

Love Song

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MANDY NEWMAN

SYDNEY

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To Andrew, you make loving fun.

And Mum – never, ever forgotten – you make it impossible.

Prologue

Friday, 30 November 1988
Kokoda Lounge
Canberra Workers Club

A familiar set of jerky notes filled the ballroom. Clutching the microphone stand, in tight stonewash jeans, the skinny frontman of the house band, threw out his bony hips, in time with the driving beat, and wailed, 'I.....maaaaaaaaaaaaaaddddddddeeeeeee itttttttt through.....the wilder...' The remnants of Year Twelve who could still stand surged onto the parquet dance floor.

'Well, come on then.' Matthew extended his left hand.

'Dance?' Jessie screwed up her button nose. Matthew, with his slender cheekbones, vintage t-shirt, black jeans, and smouldering gitane was a card-carrying member of the Cool Group. He'd never dance to a *hot hit* in *public*.

'Let us go then you and I, with the evening spread across the sky and walk over there and then step or sway in time with the music.' He pointed towards the dance floor.

'But men like *you* don't dance. To Madonna. To *Like a virgin*. White Australian men can only dance like pogo sticks to *Midnight Oil* or *The Angels*. Pissed.'

'Can't I?'

She frowned.

'I think it might be time for your re-education to begin.' Leaning down, he took her hand and led her to the dance floor.

His fingertips sizzled on her skin. The atmosphere in the room snapped into another dimension. Gulping, Jessie felt a glowing sparkly rush of silver energy flow deep inside her. Her heart pounded underneath her taffeta lavender disaster of a formal dress. A dust of magic sprinkled from the ceiling. No...

Plastered, sweaty and emotional teenagers crowded around them.

Surely, he can't dance.

But Matthew could keep in time, stay on the beat AND he knew every word to *Like a Virgin!* His body replied to the throbbing and regular drumbeat. His long arms; his slender quadriceps surrounded her. The bass beat crept up her legs and to her thighs in a sweet unrest. He smelled freshly laundered and his hips seemed to be in synchronicity with hers. Alert and alive, she tried to calm her growing desire. *This can't be happening. I must be reading the signals incorrectly. He can't be interested in me. I've never even spoken to him until half an hour ago. I'm not reed-thin. I'm not cool. I've never even had sex.*

Everyone else turned into a carousel of flashing lights. They became the only people in the room. She looked up into his gentle brown eyes and his gravelly chin, and he beamed back. His breath fell on her neck like soft droplets of rain, easing their way down her spine, along her ribs and around to her breasts to the small of her back. *Holy shit. I think I just became a woman.*

'I think you've been hanging out with the wrong men,' he whispered.

She raised her eyebrows, fighting a desire to launch at him. *Oh, God. I know.*

'I want to see people,' he murmured.

'And I want to see life. *Oh, Matthew.*' She gasped. Gossamer tears came into her eyes. *My favourite line from Morrissey. All the steel nails she had battered into her heart's coffin dissolved and she unfolded like petals of a lotus flower. The life she wanted seemed so clear. I want to go to Paris; I want to learn how to make the perfect croissant. I want to eat a mound of lemon, chilli, fried breadcrumbs and garlic pasta smothered in parmesan.*

His hand felt as if it belonged in hers. Her eyes were drawn to his soft lips. Kissing him seemed to be the most natural thing to do. *But I hardly know him and surely he doesn't feel the same way?*

He let go of her hand and reached down and took her head

in his hands just like she had seen in every romantic movie she had ever watched.

‘Oh God,’ she thought, her eyes widening.

He pushed his chin slightly forward and bent his head.

That looks like the kissing position to me.

‘You’re a little charmer, Jessie Morgan.’ He gazed into her eyes.

Sobs pooled. A deep longing and yearning boiled over. Please kiss me, she prayed. *Please. I’m dying here.* The end of the song loomed. The end of the night loomed. The harsh fluorescent lights that would smash and dash all romance and true love loomed.

Matthew leaned in, closed his eyes and parted his moistened lips.

A puff of dry ice encased them.

Her face and chin and lips seemed to know what to do. She raised her head and prayed that this first precious kiss would exceed her expectations.

His soft, delicious touch awoke her body from a silent teenage slumber. Her hips moved into his as if on a quest to find a hidden treasure deep inside his soul. Tears came into her eyes. Life suddenly made sense; it was less starless, empty and sad. A moment. A sudden revelation.

Chapter One

‘The time is ten minutes to seven and I’m joined now by notorious Sydney icon, radio shock jock, Peter Vincent.’

In the half-extinguished light of another muggy morning, Jessie lay in an all too familiar molasses of silent despair. Yet again she’d been wide-awake during the lonely early hours of the morning. She prayed that the cooler air of autumn would finally come – and soon.

Jeff the Idiot, let one rip – so powerful, so foul it made the white bed sheet tremble. A rotten egg, soft cheese, and spinach gas filled the air. She flinched. Missiles of red-hot anger soared through her chest. The imbecile really had no idea the flimsy thread on which his life reposed.

‘Sorry.’ Jeff chuckled, clearly quite impressed.

‘It’s a pleasure to be here Robbie,’ said a deep, hit with the ladies, 1970’s AM radio voice. ‘Feminism was established so as to allow unattractive women access to the mainstream of society. I’m a huge supporter of women. What I’m not, is a supporter of feminism. Feminism is what I oppose. Feminism has led women astray. I love the women’s movement – especially when I’m walking behind it.’ Proud of the bait he cast, Peter Vincent laughed heartily.

‘You’ve got to be bloody joking. Yet another bloody old white man trying to control women...’ Fuming, Jessie readied to breath fire at the universe and life as a whole.

‘What a low life scum sucking dinosaur. What the hell is he doing on the ABC? Why doesn’t he just stay up the dial where he belongs?’ Jeff leaned out of bed, picked up one of his worn brown boots from the dusty wooden floor and hurled it at the radio.

‘Go Jeff!’ She raised her eyebrows; startled something positive about her husband had escaped from her lips.

Looking at her with a trace of disbelief, that she had not

jumped down his throat or cut him off at the knees with a stinging sledge, Jeff smiled weakly.

For a moment, for the first time in months, she saw the man she had fallen in love with, nearly thirty years before. Rather than seeing his pregnant paunch, she admired Jeff's broad shoulders and muscly biceps. An ancient longing inexplicably stirred and a rare impulse to kiss him besieged her. In the past year, as she nudged towards her fiftieth birthday, all she typically felt for Jeff and the world, in general, was a wild, roaring rage. Not a Katy Perry – female empowerment, kind of bubble gum, *Frozen* kind of roar – more Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, subterranean beast.

Recently, while sitting at a school trivia night dressed as a *Liquorice All Sort*, Jessie had confessed to a friend, dressed as a blue and yellow Fantale, 'I think there may be a tiger living inside me.' Her friend had stared, her black eyes widening in surprise, 'A tiger? Mine's more like a beast.' Finding that description pertinent, on one particularly sleepless, desolate night, Jessie had set herself the task to try and describe the raging, frothing mass living just under her ribs. The kid's dog-eared copy of *The Gruffalo* had proved most helpful. Curved horns – tick. English mustard coloured eyes – tick. Scales – tick. Prickles – tick. Claws – most certainly. Slimy black tongue – oh yes. But then she had found Mary Shelley's description of the monster in *Frankenstein*...

Translucent yellowish skin pulled so taut over the body that it barely disguised the workings of the arteries and muscles underneath. Watery, glowing eyes...breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs...

Bingo!

With the beast temporarily appeased, she gently stroked Jeff's back with the tips of her fingers and thought about kissing the nape of his neck. *Maybe. Just maybe? God. He could get lucky.* If she narrowed her eyes and ignored Jeff's growing stomach and his Ned Kelly beard, he almost looked like a pasty Jamie Fraser. She gazed at the cheery buttercup alarm clock on her bedside table. Five minutes would be enough. In the real world. Not like that Jamie Fraser who

seemed to have all the time in the world to make love to his sweet sassenach – didn't he have civil wars to fight?

Dropping her permanent guise of PMS, seething, bitch, Jessie yielded. Jeff had made her laugh and deserved a reward. She gave Jeff one of those resigned, oh all right, looks.

Stunned that her missiles were momentarily disarmed and knowing this moment would only last for microseconds, Jeff snuggled in a little closer and prepared his hairy right leg to mount. Climbing on board, as if he was clamouring over a sty in a paddock, making their old mattress squeak, Jeff gently kissed the back of her neck, and ran his soft, academic hands along her bottom, wisely circumnavigating her dimpled, spongy stomach. The iron bedhead started to tap on the wall in a regular motion.

Looking up at the roses embedded in the peeling ceiling, Jessie put her arms around his naked tummy, clasping her hands around his back, finding it surprisingly relaxing to physically exert herself, if only to a minor degree. She found relief in his soothing, knowing hands and lips. Without a doubt, she was the laziest maker of love in the Inner West – maybe in the whole of Sydney.

She felt a swell on her thigh. Jeff entered and started pounding her arse with the tops of his hairy, pallid white man's thighs.

Closing her eyes, lifting up her hips, occasionally groaning, she mentally went through the coming day. Wage a war with the rest of Sydney. Drop Maggie off at school. Get a bus or train to dreaded North Sydney to attend the death of a thousand cuts Occupational Health and Safety course.

Jeff moaned.

By his distressed expression, and the amount of air he was inhaling, Jessie knew she only had to lightly exert herself for two more minutes before he would finally explode. She dug her fingernails into his back and wailed to indicate he was a rival to Jackson Maine. In principle, she and Jeff hated the North Shore. SOOOOO CONSERVATIVE. SOOOO boring. SOOOOOOO WHITE. Not like groovy, hip, glorious, diesel infused, cockroach central, less

than ten minutes to coffee, train, bus, the pub, quinoa, yoga – the holy grail of Sydney’s public sector, vegans and Amnesty activists, where you could trace the Qantas A380 en-route from Singapore – the INNER WEST.

Unlike class conscious Jeff who hated the North Shore because of the high concentration of rich tossers, Jessie avoided it because it was the Grand Central of THE PAST. The ghost of her mother dwelled in the train rattling over the Harbour Bridge, swam in the lanes of the heritage-listed North Sydney pool and lurked in the tall elms, making her painfully remember when life had been simple, rich and good. Even thinking about going to the North Shore made her tremble. The pain of missing rumbled into gear.

Jeff panted, his eyes closed.

Jessie drove her rounded, milky hips into his, digging her nails in further to his back. She had to get Connor’s birthday present too. A guitar – *the guitar* – from the best guitar shop in Sydney apparently, in Dulwich Hill. They were such terrible parents – couldn’t even manage to get a present on the day of their son’s fourteenth birthday. She thrust up her hips with an extra pizzazz so she could at least pretend she had contributed.

The imaginary man in her mind came alive; a thread and blend of the ones who’d made her believe in magic. She wondered what it would be like to make love to someone she truly, savagely desired. She liked making love to Jeff, while it was familiar and comforting, it wasn’t... but maybe those years were behind her. The girl she used to know at eighteen was almost gone. Heading into middle age seemed to be a process of deleting oneself. A concrete bitch was tilting for possession of her soul. She didn’t want to let the fresh, optimistic, sunshine part of herself to totally vanish.

With beads of sweat pouring down his brow, Jeff looked like he was squeezing out a lemon. He let out one final deep, primal, squeal and thrust his hips through her in one last almighty heave. Groaning, he collapsed on top of her, spreading his rubbery, lathered self all over her.

Trying to catch a breath, she waited for about a minute, then quietly asked, 'You done?'

He nodded. Exhausted. Ecstatic.

'Action stations everyone,' she yelled, pushing her reddened face away from his head, to snag some sorely needed, fresh and clear air.

Chapter Two

‘Did ya get the message on the machine?’ Jeff, took a loud crunch out of his piece of vegemite toast.

‘When? When would I have had the time?’ All of Jessie’s goodwill had evaporated when she spotted his ripe, soggy, soccer kit and muddy socks from the night before, still lying in a pyramid on the bathroom floor, waiting for the magic elf who did not live in the bottom of the garden, or anywhere in the Inner West for that matter, to come and collect, laundry and iron.

She looked with contempt at Jeff’s puffy, squishy, dad bod squeezed into his marriage breaking lycra (MBL) – a perfect match for her sad sack of dripping lard and their pathetic, messy failed life. She barked to Connor and Maggie, ‘Bags? Lunch?’ The watery eyes of the beast opened.

‘Apparently Toots – you’ve got a school reunion. In a couple of weeks too.’ He pushed his ridiculously expensive, imported Italian bicycle down the narrow hallway.

‘School reunion? Are you shitting me?’ She swung open the chipped front door, of their crumbling three-bedroom brick semi in vegan central, politically switched on, Marrickville South, suppressing the desire to scream like a raving lunatic. *And how many times do I have to tell you – don’t call me Toots!*

Lester, the black family cat, raced through her legs.

‘Swear jar, Ma,’ quipped Maggie, in her grubby Year Six Marrickville South Public School sweater, trailing the cat out the door.

‘They need a bucket,’ mumbled Connor, in a greyish Inner West High School shirt, following Maggie.

‘Bloody, stupid, effing...’ The beast arose. *As if I am going to front up to a school reunion?*

‘Language?’ Jeff pushed his bike through the doorway and onto the grimy veranda in desperate need of a sweep and a bucket of

hot water and sugar soap. Old soccer balls and countless forgotten, browned sports shoes lay in a heap, underneath a broken white bench.

'Oh who gives a flying...' *Don't tell me what to do.* A fug of Sydney's song of soggy April air covered Jessie in a thin film of plump moisture. Even the weather was conspiring against her sorry life. Beads of sweat marched down her back. The beast begged to be let out of her throat to strangle him.

What was Jeff going on about? The F Word was the most perfect word in the entire universe.

*F*** I've woken up.*

*F*** I had a bad night's sleep.*

*F*** why is it so hot?*

*F*** I hate my house.*

*F*** I'm so fat.*

*F*** I'm too old to be carrying on about my weight at my age.*

*F*** why did I eat so much chocolate, put a slice of pizza in the toaster and drink so much red wine last night?*

*F*** my husband is an idiot.*

*F*** my children drive me crazy.*

*F*** that woman is a complete idiot.*

*F*** you are rude.*

*My friend is so F*** mean.*

*Did you see what that F*** driver did?*

*Why am I surrounded by so many F*** imbeciles?*

*What makes you think it's a good day, you F*** idiot?*

*I F*** hate humidity.*

*Are you F*** kidding me? Did you really just say that to me, you F*** moron?*

*Just F*** the F*** off, why don't you?*

Last year she'd received an email:

Dear class 5G parents, guardians and non-parent carers,

Martha and Eva would prefer a class birthday gift for their daughters this year. Gorgeous little Lola would love a kindle and Milly would like a desk (so studious aren't they?) So if you would like to join

in, we can collect a suggested \$20 per child before the in-class party. If you'd like to direct deposit, please DM us or if you're a little old school and like to send \$\$\$, please place money in an envelope marked for Martha/Eva – that would work as well.

Thanks so much and no obligation of course.

Martha and Eva

Jessie had sent a reply that said:

*Dear Martha and Eva – please why don't you just F*** off.*

'Jessie.'

Kicking a ball on the veranda, she scowled as he galloped down the stairs, carrying his bike, with the kids following after. Glowering at his growing tummy, his big ears sprouting with long hairs and his awry wiry hair, she wished for his sake that he looked a lot more like Jamie Fraser or Jackson Maine. Tightening her fingers around the strap of her brown leather handbag she thought, you're a f*** idiot, Jeff!

She couldn't pinpoint the exact moment they'd transitioned from spontaneous sex and Tuesday nights of organic cider at the pub to a sexless treadmill of work, bloated bellies, bills, fallen breasts and bums, arguments and forcing the kids to go to school even though they had green candles coming out their noses. But it had happened, and now life was one long drag through decaying inner-city hell. When they had first got together, there'd been a lot of sex. Lots of good sex. In the back seat of his Torana, on the beach, pushed up against a wall. But lately, a delicate balance of forces had to be in play for the actual act of sex to occur.

They included:

- optimum room temperature
- optimum body temperature
- going to bed within fifteen minutes of each other
- a willingness to be partially naked with a newly acquired

muffin top, dark circles under the eyes, increased facial hair, incessant itchy skin and a preparedness to forgo scoffing *Green and Black's* chocolate, glugging a good red wine, sipping freshly roasted coffee, inhaling pasta with breadcrumbs and lemon, scoffing crusty

bread with lashings of butter while bingeing on *Younger*, *Outlander*, *Masterchef*, *The Great British Bake off*, *Chef's Table*, *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat*, and 1980s music video clips.

- an intense need to tick off sex on the To Do list to prove the relationship is not in dire straits.

'Now what we have before you, children is an example of what is known as menopause.' Jeff, mimicking Sir Richard Attenborough's soft, clearly enunciated voice, pointed up to the sweat stains on Jessie's emerald silk shirt and started chuckling. The three of them, standing in a group, in the small front yard laughed.

'You're really going there at eight o'clock in the morning? You fuc...!' She slammed the front door, with a great *Thank God it's Friday* flourish. *You bastard, making them gang up on me.*

'I only said, 'School reunion.' Don't you think you should just calm down?'

'Calm down?' Her eyes widened and she stomped down the stairs, pressing all her pent up frustration into the tread of each stair. Flames of golden and orange rage blazed in her ribcage and opening her mouth, she unleashed an inferno. 'Did you really just say that? Tell me of the singular woman, in the history of the world, who has calmed down, when her husband – or anyone for that matter – told her to calm down?' She stalked towards the front gate, walking past a perplexed Jeff. Her hands grew jet black talons, 'You clearly don't understand me, you effing fffffff. Under no circumstances, will I be attending a school reunion with all those poxy people and dickheads I went to school with. You...' She threw open the gate, turned around and inhaled to prepare for a torrent of the cleverest and most stinging combination of F words she had ever used in her life. But then she caught sight of Maggie and her mass of blonde curls – lover of unicorns and rainbows – standing next to Connor staring up at her in shock.

Her anger ground to a halt and her talons retracted. A magpie cackled in the distance. Maggie was the line. The line of civility. The day or the moment she unleashed the fullest incarnation of the beast in front of Connor and Maggie, in broad

daylight, in public was the day damnation had finally arrived. She gulped. 'Come on.' Suppressing an urge to burst into tears, she waved her hand forward as if she was leading a SWAT team. 'I've got to get over the Bridge. I've got that OH&S course in frig... North Sydney. And I have to get that blo... guitar...'

Connor and Maggie ambled past the struggling violet alliums Jessie and Maggie had planted a few months before, in the thirsty flowerbeds flanking the front path.

Jessie knew she should apologise for being such a cranky bitch and reassure them all that Mum wasn't bat shit crazy but her standard repartee of soothing, gentle inspirational quotes and phrases had dried up like a parched dam. The only words she had were for Jeff and his kind, the western way of life and patriarchy in general. *I do not want to be calm. I do not want to go to a school reunion. I am so sick of being cooperative and emotionally stable for the sake of this family and society in general. I am sick of curtailing my thoughts and desires for the greater good, so you can all have a lovely, emotionally stress-free life. I am sick of negotiating every decision. I am sick of having to think about you all and your needs and constantly having to be three steps ahead of the rest of you. I am sick of having to think about what's for dinner. I am tired of planning everything. I cannot believe I create my own non-freedom. I am the greatest instrument of social stability. I facilitate your freedom and I hate it. I want my own.* But she knew it was neither the time nor the place.

'Don't you like the people you went to school with Mum?' asked Maggie, swinging on the gate in cloud cuckoo land. 'Aren't friends the most important people?'

'Of course, sweetheart.' Looking down the cracked footpath at the front of their house, Jessie breathed out deeply, telling herself to come back to the present, to stop thinking about her ancient womanhood anger and to stop frightening her children. If she was going to burst Maggie's bubble, she wanted to do it consciously, not on a random Friday morning. *But... Bloody hell. When was the right time to tell your daughter the truth about how*

fucking disappointing friends will be? And life itself for that matter? And what her life will be like if she works, has a partner and decides she wants to have children?

‘Why don’t you want to go to your school reunion then?’ asked Maggie.

‘She’s embarrassed by us,’ said Connor, tapping on his phone, staring up at her through the strands of his long, dark fringe.

Jeff fussed with the chain of his bike in the front yard.

‘No, no,’ cried Jessie, turning around to face her two bright buttons. Her voice cracked and wobbled, ‘In fact, you two are my proudest achievement.’ A surge of sobs thundered down her throat. She leaned down and drew them into a hug, much to Connor’s horror. *I can’t tell you how much I love you. If I am honest, you’re my only achievement. It’s me. I can’t stand this Aldi version of myself and our house and life. I can’t tell you what a disappointment I am to myself and that is why I could never, ever go to a school reunion – it would be way too embarrassing and humiliating.*

When she was seventeen, she’d confessed to the frigging smooth operator, Matthew fucking MacDonald, her sacred impossible dream that she wanted to go to the freaking *Le Cordon Bleu* cooking school in freaking Paris. He’d been so impressed. But that brave, brash girl had vanished the moment she had finished Year Twelve. She had moved to Sydney, with her destiny in her hands, and become her worst nightmare. An archetypal freaking boring part-time public servant, stuck in the most pathetic version of life.

Making her way to her black Subaru parked on the street, she was sure she could hear John Lennon painfully, earnestly, warbling while plucking the strings of his acoustic guitar, that key line, that everyone who is bitterly disappointed with their life, finds themselves singing. *Life is what happens...* Her ears throbbed. Breathing in deeply, she tried to steady her bitter disappointment, bubbling just under the surface.

I don’t need to worry anyway because, in principle, Jeff

passionately abhors school reunions. Like he hates private schools, rich fat cats and attacks on the public service.

‘Why don’t we all go? It’s in Canberra in three weeks,’ said Jeff brightly, pushing his bike through the front gate and walking towards Jessie. ‘The school holidays would have started – I’ve been wanting to take the kids to the science museum. We could drive down.’

Jessie clenched her fists, hating his lime fluoro MBL losing the battle with his growing Guinness gut.

‘Not driving?’ wailed Maggie. She despised going on long trips in the car with her penchant for motion sickness. So did the rest of the family.

‘Probably should go Mum. You’ve been a right, old cranky cow lately.’ Connor jibed.

She grimaced, she’d clearly stooped to a new low, if Connor had noticed. She stared at her two messy, rays of light. *Do the kids know I hate their dad a lot of the time? Are things that bad? What’s happened to me?* Lately, she couldn’t even recognise herself. She’d ducked into Myer a month back, and caught a glimpse of an old, tired, beaten by life woman with crazy, wispy hair, and dark circles under her eyes, looking at her in a mirror, near the shoe section, and been horrified to realise – it was her!

‘But Dad and I can’t go anyway. It’s the soccer...’

A wave of relief and joy swept over her. *The soccer camp. Praise be to Jesus for the soccer camp. The one thing Connor looked forward to all year. The only thing he cared about – and he didn’t seem to care about much lately. Coach and supervising parent, Jeff loved that soccer camp too.*

‘That’s right.’ Jeff stroked the greying whiskers on his chin and pushed his bike next to Jessie.

‘But what about me?’ said Maggie.

‘We’ll have a girl’s weekend.’ Thankful for a decent reason, not to attend the reunion, Jessie rubbed Maggie’s mass of blonde curls.

‘No you go,’ Jeff said, his forehead creased with sincerity.

She stared at him, thrown off course, by his apparent thoughtfulness.

‘Granny can look after Mags, can’t she Mag?’ Jeff reached out and stroked Jessie’s cheek with his right hand. ‘Make a whole weekend of it. Take some time out for yourself.’ He swung his beefy right leg over the bar of the racing bike, to start his twenty-five-minute ride to the University of Sydney where he was the associate director of an industrial relations think tank. ‘Later, munchkins.’

Standing on the kerb, next to the car, the kids gazed up at him as if he was the funniest man in the universe.

Despite herself, she couldn’t stop smiling too. Good time Dad certainly aced fatherhood and unlike a lot of other men, he knew his way around a washing machine and could cook a decent chicken parmy. Kookaburras chirped from the tall eucalyptus tree in the yard, next door.

‘Don’t make jam.’ Jeff addressed his doting duo.

‘Don’t make jam, Dad,’ cried Maggie.

Connor even cracked a smile.

The morning sun created a brilliant yellow light, bringing to life the jade leaves of jacaranda trees lining Cherry Tree Lane. Jessie inhaled deeply and smiled at a gathering of twittering sparrows. *All is not completely lost.*

‘Do you think...the guitar?’ Connor raised his eyebrows.

‘We’ll get it this weekend. Promise.’ He must have lost faith in her and Jeff completely. ‘Did you brush your teeth?’

He growled.

She regretted saying something so petty, wishing she could stop her trap from simply erupting and ruining relationships left, right and centre.

Magpie opened her mouth for a breath inspection.

Mounting his bike with a thud, Jeff pushed and pedalled down their quiet street, making the silver spokes turn and click. He rode past polite lines of small red, white and navy, small and

smart inner-city cars, and hollered, 'Oh and by the way, a Matthew MacDonald called too.'

Chapter Three

On her lunch break from the world's most tedious occupational health and safety course, Jessie barely noticed the shiny red Audis and blue public buses zooming, swooshing, hooting and honking down Mount Street in the CBD of Sydney's ritzy, rich and boring North Snore. All the pain and aggravation from the early morning rush out the door had vanished. Her mind had been preoccupied with something far more ravishing. Memories of the one and only – drum roll please – Mr. Matthew MacDonald.

Matthew McDonald is alive.

Contrary to what I thought, I am, in fact, not sexually dead.

I can feel something other than bitter, nasty, hatred.

While pretending to listen to the drone from Nigel-no friends, the bespectacled occupational health and safety expert, Jessie had gone through her phone and found an unopened email from some over-enthusiastic, peppy ex-Cumberland College students about a forthcoming high school reunion in Canberra. She knew that she could never go, but it ignited an onslaught of memories of her sexual peak.

While Nigel talked of the ways to conduct meaningful Occupational Health and Safety Committee meetings, she played the Matthew MacDonald porno channel all over her body. On repeat. The sexy bastard with bedroom eyes, broad pale chest, gentle knowing hands, inquisitive tongue and the sweet soft and low voice that hit all the right notes, had intruded into her every single thought and abyss.

She looked at the busy lunch hour around her – a delivery cyclist waiting for an order from a cafe, a man vaping, with a cloud of puffy violet smoke hovering behind him and a woman in a pink jacket shouting into her phone and wondered if it really was the appropriate time and place to have sexy thoughts about Matthew MacDonald.

OMG. *Matthew McDonald called me.*

She'd left Matthew – trapped like an ancient mosquito in a golden tomb of amber – deep in the vault of the long distant past. He was a spirit from another time, another self. He represented her momentary, foolish, mistaken, faith in goodness and life itself.

She now knew and lived the real truth. Daily. Life was shit. And it just got shittier. No joy, no sense of anticipation – life was a long, windy painful road to grey hair, fallen eyelids, a spare tyre, bitchiness and then death.

Time, however, had most certainly not dulled the revelation of Matthew. Secret skeletons sprung to life. Matthew, with his quiff of brown, fearless, flamboyant 1980s hair, chiselled cheekbones with his arms around her waist, stood in her imagination as vividly as in 1988. She shook her head in disbelief.

I had my own Christian Gray/Patrick Swayze/frigging Jamie Fraser – hell Jackson Maine with cleaner hair. Imagine if I had loved someone like Matthew for all my adult life?

How could I have left that memory lying around for years and not replayed it over and over again?

Why did he call me?

She hit the memory replay button again, to reprise every detail of the man who had clearly known his way around a woman's body.

After locking lips at the school formal, Matthew had invited her home to show her his record collection. She knew what would happen and she wanted it to happen. For the first time in her teenage life, she had wanted to be a woman to a man. In his lounge room of a 1960s red Mercedes, he had driven her to his home and they had ended up in his bedroom. The walls had been covered with pictures of bare chests and lips, sex, drugs and rock n roll and a black Marshall amp had sat in the corner with a cherry bass guitar leaning on it. Sid Vicious giving the finger surged out of one poster and another had two tripping skulls for a band called *The Flaming Lips*. A scorched bong made out of a Fanta bottle sat on a messy

desk, next to a crumpled Clash t-shirt and a brown laminated record player. Milk crates full of records propped up his double bed futon.

And Matthew, beautiful, long and lean Matthew, had laid on top of that futon, expertly rolling a joint, with his feet tapping in time to the sexy, insistent beat, from the drums of the record, *Synthetic Substitution*, playing on his record player. Her mouth had gone dry as she had stared at him, and her hips had swayed in time with the rhythm, and all she had been able to think was a thought she had never had before... *Why don't we do it on the road?*

She smiled as she remembered, the astonishing significance of Matthew patting the empty space next to him on his futon. For once, she hadn't thought about the implications and ramifications of her actions or got lost in analysis paralysis. While time was suspended, she'd decided to do what her heart and her body was instructing her.

'Come here.'

She'd stepped towards him.

He'd pulled off his white shirt, revealing his slender but muscular torso. He'd leaned over and said, 'Listen to this bass line, on this - *Impeach the President*.'

Finding confidence and determination, and a sense of her true brave self, desire had oozed down the nape of Jessie's neck and across her back. Pursing her lips, in an attempt to stay the dragon of desire that threatened to leap out of her body, she'd joined him on the soft bed and he'd put his arm loosely, and intimately, around her shoulders. His arm had sent a violent charge through her shoulders. His fingertips had burned into her skin, healing and igniting a torrent.

He'd lit a match, fired up the joint, inhaled, and paused while he waited for the smoke to enter his lungs and then had handed it to her. She'd breathed in deeply making the edge of the joint, flame and crackle. Rough smoke had flooded her lungs, threatening to make her cough and splutter but then a gentle calm descended, quelling her anxiety. She'd undone the zip of her dress and let it fall off her shoulders and down around her waist.

He'd made the corners of his brown eyes crinkle with delight.

With a frightening pleasure, she'd put her arms around his shoulders and enjoyed the warmth of his naked chest on hers. She'd never even seen a man her age naked, and all she had ever done was kiss a few randoms and knew nothing of intimacy but lying next to him, seemed to be the most natural thing to do.

A particular set of phrases filled her mind. She hadn't known him long enough to tell him to make love to her, so she'd just pressed his groin to hers, nudged her right shoulder forward and said, 'Why don't we do it ...?'

He cocked his right eyebrow.

'No one will be watching us.'

A smile had broken out across his face. He had pulled her close and started kissing her deeply.

She had groaned, 'Oh, Matthew, me? Would you? Please?'

'Oh all right...If you insist.' He'd laughed and then rolled her arms around her body and ...

A group of schoolgirls in blue checked dresses with white collars wandered past. Traffic slashed down Mount Street. Jessie shook her head, watching a bus accelerate.

How perfect. He couldn't just dance...

But Matthew is just like Jamie Fraser isn't he? A harmless, intense figment of my imagination. Matthew is a memory – a closed book. Never, ever to be opened again.

An injured white delivery van whooshed past.

What happened to me? Where did that brave girl in Matthew's bedroom go?

A watery apparition of her mother appeared, behind the Harbour Bridge, her blonde hair expertly coiled into a Barbara Eden, *I Dream of Jeannie* beehive. 'Oh don't be so dramatic Jessica. But you do know. I always said, 'If you can't dance, you can't ...'

Matthew McDonald could dance and ...

'Oh Mum, really?' She sniffed. Mum was right though, regrets didn't get her anywhere useful and anyhow, she was

committed to Jeff the straight line – for life. Reliable. Simple. Dependable. Jeff. He was a wonderful father. She would never divorce or leave him. She would never do that to the kids. And anyway – Matthew had terrified her. Handsome. Sexy. Knew how to roll a joint. Open-minded. Passionate. Unafraid. A squiggly line.

Way too dangerous for me. How could anyone feel safe and secure bonded to that?

‘I can’t wait for the time when you finally let yourself, be truly yourself,’ said Mum. ‘Why do you deny yourself beauty in your life? Laughter? When was the last time you danced?’

Shooing her mother away, Jessie gazed down to the glistening harbour, dotted with toy-sized ferries and yachts, across to the sails of the Opera House to the hills of Kings Cross. If she’d been brave enough the interesting, creative life she was supposed to have had with Matthew MacDonald or someone like him was somewhere over there, deep in Rushcutters Bay, in some groovy semi industrial-chic Eastern suburbs inner-city warehouse, covered in pastel modern artworks and fab upcycled op shop finds like those featured on *The Design Files*.

Why have I been so gutless? What happened to all my dreams?

Fifteen years had gone by in a blur of mortgage payments and outrageous childcare fees. And she hadn’t noticed. She’d been unconscious. All she could hear was Michel Legrand, playing his grand piano, warbling, ‘*what are you doing the rest of your life?*’ The silver button on the waist of her almost too small, black cotton pants creaked under the weight of her wobbly tummy that lately had come to resemble the underside of a white whale; she was going to have to go elastic and soon.

How did I end up with my life?

Looking down at the family portrait on her phone of red-faced goofy Jeff, cool boy with the faraway look his eyes Connor and Maggie with her face painted like a bewildered yellow and dark blue butterfly, Jessie knew exactly when dreaming of Johnny Castle, dancing, baking cakes and curious, frightening pleasure had

stopped. It was around the time she had met Jeff, his progressive politics and his Doc Martens. Lefties generally, as a bunch, weren't very good dancers. Their whole lives had to be political, so music and even dancing had to be political too. They really weren't into cakes, shops, and free enterprise either because owning a shop meant being an employer which meant exploiting workers...

Sighing, she peered down at the fine steel curve of the Harbour Bridge with its iron girders and marvelled at the wind ruffling the blue water of the harbour.

An alarm rang on her phone for an incoming call.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Jessie's stomach lurched. Her hand trembled. She dreamt of that easy look Matthew's eyes once had for her. *Is it Matthew? What will I say? What does he want? An affair?* She laughed at herself for thinking something so ridiculous.

She looked at the name of the caller. Her heart sank. Didi - her red-lipped, full-faced, childless and carefree old Canberra school pal whose Dad had been the Indonesian ambassador. Didi's face looked younger and tighter every year. Her finger slipped, making her take the call. *Shit.*

'You gotta lose twenty kilos.'

Jessie rolled her eyes.

'It's critical.'

'Why?'

'You can't look like a big heifer.'

Jessie stared up at the cornflower blue sky, shaking her head. The beast snarled. *Seriously Didi? Yes, I do need to lose some weight, and yes most of the time I feel like I am lugging a sack of potatoes around every day and my face seems lost in a well of fat. But that is not the point. Can you please stop being a rude bitch?*

'He might be there,' trilled Didi.

'Matthew McDonald is too cool to go to some poxy reunion - in Canberra.'

'I've got a slot at seven. You, wine and me - drinks tomorrow night in Surry Hills. Okay?'

Jessie tried to think and talk quickly. 'As a matter of fact, we've got something on.' She resented the frame of the request and tried to sound genuinely disappointed while squashing the beast's burning red rage threatening to burst out of every pore.

'A Saturday night in with the ABC does not constitute busy. You'll have to do better than that to get rid of me.'

Clenching her teeth, Jessie punched the air. *Goddamit, Didi. You are like the most fucking evil, conniving, clever contestant on Survivor. You outplay me every time.* In recent years she could only manage to see Didi in short bursts because they just couldn't seem to find the safe ground they had occupied as teenagers.

'And we've got so much to organise and chat about – what with the reunion and all'

'Yeah about that.' Jessie had to change gear and fast, snail public service pace didn't cut it for vexatious vixens like Didi.

'It's so exciting isn't it?'

'I'm not going.'

'Thought you'd say that, so you won't mind me shagging Matthew then? Will you?'

Gasping, Jessie's left hand tightened into a fist. The beast arose. *What a cow. He's mine. All mine. And even if he isn't mine, he most certainly is not fucking yours.*

'Tomorrow night bitch at the *Old Dawg*. Don't be late. Three weeks. If you're not going to fuck him – I will.'

'He called me you know? Didn't know that now did you?' The dial tone throbbed in Jessie's ear. Jessie yelled, the beast let rip, 'He won't go to any poxy stupid fucking awful high school reunion. And he most certainly will not fuck you, DIDI.'

'Jessica Marie Morgan – what would your mother say if she heard you swearing like a sailor? In public?'

'You've got to be effing joking.' Jessie closed her eyes, her heart sinking. The Grand Central of the past arose.

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