it? You’ve been breathing in the bleach or something.’

Cara let go of my arms. ‘I’m not joking, Cassie.’

‘I can see that. But don’t you think if it was meant to be it would have happened ten years ago?’

‘No! You weren’t ready then. Now you are. Fate has brought you together and—’

‘Fate?’ I scoffed. ‘Seriously, have you been reading romance novels again? I keep telling you to mix up the escapist stuff with some crime fiction for a change—’

‘Cassie. Listen. To. Me. Send it to him.’

‘He has a girlfriend!’

‘Even better! If he loves her, it won’t make an ounce of difference. If he loves you, he never really loved her anyway.’

I held up a hand. ‘You’re delirious and I’m sure there’s a song lyric in there somewhere.’

Cara growled—she actually growled—in frustration. ‘You’re hopeless! You live in a make-believe world most of the time and you think *this* is unreasonable.’

‘Girls? What’s going on?’

We both turned to find our mother standing in the doorway wearing an amused expression.

‘Re-living the old days, are you? I must say, it warms my heart to hear you bicker in your old bedroom.’

‘We’re not bickering,’ I began.

‘Good,’ Mum said, cutting me off. ‘Then you can come and have lunch with us.’

Throwing Cara an angry glare, I stuffed Josh’s note in my pocket and followed Mum downstairs to the kitchen.



For the next month, the letters stayed firmly tucked inside my top bedside drawer. Until Josh contacted me and asked me to have coffee.

I couldn’t avoid him forever. He seemed keen to reconnect after meeting up at the reunion. I’d accepted his Facebook friend request this time and hoped that would be the end of it, only it wasn’t. He kept

commenting on my posts and direct messaging me about his writing software idea.

Not that I didn't want to see him. Oh no. Since the reunion and the discovery of both letters I was thinking about him way too much. But that was exactly the reason I knew it would be better if I didn't meet with him again.

Of course when he invited me to discuss the writing software in person, the 'yes' was out of my mouth before I could stop myself. So much for not re-living the past.

And re-living the past seemed like what I was destined to do as I sat across from Josh in the café the following Sunday morning. The first half hour was hazy. I nodded and commented in all the right places as he spoke about the technology he planned to use for his new software. What I was really focused on was the lock of hair falling across his forehead. And the two letters I'd stupidly stuffed in my jacket pockets before I raced out the door.

'Josh,' I said abruptly, when he paused to stir his coffee.

'Yeah?'

I couldn't believe I was actually doing this. But ten years was a long time and if I had any hope of starting fresh and leaving the past where it belonged, then this might be my only chance.

I pushed the note he'd written to me across the table before I could think the better of it. 'I found this the other day. Mum and Dad are moving and we're cleaning out.'

A flicker of something—surprise? Recognition?—clouded his blue eyes. Without saying anything, he reached over and took the note. He opened it then folded it closed without reading it. He pushed it back to me. 'You can keep it.'

I played with the edge of the paper with my fingers, but didn't pick it up. 'I only read it for the first time a month ago. The day after the reunion actually.'

‘I’m sorry?’

‘My sister found it. I’d never seen it before. I missed it somehow.’

‘You only just read it?’ Josh spoke slowly, like he was trying to understand.

Despite all the years gone past I knew he understood perfectly. Speaking slowly was a habit of his when his mind was whirling a million miles an hour.

He reached over and touched the edge of paper then retracted his hand like it was hot to the touch. ‘So you didn’t know?’

‘That you liked me?’

His blue eyes held mine. ‘Yes.’ He blinked. ‘I mean, no. I more than liked you, Cassie.’ Josh sat back in his seat, running hand through his dark hair like I wished I could. He exhaled while I couldn’t breathe.

Somehow I found the courage to pull the other note from my pocket and give it to him, my hand shaking slightly.

‘What’s this?’

‘It’s a note I wrote. Ten years ago. The night before the school formal. I never gave it to you.’

I watched, still unable to breathe, while he read my letter. I let myself be distracted by the way his forehead creased as he concentrated. I realised I liked the light lines that were beginning to etch themselves into his face with age.

When he was finished he sat back in his chair again. I didn’t give him the chance to speak.

‘I know it’s really inappropriate giving this to you now. I understand you have a girlfriend and that’s not what this is about. But when I found that note you’d written, well, I guess I just wanted to set the record straight after all these years so we could—’ *Move on*, I was going to say, before he interrupted.

‘I don’t have a girlfriend.’

‘You don’t?’

‘No.’

I hesitated, needing time to think. ‘Then why—’

‘Tell you I had one?’ he finished for me. ‘Because it was the only way to stop myself from blurting out something stupid. Like telling you how beautiful you are. More beautiful than I remember. Or how I re-read each of your books more than once hoping for a glimpse of me in one of your characters.’

The intensity in his gaze was making it hard to concentrate, so I looked down at the letters again. For once, I was lost for words.

‘A spring clean, you said?’ he commented, his fingers a hairsbreadth from mine.

‘Yes.’

‘You never were very neat.’

‘I’m still not.’

His index finger brushed mine and I closed my eyes, wondering if this sort of thing was enough to cause a character to tremor in one of Cara’s romance novels. Because that’s what it felt like: a tremor shifting the ground beneath me.

‘Well, maybe,’ Josh said, his deep voice soft, ‘we need to make sure you have an annual spring clean. So you don’t lose any more letters from me.’

I opened my eyes. ‘Any more?’

‘Yes, Cassie. I’d like to write you some more. How do you feel about that?’

‘I think,’ I said slowly, while my heart raced double-time, ‘I’d like to write you some, too.’

In response, he threaded his fingers through mine and I swore I felt every muscle in my body relax, like the final piece of a puzzle had just

fallen into place.

‘Good. You’d better clear a space because there might be a few.’ He squeezed my hand and grinned. ‘We have a lot of catching up to do.’

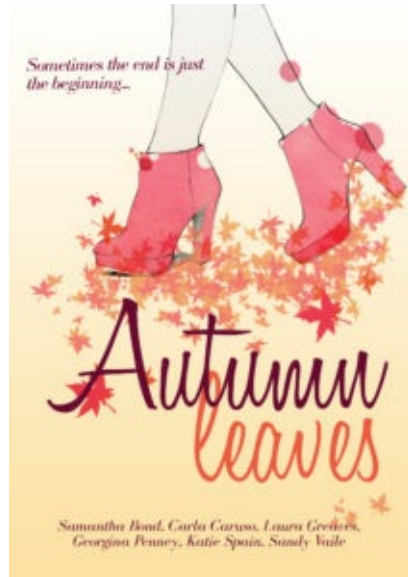


ABOUT BELINDA WILLIAMS

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.

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