

Can a modern woman take lessons in love from Shakespeare?

'Dettmann's tone is addictively dry and often laugh-out-loud funny'

Tim Minchin

'Jessica Dettmann is gifted at nailing the funny, sad and irritating little nuances of life'

Sally Hepworth



Without

FURTHER

ADO

JESSICA DETTMANN



JESSICA DETTMANN

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

Dedication

To Jess Tory, whose friendship has been constant in all things.

Contents

Dedication

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Acknowledgements

How to Be Second Best

This Has Been Absolutely Lovely

Without Further Ado Sample Book Club Questions

About the Author

Praise

Also by Jessica Dettmann

Copyright

Chapter 1

‘Stop sighing and delete that app.’

Willa looked up from her phone with a start, blinking her way back into consciousness as if a stage-hypnotist had just released her from his control. She wasn’t aware she’d made a sound. She locked her phone, but still men’s faces seemed to float in the air before her, three-quarter profiles and folded arms with bulging biceps burned into her retinas. She wiggled her thumb, which ached from swiping, and stretched out her hand to pat Billy Jowl, the grizzled Jack Russell–bulldog cross curled up beside her on the couch.

Her best friend, Kat, stood before her, holding out a steaming bowl. ‘Take it — it’s burning me.’

‘Sorry, sorry.’ Willa dropped her phone face down onto the velvet upholstery and took the bowl with both hands. Kat sat down on the other side of the sleeping dog and stirred her own bowl with her fork, mixing the meat into the pasta. ‘Voilà, signorina: Pappardelle alle Bolognese.’

‘For a change,’ Willa said. Kat cooked very good spaghetti bolognese, very often. She took a large mouthful, swallowed and said, ‘This is excellent. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to look a bolognese in the eye again after dinner with Anders on Wednesday.’

‘Was the date terrible? Please say it was terrible because, although I would try, I would definitely struggle if you went and fell for someone who sounds like his name is a plural.’

‘It was terrible,’ Willa reassured her.

‘Hooray!’ Kat’s face lit up momentarily, before she wiped the smile away. ‘Not hooray,’ she corrected herself. ‘That

came out wrong. I don't want you not to find someone. I'll just miss these stories when you do. Wait, let me sort the lamps.' She reached over several stacks of leatherbound hardback books to flick off the overhead light and turned on three artfully placed vintage lamps. It transformed her cluttered living room, with its landlord's-off-white walls and the thin plywood door to the poky kitchen, into a cosy den. Kat was good at lights and furnishings as well as bolognese. She tapped at her phone to start an 'Instrumental Taylor Swift' playlist: their usual soundtrack when relating their dating tales of woe.

Kat picked up her bowl again. 'Right, okay. Go. Tell me the story of Anders and why that was the last we will be seeing of him.'

Willa fished out a little clump of meat and presented it to Billy, who opened one eye and lapped it carefully from her hand. Wiping her palm on her jeans, she picked up her fork and took another bite, just to make sure she really and truly was safely back on the horse, before telling Kat that ultimately, it was because on their second date Anders washed the dishes from their spaghetti bolognese in the shower — the sexy shower they were taking together — that she had decided there would be no third date with that man.

It had all been going relatively well until then. The first date — a Friday night drink at the pub that turned into going for a green chicken curry, finishing up with a decent pash under the romantic glow of a purple neon sign that read *Thai Me A River* while Willa waited for her Uber — was better than most and she'd had no hesitation in agreeing to a dinner at his flat the following week.

He'd cooked spaghetti bolognese, which was what men cooked on second dates when they wanted to show you they were down to earth and capable in the kitchen. It was meant to hint at a steady domestic future, even if they were no more interested in a long-term arrangement than they were in hearing the finer details of Willa's job. They did it to give the impression they had so many other dishes in their repertoires that sometimes they just wanted to make a good old-fashioned

spag bol. It generally turned out that all the other dishes in their repertoires were toast.

While no match for Kat's cooking, Anders' effort had been a seven out of ten bolognese, which, paired with a decent shiraz in glasses that were almost bigger than the pasta bowls, was good enough to lead to kissing, which was eight out of ten kissing, which was good enough to lead to stripping off together and heading into the shower. Something to do with a spill and a joke about cleaning them both up.

The shower had also been a solid eight out of ten, heading in the direction of nine, when, after a few minutes of kissing and giggling as the water heated up, Anders had stepped out onto the bathmat and said, with a cheeky grin, 'Wait right here and don't start without me.'

Willa had been unbelievably turned on, anticipating his return with more wine, or condoms, or, in an ideal world, both. But he'd reappeared with their empty bowls and dirty forks stacked inside the pan he'd cooked the sauce in, all resting inside a larger pan that was coated with stuck-on strands of pasta, caused by not stirring enough. He'd put the messy little cairn down carefully on the tiled floor of the shower recess. It was then that Willa had noticed, lined up alongside his shampoo, conditioner, body wash and shaving cream, a bottle of Lemon Fresh Fairy Liquid.

On hearing this now, Kat laughed so hard she almost snorted sauce out of her nose. She took a gulp of wine, which she also choked on. 'He what?' she spluttered.

'I know.' Willa scrunched up her face in embarrassment at the memory. 'Kat, it was so horrible. He wanted to make the washing up part of the foreplay.'

'Did you say, "That's not the dirty fork in the shower I was hoping for"?'

'Of course I didn't. No one thinks of things like that in the moment. I was paralysed with horror. I didn't know what to do.'

‘Then what happened?’ asked Kat, wiping mascara from under her eyes, where it always migrated when she laughed hard. ‘What did he say?’

‘He said, “Now, where were we?” — you know, all waggly eyebrows — and I asked what the fuck, in a manner of speaking, and he told me he considered washing his dishes in the shower to be the ultimate in efficient living, and that living efficiently, from both a time and resources point of view, was very sexy. And I told him no it wasn’t. I told him that seeing someone you were about to have sex with poking a bit of cooked carrot down the drain with his big toe was very much the opposite of sexy. I got out and got dressed.’

‘What did he do? Did he stay in there and wash the dishes?’ Kat wanted more. ‘He didn’t? Did he?’

Willa bowed her head solemnly and took a deep breath. ‘He did. I waited in the living room for a few minutes, because it seemed rude to actually run away, but he was still in there and I could hear, like, noises from the forks and pots on the tiles and stuff so in the end I just let myself out and walked home.’

‘Hmmm.’ Kat chewed her lip. ‘I think — and this is going to be hard for you to hear — that Anders is not the right man for you.’

Willa faked a sob. ‘You may be right. Back on the express bus to Swipetown for me.’

‘I think you’d have more luck if you were clearer about what you want,’ said Kat. ‘Did you really think Anders was a likely candidate, even before the shower?’

Honestly, thought Willa, no. She knew she wanted to fall in love and be loved. That was simple enough. She just didn’t want a love that turned her into a possession. Being tied to someone by law seemed deeply unappealing: she would prefer a love where both parties were there only because they couldn’t be without the other, and they chose to remain every day. She didn’t want a relationship where she would

eventually become invisible, or bored. Her great love needed to be someone who intrigued and amused her, someone who she could wake up next to and learn more and more about, with every passing day. He must contain multitudes.

Unfortunately, it wasn't easy to tell from five photos and a few sentences on a dating profile whether someone was a fascinating, multitude-containing man with a boundless capacity for long-term passionate affection outside the institution of marriage and happy to live a child-free life.

Mostly Willa adhered to a mantra of 'I'll know it when I see it', and she usually did know from the outset if her date had serious potential. They almost never did, but that was no reason not to entertain herself while she waited for the right one to happen along.

Outside of the apps, there were occasional prospects. She had once, fleetingly, wondered if her friend and colleague Ewan Smith might have had potential — until he suddenly got married. Ewan's older brother, Dougal, whom they also worked with, was gorgeous, but not especially interested in her.

Kat was still talking about Anders. 'Where would you put him on the Ollie-scale?'

They liked to rank people as better or worse than her ex, Ollie, but it wasn't always easy, because Ollie had been insidious. Ollie was like climate change: for a long time it was easy enough to ignore his downsides, to not do anything about him, even though deep down she'd known things weren't sustainable and were worsening rapidly. Until one day, instead of catastrophic floods, devastating fires and starving polar bears floating on tiny ice cubes, there were three of his undergraduate Performance Studies students asleep, naked, in their bed when she got home from work.

Ollie had been in the bed with them, but not asleep. He'd been watching an episode of *MasterChef Junior* on his laptop. In response to Willa's curiosity about what was going on, he'd explained they'd been subverting the dominant paradigm by

workshopping a version of *Macbeth* where Macbeth tries to free himself from the influence of the three witches who hold such sway over him by ‘inverting the nature of their relationship’, which seemed to Willa an inadequately persuasive line of argument to justify having it off with a bunch of nineteen-year-olds.

Willa had then subverted the dominant paradigm by snapping out of the fugue state she’d found herself in for the past four years of their relationship and telling Ollie to fuck off and immediately behaving as though he no longer existed. Before leaving for Kat’s place, since the share-house roster said it was her night to cook, she made risotto and invited the three girls to get dressed and join her and the other housemates for dinner. Ollie spent the evening having a very long bath.

It hadn’t even been their bed: it was her bed. A couple of years earlier Ollie had gradually stopped sleeping at his own share house and cleared himself some space in her wardrobe under the guise of helping her clear out a bunch of old clothes she never wore any more. She’d stopped wearing them because he’d said they made her look like a lesbian bookseller. Like that was a bad thing.

That she’d spent five years in a relationship with Ollie shocked her to this day.

Anders the bolognese drain poker was gross, but his impact was not on the scale of Ollie’s.

‘Ollie remains the one to beat,’ she said, and they ate their pasta.

‘I’ve been trying to figure out if it was worse because it was bolognese,’ Willa said a few minutes later. ‘I mean, would there have been a meal that maybe I could have coped with him washing the dishes from in the shower? How much of the horror was literally the sight of tiny bits of minced beef splashing onto his bare feet?’

‘The state of that man’s drains,’ said Kat with a sorry shake of her head. ‘Maybe it was the order of things that was

the problem. If he had said he wanted to wash the dishes in the shower, because, I don't know, the hot water in the kitchen was rubbish or whatever, and you'd gone to do that together and from there it had turned sexy — well that might have been all right, don't you think? Sexy times coming out of something mundane can be hot. Trying to shoehorn chores into sexy times once they've started is not sexy and I don't think it can ever be. You're the expert: does it ever happen in your books?'

While Willa's hobby in the five years since things ended with Ollie was going on dreadful dates with unsuitable men, her job was publishing romance novels. By day she was tasked with finding the happily ever afters, which she packaged up and sold to the terminally hopeful, yet by night she exhibited an uncanny knack for swiping right on men the likes of whom, were she ever to encounter them in a manuscript, would get a note like *pls rework: unconvincingly stupid* or *Why would she, though? This man is the actual worst*. Inasmuch as anyone was qualified to judge which situations were inherently sexy and not sexy, Kat was right: Willa was probably as close to an expert as there was.

She thought about which type of romance novel the dishwashing situation would have even half a chance of working in. Probably the best fit would be in a Forced Proximity story — the sort in which two characters are thrown together and can't get away from each other and they eventually develop Feelings despite all the personality clashes that make that unlikely. Or a Workplace Romance story, where the protagonists finally overcome all their obstacles — professional rivalry, other partners, the likelihood that one or both will be fired for fraternisation — and get it on in a corner office while working late one night. Could a sex scene be improved by one party suggesting they might just reorder the PowerPoint slides for the next day's sales presentation while their co-worker gives them a proper seeing to? No. It was very unlikely.

If a fictional hook-up wasn't completely overwhelming, if there was any room left in either party's mind for anything as

quotidian as the washing up, then no reader would deem the scene sufficiently swoonworthy. That moment had to be everything: the heroine had to be Bridget Jones not noticing she was in her undies in a snowy street, Andie MacDowell not realising it was raining while she pashed Hugh Grant in *Four Weddings*, Sally telling Harry she hated him just as she figured out she meant she loved him while the clock counted down to the New Year. If there was even a chance that either of them was still thinking that their parking meter was about to run out, or worrying whether their mouth tasted like the tuna salad they'd had for lunch, then it wouldn't work.

'No,' Willa told Kat. 'Bringing chores into sex after it's begun is terrible. It must go on our list of Things Up With Which We Will Not Put.' This was not a real list, but she wondered if it should be. 'Anyway, that's the last you will be hearing of Anders, singular or plural. Can we start the movie now?'

Kat rose from the sofa and gave a little groan: the sort of groan that someone who didn't know her well might assume meant she had a slightly achy back, but which Willa knew was a groan of mild protest about what they were about to watch. The reason it wasn't a bigger groan was that Kat was a true and wonderful friend who wanted to continue to know and maybe one day even understand Willa, even if that meant once a year submitting to watching a particular film whose appeal Kat did not understand. That she annually tried again to figure it out was proof to Willa that there was never a truer or a better friend.

They had watched it once every year for seven years, right back to when Willa had first realised, at the age of twenty-nine, that the secret of narrative romance was right there in front of her.

Kat thought it was a joke, at first, when Willa explained that not only did she want to publish romance novels, but that she wanted to publish only those that made her feel, at some point during her first read-through of the manuscript, the same feeling of giddy elation and thrill she had felt at the age of

sixteen, the first time she watched Kenneth Branagh's 1993 film version of *Much Ado About Nothing* on DVD.

Specifically, it was the opening scenes of *Much Ado* that made Willa's heart feel like it was laughing, though they always watched the whole movie. In return for Kat sitting through it, Willa allowed her to ask any questions or make whatever comments she felt necessary. And Kat had plenty to say about the film.

Willa pressed play on the remote, issuing in the plucking of a guitar, and Emma Thompson's strong, soft, occasionally croaky voice reciting the opening lines, displayed in white on the black screen.

*'Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more,
Men were deceivers ever . . .'*

'Is it a song or a poem?' Kat interrupted, as always. 'Is she singing or saying?'

'Saying,' Willa said. 'It's a poem.'

'Then why is there music at the same time?'

'Because it's Italy.'

Now on the screen were beautiful people, all dressed in white and linen, picnicking and landscape painting and lounging hard on a hillside. No one even possessed a top button, much less had it fastened. Some weren't even wearing shirts. It was fake-tanned décolletage and bare chests as far as the eye could see. The camera panned over a woman slicing a loaf of bread by cuddling it to her and hacking through it, the knife moving inexorably towards her breast.

'KNIFE SKILLS!' Willa shouted at the same moment Kat yelled, 'That's not how you cut bread, my god!'

Suddenly the music picked up and a puffed-out young man on an even more puffed-out horse rode up to announce that someone called Don Pedro was coming from Messina. All the loungers found that terribly exciting and there was much giggling and gasping. They learned that Don Pedro was

bringing someone called Claudio, and that made the giggling go up to about seventeen on the hysteria scale, especially for the pretty young Kate Beckinsale character, Hero.

Emma, playing the character of Beatrice, came out of the tree and started confusing the young messenger man by speaking in Shakespearean at him about someone called Benedick, who, from the way she was slagging him off to everyone present, they should understand her to have the massive if reluctant hots for. It was the classic Enemies-to-Lovers trope, in one of its earliest incarnations. There was a beautiful moment where the audience of loungers, who also were likely very confused by the speaking of Shakespearean verse at high speed, were made to feel not so stupid by the fact that there was a character onscreen, who wasn't a moron, but also couldn't follow what Beatrice was on about and had to have things spelled out a bit for him. Willa always felt that was a kind move on the filmmaker's part, and it reminded her of the way English teachers in high school used to translate Shakespeare into plain modern English for their classes.

Then, from high on the reclining, poetry-listening, dangerous-bread-cutting hill, the lounging company saw horses approaching. That was the part where Willa's teenage heart had first exploded like someone shooting glitter-coated doves out of a rose-gold cannon. Everything moved into slow motion; horses' hooves kicked up clods of earth as they galloped towards the camera; and a red and white banner fluttered in the wind.

There was a momentary shot of all the loungers up on their feet and racing somewhere at high — but still slow-mo — speed, before what Willa thought of as the Sexy Six Shots kicked off: each of a different man — all sweaty, tanned, handsome — appearing roughly in order of how successful each actor's career was when the film was made, each at the high point of a gallop, rising from his saddle with the music. Then the camera panned out and they saw all seven men, who were riding abreast in one long line as if into battle or a *Man from Snowy River* re-creation at the Royal Easter Show, and at

the crescendo of the music they threw their right arms up and punched the air. (Except the man on the far left of the screen, who threw up his left arm, but Willa always assumed they'd had to film so many takes to get the galloping in time that by the time he did that everyone just agreed to live with it. And besides, as well as starring as Benedick, Kenneth Branagh had also directed the movie, and it would be very tricky to direct from the middle of a line of thundering horses.) As they punched, they roared, and when she saw it for the first time she'd honestly thought it was her heart making that sound.

The title of the film flashed up in front of the line of horses and men, and after they'd had sufficient time to gather their thoughts and catch their breath, the music shifted into urgent trilling flutes and tootling trumpets and soaring violins. Watching it as an adult, for the some-hundredth time, Willa could see how all the magic was done. She knew how the trick worked, how the music and framing and timing, casting and costuming and horse-training were all carefully co-ordinated to make her breast throb with passion and excitement. But — and this was the crazy thing — it still did. Every time. It was madness.

She looked at Kat to see if the magic was working on her too. She didn't have high hopes. It never had before. Sure enough, Kat was looking down at her phone, which she was trying to hide by putting it beside her on the couch instead of in her hand. She was tapping at it surreptitiously with her forefinger.

'Really, Kat?' Willa said. 'Not even a flicker of delight? No twitching in your nethers?'

Kat grimaced apologetically. 'It's too cheesy.'

'How can anything be too cheesy? Cheese is amazing. Cheese is the infinite bringer of joy. You have a heart of coal,' Willa said severely, and Kat smirked out one side of her mouth without taking her eyes away from her phone. Willa went on. 'In fact, I think it's harder than coal. What's that called?'

Before it's a diamond?' She strained to remember Year Nine Geology. 'Anthracite. You have a heart of anthracite.'

She looked back at the TV, where the music now had an urgent rather than a triumphal vibe, and everyone previously lolling about on the hillside listening to poetry had dashed inside the villa to wash and change their clothes. All the women stripped off, throwing their frocks to the woman who hadn't stabbed herself in the chest with the breadknife, thank heavens, and who received all their filthy petticoats with extremely good grace. They darted in and out of showers, washing their hair, which then dried into perfect bouncing curls within minutes — that would be the dry Italian heat combined with the magic of cinema, Willa supposed. The old men were falling over trying to get their pants on and laughing like drains at one other.

Meanwhile, outside, in what she could only assume was the area where the laundry was done in those days, the visiting galloping men were swinging naked from pipes, splashing into pools of water, leaping about with their penises bobbing and their bums camera-facing, before washing each other's hair and good-naturedly dunking each other under the water. A moment later they were dressed again – the five poshest men miraculously sporting freshly laundered uniforms – and were marching in a V formation, like fighter jets doing a ceremonial fly-past, into the courtyard, ready to do some more Shakespeare.

It was impossible to overstate how much Willa loved it all.

Kat paused it again. 'You know what's weird about this movie? It's just occurred to me.'

'How perfect it is, except perhaps for the bread-cutting incident?'

'No, it's weird that there are no kids in it. Anywhere. Right? There are all these adults, of all ages — Hero's what, sixteen or something, and Beatrice and Benedick are probably meant to be in their twenties, which is why everyone's treating them like they're permanently on the shelf. And then all that

other lot, but not one single kid, or baby. What's that about? Where are they all? Boarding school?'

Willa had never noticed that. 'I don't think there are any kids in the play. Shakespeare didn't tend to include them. They're impractical in a theatre. They have to be looked after and protected from harm, and they're unpredictable and bad at staying up late.'

'But he's trying to create a world, isn't he?' Kat pressed on. 'And I just think it's lacking an intrinsic element of a real world, which is that kids exist. If he's going to put old men in it, he should have kids.'

'This is a fantasy world.' Willa pointed at the screen, frozen on Beatrice and Hero curtsying to the handsome soldiers in the courtyard. 'It's a sexy fantasy. No sexy fantasy is improved by a toddler. Look at all those high open windows and unfenced bathing areas. It'd be an absolute nightmare. And besides, when there are kids around everything becomes about them. This is about adults and adult relationships. Falling in love. I like that about it.' She pressed play again.

The returning troops were being welcomed, Benedick and Beatrice were warming up into some sexy banter, and Willa's soul was filling with pure golden airy delight.

There was a loud knock on Kat's door.

'Jesus!' Willa jumped.

Kat rose. 'That's George.' There was a note of such pleasure in her voice that Willa forced a smile even though she hadn't known George was coming over. She felt a flicker of irritation that Kat had invited him when she and Willa had made plans.

'How is George not a cop? He knocks like a cop. Is he maybe undercover, masquerading as an antiques dealer?' Willa stroked Billy's smooth back.

This thing with George had been going on for more than two months and though Willa believed he was a waste of Kat's time, Kat was showing no signs of coming to that conclusion

by herself. Willa knew George wasn't right for Kat. He just liked old furniture, the same as she did, and you couldn't build a life together on sideboards alone. And he was much too keen on U2 for Willa's liking. Willa hoped it was his van that Kat was into — Kat didn't have one and George was always offering to help her collect furniture, but she feared there was more to it.

While George and Kat stood in the doorway and did a lot of early-days kissing — involving the nuzzling of necks and hands cupping faces and annoying wet-sounding whispering — Willa stared politely at the frozen image on the screen of Keanu Reeves lying shirtless on a table, being massaged. He was very shiny. Like maybe he'd oiled himself up before he even arrived for his massage.

She sighed, accidentally making her impatience audible. Kat leaned away from George and turned to her.

‘Yes?’

‘Sorry,’ Willa said. ‘Nothing. As you were.’

She restarted the movie and they resumed snogging. It felt like when someone else's dinner arrived before yours at a restaurant and you were politely obliged to let them start so it didn't get cold. At least then they'd usually give you one or two of their chips.

Several minutes later she paused the movie and spoke up. ‘Actually, shall I go? Will we watch this another time?’

‘Don't let me interrupt,’ George said, barely taking his lips from Kat's, his hand still up her shirt, caressing her back. He grinned at Willa. He knew what he was doing. ‘What are we watching?’

‘Nothing we haven't seen before,’ she said. ‘I should be heading off anyway. Got some work to finish before tomorrow, and I imagine George wants to watch *Rattle and Hum*. Again.’

Kat shot her a look, and George made half-hearted ‘No don't go’ sounds, but sitting beside them on the couch while

they tried not to have sex right then and there was not Willa's idea of a good Sunday night. She kissed Billy Jowl on the head and ruffled his ears, grabbed her bag and kissed Kat on the cheek, which took her alarmingly close to George, who was kissing her on the other cheek. 'I'll text you.'

Chapter 2

Her walk home was only a few blocks through the crowded streets of Redfern and Surry Hills. After things ended with Ollie she'd moved into a flat with Kat, but a few years ago Kat decided she had aged out of sharing and they'd rented their own smaller and less nice places. That was just before the pandemic, as it happened, which made the whole Covid thing even worse than it would have been otherwise. Kat suggesting that they should get their own flats had hurt Willa's feelings, but they'd made an agreement when they first set up home together that if either one wanted to live separately again, or with a partner, the other would be cool and accepting and it wouldn't affect their friendship.

So when Kat said she wanted to be on her own for a bit Willa was obliged to act like she was fine with it, which she wasn't. Because who would be? Living with Kat had been great. Admittedly, maybe greater for Willa than for Kat, because Kat was naturally a tidier person. Willa had done her best to stem the worst of her chaotic tendencies, but the truth was she just didn't see things the same way Kat did. Her work was stories, how things made people feel, and she lived in her head. Kat's job was things: furniture and old paintings, homewares and fabrics. Everything around her mattered, visually, and she related to her surroundings in an intimate way that Willa struggled to understand fully.

It wasn't that Kat was fastidious exactly, though she wasn't a fan of cups without coasters being put down on wooden surfaces, or melted cheese being left eternally in the grill. It was more that she naturally liked things to look nice and be arranged pleasingly. Everything had its place in Kat's flat. Willa's possessions also all had their places, but they were

never the same place twice. Her preferred method of organisation could be summed up with one word: gravity. It was never going to work long term, of course, and Willa was proud of the way they'd moved on from the failure of their attempt to live together.

It was a warm summer evening and still early so the restaurants along Redfern Street hummed with people finishing dinner and drinking small-batch-brewed beers or amber-coloured cocktails in short glasses. For a moment she considered stopping in for a drink at one of the little bars that lined the street, like an imaginary chic European person, but she was no good at sitting alone in a bar. She always felt awkward, trying to resist pulling out her phone and mindlessly scrolling. A woman of her age ought to be able to sit there confidently, just being alone in company, which is what bars used to be for. She always told herself to muster up some Big Dame Energy and be confident in her solitude, but invariably she felt silly and like people must think she'd been stood up by a date. These days people alone in bars didn't look around; they looked down at the white glow that made it all right to not have a gang of friends with you, but if she wanted to stare at her phone and drink, she might as well do it on her own couch.

She'd just passed the most recently opened bar, Kenneth's Ale House, when someone shouted her name. Turning back, she saw her workmate Ewan hanging out of the front door, waving.

A flicker of delight shot through her. So he was back from Perth: a delegation from their office had been at a trade fair. She'd had it in her head that they weren't returning until tomorrow.

'I saw you go past,' he called. 'Come have a drink with us. They have things other than ale.'

'Who's us? Walking back towards him she tried to see inside, but there were kitschy lace half-curtains on a brass pole obscuring her view. Her answer depended on who he was drinking with. If Dougal was in there she'd consider it. He

wasn't much of a conversationalist but his looks made up for it. She could happily pass a few hours contemplating his absurdly chiselled jaw. If Ewan's wife, Winter, was in there, she was out. Winter wasn't terrible but she was American and had the sort of self-confidence that meant she let people post any picture they took of her to social media without checking first, which made Willa feel vain and bad about herself. Willa's cousin Imogen might be in there too, with Ewan's younger twin brothers, Alistair and Angus, in which case Willa would go in, regardless of Winter.

'Am I not enough of a drawcard?' asked Ewan, furrowing his brow. 'Bit rude.'

'Don't answer a question with a question,' she said.

'Angus and Alistair are here. Imogen was as well but she bailed about ten minutes ago, and Winter's working until midnight.'

'Oh, doing the "night shift" is she? At the "hospital"?' Willa made air quotes with her fingers and nodded knowingly. She couldn't remember why they'd started this joke, where she pretended that she thought Winter was secretly a sex worker and not actually a nurse, but she was more than happy to carry it on. It may have borne some connection to the deep sense of inferiority she'd felt when she learned that Ewan, her closest work friend, had decided to marry an intensive care nurse two weeks after he met her. Willa had never been in a relationship where after two weeks she was sure enough to book a weekend away a month hence, let alone commit to spending her whole life with someone. And a nurse of all things. An intensive care nurse. Way to make a person feel like publishing romance novels wasn't an especially worthy way to spend their life.

Ewan carried on the gag. 'Yes, she left earlier. I must say, her uniform is extremely brief. But it's great that she gets paid in cash and her boss gives her a lift to the hospital in his Buick Electra.'

Willa sniggered and considered her options. On the upside there was no Winter, but also no Imogen. Willa liked Angus well enough, which was lucky as he was now dating Imogen, but she struggled with Alistair. His default mood was slightly surly — the kind of guy who managed to both say very little and always interrupt women. He seemed particularly prone to interrupting women who were talking to his twin brother, and more often than not that was Imogen, these days. Imogen maintained it was just a twin thing, and that it didn't bother her, but Willa thought it was more likely a result of the thirteen years they'd spent at an all boys' private school than of the nine months they'd shared a womb. The warmth and conviviality of the Smiths as a family was charming though, and tempered Alistair's more acidic personality.

He had also been a bit easier to deal with since he'd found himself a new girlfriend a few months back, around the time Angus and Imogen got serious. Her name was Sylvia and she was the type of terrifying Eastern Suburbs blonde Willa usually went out of her way to avoid — sixty per cent eyelash extensions, thirty per cent washboard abs and ten per cent tan — but the couple of times they'd met at bars or she'd stopped by the office, she'd been surprisingly pleasant. A bit clingy, maybe, but Alistair didn't seem to mind. She didn't talk a huge amount, which meant he didn't have to interrupt her as much.

Willa thought about going in, weighing it up against her desire for a decent night's sleep and a hangover-free Monday morning.

He spotted her hesitation. 'What if I said Dougal was in here too?'

'Is he?' Her gaze flicked past him, back to the window.

'No, but you looked. Really? Dougal? We've been through this. I don't think he's . . . quite what you're after.'

She shrugged and grinned. It was a surefire way to annoy Ewan, going on about how hot his brother was. 'He's very easy on the eye. I'm only human.'

‘Even though he’s a grumpy bastard who wouldn’t get a joke if it was injected into his arm?’ Ewan shook his head in disbelief. ‘Willa, you contain hidden shallows.’

‘One person’s grumpy bastard is another’s brooding heartthrob.’

‘Unbelievable.’ He stared at her like she was a medical curiosity. ‘There’s no accounting for taste. You sure you don’t want to come in and hear all about our victorious return from the west?’

‘Obviously I’m desperate to know which tractor manufacturers you’re going to produce manuals for,’ Willa said. ‘But patience is a virtue, and I’m known for my virtue, so I’ll wait until the morning meeting tomorrow.’

‘So you only want to hang out when my father is paying you?’ Ewan feigned surprise, putting his hand to his chest. ‘That hurts. I thought we were friends. All this time you were only a rent-a-friend.’

Willa shrugged. ‘Look, a job’s a job. I’m a terrific rent-a-friend because I’m convincing. Is it any consolation that your dad splurged on the top-level rent-a-friend? And being your fake friend for money means I must be very clear with my boundaries. I can’t risk actually liking any of you.’

He smiled. ‘Which genre would that story fall into?’

Willa was so used to being the only one in her office who knew anything about romance publishing that it always surprised her when Ewan showed an interest in it beyond how much money it made the company every year. Three years earlier when the walls of her office had been treated for rising damp, she’d shared his for six months, and he’d asked her endless questions about her work, even reading a few manuscripts and giving his thoughts on them. Eventually she showed him a list of common tropes and subgenres in romance novels and since then he’d brought it up quite often.

‘That?’ She thought for a moment. ‘That would be a combination of Hidden Identity and Forced Proximity, with a

touch of Forbidden Love.’

‘Not Hidden Identity, because now I *know* you’re my hired pal.’

‘You’re right. Unlikely Pairing then. I also have reading to finish before tomorrow.’

‘All right,’ he said, admitting defeat. ‘I’d better get back to my ale before it gets cold. Oh, wait — “I Don’t Like Mondays”?’ He cocked his head questioningly.

It took Willa a moment to remember what he was talking about. It was the name of their game. Ages ago they’d used to try to make the Monday staff meeting more interesting by choosing a different musical group each week. They’d compete to see who could surreptitiously work the most song titles or lyrics from that band into the general discourse of the meeting without anyone else catching on. The loser bought lunch. It had been a highlight of her week, but, like many of their games, it had petered out after Winter came on the scene, and the pandemic had forced them to work so much more from home.

‘It’s been a while since we’ve played that,’ she said.

‘I know. Why did we stop?’

Because we were friends for years and then you got married without even telling me you’d met someone, and made it feel weird for us to have special private jokes like this, Willa thought. And because you stopped suggesting it.

‘There wasn’t a reason,’ she said. ‘What band do you want to do?’

He looked up and thought. ‘We’ve covered a lot. Is it okay to start repeating?’

‘Sure — I mean, that’s not strictly adhering to International Federation of Dicking About In Meetings standards, but what the hell.’

‘Elton John, then.’

‘Elton John it is.’ This suited Willa. ‘All right, I hope you have a “Wonderful Crazy Night”.’

‘Thank you.’ He looked genuinely touched.

‘It’s an Elton John song,’ she pointed out.

‘Aha!’ he said. ‘Nice one. But we won’t start scoring until the meeting begins.’

‘Might as well start “Tonight”.’

‘I’m going to be buying lunch tomorrow, aren’t I?’ he said.

‘You will be my “Whipping Boy”’. Good night, Ewan,’ she said, and headed on down the road past the convivial glow from the shopfronts.

* * *

Inside her flat, it was quiet and cool. And, compared with Kat’s place, very untidy. Many times she’d tried to change but she’d concluded that, like having blue eyes and finding runny egg yolk nauseating, being a bit of a slattern in the housekeeping department was just something about her. As long as the council didn’t have to get involved, she figured her untidiness was her own business.

She slung her bag over the back of a kitchen chair and dropped her keys on the counter beside the fruit bowl that contained one shrivelled peach, three black bananas, and a small, thrilled swarm of fruit flies. She banged the sides of the sash window over the sink, which swelled in the summer with the humidity, then shoved it up and propped a wooden spoon in to keep it raised. A slight breeze drifted in, carrying with it the smell of the kebab shop around the corner.

She considered sending Kat a text to say she’d made it home safely, but Kat would be too busy shagging George to ‘All I Want Is You’ to care.

On the kitchen table her laptop was open. She’d been halfway through reading a new manuscript submission when she went over to Kat’s. The manuscript was good, although it hadn’t quite made her feel The Feeling. But it was by Kay

Springs, an author she'd published before, so she would persist. Besides, the thing about *The Feeling* was that it didn't have to get her in the opening scenes, like it did when she watched *Much Ado*. It just had to spark up in there at some point.

She read for a couple of minutes but the flat was too quiet. That was the problem with living alone. Willa liked the sounds people made. Even when they weren't in the same room with you, when you lived with someone you were aware of them, making their little human soundtrack as they went about their life in nearby spaces. Opening and closing drawers in another room, clearing their throat, their clothes brushing against the sofa, their phone accidentally bursting into sound as they scrolled through social media. Here there was only the hum of the overworked fan in her computer, the distant shushing of cars driving along Elizabeth Street and the sound of her finger sliding across the computer's trackpad.

That was why people got dogs — so there was another heartbeat nearby. Willa was never really a dog person before she lived with Kat — she'd grown up with farm dogs but not pets — but Billy Jowl had changed her, and she missed him. If he were there he'd be snuffling away under the table — or more realistically on her bed — dreaming and snoring. Willa didn't want a dog of her own: she wouldn't cope with the poo or the responsibility. There was always the option of moving somewhere with a flatmate again, which was what her bank account cried out for. Or moving in with a boyfriend.

Her phone glowed with a text. It was from her friend Bec, sent to Kat and Willa via their three-woman text group. It read: *Would I be a worse mother if I sold one of the twins or both?* and accompanied a photo of Bec's two-year-old sons, Quinn and Arlo, sitting on the floor of the bathroom, covered in some sort of white goo that Willa very much hoped was conditioner or moisturiser and not glue, since it was running off both their heads and into their eyes. They were looking up at the camera, their faces creased with laughter, looking like they did not give

any shits at all about the consequences of what they were doing. Which was completely on brand for them.

Along with their older sister, Persephone, Bec's twins were some of Willa's favourite people in the world. This was curious, because she also adored their mother and they seemed to cause her endless grief and would appear to an outsider to have absolutely wrecked her life. If your friend had a partner who made them cry quite often, who led to them leaving the workforce for several years, becoming worryingly thin and giving up brushing their hair, you generally wouldn't feel terribly positive towards that person. You'd identify it as coercive control and do everything you could to help them escape the situation. But when a person gave birth to their own tormentors, it was different.

Willa knew she shouldn't, but she delighted in the antics of those kids. She could totally see that they were undisciplined hooligans and that it was all going to blow up in Bec's and her husband Ralph's faces in a few years, but they were very fun to watch. The twins reminded her of when a cartoonist draws a fight: they appeared mostly as a scribble of movement and chaos, with the odd tiny fist or foot visible in the blur.

Knowing that Kat was otherwise occupied with the Man With A Van, Willa replied immediately to the text — *You'd get more for them if you had kept them box fresh. They're not in v good used condition.* — and went back to reading.

It was only later, when she was falling asleep, that Willa realised Bec hadn't replied or even hearted the message. Maybe that text had been more of a cry for help than a joke. Sometimes Willa got that wrong. She made a mental note to check in with Bec tomorrow, maybe see if she needed Willa to come help her out one evening that week.

Chapter 3

Willa had only worked in a few offices, but the Monday morning meeting had been standard in them all, no matter what the business. Sometimes it was helpful but more often it was a colossal waste of time, from a work perspective. The point of it, as far as she could gather, was mainly to remind staff that the weekend was over and this was where they lived now. It was about getting your head back in the game and reacquainting yourself with your work family.

What was different about the all-staff Monday morning meeting at Gladstone & Smith, where Willa had worked for eight years, was that the majority of participants didn't need to reacquaint themselves with their work family because it was the same as their actual family.

The boss of both the family and the company in question was Gladstone Smith. To Willa he was the archetype of a patriarch. A patriarchetype. He was only in his sixties, but he seemed to come from another time. A time when a man taking over a business from his father would think it was a great idea to change its name from the does-what-it-says-on-the-tin Smith's Manuals, and instead call it both his first and last names, adding an ampersand in between to make it sound like he was in partnership with someone other than his own inflated ego. Some people have a time in history where they would have fit perfectly, and if they can, they build themselves a little bubble in the modern world where they can live like they would have in their best era. Gladstone lived like it was 1983. He would have loved to give everyone a day off for Australia winning the America's Cup.

Every Monday morning the seven staff of Gladstone & Smith gathered at half past nine in Gladstone's office, which

was the front room on the first floor of the grand old Redfern terrace that housed his company. Originally it would have been the master bedroom of the house, and although the direct sun was intense there on summer mornings, it was the heart of Gladstone's domain, and where he liked them all to begin the working week.

Willa was almost the last in that morning, and the shady spots had all been nabbed by three of Gladstone's four sons. The eldest and youngest, Dougal and Alistair, were lounging on a leather chesterfield sofa against the wall and Angus had pulled a chair beside them. Dougal glanced at her and nodded. He was wearing a fine-checked cotton shirt, beige chinos and polished brown brogues, which with his neatly combed, side-parted hair and blank expression gave him strong Ralph-Lauren-menswear-catalogue vibes.

Ewan hadn't yet made an appearance but when he did the only spot left was going to be perched on the edge of the one windowsill that wasn't yet bathed in bright hot light. Served him right for being late. They must have had a bit of a night of it at the ale house. She was glad she'd resisted: there had been too many accidental big nights out with Ewan over the years and she'd thrown up more than once in the wastepaper basket in her office. Sometimes, if he felt like he'd been the architect of the big night, he could be very sweet and would make her toast and marmalade.

Gladstone was behind his desk, the sleeves of his blue business shirt folded up neatly to his elbows, leafing through paperwork that he insisted on printing out despite it being perfectly legible on his large monitor, and Imogen, in her role as receptionist and general administration assistant, was sitting on the mustard brocade loveseat in the bay window, ready to take minutes. The sun hitting her blonde hair made it glow so brightly it was hard to look directly at her. Her shoulders were bare in her cotton sundress, and Willa could already see them beginning to redden.

'Glad you could join us, Willa,' Gladstone said, not looking up, like it was the first morning of a murder

investigation and she was the problematic new detective, showing up reeking of booze and clearly coming straight from the Chief Constable's bed.

'Gladstone, it's boiling in here,' she said crossly. 'Can you put the fan on?' A pedestal fan stood in the corner, not plugged in.

He glanced up from his papers. 'Eh? What? It's fine. Tropical.'

'Imogen's burning to a crisp. Look at her shoulders. If she gets skin cancer it'll be an OH&S issue.'

He pulled his reading glasses down his nose and peered over them to look closely at Imogen. 'I thought that was on purpose.' He brushed his own shoulders. 'Some sort of red fake tan thing. Shoulder rouge. Imogen, why didn't you say?' He jerked his head over at the sofa. 'Squeeze in there with the boys — get out of that sun.'

'I'm okay here,' Imogen said but the droplet of sweat running down her forehead contradicted her. At the sound of her voice Angus seemed to come back into the room from whatever he'd been looking at on his phone. The cricket scores probably. Clocking Willa frowning her disapproval at him, he jumped up and offered Imogen his chair. It shouldn't have taken him so long.

Willa was firmly on the fence about whether it was a good idea for Angus and Imogen to be dating. There were more than enough familial relationships in the office, what with five members of the Smith family working together and alongside Willa and her cousin. But for the last six months Imogen and Angus had been stepping out together, as Gladstone insisted on putting it, and Willa struggled to see how that could end well for anyone.

Her own father was fond of the saying 'Don't dip your pen in the company ink', which couldn't have been a great temptation for him, since he was a dairy farmer. So far Willa had managed to avoid doing any such thing, but Imogen had

been utterly dismissive when warned of the pitfalls of dating a co-worker.

Imogen was much younger — twenty-two to Willa's thirty-six — the only child of Willa's mum's sister. They sat at opposite ends of the cousin spectrum, with five in between. Imogen had grown up in Tasmania, and when she'd decided to move to Sydney the previous year, Willa had helped her get the job as receptionist at Gladstone & Smith. It had been Willa's position when she'd first joined the company, and their family was pleased she would be there to keep an eye on Imogen, and that the cousins, until now mostly separated by age and distance, would have a chance to get to know each other.

Via the family grapevine, Willa had heard her aunt and uncle were hopeful Imogen would follow her into the publishing arm of the company, but after working with Imogen for a year, Willa couldn't see her heading in that direction. Immy just wasn't into books, romance or otherwise. Willa was surprised she had lasted as long as she had in the receptionist role. Her cousin was like a border collie: very smart but requiring a lot of running around to keep her sane. If it hadn't been for all the flirting with Angus over the reception desk Willa thought Imogen would have left long ago to become a personal trainer or move back to Tassie and find a way to make a living from riding horses. At least over the past few months Willa had managed to hand over to her the social media responsibilities for the publishing side of the business, which were slightly more interesting than answering the phone.

Besides, 'the publishing arm of the company' was a grandiose way to describe the fact that, while the rest of the staff at Gladstone & Smith produced technical instruction manuals, Willa alone published romance novels.

It hadn't been the most orthodox path into publishing.

Her mid to late twenties had been a strange period. Now, looking back over the past decade, it was as if she'd been

sleepwalking through the time after she moved back from three years in America and, for lack of any better ideas, began a Master's in English Literature — the cherry of overqualification on top of the sundae of uselessness that was her undergraduate English degree. It had taken her ages to complete, as she juggled writing a thesis about the role of wives in the later works of Evelyn Waugh with the temp reception work and waitressing that paid her (and eventually Ollie's) rent.

Four years of part-time study later, she emerged with a foundering relationship with the freeloading Ollie, a strong aversion to the institution of marriage, an equally great resentment of both Evelyn Waugh and the supervising professor who'd talked her out of writing about Mary Wesley and into writing about Waugh, a massive HECS debt and the dawning realisation that she should have done a publishing degree or become a librarian.

Exhausted, she'd found herself craving the stability of a full-time job. Somewhere she could turn up every day, sit in the same seat, and keep her own mug in the office kitchen. The receptionist position at Gladstone & Smith had come along and, despite it being in no way connected to literature or academia, Ewan had made her laugh in the interview, the location had been convenient, and she'd taken the job.

She'd enjoyed the role at first. She liked getting to know the Smiths and the way the business worked. Ewan, an inch or two shorter than Dougal and a thousand per cent more amusing, quickwitted and fun, felt like an old friend at once, and they usually ate lunch together, sharing stories of their lives. She tried to make hers sound more impressive — playing up her time overseas and downplaying how miserable her foray into academia had been — while admiring the way he could make fun of himself. He'd left his private school after Year Ten for the local high school so he could do drama for his final exams, then failed to get into any drama schools. A third-rate agent had taken him on anyway, and he'd landed a few television ads, using his crinkly-eyed smile to sell beer and

fried chicken, but after bouncing around casual jobs until he was in his late twenties, he'd finally made the decision to join his father's firm. Now he owned a small house in Newtown and enjoyed no longer being rejected at auditions three to five times a week.

But after a year or two even the fun she and Ewan had in the office couldn't mask the fact that Willa was so bored that some days she counted her breaths for fun. With her thirties approaching like a speeding train, she struggled against the bonds that had held her to the tracks of her life so far.

On the night of Bec's thirtieth birthday, after a long lunch at an overpriced waterside restaurant, she'd gone back to the share house where she and Ollie lived, lain on her bed and cried until she fell asleep. When she woke up, it was three in the morning and Ollie wasn't beside her in the bed. She didn't know where he was, his phone was off, and she found she didn't really care. She took the copy of *Anne of Green Gables* she'd had since she was seven and read it until dawn, letting the familiarity of the story calm her. Books never let her down. It occurred to her that if her life were a romcom then her one true love — her Benedick, her Darcy, her Harris K Telemacher — was not a person, it was just books.

The following Monday she returned to work and began looking for a new job, this time in publishing.

Only there weren't any. Or if there were, she didn't know how to find them. Trying to get an entry-level job in a mainstream commercial publishing house felt like trying to crack the combination on a safe using only what you'd seen in movies: endlessly twiddling a knob and listening without knowing what you were listening for. At twenty-nine, and without the funds behind her to try for an unpaid internship or go back to university yet again to do a publishing degree, she might as well have been trying to become an Olympic gymnast in her fifties.

So Willa had stopped trying to get into the closed book of the book world and decided to think like a pissed-off fox. It

was time to give up chasing the steam train along the tracks, and hijack a stagecoach to overtake it. Fuck it, she'd thought. She'd start her own publishing company.

Ollie couldn't have been less supportive of the idea. At the time it had hurt, but she'd persisted. Later it would become abundantly clear that he wasn't supportive of any endeavour of Willa's at which there was even a chance of her being successful.

She'd pitched to Gladstone the idea that, while she continued to carry out her reception duties, which involved a very small amount of phone answering and a lot of filling the printer with paper and restraining the other employees from kicking it to pieces like characters from *A Clockwork Orange* when it jammed, she could try, using the disruptive tool of social media, to put out a call for aspiring authors. Gladstone was all for it. He loved ingenuity and entrepreneurship, despite having little of either of his own, and was happy for her to investigate her new idea. Willa offered it to him as a what-have-you-got-to-lose? scenario.

It had turned out there were plenty of people out there who both could and could not write good books, who were feeling equally excluded by the cool kids in publishing and wanted to come play over in Willa's corner of the sandpit. It didn't take her long to discover she had inherent bias — she'd worried that the only writers without mainstream deals were going to be the shit writers — and to learn that she was wrong.

She found there were a million reasons people hadn't managed to get a publishing deal, and the beauty of the situation was that she didn't have to publish any of the bad ones. There was a plethora of great talent out there. You just had to find its owners. And even more helpfully lots of those writers were out there looking for someone like Willa.

Romance was the way to go, she figured, because it made people feel good. Delicious, addictive and formulaic: in big business that was how you made a product successful. Think of Coke, iPhones, Marvel movies.

Willa did some research into what kind of people generally wrote romances and realised those were the kind of people she wanted to work with: creative, clever, passionate, but at the same time pragmatic, deadline driven and surprisingly low on ego. Romance also happened to be a genre she'd always leaned towards as a consumer, in books and film.

People started sending Willa pitches and manuscripts and she began to read. It was the tenth manuscript she picked up that changed everything: a goldrush-era romance about a young woman who stowed away on a mail coach and ended up in Ballarat in 1855, pretended to be a man so she could get a prospecting licence, and fell in love with the miner on the adjacent plot of land. It was called *Mine Forever*, and there was a moment about a third of the way in, when the miner planning to share his damper with the girl-dressed-as-a-boy burned his fingers getting the loaf out of the campfire, and she bathed them with cool water from her billy, that was so sexy and delightful that Willa had a visceral flashback to how *Much Ado About Nothing* made her feel.

It was a curious thing. After overdosing on it as a teenager, she'd probably only watched *Much Ado* once or twice since leaving home. She hadn't thought of it for ages. There were no similarities between the stories, nothing (except the cross-dressing) even vaguely Shakespearean about the situation. There was nothing she could put her finger on that had reminded her of the film, just an ineffable sense of groin-sparkling excitement and breathless hope that she'd only felt before while watching Emma Thompson look through the arched window of an Italian villa at the approaching men on horseback.

That was the first book Willa published. She'd found a freelance editor, and then a proofreader, used a stock photo for the cover, taught herself the basics of InDesign using YouTube videos, researched the world of online retailers and published it as an ebook. From there things accelerated quickly. She had followed *The Feeling*, and selected manuscripts accordingly. Now she published around three books every month,

marketing them solely online, and the romance arm of Gladstone & Smith, Boundless Books, was proving itself well worth Willa's salary and the single back-room office where she worked.

She still commissioned and project managed all the books, outsourcing the cover design, copyediting and proofreading, but keeping the structural editing. She'd taught herself to lay out the pages and to create ebook files. And now she'd been at it for long enough to have a stable of writers on whom she could rely to deliver a book every six to twelve months.

The rest of the company blithely went about their business around her, paying as little attention to her work as she did to theirs. They operated like back-to-back conjoined twins.

The Monday meeting was their regular reminder of each other. Gladstone liked them all to sit together and hear what everyone else had on that week. The boys didn't seem to listen to Willa, and she certainly didn't listen to them. It worked.

That morning Willa sat and added things to her to-do list while Dougal gave a rundown of the trade show in Perth. Given that his brothers had all been there with him and Willa didn't care, the meeting could have been an email to his father alone, but the oddness of the company was ameliorated by everyone pretending it was more like a normal workplace, so they let him talk. Dougal's voice was deep and quiet, a pleasing sound but difficult to focus on. No one seemed bothered that Ewan hadn't shown up for the meeting. The whole situation wasn't exactly an energising start to the week.

Willa let his voice wash over her as she stared at a flickering shadow on the rug, caused by the sun forcing itself through and around the leaves of the tree outside. It was mesmerising and she was lost in it when she heard someone say her name.

'Willa? You'll just flick those through?'

She had no idea what Angus was talking about. She looked up from the leafy lightplay to find everyone was waiting for

her to say something. Dougal was looking at her with a rare tiny smile playing on his lips.

‘Yes,’ she said to Angus confidently. ‘Absolutely.’

Dougal looked straight at her. Willa felt a prickle of heat in her belly, a feeling she often had when she caught him watching her. It was simply because he was the most classically handsome of the Smith boys. The brothers looked like four of the same T-shirt that had been washed for a few months in different cycles, some hung on the line and some tumble dried. They were recognisably the same shirts, but all slightly differing in shape and colour and, it had to be said, attractiveness. Of all of them, Dougal looked most like he just came out of the packet. They all had red hair but Dougal’s was the darkest. They were all in good shape but only Dougal had biceps that lightly strained at his shirtsleeves, evidence of all the weekends he spent scaling cliffs in the Blue Mountains.

Her lips twitched into the beginning of a smile. Perhaps it was time for another look at her dating apps. Flirting with any of the Smith boys was a sign that she needed entertainment. A few years back it would have been Ewan with the cheeky smiles in meetings, giving her flak for drooling over Dougal, planning what they would get for lunch, covertly playing Words With Friends on their phones right under Gladstone’s nose, but after Winter had arrived on the scene Ewan’s smiles had become devoid of any sense of mischief. Which was entirely proper, but a loss to Willa in meetings nonetheless.

Chapter 4

After the meeting wound up Willa went down to the kitchen, made herself two pieces of toast and let them cool before spreading them with butter. She preferred butter unmelted, which meant eating cold toast, but what was life but a series of sacrifices? Cold toast had a more satisfying crunch too, if you cooked it for the correct length of time: until it was dark brown, but without a hint of black. It took skill to get it right.

She looked in the cupboard for the marmalade and found only a few scrapes left in the sole jar. A jolt of panic shot through her. Ewan needed to bring in more. Marmalade making was an unusual hobby for a man his age, and his brothers never let him forget it. Willa teased him too but never so much that he got huffy and cut off her supply. It was too good to risk that. She hadn't been a huge marmalade fan before working at Gladstone & Smith, but Ewan had brought her round to its bittersweet charms. He'd convinced her that not only was it the superior spread for toast; it also worked well in porridge or on a ham and cheese sandwich. Marmalade, according to Ewan, was the all-round superhero of the preserve world, and in Willa's opinion he made some of the best.

She took her meagrely marmaladed toast up to her office: the smallest room on the first floor, near the back. It had one window, which looked out over the bins in the courtyard behind the house. Still, she reminded herself, it was better than working from home. For two periods during the pandemic she'd spent four months working from her kitchen table and both times had emerged five kilos heavier, suffering from moderate depression, prone to taking a drink with lunch, addicted to jigsaw puzzles and with a crick in her neck that

cost much of her salary to remedy with yoga and physiotherapy. Any office was better than that.

Just before lunch there was a knock on her door and Ewan walked straight in and sat down in the old cane chair near her desk. Willa kept typing because she'd only just figured out how to explain to Kay Springs what was wrong with her manuscript. The final chapter needed to be moved to the beginning, and the prologue needed dragging to the bin and the bin needed emptying. Willa knew she could be too blunt so when she was able to get into a flow of politely and helpfully explaining something, she really liked to be able to see that through to completion. Otherwise she'd just be mean.

It was a dance she did with her authors, and something she'd learned from the freelance editors she hired. The editors were brilliant at it: the compliment sandwich, they called it, though often it was more of a compliment lasagne. A layer of compliments, a layer of repairs that need making, a layer of possible but not essential suggestions, perhaps another compliment here, a layer of patently desperate pleas to 'consider deleting' certain overused or problematic words and phrases, another compliment, and repeat until the dish was full.

'Two minutes,' she said, and Ewan didn't speak. He breathed out heavily. Out of the corner of her eye Willa saw he was holding a coffee. 'Is that for me?'

'Did you want one?'

'It's good manners,' she reprimanded him, still typing. 'You don't come and sit sighing in someone's office and stinking the place up with your delicious coffee without bringing them one too. Office Rule number fifty-seven. It's in the manual. You published the manual. By the way, you missed the meeting this morning which means you lost at "I Don't Like Mondays", so lunch today is on you and I want a Reuben sandwich from the new place, which means you'll have to go soon and line up because they always sell out by midday.'

‘Sorry,’ he said quietly.

‘. . . seems to be the hardest word? Well now look who’s trying to win back lunch. No way. It’s the morning meeting or nothing. You snooze, you lose. You lost. Oh, and we’re out of marmalade.’

He didn’t reply. Willa stopped typing, hit save, and twirled her chair to look at him. He was staring at the takeaway cup in his hands, his head slumped forward. He was unshaven and his face was drawn and pale beneath the red-gold stubble.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ Willa demanded. ‘What’s all this? Did you get wrecked last night? Give me a sip of that.’

Without looking at her he passed the coffee and she took a big gulp. ‘Is it work? Did you fuck up a manual?’ She kept pressing him. ‘Did you leave out how to install a safety guard on something? Did someone cut off their elbow?’

Ewan was still staring at his hands. Willa kicked his foot.

He looked up and she saw his eyes were brimming with tears. ‘Winter left me.’

‘Because you cry too much?’ It came out before she could stop it. All she could do was make a joke, and even as she spoke it sounded meaner than she intended and she regretted it, but that was how she and Ewan communicated. In the face of someone’s obvious distress, Willa thought, a better person than she would have taken a moment to find the kindness that probably lay within them and say something thoughtful and sympathetic.

Ewan gave an alarming snort-laugh-sob, and his eyes overflowed as his nose started to run. His face crumpled and he leaned forward, weeping. His shoulders were shuddering. Willa didn’t know what to do, so she tried again to make him laugh. She picked up a metal ruler from her desk and used it to pat him on the back. ‘There there.’ He kept crying.

‘Ewan,’ she said in her gentlest voice. ‘Do you want some of my coffee?’ He looked at her and she held out his own drink to him. ‘I don’t mind. You seem like you could use it.’

Finally he started to laugh as well as cry, which was an improvement on just crying, and took back his coffee. The edge of the cup was left all teary and snotty and Willa was glad she'd had a big swig of it already.

'What do you mean Winter left you? When? You seemed fine when I saw you at the bar last night.'

'When I got home. She had an Uber waiting.'

'Waiting? Who keeps an Uber waiting? Why didn't she just call it when she was ready to go?' Willa realised this wasn't the point, but it pointed to a certain callousness about people's feelings on Winter's part — both Ewan's and the Uber driver's. 'Where did she go? Home to America?'

'Yep. She's flying back to Boston today.'

'Permanently? I don't understand. I thought everything was perfect bliss with you two.'

'I thought so too, mostly.'

'So why . . .?'

It was genuinely baffling. While Willa hadn't been a fan of Winter's, and had never managed to crack her, everyone else thought she was lovely. She was sharp shouldered with a twangy accent and a CrossFit habit. For fun, she decorated cakes she never seemed to eat. Willa alone found her humourless as well as daunting. Ewan had met her when he got stuck in America at the beginning of the pandemic for a couple of months, and once he finally got a flight home, he married her and brought her along. Their honeymoon was two weeks' quarantine in a CBD hotel with no fresh air or natural light. It was very whirlwind-romance, high-stakes stuff, so dramatic that it extinguished whatever fleeting thoughts Willa might have subconsciously entertained of a Friends-to-Lovers development in the story of her friendship with Ewan. That had been three years ago.

Since then, Ewan hadn't hung out with Willa much outside work. At first she'd wondered if perhaps Winter considered her some sort of threat, but there was nothing threatening about Willa to a woman like Winter. It was far more likely that

Winter found her inconsequential and thought of her as nothing more than her husband's colleague who was always happy to take a slightly imperfect cake off her hands. Now the manic-fitspo-dream-nurse was gone: she'd packed up her piping bags and decorative nozzles and done a bunk.

Willa ran the situation through her mental database of reasons for break-ups, both her own and all the fictional versions she'd helped create. There were plenty she felt she could quickly rule out, like Ewan cheating on Winter, or abusing her. She stopped scrolling when she reached *Ex, returned to*.

'Did she go back to someone else? Someone she left when she met you?' She reached for his coffee again and took a sip from the side he hadn't wept on.

Ewan stared at her. 'How could you possibly guess that?'

Willa gestured to where the covers of all the books she'd published were pinned to the wall. 'The affairs of love, buddy: they are my bread and butter. It's all in these here books. Am I right? Was that really what happened?'

He looked wretched. 'Yep. She had a boyfriend when she met me. Grayson. She left him the night we met. They'd had a fight and she got a migraine. I ran into her in a pharmacy, trying to get something for her head.'

'His name is Grayson? That's who she's gone back to? Just out of the blue, after three years of marriage? What's his last name?'

'Presley.' Ewan looked puzzled. 'What's his name got to do with it?'

Willa wondered how to explain that a man with a name like Grayson Presley would always get the girl. Especially from someone called Ewan Smith. It was narrative destiny. Grayson Presley was a proper power name. A main character name. The moment someone with a name like that entered a story it was a foregone conclusion that there would be knickers dropping before [chapter four](#). Willa wished she didn't

think like that, but seven years of publishing romances would do that to a person.

‘Nothing,’ she said. ‘I was just curious.’ She took another couple of sips of the coffee and found she’d finished it. ‘So, what’s your plan? Has she flown out yet? Are you going to do an Airport Love Run?’

He screwed up his face. ‘So I can get rejected again?’

‘I suppose that’s a risk,’ Willa said. ‘Would she like it though? Maybe it would work. If you want her to stay, don’t you need to make a Grand Romantic Gesture?’

He looked sceptical. ‘You really do live and breathe your work. That’s not how things happen. I don’t know what flight she’s booked on. You can’t get past the check-in desks any more. Her phone’s been off all night. What, am I just going to buy a five-thousand dollar ticket to somewhere I don’t need to go and hope I run into her in the duty-free shop or at the airport Macca’s? And get down on my knees and beg her to stay? She doesn’t love me. She told me that. It wasn’t like we had a fight or anything. It was all pretty much fine and then one night she just gets a FaceTime call from Grayson fucking Presley and ends our marriage.’

Willa didn’t say what she thought, which was that it didn’t sound to her like that call from Grayson was Winter’s first in three years. ‘Yeah, that’s not how it happens in books and movies. Not on my watch anyway. Have you told your fam?’

He closed his eyes. ‘I haven’t told anyone.’

‘You’ve told me. Aren’t I someone?’

‘Anyone apart from you. They’ll all be so disappointed and sad. You know how much Mum wants grandchildren.’

‘What about me? Weren’t you worried I’d be disappointed and sad?’ It was irritating that he was concerned about sparing everyone else’s feelings but assumed Willa would be fine to have the news dumped on her. She was, but that wasn’t the point.

‘I figured you’d survive the pain,’ he said wryly. He looked straight at Willa and she looked away. She had tried — more or less — to conceal her ambivalence about Winter, but his rather pointed glance suggested she may not have been a hundred per cent successful. ‘I’m not going to tell them yet. I don’t want to wreck the party.’

Oh god, thought Willa. The party. That weekend was Ewan’s parents’ annual summer party. It was a huge combined celebration for everyone in the office, their clients and contractors, and all Fiona and Gladstone’s rich friends. They held it in February, as an alternative to a Christmas party, ostensibly because it was less likely to be rained out than earlier in summer but really because Fiona didn’t like any possible competition from other events. Fiona called it her ‘Summer Serenade’ party. It was always themed, and this year it was a masquerade ball.

Fiona was protective of her sons, almost to a fault, and would not be pleased to hear what Winter had done. She had been pleased with the marriage — it made Ewan happy and it got her closer to becoming a grandmother, her ultimate goal in life — but when she heard about Winter’s midnight flit it could get ugly. Winter would do well to be an ocean away before that happened.

Heaven help her if, in addition to breaking Ewan’s heart, Winter also spoiled the Summer Serenade. It would throw a pall over the festivities if Ewan was all tearful and heartbroken and red. He’d have to wear one of those Italian tragedy masks.

‘Look,’ Willa told him. ‘It’s only Monday. The party isn’t until Saturday. If you tell them now they’ll have some time to digest the news and let it sit a bit. If you try to hide it you’ll just be miserable all by yourself this week and then you’ll get drunk and tell them at the party. That will ruin it for sure. Telling them now is the way to go. If you’re sure things with Winter are really over.’

‘I don’t seem to have any say in whether they’re really over or not,’ he said.

He was right. It took two to tango but only one to storm off the dancefloor. Willa was suddenly furious at Winter. Had she even loved Ewan at all in the first place? Love didn't just turn off like a tap.

'I think I'll give the party a miss,' Ewan said morosely.

'Don't do that,' Willa told him. 'That means the terrorists have won. Fuck her. Tell your family now, go to the party and have a totally excellent time. I'll tell you what. I'll get really drunk with you.'

'You always get drunk at Mum's parties. You always say it's the best way to reward Mum for the quality of her booze.'

'I do, don't I.' That was her usual plan of attack. For the last couple of years she'd been doing it on her own, which wasn't as much fun. One-drink Winter had made her feel like a drunken aunty at Christmas, and last time she'd ended up discussing budget reviews with Dougal. 'But I wasn't going to this year. I'd actually planned to only have one drink. I'm old now: I can't handle my liquor like I used to. But for you I will put off drinking moderately, and we can get pissed together and sit in the corner making fun of everyone. It'll be like old times. Maybe we can really misbehave and pash inappropriate people. Let's try to cause some proper damage to the company's reputation. Let's throw someone in the pool. Or set something on fire. Wouldn't that be fun?'

'Maybe,' said Ewan, and he took a few noisy deep breaths. 'Sorry, I shouldn't have unloaded all this shit on you. Very unprofessional of me.'

'Extremely. I will be reporting you to HR.'

'You mean the suggestion box that Dad taped up when you filled it with thirty requests for a milkshake maker?'

'Yes, HR,' she said solemnly.

'Willa, can I sit in here with you today and work? I just can't face sitting on my own this afternoon.'

‘Do you have to?’ Once again Willa spoke before she thought, and Ewan’s face fell. Jesus, she thought. ‘Ewan, I’m joking! Of course you can. But no more crying and you can’t complain if I’m loud on my calls.’

He gave her a wobbly smile and extracted his large frame from Willa’s wicker chair, which creaked alarmingly. He left to get his laptop, wiping his eyes on his sleeve.

It wasn’t too great a bother having Ewan share her office for the rest of the day, because after he went and bought their Reuben sandwiches, he typed quietly on his laptop and didn’t cry very much more. But Willa had to delay having a conversation with an author about her heroine staying in a relationship with a man who isn’t The One for longer than she should — longer than the reader would reasonably tolerate. She couldn’t quite manage it with Big Sad Ewan sitting across the room with his laptop on his knees and his wife in the air somewhere over Fiji, winging her way back to someone who might well be her The One. It sucked, but Ewan had clearly been her Happy For Now, not her Happily Ever After.

Just after six o’clock, there was a single loud knock at the door and Dougal, in white trousers and a matching polo shirt, a sports bag slung over one broad shoulder, leaned in. He looked down at his brother’s faded and now tear-stained grey T-shirt and old jeans, ripped through at one knee. ‘Ewan, you coming to cricket?’

‘Ah, look, nah, I’m not sure tonight,’ Ewan began, blustering along. If he expected that to be enough to cause his brother to enquire more into his state of mind, he was overestimating their bond, because Dougal just said, ‘Righto, see you tomorrow,’ and shut the door after himself.

‘Ewan,’ said Willa. ‘Tell him.’

‘I’m not . . . How do . . .?’ All at once Sad Ewan was back.

She sighed and went to the door, looking out onto the landing in time to see Dougal’s head as he descended the staircase.

‘Dougal,’ she said, and he looked up. ‘Can you come back? Ewan wants to tell you something.’

He spun around and in about three steps he was back in her office, looking at his brother. ‘What?’

Ewan frowned and squinted and looked like he was trying to pass something.

‘What?’ asked Dougal again, impatient.

Suddenly it was like a dam had burst and the River Ewan was in full flood. ‘Winter left me, Dougal. She’s gone. Forever. Like properly left me. She’s gone back to America, and I think she’s gone back to her old boyfriend, and I don’t know what to do. Mum’s going to be devo, and Dad, well I don’t know, we don’t have any divorces in the family and I’m going to be the first one and fuck, there’s the party and everything and I feel like such an idiot. Like maybe she never even loved me: maybe she was just mad at her boyfriend and she wanted to teach him a lesson and make him really appreciate her and now she’s forgiven him for whatever . . .’

Dougal shook his head, as if some of this flood had become trapped in one of his ears like pool water. ‘Ewan, mate, that’s shit. I’m sorry that’s happened. God knows how women think or why they do half the stuff they do. There’s no way to understand them. Mum and Dad will be all right. Come to cricket practice. We’ll ring them on the way.’

Ewan sniffed, but he got up. When he reached the door Dougal slung an arm over his little brother’s shoulder.

‘Chin up,’ Willa told him as he left. ‘We’ve all been there,’ she added, even though it was a lie. She hadn’t ever been there. Ollie had been so irritating by the time they broke up that apart from the initial embarrassment of his cheating she’d been more relieved than heartbroken. Since him she hadn’t had any liaisons serious enough to stray into potential heartbreak territory. These days she tended to call a halt to proceedings as soon as the object of her interest revealed himself to be an idiot or dull. If he was particularly hot she’d overlook that

until they'd slept together, then she would move on, but she didn't hang around once she'd deemed them Not The One. In books the heroines always got too entangled with the wrong person, making it complicated when the right one fetched up. She wasn't going to make that mistake.

It was always better to ditch a liaison you could see wasn't going to work sooner rather than later. The lower the burning plane of a relationship had dived before you ejected, the greater the chance of your parachute not having time to open fully before you hit the ground. And hitting the ground, like she had with Ollie, wasn't something she ever wanted to repeat.

She was quite proud of her record at avoiding emotional anguish. Ollie aside, her experience of heartbreak had largely been through fiction. Break-ups in fiction were rarely as painful as they appeared in real life, because in a book you could see from the stack of pages still remaining in your right hand that there was hope for the broken-hearted. What Ewan didn't have at that moment was a vision of the pages left in his story. Those pages were where something redeeming happened, whether that be the heartbroken realising that the heartbreaker wasn't worth it, and finding someone else better, or sometimes overcoming the obstacles that caused the heartbreak and getting back together for good. That last one was Willa's least favourite. If she loved a character, once they'd had their heart pulverised by a villain, then an author could almost never convince her that the couple should reconcile.

As she saved her documents and shut down her laptop, gathering up her phone and water bottle, Willa thought about Big Sad Ewan trotting around the twilit oval with his brother, flinging a small red ball as fast as they could at each other in the nets and being all strong and manly, because that's how his family most often dealt with their feelings, and she remembered his teary, craggy face earlier that day. She felt a stab of heartache by proxy and she was glad it wasn't her sadness to deal with.

Chapter 5

On Friday night, Willa met Kat at Central Station after work, and they set off for Bec's house in Artarmon for dinner. As often as they could manage, they went up to make sure everyone was still alive; this usually ended up being about once every three weeks. Bec hardly ever came in to the city to meet them any more: there were so few people prepared to look after her children in her absence, and she needed to save those people for the likely event of her having a nervous breakdown, which would probably take place in around twelve more weeks, by Willa's estimation.

Bec and Ralph were a strong team, but their home life was like the ocean: teeming with bits of broken plastic and dangerous to turn one's back on.

Willa wished they lived closer, but when people had kids they wanted to live close to their own parents. When Bec and Ralph bought their house, Bec's parents had lived one suburb away in Chatswood. Unfortunately the week after Bec and Ralph moved in her parents put Bec's childhood home on the market and relocated to Tasmania in a move that seemed both audaciously self-centred, and now, in light of the twins, eminently sensible.

So Bec and Ralph lived in a heavily mortgaged brick semidetached house, the value of which had since plummeted, in a suburban street, not too far from the shops and the train station, with an overgrown front lawn littered with rusted kids' bikes and a beaten-up yellow and red plastic toddler car scavenged from the hard rubbish that looked like it had been driven through the sun. The neighbours' gardens were all much neater, which couldn't have been a nice feeling.

Kat rang the doorbell and after a few seconds they could hear thundering footsteps, large and small, a series of high, piercing miaows, several small protesting voices and the deeper, more desperate bellowing of Ralph. The door opened a crack and Ralph tried to let them in while holding a writhing twin under one arm. Another twin was trying to get out through the gap, and there was a small grey kitten hanging off the front of Ralph's jumper. 'QUINN, back!' shouted Ralph. 'Rebecca, the kitten, FUCK. Arlo, ow, no pinching. Jesus. Quick, get in.'

Willa crouched down like a wicket keeper and caught Quinn as he slid out past his dad, and Kat removed the animal, which came away from Ralph's jumper with four claws full of still-connected woollen strands, making Ralph look like a puppet being operated by a kitten. They all made it inside and slammed the door shut.

'Operation Stop Swearing In Front of the Kids is going well, I see,' said Kat. She untangled the kitten and put it on the floor, where it sprinted away towards the kitchen, followed by the yowling twins.

'Don't even start,' said Ralph. 'Welcome to hell. Drink?'

In the kitchen they found Bec, sitting in front of her laptop on a high stool at the kitchen island as if nothing was amiss, clutching a large gin and tonic. To be fair, thought Willa, the scene that greeted them probably didn't register as amiss for Bec any more. She had a pretty high amiss threshold. She closed the computer, hopped down and hugged them.

'You are so good for coming all the way here. Fuck, they're awful at the moment. We can't leave them with anyone except blood relatives, and they've all made themselves scarce. The last babysitter we used got her mum to ring us and ask us never to call her again. She only lives across the road and her little sister's in Persephone's class. It's so awkward now.'

'They're just spirited,' Willa said.

‘So are poltergeists,’ replied Ralph, and he gave a hollow laugh as he pulled up his jumper and shirt to examine the bright red pinch mark on his side. ‘Look, Bec, look what he did to me.’

Bec frowned. ‘Which one did that?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Ralph. ‘It all happened very fast. I wouldn’t be able to pick him out in a line-up. It was one of those two, officer —’ he gestured towards the living room, where a cartoon was now blaring ‘— one of Satan’s Proclaimers.’

‘Poor you,’ said his wife with genuine sympathy. ‘Hey, Ralph, remember that time I asked you out on a date?’

‘Vaguely,’ he said, still rubbing his injury.

‘If you could see all this ahead of you, would you have said yes to me?’

‘Not a chance.’

‘No, me neither,’ she said, and slurped her drink.

‘That’s an awful thing to say,’ Willa said.

The sound of small bodies thumping against a wall came from the living room. They looked over to see one child had slid upside down between the sofa and the wall. His bare feet were just visible, waggling over the top of the cushions. No one got up.

‘We don’t always feel like that,’ Ralph reassured Willa. ‘That would be a problem. Only sometimes.’

‘Where’s your nice child?’ asked Kat, who was following Ralph around the kitchen tidying up after him. He emptied the last of the ice cubes from a freezer tray into three glasses, then dropped it into the sink. Kat refilled it and replaced it in the freezer. She picked up the squeezed-out lime halves as he discarded them on the counter and threw them in the bin.

‘The nice one is upstairs, reading. God knows how she can with that racket going on,’ said Bec. ‘Perce!’ she yelled.

Obedient footsteps could immediately be heard overhead, and then padding calmly down the stairs. Into the kitchen came Persephone, carrying a thick book. Willa loved Persephone. She was almost nine but also about forty-seven.

She gave her little friend a hug and pulled her up onto her lap, even though she was too big for that. She asked what Perce was reading and was told it was *Little Women* and that she liked Aunt March the best of all the characters. That was exactly the kind of thing Willa liked about Persephone. She was a weirdo. No kids liked Aunt March the best. Most wouldn't even think of choosing an adult as their favourite character in a book about four girls. But Willa could see where she was coming from. Aunt March was sensible. She told it like it was.

‘Willa, want to come up and play Beyblades with me?’

‘I’ll play anything with you, Perce. But you’ll have to explain Beyblades to me. I don’t know it.’

‘It’s them, not it. I’ll show you.’

Ralph chimed in. ‘They’re a version of spinning tops. But they have a launcher and they explode when they crash into each other.’

‘Sounds like someone is quite into these — what’re they called again?’

‘Beyblades,’ said Perce.

‘I am,’ said Ralph. ‘I have some of my own.’

‘Not as many as me,’ his daughter reminded him.

‘No, because I don’t go to birthday parties where you get one as a going-home present.’

‘Sucks to be you,’ Willa told Ralph as Perce led her upstairs. They played together — Willa learning that the spinning tops were all rated for stamina, speed, attack and defence capabilities. She thought people could probably be ranked similarly. A dating app with those categories would be helpful.

Ralph called them down to eat thick suburban takeaway pizza, and the evening became a blur of laughter and movement: no one stayed seated for more than a minute or two at a time, people picked up each other's half-eaten slices of pizza and continued eating where the last mouth left off. Children carefully removed spicy salami and added it to the nearest adult's plate, and the twins did the same with their salty olives, offering them like tribute to their beloved Perce, who guzzled them with the carefree attitude of one whose parents will refill her water bottle during the night. To Willa this sharing of food was revolting but it also felt like love. She reciprocated by dividing her pineapple chunks evenly between the three kids.

Getting more tonic water, she saw a shopping list stuck to the fridge with a magnet from a plumbing company. The list read: *cheese sticks, Weet-Bix, nit stuff, bum chocolate, mince*. 'Um, guys,' she said, pointing to the list and grimacing. 'Bum chocolate?'

'Worming medicine,' Bec translated, not batting an eyelid. 'When we were kids, remember how they were tablets? Now they're squares of chocolate with medicine in them. Taste exactly like normal chocolate, only they fix itchy bums. They're fine. I've had them when we've run out of Lindt before.'

'That's disgusting,' Willa said. 'Any maybe dangerous?'

Bec defended herself. 'It's practical. And it's chocolate. What's not to like?'

'I don't know why all medicine doesn't come in chocolate, to be honest,' said Ralph.

'Because people like you would abuse it,' Kat pointed out. 'You'd OD on antidepressants or blood pressure meds or whatever just because someone finished the salted-caramel-flavoured seventy per cent cacao stuff.'

'You make a good point,' said Bec, laughing, and she went to the cabinet and brought out a couple of blocks of non-bum

chocolate. ‘You’ve made me hungry again.’

Willa covertly snapped a photo of the depressing shopping list and texted it to Ewan with the message, *Bright side? This would have been your future shopping list if she’d stayed.*

They refilled their gins and moved on to red wine, and although Ralph and Bec said to each other at least five times that the twins must be washed that night, neither of them got up to put that plan into effect, so eventually Kat and Perce chased Quinn and Arlo into the bathroom and cajoled them into a deep warm bath.

To the sounds of small shrieking voices and waves crashing over the side of the tub, soaking the bathmat, Ralph, Bec and Willa sat together in the living room and pretended it was ten years ago.

‘What news from the front?’ Ralph asked, elbowing her. ‘Any horrors lately?’

She related the Tale of Anders and the Bolognese to make them feel better about their own situation. While Ralph grimaced in disgust, she shook her head sadly. ‘All the good ones are married or trapped in one of my books. The pickings out there are slim, and not in a hot-slim Jarvis Cocker way. They’re gross-slim like Machine Gun Kelly or Jared Leto when he’s up for an award.’

‘Haven’t you got a back-up plan?’ he asked.

Willa peered at him to see if he was joking, but his eyes were wide and sincere.

‘Like what?’

‘I don’t know. I had a deal with my friend Mel at uni, that if we were both still single when we were thirty we’d get married.’

‘Your friend Mel had been married three times by then,’ Bec pointed out. ‘Which is why you had to marry me. She broke your pact.’

‘No,’ Willa said. ‘Marriage at all costs isn’t what I’m after. I am here for Great Love and nothing less.’

‘What about all those blokes you work with?’ Ralph had the bit between his teeth now. ‘Aren’t there seven brothers? They can’t all be taken yet.’

‘Four,’ she said, and sipped her wine. ‘And as of this week there’s one more back on the market. Ewan’s wife left him.’

‘Is he the super-hot one you two are always swooning about? The one who looks like he should be on the cover of one of your books?’ asked Ralph. ‘I get them mixed up.’

‘You’re thinking of Dougal,’ Bec said. ‘The smouldering bouldering one.’

‘Oh yeah, I remember him,’ said Ralph. ‘From your birthday dinner ages ago, Will. He nearly convinced me to go to a climbing gym. Even I wouldn’t kick Dougal out of bed for eating biscuits.’

‘Oh my god,’ Bec snorted, and slapped him on the arm. ‘You literally told me to get out of bed for eating a chocolate bar not two nights ago.’

‘You were eating a Flake!’ He turned to Willa for support. ‘A Flake, Willa. And,’ he added, turning to his wife with a sly grin, ‘let’s face it love, you’re no Dougal.’

Bec flopped happily onto Ralph’s chest. He gave her hair an affectionate ruffle and kissed her.

Willa hoped the conversation could move on now, but they weren’t finished. Bec turned to her.

‘You and Ewan used to hang out all the time before he married the American. I always thought there might be something there. He’s nice, and funny.’ She ticked off the traits on her fingers. ‘I’d argue he’s more attractive than Dougal. Dougal’s a bit *distractingly* good looking. Like, I’d find it hard to listen to what he was saying, because his face is so perfect. Ewan’s more like an actual person.’

‘Correct.’ Ralph nodded in agreement. ‘And I recall Ewan being more fun.’

‘You’re forgetting that he’s not into me like that,’ said Willa matter-of-factly. ‘As evidenced by him marrying the American. Also, does what I want come into this at all?’

‘Obviously not,’ Bec deadpanned. ‘I think you’ll find that we are married so we know what’s best for you.’

‘I will not be taking life advice at this time from someone who eats worming medicine as a snack,’ Willa said, which was difficult for Bec and Ralph to come back from.

* * *

After the bath, Kat and Perce dressed the twins in white pyjamas that were all one piece, including little feet, which made them look like little forensic investigators who were not tired.

As a special treat, and so their parents didn’t have to devote the last hours of Willa and Kat’s visit to the usual elaborate bedtime routine, Ralph plonked all the kids in his and Bec’s bed and let them fall asleep to a movie on the iPad. The twins lobbied for *Minions 2*, and Perce didn’t argue because she knew she’d just change it to *Jurassic Park* once her brothers crashed out.

The friends continued drinking and talking, and as the alcohol soaked into Willa everything felt somehow both softer and sharper. She watched the tiny touches between Ralph and Bec: when his wife picked the cuticle on her thumb with the nail of her forefinger, he lifted up her hand and kissed it gently. Bec’s body momentarily froze in panic when she spotted something small and white in Ralph’s hair, and when it was discovered to be a flake of pizza crust and not a nit she dissolved into laughter and gave him a spontaneous head massage.

They were both so tired, Willa could tell, but they pushed through it, wanting to be with their friends, refilling themselves with energy from outside their little unit. They

were such funny vivacious people, which was lucky, thought Willa, because their ability to tell a good story was all that was keeping their guests entertained, since they no longer had any actually decent content. Somehow Ralph made them laugh and kept them engaged with the tale of the new sofa bed they'd bought from Ikea, and how they'd made a deal that in order to protect their marriage they would hire an Airtasker to assemble it. The Airtasker brought his wife with him to help, and so Ralph and Bec had had to witness someone else maritally squabbling through the building of the sofa. Kat and Willa found the retelling hilarious, but at the end they looked over and saw that they'd lost Bec. She'd rested her head back against the wall and was fast asleep.

Kat and Willa made moves to collect their bags and jackets, and Ralph whispered, 'I'll see you out — it's bin night anyway.' He went into the laundry and emerged with five long plastic sacks jammed full of used nappies. He grinned at Willa and said, 'Time to go bum dumping!'

'What the . . .?' Kat murmured. 'Is everything here bum-related?'

'Our bin can't cope with the horrifying amount of shit that comes out of the twins,' he explained, 'and until they're toilet trained, which isn't going to be any time soon, I have to wait for bin night, and then I sneak up and down the street hiding the bags of crap in other people's bins. Bum dumping. It's somehow both one of the lowest points of my week, and the most exciting thing I do. I've nearly been caught several times.'

'I'm very sorry this is your life,' Willa said. 'There's just so much shit involved.'

'Thank you,' he told her sincerely. 'I appreciate your sympathy. But Bec and I made our bed and we must lie in it. With damp, whiffy toddlers.'

* * *

On the train home Willa checked her phone. Ewan hadn't responded to her text, which she thought would at least have elicited a laughing emoji or a haha. She ran it by Kat. 'Do you reckon I've made it worse? Was this a bit much?'

Kat read the text and gave Willa a look. 'Maybe a bit much. His wife only just left him. There is such a thing as too soon.'

Willa was indignant. 'He knows I'm joking. Of course I'm joking. It would be horrible to send that and mean it. It's what people do: it's banter.'

'Yeah, but Willa, his wife *just* left him. It's quite a big deal. Just because you didn't think it would last doesn't mean he didn't.'

'Who says I didn't think it would last? I never said that.'

'But you didn't, did you? You thought it was a fleeting thing, a whirlwind romance, as they say. Like people who get married when they're drunk in Vegas.'

'And I was right, wasn't I?'

'I suppose you're right technically. But that's not because it was a rush job. I reckon as many of those work out as relationships where people take a long time to commit. Just because it didn't work out doesn't mean they didn't go into it seriously. And even if you're right, you could be a bit more sympathetic to what he's going through.'

Willa folded her arms. 'They hardly knew each other. They must have known there was quite a good chance it wouldn't last.'

'Sometimes I don't understand how you do your job when you are the least romantic person ever.'

'I don't know what you're basing that assertion on,' Willa said. 'I go on loads of dates. How does that make me unromantic?'

'You live too much up here —' Kat tapped the side of her friend's head '— and not enough in here —' she patted the left

side of Willa's chest.

'You're right,' Willa said. 'I must listen more to how my left tit wants me to live my life.'

They rode in silence for a few minutes, listening to the rhythm of the wheels on the tracks and the episode of *Married at First Sight* that the woman across the aisle was watching on her phone without headphones.

Kat was a bit cross at her, thought Willa. She hated that feeling. Then she remembered something. 'Kat?'

'What?'

'Do you have a masquerade mask?'

'No. Why?'

'Office party tomorrow night. It's masquerade themed.'

'Oh.' She was definitely cross.

'I just thought you might have one, in the shop or whatever. But not a problem. I'll just grab one from that costume shop on Bourke Street. It'll probably be plastic but I'm sure it will do the trick.'

Kat finally turned from the window. 'Don't buy a shitty plastic one. There are some in the next booth at work. Really nice old ones. If you come in tomorrow, I'll show you.'

'Thanks, Katty,' said Willa. 'I knew in my left tit you'd be able to hook me up with a mask.'

'You're a dick,' said Kat.

The train was pulling into the station so they swayed down the stairs and out onto the platform. They were almost at the top of the steps near the road when Kat took Willa's hand and said, 'Please be as nice a friend to Ewan as you are to me. Ease off the jokes until he's ready, okay?'

'He'd find that very unnerving,' Willa said. 'That's not how our friendship works. We take the piss. If he's feeling all fragile and weird, then me being a huge sook about it too is

only going to make him feel worse. Trust me, Kat, my way is better.' She squeezed Kat's hand. 'Besides, I'm not as nice to anyone as I am to you. You're my favourite.'

When they reached Willa's street, Kat stood on the corner until Willa opened the front door of the building and waved. Once she was upstairs in her flat, Willa switched on the living-room light, and stuck her head out the front window to show Kat that she had not been murdered on the stairs. Kat waved back and headed off down the main road towards her own place. Willa knew she'd text when she was home safely.

Chapter 6

Willa had to hand it to her: Kat knew her old tat. The next day at the giant antique warehouse where Kat had a booth from which she sold her old chairs and lamps, she led Willa to a neighbouring stall. The mask dealer wasn't in that afternoon, but the way the warehouse worked was that dealers rented a space for all their furniture and bits and pieces, displayed it nicely, and then customers paid for it at the front desk, thereby allowing the dealers to be off sourcing new things to flog more often, and not sitting there tied to the stall all the time. Today this left Willa free to fossick about unobserved, rummaging through the racks of vintage clothes and trying on all the masks in front of a gilt mirror.

There was a whole chest of masks. Some of them seemed very old, with the tempera paint cracking off, bedraggled feathers around their edges, and some were clearly newer, mass-produced numbers with velvet and lace sequin trim. The old ones were the ones that caught Willa's eye, even though they were creepy. There were some full-face masks, but she couldn't see herself lasting very long in one of those on a hot February night. There was a vertical half-mask, but if she wore that people would sing *Phantom of the Opera* songs at her all night.

At the very bottom of the chest, she found the perfect mask. It only covered her eyes and the bridge of her nose, but it had a crackly gold patina, the eyes slanted upwards and were outlined in purple and it had an air of mischief. It was also, helpfully, only thirty dollars. The fancy ones started at a hundred and there was no chance of Willa spending that on something she knew she would irritatingly bang her champagne glass on all evening. She was putting everything

back into the chest when she spotted one last mask at the bottom, face down. Turning it over she couldn't help but grin. It was flesh coloured, with a long drooping nose and the forehead painted to look deeply wrinkled. It was a truly gross object and the perfect monstrosity with which to cheer up Ewan. She bought both.

* * *

It wasn't until her Uber was crossing the Harbour Bridge that evening, heading north as the sun blazed away in the west, that Willa idly googled Venetian Carnival masks and learned that the mask she had bought for Ewan was a Commedia dell'Arte character called Zanni, who was traditionally a simpleton and a fool. Great, she thought. That was probably not what Kat meant by being as good a friend to Ewan as Willa was to her.

The car pulled up outside the Smiths' house and Willa got out, thanking the driver and closing the door carefully. The street was full of parked cars, obviously driven by people who didn't know that when Gladstone and Fiona threw a party, they did not stint on the good wine. She smoothed the folds of her gold dress, adjusting where it sat at her waist, and checking that her strapless bra was still safely taped inside the bodice. She felt overdressed but knew from experience that she wouldn't be.

She walked to the driveway and stood looking around for somewhere to stash the awful mask. It didn't seem as funny now. Looking at it again she realised that even if Ewan didn't know anything about the meaning of carnival masks — and realistically, why would he? — there was also the problem of the beige, saggy-nosed creation being quite reminiscent of a limp penis. Willa knew the Ewan of two weeks ago would have laughed at this, but the new, sad, cuckolded Ewan? Maybe not so much. There was a thick dark-green hedge beside one of the stone gate pillars, and she quickly stuffed the mask deep into its foliage. Just as she was checking it was completely hidden Ewan's voice came from behind, saying Willa's name and startling her so much she squawked like a guilty duck.

She spun around, almost losing her balance in her heels. ‘God, Ewan, don’t sneak up on people like that. You scared me.’

Ewan looked startlingly good in his classic black tuxedo. It hung elegantly from his tall slender frame, his jaw, cleanly shaven of the misery stubble he had sported all week, was sharp and though she could still see sadness in his eyes, he didn’t appear to have been crying.

He was looking at her now, and she fidgeted uncomfortably under his gaze.

‘Where’s your mask?’ she asked.

He held out a piece of black fabric he had balled in his fist, spread it out and wrapped it clumsily around his face. Willa was pretty sure it was part of a black T-shirt with eye holes hacked in it. His mother was not going to be impressed at how little effort he’d gone to.

‘What were you shoving into that bush?’

‘Nothing.’ She looked him in the eyes. ‘I heard something and I thought a bird was trapped. There was nothing. It’s all good.’

He looked straight back at her. Even through his rubbish mask she could tell he didn’t believe her.

She kept talking. ‘Shall we head in? It’s party time!’ She tried to look excited. ‘You look very schmick. Did you rent the tux?’

‘No, I’m an adult. I own my own tuxedo.’

‘All right, grumpy, I was only asking.’

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I really don’t want to be here.’ He fiddled with his cufflinks.

‘Well, the sooner you get inside, the sooner you can drink too much, make an embarrassing scene and throw up in a pot plant.’

He held out his arm to her, and she linked her elbow through his, the slightly rough wool of his jacket rubbing on the soft skin of her bare arm. She shivered. Together they walked up the driveway towards his parents' front door.

It took just one rap with the brass lion's head knocker before the door was flung open by an exuberant Fiona. Her red curls, streaked with silver, were loose and her mask was adorned with so many feathers it looked like she'd dipped her face first into glue and then into a peacock.

'Hello, gorgeous!' Her hug was so tight it made the underwire in Willa's bra poke into her chest. Fiona's Scottish accent was softer now she'd been in Australia for almost forty years, but still discernible in its underlying warmth.

'Hi, Fiona — great mask.'

'Ah, away with you, pet. Let me get a better look at yours.' She grabbed the glasses that were tucked into the neckline of her red sequined dress and put them on over the mask. 'Fabulous. Just fab. Love it. Is it vintage?'

'It is, yeah.'

'And the dress? You're a bombshell.'

Willa yanked the front of her dress up. When people said, 'bombshell', they usually meant, 'Put 'em away, love.'

'I appreciate the effort. You're a good girl.' Fiona turned her attention to Ewan and his half-arsed mask. 'What's going on here?' She waved her hand at his face. 'Ewan, have you come as a raccoon?'

'It's like . . . Zorro,' he muttered.

'It's like Hamburglar,' she replied. 'Go and get a drink.' She said it like she was sending him to his room. 'And bring Willa back a glass of champagne.' She watched him head towards the bar set up outside on the patio and shook her head. 'My poor boy. I could strangle that girl. I never would have thought it of her. I thought she loved him. He certainly adored her.'

‘They did sort of rush into it,’ Willa pointed out.

‘Gladstone and I got engaged four days after we met, and look at us.’ Fiona gestured across the room at her husband, who was dressed in a shiny pale-blue frock coat with a froth of lace at his throat, matching blue breeches, white knee socks, buckled black shoes, a curly platinum wig that could serve either Beethoven or Dolly Parton, and a gold half-mask. He was holding court, with half a dozen masked revellers hanging on his every word. He reached the punchline of whatever tale he was declaiming, and they erupted in laughter. His laughter was the loudest.

Fiona smiled, and even with the mask and the glasses Willa could see the love in her eyes. Incredible. Four days after she’d met Gladstone she wasn’t even sure she still wanted to work for him, let alone marry him.

‘Yes, well,’ Willa said. ‘Yours is a true romance for the ages. I’m sorry that wasn’t the case for Ewan and Winter. But he’ll bounce back.’

‘Maybe the two of you might —’

‘Oh no you don’t!’ Willa cut her off. ‘Don’t be trying to fob off your second son on me, thank you very much, Fiona. Number one son or nothing. I’m only interested in Dougal. I need to marry your heir if I’m going to get my hands on all this.’ She waved at Fiona’s grand home.

‘Away with you,’ Fiona said and nodded over at Ewan. ‘Look, he’s got a drink for you. There’s food coming out soon. Have a great time.’ She squeezed Willa’s arm and made for a group of sparkly women in the corner who were calling her name.

Out on the patio, Ewan handed Willa a flute of champagne. He was chatting to a man who introduced himself as ‘Ian from next door’.

‘This is Willa,’ said Ewan. He sounded slightly brighter with a half a drink in him.

‘Tell me how you fit in here, Willa,’ Ian said.

‘I work for Gladstone.’

‘Ah right, doing the manuals, the instruction books, is it?’

‘My work’s a bit different,’ she explained. ‘Most of the business is manuals, but we also have a commercial book publishing arm. Well, it’s a small arm. It’s just me. Less an arm than a hand. A finger, really. I publish romance novels.’

Internally she braced for the disparaging comment about romance novels that usually followed her telling someone about her job. But Ian From Next Door was different. His face lit up.

‘Terrific! Diversification is what keeps businesses alive. Very clever. I have a friend in that line of work,’ he said.

Ah. Here we go, she thought. This was the moment where she’d have to explain that although she was in book publishing, she operated in a more industry-adjacent way, which was the term she had settled on as preferable to ‘I sneaked into this job through an unlocked back entrance, I have a Stage Four case of imposter syndrome so I’ve interacted with very few people in the mainstream publishing world and yes this is probably something best explored in therapy.’ But before she could say anything, Ian said, ‘Emma Baker is her name. She edits books.’

‘Oh,’ said Willa, happily surprised. ‘I know Emma. She’s edited several books for me.’

She turned to make sure Ewan was taking all this in — he frequently gave her grief for her isolationist policy — but he was no longer there. He’d silently extracted himself from the conversation and was now on the far side of the back garden with Angus and Imogen, Alistair and Sylvia, forming the sort of fun cloud she’d always noticed at parties: from afar it looked magical but once you were inside it vanished, and it was just the people you knew having a normal conversation. Fairy lights were strung through the hedges and trees, and beneath their glow everyone looked glorious in their gowns and suits, sipping drinks and falling around laughing like they

were an ad for being more fun than other people. Willa returned her focus to Ian, because he was interested in her and her work, and hadn't yet said that he never read novels.

* * *

She was on her third drink by the time the dancing began. A small swing band was mostly playing covers of noughties hits, and when they started up with 'Toxic', Willa cast around for someone to drag up there. Dougal was standing alone by a table that was completely covered with cheese, meats, bread, nuts and fruit, like something out of a Roman orgy. His black tux was so sharply cut it could take your eye out, and he wore a mask similar to Ewan's but moulded and silk. Willa could have put him straight on the cover of a Dark-Secret romance, or a Bully-Turned-Nice-Guy story. He looked bored. Worth a try, Willa thought, and she sidled up to him.

'Willa,' he said.

'Dougal.' She gave a slightly flustered curtsy and he looked bemused.

She grimaced. 'No idea why I curtsied.'

His face softened ever so slightly. 'You look . . . very, very nice.'

'Two verys! Why you flatter me.'

His face turned stony again at her teasing.

'You look amazing,' she said. 'May I have the honour of a dance?' She held out her arm.

'I don't dance.'

'All right, Darcy,' Willa said. 'I'll dance with one of the other soldiers from the regiment at Meriton.'

'I have no idea what that is a reference to.'

'It's from a book about a man who's rude to women at parties. Timeless theme,' she explained, as she selected a piece of salami from a processed meat rosette on the table.

‘Right. Well, as I said I don’t dance.’

‘You astonish me.’ She stood next to him, eating charcuterie and watching the others dance. The song finished and another began. Angus and Imogen were actually swing-dancing very competently to a cover of Justin Bieber’s ‘Love Yourself’. They looked like they’d had lessons, and they were laughing as they twisted and jived, flicking their hands and feet out, seemingly without effort and without their centres of gravity shifting. ‘Where did they learn that?’ she asked Dougal, who shook his head.

‘TikTok, I bet.’ Willa answered her own question. ‘Everyone learns everything from TikTok.’

The song ended and Angus finished with a dramatic drop to his knees, straight onto the terracotta tiles of his parents’ terrace.

‘Oof,’ Willa said, at the same moment Dougal made a sharp hissing intake of breath through his teeth.

Everyone applauded, but Angus didn’t immediately spring up.

‘Has he kneecapped himself?’ Willa asked.

Dougal didn’t reply, and when she looked up at him he was watching his brother intently.

‘What?’ Willa asked.

‘Watch.’

Suddenly it was clear what Angus was doing down there on his knees. It was so obvious. It was what men did on their knees in most of the books Willa had worked on. She’d never seen it done off the page. Angus had hauled one foot from beneath him and he was leaning on his raised knee, holding Imogen’s hand. He pulled up his mask and propped it on his head like sunglasses. He held out a tiny open box. All around her, people took out their phones and started filming. Across the dancefloor she saw Sylvia clutch Alistair’s elbow

excitedly, but he stood like a statue, his brow creased into a frown. So not everyone was in on this plan then.

Willa's face burned hot with the intimacy of what she was witnessing. How could he be doing that in front of everyone? His whole family, all these colleagues and clients and random friends of his parents? It was excruciating. Poor Imogen.

But even though Imogen's back was to her, Willa had a sense that maybe not Poor Imogen. She couldn't hear what Angus was saying, but he was talking to her with his face full of hope, sincerity and love, and Imogen was clasping one of his hands in both of hers, implying she was not finding the situation nearly as mortifying as Willa was.

She wondered if it was weird that she'd never seen anyone proposed to. She'd read a thousand proposals in books, and seen hundreds on TV and in movies, but in person it was so confronting. It felt as if Imogen and Angus were having sex in front of everyone. We shouldn't be watching this, she thought. It's too private.

There was also the fact that responding to a marriage proposal was inherently a very strange way to make a big decision in life. There was nothing else you'd ever decide on the spot like that. Nothing important anyway — and there were plenty of unimportant decisions that were hard to make in public too. Willa struggled to even order a drink while a waiter hovered beside her, unless she'd done a lot of planning and forethinking.

The buzzing in her ears cleared and she snapped back into the room when a huge cheer erupted. Imogen must have said yes. Angus clambered up off the floor and wrapped his arms around Willa's little cousin. The ring was on her finger. They kissed and he dipped her like a war had just ended.

Imogen spun around and caught Willa's eye, and she forced herself to smile back. She was happy for her cousin, really. She just didn't need to witness the whole shocking ordeal. Squealing, Imogen rushed over, her eyes wide and holding up her hand so the ring was coming right at Willa's

face like an asteroid hurtling towards earth. ‘Willa! I’m getting married!’

Trying to match her excitement Willa shouted back, ‘You’re getting married!’ and they hugged tightly.

Imogen pulled back and made a worried face. ‘Are my parents going to freak?’

‘No!’ Willa said, though they absolutely would. This was not the sort of ‘looking after your baby cousin’ her aunt and uncle had in mind. Imogen was only twenty-two. When Willa was twenty-two she was living in Seattle because she was obsessed with *Twin Peaks*. She shared a basement apartment in Ballard with two other Australians and a Frenchman, none of whom had much better reasons than hers for moving to one of the rainiest parts of the United States. She’d worked in the gift shop of the National Nordic Museum, a job that bore no connection whatsoever to her recently acquired Bachelor of Arts, majoring in English. She went on lots of soggy hikes and did shifts in the box office of the legendary music venue the Showbox, where she got to see live music for free and sometimes make out with various minor musicians, including but not limited to the bass player from Death Cab for Cutie.

All Imogen had done was answer the phones for a family of Scottish weirdos, with whom Willa had been responsible for getting her mixed up, and now she was going to throw away her best years on one of them. Shit. Willa didn’t think it had necessarily been a great idea to have casual sex with indie emo rockers, but at least she hadn’t gone and married any of them.

That was what you did at twenty-two. It was age-appropriate behaviour. You didn’t get engaged. But she said none of that to Imogen. She just jumped up and down with her, saying, ‘Eeeeeee!’

Angus came up behind Imogen and rested his face happily on her shoulder, and she turned to kiss his cheek hard. His expression was one of pure delight, like a little boy on a rollercoaster and for a second Willa felt a great gladness. He was a good guy, that wasn’t the problem. She’d only ever

known him to be sweet and gentle, significantly more personable than his twin and while maybe he wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed, she genuinely had no objection to his relationship with her cousin. But marriage? She needed to process this. Angus slid his arm around Imogen's waist and together they headed off on their congratulatory tour of the party.

Willa felt Dougal watching her, so she kept the smile on her face and muttered something about the toilet. When he turned away she slipped off the terrace, round the side and into the front garden, grabbing a half-full bottle of white wine on her way past the bar.

Down by the front hedge was a shadowy corner of lawn and there she sat, feeling the moisture from the night seeping through her thin dress, focussing on the solidness of the ground, and breathing deeply. Her hands were shaking. She felt like someone should put a foil blanket around her shoulders. It was an absurd response to someone she loved getting engaged. Maybe someone had slipped something into her drink. Into all her drinks.

'She loves him and they're going to be very happy,' she said out loud to no one, just to see if she could sound convincing. 'They're going to be very happy.' She looked down at her hands and willed them to be still.

Out of the darkness beside her came a familiar voice. 'They actually might, you know.'

'Ewan, christ, you scared the crap out of me. Again.' She hadn't even heard him approaching. 'Stop doing that.'

'I saw you come down here. You all right?' He sat down on the grass beside her.

'Yes! I'm excellent. So good. Imogen's getting married! To your brother! Just after you stopped being married. Have you lot got a one-in, one-out policy or something? And she's old enough. Legally. It's fine. It's lovely. Angus is great. He's probably your best brother, wouldn't you say? I mean he's

seven years older than she is, but that's nothing, right? It won't mean anything when she's eighty-six and he's ninety-three. And they'd probably already discussed getting married, right? He wouldn't have just sprung it on her in front of everyone, because then she might have felt very pressured to say yes, even if it wasn't exactly what she wanted to say, just because she didn't want to embarrass him. He's nice: he wouldn't have done that to her, would he? She's not that young, is she? Twenty-two? That would have been considered an old maid a few hundred years ago. Juliet was fourteen when she married Romeo. That's not a good comparison. Didn't end well. But twenty-two is completely different. She's in the peak of her fertility — oh, you don't think she's pregnant, do you? That's not why this is happening. She would have told me . . .'

Ewan waited until every thought in Willa's head had finished streaming out, then he said, 'So, you're not all right.'

'I'm not. But why aren't I? Why am I freaking out?'

'Could be lots of reasons. Could be because you're a bit of a control freak. Could be you're jealous. Could be you're drunk.'

'I am none of those things,' she said witheringly. She poured the last of the wine into her glass and dropped the bottle onto the grass. 'It's very soon and she's so young. I just don't want her to do something hasty that she regrets later.'

Ewan didn't reply at once. He was quiet for a moment, and then he said, 'You know, Will, regret isn't the worst thing in the world. Regret can mean you at least tried something.' He sounded like a little boy trying to sound brave, and she felt so sad for him. But his vulnerability made her feel awkward.

'I realise that, and I know you're talking about your own marriage here, Ewan. I wasn't suggesting that having a marriage not work out is something to be ashamed of. Also, way to go for making this about you.'

'That's not what I —'

'Yeah, it is.'

‘I’m only saying you could be nicer about this. You could be excited and hopeful for them. The fact that you aren’t is a bit weird and does smack of envy of two people who are just in love. Maybe you’re the one making this about you. I think you’re just pissed off that you’re single right now. You go on all these dates but nothing ever comes of it.’

‘Because I have standards, Ewan. Forgive me for not shacking up with the first person who wants to go on more than two dates. And I don’t care about getting married. I’m certainly not envious of that. From where I stand, most marriages look very dull at best and like some sort of medieval punishment at worst.’

‘Marriage can be fantastic.’

‘See, Ewan, the fact you are saying that makes me worry. It makes me think that maybe marriage is like heroin. You’ve done it once and so now you’ll be chasing that feeling for the rest of your life. I don’t think you can be trusted.’

He laughed. ‘You’re lecturing *me* about chasing a feeling? Little Miss Much Ado?’

Willa was stung. ‘That’s my work. How I do my job. That’s not how I live.’ She turned away.

‘Isn’t it,’ he replied.

For a moment they sat in silence, side by side in the darkness.

Then he spoke. ‘So what’s your plan? Be a dick about their engagement?’

‘Of course not. I’ll be a supportive and loving cousin to Imogen, and I’ll do whatever she wants me to do to help with the wedding. This was supposed to be a private moment to air my feelings before I went back in smiling. I didn’t come looking for you.’

‘Fair enough.’ With a little shake of his head, Ewan stood up and reached his hand down to her. He pulled her to her feet and, with one heel firmly sunken into the lawn, Willa crashed

into his chest and her breath caught in her throat, snagged on a memory.

‘You right there?’ he asked.

She straightened up her dress and brushed away the bits of grass that had stuck to her bottom. Ewan leaned down to collect her discarded wine bottle, and as he did so he saw something sticking out of the hedge.

‘What on earth . . .?’ he said and pulled out the beige penis mask Willa had shoved in earlier, from the other side of the hedge.

Willa glanced at it, her face impassive. ‘Fuck knows.’

Chapter 7

To Willa's great astonishment, over the next few days it became apparent that she was off the hook as far as having let her baby cousin throw her life away by becoming a child bride. Imogen's parents, Willa's Aunty Jenny and Uncle Gordon, declared in a phone call she'd been dreading that if Imogen was happy, then so were they. Then they talked a lot about a new foal that had been born, so Willa could only assume they really weren't angry.

This was backed up by her own mother, who reassured her on several calls that honestly, Jenny was fine with the engagement. If she weren't — if she were just putting on a brave face so as not to rain on Imogen's parade and was secretly devastated and plotting Willa's demise for introducing Imogen and Angus — she would definitely have told Willa's mum, because she told her everything. They texted and called each other about forty-five times a day about everything from suggestions of comfortable sandals and links to GoFundMe campaigns for refugees, to pictures of iffy-looking moles they'd found in various unmentionable spots on their respective husbands. Nothing was sacred. So Willa became increasingly confident that Jenny didn't hate her, and wasn't going to poison her pavlova at Christmas, which was lucky because Jenny's pavlova was so good Willa would still have eaten it even if it was dusted with anthrax and clearly labelled as such.

* * *

On Wednesday Willa had a meeting out of the office with an author. This didn't happen very often — not many of her authors lived in Sydney.

Before she built her romance list, she'd thought all books were written by inner-city-dwelling, martini-swilling intellectuals who wrote in apartments where the walls were lined with books, or in cafes where despite the sky-high rents no one minded them nursing a long black for six hours a day. She'd thought they were written by the people she went to uni with who stayed on to do PhDs, who had part-time jobs in independent bookstores and wore the same jumper every day. Still not having worked in mainstream publishing, Willa hadn't yet had this stereotype comprehensively debunked, but she'd learned that it at least wasn't accurate for romance authors.

Writers of romances could be absolutely anyone. Some of Willa's were academics in universities. Some were stay-at-home parents who wrote on their phones while standing on the sidelines of netball games. One of them sold fancy sneakers. A couple were lawyers. One had been a lawyer but was now in prison. Romance authors were of all genders and all walks of life.

Publishing had become a very digital affair. Authors delivered their manuscripts to Willa via email, editors worked onscreen, and she only published the books electronically, so theoretically there was no call to ever meet in person. Which was a terrible situation, because what was the point of life if you couldn't meet people for a coffee, or lunch, or an after-lunch coffee that you both knew would actually be a bottle of wine, and call it work? The world might as well have stayed in lockdown.

But that day Willa was meeting Stephen Murdoch, who, despite having a full-time marketing job, two kids and being married to a busy lawyer, had still managed two books a year for Willa for the past three years, under the pen name Rosalind Baker. He lived in the northern suburbs, so they liked to try to get together whenever he delivered a manuscript, just to give themselves a taste of what they imagined book life to be like.

Steve was already at the restaurant when she walked in, and he stood up to kiss her hello. He'd ordered a bottle of

wine, and it was chilling in a metal cooler that hung off the side of the table. Kat had once reminded Willa that babies used to go in seats that attached like that, but they fell off too often so that style of highchair was outlawed. They were still used for wine, which Willa took as proof that wine bottles were inherently superior to babies. Wine wasn't going to chuck itself on the floor and cause a scene. It had too much self-respect.

After they'd ordered two croque monsieurs with skinny French fries and a side salad to ignore, Steve ceremoniously presented Willa with a USB in the shape of Baby Yoda. 'Sorry, it was all I could find,' he said. 'I think one of the kids got it in a party bag.'

'People put USBs in party bags?' asked Willa. 'It was just a paper packet of Wizz Fizz in my day, and a handful of Clinkers if you were lucky.'

'Mate, if it's plastic and there is no place in your house where it will make sense to keep it, it will show up in a party bag.'

She shook her head. 'Dear god, what a life. Thanks though. I can't wait to read the new book.'

'You're going to love it,' he said, almost bouncing in his seat with excitement.

'I always do,' she told him. She wasn't just saying that. Steve wrote time travel romances, in which a barely explained fold in the fabric of existence meant that a character from the present day always somehow fell in love with someone from hundreds of years ago — with an architectural twist. The elevator pitch for this book, which Willa was very strongly hoping Steve had stuck to, was, *While restoring a derelict house in country Tasmania, a recent widower has a beam fall on his head and he wakes up in 1801 to find he is a convict assigned to help a cruel settler build that house in the first place. He falls in love with the man's wife, who has been forced into the marriage by poverty. There will be passion: both corporeal and in the almost pornographic levels of*

description of the Georgian architecture. They were calling it *The Ruins of His Love* and if the success of *The Craftsman Returns*, *Her Semi-Detached Heart* and *The Terrace of Forgotten Passion* was anything to go by, Willa knew already it was going to be a hit.

They'd finished their sandwiches and were most of the way through the wine, deep in a discussion of whether Steve dared to set his next book in a mid-century modern house, thereby taking the risk that the main character's female love interest might still be alive in the present day, and what complications that could throw up, when Steve got distracted by something near the counter. He glanced over to the right several times before he finally interrupted Willa.

'Sorry, Willa, but there's a man over there who cannot take his eyes off you.' He gave her a cheeky eyebrow raise. 'He's alright-looking too. Not my type, but he might do for you.'

She looked over and saw Ewan, who immediately snatched up a menu from the counter and studied it, squinting at it like he was reading *Finnegan's Wake* in ten-point type, not a list of four sandwiches and two salads.

'That's my friend Ewan. He works with me. Ewan,' Willa called. 'We can see you.'

'I know.' He looked annoyed. 'I wasn't hiding. I'm waiting for takeaway coffee.'

'Can you wait for a coffee without staring at me like a demented stalker? You're distracting Steve. We're in a meeting.'

'Looks like a pretty fun meeting.'

'It is. What's your point?'

He seemed like he had something to say, but he looked at Steve and Willa saw him stop himself. She was pretty sure he wanted to lecture her about day-drinking on work time, but he didn't want to do it in front of Steve and come across as a sanctimonious trainee constable in the Fun Police.

Instead, he came over, stuck out his hand at Steve and said, 'Ewan Smith, glad to meet you . . .?'

'Steve.'

'Steve . . . Steve . . . which one are you?'

'Rosalind Baker,' Willa reminded him.

'The sexy old houses books?'

'Do you read them?' asked Steve, his face lighting up with the needy desperation for approval that was endemic to writers.

'Ah . . . no,' said Ewan. 'But they must be good because your sales are tremendous. I'll bet your wife's proud.'

Willa frowned at him. What an odd thing to say.

'Er, yes, she is,' said Steve.

The barista, pretty and bored-looking, held out a coffee and said, 'Long black for Ewan?'

He gave her a cute half-smile and took the cup. 'That's me, thank you.' He turned back to them and said very quietly, 'I think she's quite into me.' Willa saw no evidence of that. Marriage had clearly dulled his senses on that front.

'Bye-bye then. I'd better head back. Good to meet you, Steve.'

Willa and Steve watched him head out through the door — holding it open for a man with a stroller and a dog — and walk off down the street. Willa poured the last splashes of wine into their glasses.

'Are you two . . .?'

'What? Me and Ewan? No. Absolutely not. What on earth makes you ask that?' She focussed on her glass.

'Come on,' said Steve. 'What was that then?'

'What?'

‘All the staring and then trying to figure out if I’m married, and then flirting pathetically with her.’ He nodded towards the barista.

‘I couldn’t tell you,’ Willa told him. ‘His wife has just left him, so he appears to be doing the standard thing men do: rebounding onto inappropriately young women in service roles. Obviously his skills are pretty rusty. But there’s nothing between us. I’m not a gorgeous young one like your girl there, and men who are into that aren’t my thing. That would be rather pointless.’

‘I don’t think I believe you, Willa,’ said Steve, smiling. ‘You’re blushing.’

‘It’s the wine,’ she told him. ‘It’s a histamine reaction.’

‘It’s all right, it’s none of my business. Except as you know I am a fully qualified professional in the art of observing and describing romance, and what I observed there from your friend Ewan was some level of longing, possibly with a twinge of regret, and more than a smattering of jealousy.’

‘What do you mean, regret?’

‘You tell me. If I had to put money on it, I’d say you two had either once had a thing together, or almost had a thing together. If I had to hazard a guess at what kind of story it is, I might go for Sworn Off Relationships, or Missed Opportunity?’

She stared hard at Steve’s face, because it was the only way she could keep another image out of her mind. An image of one near kiss. One summer night. Three years before. Before there was a pandemic and before a quarantine hotel stay turned into a Forced Proximity honeymoon. Willa did her best to never think about that moment, nor the curious disappointment of the moment the tension vanished and nothing happened. That kiss that never was had been redacted from her files.

‘Nope,’ she said. ‘We’re friends. Colleagues. Workmates.’

Steve nodded in a very irritating way that made her think he absolutely didn't believe her.

'Right,' she said, placing both palms firmly on the table. 'That's enough with your baseless accusations. I'm going to head back and get stuck into the made-up love story I'm actually paying you for.' She picked up the Baby Yoda USB and waggled it at him before tucking it into her skirt pocket. Steve hugged her goodbye and headed off to do the school pick-up.

When she went to the counter to pay, she found that Ewan had picked up the tab for their lunch, along with his coffee. Her first feeling was an instinctive pleasure at the gesture, until she remembered that Ewan would have used his work credit card, just as she was going to, so what was it even a gesture of? He was just trying to impress the barista.

Chapter 8

Back at her desk, Willa inserted the Baby Yoda drive into her computer. It was slow to download the file, and she looked around the room, her gaze coming to rest on the wicker chair.

Unbidden, her mind flashed back to a Friday night in January 2020. The night she'd just told Steve hadn't happened.

Ewan had been working late to finish a new contract before he headed off the next morning for five weeks in America with his friend Stu, who'd moved to Arizona on a basketball scholarship for university and had ended up pursuing a PhD in plant pathology in Boston, the way so many basketballers do. They were planning a spring road trip to collect specimens from the Appalachian Mountains, then Ewan was going to hang out with friends in New York. The amount of annual leave Gladstone permitted his sons to take was seemingly infinite.

Willa had been finishing a report when she heard the rest of the company clatter out the front door, calling up that they'd be in the pub. Ewan had appeared soon after with two glasses and a bottle of red wine. 'I'm basically done,' he said, 'but if you're on a roll I'll keep you company.'

He'd settled himself in the rickety cane chair and begun scrolling through his phone. He clicked it locked and looked up. 'What are you reading? Is it good?'

'It will be. It needs some work on character description. It's hard to do it without resorting to cliches. Look,' she said and turned the screen so he could see. 'The author writes that this woman, who is posing nude here for a drawing class, is a blonde bombshell, and that description makes me want to blow things up. It's so lazy. I want to know how she looks to

him, the man watching her. The curve of her waist, how soft her skin looks, how the light catches her hair. The way her face becomes gentler when she isn't posing, when she doesn't think anyone's looking at her. I need to know what her appearance does to him.'

He stared at her. 'It's hard, describing people. I mean, I don't know how to explain what you look like, really. I'd just say things like brown hair, to her shoulders. Blue eyes. Pretty face.'

She glanced scornfully at him. 'That's fine if I've mugged you, you're describing me to the police and you don't care if they catch me, but it needs to do more than that, in a book. What does pretty mean? What kind of brown? You'll have to do better.'

She turned the screen back and continued her work. The feeling of his eyes on her made her skin tingle. Being looked at was weird. She could never be a life model.

'All right,' he said after a few minutes. 'Your hair is the colour of toast just how you like it, but shiny and straight. Usually less crumbly. Your eyes are a little bit sleepy looking, even when you're wide awake. Maybe because your eyelashes are quite long and you wear a shitload of mascara. Your mouth is wide but not tall. When you smile your top lip almost disappears, but not completely, like a curtain that comes up at the start of a movie in an old cinema. You have really symmetrical eyebrows — they make me trust you.'

She raised one of her symmetrical eyebrows. 'I like the toast thing. It's hard to describe brown in an appealing way. Most writers resort to types of wood or desserts. Or they just chicken out and make the woman blonde or a redhead. And you're right about my top lip. I hate it. I've thought about getting it injected with something to puff it up, but I'm worried I'd look like an idiot.'

'You would look like an idiot. Don't go mucking around with your face. It's a very good face. It's a face that I always want to look at.'

She flushed hotly and hid her face behind her computer. ‘I might just grow a moustache to disguise it. A long one with twiddly ends.’

‘You’d have to be more villainous,’ he said. ‘It’s your turn: do me.’

‘Right.’ She rolled her chair over to him. ‘You are greeneyed, except when they’re grey or blue. How they look changes according to the weather. Cloudy days: cloudy eyes. Blue skies, bluer eyes. You’re quite handy in that respect. Like an app. Your hair varies too. Sometimes it looks almost brown, but it’s actually red. Again, how it looks is very dependent on the light. It’s coppery blond, but sometimes it seems more tarnished.’

‘Mum’s always called it strawberry blond.’

Willa frowned. ‘That’s a dumb term. It refers to a colour that’s nothing like strawberries, in any of their forms. Yours is more sandy.’

‘Sandy is vague,’ he shot back. ‘In Hawaii sand is black. In the desert it’s bright red. At Hyams Beach it’s pure white.’

‘Wait then.’ Willa scooted back to the desk and typed quickly. ‘There.’ In triumph, she showed him the screen. ‘Your hair is the colour of Ramla Bay Beach in Malta.’

He rocked back in the chair, laughing. ‘Okay, so what about the rest of me?’

‘You’re handsome,’ she said simply.

‘I’m not,’ he said. ‘I’m not saying I frighten children but Dougal is what you’d call handsome, and the twins too, in a nuggety way. But I’m too skinny for that word. I’ve always been gangly and a bit weird looking in the face.’

She tried to see what he meant. ‘You have high cheekbones, a square chin, wide jaw — these are all checking the boxes of handsome.’

‘Yeah but I’m quite pasty, and my nose is too big for my face. My mouth is small. My eyelids are weird.’

‘I’d kill for your eyelids.’

‘All right, Buffalo Bill, steady on.’

She laughed. ‘Really. Women always want more eyelid space, so we can paint more colours on them and do more eyeliner. I’ve barely got any and what I do have is sort of trapped under my browbone.’

‘What are you talking about? You sound insane.’

‘Look.’ She rolled her chair right up until it hit the legs of his. Leaning forward, she closed her eyes and said, ‘See? When they’re shut they’re normal looking, but when I open them the lids disappear. They’re called hooded eyes.’ She pinged her eyes open and caught her breath. He’d leaned in too. She could smell him: a clean, spicy scent, with a slight citrus edge. He was looking just above her eyes and when his gaze dropped down she caught it. For a moment too long they were suspended in breath, staring deep into each other’s eyes. Then he looked at her mouth. Was he — were they about to kiss? What was this? Willa felt a deep stirring of attraction, as if ten locks on the inside of a door were opening one by one, lower and lower inside her body.

Just as she was about to lean a fraction closer, he spoke. ‘Hey, do you think it’s silly to fly to America tomorrow?’

For a second she thought he meant because of what was happening to them right then — the weird shift in energy, the unmistakable frisson. ‘Maybe,’ she said softly.

He sat back. ‘Yeah. That’s what Mum reckons. She’s panicking about this coronavirus thing.’

Oh. That. The abrupt gear change left her rattled. Had she imagined what nearly just happened?

‘I don’t know. Is it in America too? I thought it was just China.’

‘Yeah, but only a few people have it.’

‘It’s probably okay then? I guess?’

‘That’s what I reckon. We’re going to be outside in the mountains mostly anyway.’

After that, the moment was gone. Willa carried it like a little ember, those weeks when Ewan was in America. They spoke on the phone, and texted, but he didn’t refer to it so she didn’t either. She felt sure he was waiting until he could be with her in person again. Then something would happen.

But he couldn’t get back. The borders closed. He’d met Winter, and when they finally came back, his friendship with Willa had bumbled along the way many do when a new partner comes on the scene: slightly uncomfortably, for no clear or admissible reason. Finally she’d kicked dirt over the ember. There was no point in keeping it warm.

Her computer pinged and she turned back to it. *The Ruins of His Love* was ready for her attention. She blinked away the memories and went to work.

* * *

Willa was only a chapter in when Imogen marched into her office and plonked herself down in the wicker chair with a triumphant expression on her face. Willa looked over the top of her computer.

‘Yes?’

‘The twenty-third of April. Saturday, the twenty-third of April.’ Imogen’s eyes were shining.

‘What about it?’

‘We’ve set a date, Willa! That’s going to be our wedding day. And then for the rest of my life, the twenty-third of April is going to be our wedding anniversary.’

Willa took a deep breath and rolled her chair to the side so there was no longer a screen between them. ‘Right. Gosh. Seven weeks away. So, not having a long engagement?’

‘There’s no need! They’re just for when people are having a massive wedding and they need to book a big venue and people have to fly in from all over. Big weddings are gross.’

Intimate is the way to go, which means we can have it at Gladstone and Fiona's house. Forty people, tops. I thought it would be nice to have the ceremony down at Balmoral Beach first, in that rotunda, but apparently there's some Shakespeare by the Sea thing on all through April, so we'll just have the whole do up at the house. And everyone from home can make it that weekend, so we thought why not?

'Are you sure?' Willa asked her. She tried not to sound like a huge bucket of cold water. 'What's the rush? Immy, you're not pregnant, are you?'

'No,' she scoffed. 'And even if I was it wouldn't affect when we got married. But no. We just want to be together forever, so why delay it?'

Willa had never been married, but she'd had enough friends go through it to know there were elements of a wedding that took time. 'But your dress. I went with Bec to shop for her wedding dress, and it had a six-month lead time. They actually acted like it was a bit of a stretch, ordering a dress only six months out. You're talking about seven weeks.'

'It's all good, Willa. I'm not planning to spend four grand on a meringue. I've found what I want to wear already. It's vintage. I've seen it online, and I've been messaging the woman selling it this morning. She's in Melbourne but she's express posting it up for me to try. If it fits, great. Sorted. If not, I can send it back and there's heaps of other stuff I could get.'

'Oh great.' Willa struggled to match her enthusiasm. 'That sounds easy. But what about, I don't know, bridesmaids' dresses? If you want them to match you'll need to get organised pretty swiftly to get something everyone likes and fits in seven weeks.'

'I only need one bridesmaid's dress,' Imogen said, and she grinned at Willa. She looked like a kid.

'One? You have so many friends. Your old gang. Aren't they going to get all shitty if you pick just one?'

‘I don’t want any of them.’ Still grinning, she nodded encouragingly at Willa, urging her old brain to catch up, which it did haltingly.

‘Me?’ Willa’s eyes stung with tears.

‘Of course you, stupid. Who else? If it wasn’t for you I wouldn’t even be getting married. I wouldn’t have ever met Angus.’

‘I’m aware of that.’

‘Then is it a yes?’

‘It is.’ Willa wrapped her in a hug. ‘I’d be honoured to be your bridesmaid. But because I’m old, do I have to be called a Matron of Honour? I don’t love that term. It’s very . . . matronly, for want of a better word. It makes me feel like I should be running a field hospital during the Crimean War.’

‘You can be called any name you want. And you can wear what you like.’

‘You’re a sweetheart. What about Angus? Is he having just one groomsman?’

‘Ah, no. Not exactly. He’s having three. All the brothers Smith.’

‘Won’t that look a bit lopsided?’

‘Who cares?’

Willa tried to picture it: some sort of celebrant in the middle, four suited-up Smith boys on one side looking like those paper chains of figures you cut out when you’re a kid, and just Imogen and her on the other side. It felt unbalanced, like their side was winning in a sport where her team didn’t have any subs.

Bloody Angus. He had his identical twin, Alistair. Why not just choose him and be done with it? There was no need for Dougal and Ewan to be up there too. There wasn’t anything Willa could do about it though. She’d just have to be worth three Smith brothers.

‘Show me the dress,’ she said. ‘I can’t start figuring out what I’m going to wear until I see what I need to outshine.’

Imogen tapped her phone a few times and brought up a picture of a silk shantung mini shift dress with a rolled collar and bell-shaped lace sleeves. It was going to look incredible on her.

‘I don’t know if I can do it,’ Willa said, seriously. ‘How am I going to look better than that? It’s gorgeous. Very French. Like you should be marrying one of the Rolling Stones. How did you find it so fast? Have you always had it in your head that you’d get married in something like that?’

‘I don’t know,’ Imogen said, thoughtfully. ‘I suppose so. I mean, people often have a basic wedding plan in their head, don’t they? Just a rough picture, of how you want to look, a vibe for the thing.’

Did they? Her comment floored Willa. In this day and age? Did women really grow up thinking about what they were going to look like as brides? She could honestly say she hadn’t pictured herself as a bride since she was about four. Back then she’d rather fancied the dress that Celeste the elephant wore when she married Babar.

Her doubt must have shown, because Imogen smiled kindly and said, ‘Obviously not you, Will. I mean people who don’t hate the idea of marriage.’

‘I don’t hate the idea of marriage!’ The nerve of her. ‘It’s not what I want for myself, but I don’t think it’s inherently a bad thing. It’s not clear to me what anyone gains by it, sure, and I can’t say I know very many people who are having a better time married than they did unmarried, but each to their own. Why does everyone think that because I’m not married I’m against it? I’m starting to understand how non-drinkers feel. They always get cranky and say that people who drink get all unsettled by them and feel personally attacked by their not imbibing. Do you know what I mean, Imogen? Just because it’s not for me, it has nothing to do with your decisions.’

Willa realised she'd gone off on a bit of a rant. It may not have come off as casual and free as she'd intended. Imogen sat wideeyed, not saying anything.

'All I mean is that I'm really happy for you, and I'm sure you and Angus will make a lovely life together. What can I do to help with the wedding, besides getting some sort of incredible sixties jumpsuit that will be impossible to use the toilet in?'

Imogen pulled the scrunchie out of her hair slightly, then separated her ponytail and yanked it to tighten. Willa thought they might be okay again.

'Would you like to organise a hens thing for me? Just a night out somewhere a few days before the wedding, once everyone's arrived from Tassie?'

'Absolutely,' Willa said, and she clapped her hands together like a first-grade teacher trying to get the kids back on track. 'Are we talking tasteful, some sort of classy bar, champagne, and then a nice restaurant situation?' She could tell by the way Imogen was wrinkling her nose that that was not what they were talking. 'Or is it more of a penis straw, karaoke with male strippers and cocktails that make us spew and maybe someone gets a tiny bit arrested vibe?'

'The second one, please. Your first idea feels like more of a second-marriage thing.' Imogen stood up. 'I'll leave it all in your capable hands.' She blew a kiss from the doorway, then paused. 'Maybe chat with Madison and Kristy?'

Willa understood. It was all in her hands, but her hands were to be held by Imogen's best high-school buddies in case she tried to book a high tea and tickets to an André Rieu concert instead of arranging karaoke and drugs.

Willa woke up her computer screen and tried to remember where she was up to. She read another whole page of the manuscript before someone else knocked on her door. Before she could speak it opened and Gladstone poked his head around.

‘All good?’ he asked.

‘Yep. Tickety-boo, as they say.’

He puffed out his cheeks, looking like he was thinking hard, then entered the room decisively and sat down firmly on the wicker chair.

With a sigh, Willa shut her laptop. ‘What’s up?’

‘Poor old Ewan,’ Gladstone said, and pursed his lips worriedly.

Oh. That. She waited for him to continue.

‘Why do you think Winter left, Willa? He’s a good boy.’

This family, thought Willa, exasperated. Why was she becoming their de facto therapist? ‘Who can say, Gladstone? The heart wants what it wants.’ Platitudes. That’s what they were going to get from her. She was not qualified or paid for this.

‘Was it about kids? Did Fiona and I put too much pressure on them to start a family? I know we can be a bit . . . overly encouraging about that sort of thing at times. Did we frighten her off? Didn’t she want kids? We thought she did. She told us she did.’ He ran his hands through the hair that no longer existed at the front of his head. Old habits died hard, but male pattern baldness died harder.

‘I don’t know, Gladstone. I wasn’t close to her. Do you know who might know? Ewan. Have you asked him?’

‘Hmmm.’ Gladstone wasn’t listening. ‘I know it wasn’t the other way around. Ewan’s always been keen to start a family. That’s one of the reasons . . .’ He looked up at Willa and trailed off.

‘One of the reasons what?’

‘None of my business, Willa, but I’ve always thought it was why you two didn’t . . . you know . . .’

‘Gladstone, you’ve lost me.’ She looked down at her skirt. It had twisted around and the pockets were in the wrong place.

The tag was scratching at the side of her waist. She fiddled with it, focussing on the irritation.

He stood up and shrugged. 'I don't know. You kids today.' It was a general complaint, it seemed, and thankfully he didn't elucidate.

After he'd gone Willa sat and stared blankly at her laptop. She thought about what he'd said, about whether Winter hadn't wanted kids. She had no idea if that was true or not. Willa assumed she had because she knew how much that was part of Ewan's plan. Maybe she hadn't. Maybe she was like Willa.

Willa had never wanted a baby. She liked them, and she liked children, for the most part. She just hadn't ever wanted to be the mother of any of them. She'd wondered if this was a deficiency of some sort. It had often felt like it was, though when she was younger she assumed it would pass and some sort of maternal longing would eventually awaken in her. That she'd reach maternal puberty. She revisited it from time to time, and poked away at her feelings on the subject, examining them like they were a mole she needed to keep an eye on for changes, but so far, nothing. Kat was the same. It was one of the things that had brought them together as friends.

She knew there were people who felt like she did and behaved like it was a defining character trait, bringing it up whenever they could, but for her it was more akin to how she didn't spend any time discussing why she didn't play professional darts — it just wasn't for her. Her uterus remained a pristine display home.

Fiona and Gladstone were baby mad. Even after four kids, Fiona had told Willa several times she had wished for more. There were some big gaps between the boys — seven years between Ewan and the twins — which made Willa wonder if Fiona had lost babies then. They were always talking about when they'd have grandchildren, and all the things they'd do with them. They had a beach house and a place in the country with ponies and trampolines and boogie boards primed and

ready. She knew they were disappointed Dougal had made it to forty, Ewan to thirty-six and the twins to twenty-nine without fathering a single child.

When Winter appeared on the scene Willa had figured it was a done deal that they'd start a family. Maybe they would have if Winter hadn't had one foot out the door. Maybe she'd have a baby with Grayson. For the first time Willa thought of their names together: Grayson and Winter. How bleak. They could name their baby Sleet.

She hoped Ewan would find someone else who wanted the same things he did. And soon, so his father would stop wasting her work time moaning about it. She stood up from her chair and properly sorted out her skirt. There. Now she could get back to work.

Chapter 9

‘Should we intervene?’ Kat asked, concerned and shading her eyes from the bright autumn sun as she squinted into the middle distance. The heat had gone out of it early this year, taking with it Sydney’s humidity, which had been known to hang around until Easter. This was much nicer: just the brightness, sparkling and cool, illuminating the bright pink crepe myrtle blossoms that carpeted the grass.

Willa and Kat were sitting with Bec on a park bench in a playground near her house, watching the twins, who were very high up in a castle-shaped play structure, shouting incoherently in stereo at a bigger child who wasn’t quite ready to slide down the big slippery dip. Kat was the only one watching the kids. Bec was ordering children’s underpants from Kmart on her phone and Willa was checking the messages on her LikeLike dating app. She’d been texting a man called Edward, who was a School Crossing Program Coordinator, which she gathered meant he hired lollipop ladies and men. They’d talked about grabbing a coffee that afternoon, but he’d gone quiet before anything had been locked in.

‘They’re fine,’ Bec said, and sipped her takeaway flat white before resuming the story she’d been telling about the inflatable stand-up paddleboard she’d ordered Ralph for his birthday.

‘I was thinking more that the other kid might need a hand,’ said Kat. ‘The twins can be pretty scary close up like that.’

‘That kid’s about six. Mine are tiny.’ Bec dismissed the suggestion. ‘So the paddleboard only supports up to ninety kilos, which might be a teeny bit ambitious for Ralph right

now, but it could be good motivation for him to stay out of the nervous nineties? What do you think happens if you're heavier than that and you stand on it? Would it pop? Or, like, fold in half like a taco shell? Maybe it would just sink.'

A wail came from the top of the castle.

'Perce!' yelled Bec. 'Can you go up and see what's happening?'

Persephone had been spinning herself alone in a teacup but she staggered dizzily off and climbed the ladder to run interference between her brothers and the rest of the world, a role she had slipped into without complaint ever since they started crawling.

'She's such a legend,' said Kat.

'Isn't she?' Bec agreed. 'I worry sometimes that I rely on her too much with them. She shouldn't be punished for being good, while they're rewarded for being hellions. I'm not crazy about the good girl-bad boys dynamic we have going, but I don't think it's something we've fallen into because of gender norms. I genuinely think we have a good girl and two bad boys.'

'Maybe she'll turn on you eventually,' Willa suggested.

'Yeah,' said Bec, and she turned to Willa, looking genuinely grateful. 'I hope so. I really hope one day she tells me to get fucked and look after them myself. Maybe not until she's, like, twenty-four though.'

'Wow. That's in fifteen more years.' The sheer lengthiness of the time commitment people made to child-rearing never failed to shock Willa. 'We'll be over fifty.'

'It's not that long,' Bec said, brushing it off. 'The first nine years have whizzed by. In fifteen more, they'll be all grown up and we'll be able to go to Italy without them and swan around in pale linen dresses and big hats.'

'I'm counting down the days, mate,' Willa told her. 'I've already made a Pinterest board of villas we can rent. They've

all got unfenced pools and we will eat cheese and prosciutto and pasta until we crave steamed Chinese greens.'

Kat laughed, and Willa knew she was remembering when they went to Malaysia together and ate so much sambal fish that all they wanted was a pizza. 'Eat it 'til you hate it,' had been their mantra.

Bec rummaged through the backpack at her feet, took out three small packages and handed them out. 'There you go. Antipasto in a bag.'

'*Kiddylicious Veggie Straws,*' read Kat. 'Shouldn't you save these for the children?'

'Probably,' said Bec, and she tore open the plastic and crunched down on a pale pink maize-based snack. 'You know, I used to be annoyed that you two didn't want kids. I thought I'd feel so left out. But now I can't imagine how we'd manage if you did. It would be a nightmare.'

'I know!' Willa was delighted to hear that. She'd thought about it too. If more than one of them had kids, they'd struggle to manage this sort of casual get together. All the offspring would be different and incompatible ages, and they'd all require naps at conflicting times. There wouldn't be any guarantee the kids would get along, so even if for a while they'd be able to force them to hang out, eventually once they all had personalities and preferences of their own, they might hate each other and refuse to play.

'Hey,' said Kat, out of left field. 'How's the hens night planning going?'

'The planning of the Festival of Imogen is going great guns. I've booked a table for drinks and dinner — well, substantial bar snacks — at a place in Bondi, followed by a private karaoke room in Chinatown. And apparently we have to have a topless waiter. You can help me choose him. I've narrowed it down to three.' Willa unlocked her phone and swiped to the search page she'd had open for a few days now.

Bec snorted in disdain. 'I can't believe people still want strippers at hens and bucks nights. It's so retrograde.'

'I can't believe people still have hens and bucks nights,' added Kat, taking the phone.

'Ordinarily I would agree with you,' Willa said, 'but I found a company called Toplessly Devoted To You and that level of commitment to puns is what I want to see more of in the world, so I'm hiring one of their blokes.'

Kat suddenly laughed.

'What?'

'Look at your top three,' she said, holding out the phone. 'They could be three more Smith brothers. Into redheads much?'

'Oh bullshit,' said Willa. 'They're not redheads. Well, those two aren't.' She enlarged the photo. 'Okay, this guy is, I'll grant you that, but Imogen is marrying one of the Smiths so that's obviously a look she's into. The other two aren't redheads.' She zoomed in on the second man on her shortlist. 'I mean this one is maybe a little bit sandy. Vaguely tending towards the coppery end of the spectrum. And this one has a shaved head. How can you call him a redhead?'

'Come on, look at those freckles.' Kat wouldn't give up.

'What's your point?' Willa asked irritably. 'I'm not choosing them for me. They're for Imogen.'

'Hey, I'm only mucking around,' Kat said. 'Chill out.'

Willa closed the page and put her phone away in her bag. That could be a problem for another time. She might even delegate it to Sylvia, who'd been on at Willa about what she could do to help. Imogen had put Sylvia on the friendship fast track, seeing as they were dating twin brothers, so it would be fine for her to get involved. Everyone could make fun of Sylvia's taste in men instead of hers.

Persephone wandered over and sat on the ground in front of them. 'Kat?' she said, looking up through her too-long

fringe. ‘Why didn’t you bring Billy Jowl today?’

‘Sorry, kiddo, I have to do some work after this and I can’t take him, so he’s at home. But I took him for a big walk this morning.’

‘Oh.’ Perce sounded resigned. ‘I could have looked after him when you went to do your work.’

‘I know, I should have thought of that,’ said Kat. ‘Next time that’s what we’ll do.’

‘I wish we could have a dog.’

Bec squeezed her daughter close. ‘The twins are a bit like puppies. They wreck your stuff and wee everywhere.’

This was well-worn territory and no longer even garnered a smile from Persephone.

‘Can we go? Don’t the boys need a nap?’

‘Yeah, it’s that time, isn’t it? Shall we walk them to sleep in the stroller and then get an ice-cream?’

It took three adults ten minutes to catch the twins and wrestle them into their double stroller, but by the time Bec had reached the fence on the far side of the park Willa could see their frantically kicking legs had become still.

‘What next?’ asked Willa. ‘Pub? Walk? I thought I might have a date this arvo but I think he’s forgotten or bailed.’

‘There’s a deceased estate sale I need to check out in Waverton. Want to come?’

One more glance at Willa’s phone revealed no contact from Edward Zebra Crossing in the two minutes since she’d last checked. Oh well. His loss.

‘Will the Man With A Van be there?’

‘I wish you wouldn’t call him that. And no.’

‘Good. He’s around an awful lot at the moment. I like having you to myself.’

Kat pursed her lips. ‘He’s really a good guy. I’m not sure why you aren’t nicer to him.’

‘I don’t want to get too attached,’ Willa said archly.

‘You can get attached,’ said Kat, and the contentment in her voice made Willa’s heart sink. ‘I don’t think he’s going anywhere.’

* * *

The estate sale wasn’t far from Waverton Station. Someone had helpfully propped the rusty wire gate open with a brick and beaten a path through the tangled weeds of the garden to the steps leading to the also open front door. The afternoon sun shone through leadlight panels either side of the door, bathing the hallway in filtered red and purple light.

After they’d written their names and phone numbers on a clipboard on the hall table, Kat picked up an inventory sheet and examined it. Willa looked around. A hall stand held one straw hat hanging on a hook, one umbrella, and two empty calico shopping bags. A pair of cracked old navy ankle-length gumboots sat at its base, blades of dried grass still stuck to them, beside a foam rectangle for kneeling on, to protect old knees. Willa’s mum had one. Gardening. She wondered if it came for everyone in the end.

There were a few other people wandering through, some of whom greeted Kat — other second-hand dealers, Willa assumed — and a woman, looking too formal in a buttoned-up shirt and slacks, who seemed like she was in charge.

Willa followed Kat through the house, watching her run her hands over furniture, rub nubbly curtain fabric between her fingers, and lift cut glass bowls and pottery vases, holding them up to the dusty light to see them better. What she saw potential in intrigued Willa. Kat had a very good poker face, but Willa knew her tell: when she was very excited about an item, she would make a little huffing sound, once, out through her nose, like she was stifling a tiny laugh. She did it now, as she fondled what was frankly the most revolting vase Willa

had ever laid eyes on. It had been standing in a collection of other, similarly unpleasant vases, and looked like the ceramic version of the Coogi jumper Willa's mum was wearing in almost all the photos of her holding Willa when she was a baby.

‘That?’ Willa asked, incredulous.

Kat responded with a tiny nod, her eyes wide with excitement, the rest of her face impassive. In a low quiet voice, out of the corner of her mouth, like a TV spy, she muttered, ‘It’s West German and worth a fortune. Insanely under-priced.’ She carried the vase around the house as they kept looking.

It wasn't a cluttered house. Everything in it looked old to Willa, but well cared for and tidy. Family photos stood on a sideboard in the dining room, and she lingered there pretending to be interested in the frames. Things like that shouldn't be for sale. A family member ought to have taken them before everything went on the market. A black and white shot of a young couple caught her eye. The woman's hairstyle dated it to the 1960s. Willa searched for that face in the other pictures, and found it in each one, changing slightly as the years passed. In several pictures the woman was in an office lined with bookshelves, a hint of the edge of a mullioned window visible too. A university?

Willa imagined a series of images telling the story of her own life. Her office, her home. Her with Kat and Bec. Her with someone else? A face floated into her consciousness and she blinked it away. All this talk of redheads wasn't good for her.

Chapter 10

Kat ended up buying three vases, a pair of end tables and all of the picture frames. She'd borrow George's van to collect her haul during the week.

They parted when they got off the train at Redfern Station, where George was waiting outside the ticket barrier, van nowhere in evidence, leaning against a pole and grinning at Kat as she approached. He smiled far too much. It would annoy Willa if she were Kat. It made him seem untrustworthy, or dim. Willa had been going to see if Kat wanted to grab some dinner, but instead she left them kissing at the barrier.

All she'd had for lunch was a coffee and a twelve-gram packet of puffed veggie straws so when the smell of schnitzel wafted out of a pub she rarely went into, because it was dreadful and somehow always smelled like cigarettes many years after smoking inside had been banned, she was powerless against it. It wouldn't be a good schnitzel, she knew, but there were times in life when an average schnitzel was just what was required.

After she ordered and paid at the bar, Willa took her order number — 25 — on its stand and her schooner of beer to an empty table. She didn't often drink beer, but in this instance it would do to take the edge off her hunger while she waited for dinner. Again she checked her phone for a message from Edward Zebra Crossing. Nothing from him, but there was, to her surprise, a message from Anders Bolognese Toes. She shuddered at the memory. It had been several weeks since their date, and they'd not spoken since, but he wanted to meet up again.

That happened with dating apps, and it was baffling. A date ended poorly, contact ceased, and then out of nowhere, after a few weeks, they would try again. Did these men think it had been so long that she now looked back on their brief time together with nostalgic fondness? Or had they genuinely forgotten her, like goldfish? Was there some setting she didn't know about on the app which meant they didn't see their previous message history with her? Either way, she wasn't interested in an encore with Anders.

A waiter approached from the kitchen, carrying a steaming plate of schnitzel and chips. Willa sat up straight, unwrapped her cutlery from its tight napkin toga, moved the stand with the number a little bit so it was angled towards him and smiled expectantly. He walked straight past. She felt like a puppy in the pound who'd been passed over, and her smile dropped away as she turned involuntarily in the seat to watch the food going to its rightful home.

The waiter put down the plate on a table near the window, in front of Ewan. She hadn't even noticed he was there. While it was very much not as good as the schnitzel being hers, at least it being Ewan's meant she could go over and eat his chips while she waited. His number was 21, so hers might be a while still.

Ewan looked up with a start when Willa pulled out the chair opposite him, slung her bag over the back and sat down, knocking over her order number as she placed it on the table, and almost his beer as well.

'Hi!' she said. 'Can I have a chip?'

'Where did you come from?'

'I was sitting just there. I didn't see you either.'

He pushed the plate towards her. 'Go for it, seagull. What have you ordered?'

'Same as you,' she said, and shoved three chips into her mouth. They were straight out of the fryer and her eyes watered as she chewed. That didn't help enough so she opened

her mouth and puffed. ‘Hot, hot, hot,’ she huffed, spat out her chewed mouthful into the palm of her hand and took a swig of beer, which she held in her mouth, swilling it around to cool the burn.

Ewan put his fork down. ‘Remind me which Swiss finishing school it was that your parents sent you to? Do they offer any sort of money-back guarantee?’

‘Piss off. They were hot.’ This was good. He was being Normal Ewan again.

He sipped his beer.

‘So,’ said Willa. ‘I hear you’re one of Angus’s squadron of best men.’

‘It’s only the three of us.’

‘Imogen’s just having me,’ she said. ‘I’m organising the hens. What’s happening for the bucks party?’

‘Alistair’s sorting it. Nothing massive. I’m not getting involved. They’re all being very “Don’t mention the war” with the wedding around me. It’s mostly coming from Dougal, I think. Angus is pretty wrapped up in himself and you know Al — he’s not that into other people’s feelings.’

‘Good on Dougal,’ said Willa, pleased that someone had relieved Ewan of this chore. She ventured another chip. ‘They’re cool enough to eat now.’

‘Thanks. Look, here comes yours I think.’

The waiter delivered Willa’s plate and she tasted one of her chips. ‘These aren’t as hot as yours were. Here, I owe you five.’ She counted out the chips and put them onto Ewan’s plate.

‘That’s okay —’ he tried to protest but Willa wouldn’t hear of it.

‘No, I insist. I won’t have you going round telling people I don’t pay my chip debts.’

They ate together in companionable silence. Ewan finished first and sat watching Willa. ‘What have you been up to today?’

She swallowed her mouthful. ‘Hanging out with Kat and Bec and her kids.’ Ewan had met Kat many times over the years, Bec only a handful.

‘How old are the kids now?’

‘Persephone is nine and the twins are two and a half.’ She looked cautiously at him. Would talk of kids trigger a metamorphosis back into Big Sad Ewan? He seemed all right. ‘They’re awesome. Perce is the sort of kid who makes me think being a mother wouldn’t be so bad, but only if there was a guarantee of getting a brilliant little weirdo like her.’

‘You’d probably want to be a little more into the idea than thinking “it wouldn’t be so bad” before you chose to have baby,’ Ewan pointed out.

‘Hard agree,’ said Willa. ‘Which is why I’m not going to do it. Because there are no guarantees of what kind of person is going to come out of you, and even if it was someone like Perce, the way they ask things would get annoying after a while. You’d constantly be forced to reveal how much you don’t know or understand about the world. I imagine it would feel like losing on a game show but having to continue to show up and compete again anyway, every day. For the rest of your life.’

‘I don’t think it would be like that.’ Oh god. His eyes were all misty again. Why were all their conversations ending up here, in the sandpit at the bottom of the burning hot slippery dip that had been his stupid marriage, talking about his life like it was actually ruined, when in fact he’d just had a lucky escape?

‘You know what you need, Ewan?’

‘What do I need, Willa?’

‘A date. You need to go out and have dinner with someone who you like the look of. You are a thirty-six-year-old man,

gainfully employed, all your own teeth: you're what many women want. Your hobby is making marmalade, not riding a bike with your mates for three-quarters of every weekend. This city is stuffed with women who want someone exactly like you, who desperately want to settle down and have babies. You're a goddamn unicorn.'

He looked at her with eyes full of gratitude and affection. 'It's really nice of you to say that.' He took her hand across the table and squeezed it. 'You're a good egg, Willa. You know that?'

She pulled her hand back and ran it through her hair, disarmed by his touch. She cast around the room for somewhere else to point the conversation.

'You know what you should do? Download an app and take someone out. Hell, you probably don't even need an app. Just start looking around. There are two women in this pub right now who have given you the eye. They've no idea how annoying you are so you should make the most of that.'

'What women?'

'There's one at that table two over.' Ewan moved to turn and look, and Willa grabbed both his hands from the tabletop to stop him. 'Don't be so obvious. Christ, you're such an amateur. Get up and go to the bar and check her out on the way.'

He eyed Willa's empty beer with suspicion. 'Is there really a woman looking at me or do you just need another schooner?'

'Both: let's call it a happy coincidence. She really has been watching you. The one in the gingham top. Shoulder-length blonde hair. Pretty. She has a kind face. I can tell she's been trying to suss out our deal so I shall continue to refrain from snogging you.'

'You're too kind.' Ewan stood up, collected both of their empty glasses, and walked haltingly over to the bar. Sure enough, the woman two tables over gave him a shy smile as he passed. He stood at the bar, spoke to the barman and waited.

He reached into his back pocket for his wallet. Willa couldn't help admiring the rear view of him in his jeans. In a platonic way. He just objectively did have a very nice bum. So many men had no bum at all. Or too much bum. But Ewan's was just right. She looked away, feeling like the Goldilocks of Glutes.

When she looked back a second later there was another bum beside Ewan's. His admirer was also ordering a drink. What a coincidence. They were chatting. The girl was leaning on the bar with both elbows. Willa could only see her back but she knew that move. It made your boobs look bigger. She knew she should look away: it was rude to stare at them.

She took her phone out: there was a notification of a new LikeLike message. Apps were amazing.

'Hey!' Ewan slid back into his seat, his face glowing with excitement. He thumped their beers down on the table so enthusiastically they slopped over the sides. 'You were right. Her name is Sarah and she's a teacher. I can't believe how easy it was. I just said hi and we got talking and I asked if she was having a good night. She said she's just having a couple of beers with some mates, and I said same, and I made sure to say you were just my mate. Anyway, she's really nice. She asked if we want to come sit with them. Should we?'

'You should,' said Willa. 'I'm afraid I have to bail as your wingwoman. I've got a date.'

'Oh.' He looked crestfallen.

'But you'll have a great time, I know it.' She gave him a quick hug.

'You sure? A date. You didn't say anything before about having a date.'

'It just came up.'

'Right. Sure, of course. The apps. I forget. Been off for so long now. You'll be safe? Do you check in with Kat, or someone, just in case?'

This was just as awkward as having a conversation with her dad. ‘Ewan, I’m a big girl. I know what I’m doing.’

‘All right, well, can you text me or something, maybe in the morning? Let me know you got home safely.’ He was babbling. ‘Or not, I mean, maybe you won’t be at your place. Just, ugh, never mind. Ignore me. Have fun. Take care.’

‘I will. You too.’ Willa looked over his shoulder at Sarah and her friends. ‘A teacher, eh? Teachers love kids.’

His smile faded. ‘Willa, give it a rest. My only aim in life is not to have a baby by any means necessary. Give me some credit. Let me just have a drink with her.’ His voice was suddenly serious, and Willa felt a twinge of embarrassment. She had been laying it on a bit thick.

‘Have fun,’ she said again, and smiled at him. ‘Really. You deserve some fun.’

* * *

Fun. Willa thought about that word as she left the pub, resisting a last look back at the table where Sarah would be shifting her chair so Ewan could squeeze in beside her; where there wouldn’t be quite enough room for his broad shoulders so he’d be forced to put his arm around her back; where he’d put his glass close to hers and the beads of condensation on the outside of them would mingle and run down together, dampening the cardboard beer mats. She wished she were actually heading to meet an exciting prospect in a dimly lit bar where she might have some condensation-mingling fun, that her date wasn’t something she’d made up to encourage Ewan to get back on the horse.

What even was fun? Did adults have fun? Mostly it seemed people used it as a euphemism for sex. That’s what she and Ewan had meant back there, when he’d told her to have fun on her date and she’d told him to have fun with Sarah the Pretty Teacher.

It had been fun, in the shower with Anders. Until all of a sudden it had been gross. Maybe that was how people knew

when they'd found The One: they just kept having fun together and the moment of complete repulsion, where you could no longer stand to be near them, let alone touch them, never eventuated. It seemed to Willa like a pretty grim standard for love.

She was waiting to cross at the last set of lights before her flat when her phone buzzed again in her pocket. She pulled it back out and glanced at the message. It was from Edward Zebra Crossing. Having ignored her all afternoon, now he was in the area. Suggesting a drink. Whatever had kept him so busy today had clearly fizzled out and she felt a distinct whiff of Back-Up Plan to his invitation to meet up.

The lights changed but Willa stood still, staring at the phone screen with its tiny image of a man: a little digital offering that could be a real-life one if she wanted. The green man on the walk sign turned to a flashing red man. She waited for the little sparkly feeling that accompanied a new prospect. Nothing. Not so much as a twinge of *Much Ado* excitement. The lights changed back and the red man became solid.

She scrolled back through the chatty interactions she'd had with Edward so far. There were no red flags. He was fine. Not funny though. Nothing he'd said had really grabbed her in any way. That wasn't unusual: she'd dated plenty of people who didn't come across as sparkling company in text messages and she'd had a good time with many of them. But tonight she couldn't do it. Without at least a tingle of anticipation to fuel her, she didn't want to sit opposite someone new in a bar, giving the Willa 101 lecture, highlighting in a self-deprecating way all her good qualities while trying to confirm that the man opposite her wasn't a rapist or a racist, a climate crisis denier or one of the ones who believed in feminism but nonetheless thought it was getting a bit hard for blokes to say anything these days.

The traffic lights went orange again, then red. The crossing light beeped and another green man appeared. Willa crossed and went home to her empty flat.

Chapter 11

Sunday mornings, in Willa's view, were for reminding yourself of all the good things about the way you'd set up your life. Being child-free and single meant she could wake up whenever she felt like it. She rarely felt lonely in the mornings, not like she did at night. In the mornings she liked that there was no one to look askance at her if she chose for her breakfast a whole loaf of sourdough bread, eaten slowly, slice by slice, buttered, while lying in bed listening to a funny podcast about romcoms, with her feet in the small patch of sunlight that hit her bed at this time of year. No one complained about the crumbs.

Later she FaceTimed her parents: she hadn't talked to them that week, though there had been an endless stream of texts concerning the wedding arrangements.

Her mother answered but Willa couldn't see her face. All that was on the screen was smooth pale plaster and the corner of a light fitting she recognised from her parents' living-room ceiling. With a jolt she remembered they weren't on the farm any more. This was the ceiling of their new house in town.

'Mum?'

'Just a tick!' came her mother's voice. There was a rustling sound, and she appeared on the screen. 'Hi!'

'Hi. What's happening?'

'I was just getting these little fellers settled.' The camera spun around to show a cardboard box, its lid off, with a blanket inside. Willa squinted to see what was wrapped in the blanket. She could just make out grey fur.

'I can't quite see. Is it a possum?'

‘They’re yellow-belly gliders: a mum and a little one. Sandy and Pip found them off to the side where the road is being graded for that dreadful new estate. That developer has taken down so many more trees than . . . Ugh, don’t get me started. I think they’re all right, but they shouldn’t have been out in the middle of the day like that, so I’ll keep an eye on them for a bit.’

‘Where will you release them?’

‘I’m not sure. They aren’t that common around here. I’ll check if anyone’s seen any others — they live in families. I’ll hop on the Facebook group in a minute.’

Willa smiled. She too was a member of the social media community group for the small dairy-farming town where her parents lived. She hadn’t lived there since moving to the city at eighteen to start university, but it kept her connected to what was happening in their world. Mostly that seemed to be people returning each other’s runaway dogs, noting when the river was up and over the bridge into town and when there were cows on the road. In winter it was largely people giving away excess citrus fruit. Anything to do with stray or injured wildlife was answered by Willa’s mum, Jo. Occasionally there was a callout from the Facebook group of the bigger town nearby, asking for volunteer moderators for their much more volatile posts. No one from the small-town group ever replied.

After her mother hung up — it was time to feed the gliders — Willa felt restless. She considered calling Bec, to see if she could take Perce to get pancakes or see a movie, but the idea of catching the train back up to Artarmon was tiring. That led to another Sunday tradition: wondering briefly if she should borrow money to buy a car and concluding that the parking where she lived was too dire to bother.

Eventually she got out of bed, shed her pyjamas — leaving them where they fell — and dressed in jeans, a light jumper, Birkenstocks and large sunglasses. She would walk to the park and lie under a tree. She threw a towel, a book, a water bottle,

her phone and keys into a free tote bag from her local bookshop and opened her front door.

If she hadn't already had her sunglasses on she might have seen the flowers lying on the doormat before she stepped on them. The crunch of paper and the soft give of petals being crushed stopped her in her tracks and she looked down. It was a large bouquet: crimson ranunculus, peach dahlias, tall blue delphiniums, and some little clusters of white bell-shaped blooms she couldn't name. They were wrapped in understated brown paper and tied with string. A little brown envelope hung off the side. She leaned down and picked them up, pleased to see they hadn't been too badly damaged by her great stomping foot.

Inside the envelope was a small white card. She didn't recognise the handwriting but the words on it she knew at once: *I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes.* There was no signature.

Willa frowned. It was a quote from *Much Ado About Nothing*. The line was Benedick's, said to Beatrice. Who would send her this? It had to be someone from work or a close friend. For barely a second the memory of her near miss with Ewan surged through her body, defibrillating her heart with curious possibility, before she remembered that she'd last seen him late the night before, more interested in the heart, lap and eyes of the lovely Sarah. These were not from Ewan. They almost certainly couldn't be. But Dougal? Interesting. As much as she made a running joke of fancying Dougal, she'd never really looked that idea square in the face before.

The flowers were too big for the one vase Willa owned. Where was Kat with her collection of fine German pottery when she needed her? She filled the kitchen sink with water, unwrapped the bouquet and placed it gently in so the flower heads rested on the draining board. They looked like tired ladies in a spa. The card she tucked into the back of her phone case.

* * *

Centennial Park on an early autumn afternoon could have been the perfect place for Willa to lie quietly under a tree with the improving work of literary fiction she'd brought to read so as not to develop romance myopia. Kat had bought her the book, and claimed it was terrific. But the question of the flowers was filling her head and making it hard to get into this multi-award-winning work of genius called — she had to check the cover because she couldn't keep the title in her head — *The Upside of Wrong*. These word salad titles were a thing right now. Once she'd managed a chapter, Willa rewarded herself with a choc top from the Mr Whippy van that had pulled over near her and played its siren song until she gave in.

She sat back down on the grass, leaned against a tree, and surveyed the passing people. A young couple pushed a newborn along in a huge pram, with a depressed-looking pug trailing behind them on an extendable leash. He'd have been their baby until a few weeks earlier. A man in khaki shorts and an elastic knee support brace helped a small child learn to ride a bike without training wheels, running alongside with one hand on the seat of the bike and one on his own hunched, clearly aching back. Two fifty-ish women strode by, arms pumping, gossip powered. A gang of teenagers meandered past, all in dark clothes, all sporting haircuts and colours designed to make themselves simultaneously fit in and stand out. One of the boys had an arm slung casually around another boy's shoulders, and he held hands with a girl on the other side. Their backpacks looked like they were dripping off them.

As she watched, Willa found she couldn't let the thought of the flowers rest. She hadn't disclosed her *Much Ado* inspiration theory to very many people outside work, conscious it would come off as insufferably quirky at best and that at worst she'd seem like a weird Shakespeare-Branagh-Thompson fangirl, still mired, in her mid-thirties, dangerously deep in a teenage crush on a movie. It turned out there was, astonishingly to Willa, also a very large number of people who didn't seem even passingly familiar with the movie. It troubled

her sometimes, to consider the distorted lens through which those people saw the world.

Even within the office it wasn't something she talked about a lot. It was just a touchstone, though definitely one the Smiths all knew about, even if half of them frequently got confused and thought it was *Shakespeare in Love* she was into.

Dougal knew about it, that was for sure. He had been quietly dismissive of Willa's affection for *Much Ado* on more than one occasion. Willa didn't have a great handle on Dougal. His good looks were distracting, and she couldn't make up her mind if he was shy, or a self-important asshole, or a shy, self-important asshole. Her long-running joke with Ewan and Fiona that she planned to marry him for his looks and the money he'd inherit was obviously not serious, but every now and then she'd caught him watching her with an impossible-to-read expression. Was it scornful or admiring? Her literary training had led her to understand that inscrutable faces were generally disguising desperate, roiling ardour, but in real life when people looked at you like they were having trouble placing you, it was most often because they were having trouble placing you.

Dougal was enigmatic. He worked for the family business but remained somewhat apart from the rest of them, rarely talking about his personal life at work. She knew he liked rock climbing, and was fairly certain that was how he spent most weekends. Sometimes she would ask him about it and he'd tell her which rock face he had scrambled up or down recently, but not being interested in such pursuits herself, the conversations always petered out quite quickly. He had certainly never thumped himself down on the wicker chair in her office and sloshed his woes everywhere.

His father respected him, Willa could tell. Gladstone deferred to Dougal in all important decision-making. And he was definitely smart and good at his job. Good enough that, even though he wasn't interested in what Willa published, he sufficiently respected the outcome of her work when it showed up on the balance sheets at the end of the month to have

advised his father they should just stand back and let her do what she did with a minimum of interference.

The sounds of a soccer game being played on the open patch of grass behind her tree drifted over, and soon a ball thumped onto her towel. She glanced around and tossed it back. One of the sweaty men running around in the glaring sunlight shouted his thanks. Willa went back to her people watching and wondering, delicately removing the last tile of crackled chocolate topping from her ice-cream with her teeth.

Much of what she knew about Dougal she had gleaned from his family. He was sporty. Not a reader. Competent at playing the trombone at school. Of his personal life she knew almost nothing: certainly not enough to be able to judge whether it would be like or unlike him to send flowers with a Shakespearean quote as the opening salvo in a romantic campaign. She'd never known him to have a girlfriend — or a boyfriend. She knew he played cricket, and that of all his brothers he was closest to Ewan, but he always seemed to have a watchful eye on his younger twin brothers too. The night Angus proposed to Imogen on the dancefloor was the most emotion she'd ever seen Dougal display — and all he'd done was stare intently at them while they got engaged, with a hint of a smile, which could hardly be described as demonstrative. She wondered if he might, if he'd been a teenager now, have been assessed for neurodivergence of some kind or other. Or maybe he was just a plain old serious person.

She'd called him Mr Darcy that night when he wouldn't dance with her, but now it occurred to her that maybe he was more Darcy than she'd realised. He needed one of his brothers to act as his Bingley and explain him to people. Maybe he was secretly in love with her and the flowers were from him.

It wasn't enormously likely, but things didn't have to be likely to be true. For a moment she allowed herself to picture them together: walking in the park like all these people, his arm around her shoulders; hers around his slim waist. The leaves falling around them would be golden and scarlet — this would take place in proper Imaginary Autumn, not this in-

between Sydney-in-March nonsense. His legs were longer than hers — she'd have to skip every now and then to keep in step. She could almost feel the warmth of him, and smell the mineral woody fragrance of his skin. She saw herself glancing up, and finding him gazing down at her, his eyes dark with desire. Was that something that could really happen? It was hard to know — he was a closed book. But with such a lovely cover.

A man and a woman strolled along the path, slowly, causing a jogger to come up close behind before veering around them. They were too far off to see clearly, but Willa felt a rush of blood to her head and her stomach flopped ominously. Her body knew before her brain that it was Ewan and Sarah approaching, and it was overreacting in a highly absurd manner. She knew three things very quickly: that they hadn't seen her yet, that she didn't want them to, and that she was foolish to have come here. This was a regular haunt of Ewan and his brothers on weekends, and if she hadn't wanted to risk running into him she should have gone somewhere else. There had been far too much running into Ewan in her life lately. Making no sudden movements, she quietly gathered her belongings and moved to the other side of the wide tree trunk. There, now they wouldn't spot her. No drama. And of course she was feeling weird, she reassured herself. It was awkward to be confronted with the incontestable fact that one of your friends just hooked up with someone. She'd feel the same way if faced with her brother, Andy, and some random person he'd just shagged.

She spread her towel out again and settled down to read. There was less distraction here, with the path harder to see. That was good. She opened the book again and began [chapter two](#).

'Willa!' came a yell from somewhere over past the soccer game. Startled, she looked up and squinted into the sunny afternoon for the source of the voice. There was a small group on the sidelines at the other end of the pitch, and one of them was standing up and waving their arms as if trying to signal to

a plane that they were stranded on an island. When Willa didn't respond to their yells, they came bounding over, and from the smooth, leggy run Willa realised it was Imogen. Which meant — Willa scoured the faces of the soccer players — of course. Three Smith brothers: Angus, Alistair and Dougal. Of all the trees in all the parks in all the city, she'd had to choose this one. Her chest tightened at the thought of Dougal. What if he had sent the flowers? Suddenly her little rumination on what it might be like to be with him seemed absurdly childish, and she felt herself blush. At least Ewan had passed unnoticed by his brothers.

‘Oi! Ewan Whose Army!’ Nope. Alistair had spotted him.

Imogen put her hands on her hips, barely out of breath after her sprint, and turned to see what was happening. ‘Ewan’s here! Why does Al call him that? I don’t get it.’

‘It’s from when they were kids and the other three – well, mostly Alistair, from what I gather – used to gang up on him.’ Willa knew so much family lore. ‘You know the saying, “You and whose army?”’

Imogen looked blank.

‘It’s something people say when someone threatens to do something and you don’t think they have strength on their own to carry out that threat. One of them heard that phrase and thought it would be funny to apply it to their brother. It sort of stuck.’

‘Oh. That’s mean. Hey, come sit with us! Sylvia and I are being WAGs.’ She pointed over and Willa could see Sylvia, in a fawn romper, under a big hat, sitting in a foldable beach chair on the sidelines. She waved at Willa.

Willa frowned at her cousin. ‘Don’t talk yourself down like that. You are a strong, independent woman. You are not defined by your fiancé, or anything he does.’

‘I just meant we were watching the soccer and day-drinking.’

‘Oh. Still. That language demeans women.’

‘Okay.’ Imogen paused. ‘So, is that a no to sitting with us?’

‘Thanks, but I was just about to head home.’

‘Come on,’ Imogen cajoled. ‘Just one drink. Why would you want to go home all alone when you could be drinking in the sun with us? We’re heaps more fun. And we aren’t really watching the game; we’re just talking about wedding stuff.’

Willa gave a tight smile. ‘There’s an offer too good to refuse. Just one drink though. I can’t do a Monday morning hangover. Wine in the sun is a liquid headache.’

‘I don’t get hangovers,’ Imogen said.

‘I know,’ said Willa. ‘It’s why we all hate you.’

Chapter 12

The soccer players were having a break, chugging water and tipping it over their heads to cool off. It was absurd weather to be running around in. They'll all give themselves heatstroke, Willa thought. Dougal looked at her and nodded, saying 'howyougoing' like it was all one word, then ran to the far corner of the field, dribbling the ball. He wasn't behaving like an obvious candidate for her secret admirer.

'Hey,' said Sylvia as Willa and Imogen approached. Willa hadn't spent much time with Sylvia. Alistair had met her at someone's birthday drinks at the Coogee Pavilion, where picking her out of the crowd would have been like trying to figure out which zebra was your zebra if it got loose on a savannah. She wore the sort of neutral-coloured linen baby clothes for hot girls that Willa saw advertised on Instagram and couldn't begin to imagine herself in. Tiny rompers with ruffled straps, matching high-waisted shorts and crop tops. It required a lot of effort on Willa's part not to write her off as an airhead, and she chastised herself for having such an unfeminist and curmudgeonly instinct.

She accepted the glass of champagne Sylvia held out, and declined to take Imogen's seat, bristling internally at the offer. She wasn't an old lady. Instead she stood, sipping her drink, and trying not to stare at Angus chatting with Ewan and Sarah over by the walking path. She tried to remember if the shirt Ewan was wearing was the same one he'd had on last night, but she couldn't be sure: all his shirts looked a bit the same, and he almost always wore the same pair of jeans.

Imagine running into your family after a first date, she thought, with a shudder. Mortifying. Ewan would be dying to escape his brother and get on with his post-coital Sunday

afternoon stroll. At least it was only Angus who'd bounded over like a red setter. He was the most normal of the three, if you were meeting them for the first time. He could make small talk and wouldn't stand like a blank-faced statue or make some snarky remark.

'Ooh, he's bringing her over,' said Imogen, 'whoever she is.' It was true. Surely they weren't going to stop and hang out, watching the game, introducing Sarah to his entire family.

Sylvia stood up and slipped her arm around Alistair's waist. 'Hey, babe,' she said, and kissed him. 'Hi, Ewan.'

Alistair twisted around, out of her embrace. 'Where's my water bottle?'

'Hi, everyone,' said Ewan, looking like a wombat caught in the headlights of a milk tanker. 'Er, this is, er, Sarah. Sarah, this is Alistair, another of my brothers, his girlfriend, Sylvia, and Imogen, Angus's fiancée. And you've met Willa, my — who we work with.'

Sarah smiled generously at Willa. 'Of course! Nice to see you again. Did you have a good night last night?'

Willa nodded. 'Very good thanks.' Sarah was dealing with this onslaught of friends and family with remarkable grace. Her composure was admirable. Maybe inside she was screaming and planning how she would tell her best friend about sleeping with a guy she met at the pub and then being taken to a park to meet his entire family almost before she had her pants back on. Willa wondered if Ewan had told her about Winter. Probably. He wasn't much good at secrets. Maybe he'd used the Sad Ewan situation to pull Sarah. Maybe it had been a sympathy shag.

Suddenly a woman's voice called 'Yoo-hoo!' across the grass and the four Smith boys turned as one in its direction. Willa found it endlessly amusing that their mother's voice still had this effect on them. The way their ears pricked up when they heard Fiona reminded Willa of a book she'd read Perce a few years back, which she'd also had as a child. The Smith

boys were like the litter in *The Poky Little Puppy* when they smelled their dessert.

‘Did you invite your mum and dad?’ Sylvia asked Alistair, sounding bemused. Willa was reminded that Sylvia was still quite new on the scene and therefore had not yet realised that Gladstone and Fiona showed up unannounced all the time, as if they had GPS trackers on their adult children and no boundaries.

‘No!’ he said. ‘Of course not. They just turn up. Mum has a sixth sense about where we are.’

‘Hello, boys,’ said Fiona, beaming under a sporty white visor. ‘Dad and I drove over for breakfast in Paddington and thought we’d do one of our big walks and we spotted you! Isn’t that fun!’

‘Yes,’ confirmed Gladstone, who was wearing bright white sneakers and tube socks pulled up to his shins, before immediately contradicting the story of this completely serendipitous meeting. ‘Your mother thought she remembered Angus saying you were planning a kickabout here this afternoon so we thought we’d say hello.’

‘No, I remembered him saying they were having a kickabout somewhere. It was just sheer luck that we ran into you.’ It was only then that Fiona seemed to notice there was a new person in the group. She turned her head to the side a little without breaking eye contact with Sarah which made her look unintentionally menacing, like an emu. ‘Hello,’ she said. ‘I’m not sure we’ve met.’

Sarah took a small step backwards. ‘I’m Sarah,’ she said, at the same time as Ewan said, ‘Mum, this is Sarah.’ He rested his hand in the small of Sarah’s back.

Fiona glanced at Willa, her eyes wide and worried, then looked back at Sarah and smiled. ‘Hello, Sarah. Fiona Smith, mother of all this lot.’

‘Really nice to meet you, Mrs Smith.’

‘Oh away with the Mrs Smith,’ she said, her normal cheerful demeanour returning as if the clouds had never crossed her face. ‘Makes me sound like I’m checking into a hotel for a dirty weekend with someone else’s husband. Chance would be a fine thing. Call me Fiona.’

Cold drinks were procured for Gladstone, Fiona, Ewan and Sarah, the folding chairs were given to the parents, and everyone else made themselves comfortable on the ground, spread out along the sideline in the increasing shade. The soccer game resumed, this time with Imogen subbing in for Alistair, who sat and watched his friends and brother play, idly stroking Sylvia’s bare brown legs in a way that Willa couldn’t stop watching.

After a while Fiona casually rose from her seat and made her way to sit on the grass beside Willa. She leaned in close and spoke quietly. ‘Who’s Sarah when she’s at home then?’

‘Ask her yourself,’ replied Willa archly. ‘I’m not your informant.’

‘Come on, Willa, tell me what you know. Where’s he been hiding her? When did they meet? Is she anything to do with why Winter went home?’

‘No, they only met last —’ Willa broke off when she realised what she was saying. ‘You’re so naughty, Fiona. It’s none of your business and I’m not saying any more.’

Fiona smirked at her. ‘You do know. Last what? What were you going to say? Last week? They met last week?’

Willa pressed her lips together and refused to look at Fiona.

‘Anyway, what brings you down here to watch my boys play football, eh? Or should I say, who?’

Willa rolled her eyes. ‘I was actually here alone, sitting under that tree minding my own business and reading when your gang hijacked me and dragged me over here to watch them run around like idiots. I only stayed to talk to Imogen and Sylvia about wedding plans.’

Fiona curled her lip slightly.

‘What’s that?’ Willa pointed at Fiona’s face. ‘What’s with that lip thing? Have you got a problem with the wedding?’

Fiona shrugged. ‘Don’t be silly, I’m thrilled about the wedding. It’s Sylvia. I don’t find her very sincere. She’s always trying so hard. Haven’t you noticed? The way she hovers around Alistair all the time. Like a buzzy little fly.’

‘She doesn’t,’ Willa said. ‘And if she does it’s only because he’s a bit hard to get attention from. I can see why she’d be feeling unsettled. He pretty much ignores her when he’s with his brothers.’

‘Pish tosh,’ said Fiona. ‘If he’s not paying her enough attention it’s because she’s being too needy.’

It was a circular argument, and not one Willa wanted to be involved in, so she let it drop. There wasn’t much she could do about the fact that inherently Fiona thought country girls like Imogen were to be trusted and girls from the city weren’t. It was a binary prejudice based on Fiona’s own childhood in the Scottish Highlands, but it didn’t seem fair to assume that just because Sylvia grew up in Bellevue Hill she was treating life like one giant episode of *The Bachelor*.

For a few minutes they watched the game. Willa didn’t generally enjoy watching sport, but Dougal was an elegant player. The way he effortlessly took possession of the ball and dodged other attackers was quite pleasing to watch. She found her gaze following him on the field.

‘How about you then, lovely Willa? Any special feller squiring you about at the moment?’

‘No, nothing happening on that front, I’m afraid.’ Willa remembered the flowers and had a sudden urge to share. ‘Though I did get an anonymous bunch of flowers on my doorstep today,’ she added airily, as if that was a thing that had ever happened before in her whole life.

‘Anonymous?’ Fiona’s obvious excitement fanned the coals of delight for Willa and she turned to face her, grinning.

‘I know! I’ve never had anonymous flowers!’

‘It’s like something from one of your books,’ said Fiona. ‘Was there a card?’

Willa paused. To tell Fiona about the card with its quotation meant leading the conversation down the path of who knew about Willa’s attachment to *Much Ado*, and the possibility, however remote, that one of Fiona’s sons was responsible. It was too soon for that. ‘No card. Just flowers.’ She pushed her hair back from her forehead. ‘They’re probably from Mum.’

‘No card?’

Willa shook her head.

‘Hmm, no card.’ Fiona watched Dougal tackle Angus, deftly relieving him of possession of the ball. ‘Your mum would have sent a card,’ she said. ‘If there was no card, as you say, they must be from an admirer.’

Willa steered the conversation away from her love life then, and as soon as she brought up the wedding plans it was like Fiona was a toy she could just wind up and set loose. While she talked of flowers, canapes, music, hairdressers, parking permits and chair hire, Willa tuned out and wondered how, once again, the Smiths had managed to commandeer her Sunday afternoon like this.

Chapter 13

In the staff meeting the next morning, Willa decided either she was terrible at watching people surreptitiously or Dougal looked at her an awful lot more than he looked at other people. She attempted covert surveillance from the other side of the room, only to find that every time she ventured a glance at him he was already looking at her. Was he watching her to see if she suspected him of sending the flowers, or was he watching her because she was glancing up at him from the agenda in front of her every six seconds? It was impossible to tell and achieved nothing except making her feel very flustered.

Dougal didn't look flustered. His mouth, Willa observed, was not set as seriously today. Instead it turned up slightly at the corners, like a waxed moustache, which gave him the air of someone who was always thinking of something just moderately entertaining. Something on the level of a witty but unkind political tweet. He sat quietly, listening as his father congratulated Angus on a potential new client he had met with on Friday, looking at everyone else only about five per cent as often as he looked at Willa.

Ewan was remarkably chipper and a million miles from the morose shadow of his former self he had been since Winter left. That would be from shagging Sarah the Pretty Teacher. Which was precisely what she had suggested he needed so the slight grittiness she felt made no sense. She was probably just a bit envious of how well his weekend had turned out, when hers had yielded only a ghosting crossing guard recruiter and some emotionally confusing flowers.

After the meeting she hurried into her office and closed the door. She sat facing the wall of her book covers and tried to rein in her racing mind. What if it was Dougal who'd sent the

flowers? What did that mean? Why anonymous? Despite all the jokes, she'd never seriously thought of him that way. But that was a thing, wasn't it, in romance stories? People were always falling for the last person they would have expected. It was rarely convincing. Authors struggled to create a standoffish, male character in the heroine's orbit without arousing suspicion that he was the one she was going to end up with. That was Jane Austen's fault.

It never worked like that in real life. She couldn't think of a single instance where someone she knew ended up having a relationship with someone who had genuinely never appeared interested in them. It wasn't as if she and Dougal were friends like she and Ewan were. He wasn't interested in her work, beyond how much money it brought into the company coffers. They had nothing in common. Incidents of teasing aside, she could count on the index finger of one hand the number of real, serious conversations they had ever had: once at a work lunch, early in her time there, they had managed a discussion about a brand of tractor her parents owned, which he produced the manual for. It wasn't much to build a life on.

She could just ask him if he'd sent the flowers. But if he said no the mortification would likely be fatal — it would look like she was trying to show off that she had a secret admirer — and if he said yes that would be even worse: she'd be faced with the question of how to deal with it.

Would she go out with him if he asked? Her feelings were muddled now by the possibility of his liking her. That was very bad, Willa thought. It was essential to be sure and strong in what you felt for a person, regardless of what they thought of you. That was how women ended up with men they felt sorry for, saying yes because they didn't want to cause hurt feelings. That sort of politeness could land you with a husband you didn't want and kids who were genetically half identical to the person you married out of pity, and before you knew it you'd be living in a house you hated, with friends who didn't understand you. You'd forget who you were because it would

be less painful than remembering. You'd be a living, breathing Talking Heads song.

Willa spun her chair back around and grabbed her phone from the desk. Her first instinct was to call Kat. She wanted to lay everything out — the flowers, the card, Dougal's looks in the meeting, the thing with Sarah in the pub, with Ewan. Kat was her sounding board. Kat was how Willa thought everything through. She would listen, ask a few thoughtful and astute questions, and then, almost always, Willa would know the answer to whatever was troubling her.

But now George was on the scene, Willa hesitated. For the first time, she feared that her problem, presented to Kat, might seem insignificant and silly. The idea of Kat thinking she was pathetic, of Kat feeling sorry for her — well, it almost made Willa want to throw up. And what if Kat then talked to George about it? She would die if that happened. She could just imagine: Kat and George, curled up on Kat's couch with glasses of red and a fire flickering in front of them (never mind that there was no fireplace in Kat's flat — paranoid fantasies were better furnished than real life). Kat, turning to George with a light laugh and a toss of her glossy dark hair, saying, 'I didn't tell you about Willa, did I? She got some flowers, anonymously, and now she's convinced they're from one of the men at her work. She talked about it for an hour. A full hour. Honestly, George, she has nothing else in her life. It's pathetic. She's obsessed with the men in her office. She imagines everyone's in love with her. I don't know why I'm friends with such a fool.'

Imaginary Kat was so much meaner than Real Kat. But what Imaginary Kat didn't get was that it actually did really matter who had sent those flowers.

* * *

All day Willa worked uninterrupted, which made a nice change. She thought perhaps Ewan would visit to fill her in on how everything had unfolded with Sarah, but even after she

propped open her door welcomingly and angled the wicker chair towards it, she had no takers.

An edited manuscript arrived for a new book, ping-pong into Willa's inbox pleasingly on schedule, giving her a spark of pride. She had created this: a well-oiled little publishing machine. The books were good, the authors were paid enough, and the freelancers she'd developed relationships with were clever and reliable. It was a satisfying arrangement, in spite of what Kat thought of romance novels. She felt like the little engine that could.

She would call Kat. She wouldn't mention the flowers. It would just be a general catchup. Before George had come along she and Kat would probably have spent Sunday together as well as Saturday. Willa missed her.

Kat answered on the first ring. 'Hey, Will, what's up?'

'Nothing really, I'm at work. Are you?'

'Yeah, I'm rearranging my shop. But I've got my headphones on so we can chat while I keep working.' There was a screech of wooden table legs being shoved across a concrete warehouse floor. 'What are you working on?'

'A romance, you'll be shocked to hear,' said Willa. 'But it's really clever. A bit different. It's called *Out of Order* and it's about a girl who gets in a lift in her apartment building, and there's an out of order sign on it but she gets in anyway and the lift takes her to all these floors where she can enter different parts of her life out of chronological order. She ends up reconnecting with a lost love who in real life married someone else, and then there are issues about whether she will return to her real life or continue in the parallel existence with him.'

'What happens in the end?'

'She goes back to her real life, but then runs into him anyway, and he's no longer married and so they live happily ever after.'

‘That’s a cool premise,’ says Kat. ‘What if — and hear me out here — they don’t live happily ever after?’

‘Then, as you well know, Katharine, it would not fit my list and I wouldn’t publish it. It wouldn’t be a romance.’

‘See, I don’t get that,’ said Kat, and they began winding their way along a well-trodden conversational path. Kat couldn’t see why Willa restricted herself to romance. Willa had tried to explain that her success was built on doing one thing well. ‘Why do all your books have to be the same? It’s always a quirky set-up —’

‘Meet Cute,’ Willa corrected her.

‘Fine, a Meet Cute, then some drama and obstacles, then they get together and live happily ever after.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I know: you don’t think happily ever after should be what people think is normal.’

‘Actually, I think I might have shifted on that.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. I think I’m okay with happily ever after. Now it’s the drama and obstacles that I think are the problem. By always having people who love each other face these terrible barriers to their love, I think you promulgate the idea that unless there are hurdles and problems to overcome, then it isn’t a love that’s worth anything.’

‘I promulgate that, do I?’ replied Willa, trying to keep a straight face.

‘Yes, you promulgate it.’

‘Katty, your half a law degree is showing.’

Kat laughed and moved something with a loud clatter. ‘It’s a great word. I don’t get to use it enough.’

‘Wait,’ said Willa, ‘let me get this straight: you want me to publish stories where people fall in love and get together and . . . that’s it? How’s that even a story, Kat?’

‘I know, it’s not a story. It’s just life. That’s why I think romance stories are bullshit. I think you’re better than them.’

‘No, no, no,’ said Willa. ‘You’re thinking of bad romances. The thing about good romances — the kind I publish — is that they’re like food. You’re not meant to remember everything you eat. You’re meant to enjoy it at the time, then your body takes what you need from it. With romances, as long as they are the right shape, resolve correctly and have the elements we need, they pass into our consciousness, nourishing us with what our souls need. It’s only if they’re bad that they stick with you. Like the meal that makes you spend the night throwing every part of you up into the toilet — you never forget that meal. That’s a bad romance novel. Good ones are satisfying, but quickly digested, which means we can reread them, and we can read more like them without ever tiring of them. People say they are like junk food, but I don’t think that’s right. Junk food leaves you feeling regretful and queasy with a slick mouth, and a strong feeling that you’re going to vom. Good romances leave our hearts feeling full of love and hope. They give us the impetus to go on. To see the light and joy in the world. In food terms, they’re something sweet but nourishing, with a tang, that leaves you satisfied but not full of self-loathing. They’re carrot cake with a rich, lemony, cream-cheese frosting.’

Kat was silent, as though she was taking in Willa’s wise theory.

‘That,’ she finally said, ‘makes absolutely no sense. You’re wasted on romances. I think you should be turning your considerable talents to a different genre.’

‘Like what for instance?’

‘Crime?’

‘Crime. How is that better for the world?’

There were thumping noises at Kat’s end. ‘Crime novels help us learn to stay safe. They show the baser instincts of humankind and . . . oh fuck, Willa, I don’t know, I just plucked

crime out of the air. Why not publish historical fiction, or self-help books about breathing or poems by Instagrammers?’

‘I think romance novels give people hope. Not everyone is in love in their own lives. Don’t you think it’s nice for them to vicariously experience that feeling through a book? My books all do that. They lift hearts.’ Willa was valiant in her defence of her books, as though they were soldiers under her command, sent out into the world on a mission to show people all the ways you could fall in love, and all the things it was possible to overcome in the name of that love. ‘My books help keep people’s heart muscles fit until the real thing comes along. At least, that’s what they do for me. I think I’ll be able to recognise true love when I see it because of these books, because I know they’re heightened and they rely on tropes and cliches, but they’re all based in someone’s truth, at some point.’

‘Hmmm, maybe,’ said Kat, dubiously.

Willa changed the subject. ‘How was the rest of your weekend?’

‘It was nice. Quiet. We had dinner at George’s place on Saturday, and then we hung out at mine on Sunday. Walked Billy Jowl a few times. Warm for March, wasn’t it? I thought the weather had turned cool now properly but it seems not.’

Kat being boring and vague about a boyfriend was new. It didn’t sit well with Willa at all. Normally Kat was fantastically indiscreet about her love life. She hadn’t dated a sex shower dishwasher, but last year Kat had been on several dates with a man with a very small penis. Not a micro-penis, they’d ascertained with some google searches that led to Willa having to reset all the cookies on her laptop afterwards, but in car terms it would have been a Mazda 121 — fine in the ‘Small Cars Only’ spaces in the Westfield parking station.

Lately — since George came on the scene, actually, now that Willa thought about it — Kat had been very general about how things were going.

This non-specific weekend report — ‘quiet’ and ‘nice’ — was not how their conversations went. Kat was talking like they were being recorded by ASIO. This was horrible. Stilted. It felt like talking to a bad fan-fiction version of her best friend, written by some random on the internet. Maybe if Willa offered some juicy gossip, she’d get some in return.

‘Ewan’s already seeing someone new,’ Willa confided. ‘He picked her up at the pub on Saturday night when we were having a schnitzel. Can you believe that? It’s only been a few weeks since Winter buggered off.’

Kat’s real laugh came burbling down the line, and Willa’s heart lifted. That was more like it.

‘No, not there.’ Kat laughed again. ‘It’ll fall.’

‘What?’ Willa was confused.

‘Sorry, I was talking to George.’

‘Oh,’ said Willa, deflated. ‘I didn’t realise he was with you.’

‘Yeah, he’s actually moved his shop next to mine in the warehouse. We can be together during the day now!’

‘Really? He wants to watch you at work all day? Isn’t that a bit red-flaggy? Remember that doco we watched about coercive control? This is how it starts. You’re allowed to have your own life, Kat.’

‘Don’t be silly. I want him around more. What was that you were saying about Ewan?’

‘Never mind,’ said Willa. ‘Oops, I’ve got a work call coming through. Talk soon.’ She ended the call.

She looked at the manuscript on her screen. Almost a hundred thousand words. Kat was wrong. This book, and many of the others Willa helped bring to the world, was a good, important book. Maybe not important in a global, historical sense — she didn’t imagine it’d be found on university reading lists in centuries to come — but it was useful now. Readers liked being reminded that exhilaration

and lust existed. Her books almost always contained something that readers could use to bring themselves to a happy orgasm in the knowledge that no one was harmed in the making. That had to be good for the world. In a time when so much wasn't going right, when people were drudging about all day long with a low-level fear of the world ending like the fuse going out on an overheating hairdryer, wondering each summer which way the coin would fall — whether there would be fires or flood, or just for shits and giggles maybe another global pandemic, financial collapse or a world war — people needed some levity and thrills.

It was after seven when Willa stopped working. The time had sped by and even the growing shadows of evening hadn't reminded her to stop. Gradually she became aware of an empty quietness, and when she paused to think, she recalled Gladstone had said goodbye as he passed her office some hours earlier, and that she'd heard others sing out as they'd left too. She gathered up the plate she'd put her sandwich on at lunchtime and her two empty coffee mugs from that morning, but as she reached the top of the landing she heard someone moving around in the big room below. Ewan appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

'Hi,' he said. 'I thought I was the only one still here.'

'I'm about to head off,' she said, continuing down towards him. He moved aside from the newel post to let her by, and as she passed her shoulder brushed his chest. He stepped back quickly. She paused and looked at him. 'You all right?'

'Hmm? Yeah. Great.' He fiddled with the rolled-up cuff on his right shirt sleeve, unfolding it as if he were going to button it at his wrist, then re-rolling to just where it had been. Willa stood and watched until she became conscious that she was staring at his forearm and turned to hurry along the corridor to the small kitchen at the back of the house. The dishwasher was already running — it was one of Imogen's duties to turn it on at the end of the day — so Willa ran hot water into the sink and squirted detergent onto her mugs and plate. She stood,

washing them by hand, until a small cough alerted her to Ewan's presence behind her.

'Am I in your way? Did you need the sink?'

He was fiddling with his left cuff now.

'Ewan? What's going on? You're being fucking odd.'

'I was just thinking,' he said, still not meeting Willa's eyes, 'that it's funny how much people change. How what they want changes.'

Winter. He was talking about Winter, she realised. He wanted to talk about what had caused the demise of their marriage, probably so he could make sense of how he was moving on so quickly. She was curious to hear how he was justifying that to himself. Not that it needed justifying: she just found it curious, the way people thought about themselves and their behaviour, the way they made decisions. It all helped when she was working, to make sure the characters in the books she published made sense and were interesting.

She rinsed the mugs and set them on the draining rack. 'What kind of changes?'

'Well, you know. People say they want something, or don't want it, that it's not who they are and it doesn't fit with their life, but you can never assume that decision is permanent. We grow and we change. What we want changes. I guess like how some people consider themselves dog people, and think they should have one all the time, because they grew up with dogs. And then they realise they live in a flat and there isn't room for a dog, and they don't have time for it, and it wouldn't be good for them or the dog.'

Willa tried to follow what he was saying. What was the dog in this metaphor? Winter?

When he'd finished speaking, Ewan just stood there. Willa didn't know what to say. There hadn't been a question in that little ramble, had there? The dishwasher hummed behind her, a white-noise soundtrack of swishing water and the gentle rhythmic clunk of the spinning arm inside hitting something

slightly too tall on the bottom rack. She turned back to the counter, took a tea towel from a hook on the wall, and methodically dried the mugs and the plate, replacing them on the shelf where they lived. Someone had left a jar of Ewan's marmalade on the counter with the lid off, so she screwed it back on and replaced it in the cupboard beside three more jars.

Finally he spoke again. 'Anyway. I wanted to say that. To explain. That I might have changed my mind on how I see my life going. Because you never really know what the future has in store, do you?'

Willa's eyes prickled, startling her. She opened them as wide as she could, staring down at the empty sink and commanding the nonsensical tears away. The thought of crying in front of Ewan filled her with dismay, and instead she faked a huge sneeze into the crook of her elbow.

'Bless you,' he said, and she turned to him, wiping her eyes and smiling.

'I'm fine, it's just my allergy to other people's feelings.'

He laughed. 'Sorry, I forgot about that. Should have brought you a Zyrtec before I shared.'

'I'd better head off,' she said.

'Yeah, of course, me too. Got plans tonight?'

'Another date,' she lied.

'Awesome — anyone I know?'

'Mate, it's not even anyone I know. You know I don't go out with people I know.'

'What's this one do?'

'This one is a . . . submariner.'

'Really, like in the actual navy?'

'No, he's a freelance submariner. He uses a GoGet Sub. Of course in the navy.'

'Wow. Where are you going?'

‘Um, a new micro-bar on Clarence Street in the city. It only holds six people. You have to book. I figured he’d be comfortable there. Close confines, you know.’

‘That’s thoughtful of you. Hope it goes well. See you tomorrow.’ He turned, then stopped and looked back. ‘Hey, if you can’t find him when you get to the bar, just ping and he’ll ping back.’

Willa snorted. ‘Go home, Ewan. Or out or whatever. You catching up with Sarah?’ She tried to keep her voice casual.

‘No,’ he said. ‘She was nice but . . . I don’t know. Too soon maybe. Or just not for me.’

‘Oh.’

He glanced at her quickly. ‘Bye.’

She listened as he walked the length of the hall, opened the front door and closed it behind him. His footsteps grew fainter: he’d be down the front steps now, and on the footpath.

It took Willa a second to remember that she did not in fact have a date with a submariner in a small bar that night. She was going home to her empty flat, long overdue for a vacuum. Vacuuming was on her to-do list, but there were other things above it. There was the hens night, and she needed to find something to wear to the wedding. It was coming up alarmingly quickly.

Chapter 14

On every internet list Willa had found of Dos and Don'ts for Planning a Hens Do, holding the event the night before the wedding was the number one Don't. Universally, every magazine article and blog post warned against it. A bride should, the night before her wedding, be drinking a lot of water, advice that seemed incompatible with the instruction that she should also get a good night's sleep. The bride needed to eat a healthy, light meal, and practise walking in her wedding shoes while taking calm breaths.

That was all well and good if your family and friends lived where you were getting married, and you had the luxury of seeing them in the weeks leading up to Your Special Day, but Imogen's mates were mainly in Tasmania, and only coming up for the weekend of the wedding. It was unreasonable to expect a bunch of women in their early twenties to shell out for two weekends in Sydney, Imogen had maintained, also scoffing at the preachy night-before lists Willa had emailed her. Those, she maintained, were more appropriate for people who were over thirty. Older brides probably did need an early night and a big drink of water. If at twenty-two she couldn't back up a massive night out with a wedding that wasn't even taking place until two thirty in the afternoon, well, that was just a bit pathetic.

Willa just went with the flow in the end, and booked the bar and the karaoke private room for the Friday evening before the Saturday wedding, but it still felt like a bad idea. The compromise they reached was that Imogen had agreed to make sure everything for the wedding was done before the party began on Friday night. Willa was relieved but simultaneously resented being made to feel like a nagging mother. Aunty

Jenny seemed to have abdicated that responsibility and had declared that Willa had it all under control. Jenny and Gordon were planning to spend the night before the wedding with Willa's parents and a bunch of old friends from Sydney. The hens night was for the kids.

As she tried to stay abreast of the various WhatsApp groups, email threads and texts that flew between Imogen, her family, the Smiths and all their friends, Willa was feeling more and more like one of the older generation. Once she found out that her parents, aunt and uncle and their friends were going to Hubert for dinner, she almost cried. She would be trying to keep up with shot-drinking children — who'd be screaming Britney songs ironically into two microphones while sexually harassing some poor bloke who was probably trying to pay his way through uni as a stripper waiter — and trying to make sure Imogen was in a fit state to enter into matrimony the next day, while the grownups got to go to one of the best restaurants in town. Willa had only been to the bar at Hubert, but it had been everything she liked: elegant, hushed and dark, fragrant with candlewax and the citrus and spices that were smashed into the cocktails. If she could go with the oldies she'd leave feeling young by comparison. The hens night would make her feel ancient.

A sole bridesmaid didn't have a choice though, and so Willa found herself sitting in a waterfront bar in Bondi at seven o'clock the evening before the wedding, trying to keep two tables from being taken over by the steadily encroaching gangs of revellers and keeping her eye on her phone and the door to the venue. Angus was supposed to be dropping Imogen off with her two best friends from home, Kristy and Madison, after picking them up from the airport. They were half an hour late already and blondes in ribbed crop tops were circling the table. Willa had spread out as much as she could, even going to the extent of buying two bottles of champagne and placing a glass at each of the eight seats, but that wouldn't stave them off forever. Eventually they'd launch a takeover, all 'sweetie

you don't mind if we perch here's and battings of their heavy black lash extensions.

By Willa's feet sat two shopping bags of the most awful plastic tat: a veritable cornucopia of phalluses that Madison had insisted on buying online and having delivered to Willa's flat. Rose-gold penis straws, willy whistles, knob-shaped syringes that apparently people drank shots of alcohol from, a banner that in glitter letters spelled out the words *CHICKS BEFORE DICKS*, a sheriff's badge that read *Pecker Inspector* and eight pairs of earrings with two-inch plastic dicks hanging from them. Never in her life had Willa been so afraid of dying in a traffic accident as she had on the way to the pub. The thought of being knocked over by a car and her broken body coming to rest on a pile of sexist landfill was utterly horrifying. Of course if she were dead she wouldn't feel embarrassment, but she thought there was a good chance that the sheer quantity of the stuff might transcend realms and she'd take the mortification with her into the hereafter. Willa didn't believe in heaven or hell, but it would be Murphy's Law that she'd be wrong and turn up at the pearly gates wearing the satin sash that declared *SAME PENIS FOREVER*.

One of the circling blondes was up at the bar, leaning over to talk to the manager, a slightly older woman (though still under thirty), and Willa could see her pointing over at the conspicuously underpopulated tables by the window. The supervisor nodded at the blonde, came out from behind the bar and approached.

'Hi there, madam,' she said, her voice sugar-coated. Don't you madam me, Willa thought, and immediately realised that even thinking that made her entirely deserving of being called madam. 'I'm afraid we can't let you hang onto both these tables all night: as you can see, we're very busy.'

Willa was on the verge of giving up the tables when shrieks from the door made both her and the supervisor look over.

'Willaaaaaaaaa!' yelled Imogen. 'Woo!'

‘Sorry,’ Willa told the supervisor. ‘I was as hopeful as you that they weren’t going to show up but looks like fortune favours the loud.’

Imogen wiggled through the crowd, followed by two girls Willa presumed were Madison and Kristy, and Sylvia, in a conga line of tanned midriffs. Kat and Bec had said they’d be here too, but there was no sign of them.

‘Mwah!’ Imogen planted a huge kiss on Willa’s cheek and took a seat beside her. ‘Will, these are my oldest friends, Kristy and Madison. Aren’t they the most beautiful people you’ve ever seen? Like ever?’

Imogen and her friends were already a few shots in, at least, which perhaps wasn’t a bad thing, as it meant Willa could pretend to keep up for a bit, and then they’d be too pissed to notice when she switched to water. She’d need to keep an eye on Imogen: her cousin’s claim of being hangover-proof might be thus far undisputed, but her wedding was not the time to break her winning streak.

As they drank and picked at bowls of fries and the pumpkin and rocket salad that someone insisted on ordering, Willa gently probed Imogen’s friends. What did they make of her impending nuptials? Surely, as young women in this day and age, they thought it nonsensical of Imogen to marry her first serious boyfriend.

Willa was wrong. They were into it, and she came over the course of the next two hours to understand that they thought getting married was a great idea, on par with living overseas, or getting a new piercing. No big deal, might be fun, can’t hurt: that was the vibe. It astonished her. Did they not see what a big decision this was? It was momentous to bind yourself by law to another human being. Why didn’t they take it more seriously? It was because, Madison confided, when she and Willa found themselves together in the queue for the toilets just before nine, if it didn’t work, then there’d be no harm done. Nothing, she slurred boozily into Willa’s ear, was forever, and that was the true secret of happiness. You had to

be cool with that, and then everything was sweet. Madison sounded so much like Willa's grandmother, Ruth, who'd come of age in the 1960s, that she would have laughed aloud if the tequila fumes from Madison's breath hadn't made her cough instead.

Chapter 15

By a quarter to ten Imogen and her friends were wearing pink plastic headbands adorned with three-inch-high pink spring-mounted penises, which made them in equal parts mortifying to be seen with and easy to keep track of, as Willa shepherded them out to a pair of waiting Ubers, doing a sweep behind them to gather two abandoned jackets, the Woolworths bags of dicks, and Imogen's phone.

The cars let them out in an alley near Central Station, where they all piled through a doorway that looked like a fire exit and up several flights of stairs that smelled like urine, to what several websites had assured Willa was the best karaoke club in town. On the last landing before the club she stopped everyone. She turned to face them, with her best approximation of the expression she'd seen Bec use when the twins were on their last warning before a visit to the naughty step.

'Guys. You have to settle down. Get out your IDs, have them ready. Madison, put your shoes back on.' Willa reached over and pressed a half-fallen-off false eyelash strip back into place on Imogen's eye. 'Imogen, fix that. It's either on or off. Headbands into this bag please, just until we're in the private room.'

'D'you promise you'll give them back?' Kristy clutched her headband to her chest and pouted at Willa.

'I promise.'

Kristy surrendered the headband and smoothed her black bob back into place.

To Willa's surprise they all passed the bouncers without a second glance and were ushered into a large private room —

too large for their relatively small number. Initially they'd planned for a dozen attendees, but since neither Kat nor Bec had bothered to show up, they remained a grand total of five, though Imogen still thought her housemates and some girls she knew from her boot camp might join them eventually.

While the girls tested the microphones and pored over the playlists, cueing up songs Willa hadn't heard of, she checked her phone. Nothing from Kat, but there was a message five minutes ago from Bec:

Order me a double shitfaced on the rocks. Be with you in 5. It was followed by a GIF of Amy Poehler and Tina Fey dancing in a club, and Willa had barely hit the like button when the door was flung open by Bec herself, wearing a sparkly halter-neck top, black skinny jeans and Converse hi-tops. Her hair was loose, and there was the best part of a glitter eyeshadow palette smudged generously around her eyes.

'Hey, baby bride!' she bellowed at Imogen, who embraced her with the enthusiasm of four expensive cocktails, an indeterminate number of shots and zero glasses of water.

Imogen's friends looked on, visibly unsettled by Bec's frantic mother-on-the-loose energy. To their evident relief, Bec plonked herself down on the banquette next to Willa and didn't talk to them.

'I didn't think you were going to make it,' said Willa.

'I nearly bailed,' admitted Bec. 'Twins were unspeakable at bedtime, Perce is having a sleepover at a friend's, and I felt bad leaving Ralph to deal with it all. And he made it so much worse, by being just so encouraging. So I pinched two little bottles of whiskey from a tasting set I got him for Father's Day and drank them in the cab. Serves him right. I'm ready for another one now. Are we getting any drinks or what?'

'There's a stripper waiter coming; he'll be here in a minute. If we go out and order the drinks ourselves he'll have nothing to do.' Willa noticed Sylvia wasn't in the room any more — she must have gone to meet the waiter and get things

organised. She'd been thrilled when Sylvia had taken over the organisation on that front. Willa had forwarded the link to Toplessly Devoted To You's website, and now just had to sit back and wait for the objectification to begin. She returned to Bec.

'Hang on. Why's it bad that Ralph was encouraging you to come out?'

'Because, Willa, he was awful. He kept saying I should just go and have a good time. That I deserved a night out. That he could tell I needed a break. But it was so passive aggressive, you know? I know he didn't mean it.'

'He might have meant it. He's not a passive aggressive person, in general, is he?'

'No, the shit. You're right. He did mean it. Which only makes it worse. Because that means he's a good person and he loves me and wants me to be happy and I just want him to suffer, like I suffer.'

'I don't think you really want him to suffer. I think you're both just knackered.'

'We are. It would just be easier if he was a proper shit. I wouldn't feel so bad complaining.'

'You're allowed to complain.' Willa put her arm around her friend's skinny shoulders. She'd vomited so much during her pregnancy with the twins that she'd emerged looking like Kate Moss going through a rough patch and never put the weight back on. 'If it's any consolation, I think your life seems absolutely horrible, and I don't know how you do it. Any of it. The kids, the nappies, the bins.'

Bec's rage had softened into sniffly tears. She wiped her eyes and her hand came away streaked with nine shades from the Urban Decay Naked Heat Palette. 'It is. It's shit. And my terrible parents ran away from us. That hurts. Who chooses Tasmania over their own child?'

'It will get better, Bec. The twins will be like Persephone before you know it.'

‘Do you really think they will?’

‘Well . . . no, they’re nothing like her. Sorry.’

Bec snort-laughed. ‘Who do you have to screw to get a drink around here?’

As she spoke, Sylvia came through the doorway with a flourish, grabbed the remote control for the karaoke system from the table and paused ‘Wrecking Ball’, which Kristy and Madison had been howling along to.

‘Ladies and older ladies, can I interest anyone in a shot . . . of Jim Beam?’ She gestured to the door and in strutted a man wearing a black sequined G-string, the collar and cuffs of a white dress shirt, a black bow tie and shiny black shoes and socks. He held out a tray of cocktails and, amid whoops of glee, grinned cheekily at them all.

‘Evening, ladies. I’m Jim. I’m here to help you have a very good time.’

Barely beneath her breath Bec said, ‘Dear god, the shoes and socks: I just can’t,’ before collapsing into silent shuddering laughter, her head resting on her arm on the back of the banquette. Willa was with her all the way. The man was in his mid-twenties, built like a Ken doll, and spray tanned the colour of sticky date pudding. She’d never before considered what a Buff Butler would wear on his feet, but a G-string with shoes and socks was somehow so infinitely more ridiculous than bare feet would have been. It was probably an Occupational Health and Safety requirement though, that he wear shoes. The stickiness of the carpet in the karaoke rooms was certainly an extreme health hazard. And what else could he have worn? Sneakers? Thongs? It took a moment for her to figure out what the whole get-up reminded her of, but Bec was ahead of her. Through her laughter, she managed to tell Willa, ‘*Possum Magic*. He’s like the possum in that book, when it’s been made invisible and then parts of it start to reappear.’

They sat, shaking with mirth, on the banquette, unregarded by the rest of the party.

Willa had been to a few hens nights before. There had been a flurry of weddings beginning when she was twenty-nine that had continued for three years, and then they'd eased off to one or two a year. None of them had featured parties like this. Her friends had mostly regarded traditional hens parties as sexist and outdated.

It intrigued Willa that this generation — or at least the sample size of three members of this generation — didn't feel like that. Some of her mates had gone for a night at the pub with friends in the lead-up to getting married, but mostly with both sexes. One had done a visit to a paint and sip art studio, but she hadn't even taken the raunchy life-drawing option: they'd all copied the same landscape of a canal in Venice, and by the time they came to daub in the gondolier they'd all been so hammered that the gondolas mostly looked like they were being piloted by the marshmallow man from *Ghostbusters*. The bride-to-be on that occasion had worn a flower crown with a little laser-cut wooden sign that read *Bride* tucked into the front — a far cry from Imogen, who was now sporting the *Same Penis Forever* sash over her minidress and wearing both her own and Willa's headbands, giving her a total of four knobs bobbing above her face.

Jim Beam had put down his tray and was dancing with Imogen, which Willa assumed meant that Sylvia had paid for the upgraded package. Madison was delivering a word- and pitch-perfect performance of My Chemical Romance's 'Teenagers', throwing Willa's brain into a momentary spin as she recognised it as a song she'd danced to at the same age these girls were now. Was this a retro revival or had she slipped back in time? 'How do they know this?' she asked Bec. 'They would have been toddlers when it was a hit.'

'TikTok,' said Bec. 'And they would have been six, not toddlers. I can see Perce getting back into stuff she likes now, fifteen years down the track. For us it would be like if we got up and sang "Baby Got Back" or "November Rain".'

Willa sat with that information and watched the scene unfolding before her. The dancing waiter was grinding up

against Imogen's thigh, who was somehow managing to dance while sipping her drink through a penis straw and not actually putting her free hand on Jim's sweaty, oiled shoulders. She was very cool. Cooler than Willa had ever been. Even as young as she was, thought Willa, she'd be all right.

She tapped Bec's arm. 'Shall we do "November Rain"?'

'Nah, it's four hours long and a total bummer. Read the room, Will.'

'You're probably right.'

They kept watching. 'They're very confident, aren't they?' Willa commented. 'I was nowhere near that self-assured when I was twenty-two. I still felt like a kid. These are fully grown-up people.'

'They look confident,' agreed Bec. 'But who knows? I remember putting a lot of energy into seeming confident, but it was all surface level. Still do, to be honest.'

Kristy broke away from where she'd been filming the others and joined them on the banquette. 'Fuck, I'm boiling.'

'Want some water?' Bec offered her a bottle, which she took and drank from. With her head tilted back her bob swung slightly but stayed parallel to the floor, like a glossy black spirit level. Willa watched her arched neck as she gulped down the water: her skin was so taut and smooth. Necks were something people took entirely for granted. Unless you read Nora Ephron, you didn't even know to worry about them until it was too late. Unconsciously Willa put her hand over her own throat. It wasn't terrible yet, but she felt like it could give way at any time, like an overstretched elastic band.

'So, is Imogen your first friend to get married?' Willa asked, continuing her unofficial anthropological survey.

'Yep. It's cool.'

'See, that's interesting to me,' said Willa. 'When I was twenty-two we thought marriage was something you wouldn't

even consider until you were nearly thirty. Your twenties were for experimenting and travelling, not settling down.’

‘I was twenty-seven,’ Bec interrupted. ‘And everyone acted like I was a child bride.’

Kristy nodded thoughtfully. ‘You could look at this — Immy marrying a guy — as an experiment, in a different way. It doesn’t have to tie her down. Who knows where it might lead?’

Bec looked confused. ‘Well, to being with Angus and having kids and living with him forever, presumably, forsaking all others. That’s kind of what they’re signing themselves up for.’

‘I don’t necessarily think so. Maybe, but maybe they’ll try new stuff within the marriage paradigm. Things aren’t as binary as your generation makes out.’

‘Like an open marriage?’

‘Possibly. Maybe they’ll be poly or explore other forms of nonmonogamy. The fact that she’s marrying a guy isn’t even as set in stone as you make out. Gender identity can change over time, the same way sexual orientation can.’

‘Angus doesn’t strike me as trans, or even non-binary,’ said Willa.

‘People can surprise you,’ said Kristy, with an arched eyebrow, and she took another swig of water before bouncing back to join Imogen at the microphone. Willa sat, dazed, and watched Kristy singing, wondering what it would be like to feel so free and confident, to not be preoccupied with the idea that out there in the world was someone for you, and that you needed to find them. Suddenly Willa felt very tired, exhausted by constantly seeking, while pretending not to, and always feeling left behind. She wished she could just stop.

Someone had figured out how to work the settings on the lights, and flashes of purple and pink now sparkled around the room, washing Kristy’s sharp dark hair and Imogen’s blonde head, as they concentrated hard on reading the lyrics scrolling

over a video of a young Korean couple walking through a garden in springtime.

Chapter 16

The door opened and in came four more young women — Imogen's boot camp friends, if their extremely toned shoulders and arms were any indication. It was starting, finally, to feel like a real party.

Willa relaxed and took the last shot from the tray Jim Beam was offering around. It was Baileys layered with sambuca: it tasted like a liquorice bullet, and the warmth it sent through her body felt like a kiss. Sylvia was speaking earnestly to Jim, her hand cupped around her mouth as she leaned close to his ear. Willa hoped she was sending him to the bar for more shots. He tucked the empty tray under his arm and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Now there was a huge group rendition of 'I've Had the Time of My Life' from *Dirty Dancing* — it seemed some karaoke classics transcended generations — and though it was one of Willa's least favourite songs in the world, she joined in with gusto, shouting along with the others and dancing, holding hands with Bec and feeling like she was back in high school. When the song reached its crescendo, Bec leaped onto the banquette and gave the sax solo her all, eyes squeezed closed, clutching an instrument made of air, and somehow managing to blow away all the second-hand embarrassment that welled up in Willa on her behalf. She was wild in a way Willa hadn't seen for years, probably since before she was pregnant with Persephone.

Willa looked around for Imogen. She would be having the best time. Tonight was working out so much better than she had expected, and it wasn't just the opinion of all the sambuca. But Imogen wasn't there. Toilet, thought Willa, which reminded her of her own full bladder. She grabbed her bag and

as she reached the door it opened and Imogen stood before her, breathing hard, wild-eyed.

Willa took her hand. 'You okay, Immy?'

'I need to go home.' Her eyes were glassy with tears.

'Sure, no worries. Did something happen?'

'I just need to go. Now.' Imogen retreated into the corridor and stood leaning against the wall, clearly trying to calm her breathing.

Willa looked back into the room and considered her options. If she waited until the song ended to say goodbye, they'd all want to know why she and Imogen were leaving. Imogen needed to get out now. Willa slipped out of the room and put her arm around her cousin and in silence they descended all the flights of stairs to the street. Willa sent a quick text of apology to Bec, asking her to gather and bin all the hens paraphernalia when she left.

'I'll just call an Uber,' said Willa.

'I don't want to wait for an Uber. There's a cab,' said Imogen, and Willa saw she was shivering, her teeth chattering in spite of the unseasonably warm April night.

Willa hailed the taxi and they rode in silence in the back seat, Imogen holding Willa's hand so tightly it hurt all the way home. Her mind raced through possible causes for Imogen's distress: had she taken something? Was this a drug reaction? Or had she simply drunk too much? Had something happened to Angus?

'Imogen,' she said. 'I just need you to tell me: is someone hurt, or sick? Did you get a phone call? Have you taken anything?'

Imogen looked at her, blinking. She seemed confused. 'No. No phone call. I didn't take anything.'

The cab pulled up outside Willa's flat and Imogen led the way upstairs, swaying slightly.

Inside, Willa poured a glass of water and passed it to Imogen, filled the kettle and clicked it on to boil. Imogen stood in the kitchen, holding her bag to her chest, staring.

‘Imogen, sit down. You’re freaking me out. What the fuck happened?’

Imogen took a breath that cracked twice into sobs during her inhale. ‘The . . .’ Her chest heaved again. ‘The guy.’

‘What guy?’

‘The stripper.’

‘Jim Beam?’

Imogen nodded and stared down.

Willa felt cold. ‘What about him?’

‘I was so drunk.’

‘What did he do? Did he hurt you?’

‘I was so drunk. I am so drunk.’ Her voice was angry.

‘Imogen,’ Willa snapped. ‘Stop saying that. It doesn’t make any difference. What happened?’

‘He kissed me, and touched me, in the corridor. I was coming back from the toilet. He came out of our karaoke room and shut the door behind him. We were right outside the door. Fast, it all happened so fast. I didn’t want to. I must have made him think I did, because he grabbed me and pushed me against the wall. My head hit the wall. Did you notice the walls were carpeted? I didn’t realise until my head hit it.’ Her face was blank as she spoke, but tears were pouring down her cheeks. ‘It felt slow though. I didn’t react. I wasn’t fast enough to stop him. It felt like everything was moving slowly. I was moving so slowly. I said fast but it was slow too.’

Willa purposefully slowed her own breathing. Panicking wouldn’t help Imogen. ‘You said he touched you.’

‘On my legs. He pulled one of my legs up, around him. It pushed my dress right up. He kissed my neck and my mouth.’

He touched my breasts. He pulled my top down, off my shoulder.’ Now she sounded flat. Horribly flat.

‘God,’ breathed Willa. ‘Imogen, I’m so sorry.’

Imogen moved to the sofa and sat down, and Willa joined her, shoving a stack of books to the floor and gently taking her hand again.

‘I feel so stupid,’ Imogen whispered. ‘I was dancing with him. You saw us. It was pretty slutty.’

‘Do not ever say that.’ Willa’s voice shook with anger. ‘You did nothing wrong. You were just having a laugh. You are allowed to dance however you want with whoever you want; it doesn’t give anyone the right to shove you against a wall and assault you.’

‘It wasn’t really an assault. It was just a few kisses. It was my own fault.’ Her voice was almost a whisper now.

‘Imogen, stop. It wasn’t your fault. There’s no way it can be your fault. Shall I call the police? We can make a report right now. They’ll arrest the little bastard. The club might have CCTV.’

Imogen looked uncertain. ‘He did eventually let me go when I shoved him off. I guess I’m lucky, in a way.’ A little sob escaped her throat. ‘I don’t want to tell anyone. I don’t want cops involved. It’s nearly three. I’m getting married in a few hours. I just want to drink some water and go to sleep.’ She sniffed. ‘It’s not that big a deal. I feel stupid now. It was just a shock.’

‘Do you want me to call Angus? I can get him round here. You know that stuff about not seeing the bride before the wedding is nonsense.’

Imogen shook her head. ‘Really, I just want to go to sleep and forget about it. I’m making a fuss about nothing. It was just a bit of a grope. Worse things have happened on crowded trains.’

They sat in silence for a few moments.

‘Immy,’ said Willa. ‘Can I just check one more thing?’

‘What?’

‘Are there any marks on you? You said he grabbed your leg, and he pulled your strap down. Are there any marks on your skin? Because if there are, I want to take a quick photo. Will you do that?’

Imogen pulled the hem of her dress up and examined her thigh. There were no marks there, and none on her arms or neck or shoulders. ‘See?’ she said. ‘I’m making too much of it.’

Willa didn’t know what to do. Maybe Imogen had just panicked, drunkenly. There was no physical sign that the guy had hurt her.

‘Do you want a shower?’

Imogen lay her head on a cushion at the end of the sofa. ‘Hmmm, no. I mean I do but I’m too tired. In the morning.’

Willa had planned to give the bride her bed and take the couch herself, but within moments Imogen was asleep. She gently removed her cousin’s shoes and tucked a blanket around her.

‘Will?’ Imogen mumbled, her eyes still closed. ‘Please don’t tell anyone what happened. I just want to forget it.’

‘All right.’ Willa dropped a kiss on Imogen’s head.

* * *

Lying in bed, Willa’s eyes wouldn’t close. It was so close to morning already. She went through the running order for the wedding day in her head: two thirty ceremony; cars coming to collect them from her place at one thirty. The hair and make-up artist was arriving at ten, to have time to do Imogen, Willa and their mothers. If Imogen wasn’t up by nine she’d wake her, to give her time for a shower and some food.

The wedding blogs had been right. Having the hens do the night before the wedding had been a monstrously stupid thing

to do. Imogen needed to recover from what had happened. It seemed absurd that in a few hours she would have to get up, put aside a sexual assault, get all dressed up and walk down the aisle.

But you couldn't put off a wedding for something like that. Something so vague. Was it an assault? Was it a drunken fumble that went too far? She believed Imogen — of course she did. There was no faking that level of distress and trauma. Clearly what had happened had been awful for her. But was it possible that there was no ill intent from Jim Beam? God, they didn't even know his real name. He might have just thought Imogen was up for it. By Imogen's own admission it ended as quickly as it began. There was no use going over and over it any more tonight. There was nothing to be done and she needed to shut her brain off.

She hoped the bucks night had been more successful. Traditionally that was the event that got messy, not the hens. She'd half-expected a text or two from Ewan during the evening but there had been nothing. The last thing they needed in the morning was Angus showing up to the wedding with his eyebrows shaved off or a Sharpie drawing of a dick on his face. It wasn't likely: she couldn't see Ewan or Dougal letting things get too out of hand, but when Alistair and the twins' mates from school were involved, anything was possible. Willa had heard rumours they'd been involved in something that got some of their classmates suspended in Year Twelve. Some pacifying arrangement (probably donation-based) had been reached with the headmaster of their private boys' school and the problem went away, but the twins, especially Alistair, had always had a mild whiff of trouble about them. He wouldn't do anything too stupid though, surely. He adored Angus.

A montage of possible post-bucks issues they might be faced with in the morning ran through Willa's head on a loop, but they were calming, standard Hollywood fare — the sorts of shenanigans everyone would be laughing about by the time the speeches rolled around at the reception. Angus, fallen

asleep drunk and painted with fake tan; Angus, driven out to god knows where and left naked, cling-wrapped to a lamppost, to find his own way home; Angus, drunkenly deciding to try on his wedding suit and spilling bleach all over it. The cognitive crisis shuffle helped, drawing Willa closer to sleep and calmer. As the first rays of dawn began to melt the night, she fell into a heavy and dreamless sleep.

Chapter 17

The sound of gently clattering china cups and the kettle coming to the boil woke Willa. She opened her eyes enough for the aggressive morning light to pierce her brain, popping the bubble of possibility that she wasn't going to have a bad hangover. Her head throbbed and her mouth felt like a gangrenous foot. That she was feeling this ropery on first waking was violently unfair. She hadn't even tried to keep up with the twenty-two-year-olds.

The night before flooded back, and she cursed herself for letting the crisis of Imogen and the topless waiter distract her so much that she'd forgotten to carry out any of her usual hangover mitigation practices.

Willa had entered her thirties with a few rules about drinking, developed through trial and error, and by thirty-six had a well-honed arsenal of weapons in the war against day-after misery. All of these relied on doing certain things after drinking and before sleeping, none of which she'd even thought of the previous night. There had been no bowl of cereal. She hadn't forced down a litre of fluorescent yellow electrolyte solution or taken any ibuprofen. All her own rules of drinking — from not mixing her drinks to never doing shots that tasted like lollies — she'd totally disregarded, consuming a panoply of idiotic concoctions. It was going to be a rough day.

Imogen's voice drifted in — she was singing quietly to herself. Her voice was sweet and soft, and she sounded happy. How could she have woken up behaving like Snow White when Willa felt slightly too ill to be in a morgue?

With one hand pressed to her forehead to keep it from falling off, Willa staggered to the bathroom. In the mirror her face looked like a sofa cushion that had been left out for the council cleanup on a rainy night. On the plus side, she was definitely going to get her money's worth out of the makeup artist. She swallowed painkillers, drank some water, scrubbed the scum off her teeth, stood under a scalding shower for a while, and emerged from the bathroom in her robe with a sheet mask pressed onto her face. The mask packaging made some frankly ludicrous claims about transforming her skin into the skin of a person who made better decisions, none of which Willa believed, but it wasn't going to make anything worse. She didn't feel much better, but she was ready to help Imogen face the day.

'Coffee?' asked Imogen, her voice light. She looked as if the night before had never happened. Willa hadn't heard anything through her exhausted slumber but Imogen had evidently already showered and was fresh-faced and fragrant, her wet hair wrapped up in a towel.

'Yep,' said Willa, as she filled a glass from the tap and gulped down the cold water. It made her want to throw up. Her head was pounding. The painkillers would work better if she had some food in her stomach, so she tore open a package of salt-and-vinegar-flavoured rice crackers and ate them four at a time, sitting at the table.

Imogen put a mug of milky coffee in front of her and stood sipping her own, watching Willa curiously. 'Are you feeling okay?' she asked.

Willa looked at her cousin. She looked like she'd had twelve hours' sleep and had never taken a drink in her life. Willa felt a thousand years old. Being thirty-six was absolute bullshit, she thought: some sort of thoroughly undeserved punishment for . . . what? For continuing to exist with a slackening jawline?

'I feel like I died,' Willa croaked. 'I am never, ever drinking again until this afternoon. How are you?'

Imogen pulled out the other wooden chair and joined Willa at the table. ‘I feel a bit stupid. I had a million texts from my friends. I just told them I spewed. All that stuff last night — that was a bit dramatic. I’m sorry I made such a fuss and made us bail.’

‘What? You weren’t being dramatic. You were assaulted.’

Imogen pulled the towel off her head and shook out her damp hair. ‘I wasn’t assaulted. I do know the difference. I got tangled up with a dickhead when I was drunk. It was silly to make a big deal of it. It’s done now. Going on about it makes me sound like a victim, which I am not.’

‘But Imogen, you know assault doesn’t just mean rape. It’s not just being dragged down an alley.’

Imogen looked at her scathingly. ‘Willa, it was not that bad. I’ve had more groping at music festivals. Last night I was drunk and hysterical. I’m not letting this ruin my wedding day.’ Her voice was bright and determined.

Willa searched Imogen’s face for a sign that this was a front. She’d been so distressed last night. Willa had been about to call the cops. And now Imogen seemed totally fine. Was she in shock?

‘Are you absolutely sure, Immy? You don’t have to make any decisions now. We can just enjoy today and then if you change your mind in the next few days we can still report it.’

‘I’m sure. I was drunk, off my guard, and he just took a chance. I didn’t pull away fast enough. He probably thought I was into it.’

‘I don’t know about that.’

‘Can we not talk about it? I just want to focus on today.’

‘Sure, absolutely,’ said Willa. She sipped her coffee and tried to imagine it was a magical elixir that would undo her overindulgence. She visualised it coursing through her body, the molecules of caffeine like angry mothers flinging open the doors to her cells and shouting, ‘For god’s sake pull up that

blind and open the windows. It smells revolting in here. You need some fresh air. Take all those plates down to the kitchen at once and get out of that bed!’ She quietly executed an emotional three-point turn and grinned at Imogen. ‘All right then, bride-face. It’s Your Special Day!’

‘Too bloody right it is. Ooh. Are you all right?’

Willa had closed her eyes and was trying with all her might to keep down the sleeve of crackers she’d just inhaled. She pursed her lips and breathed slowly. That wasn’t going to cut it.

She rose from the table, pulled the sheet mask from her skin and balled it up in her hand. ‘Imogen, I’m just going to excuse myself for a very quick spew, then I’m all yours, reporting for Chief and Only Bridesmaid duties.’

* * *

Willa had only had her makeup done professionally once before, when she and Kat were bridesmaids in Bec’s wedding. That makeup artist had been older than Willa, and while she worked she’d kept up a running stream of compliments about Willa’s skin. Wasn’t it smooth? Willa must always wear sunscreen, mustn’t she, because it was so pale and lovely, no sun damage at all. It had been a glorious experience, all told, and at the end Willa had come out looking like a glittering, smoky-eyed Hollywood starlet with a low loosely curled side ponytail. Her dress had been a just-above-the-knee strapless eau-de-nil chiffon frock she firmly believed she’d wear again. Kat’s dress was the same fabric but one shouldered and mid-calf length. Neither dress had seen the light of day since.

At twenty-seven they’d all been young enough to not have seen many things go properly out of fashion, and they’d worked hard with Bec to make everything at her wedding ‘classic’. Now, whenever they looked back at the photos, they were agog to have been so convinced of how timeless every element of the wedding was, from the moustaches on sticks they’d posed with in the photo booth to the jam jars wrapped in lace and burlap they’d arranged the coral-toned dahlias in.

Now Willa sat on a kitchen chair in front of the living-room window while a makeup artist called Giovanna made pained faces as she patted concealer around Willa's tired bloodshot eyes with her ring finger. She was a good decade younger than Willa, had just finished making Imogen look somehow even more stunning, and was struggling with the transition from working on that smooth and flawless twenty-two-year-old canvas to Willa's hungover mid-thirties face.

'What we really don't want is for all this —' dab dab, pat pat '— to slide into the deep creases here —' pat pat '— and get all —' dab '— stuck.' She patted again, as if she were trying to secure the foundations for a castle in not quite damp enough sand on the beach. She stood back to survey her work critically. 'There's a really fine line between concealing the dark circles and drawing too much attention to the sagging undereye area.'

Willa's father sat on the sofa, scrolling through the Bureau of Meteorology app on his phone. He was already in his good navy suit, though he had a tea towel tucked into his collar to cover the front of his shirt, protecting it from the meat pie that was sitting on the coffee table, cooling and threatening Willa's earlier certainty that after one tactical vomit she was done and ready to rock on. He glanced up, caught her eye and twinkled at her. 'Giovanna,' he said seriously, 'that looks much better. Much, much better. Amazing.'

A raucous hoot of laughter came from the kitchen. Only Aunty Jenny made Willa's mum laugh like that. They turned into children when they were together. After witnessing them losing it over something no one else understood to the point that they were holding each other up and had tears rolling down their cheeks, Giovanna had said she would have to do them last if there was to be any chance of them still having their mascara on by the time they got to the wedding.

Having apparently concealed all she could, the makeup artist moved on to what she was calling a smoky brown eye. She was holding Willa's chin up to get more light on her face but in her peripheral vision Willa saw her father's shoulders

quivering with silent laughter. Giovanna ignored him as she smudged several shades of powder on Willa's eyelids, muttering things about the trickiness of such deeply hooded eyes.

'Are you nearly fixed, Will?' called her mum.

'Don't rush her, Jo,' her dad said. 'Poor old Giovanna has quite a job to do. Willa's got an absolute bugger of a face.'

Giovanna looked horrified. Jenny and Jo came to join the fun, tutting and humming at the tough gig facing Giovanna, offering commiserations and encouragement to the makeup artist to just do her best and not blame herself.

Willa had missed this. She loved the energy of her family when they were all together. Their sense of humour was demented and dark, and there was nothing they liked more than working a long con on a stranger.

'Come on, Tony,' her mum said, patting her dad on the shoulder. 'Come in the kitchen and let the poor girl do what she can. She's a professional. I'm sure she's seen worse.'

Giovanna finished the rest of Willa's face quickly, saying very little as she glued on false eyelashes and swiped on blush.

'They're just joking,' Willa finally told her, but she was pretty sure Giovanna didn't believe her, and thought they were a family of hypercritical monsters.

At Bec's wedding there had been a lot of fanfare before the great bridal reveal, where she'd walked out of the bedroom of the hotel suite where they were getting ready, resplendent in a gown that was pretty much a knock-off of Kate Middleton's. There had been both a photographer and a videographer present to record the moment, and there had been no doubt she looked like a gorgeous amalgam of all the bridal inspiration images on her Pinterest boards.

That wasn't Imogen's style, so it didn't surprise Willa when, while her mum was unpacking the dishwasher, Auntie Jenny was having her lips lined, her dad was refolding the tea towels Willa kept stuffed in a drawer and Uncle Gordon was

emerging from a long spell in the bathroom, flapping a copy of the *Good Weekend* in his wake, Imogen casually wandered out of Willa's room, ready to get married.

She picked up a tea towel from the pile and started folding it, and it was a few moments before anyone noticed she was wearing her vintage wedding dress, her long legs smooth and tanned beneath its scalloped hem. Her hair was loose, and her curtain fringe looked perfectly undone and tousled, topped with a shoulder-length tulle veil pinned on with a flat satin bow.

Willa's dad spoke first. 'Well, hello, Brigitte bloody Bardot. Where's Imogen? Wowsers, kiddo.'

Imogen grinned. 'Do you guys like it?'

Uncle Gordon made a strangled sound and burst into tears.

'Dad!' said Imogen, and she hurried to him. 'It's all right!'

Gordon couldn't speak, but through a series of gestures involving clasping his hands over his heart, tilting his head to the side and scrunching his eyes shut while nodding, he got his point across. Imogen looked beautiful.

Aunty Jenny moved to her daughter as if she were being pulled in by her energy, then stopped abruptly. 'My little chicken. I want to cuddle you but I don't want all this makeup to come off on your wonderful dress.' She too had tears in her eyes.

'Oh my god, you pair of soggy idiots, why are you crying?' Willa's mum could always be relied on to turn the sentimentality dial down. 'She's perfect. This is a happy day.'

'Bugger off, Jo, she's my only kid. This is only going to happen once.' Aunty Jenny couldn't take her eyes off Imogen. Her next words were so predictable that Imogen, Jo and Willa all recited them along with her: 'The doctors told me I'd never be able to have a child and now look!' She frowned at them but the words were echoed with love, not mockery. The whole family knew how wanted and long-awaited baby Imogen had been.

‘Here, Dad, take some pictures of them.’ Willa unlocked her phone and handed it to him. Tony moved around the kitchen, snapping away. Willa watched over his shoulder as he caught Jenny’s smile crinkling her eyes so much they disappeared; Jo watching Jenny with almost the same smile.

Was there a hint of wistfulness in her mum’s expression or was Willa projecting it? Her parents knew she didn’t plan to get married. They’d always professed not to care whether she did or not, as long as she was happy. They’d been delighted when her younger brother, Andy, had married his partner, Josh, a week after the law permitted, almost six years ago now, but maybe deep down this was a moment they wanted for her.

As she watched Imogen spin and pose, hugging her parents and smiling for the camera, Willa tried to visualise herself as a bride. Did a person exist on this planet who could ever make her want to announce, unequivocally, that she would love only them, and never love anyone more than that? Because that’s what marriage was. Whether or not it was true, that’s what you were telling everyone in your life. I love this person the most of all the people. I am willing to spend a lot of money and go through significant administrative hassle if I go back on this declaration. It was like a bet. You were backing your love for that person and their love and commitment to you. As much as Willa hoped for love, she wasn’t sure she could ever have that much confidence in the longevity of a relationship. Because even if your feelings were solid, you could never be sure the other person would continue to feel the same. It was so statistically improbable.

She’d stopped loving people before. Shortly after her twenty-third birthday, when she was living in America, she’d started going out with a man called Daniel, a historian working at the museum where she sold postcards in the gift shop. On paper everything had been great. There had been sexual chemistry, shared interests, mutual friends. They’d flown together to see her brother when he was living in France and taken road trips up and down the west coast from Seattle to California. His family were kind, and they’d welcomed her.

It hadn't stopped her feeling, as they approached their first anniversary, a creeping sense of dread that started in her heart and spread throughout her gut and mind. She'd found herself lying in bed at night, listening to Dan breathing and wondering how the high-ceilinged bedroom in his house could feel so much like a coffin.

Dan had been blindsided when she'd ended things. Even at the time, Willa's greatest sadness had been hurting him — she hadn't felt conflicted about her decision, or sad that she was parting from someone she loved. She found it hard to explain to people: she did love Dan, she just didn't want to be with him any more. The best analogy she'd been able to come up with — and it was by no means perfect — was one she'd used to describe her feelings to her parents on Skype, after the break-up. Dan was like a key that looked like it fit exactly into a lock, but it wasn't the right key. It wouldn't turn. It wouldn't open anything. Her mum had said that made sense, but her dad had made a huffing sound and said that when that happened sometimes you needed to get the lock fixed.

She'd moved back to Australia shortly after, gone back to university and rebounded into the arms of Ollie, whom she'd then pretended to love for five years despite realising she probably didn't for most of that time, because pretending to love someone seemed better than nothing.

Now her dad finished taking pictures of Imogen and passed her phone back. Willa climbed into the vintage-style jumpsuit she'd ordered from a website that specialised in reproducing 1960s styles that fit people today. She'd have preferred to wear true vintage, like Imogen, but it seemed that boobs hadn't been invented back then and everything from that period she'd ever tried had no place to keep hers. Her shoes had heels she knew she would regret before they'd even arrived, but flat shoes with fancy clothes made her look dumpy.

Once dressed, they clattered downstairs and into the vintage Kombi van with white ribbons in a V on its windscreen that was waiting half a block down the street,

idling its engine. Willa carried a large white box, cold from the fridge, containing their bouquets.

The driver climbed out when he saw them approaching and slid open the back door to let his passengers aboard.

‘Oi, love, whoever he is, you’re too good for him,’ shouted Willa’s neighbour Eddy, as he dropped a night’s worth of beer bottles into the recycling bin in front of his terrace, and Imogen blew him a kiss as she stepped up into the van.

There were enough seats in the back for them all, but Gordon climbed into the front seat, where he’d be better able to discuss Sydney’s traffic and parking issues with the driver.

The diesel fumes from the van mingled with duelling fragrances her mother and aunt wore. It was an olfactory smackdown between Jo’s Trésor and Jenny’s Opium. Imogen’s gentle Tocca, with hints of freesia and lemon, was overpowered. Willa’s queasiness returned and she slid open the window, only to get a whiff of bins.

She tapped Imogen on the arm. ‘You okay? Any word from the opposition?’

‘We’re not going into battle. But no. All quiet.’

‘That’s good.’

Gordon leaned around from the front seat and patted Imogen on the knee. ‘Exciting day. I remember driving to get married to your mum. I was so nervous I thought I might chuck.’

‘Oh nerves, was it?’ Jenny chimed in. ‘Nothing to do with how you and your brother spent most of the night before our wedding at the pub?’

‘Well, maybe there was an element of that. Jen, what was it your aunt made me take at the church?’

‘Which aunt?’

‘The witchy one.’

‘Oh Aunty Marg,’ said Jo. ‘That would have been milk thistle. It’s an ancient hangover remedy. She used to grow it and dry the seeds, then make it into a tincture.’

‘Sounds like hair of the dog. Did it work?’ Willa asked. ‘I could use some milk thistle.’

‘Sorry, it did nothing,’ Gordon told her. ‘The only way a thistle would help with a hangover would be if you stepped on one the night before and hurt your foot so badly you couldn’t walk to the pub.’

Willa rolled her eyes. ‘Just my luck.’

Chapter 18

If she'd had as much money as the Smiths and could have bought a house anywhere in Sydney, Willa wouldn't have chosen Mosman. It had an atmosphere she didn't understand. The main street of the suburb ran along a ridge out to a headland in the middle of the harbour, and large houses, keeping their backs to the shops at the top of the hill, cascaded down the slopes to either side, stopping just above the harbour beaches to the north and south. It wasn't so much a beachside suburb as a suburb floating above some beaches. Harbourside beaches at that, so they lacked the surf vibe that might have freshened things up. Its town centre was a thoroughfare, and nowadays a very quiet one, with about half of the shops vacant since the pandemic. The shop to restaurant ratio was still too high, though, and there was little in the way of bars or nightlife.

She didn't often go there, but when she did she felt unkempt and slobby: every woman she passed on the streets seemed to be a lean blonde of indeterminate age in boutique activewear brands, protecting her face with a visor, carrying a coffee in one hand, a phone in the other, and with a leash attached to some sort of oodle looped around her thin brown wrist. This was not possible, she understood, but an example of confirmation bias. Obviously not everyone in a suburb could look the same, but once she'd started noticing the pattern, it was all she could see.

Fiona didn't fit the mould, but then she was an import. It was Gladstone who was seventh-generation Mosmanian, heir to the not insignificant remains of a fortune made from killing and processing whales in the bay below their magnificent house. Willa had once read an article theorising that Mosman

was haunted by the ghosts of those whales, which struck her as being as good an explanation as any for the faint sense of impending doom she felt whenever she was forced to go there.

Willa wasn't sure exactly how rich the Smiths were, but they obviously had enough in the historical coffers, and quite likely in a diversified portfolio of passive investments and holdings, that it didn't matter much that the manual-publishing industry was going the same way as whaling. Her romance novels were the only part of the company that could be described as thriving.

She looked out at the Saturday traffic crawling along the expressway towards the Military Road exit and was glad they'd allowed an hour to get from Surry Hills to Mosman. Sydney's weekend traffic was worse than weekdays.

'Thank god we didn't try to bring Mum, hey?' said Jo, nudging Jenny, who agreed emphatically, as if the hour in the Kombi would have been too much for their aged mother. Willa exchanged a look with her dad, who knew as well as she did that it was simply that Jenny and Jo didn't want the hassle of bringing their mother, Ruth, up from her nursing home in Kiama, keeping a close eye on her scotch consumption and trying to stop her bailing up other guests and subjecting them to the long anarcha-feminist lectures that were her stock-in-trade. Which was fair enough.

Willa wasn't even sure Ruth knew about the wedding. She certainly wouldn't approve. Ruth believed marriage stifled individual growth.

Maybe it did and maybe it didn't. There was a chance that personal growth was overrated anyway.

Imogen seemed okay. She had a soft buzz of energy about her that felt appropriate for a bride, and it was starting to spread to Willa, despite her best efforts to resist.

Uncle Gordon had finished opining about the rights and wrongs of metered parking and loading zones and had turned around to ask his daughter more about the details of the day

that lay ahead of them. Willa half-listened to Imogen telling him about the minister who would be marrying them — he was the chaplain and rugby coach from the Smith boys' sandstone private school — and how they hadn't really planned to have a band until they found out that Dan Murphy's Opening Hours, who they loved but thought were a step up in their career from playing weddings, actually weren't as successful as all that and had agreed to play at the reception. Fiona had suggested a string quartet for the ceremony, which Angus had also wanted.

Willa's phone buzzed with a message and she swiped it open. It was from Ewan.

Everything's fine but has Imogen heard from Angus this morning?

Oh christ, thought Willa. So, everything wasn't fine. The universal signal of nothing being fine was a message beginning, *Everything's fine but*.

Don't think so. What's up? she replied.

Three dots appeared and she watched them blinking for almost a minute before they disappeared briefly and started again: that was how you knew your correspondent was trying to word something delicately. Shit.

Then another message: *Nothing. He probably went for a run. Just can't get in touch and he needs to get dressed. He was here last night but seems to be AWOL. He won't get far on foot.*

It had been Fiona's idea for all her sons to go back to their parents' house after the bucks party last night. She'd wanted both one last night of them as a family and to prevent the twins oversleeping in Bondi. There was going to be enough to worry about on the morning of the wedding, Fiona had argued, without Angus and Alistair running late or leaving one of their good shoes back at their flat.

So where was Angus?

Willa texted back: *Does Alistair have any ideas?* A bead of sweat rolled down the front of her neck.

Texting was an infuriating way to communicate about something of this magnitude. All Willa wanted was to get Ewan on the phone and grill him: how drunk had Angus been? What, if anything, happened last night? Was there a stripper involved? She chastised herself for immediately leaping to that as an explanation for what was going on. Of course Angus hadn't run off with his bucks-night stripper. This wasn't a soap opera. He'd almost certainly gone for a swim, or a run, or one of the other unlikely ways to get rid of a hangover by which the Smith brothers swore. The bridal party would be there in ten minutes anyway, and she'd leave Imogen with their parents and go sort this out. It would be nothing.

It occurred to Willa that if she was this worried about something ruining the wedding, that maybe she had, in spite of herself, come around to the idea. She smiled. It was a nice feeling. No one wanted to be the spectre at the feast: the old maid sitting cynically with her arms folded, thinking, It won't last, so loudly that everyone can hear.

Imogen had stopped pointing out sites of interest to the out-of-towners and was gazing out at the streets, one arm on the window and the other holding her mother's hand. The sun shining through the back window of the van lit up the veil around her head like a halo.

Willa's phone buzzed with another text from Ewan: *Call off the dogs. Found him. All good.*

She let out the breath she hadn't realised she was holding. A tiny crisis averted without the bride ever knowing anything was up. Now that was some good bridesmaiding. She started to relax.

The day felt special because Imogen was so calm and centred. She exuded a quiet joy. Could it just be because she looked so ethereally bridal? No, there was something more than that. It felt like Imogen was on a sacred path, and while her family was all there to bumble along happily behind her,

this was truly just a day about two people coming together without embarrassment or qualms to celebrate their love. For a moment Willa felt her heart race with excitement, and she put her hand to her chest. It was The Feeling: the *Much Ado* feeling. She let it wash over her, this wave of hope and elation and joy. The day felt bright and blessed, and she knew with a deep certainty that things were going to work out just fine for Imogen and Angus. Whether she would ever experience that kind of love herself, she couldn't say, but in that moment, their love was enough.

Chapter 19

From the moment the Kombi pulled up outside the Smiths' house, it seemed to Willa that everything sped up. Ewan was waiting out on the nature strip, and beside him Gladstone was so excited he began opening the sliding van door before they'd even stopped.

'Here she is, here she is! Imogen, you stunner. Goodness me, if I were forty years younger and not the father of the groom . . .' He cackled at his own joke and held out his arm to Imogen as she stepped onto the footpath.

A flurry of greetings followed, with Willa's and Imogen's parents falling over each other to shake hands and kiss Gladstone, and to lavish compliments on his house. Willa watched Jenny and Jo exchange meaningful glances — the sort that Willa knew from experience meant the value of this house would be top of the agenda for a serious chat and some deep googling later, once they were home. They knew no one else who owned a house like this.

Less discreet than his wife and her sister, Uncle Gordon nudged Willa and murmured, 'What would this go for? Gotta be over five mill.'

Willa didn't reply, but subtly pointed up.

'What, more?'

'In the teens, I'd say,' she whispered. 'Wait until you see inside, and the view out the back.'

'Dad,' Imogen called to him. 'Come stand by me.'

Gordon darted to his daughter's side and Ewan moved next to Willa. She looked at him in his three-piece blue suit, his pink tie slightly askew. He looked amazing. How did good

suits do that to men? How could such a miraculous garment exist that made every man look seventy per cent more handsome and infinitely more . . . what was the word? Dashing. Of course. It was a dated word but there wasn't anything else quite right.

'Aren't you going to tell me how smart I look?' he asked.

'You know exactly how smart you look. You don't need me to tell you.'

'Maybe I'd like you to tell me anyway.' He spoke quietly, sounding unguarded.

She glanced at him again. 'Ewan, you are quite the fine figure of a man in that suit. Dashing is what sprang to mind. But your tie is all skew-whiff.'

He looked down. 'Can you please fix it for me?'

She hesitated. It was such a cliché, adjusting a man's tie: a moment of contact, face to face, but not eye to eye, lingering. It would give her family completely the wrong idea about Ewan and they'd spend the entire wedding hassling her about him. And the way his voice had just sounded was confusing: the last time his voice had been all low and nervous like that was just before he chose not to kiss her, all those years ago. She needed to learn how to read this man better.

'I don't know how to tie a tie,' she said briskly. 'Is everyone ready inside? I'll bet Angus looks even better than you.'

The sudden slamming of four car doors drew her attention, and Willa looked up the road to see Bec, Ralph, Kat and George running as fast as anyone can when two of them are hobbled by high heels and dresses cut so tightly that leg movement is only possible from the knees down.

'Don't start without us!' shouted Bec. 'We haven't seen you, Imogen,' she added breathlessly, shielding her eyes as she passed the bride. 'I want the full effect when you come down the aisle.' She continued her hobble through the gate and up

the path to the front door, pausing only as she passed Willa to mutter ‘Worst hangover *of my life.*’

‘Sorry,’ puffed Ralph in a general apology, following his wife. ‘My mum and dad . . . twins . . . touch and go there for a bit . . .’

Kat slowed down enough to kiss Willa. ‘You look gorgeous: shall I save you a seat or do you stand the whole time?’

‘I’m all good — sitting with the family — you head on in. George, hello.’ Willa tried to sound welcoming. Kat hadn’t said she was bringing him. Why did George have to be everywhere? He was surplus to requirements. He was a side salad when you were already having a vegetarian main.

‘Hi, Willa,’ he said.

‘Here you are again.’ She gave him a smile that came nowhere near reaching her eyes, and he jogged on to catch up with Kat.

‘Why are you so mean to him?’ asked Ewan quietly.

‘Why is he so annoying?’

‘He’s fine. What do you mean?’

‘He just shows up everywhere now and makes everything a hassle. He’s like a fucking human QR code.’

Ewan snorted. ‘Maybe he’s just part of the new normal. You might have to learn to live with him. Kat seems pretty into him.’

‘It will pass. Anyway, can we not talk about him? Let’s talk about this ridiculously beautiful creature.’ She turned her attention to Imogen, who was fiddling with her veil. ‘Leave it alone, Immy, it’s perfect.’

Beside her Ewan made an odd choked sound and Willa looked at him sharply. His eyes were full of tears. She looked away at once, but he took her hand, sending a sudden shock through her entire body. His hand was warm and dry, and it fit

hers well. God, how pathetic. This truly was a sign that she was turning into an absolute desperado, getting all excited about an old friend holding her hand. She and Kat had a theory about this: the longer you went without being in love, the more overreactive you became to the smallest acts of physical intimacy. It could be very dangerous. They called it the Turn-on-ometer, and hers was quite clearly in need of recalibrating.

She squeezed Ewan's hand sympathetically: she had forgotten how hard this would be for him. Of course he would return to being Big Sad Ewan, watching his brother get hitched with his own marriage not even properly cold in the ground yet, despite his cavorting with that Sarah girl.

'Should we get this show on the road?' she suggested. 'You know, before the best man cries off all his makeup?' The others laughed and Ewan quickly let go of her hand.

'Yes,' he said loudly. 'Imogen, aaaare you ready to maaaaarrrryyy?' he shouted like a wrestling announcer.

'Have we got a groom in there ready to give it a bit of the old "for ever and ever amen"?' Willa asked, taking on the role of a warm-up act at the filming of an afternoon TV cooking program.

Ewan checked his phone. 'According to Dougal, we are all systems go inside. They're ready when you are, Imogen.'

Imogen suddenly went pale; she looked very nervous and her grip on her father's arm tightened. 'Mum, Jo, Tony — you can all go sit down. We'll be in soon.'

'Allow me to escort you,' said Ewan, offering his elbow to Jenny.

'Hang on,' said Willa. 'Don't you walk with me?'

'I told you we needed a rehearsal,' said Imogen. 'We talked about this, remember, Will? The groomsmen stand at the front with the groom, and you walk ahead of Dad and me.'

'On my own?'

‘Yes, that’s how it’s commonly done. You have been to a wedding before?’

Willa did remember that discussion, but what she couldn’t remember now was why she’d agreed to it. Now she thought about it, she and Kat had walked ahead of Bec at her wedding and it hadn’t bothered her in the slightest. This time though, she felt unbearably self-conscious. She would look so foolish, walking down the aisle ahead of Imogen, in this stupid jumpsuit, being so old, carrying the even tinier version of the already modest trailing bouquet of orchids Imogen had selected so as not to overwhelm her cute little dress.

Imogen looked worried. ‘If you don’t want to walk on your own, I suppose Ewan could walk with you. Would that work?’

A charity walk. That would be even worse. ‘No, god, don’t be silly. I am perfectly capable of walking along a carpet by myself. And we decided we’d all sit down once we got there, right? Didn’t we? You’re not having us all stand up beside you through the whole thing?’

‘No, no, you get to sit. It will just be Angus, me and Reverend Francis. It would have looked uneven with you all up there.’

‘Yep, of course, because I am worth three Smith brothers. It’s all coming back to me now,’ said Willa. ‘Right. Ewan, you guys go — I’m fine.’

‘Are you sure?’ asked Ewan.

‘Sure as Pauly,’ said Willa, avoiding his eye. She couldn’t be worrying about his sadness now. This was a moment for joy. Her mother cocked her head at Willa’s unusual simile but said nothing. ‘Go, go!’

Ewan led her family inside and she did a final check of her appearance in her phone’s reverse camera: as good as it was ever going to be. The mean makeup artist was good at her job.

‘Immy, you ready? Need anything?’ She smoothed out her cousin’s veil and brushed an invisible piece of lint from her shoulder. ‘You look so beautiful. You too, Uncle Gordon.’

Imogen shook her head.

‘Okay,’ said Willa. ‘I’m going in. I just go stand at the door to the back patio and wait for the music to start, right? Then I walk and I sit.’

Imogen nodded.

‘I’m going. Break a leg, kid. Knock ’em dead.’ The nerves were turning her into Humphrey Bogart. She went inside.

A hushed anticipation filled the house. Ornate arrangements of roses graced every immaculately polished surface Willa passed, and aproned waitstaff in black and white bustled quietly around, preparing food for after the ceremony. She took a glass of champagne from an unattended tray and drank half of it down. The bubbles immediately made her hiccup. She could see through the French doors that out on the terrace were several rows of seats, all filled with friends and family, quietly chatting and waiting.

A short aisle ran between them with a soft pink runner to walk on. At the end of the aisle stood a large archway of apricot roses that had been Fiona’s concept, executed by a florist. In front of the roses, wearing a black suit, stood Angus. He was very still, his face impassive, looking down at his clasped hands. Beside him stood a man in a white surplice. Willa didn’t think you were supposed to wear white to weddings, but maybe that rule didn’t apply to the clergy. Still, it wouldn’t look as good in pictures as if only the bride were wearing white. Very inconsiderate.

Dougal walked up to Angus and patted him on the shoulder before taking a seat in the front row beside Ewan, Alistair, Fiona and Gladstone. Behind them Sylvia sat with four other girls around her age who Willa recognised from their late appearance at karaoke — Imogen’s Sydney friends. Their perfectly styled waves, tiny elegant dresses and vertiginous heels made them look like when Perce took all the Barbies her mother hated so much and sat them in a row to watch Bec cook dinner. Behind them she saw Imogen’s friends from home.

Bec, Ralph, Kat and George were across the aisle and Willa watched them chatting animatedly with her parents. She'd have to remember to get her mum's take on George after the ceremony.

Stepping back from the French doors, she finished the rest of the champagne, put the glass and her clutch bag down on a side table and took her place in the doorway.

From the front row Ewan turned and met her gaze. For a second she felt very calm, like someone had thrown a sheet over the nervous chattering parrot in a cage in her head. He looked away, over at the string quartet, and nodded to them. They started up the plucky busker's classic 'I'm Yours', Willa took a deep breath and she walked down the aisle. There were only four rows of chairs, so it didn't take long, but what the procession lacked in length it made up for in awkwardness: the song was jerky and boppy, not something a person could walk elegantly to, and after three steps she gave up fighting her instinct to ham it up, finishing the walk with a weird little wiggly dance that she immediately regretted. She smiled in apology to Angus when she reached the arch, but he didn't smile back, so she moved quickly to her seat just across the aisle from Ewan, who had his lips pressed together and was clearly trying not to laugh at her.

He mockingly wiggled his shoulders in imitation of her dance and whispered, 'Did you have lessons? That was very good.'

'Get fucked,' she mouthed at him, then turned away to stifle the giggles she felt rising.

Trying to compose herself, she looked back down the tiny aisle to the door, where a beaming Imogen stood, arm in arm with her father, ready to walk in. At once everyone stood, and, like she'd been pepper-sprayed in the face, tears sprang unbidden to Willa's eyes as she watched her baby cousin, so beautiful and excited, so brave and optimistic — so completely unlike Willa — step towards a future she had chosen for herself because she was not afraid of anything. She

feared neither failure nor heartbreak, and that, Willa knew, was the properly bold way to live. In the same moment, she knew she could never be that fearless.

The music finished, Uncle Gordon kissed Imogen on the cheek and took his seat beside Auntie Jenny. Imogen moved to stand beside Angus, and looked up, smiling prettily at him.

The reverend spoke. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Reverend Francis and I welcome you here today. I have known the Smith family for a long time, through their association with St Mark’s College, and the rugby teams of that fine institution. It’s an honour to be asked to perform this ceremony today, and I thank you. As a rugby coach and an Anglican minister, I have witnessed many tries but fewer conversions.’ He paused, and a few people chuckled. Willa assumed that was some sort of rugby joke. ‘Anyway, I welcome you on this beautiful day, for here in the presence of God, we have come to witness the marriage of Angus and Imogen. Now, they’ve asked me to make this brief, because apparently they’ve a party to attend afterwards!’ Again he paused for the laughter he expected. ‘All right, let’s kick off. Angus and Imogen, please will you take each other’s hands.’

Imogen, already holding one of Angus’s hands, passed her bouquet to Willa and took hold of his other hand, swinging to face him. Angus’s face was red. He was, Willa surmised, either so hungover he was about to pass out, or the most nervous groom in history. She would be surprised if it was the latter. Angus was usually so sunny and carefree. It was a big deal though, getting married. It was just a shame he looked like he was being marched to the gallows. It wouldn’t play well in the pictures. Maybe they could bring his high colour down with Photoshop.

The priest went on. ‘Marriage was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of His holy Name.’

Willa didn’t know why they were having such a churchy ceremony. The Smith boys had attended an Anglican private

school, but more for the rugby and because Gladstone had gone there than anything else, and she doubted any of them had set foot in a church since graduation, except for weddings and funerals. This guy was supposed to be a family friend who was going to do a casual ceremony for them. There hadn't been any discussion of praising anyone's holy name, as far as Imogen had told her.

'Marriage was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.'

A tiny snort of scepticism escaped from Willa's nose, which she covered with a sniff. Other people around her were already dabbing away at tearful eyes, so it went largely unnoticed.

'Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. Therefore if any man can show any just cause why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace.'

People didn't include this last-minute escape clause much any more, Willa realised. She couldn't remember ever hearing these words said outside of a film script. Why would you give anyone extra opportunities for drama at an event potentially already fraught with interpersonal tension and conflict? It did seem like asking for trouble.

The reverend was peering around the congregation exaggeratedly, loving the suspense, as if waiting for someone to leap out of their seat, waving their just cause over their head. No one spoke.

A loud champagne hiccup burst from Willa's throat, and every head turned towards her. Imogen looked like she was about to laugh, and Angus looked like he'd been tasered awake.

‘Oh god, shit, no, sorry,’ Willa babbled. ‘Hiccups, it’s just hiccups. Carry on. Sorry for saying god. And sorry for saying shit. And for interrupting.’

A ripple of relieved laughter moved through the crowd and the reverend smiled at her. ‘Well thank heavens for that,’ he said amiably. ‘I’ve never had play disrupted before, and it would be a shame to start today.’

Willa looked down at her lap in embarrassment, conscious of Ewan’s shoulders shaking with laughter. When she had composed herself, she looked up again, and glanced over in time to see Dougal, ramrod straight in his chair, looking quizzically at her.

The priest turned back to Angus and Imogen. ‘Now, where were we? Ah yes, now I have to ask you two: if either of you know any impediment, why you may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, you must now confess it.’ This time he paused only for a fraction of a second before continuing. ‘Nothing? No? Great. Right, so Angus, do you take Imogen to be your wedded wife, to live together in marriage? Do you promise to love her, comfort her, honour and keep her for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health, and forsaking all others, be faithful only to her, for as long as you both shall live?’

This was the moment. Willa was pleased they’d gone with the wording that meant the answer was ‘I do’, rather than the somehow not quite right sounding ‘I will’ that some people chose. ‘Do’ seemed a much stronger verb, better suited to such a serious undertaking as marriage. ‘Will’ seemed a bit more wishy washy, more of a future promise than a present commitment. Willa refocussed her attention away from comparing verbs and back to the momentous event taking place in front of her. Angus was about to say I do. And then Imogen would say it, and it would be a done deal. Married. United. Two made one. Sealed with a kiss.

But Angus wasn’t saying anything. Angus, Willa observed, was staring at the pavers at his feet on his parents’ patio like

he was trying to carve them into shapes with lasers from his eyes. His jaw was clenched so tightly the muscles in his face looked like acorns in his cheeks. Seconds passed like hours.

‘Angus?’ said Imogen, softly.

‘Would you like me to read the question again?’ asked the reverend, with a chuckle. ‘It was “Do you take Imogen to be your wedded wife?”’

Angus looked up, straight into Imogen’s eyes and said, ‘Fuck no.’

Chapter 20

No one spoke. There was no mistaking what Angus had said. Shocked silence should have followed, but a small flock of cockatoos chose that moment to alight in a large macadamia tree in the garden beyond the patio, so the soundtrack to what unfolded next was a chorus of raucous squawking.

Imogen looked like she'd been slapped. 'What?' she said quietly. And then more loudly, 'What the fuck, Angus?'

Their family and friends began to murmur, and the reverend looked completely out of his depth.

'Whoa there now, hey, come on, that's not funny, Angus, let's not have that sort of talk. What's all this about?'

Angus was almost purple with rage. With clenched fists to go with his clenched jaw he said, 'She knows. You can ask this slut why I'm not going to marry her.'

Horrificed gasps came from the congregation.

Imogen's face crumpled in confusion. 'Angus, what are you talking about?'

He turned on her. 'Don't fucking lie to me about it, Imogen. I know. I know what you did. I saw. Don't try to tell me it's nothing, that it didn't mean anything. We agreed. You agreed.' His voice cracked and tears started to fall. 'It was supposed to be us, just us, forever. That was what you said you wanted. It was what I wanted. You should have said. You should have told me. It didn't have to be like this.'

Imogen was crying too. 'I don't know what you're talking about. I truly don't. Told you what?'

‘Don’t bullshit me.’ He was yelling now. ‘Of course you know. You just didn’t think I’d find out. And you didn’t care. You probably thought even if I did find out I’d be too embarrassed to call it off in front of our families but guess what? I don’t give a shit. I’d rather be embarrassed than married to a lying slut.’

Imogen’s legs gave way and she collapsed to the ground. Gordon let out a roar and lunged forwards, stopping just short of the reverend, who threw himself in front of Angus.

Willa and Jenny rushed to Imogen, pulling her away from the arch of roses, off the patio and onto the lawn. Gordon backed away from Angus and kneeled down beside his daughter on the grass, cradling her in his arms.

The reverend grabbed Angus by the shoulders and shook him. ‘Angus Smith, for goodness’ sake stop this. Stop it at once.’

But there was no stopping Angus. He broke away and stormed towards Imogen, his face twisted with anger. ‘How could you? How could you?’

‘How could I *what?*’ screamed Imogen, and she covered her face in her hands and wailed. It was the sound of pure confusion and grief: the sound of a future exploding before them, the broken anguish of deep betrayal. The cockatoos fell silent and flew off.

Gladstone and Ewan seized Angus and pulled him away, halfdragging him towards the house as he fought their hold. Fiona, Alistair and Sylvia followed them inside, pulling closed the French doors behind them.

The garden fell quiet: now there was only the sound of Imogen sobbing, her father gently shushing her. Jenny, stroking Imogen’s shuddering back, looked up at Willa. ‘What’s happening? Willa, please, find out what this is. Why did he do that? What does he think Imogen has done?’

Willa shook her head in bewilderment. She didn’t think Imogen had cheated on Angus. In spite of all her friends’

casual attitude to this marriage as something as non-binding as the free trial of a streaming service, she was pretty sure that wasn't how Imogen felt. If Imogen had been seeing someone on the side, Willa would have known. Or one of her friends would, and they'd definitely have made some mention of it last night. Secrets tended to seep out of people when they were drunk, like they were physically displaced from the body by shots of tequila.

As far as Willa knew, Imogen hadn't so much as kissed anyone else since she took up with Angus.

A memory of Imogen's distraught face from the night before flashed into Willa's mind. This wasn't anything to do with that, was it? It couldn't possibly be. Imogen said she wasn't going to tell Angus, and even if she'd changed her mind and done so, you couldn't mistake your fiancée telling you she'd been molested for her cheating on you. That was like saying a plane that crashed in the sea cheated on the airport.

'I don't know,' she said to Jenny. 'It doesn't make any sense.'

'Please,' begged her aunt. 'You know these people. Please talk to them.'

Shame washed over Willa. She did know these people. Imogen had met them because of her. Whatever this was, it was at least partially her fault.

The sound of men shouting drifted out through an upstairs window, making Willa look up. Several of the boys' childhood bedrooms overlooked the garden, and through one window she saw the backs of men in suits, too distant to distinguish, but she assumed it was Gladstone and his other sons, trying to calm Angus and figure out what on earth had made him wreck the happiest day of his life.

'Wait here,' said Willa. She strode back across the patio, past a few remaining guests who hadn't taken the cockatoos' lead and made themselves scarce, and into the house. When

she reached the front hall she turned and started to climb the stairs, but as she came to the landing she ran straight into Gladstone and Dougal making their way down.

‘What is going on?’ she demanded. ‘What the hell is Angus doing?’

Gladstone’s voice shook with anger. ‘Angus is doing the only thing a man with any self-respect would do in a situation like this. He is making the very sensible decision not to marry a woman who has so little love for him that she cheated on him the night before the wedding.’

So it *was* about the sexy waiter. Christ.

‘Don’t be so ridiculous. What does he think happened?’

‘Willa,’ said Dougal, in a sad, resigned voice. ‘We have proof.’

‘You don’t have proof because there is nothing to have proof of. What proof do you think you have?’

‘Photos. This morning Angus woke up to a text with photos of Imogen with another man. The timestamp of the photos is from last night.’

‘Photos?’ Willa was confused. How could there be photos of the attack? Taken by whom?

‘Pretty steamy stuff,’ piped up Gladstone.

Willa looked at him with disgust. ‘Something did happen last night, but not what you think. Something terrible. And if there really are photos, then whatever is going on is even worse than I thought.’

Dougal shook his head. ‘It’s pretty clear what’s happening in the pictures. There’s not much left to the imagination.’

‘Who sent them?’

‘It was a text from an unknown number. It just said: *Angus you need to see this*. And then there were four pictures attached.’

‘Show me,’ said Willa.

‘Wait here,’ said Dougal. ‘I’ll get Angus’s phone.’ He turned and jogged back up to the first floor.

Gladstone stood on the landing with her for only a moment more before his discomfort under Willa’s stony glare got the better of him and without a word he followed Dougal.

From the foot of the staircase came Kat’s voice. ‘Willa?’

Willa ran down to her. ‘They’ve got photos of Imogen with someone last night. But if it’s what I think it is, something really fucking weird is going on.’

‘We should all leave, right?’ said Kat uncertainly. ‘Whatever’s happened, I don’t think it’s going to be sorted out in a few minutes. There’s not going to be a wedding here today, is there? Would it be helpful if we got rid of people? Dispersed them?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Willa. Why was this falling to her? ‘I suppose so. Maybe suggest people go up to the pub? The Buena Vista is just back along the main road to Mosman, at the roundabout. You could wait there for a bit, see if things settle down?’

‘Do you think things can settle down? That was pretty massive, what he did out there. Seems to me that even if Imogen had done something wrong — and I’m not saying she has — you shouldn’t marry someone who got up and said those things about you in front of all your family and friends.’ Kat had the most irritating habit of articulating things Willa didn’t want to think.

‘I don’t know, I just don’t know.’ Willa had never felt so unsettled. That outburst was so uncharacteristic of calm, easygoing Angus. It was like someone ripping off their face in a horror movie to reveal they were the thing you feared the most. Kat had nailed the truth. It was hard to see how Angus and Imogen could come back from this.

‘Are Immy and my family still in the back garden?’ she asked.

‘No, they’re out the front.’

Willa stood on the spot, unable to decide what to do next. She needed time to think.

‘Excuse me?’ One of the waitstaff was standing in the doorway from the kitchen. He was young, vaguely familiar looking.

‘What? What do you want?’ Willa was shocked at how rude she sounded. ‘Sorry. But what?’

‘I live next door,’ he started. ‘My parents do, I mean, and I live with them. Do you want me to take the —’ here he paused, unsure of the right word to use now ‘— the girl Angus was marrying, Imogen I mean, and her family? Shall I take them next door? Give them a cup of tea or something?’

Willa almost cried with relief. Someone was helping. ‘Yes, please. That’s a great idea. Thank you . . .?’

‘Damon,’ said the boy. ‘My mum and dad are Julia and Ian.’

‘Yes!’ Willa remembered. ‘I’ve met your dad. He was at a party here. He’s nice. You look like him. Thank you, Damon, that’s very thoughtful. Kat? Can you help organise all that? I have to go back up and see these bullshit photos. Tell them I’ll come next door and find them as soon as I know what’s going on.’

‘Absolutely,’ said Kat, and she wrapped Willa in a tight hug. ‘It’s going to be okay.’

‘I don’t think it is.’

‘Probably not,’ Kat agreed.

Willa ran her hand along the glossy polished wood of the banister as she slowly walked back up the stairs. What was she about to confront? Was there any chance that what Angus said was true? She hated herself instantly for the thought. Imogen had said the man had forced himself on her, so any compromising pictures could only reveal that, no matter what they looked like to someone who didn’t know the context.

At the top of the stairs she paused and looked around. She'd never been up there before, to the family bedrooms. Six doors led off the wide corridor, and they were all closed. The doors on the right must be to the rooms that overlooked the garden: they were probably in one of those. 'Dougal?' she called.

The second door on the right opened. 'Come in,' said Dougal.

'I don't need to come in. Show me the pictures.'

'Come in,' he said again and she complied.

The room was large, bigger than any child's bedroom she'd ever seen. There were two double beds, two desks and built-in wardrobes. On the walls were posters of men with heads like thumbs, wearing yellowy-orange jerseys — action shots of them in the middle of scoring tries or running away from other men with heads like thumbs. She couldn't have named a single one and was surprised to see the words Stirling Mortlock under several portraits. Until that moment she would have sworn that was the name of a company that made security systems.

The beds were neatly made up with madras-checked quilt covers, and on one sat Angus, his shoulders slumped, head in his hands. Fiona sat next to him with one arm around his back, her face set. On his other side was Alistair, looking at something on his phone. Ewan stood at the window, turning to her as she came in, and Gladstone lay stretched out on the second bed, his arms folded across his chest and his eyes shut, as if laid out for viewing before his burial.

The silence was heavy. 'All right, show me,' Willa said. Only Ewan looked at her as Dougal handed over Angus's phone.

'There,' he said. 'Scroll through.'

She looked at the screen and felt like she'd been punched in the stomach. There was Imogen. Unmistakably Imogen. Her hands on the muscly chest of a man whose back was against a

red wall. One of his naked thighs was pushed between her legs so she appeared to be astride it. One of his hands was gripping the back of her head, and the other was unseen, disappearing up beneath her skirt, which was hitched up so high at one side that her underwear was clearly visible. Their faces were pushed together. His mouth was on hers and one of the straps of her top had fallen off her shoulder.

The second shot was different. Now Imogen was pressed against the wall and the man's apparently naked body was covering hers, his mouth on her neck, her head turned to the side, her hair messy and half-covering her face. His left palm was flat against the wall, pinning her in, and his right hand was groping her left breast. Now both straps of her top were off her shoulders.

It was a style of image Willa knew intimately: these were the softcore poses from the fronts of romance novels. She'd seen hundreds, selected them from image libraries to match the stories she published. But there was something different about these, apart from their subject being someone she was related to.

These were not pictures of stolen moments of passion. Whoever took these had recorded an assault. The man wasn't naked: a G-string peeked out from between his buttocks, and around his neck was a bow tie. These had definitely been taken the night before. It was exactly like Imogen had described: the sexy waiter had grabbed her and forced himself on her.

Willa stood staring at the phone for so long that the screen went black. She tapped it again and the images reappeared. She quickly sent them to herself, then looked at them all again, closely. The way the man was holding on to Imogen — to her head, her thigh, her back in another shot — it looked commanding, powerful. This was what she sold. So many books, so many tales of men, their eyes dark with passion, seizing the objects of their desire, overcome with their needs to touch, kiss and hold women who wanted that too, with every fibre of their beings. This wasn't that, and yet it looked

so much like it was. She could see why Angus thought this was Imogen, enraptured by someone else, carried away with the illicit thrill of sex with a stranger.

She wanted to vomit. If Imogen hadn't come straight to her after this happened, if Willa hadn't seen how distressed and frightened she'd been by the encounter, would she too, when faced with these photos, have assumed the encounter was consensual?

Rage began to bubble up inside Willa. They were all watching her as she threw the phone on the bed beside Gladstone, hitting his leg.

'That?' she said to Angus, disdain and fury battling for dominance in her voice. 'A few photos are the reason you just humiliated the woman you are supposed to love, in front of all her family and friends? Angus, you pathetic piece of shit. That guy attacked her. Those pictures are of her trying to fight him off. She was in pieces afterwards. The fact that it happened at all is bad enough, but that someone was there and took pictures, and then sent them to you? That's beyond disgusting. Not to mention against the law.'

He looked back at her, his mouth opening and closing in confusion. God he was a moron. She looked around at the rest of his family. No one looked at her, and no one spoke. What was wrong with these people?

'So . . . any apologies? Anyone want to come say they're sorry to Imogen? Angus? Before I call the police?'

They were still avoiding her gaze, and slowly it dawned on her: they didn't believe what she'd told them. She turned and left the room.

Chapter 21

She paused at the bottom of the stairs, breathing fast, the adrenaline of the past half-hour flooding her body and pooling in her gut, making her nauseated. Her handbag was on the sideboard where she'd left it not twenty minutes earlier, just before she'd stepped onto the carpet, when the string quartet had still been playing and not uncomfortably packing up their instruments without meeting anyone's eye, as they were doing now. It seemed like another person who'd put this bag down because they couldn't figure out how to carry it and a bouquet without shoving one of the two under their arm, which hadn't seemed very good wedding etiquette.

'Willa.'

She stopped at the sound of Ewan's voice. He'd followed her down the stairs and was moving towards her, and without another thought she let him wrap her in his arms, burying her face in the lapel of his suit jacket. Neither said a word; they just stood, holding each other tightly in a way they hadn't ever before.

Willa waited for embarrassment to overcome her, to force her to pull away. This was ridiculous, standing there hugging Ewan like she was a koala with a bushfire at her heels. He'd let her go soon. She should be the one to let go first, for her own dignity's sake. But he didn't let go. And she didn't let go. His thudding heart beat loudly in her ear, and as it slowed so did hers.

It must have been minutes they stood there, like a sculpture of two figures carved from one piece of stone. Eventually, she felt his arms loosen ever so slightly so she dropped hers and pulled back, only to feel him take both her hands in his.

‘Please,’ Willa said. ‘Outside. I don’t want to talk in here.’

Letting go only of her left hand, Ewan led her out the front door and down the path. Hand in hand they stood on the footpath, both looking for which direction to take. Ewan turned left and started walking quickly, and Willa had to scurry to keep up. ‘Slow down,’ she said. ‘These goddamn heels.’

He dropped his pace and they walked along the path beneath the established trees that lined this street where every house cost many millions of dollars, which clearly hadn’t left the Smiths with enough money to send all of their kids to Don’t Be An Arsehole lessons. Ewan wasn’t being an arsehole though. Maybe he was adopted. He was still holding her hand, like that was normal for them now.

At the end of the block, they paused beside a bus stop with a bench. If they continued straight ahead the only place to go was down the steeply sloping road that led to the ferry wharf, or, she supposed, they could visit the zoo, off to their right. Turning left would lead them along a track through the bush.

‘Shall we sit?’ suggested Ewan, and Willa nodded. They sat side by side on the metal bench, the dappled sunshine playing on their faces. It was such a beautiful day for a wedding.

He squeezed her hand. ‘Willa, those pictures. Tell me what happened last night.’

‘It was an assault. And I can see at first glance in those photos it didn’t look like that, but it was. That man grabbed Imogen and groped her, pushed her against a wall, yanked her dress up at the hem and down at the top, held her and kissed her. He had his hands all over her. It lasted seconds, just a few seconds, before she shoved him off and he let her go.’

‘Shit,’ said Ewan. ‘You’re sure?’

Angrily she dropped his hand and swivelled on the seat to face him. ‘Of course I’m sure. It was at the karaoke club. I was in the room with all her friends, and she went to the toilet. Suddenly she came back looking petrified. Said she wanted to

leave, and then when we got home she told me what happened. He was strong, Ewan: he pulled her against him and then he turned her around and pinned her against the wall. Can you imagine how frightened she would have been? And then he just let her go and walked off. What if he hadn't? She didn't successfully fight him off: he chose to end the assault, for some reason.'

'Why didn't she —?' he began but she cut him off.

'What? Call the cops? Call Angus? Christ, so many reasons. For all the same reasons women always let this shit go. Embarrassment. She thought she must have given him the wrong idea because they'd danced together in the karaoke room earlier. And she was really drunk. We all talk about how it doesn't matter what anyone is wearing, nothing gives anyone else the right to touch your body without your permission even if all you're wearing is crotchless knickers and a sign that says, *Please rape me*, but that's bullshit. If Imogen went to the cops and said she'd been grinding against this man while she was wearing a teeny little sexy dress and stupid fuck-me heels, with a pair of cocks on her head —'

'With *what* on her head?'

'It's a hens night thing. It's stupid.'

'Right, sorry, go on.'

'If she had gone to the cops and said this man grabbed me, and they heard the circumstances, do you think they would have done anything? Where's the evidence? It's her word against his and he'd just say it was a consensual snog that she sobered up and regretted, nothing more. There's no way of recording the fear, the force.'

'Except there is,' said Ewan. 'Someone took photos.'

'Yes,' said Willa, 'and isn't that an interesting development.' Someone had been there, in the corridor, when that interaction took place. The work of less than a minute, by Imogen's account. That couldn't have been a coincidence. Imogen had been set up, somehow. Whoever took the photos

sent them to Angus this morning. It could only have been one of the women at the hens party. One of Imogen's old friends? Her flatmates? Willa's brain leaped from thought to thought, moving backwards from outcome to motive, landing neatly on the one obvious candidate.

'Sylvia,' she said.

Ewan raised his eyebrows sceptically. 'Why would Sylvia watch someone assault Imogen, and just stand there taking photos? She would have tried to stop him.'

'Not if she'd set it up in the first place.'

'To what end?'

'Think about it. Alistair's a jealous little shit. He's never been particularly cool about sharing Angus with Imogen, let alone her marrying him. I reckon he got Sylvia to arrange for the sexy waiter to kiss Imogen, so she could take photos, send them anonymously to Angus and derail the whole wedding.'

'That's ridiculous. Alistair isn't that childish.'

'Isn't he?'

Ewan looked thoughtful.

Willa went on. 'And if I'm right and that's what happened, then Angus, who I thought was sweet and loving, and good, took one look at those photos, and without so much as a phone call, a single question to Imogen, just chucked her, in the most humiliating way possible. He called her a slut in front of everyone she loves. A lying slut. You texted me earlier to say he was missing. Was he different when he came back to get dressed? Do you know where he was?'

Ewan looked embarrassed. 'He'd just crashed in one of the guest rooms, not with Alistair in their old room where I thought he'd be.'

'Your house is so big you lost a fully grown brother in it,' said Willa, unable to resist. 'How many other siblings do you think you might have started with? There could be more tucked away in there.'

The taste of levity made her yearn for what the day was supposed to have been. By now they should have all been drinking champagne in the marquee down on the tennis court below the house. Instead, their families had split off into warring factions like the Montagues and the Capulets, and she and Ewan were sitting stone-cold sober at a bus stop trying to figure out if one of his brothers was a sociopath out to ruin people's lives and another was so dull-witted and easily manipulated that he would destroy his own wedding day and his entire relationship on the strength of a few photos.

Ewan picked up her hand again.

'Why do you keep doing that?' she asked abruptly. 'Why are we holding hands all of a sudden?' As she spoke she sensed she was opening a door that might not be easy to close. Now they would have to address the hug and the hand-holding and there was enough going on today without adding anything like that to the mix.

'Would you prefer me not to?'

She stared down at their hands. For once she had nice nails. Imogen had nagged her into going to a salon with her a few days back and having some sort of Kevlar-strength varnish applied. These didn't look like her hands. But she couldn't remember ever being more aware of how her hand felt, wrapping and being wrapped in Ewan's hand, which was so much bigger than hers, firm but not uncomfortably tight. It didn't make any logical sense, but it felt like energy was passing between their bodies, through the palms of their hands and their clasping fingers.

'No,' she told him. 'I wouldn't prefer you not to. I like it. I just don't understand it. When you did it earlier, out the front when I arrived, I thought you were sad. That the wedding was making you sad because of what happened with Winter. But now you've been holding my hand, on and off, for quite a while.'

'You've been holding my hand too,' he pointed out.

‘I have,’ she admitted.

‘So why are you holding my hand?’

‘Don’t ask me that. You started it. You’re the one who needs a reason. I’m a passive hand-holder. I’m being handheld. You were the instigator.’

‘Do you really want to know?’ There was fear in his eyes, and something softer.

Her heart was thumping so hard she felt like a car with a subwoofer. She looked everywhere but at his face. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I don’t.’ If he spoke now, expressed in words what their tightly clutched hands were already saying, then there would be no going back. They’d have run across a collapsing suspension bridge together, leaving their long friendship behind, and be stuck on the other side, forced to face whatever lay in their future. The mere thought of that gave her waves of terror so strong she pulled her hand away and hugged her arms tightly around herself.

They didn’t want the same things. There was no way to get around that. The future Ewan saw for himself was kissing his wife’s belly, feeling his baby kick. He wanted to push a little laughing person on a swing, and walk them to school on their first day, and post pictures of them carrying a backpack so big it almost touched the ground. The future he wanted looked like a health insurance commercial. As hard as she tried, Willa couldn’t see herself in that story.

There wasn’t a good reason why. Nothing in her childhood accounted for it — no trauma, no neglectful parenting. She’d played with dolls. She’d picked out names for babies when she was a tween — Jewel for a girl, Brandon for a boy. It wasn’t because of her career either. Her job was time-consuming and she loved it, but lots of people had jobs like hers and kids too.

Maybe she was just immature and she would come to it later.

None of that mattered right now. She shook her head in confusion. How were they sitting there together, thinking

about themselves and their own feelings? It was obscene, in the light of what Angus had just done to poor Imogen. Right now she needed to make sure Ewan didn't say anything in the heat of the moment that would make life difficult or awkward after this, and then she needed to get back to Imogen and their family, who were presumably sitting in Ian's living room wondering where she'd got to, and explain what had happened.

A bus approached the stop and she waved it past. 'What are we doing?' she said and stood up. 'I'm going to find Imogen.'

As she turned to walk back up the road Ewan grabbed her hand again. 'Willa, wait.'

She paused.

'I know this isn't the right time or place to tell you this,' he began.

'Then don't tell me!' she said with a panicky laugh, pulling back.

He stood up and faced her, holding his palms out; he looked like someone trying to prove they weren't armed. 'I love you more than anything in the world. It's the strangest thing.'

A curious mixture of elation and defeat flooded Willa. She felt like she was drowning in feelings, like there was just one more mouthful of air she could gasp into her lungs before it all dragged her down and she was lost forever.

'No,' she said. 'That isn't the strangest thing. The strangest thing is that you chose to tell me now. At a moment when I don't understand anything. Why would you do that? What am I supposed to do with this information?'

Ewan looked like she'd slapped him. 'I don't know,' he said quietly. 'I thought you might feel the same. The flowers you sent, with the quote —'

'Hang on, what?'

He squinted, like he was trying to remember something. ‘*For which of my good parts did you first suffer love for me? Is that the line?*’

‘What line?’

‘You sent me flowers with that line on the card, didn’t you?’

‘I’ve never sent you flowers in my life. Was this back in March? Because someone sent me flowers then too, with another line from *Much Ado* on the card.’

‘Did you think they were from me?’ He looked hopeful.

‘Maybe for a second. But it didn’t make sense. You gave me no sign of anything other than friendship. You’d only just split up with Winter, plus it was the day after you hooked up with Sarah the teacher. I had no idea who sent them, but now I know you got some too it has the ridiculous fingerprints of your parents all over it.’

He reddened and shook his head. ‘Those idiots,’ he muttered. Then he looked boldly at her. ‘Well, if it took them doing that to make me see I love you then I’m not sorry they did it. Because I do.’

‘A declaration of love isn’t meant to be like a grenade,’ Willa said. ‘You don’t just pull the pin and chuck it at someone, especially when that person is already juggling a lot of bigger bombs while also trying to put someone who has been blown up back together.’ She knew her military metaphors wouldn’t stand up to even cursory examination, but it was the best explanation she could come up with on the spot. This felt like an attack. She pulled away and ran back up the slight hill, leaving him at the bus stop.

The heel of her left shoe wedged into a crack in the footpath and threw her off balance, and for a second she thought she was falling, but she sped up and managed to right herself. There was no dignity to be had in high-heeled shoes and she cursed herself for wearing them.

Chapter 22

There were fewer cars parked near the Smiths' house now. Two catering staff were loading crates of glasses into the back of a van, and the Kombi was gone.

As she approached the house beyond the Smiths' — a much more modest structure, it had probably been built on a corner of the big house's original grounds, decades after — the next door neighbour came out through the gate, like he'd been waiting for her.

'Willa, hello again.' He thrust out his hand for her to shake. 'I wonder if you'll remember me. Ian from next door. Well, it's not next door when we are here!' He pointed at the step he was standing on. 'Ian from in there.'

'Hi, Ian,' she said wearily. 'Are my family still at your place? Your son invited them in.'

'Yes, yes, they're here. I've made them cheese and tomato toasties. And tea. Anyway, they're heading off soon, but I just wanted to have a quiet word with you for a second, if I might?'

'What about?'

'My daughter, Georgie, she's at university, but she still lives here with us — upstairs. You know how expensive it is for youngsters today. They can't all move out and afford to study at the same time, not like when I was at uni. Whitlam took care of us in those days. Anyway, I'm getting off track. Let me get Georgie: she can explain things better than I can.' He looked back at his house and bellowed, 'Georgie!' He turned to Willa again. 'Better get her down or I'll get sidetracked from my sidetrack and just end up telling you some old story about the man who lived across from us in that

house there, the one that hasn't brought their bins in —' he pointed accusingly '— or something equally irrelevant. He was a minor European royal from one of those countries that don't have a monarchy any more. I want to say . . . Bulgaria? Lived in his sister's shed behind that house for years. Used to make coffee with a machine that looked like a science lab.'

There was no sign of Georgie. 'Ian, I'll head in and see everyone,' said Willa. 'Maybe I can talk to Georgie another time if it's important?'

Ian grimaced. 'Mmmm, I think you should hear this first. *Georgie!*' he yelled back at his house, aiming generally for the first floor.

The front door opened and a girl in grey tracksuit pants, a singlet and bare feet ran lightly down the path. 'Dad, do you have to stand out here screaming at me? Jesus. Just text next time.'

Ian ignored her disapproval. 'Georgie, this is Willa. She's Imogen's cousin. Tell her what you told me, love.'

Georgie folded her arms and shifted from one foot to the other, looking uncomfortable. 'So, I don't know your cousin, but I know the Smith boys, kind of. We've only been here a few years but the twins were still living at home when we moved in, and I've met them around the place. Pub and stuff.' She cast a sidelong glance at her father that Willa read as a tacit confession of underage drinking with older boys. It made sense. Georgie was good looking and young — she'd tick a lot of boxes for Alistair and Angus.

Willa nodded.

'So, anyway, this morning I was in our back garden, near the fence to the Smiths' place. There's a bit where their tennis court starts and there's a big passionfruit vine on the fence, so it looks solid, but you can hear right through it. I —'

'That's where Georgie goes to vape,' said Ian, 'despite being an otherwise bright girl who knows it's a dangerous habit.' For a moment he and his child glared at each other.

‘Do you want me to tell her or not? I can just go back inside?’ Georgie’s voice was scathing. Willa took her tone and filed it in her brain with all the other reasons she didn’t want kids.

Ian put up his hands in surrender and she continued. ‘So anyway, I heard Alistair talking to his girlfriend, the blonde one.’

‘Sylvia?’ asked Willa.

‘I don’t know her name. About my height, skinny, pretty, I guess.’

‘Like a possum with laminated eyebrows?’

‘That’s . . . weird, but accurate.’

‘That’s Sylvia.’

‘Okay, well they were talking about some photos they had, and whether they should just show them to Angus or send them through a phone with the number hidden.’

‘Did they say where they got the photos?’ Willa had been right. It wasn’t the most sophisticated act of deception ever carried out. It had taken her about thirty seconds to guess Sylvia and Alistair were behind it.

‘It sort of sounded like Sylvia had taken them? I wasn’t really paying that much attention until they mentioned a hidden number. Then I started listening because it got kind of obvious they were up to some dodgy shit. Like, I knew the pictures they were talking about were sexual because she said, like, “I told him she was up for it, that he should just go for it and she’d be into it.” I didn’t know it was anything to do with the wedding until Damon showed up with Imogen and everyone. Then I told Dad.’ Georgie stretched out one foot and used her toes to brush some leaves off the path. ‘What a pair of cunts.’

‘Georgie!’ Ian was aghast. ‘Language!’

‘It’s all right, Ian,’ Willa said. ‘She’s spot on. That’s exactly what they are. Shame they waited until now to make

that apparent. Thanks for telling me, Georgie.’ Leaving Ian and Georgie at the gate, she marched through their open front door.

* * *

Afterwards it felt like someone else had taken over once Willa entered Ian’s house. It didn’t feel like her who followed the sound of familiar voices along the hallway to the kitchen; who saw Imogen sitting ashen and dark-eyed at Ian’s breakfast bar, looking like a child playing Miss Havisham in a school play; who explained the absurd series of events behind Angus’s behaviour that morning. Her own voice sounded like a calm stranger’s, telling them how Alistair had been behind the plan, which had probably sprung from him not wanting his relationship with his twin brother to change. Sylvia’s motive was likely just trying to keep Alistair’s approval. Jim Beam had been asked to do what he did to Imogen, not that it excused his actions. Imogen could still report him to the police if she wanted. Imogen didn’t cry or ask questions, she just listened.

When Willa was finished, she looked at the shocked expressions of her family. There were tears in Gordon’s eyes, and Jenny had a face like thunder. Willa’s mother stood and put her arm around Imogen’s shoulders. ‘That’s all we needed to hear. We sent the Kombi away, so I’ll book us Ubers back to your flat, Willa. Then we’ll check out of the hotel and drive down to our place. Jen? Tony, Immy? Sound like a plan? You don’t want to stay here at the hotel, do you? Come stay with us. At least for the weekend. Then we can see where things are after that. We can chat about getting the cops involved.’

Jenny nodded and helped her daughter up. Imogen was walking like she’d been in a car accident, tense and tentative, unsure what might start to hurt at any moment. Her veil was gone.

‘Please,’ said Ian from the doorway, ‘let me drive you wherever you need to go. The LandCruiser seats seven.’

Willa took her house key from her clutch and passed it to her dad. ‘You’ll need this. I have to sort some stuff out here, then I’ll try to come down to you on the train tomorrow. When you leave, can you hide this inside the electricity meter near the front door?’

‘Is that safe?’ asked her father. ‘What if someone sees us put it there and breaks in?’

Willa sighed. ‘Normally I’d worry about that too, Dad, but I think the universe has given us enough shit for one day.’

He gave her a rueful smile. ‘As long as you’re home before midnight. Otherwise it will be tomorrow and a clean slate for shit from the universe.’

‘I’ll be home by midnight,’ she promised.

While their parents said polite goodbyes and thanked Ian and his kids, Willa stood arm in arm with Imogen on the nature strip. Their heels slowly sank into the soft ground.

Imogen looked at her, glassy-eyed. ‘Will you say sorry to everyone? To Kristy and Madison? They flew all the way up here. Tell them I’ll pay them back for their flights.’

‘I will tell them no such thing,’ Willa shot back. ‘You’re not to apologise to a single person, do you hear me? No one.’

‘What do I do if he says sorry to me?’ Imogen’s voice wobbled.

It didn’t seem a likely scenario, but Willa considered it anyway. ‘I can’t tell you what to do, Immy, but if I were in your position, I’d think very hard about what Angus did today, and what that says about him. I know you love him. I thought he loved you, but that wasn’t an act of love. I don’t know if you can love someone without trusting them, and the way he reacted to those photos, it didn’t seem like he trusted you. He just accepted them as evidence that you were unfaithful without considering anything else. That’s hard to come back from. So don’t do anything rash if he does come crawling back.’

Imogen nodded sadly. 'I want to go home.'

The garage door beside them opened and a shiny white SUV backed slowly out and onto the road. 'There you go,' said Willa. 'Hop in and then Mum and Dad will drive you guys down to their place. You'll be there within three hours. Depending on how many Macca's stops you make.'

'No,' said Imogen. 'Home home.'

Tasmania. Of course. She didn't want any part of this mess any more and fair enough too. Sydney had swept Imogen into a whirlpool before shooting her down the plughole, through the drains and depositing her in a flood of raw sewage somewhere off the coast of Bondi. Willa hugged her cousin tightly. 'You don't have to decide anything now.'

Chapter 23

Willa got out of Ian's car at the top of the hill and walked the rest of the way to the pub. Feeling deep gratitude to her mother, she wiggled her toes in the rubber-soled loafers Jo had been wearing until a few minutes before, when she'd caught sight of the two-inch red blisters on the back of Willa's heels. 'I'll take those ridiculous shoes back to your house,' she'd said, her own bare feet flat on the rubber floor mat of the car. 'There's been enough pain today.'

A gust of wind blew from behind, chilling Willa's shoulders, arms and back and making her wish she had also thought to borrow her mother's pashmina. Her halter-neck jumpsuit didn't really work with a jacket, and she'd known it might get cold as the sun went down. Her plan had been that by this point in the evening, two hours after the ceremony should have finished, she'd be wearing what Kat had once dubbed 'a cardi-gin': the warmth generated by drinking enough to render another layer of actual clothing unnecessary.

The Buena Vista Hotel loomed ahead at the end of the block. It was an old pub, oddly triangular as it sat at the acute angle where two roads met at a five-way roundabout. 'The Buena,' she said aloud to no one, simply to reinforce her own preferred pronunciation. It baffled her the way Mosman locals called it the 'byoona' instead of 'bway-na' Vista, which was the correct way to say the Spanish word. Angus and Alistair had made fun of her the first time she'd come here with them all. Ewan had graciously explained that saying it like she was Spanish would mark her out as not from around there, which had cemented her decision never to say it any other way.

Ralph was standing outside, slightly away from the tables of alfresco drinkers, massaging his temples as he spoke on his

phone. When he saw Willa he held up one finger, rolled his eyes and said, 'Well it sounds like you have it all under control then, Mum. But yeah, do put that guard back on the stair railings, otherwise they will keep weaving their arms in and out of the banisters. I gotta go, bye-bye! Love you!'

'Everything okay?' asked Willa.

Ralph put the phone back into his jacket pocket. 'Oh you know, the usual. Come in. We're just over here.' He led her to a booth where Kat, Bec and George sat nursing glasses of red wine.

Like Ralph, George was still in the suit she'd seen him in earlier, but Bec and Kat were wearing jeans and blinding white trainers. Bec sported a T-shirt with sequins on it in the shape of a horse's head and Kat wore a plain navy jumper. They fit right in.

'Where did you get those clothes?' Willa asked them by way of a greeting. 'Are they yours? They don't look like yours. You look very Mosmanny.'

'I think the adjective is Mosmanic. Maybe with a -que. Mosmanique,' said Bec. 'We went shopping.'

'For our nerves,' added Kat.

'Oh. You look great. Where'd you go? Country Road?'

'Bingo! Well spotted,' said Kat.

Willa sat down beside George and looked hard at Kat. 'How come you look French? If I wore a plain navy jumper I'd look like I worked at CityRail.'

George laughed out loud and Willa looked at him. Maybe he had a sense of humour after all. Either that or she did look like a train guard.

'*Je ne sais pas,*' Kat said with a Gallic shrug. She poured red wine into a spare glass and handed it to Willa. 'But my jumper isn't important. Did you figure out what happened to Angus? Sudden Onset Fuckwittery?'

Once again Willa outlined the dastardly if surprisingly straightforward deeds of Sylvia and Alistair, and their plot to bring about the ruin of Angus and Imogen's wedding.

'Fuck,' breathed Ralph. 'It shouldn't be that easy, should it?'

'No, it shouldn't,' Willa said. 'I thought Angus was a better man than that.'

'Do you think they'll patch things up?' asked Bec. 'Once Angus realises she didn't do anything wrong?'

'I hope not. I hope she never speaks to him again. He doesn't deserve her. He was so fast to believe she'd cheated and to react that violently even if she had would be unacceptable. No, she's much better off out of it. I was right. They were too young to do this.'

'It's not so much their age though,' George said thoughtfully. 'Isn't it more that Angus is a total cock?'

She smiled at him for the first time. 'That's exactly what the problem is. And if she were older she'd have had more experience with total cocks and been able to spot one sooner.'

George went on. 'Even when the dust settles Angus will still be an entitled prick with massive trust issues. Though, to be fair, when the dust settles Imogen will also have massive trust issues, so they'll have more in common.'

She erupted in laughter. Kat smiled at them across the table and Willa felt her heart give an inch.

After the battlefield of the wedding and its aftermath, sitting there squashed into a too-small-for-five booth and drinking red wine with her friends felt like putting on an old tracksuit: warm, accommodating and supportive of whatever shape she was in. Even with George the interloper there, she felt safe.

Kat was watching George across the table, her eyes soft and delighted. Willa had seen her with boyfriends before, but she was different with George. A pang of something acidic

shot through her. Envy? Not of Kat's happiness. That was all Willa wanted. But perhaps jealousy: it hurt to acknowledge that it was George who made her the happiest. The thought that perhaps she was in love with her best friend floated through Willa's mind and she watched it with curiosity. Was she? Probably, in a way.

'Hey, Will,' said Bec. 'We were just wondering: did you manifest this?'

'Your sparkly shirt?'

'No, did you somehow make it so that the entire bloody plot of *Much Ado About Nothing* would play out at Imogen's wedding? That's some spooky Macbeth witches shit.'

'What are you talking about?' Willa took a large gulp of her wine, a tannic cab sav that burned her throat in the best way.

'Someone getting chucked at their wedding for cheating they didn't do — isn't that what happens to what's-her-face, *Last Days of Disco* lady?' Bec was notoriously bad at remembering celebrities' names, though correspondingly good at remembering what TV shows and movies they'd all been in.

'Kate Beckinsale,' Willa said. 'She plays Hero.'

'Yeah, her. Isn't that the story?'

'Well, there's a vague similarity, I suppose,' said Willa, playing down what she was realising, which was that far from there being a vague similarity, the situation was exactly the same. Eerily so. Even down to Ewan's absurd declaration of love afterwards. Maybe he'd seen the movie enough times that his brain had been pickled in the plot and he'd unwittingly continued the storyline.

If that was the case, it had come to a screeching halt when she hadn't reciprocated his Grand Romantic Gesture. In the play, when Benedick shows his hand, so to speak, Beatrice responds in kind, with the iconic line 'I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.' It was Willa's second-favourite part of the movie. They are fated to love each other

and it's their love that fuels the rest of the admittedly fairly demented plot, which involves Beatrice asking Benedick to promise he will kill Claudio, the man who spurned Hero. She hadn't said anything of the kind to Ewan and she certainly hadn't brought up murder.

She didn't feel the need to share any of that with her friends right now. It would add fuel to their theory, which she didn't even really understand. What did they think? That she was somehow living out a version of her favourite film? A work alert flashed suddenly in her brain and without even meaning to she made a mental note to pass this plot idea to one of her authors: a woman obsessed with a particular romantic tale finds herself living out that story. It could be something. Something that wasn't *Bridget Jones's Diary*, which had already sort of done it with *Pride and Prejudice*.

Slamming her work brain into a mental filing drawer, Willa returned her attention to her friends. 'So, what's your point? In *Much Ado* they pretend Hero is dead after Claudio slut-shames her. Are you proposing we get back at Angus by faking Imogen's death? And we'll punish him by telling him he has to marry me instead and then when he lifts my veil it will be her after all?'

She looked around the table at their astonished faces. Had none of them ever paid attention to the film? Surely Kat had. They'd watched it together so many times over the years.

'Is that what happens?' asked Ralph. 'In *Much Ado*?'

'Yes,' she said, exasperated. 'Hero gets shunned at her wedding and they tell her fiancé, Claudio, that she died because he slandered her. Then he learns she did nothing wrong, and he feels awful, as he should. Her dad decides he will let them marry but to punish him for wrecking the wedding and causing all this grief, he tells Claudio he has to marry Beatrice, who is his niece. But on the day, it's Hero not Beatrice at the end of the aisle and all's well. Beatrice marries Benedick.'

'Who's he?' Ralph looked confused.

‘He’s the love interest for Beatrice. Kenneth Branagh plays him, and Emma Thompson is Beatrice. They bickerflirt the whole time, their families try to trick them by making them overhear people talking about how actually Beatrice loves Benedick, and Benedick loves Beatrice. That makes them realise they do love each other without having to risk admitting it and not being sure how the other one will react.’ She felt her chest tighten as she remembered Fiona and Gladstone’s clumsy effort to bring her and Ewan together with the flowers. Had they been trying to mimic the movie?

‘Always seemed a risky strategy to me,’ said Kat, and sipped her wine.

‘Can we go back a sec?’ asked George. ‘You said at the end with the pretending people are dead and then at the wedding revealing they’re alive — you said that ends well? Does Claudio care that everyone lied to him? Does Hero forgive him? How is all that dealt with?’

‘Look it just turns out all right,’ Willa told him crossly. ‘It’s a comedy. Everything is okay in the end.’

‘Sounds like it could have gone either way,’ George said. ‘You know, it’s not miles off turning into a *Romeo and Juliet* tragedy.’

‘I’d never thought of that,’ said Bec. ‘It’s one plot twist away. What if, when Claudio is told that Hero is dead, he kills himself out of remorse for ditching her?’

‘I’d be pretty all right if Angus did that,’ grumbled Willa. ‘The shithead.’

‘Willa!’ Kat admonished. ‘Don’t joke about suicide.’

‘Oh relax, he’s not going to top himself. People like him don’t. You have to have a conscience and heart for that and it turns out he has neither.’

‘You still shouldn’t say things like that.’

‘Why am I getting in trouble? Why are we even talking about this?’ Willa upended the last of the wine into her now

empty glass. ‘Another?’

Bec tapped her phone to check the time. Almost seven o’clock. ‘I’m not going home until my children are asleep. Ralph’s mum is staying over, and I was promised alcohol, food and a good time. I’m sorry, but I’m still going to have all those things, regardless of what happened back there. Ralph, will you please grab some menus? No wait, don’t bother: we just want all the golden bar snack classics, right? Wedges, salt and pepper calamari, nachos. Order too much.’

Ralph headed for the bar, and the conversation moved away from Shakespeare. It was amazing to Willa how fast people could get over an upset as extreme as a jilted bride. To be fair, these were her friends not Imogen’s, so she couldn’t exactly expect them to be gnashing their teeth and wailing that Imogen and Angus had split up. It was Willa who had walked through the spiderweb that was the Smith family, and it would probably take years to remove all their sticky strands from her life.

Not that she could while she still worked for them. How would she return to the office on Monday? Maybe they would sack her, to save themselves the awkwardness of having to deal with the situation.

Her phone buzzed and she looked at the screen. Dougal was calling. Curiosity got the better of her.

‘Hello?’

‘Willa, it’s Dougal.’

‘I know.’

A pause.

‘Is Imogen with you? Angus is here and he wants to talk to her. Her phone is off.’

The nerve, thought Willa. ‘I’m not with Imogen. Tell Angus if she isn’t answering her phone he should respect that, not try to get to her through me.’ Her voice was cold.

‘Right. I’ll pass that on.’ He paused again. ‘Our neighbour Ian has just been by with his daughter. I gather you already know what she overheard? It seems Alistair may have been involved in some way. A misguided ploy to keep his brother to himself. He’s very sorry.’

‘Oh he is not,’ said Willa, the coals of her fury igniting again. ‘If Alistair is acting sorry it’s only because he got found out. Imogen hasn’t ruled out going to the police about this.’

‘That’s up to Imogen.’

‘Yes, it is.’

He paused, before asking tentatively, ‘Is Ewan with you?’

She sighed. ‘Dougal, stop trying to get to people through me. And no, Ewan’s not with me. He is on your team, in case you’d forgotten.’

‘I only ask because he left when you did and we haven’t seen him since.’

‘I don’t know where he is, all right?’

‘All right. I have to ask you one more thing,’ said Dougal. ‘This is going to sound weird but on a practical level, we have a huge amount of food here. Can you take any of it off our hands? The caterers have packaged it all up and we can deliver it to whoever wants it — you or anyone else in the family. Imogen’s parents, maybe?’

‘No thank you.’

‘Mum asked me to say we have a lot of scallops. She knows you like scallops. I think she’s trying to say sorry, Willa, to your family.’ His voice was kind but the practical offer infuriated her.

‘You think my family’s forgiveness can be bought with scallops? Unbelievable. That’s blood money. Blood scallops.’

‘It’s really not,’ he said tiredly.

‘If you think I or anyone I am related to would eat even one of your parents’ scallops after they were complicit in what

happened earlier, after they believed those photos were real, then you are even dumber than I thought.'

'I wasn't aware you thought I was dumb.'

'Dougal, we don't want anything more from your family. Just leave us alone.'

'Does that mean you'll no longer be accepting the salary my father pays you?'

'That remains to be seen,' said Willa haughtily and she ended the call.

Her friends were all quiet, listening and watching her.

'Isn't Dougal kind of like your boss?' said Bec.

'No, his dad is. The org chart is basically a family tree at that place but technically I only answer to Gladstone.'

'Good,' said Bec. 'Because you might not have a boss for long if you talk to them like that.'

'He deserved it.'

'I'm not saying he didn't. But you don't have to lose your job over this. You might decide you want to, but isn't it better if that's your choice, not foisted on you when you get fired for calling your boss dumb?'

The excitement, hurt and outrage of the day had taken up every thought in Willa's head, but now she let the clouds of rage part enough to reveal that beyond them still lay her life. She still had to show up to work in thirty-six hours and sit in a Monday morning meeting with Gladstone, Dougal, Ewan, Angus and Alistair. Surely not. The meeting could be cancelled just this once. But how would that help? They worked together, there was no getting around it. She didn't think she could be in the same room as Angus and Alistair without wanting to tear their faces off like a rabid chimpanzee, and that wouldn't play well when it came time for her annual performance review.

Her friends' conversation swirled around her. It didn't feel comforting any more: it just made her feel alone. Images from the day scrolled through her head on repeat, like a slideshow made by her phone. Those slideshows always contained at least one photo that made you cringe and stab wildly at the screen, trying to edit it out. So many moments from today fit that bill: Imogen's tearstained face as she cowered in her mother's arms on the lawn; the sadness in Dougal's eyes as he handed over the phone; the violent and confronting images themselves; and finally, the moment she couldn't bear to picture. Ewan. Standing in the street outside the zoo, throwing a lit match onto seven years of friendship with his words. 'I love you more than anything else in the world.'

Willa reached for her phone and booked an Uber. She was done with today.

Chapter 24

Sydney's weather got the memo that things were not good for Willa that night, and when she woke late on Sunday morning, it was to the sound of torrential rain and wind that blew between the buildings with an eerie high-pitched moan.

The flat was gloomy and cold. It was cleaner than usual, because she'd vaguely tidied before the hens and her parents always wiped the counters and tabletop when they came over, but the sight of her beautifully organised tea-towel drawer brought a lump to her throat.

She made a cup of tea with the bag left in, as she preferred it, and sat at the clean table, wearing a satin-trimmed fleece dressing gown that buttoned up to the chin. It was turquoise, her least favourite colour, and Kat had bought it for her the year she broke up with Ollie. She'd been moaning that she was going to die alone, wearing a horrible turquoise dressing gown and quilted slippers, and no one would notice for so long that her pet cats would have eaten her face by the time she was found. The conversation had culminated in their trying to outdo each other with increasingly gory and poignant descriptions of how she would die.

Kat reckoned it would be the left-in teabag that would be the end of Willa: she would accidentally drink it, choke and when they found her body the string and tag would be hanging from the corner of her mouth. Willa thought she would spill a tin of baked beans and skid on them, coming to rest on her back on the kitchen floor. With the tap running into a sink full of dishes, the room would flood. She'd be found floating in a river of orange beans, her long grey hair trailing around her like Millais's portrait of Ophelia. Kat disqualified her on the grounds that the kitchen was next to the bathroom and the

water would drain away down the floor grate before it was deep enough to float in.

The dressing gown really was a heinous thing to look at, but it was cosy and the next best thing to being with Kat. Willa fished the teabag out of the cup with her fingers and squeezed it. Extra brown, that's what she wanted. She didn't need the teabag. It was a security teabag. It *was* a bit gross to leave it in there. She was strange enough without being peculiar about how she took her tea. That was an eccentricity she could do without.

She looked around her flat. What else could she do to make herself more normal? Sweep? She found the broom at the very back of a cupboard and pushed it around in a desultory fashion. An alarming pile accumulated. What was it all? How did the floor get like this? Why didn't nice things build up like filth did? You never looked around your home and found it suddenly nicer, filled with flowers and delicious things to eat, good people, and warmth. No, it was just mess that encroached like this, insidiously. And if you didn't fight it constantly, it would overcome you, and the chaos of the universe would reign supreme.

Entropy. That was the word for it. It came up a lot in her time with Ollie, while doing her Master's. It was a scientific term that had wiggled into narrative theory as a fancy way of describing disorder. Her home was a place of high entropy. You had to clean it eventually.

Kat always said it made her feel better to clean. As Willa now swept the large pile of who knew what — dead skin? Hair? Hope? Tiny bits of cars that floated out of their exhaust pipes and through her windows? — she found that baffling. Cleaning was awful. It was depressing: a reminder that things were falling apart around you, all the time. The dirt that accumulated in a house was visible change, the passing of time made concrete. She felt like she was sweeping up the last few months and throwing them in the bin.

Which, she supposed, was why people liked to keep on top of the cleaning. A tiny bit of it once a day would be much less onerous than this. It was so much worse to clean when you were feeling sad, but why would you do it when you weren't?

Exhausted by the sweeping and the psychic weight of the inherent disorder of the universe, Willa went back to bed. She'd told her parents she would head home on the train today, but she couldn't face Imogen. She scolded herself for being pathetic and making the situation about her. It was Imogen who had had her heart broken after enduring a traumatic assault, not Willa.

By mid-afternoon she could no longer put off replying to the texts her mother had been sending since nine, asking what train she'd be on. She composed and deleted half a dozen possible replies — feigning illness, pleading a heavy workload — before finally just calling.

'Are you all right?' Her mum answered on the first ring.

Willa started to cry. 'Not really. This is my fault. I'm so sorry. I should never have let Imogen work there. I can't come down and face her, and Jenny and Gordon.'

'Oh love, it isn't your fault. It's nothing to do with you. No one blames you.'

'They should. The Smiths are toxic. I don't know how I'm going to go back there, Mum. How do I go in and sit beside them all tomorrow?'

A pause. 'So you're going back?'

'I work there. I have to go back.'

'It's not the only job in the world.'

'Mum, I've built what I do there. I'm the only one. There are people who rely on me for their income. Authors, editors, designers. If I quit, what happens to them? To my books?'

'I imagine they'll hire someone else to do your job.'

The very thought of it made Willa's throat close over.

‘Willa?’

‘Mum, you don’t understand. Those books are more than just work to me. They’re sort of like my children. I help the authors create them, develop the stories, and we figure out the best way to bring them to life, into the world.’ She’d never articulated this before, but it was true. ‘I don’t know if this is how other publishers do it. God, I don’t even know anyone else in publishing.’

It was true, and it was, even to Willa, a deeply weird thing to acknowledge. How could she have worked in this industry for that many years and not have connected with anyone else doing the same job? Many times she’d thought about it. She could have reached out on Twitter to lots of people from other publishers, big and small. People did. It was normal. It was called networking. Her authors were better at it than she was: some of them went to festivals and romance conferences. But Willa hadn’t. She’d kept her head down and forged her own way. It had made her proud, to know she hadn’t needed anyone else’s help or guidance.

Why hadn’t she? Fear, probably, she now realised. And stubbornness. Arrogance.

Her mum cleared her throat — a sign she was about to say something that required tact. Willa braced herself. ‘I think,’ she began, ‘that the work environment there is possibly not the healthiest for you. Even without what happened yesterday. It might be better to work somewhere where you’re part of a team. You’re very isolated, and you’ve been sounding a little bit lonely lately.’

‘I’m the exact opposite of isolated! I am surrounded by people at work. There are five bloody Smiths there with me.’

‘Yes, I realise that, but why aren’t any of them working *with* you, on your books? You’ve been telling me for ages that yours is the most profitable part of the business. A smart boss would be expanding what you’re doing and winding up the manuals side of things. I mean, manuals? Do people really outsource them any more?’

‘Less and less,’ Willa admitted. ‘I don’t know why they do them. But I don’t run the business, and I don’t want to. I don’t want to try to teach Dougal and Ewan and the twins how to do my job. They’d suck at it. None of them are readers.’

‘That might be right.’ Her mother’s voice was so calm and even. ‘I just think you’d be happier somewhere else. That’s my two cents’ worth.’

Willa didn’t reply.

‘Will you be coming down today?’

‘No. You’re cross at me. Everyone is.’

Her mother sighed. ‘No one is cross at you.’

But Willa had the reins of self-pity now and wasn’t ready to pull up. ‘You are. You think I should quit my job, like it’s that simple. Like I have any other way to pay my rent and feed myself. You said before that no one blames me but then you say I should leave Gladstone and Smith. Which is it?’

‘Those things aren’t necessarily connected.’

‘I’m not coming. I’m tired and I just want to go back to sleep, then go to work tomorrow and pretend this never happened. Hopefully that’s what the Smiths will do too. We can just get a new receptionist and move on. Nothing needs to change. I don’t have much to do with the twins in my work anyway. I think I can pull off never speaking to either of them again.’ The question of Ewan bubbled up like a notification in her brain and she immediately deleted it. She wasn’t ready to deal with him.

‘It mightn’t be as easy as that.’

‘Mum! Can’t you ever just support me?’

‘Disagreeing isn’t the same as not supporting.’ Her mother’s rational argument tipped her over the edge.

‘Well I disagree with that,’ Willa snapped, and ended the call. It was a pathetic comeback. How did her mother manage to make her feel so shit while pretending to be so nice? She

threw her phone onto the floor in an act of anger made safe by the crumpled wedding jumpsuit that cushioned its fall. As the rain fell outside, she pulled the covers over her head and fell into an exhausted half-sleep, the line between thoughts and dreams blurred and disturbing.

Chapter 25

Gladstone's office door was always open — it was his policy — and he didn't seem to realise that people usually meant that in a metaphorical sense. A closed door would have blocked some of the noise of his very loud phone calls, which bounced off the plaster walls and echoed throughout the house. But at nine thirty the next morning Willa stood in the hall outside his closed office door for the first time she could remember.

The closed door was the only sign that anyone else was in the office. She'd passed the reception desk on her way in and glanced at Imogen's empty chair, pushed back when she'd knocked off early to get ready for her hens night. Her water bottle still stood beside the phone.

No sounds came from the boys' offices or the kitchen. No Monday chat about the weekend, sport or the week ahead. No one asking if she'd been on any dates. No musical artist selected for 'I Don't Like Mondays'. The office had an eerie end-of-term feeling. It reminded her of the day she went back to her high school a few days after her final exams finished to return some books. It didn't feel like her place any more.

She knocked tentatively on Gladstone's door.

'What?' There was the booming voice.

'Um, it's Willa. Is the meeting on?'

There was no answer. After a few moments she heard the wheels of Gladstone's desk chair rolling, and footsteps. The door opened.

Her boss stood before her, tired and wild-eyed. There were dark circles under his eyes and though he was mostly bald, what little hair he retained looked decidedly dishevelled. He

wasn't wearing his usual business shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbows and suit pants, but an oversized faded pink polo shirt over a pair of baggy dark denim jeans. It was the sort of outfit he wore to work on his boat.

'No meeting this morning.'

'Oh.' She turned to leave.

'We should have a, er, a talk, of some sort. At some stage,' he said. 'About it all.'

'All right.' She didn't know how to act. Would a polite smile imply a level of forgiveness she didn't intend? She hadn't discussed the situation with Gladstone since she stormed out of their house on Saturday after seeing the photos, but Dougal and Ewan knew what Alistair and Sylvia had done and would have explained it all to their father. Surely. He had to be feeling pretty rotten, both about what a pair of vile humans his younger sons had turned out to be, and about how he hadn't stood up for Imogen. She settled on a little nod. He could make of that what he would. As she walked back to her office she heard Gladstone close his door.

* * *

Sitting at her desk, Willa felt her shoulders relax as she turned on the computer and opened her email. No meeting was a bonus. Everything was in order here. There were cover roughs for two new titles, page proofs for another returned from the author with her corrections, and a few query emails from prospective authors and agents. Her mother was wrong. There was no need for a team for this. There was exactly enough work for Willa and Willa alone. She didn't need help making decisions about which books to publish. It might have been unorthodox but holding out for the *Much Ado* feeling hadn't steered her wrong so far. Well, until she'd had it just before the wedding, at least. She felt a whiff of betrayal by the system that had worked so well for her for so long. But work-wise it would still serve her well. This was a neat and economical operation. Everything was under control.

The phone on her desk rang, startling her. She rarely used it — all her authors and freelancers rang her mobile if they needed her. The whole office phone system was a relic from premobile days, or the time when mobile calls cost enough for people to object to using their personal phones for work. The tiny grey screen lit up green with the word *reception*.

In Imogen's absence the reception phone was ringing to every other handset in the building. Someone would answer it. Willa wasn't sure who else was in but, as the phone pealed away, it became apparent it was just her and Gladstone.

She stared at the phone as it passed its tenth ring and kept going. She'd been the receptionist, of course. She didn't intend to go back to it. The call wasn't going to be for her, she was reasonably certain. Gladstone could answer it. Or one of the boys could, if they ever turned up. She put her headphones on and went back to her emails. Finally it stopped. She'd forgotten how long landlines rang for. Mobiles gave you about three seconds to pick up a call. Landlines were a bit desperate.

Her headphones prevented her from hearing Gladstone's first knock. By the time she registered the thumping reverberating through her chair, pulled off the headphones and opened the door, he was decidedly unhappy.

'Why didn't you answer the telephone?' His face was red and his mouth was screwed up into an angry puncture.

'It wasn't for me,' said Willa, calmly.

'We are, as you well know, currently without a receptionist, so perhaps you would be so kind as to answer the bloody phone when it rings.'

Willa tried to remain calm. He was her boss. 'Imogen was meant to be on her honeymoon now anyway. That aside, it's not my fault we haven't got a receptionist any more. Maybe you should get whoever's fault it is to answer the phones.'

'I don't think Sylvia is going to come answer the phone, Willa. What a stupid suggestion.'

'Sylvia?'

‘Yes, Sylvia.’ He folded his arms and glared at her. Was she missing something?

‘Gladstone, should we have that talk you mentioned now? Because the person responsible for Imogen not being here is Angus. Aided by Alistair and yes even Sylvia, but ultimately Angus.’

Gladstone gave a hollow laugh. ‘You’re very naive, Willa. It wasn’t Angus’s fault. He was played. It was that manipulative piece of work Sylvia who was behind everything.’

‘If you mean she was the one who booked the stripper, tricked him into assaulting my cousin, took the photos and sent them to Angus, then yes, she was involved. But it wasn’t her idea. It was Alistair’s.’

‘Alistair? Ha! That’s a good one. Alistair is as much a victim here as Imogen.’

Willa shook her head. ‘*What* did you say?’

Gladstone came in and sat heavily on the wicker chair. It creaked in protest and wobbled ominously. ‘Alistair and Angus explained it all.’ He took a pen from his pocket and pointed it at various spots in the air in front of him as if there were a PowerPoint presentation only he could see. ‘Sylvia had the hots for Angus, even while she was going out with Alistair. She was jealous that he was marrying Imogen, so when she spotted Imogen kissing the man in the glittery underpants, she saw her opportunity. She took the photos, then she sent them anonymously to Angus, so he wouldn’t marry Imogen. All the while leading Alistair on a merry dance. Both my little fellers have been taken for a ride by that girl. That level of manipulation, it beggars belief.’

Willa couldn’t stay quiet. ‘It beggars belief because it isn’t true. The twins are lying to you, Gladstone. Alistair is lying to save his skin and his relationship with his brother. And if Angus really believes that story — and I promise you he doesn’t — he’s even dimmer than I thought. It’s one evilly

stupid thing to see those photos and decide Imogen was cheating on him — which I notice you still think she was — but entirely another to think Sylvia set it up without Alistair's say-so. Didn't Ewan and Dougal explain all this? There is a witness to Alistair and Sylvia discussing their plan.'

Gladstone waved his hand as if the truth were an annoying blowfly. 'Oh, none of that's true. Ewan and Dougal did say something like that but it just didn't make any sense. My Alistair would never do that. He wouldn't hurt his brother. He worships Angus.'

'Exactly: that's why he broke up his wedding. He's not right in the head. He worships Angus in a weird way, Gladstone. He wants his twin brother all to himself. I'm sorry, but you have to be able to see that Alistair is the one who set this all up. Sylvia helped him, but that story about her wanting Angus for herself? It's a pure fabrication. Your neighbour's daughter, Georgie, overheard Alistair and Sylvia discussing it on the morning of the wedding. There's no way Alistair wasn't in on it.'

'Rubbish,' he shouted, and he rose to his feet and swayed. He wasn't looking well. The veins on his forehead were bulging and his breathing was laboured. Christ, that was all she needed, her boss having a heart attack on the floor of her office.

'Sit back down.' She pulled the chair closer to him. He sank into it. 'Take some deep breaths.'

Gladstone sat with his hands on his knees, breathing as instructed. She crouched beside him with her hand on his back. Gradually his high colour faded and his breathing returned to normal. There were tears in his eyes.

'What you're saying about my boys is too much, Willa, it's too much. The twins aren't like that.'

There was nothing she could tell him. Parents are programmed to believe the best of their children. They can't help it. She saw it all the time with Bec and Ralph. She

supposed it was a form of narcissism: accepting failings in your offspring meant accepting the same in yourself.

But even when faced with irrefutable evidence to the contrary — including two more of his children telling him so — Gladstone wouldn't let himself see that Imogen had been wronged, and he'd convinced himself of the preposterous assertion that Sylvia alone had sent Angus the photos. The extent to which his filial blinkers protected him was astounding. It was shocking to think that being a parent could impair your judgement so drastically. She wanted to keep pushing him, make him see that Dougal and Ewan had no reason to lie about their brothers, and a good deal more in the way of a history of good behaviour, but she could see there was no point.

'I'll make you a cup of tea.' She handed Gladstone the box of tissues from her desk and went downstairs.

As she passed the open door of Dougal's office on the ground floor she heard typing — when had he come in? She paused and stood for a moment in the doorway. His desk faced the wall, so he sat with his back to the door. She could never set her office up like that. She'd always be worried someone would walk by and see when she was ordering clothes online, not to mention the fact that having your back to the door left you completely defenceless against murderers, especially when you had headphones on. Dougal probably didn't worry about murderers.

'Hey,' she said, and he spun around in his chair. As always, he was clean-shaven and neatly dressed. The chaos of the weekend had left no mark on him.

'You're here,' he said, surprised.

'I've been here all day. I thought it was just your dad and me.'

'I came in late.'

'You did better than the rest of your brothers,' she commented. 'They didn't even show up.'

‘Were you expecting them to? It was a pretty rough weekend.’

She shrugged. ‘I had work to do; didn’t they? So, your dad seems to have a few crossed wires about what happened.’

He stared at her, unmoved.

‘He seems to believe Imogen is to blame for Angus dumping her. Apparently Alistair claimed the photos were of a real hook-up, and said Sylvia shared them because she has the hots for Angus and wanted the wedding to be cancelled. Have you ever heard anything more bonkers?’

Dougal ran his fingers through his hair and rocked back on his chair. ‘Look, Willa,’ he began, ‘this is a really difficult situation.’

‘It really isn’t. You just need to explain it to him again. I get that he doesn’t want to believe his precious twins have behaved badly, but we’re kind of past that point. Way past.’

‘It’s all over. Does it matter what he thinks?’

‘Yes! It matters to me. It matters to Imogen. It should matter to you. The truth is important. I don’t want to sound too eighteenth-century about it, but my family’s honour is at stake.’

Dougal’s gaze flicked back to his computer screen.

‘Oh sorry, Dougal, am I boring you?’

He sighed. ‘I’m stuck, Willa. I’m not prepared to get in the middle of whatever’s going on between your family and mine. I’m sorry about what happened to Imogen, but she’s probably better off. I can’t make my parents believe anything other than what they already believe. If you make a big deal out of this, trying to force everyone to see it how you see it, I think you’re going to end up disappointed. You can’t control other people’s feelings.’

‘It’s not a question of how I see it: it’s the facts. And I don’t want to keep working here if your father thinks my

cousin is a treacherous slut, Dougal. And I definitely can't keep working with Alistair or Angus. Surely you see that.'

'My father won't always be here, Willa. He's almost ready to retire. And you know as well as I do that the twins are bored. They'll be off soon enough, playing at something else. Don't ruin what you've built here over this. Imagine what we could do together, what we could make this place into.'

'Just you and me and Ewan?'

He stood and moved towards her. His broad shoulders looked tense, as if he were bracing himself against something. 'Yeah, if he wants to stay. But I know he has other things he wants to do with his life, other ambitions.' He swallowed hard and fixed her with his intense gaze. She hadn't ever noticed before that there were flecks of amber in his green eyes. 'I don't want to assume anything about your feelings, but perhaps it could be just you and me. And maybe not just at work. I've always thought we could make a good . . . partnership. We get along well. I'm a bit hopeless with girls, but you've always seemed to quite like me. I'm not the most romantic man alive, and, despite the contents of your books, you've always made me think that all that traditional romance stuff isn't what you're after either. You're more pragmatic, like me. I suppose I thought a partnership could, in the absence of all that hearts and flowers stuff, be forged from shared goals, and deep admiration. Am I wrong?'

Her bluster vanished like she was a skydancer outside a second-hand car dealership and someone had switched off her air supply. She stared at Dougal, trying to make sense of what he'd said. Was that how she came across to him? As someone who'd prefer a sensible and businesslike relationship to true, deep and passionate love? Was he for real?

It was true that she had semi-flirted with him, for years. But it had been like flirting with a statue: she now realised she hadn't been expecting him to come to life and respond in any way. Certainly not in this way.

'And the kids thing is fine,' he added.

‘The kids thing?’

‘You’ve hardly made it secret that you don’t want marriage and children, Willa. I just want you to know I don’t need those things either. I think we could be happy together, with work and companionship, and the attraction I think we both feel.’

A sick feeling crept over her. This was absurd. For the second time in forty-eight hours a Smith man was declaring his love for her. Well, not really his love, in this case. She wasn’t entirely sure what this arrangement Dougal was offering was: a two-for-one life and business partnership?

Her silence was too long, and Dougal shuffled uncomfortably. ‘I’ll take that as a no,’ he said, with sadness in his voice.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Willa. ‘Truly, I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to make you think there was anything . . . that we were . . . just, sorry.’ Her chest ached. The only thing to do was tell the truth. ‘I don’t feel that way.’

He nodded, his lips pursed together. ‘Yes. I see that.’

‘You’re right though, I do always flirt with you. I didn’t mean anything by it. I was just being silly. You’re very handsome.’

‘Not handsome enough, evidently.’

‘No! That isn’t it at all. Too handsome, if anything.’ She gave a little laugh. ‘Dougal, I do want that big love, like in my books. Maybe that’s unrealistic, and I see how you might have thought that because I don’t want kids and a big white wedding that I wasn’t looking for a grand passion. But I am. I might not find it, but it’s still what I want. And that isn’t us. I’m not the one for you. But someone is. You’ll find her. She’ll want to go rock climbing with you.’

‘Yes,’ he said, and he bravely returned her smile. ‘I suppose I will have to look further afield. And Willa?’

‘Yes?’

‘You okay to not mention this to the others?’

‘Mention what?’ she asked, and he turned away, nodding.

In a daze she made a cup of tea for Gladstone and carried it back upstairs. Finding he had left her office she sat in the wicker chair and drank his tea herself, her hands shaking.

Chapter 26

Dougal's words had cracked something in Willa. Guilt, sorrow and repulsion were filling her up like water in a sinking ship, and a need to see Ewan swept through her, so strong it felt like hunger. The feeling of her hand wrapped in his; the crinkle of his eyes when he smiled: she craved them like salt.

But who was Ewan to her now? Were they still friends? She had been so dismissive. Had he meant what he said? 'I love you more than anything in the world' sounded pretty serious. It wasn't a tentative, hey, so this is going to sound crazy but hear me out, I sort of think that maybe if you're into it too, I might be a bit into you, you know, maybe as more than a friend. Like Dougal's overture, it was a bold declaration, no mucking around, but Ewan's had been underscored by something deep and animalistic.

No one had ever said anything that intense to her before. Ollie had first said he loved her the time he left his laptop in the backyard and went to the pub. A sudden thunderstorm had erupted and he'd remembered his computer, abandoned his beer and come sprinting back down the street to discover she'd brought it inside because it was expensive and had all his work on it that he never backed up. 'I love you, I love you, I love you,' he'd told her, hugging her in his drenched clothes and making her all damp. It was too diluted with gratitude and stormwater for her to know if he meant it.

With American Dan she had been the first one to say the L word. It had been accidental, during sex, and he'd responded so enthusiastically that she kept saying it, even though she knew she actually meant she loved what he was doing. From the bedroom it moved swiftly into their everyday discourse. Too swiftly, for Willa, and the more he said it the more she felt

like she was lying under oath every time she responded in kind.

Even Dougal, though forthright, had been measured and careful with his approach.

But not Ewan. What sort of person just threw out a superlative proclamation of love to someone they weren't even vaguely romantically involved with? To a friend. A friend they had once almost kissed, but so long ago he probably didn't even remember it. Willa had tried her hardest to forget the way he had smelled and the heat from his body as he leaned in to examine her face. She had tried so hard never to think of what it would be like to see that face beside her when she woke up in the morning, or to wonder what his body would feel like pressing down on hers.

It was probably just the drama of the wedding that made him say it. Weddings were a strange time for feelings. Just as Halloween is the time of year when the threshold between the world of the living and the dead is thinnest, and spirits can pass through, the same went for weddings, love and friends. People got confused, they stretched out a hand through the veil of friendship and grabbed someone and thought they loved them. That had to be what it was. He was on the rebound from Winter and confusing their friendship for love, which was such a bad idea, because that was how you killed a friendship. It might perk up slightly to begin with, but it would ultimately wither like an overwatered pot plant.

The throbbing pain of wanting him was morphing into regular old pain. There was simply no avoiding the fact that when it came down to it she and Ewan wanted very different things. Bloody children. They'd ruin her life one way or another.

It was obvious what would happen. If they got together, all the people in her life who had thus far been supportive of her decision not to become a parent would gradually turn on her. They wouldn't be able to help themselves. Ewan was so lovely and kind, so caring. It would be such a shame, they'd say, to

deprive him of that experience. He'd be the best dad. Her parents, Bec, Ralph — they'd all show their true colours. No one really believed her. They'd all been waiting for her to meet the right man. They thought she was George Clooney, waiting for Amal.

Only Kat would stand strong at her side. But would she be enough? Would Willa crack and have a baby she didn't really want because Ewan would be a great dad? There was a decent chance she might. And that it would be the wrong thing for her to do. She might love the child. She probably would. But she would know, always, that she hadn't been sure she wanted to be a mother, and no child deserved that. Not when it was avoidable.

Deep down, in the same place where that truth lay, she felt the tiny glow of another truth she could under no circumstances allow to come into contact with oxygen. An ember of love. If it ignited it would ruin both their lives.

But she wanted to see him. Even though she'd have to lie to him. There wasn't any other way around it. If she let him know how she really felt, he might lie to her. He might say kids weren't that important, that all he wanted was her. Whatever they had would begin with a lie: either his or hers. It would simply be a question of who was going to whip out their pistol of bullshit first. If she could be the quicker draw, then there was a chance they could salvage something of their friendship from this, and that was the best she could hope for.

She grabbed her phone from the desk and sent Ewan a message: *Are you coming to work?*

His reply came almost instantly: *Stopping by this arvo to see Dad.*

She stared at the reply, trying to decipher his mood, tone and deepest inner thoughts from those seven words. The message gave her nothing. There was no indication that he wanted to see her or talk more about what had transpired between them after the wedding-that-wasn't. Maybe that was for the best. They could just go on as if nothing had happened.

God, she hoped so. Without thinking, she went to the kitchen, took a full jar of Ewan's marmalade from the shelf and a teaspoon from the drying rack. After that she didn't leave her desk: she worked and ate spoonfuls of bittersweet jam until the jar was empty and she felt as sick in her stomach as she did in her heart.

* * *

It was almost five o'clock before Willa heard the front door open again. Ewan's footsteps came up the stairs. Funny how she could distinguish his clomping from the clomping of four of his male relatives, all men of similar stature and build. His footsteps were the only ones that made her stop typing and hold her breath.

The footsteps paused at the top of the stairs. He would be turning; he would walk past her office to get to the room where his father sat behind a closed door. For a second she was acutely aware of having no idea what was likely to happen next. It was an unfamiliar feeling. So far the events in her life had followed a set of universal rules that she didn't always like, but which had been predictable, in a narrative sense. Even the bad things, like walking in on Ollie cheating on her, while shocking, had been underscored by a quiet voice that said, Of course. Of course the end of your relationship with a dickhead would happen like this.

But since Saturday, events had not been following the rules. Now Willa felt like she was living in a board game bought from an op shop, where no one had noticed before putting it on the shelf for sale that the board was from *The Game of Life*, but the questions were from *Cards Against Humanity*, the markers were from *Monopoly* and the dice was the icosahedron from *Scattergories*, able to throw up twenty possibilities with every roll.

Her brain had no idea which path to take or what was going to happen next. Things kept coming out of people's mouths that weren't what she had thought they were going to say, and if the theory she'd read about fun was true, then today

should be an absolute blast. It was all new. But it felt awful, unstable and unpredictable.

His footsteps passed her door, not even hesitating, and continued to his father's office. She heard two knocks, and the door open and close.

* * *

She was running her index finger around the inside of the jar when he came back, walking straight into her office without knocking. A hasty attempt to hide the jar failed.

Ewan's mouth twitched with a smile. 'What's up, Paddington?' 'Don't,' she said. 'Today's been a bit of a week.'

'No judgement from me. Whatever gets you through.'

That they had something to joke about was a relief. She wasn't sure what she'd expected him to say, but considering the last thing he'd told her was that he loved her, she'd thought it might be a bit heavy.

She gestured with a sticky hand to her wicker chair. 'Want to sit down?'

He nodded, and gingerly lowered himself into the chair, which gave a slight sway before seeming to find its balance. He grinned adorably at her and gripped the arms of the chair. 'One day this thing is going to crumble into a heap of sticks. One day soon.'

'Things okay with your dad?' she asked, trying to ignore the thumping in her chest.

He shrugged. 'Well, I've resigned, so . . . things have been better.'

'You've what?'

'Quit. Handed in my notice. Given myself my marching orders. I no longer work here.'

'I know what resigned means,' she told him crossly. 'I just can't believe you've done it. Why?'

‘Why?’ He sounded incredulous.

‘Yes, why?’

‘Because I don’t want to work here any more. My boss is deranged. He somehow believes that what happened to Imogen was her own fault. Can you believe that? I mean, what the fuck?’

‘I know,’ said Willa.

‘You know? That my dad thinks that what happened was mostly down to Imogen cheating and partly down to Sylvia trying to break up the wedding because she is in love with Angus?’

She sighed heavily. ‘He explained all that to me this morning. It doesn’t make any sense.’

‘That’s putting it mildly,’ Ewan said. ‘I’m beginning to think my father has a problem with women. As in, he doesn’t believe anything they say, and is possibly a huge misogynist.’

Willa thought about it. ‘Maybe, but the problem is also that he refuses to see any fault in the twins. I think he’d believe whatever it took to not accept that they’ve done anything wrong. He’s just a bit child-blind.’

‘That he believes those two over Dougal and me is mindblowing. I can’t understand why he keeps paying them when they basically do nothing and bring in no money for the company.’

Willa had wondered about that. The twins seemed to do a lot of what they called ‘business development’, but she’d never been quite clear on what that was or how it was measured.

‘Do they not bring in new business? They’re always off having lunches with potential clients.’

‘No one brings in new business! Except you, I mean. Your books are all that’s been keeping this place running. That and the big cash injections from Dad’s share dividends and real estate holdings.’

The almost simultaneous punches of shock and understanding hit Willa like a quick one-two jab in a boxing class. Was he saying what she thought he was saying?

‘Do you mean the manuals aren’t profitable *at all*?’

‘Willa, come on. Of course they’re not. Hardly anyone outsources manuals to a company like this any more, not when you can pay someone in India a fiftieth of the money to whip something up. Dad took over from his father in the eighties, and every year since he’s made a bit less money from it. Dougal knows. He’s all over the accounts. The only part turning a profit is your books. Dad’s been paying our salaries out of his pocket because he likes us all being together. This place is his playhouse.’

‘That’s a really generous thing to do,’ she said.

‘Is it? I think it’s sort of shit. It’s not like we’re doing anything valuable. He doesn’t care about us standing on our own in the world. He just wants to play happy families. Kids need to grow up and be independent. That’s what makes people confident and strong, not living in a fantasy world. He’s delusional. He and Mum both are. They won’t see anything negative in any of us. It’s pathological. Winter saw it. She saw what they were like and she called me on it. I told her she was wrong, but that was a lie.’

‘You’re trying to tell me Winter left because your parents are too nice to you?’

‘You’re not hearing me,’ he said, his brow furrowed with frustration. ‘I don’t want to work in a playhouse. I’m done here. I’d rather have no money than get paid for a fake job.’

‘Oh,’ scoffed Willa, ‘so says the man who owns a house in Newtown outright because his parents bought it for him.’

He paused. ‘That’s mean. Anyway, I’m thinking of selling it.’

‘Are you going to give the money back?’

‘Why do you care?’

‘I’m curious about these high standards you’ve just discovered. I wonder how far they extend.’

‘I’m not going to apologise for coming from a family that has the money to help me get set up in life, but I’m also not planning to ride that gravy train forever. I want to achieve something myself that I can be proud of, and I can’t be proud of working for a man who would treat someone like my father has treated Imogen. And I sure as shit can’t work with Angus and Alistair, who are happy to destroy someone’s life.’ He paused in his rant and looked her in the eyes. ‘I’m kind of surprised to see you here today. I thought you’d have quit after what they did.’

Fury and shame battled for supremacy inside Willa. ‘I don’t have a choice. If I don’t have a job, no one is going to pay my rent for me. Taking a big dramatic stand requires a certain level of privilege. I don’t have that. I need to eat. I need this job.’

‘You need *a* job,’ he corrected her. ‘It doesn’t have to be here. You’re amazing at what you do. Any publishing company would jump at the chance to hire you.’

‘Oh, yeah, absolutely,’ Willa said scornfully. ‘That’s how it works. I’ll just stroll into a big publishing company and they’ll hire me. You don’t know the first thing about that industry. Jobs as a publisher hardly ever come up, and when they do they promote someone from inside the company. I’ve never worked at a proper publishing house. I had to build this job myself because I couldn’t get my foot in the door because my parents are dairy farmers and I don’t have any way into that world. I don’t want to start at the bottom as an assistant somewhere. Not after what I’ve been doing here.’

‘Then you should start your own business. You practically run a business by yourself here already.’

‘With all my bundles of cash, eh? You need capital to start a business, Ewan — even I know that.’

‘That wouldn’t be an insurmountable problem,’ he insisted, ‘if you weren’t so scared of everything.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean? I’m not scared of everything.’

‘Well, not everything then. But you’re certainly scared of change and risk.’

Tears sprang to her eyes and her voice shook. ‘I am not. If that were true, would I have moved to the city alone when I was eighteen? Would I have lived in America? Would I have had relationships, and made friends, and practically started my own business, as you only just pointed out? Seems like I’m pretty keen to take risks and embrace change.’

‘Maybe you haven’t always been afraid, but you are now. You are so scared of taking chances and letting change into your life that you don’t care how it could affect your long-term happiness.’

The last thing she wanted to do was cry, but there was no holding it back. ‘I can’t have everything change at once. It’s all changed here, just overnight. Your dad’s like a different person. So is Dougal. I can’t even fathom how I’ll talk to Angus and Alistair. Imogen’s gone. I’m losing Kat. And now you’re —’ She broke off.

‘I’m what?’ he said softly.

She raised her tearstained face. ‘You’re going too. I won’t see you every day. Not like I’m used to. Though it probably doesn’t even matter.’

His voice caught. ‘We don’t have to not see each other every day.’

‘You might stay?’ She failed to keep the hope from her voice.

‘No. I’m finished here. But I meant what I said at the wedding. You know, the thing you’ve been pretending I didn’t say. Even though you’re apparently so utterly fine with change and risk.’

He waited for her to say something. She stayed silent, not trusting herself. What a disgusting cocktail of feelings, she thought: to love someone like she now thought she loved Ewan, to be loved by them, but to be unable to tell them. How deeply painful to want to tear someone's clothes off and ravish them, when they have just said something so searingly and unpleasantly truthful about you.

After another minute he stood. 'Well, that's embarrassing. You don't feel like I do. Okay. Right.' He took his phone out of his pocket, unlocked it, locked it again, and put it back into his pocket. It reminded her of when her old cat used to fall off the table because it didn't realise the newspaper it was standing on was hanging off the edge. Embarrassed, it would start to clean itself. The phone fiddle was the modern human equivalent, and her heart ached. She'd already had a man act out this precise scene once today, but this version was a thousand times worse.

She could end his pain so easily, if she told him how she felt, but it would be temporary. The pain would be worse when he eventually understood how differently they saw their futures. This was the brave thing to do.

He gave her a pained half-smile and raised his hand in a little wave. 'I'll, er . . . I'll see you. No doubt. Bye.' And then he was gone.

Willa put her hands to her chest. It hurt like she'd slammed on the brakes and hit the steering wheel. Jesus. This was real physical pain. It hurt to breathe. She'd never felt like this before. How could emotional pain affect the body like this?

What were the chances, she wondered, of having a heart attack at the same time as suffering a heartbreak? Slim but not impossible.

She tried to console herself with the thought that, whatever this feeling was, it was too awful to be love. Love wouldn't have such a seething undercurrent of anger. Surely. And very likely what he claimed was love for her was also not that, but some other thing entirely. Some knock-off emotion that could

trick people. A counterfeit, sold-at-a-market, almost-looks-right-but-on-close-inspection-has-a-misspelling-in-the-brand-name version of the real thing.

Then, like a car she hadn't seen in her mirror suddenly merging in front of her, came the realisation that she was thirty-six years old and unable to reliably identify what was love and what wasn't. She blinked hard, took a deep breath, and let it out in a shuddering sigh.

Her hand moved to the mouse on the desk and she clicked it. The computer screen lit up, revealing the manuscript page she had been trying to read when Ewan came in. Something like relief welled up, drowning the worst of the other feelings. This was where she was safe. In the words of the stories other people made up, she understood love. The authors she worked with knew what it was, how it worked and how it didn't work, and maybe, if she kept at it long enough — read enough, studied enough — she would understand how to do it too.

Chapter 27

Previously, when she'd thought about the expression 'to bury oneself in work', Willa had always associated it with feeble-minded men, hiding from failing marriages, angry wives and difficult children.

Now, two weeks after the wedding-that-wasn't, she had come round to the idea entirely and thought it was a splendid way to proceed. Those men were on to something. Working every waking hour meant it didn't matter that Kat was always with George and hadn't suggested they hang out even once, and that she didn't have time to call Imogen. It meant she was ploughing through the folder in her inbox full of unsolicited manuscripts, even finding a few that warranted further consideration, while simultaneously not dwelling on the fact that since the Monday when Ewan had basically told her he loved her even though she was a horrendous disappointment for not quitting her job, she had been almost the only one in the office. Neither of the twins had shown their faces, Dougal was mercifully working from home a lot, and several days not even Gladstone turned up.

That Friday, Willa woke up and decided she wasn't going either. She'd work from home. Like the rest of them. Who cared? Who would even know?

Except, she remembered, she hated working from home. After the lockdowns, it had stopped being a treat, akin to when a primary school teacher would let the class work out in the playground occasionally, if they were writing poems about clouds or measuring something with a wheeled device and sticks of chalk, and now it just felt like quarantine. It gave her a psychosomatic sore throat just thinking about it: moving from bed to table to couch all day, constantly opening the

fridge only to find it still contained all the same things it had ten minutes before, refreshing the news websites over and over.

She might, she considered, just take a long weekend. Or even a week off. She had annual leave saved up, but she mightn't even need to use it. If anyone asked, and they probably wouldn't, she'd say she was working from her parents' house. Her job at Gladstone & Smith felt increasingly like being an extra in a movie about a workplace, and she craved a change of scenery, even if it meant having to hear her mum's opinions on how she lived her life.

A visit to her grandmother was in order too. She wasn't sure how much her parents had told Ruth about the wedding but if Willa knew her grandmother she'd be dying for a full explanation.

Before she could second-guess her decision, Willa packed a bag, drank the last of the milk in the fridge, and walked to the station. Things like this were easy when you were on your own. Bec and Ralph had to do more planning and packing for a night away with their family than Willa had done when she moved to America. Unattached was good. She could move fast, travel light.

Not that she took advantage of it very often. Waiting to buy her train ticket, she reviewed her travel over the past years. A couple of short trips to Asia with Kat. A few Christmas visits to Tasmania with her mum and dad and Andy when he'd been in the country. Several beach-house holidays with Bec and Ralph, mostly before the twins were born. Even those had been feats of logistics: figuring out how to fit Willa and her bag into the back of the car alongside Perce's car seat, with a travel cot, stroller, and myriad bags containing only parents knew what stuffing the boot and all the available leg space in the little Mazda. Each time, in a display of hope over experience, Ralph had strapped his surfboard to the roof, where its shadow loomed over the driver like a crashing plane, and each time he hadn't been out surfing even once. After the twins were born, they'd upgraded the car to a Kia Carnival,

because, as Ralph would say with a brittle laugh, their life was a total circus now and there was no use pretending otherwise.

Willa chided herself as she tapped her credit card and took her ticket. Surely one of the main benefits of choosing a child-free life was travel. But the years of the pandemic had stopped her seeing more of the world. She'd tried to go to Byron Bay once, and a couple of times to Melbourne, but each attempt had been scuppered by something: another lockdown, a border closure, a localised outbreak. In the end she stopped planning fun things and stuck close to home. At least now she felt safe on the train. For a while there she'd stopped visiting her parents altogether, because so many people on the two-hour journey treated wearing a mask as a violation of their human rights akin to segregation or being asked to use headphones when watching porn on their phones in the next seat.

Which was a shame because it was a wonderful train trip, if you could look out the window and ignore your fellow passengers. It even started in a beautiful place. The Grand Concourse of Central Station had proper romantic European vibes. It felt like the sort of station where someone would jump a barrier to find their lover, and run down a platform shouting their name, frantically cupping their hands to their face to peer into carriages. Someone would finally stick their head out the doors, just before they closed, and their pursuer would have only moments to say their piece before the train departed and all was lost. Urgency like that was hot, and there just wasn't enough of it around, normally.

Despite the new rule she had instigated and firmly read aloud to herself, she thought of Ewan. There was no urgency in their friendship, and there never had been, which was another piece of evidence that pointed towards him having been mistaken about being in love with her. Things had always just been easy between them. There was no tension. Well there hadn't been until this inconvenient lust had arisen in her for no good reason. But that would burn itself out once her stupid brain properly understood that it wouldn't work out long term. So it couldn't be love. It was just a friendship with a

misleading cover, that almost got misshelved in with the romances by a trainee bookseller.

She bought a takeaway coffee and after considering the sandwich options added a Kit-Kat to her order. A gust of wind blew through the concourse as she made her way to the platform, where the train sat waiting, its doors still closed. She pulled her coat more tightly around her, awkwardly flipping the collar up with one hand, and half-turned back for a moment. It took another few seconds after she had resumed walking forward for her brain to process what it had seen. A familiar hunch of shoulders, one leg crossed in front of the other, a lean body propped against a drink vending machine in the middle of the platform. He was looking in the other direction so his face couldn't be seen but even the split-second glance sent a spark of recognition through Willa. Ollie.

The last time she'd seen Ollie was the night she'd walked in on him conducting a horizontal tutor group. It was Kat who had made it possible for the mechanics of breaking up to take place without Willa having to come face to face with him again. What a gift that had been. She'd been able to walk away from five years with the man without a second glance, while Kat had been the one to return to the share house with her own suitcase, pack up all Willa's clothes and books and bring them back to her flat, where Willa had slept on the sofa until they moved into a two-bedroom place the following month. In a grand gesture of moving on, Willa had left the bed — the only piece of furniture she owned that wasn't a milk crate or a bookshelf made from planks and bricks — behind.

The doors of the train beside her opened and she kept walking. She liked to be in the second carriage from the front. When she turned to board, she couldn't resist a glance back down the platform: there was no one leaning against the drink machine now. Did that mean he was on her train? She hoped not.

* * *

The ten o'clock train on a Friday morning from Sydney to Kiama was about as good as it got in terms of quiet journeys. There were only three other people sitting upstairs in the second carriage from the front, and from a cursory assessment, Willa deemed none of them a huge risk of watching loud porn or conducting a live version of the same. She sat beside a window on the left, so she'd have the best views as the train wound through the national park and along the coast.

Usually when she was on a long train journey Willa liked to listen to music or a podcast or read something. The alternative was sitting with her own thoughts, and she preferred to avoid those, because, like her Year Ten drama teacher, Mr Hale, she was uncomfortable being alone with them. Today was different though. Her mind was quiet, and she let the scenery wash past her, flickering by at such speed that it seemed to scour clean the dark and cobwebbed corners of her mind. Small thoughts sprang up every now and then, and she gazed on them like they belonged to someone else.

Ollie. On this train. Going where? Who was he now? What had become of him? He didn't look any different. Still wearing all black, in a look that was equal parts Johnny Cash and teenage school shooter. Up close he'd look older though, she was sure. His face would still be pale and skinny, because he was always going to be pale and skinny, but it might be puffy now, from all the beer.

When they'd been together he seemed immune to the usual effects of the graduate student lifestyle. They'd lived on cheap carbs and booze and she'd come out of it softer, paler and spottier than she wanted to be, but he'd looked the same the whole time. With a bit of luck it might have caught up with him. Maybe his face looked doughy now. And maybe his light brown freckles had bled together into sunspots. He could be balding. She hadn't been able to see his hair back at Central. He'd had some sort of black hat on.

She'd forgotten to bring a hat. No matter: she'd find one at her parents' place. You never knew with the winter weather down south whether you'd need a beanie or a sunhat. It could

go either way. She still had old clothes and hats there, but not in her old room. That was in the farmhouse that they'd left behind. She didn't have a room any more. Nothing had made her feel more young and lost yet simultaneously more old and grown up than her parents moving to a new house where there wasn't anywhere called Willa's Room. There was a spare room with a sofa bed, and that was where she slept these days when she came down, but she often shared it with a cardboard box containing an orphaned puggle or a currawong with a twisted foot.

Andy didn't have a room any more either. All their remaining childhood toys, trophies, books and miscellany were now in the big shed, stored in large plastic crates. Willa had only been in to see them once and the sight of the stuffed dog she'd won at the Kiama Show when she was six with its face pressed up against the plastic like a suffocated murder victim had been a bit much, so she avoided the shed now whenever possible. There was no reason to keep that stuff, anyway. People kept toys like that for their own kids. She ought to take them to the charity shop.

The landscape flashed past, the backsides of city buildings giving way to suburbs, then national park. The only problem with being in a carriage near the front of the train, she realised, was that she couldn't see who got off at each station, which left her with the uneasy feeling of not knowing where Ollie was. Not that it mattered, but if she knew that he'd alighted at Sydenham after two stops — there'd been a brewery he liked there, back in the day — or at Waterfall — perhaps he had taken up bushwalking — she would feel more relaxed. This way it felt like when a huntsman disappears from the wall above the TV. Ollie could still be lurking.

As the train approached Kiama, running almost along the beach and then over a bridge into town, she moved down and stood beside the doors so she would get a good view of the whole platform as soon as they opened. There was no reason Ollie would be going there too. He was probably long gone. But despite having had no curiosity about him since they split,

suddenly it felt important to have confirmation of his whereabouts. Or at least to know where he wasn't.

The train slid to a standstill and the doors hissed apart. As Willa stepped towards them a voice from the lower seating level said, 'I'm so sorry, can I grab a hand with this?'

Glancing down the steps, she saw a young woman wrestling an empty stroller while holding a baby on her hip, three bags slung over her shoulders. She gave Willa a regretful grimace.

'Of course,' said Willa. 'Hang on.' She leaned down and hauled the stroller to the top doorway and out onto the platform, then went back to hold the door open while the woman hurried out, thanking her.

By the time she looked along the platform, she could not see Ollie. A few people were disappearing up the stairs at the end, but none appeared to be wearing the same Doc Martens they'd had since high school and mentioning that fact almost constantly as if it were a point of moral rectitude, so he must have left the train earlier, or be heading on further south.

The woman with the stroller took the lift up to the exit, but Willa always took the stairs. There hadn't been a lift there for most of her life. She liked the moment, at the top of the stairs, when she would turn and see one of her parents waiting in the five-minute parking bays. Today it was her dad in his work ute. He was looking down at his phone as she approached, and glanced up, startled, when she opened the door.

'God, Willa, you gave me a fright.'

'What are you looking at?'

He turned the phone to face her. 'It's called a Wordle. You have to guess a five-letter word in six turns or fewer.'

'I know,' she said. 'I told you about it ages ago.'

'Oh, so you did.' He smiled at the memory. 'I thought it sounded like a waste of time, I remember now.'

‘Let me guess: then Mum started doing it and you got interested and now you’re both addicted.’

He chuckled and started the car. ‘Got it in one. Which I have not done yet.’

‘No one gets it on the first go,’ Willa reassured him. ‘It’s basically impossible, statistically.’

‘I do it first thing in the morning,’ he said, pulling out of the drop-off bay and onto the road. ‘We have a pact that we don’t talk about it till lunch though, because your mum doesn’t always like to do it straight off. She waits until she’s had her muesli and a coffee. Reckons her brain fires better with some fuel.’

Willa smiled at him and opened the window. The air was cold but she wanted to smell the countryside: the familiar mixture of grass, cows and salty sea air that meant she was home.

They hadn’t discussed her work situation since the day after the wedding and now he didn’t ask why she’d come home on a weekday. She’d texted them to say she was coming for a few days and left it at that. As they drove he gave her a rundown of assorted people and events in the district. Someone was trying a new milking schedule: three times a day instead of two. Someone else was trying, yet again, to subdivide part of the valley for a housing estate. The citizens’ action group in town was holding strong against the developer. These skirmishes had been going on for as long as Willa could remember, and the residents always won. She hoped they always would because the valley where her parents had farmed was special. Obviously progress had to occur, and probably every patch of land was special to someone, but she didn’t care if she was being a NIMBY about it. They could go build a new housing estate in someone else’s backyard.

When they drove past the turnoff to their old farm Willa instinctively put her hand on her dad’s arm. ‘You missed the —’ She cut herself off.

He turned and smiled sadly at her. ‘Took me ages to stop turning there when I come back from town. Old habits, eh? At least I still head up there most days to help Tom out.’

It had been almost a year since her parents had left the dairy farm they’d had since before Willa was born, but when they spoke on the phone she still pictured them in the farmhouse where she grew up. When the pandemic hit and tree-change fever had swept over Sydney with far more severity than the virus, property values down where they were had skyrocketed and they’d sold the farm to a city couple not much older than Willa.

Now her parents lived in a fully paid off house in town, on the main street, and her dad worked for Tom and Iris, the new owners of the farm. Her dad had become, essentially, a farming teacher. Willa couldn’t have wished for a better outcome for them. Neither she nor her brother, Andy, ever showed farming tendencies, and her parents, unlike some, had accepted this with good grace. Perhaps they’d seen the way the world was going. Little farms like theirs struggled more every year. It would take ingenuity, passion and more seed capital than they had to transform it into something that would survive in the coming decades. Tom and Iris had that, and in some ways they’d become the farmer son and daughter Andy and Willa had failed to be.

This was all great in theory, but it still gave her surges of homesickness to remember that the farm wasn’t home any more.

‘How’s Tom getting on?’

‘Not bad for a city bloke. He’s got a lot of money to throw around, so that makes a change. It means he won’t learn as fast, because he just calls the vet for everything that goes wrong with the cattle, and gets Barry out whenever the tractor plays up, or me, but he’s keen. Bit sad to see the dairy going to ruin now, but Tom’s only interested in Wagyu cattle, and Iris is building a gin distillery.’

‘Are you learning a lot too? Is it very different from dairy farming?’

‘A bit. But change is good. You can’t do the same thing all your life. You’d die of boredom. You’ve got to be like a shark: always keep moving.’

‘You know that’s not true, that thing people say about sharks.’

‘What? Yes it is.’

‘No, it’s only some of them. Certain species can stop moving to sleep, and they still get enough oxygen to stay alive.’

‘Hashtag not all sharks,’ said her dad.

‘Exactly.’

Chapter 28

After he dropped her off, her father went back to the farm and Willa wandered through her parents' new home like a moody ghost. It was still unsettling to see objects she'd known all her life in a different context. So many of them looked wrong: the new house was a nineties double-brick build, so instead of fitting in like they had in the old 1910 weatherboard farmhouse, her parents' lifelong accumulation of second-hand Victorian china plates and cups, cut crystal vases, porcelain animal figurines, cast iron beds and old cedar furniture stood out like a vintage Laura Ashley prairie dress on the red carpet at the MTV awards.

Her mother was at work, doing one of her four shifts a week at the pharmacy in a town twenty minutes inland, leaving Willa with no one to talk to and no car. The weather was cold and clear, so she left the house and walked out of town and through the countryside, over three creeks, up and down hills. The sun shone weakly and she lifted her face to get as much light on her skin as she could.

Walks were supposed to be calming, but now her mind was behaving like a terrier that hadn't been out of the house for a week, sniffing out problems and straining at the leash to chase them down and roll in their rotting carcasses. Work was what she fixated on first. Was she going to stay where she was forever, sitting there publishing romances with Gladstone in the other room pretending to run a business, then with Dougal as her business partner? It seemed an insane proposition to remain. But the alternative was daunting. To take her skills and try to figure out if their contracts meant she could take any of her authors and front up to another company — perhaps one that actually had book publishing as its primary business —

and ask for a job, was a horrifying prospect. Because, sure, someone might say yes, but what if they said no? Then what would she do? All her eggs were in one basket.

Eggs. That was another thing to worry about. Those wretched, microscopic balls of DNA and possibility that were lurking in her ovaries, ruining her life. Carrying, every moment of every day, tens of thousands of possible future humans around in her abdomen was quite an onerous responsibility, and she didn't understand why it didn't bother other people. Maybe it would have been easier to be alive at a time when deciding to have a baby or not to have a baby wasn't something women did. Even a generation or two ago there would have been far more social impetus for her to ignore this feeling that motherhood wasn't for her. It probably wouldn't have even occurred to her to not want kids, if she'd been born in the sixties.

Sometimes she wished she could go to sleep and wake up in fifteen years' time when the window of possibility would be closed and painted shut.

It was best not to think about her eggs, as much as possible, but that was made difficult when they were the one thing standing in the way of being with someone she couldn't help wanting to be with, someone who might be her true love.

She tore a handful of lantana flowers from a bush as she passed and threw them in the air like confetti. True love. She was really being silly now. Ewan couldn't be her true love. She hadn't heard a word from him since he'd stormed out of the office. She had to stop herself several times from sending him messages, funny pictures of otters, a latte she'd ordered that looked like a pig's face, or the heavily laden orange tree in her parents' garden. Was he stopping himself from sending her things too?

She hated feeling like this. Why couldn't she just want a bloody baby? Or at least feel ambivalent about it?

On her way back, she stopped when she reached the biggest creek, climbed over the guard rail and down the bank.

The water rushing softly over the stones was mesmerising to watch, and the quiet burbling helped her mind take a break from playing Kick-the-Worry-Down-the-Road.

What would Ewan be doing now? Without thinking she took her phone out and opened his Instagram profile. He hadn't updated it in months. She knew he rarely used social media, and normally that didn't matter, but now no longer having a sense of where he was and what he was doing made her feel adrift. Facebook was the same, and in a fit of irritation she unfollowed him on both apps. Maybe that would help get him out of her head.

The buzzing of her phone in her pocket broke her reverie and she pulled it out and answered.

'Hey, Katty, guess where I am,' she said, tapping the speakerphone icon and holding the phone towards the river for a moment.

'On the toilet?'

Willa laughed. 'I'm home. That's the river.'

'Oh, lovely.' There was something tight in Kat's voice. Almost nervous. Maybe George had dumped her, Willa thought with a cruel flash of hope. She wouldn't ask, she'd let Kat tell her when she was ready. It occurred to her that they hadn't seen each other since the wedding. Had they even spoken since then, or had it just been texts? Willa had definitely given Kat a potted account of the stuff at work, and how she was apparently employed in a made-up business run by a delusional helicopter parent. She hadn't told her, for some reason, anything about Ewan, or Dougal. She couldn't say why, exactly, except that the Dougal situation had made her feel ashamed and uncomfortable and she wished it had never happened. It was another good reason to stay away from Ewan: now between her fury and her mortification she didn't think she could stand to see any of his brothers again. That wouldn't lend itself to happy future family Christmases.

‘Yeah, the vibe at work is so weird I thought I’d come down and work from here for a few days. Might even stay a week or two. No one seems to give a shit whether I’m in the office or not.’

‘You’re staying in the job?’ Kat sounded surprised. ‘I thought you said no one else was working there any more. I thought the whole thing had fallen apart.’

‘No, my books are still going really well. I’m the goose that lays the golden eggs. Well, I’m the only goose.’ Clearly she had eggs on the brain.

‘That’s good.’ Kat still sounded vague and odd.

‘Everything okay with you?’ Willa asked.

There was a pause.

‘Kat?’

It all came in a rush. ‘I’m so sorry I haven’t called you. It’s been two weeks, Willa, and I know we’ve never gone that long without talking before. I didn’t know how to tell you. I didn’t even know how to get my own head around it, for a few days, and then I got scared to tell you, because I didn’t know how you’d react.’

‘How I’d react to what?’ said Willa. ‘Have you got cancer or did you get engaged?’ The ferocity in her own voice shocked her.

‘Neither,’ said Kat. ‘George and I are having a baby.’

* * *

Late that night, Willa lay on the sofa bed in the spare room of the new house, staring at the ceiling. The orphaned wallaby joey her dad had brought home from the farm that evening had gone in with her parents for the night, so she was alone. Every few minutes she whispered to herself, ‘Kat’s having a baby.’

She hadn’t said, ‘I’m pregnant.’ Willa was sure the wording had been very deliberate. Kat’s attitude to the situation was unequivocal. There was no room for Willa to ask

if she were planning to continue the pregnancy. She hadn't even said, 'I'm having a baby.' In one sentence Kat had joined a group she and Willa had long poured scorn on: people who acted like fathers had an equal role in bearing a child. George wasn't pregnant, Willa thought furiously, Kat was. And sure, he would have part-ownership of a baby once the hard work of gestation and childbirth was done, but right now? He was not 'having a baby'.

Willa's stomach ached. Her mum had brought home a barbecued chicken and chips for dinner, and she'd eaten chips long past the point of satiety, even when they were stone cold and she couldn't taste anything but salt and the fat coating her mouth.

She'd wanted so much, on the phone to Kat, to sound happy for her. To *be* happy for her. A true and good friend would have had an epiphany with that call, and realised that what made her friend happy was all that mattered. But she hadn't managed that. No such emotional breakthrough came for Willa, who had audibly gasped at the news, and not in an acceptable, followed-by-a-squeal-of-joy way. She'd gasped and then said nothing for a very long time.

'Is that what you want?' That's what she'd finally followed up the gasp and silence with. What a disgrace she was. Of course that was what Kat wanted. She wouldn't be telling Willa if it wasn't. Her best friend in the whole world was pregnant and delighted, and Willa hadn't been able to even fake being pleased.

Kat was ten weeks pregnant already, which, going by Willa's limited understanding of such things, meant she might have known about the baby for more than a month. A whole month of lying. It hurt so much.

The conversation had continued its downwards trajectory like Willa had strapped their friendship to a hundred-kilo weight and kicked it out of a plane.

'Can't you be happy for me?' Kat had asked. 'I know I've always said I didn't want a kid, but I changed my mind. I

honestly didn't think I wanted to be a mother until I saw the test result. I'm as shocked as you are to discover how much I want this. I already love this baby — I'm so excited.'

'How can you love it already? Really, Kat, you shouldn't get too attached so early. Don't like, half of all pregnancies end in miscarriage?'

'One in five,' said Kat quietly.

'See? It's a bunch of cells right now. It doesn't even have a brain stem yet.'

Kat had started to cry then. 'You're not acting like you have a brain stem. What a horrible thing to say.'

Willa had sighed again and tried to fix things by saying she was sorry, and that she was sure they'd be great parents, but something was broken. She'd gone too far. She'd sighed too many times and Kat had, quite rightly, decided she was a terrible person.

They'd ended the call on such a bad note: Willa trying to reassure her that she really was pleased, but she just wanted Kat to proceed with caution until after the twelve-week mark, and Kat being fully aware that this was a lie. Her best friend was genuinely not pleased for her.

Willa pulled the covers up around her ears and let the tears come. This was the worst feeling in the world. Poor Kat deserved only love and support. It was probably for the best that she discovered her best friend wasn't a friend at all, she was just a ball of spite and misery disguised as one.

Chapter 29

Willa barely slept that night. The noises were all wrong: neither the swishing car tyres and drunken passers-by soundtrack of her flat nor the gentle lowing of cows and wind in the big pine trees she knew from the farm. The house in town was too well soundproofed and quiet. All she could hear was the ticking of the clock in the hall, which irritated her so much that at 1 am she stormed out of her room to hold the pendulum still until it stopped. For a few hours after that she dozed fitfully, but at five she finally gave in and got up.

Cold water was what she needed. Many times as a teenager she'd needed to sober up after a night of underage drinking at her friends' houses in Kiama, and the best way to do that, they'd figured out, was to hurl themselves into the sea. Today she needed to wash away guilt and shame, but the principle was the same: she wanted a fresh start.

She hadn't brought a swimsuit, but there was probably one of her old ones in the shed. Her mum wasn't working in the morning, and her Saturday routine of a leisurely breakfast while reading the weekend papers was sacrosanct: she wouldn't mind if Willa took the car for a bit. Quietly she tiptoed through the house, pulling on a tracksuit and gathering her phone, shoes, her mum's keys and an old beach towel from the linen cupboard.

The shed wasn't locked. There were dozens of plastic crates stacked inside, all labelled in her mum's neat handwriting on the end and the lid. By the light of her phone, she located the one marked *Willa's Clothes TO BE SORTED* and slid it out of the stack. She vaguely remembered there having been stuff left in her chest of drawers when she'd moved to America, but it hadn't been anything she liked any

more or wanted, so she'd blithely moved on and left it for her parents to deal with. They'd now been asking her since the previous year to have a look through the boxes, to cull what didn't need to be kept.

She took off the lid and rifled through the contents. White stretch hipster jeans, handkerchief-hem dresses, a studded belt made from large circles of brown vinyl. So many lacy satin camisole tops in lurid shades of orange and green. A flash of burgundy stripes caught her eye and she pulled it out: her old tankini with the boy-short bottoms. Perfect. If she could still get into it.

* * *

By the time Willa reached the coast twenty minutes later, she had made a different decision from the one she would have made at the age of seventeen. Because she hadn't imbibed half a box of Coolabah crisp dry white, she decided it was smarter not to swim in the surf at daybreak, but rather to go to the safe, calm ocean pool on the northern side of the harbour. The one where old people did laps, where she and her mates would not have been caught dead.

They'd been idiots, she realised, as she parked the car and walked barely a hundred metres along a smooth concrete path, past a well-kept amenities block, to where the fifty-metre pool stretched out towards the horizon. It was so nice here. This was much more pleasant than the violent crashing waves two headlands along. She stood for a moment, taking in the familiar shape of the pool: it was a perfect rectangle with one corner cut. The exact shape of a smartphone SIM card. A glow of light was blurring the horizon, casting a silver sheen over the surface of the pool as she dived in.

The water was so cold it anaesthetised her, except for her swearing muscles. She came up for air and muttered, 'Shit, shit, shit it's cold,' until a sort of hypothermia-induced euphoria took over and she felt alive, if numb. Two other early risers were already swimming laps of elegant freestyle, and she joined them.

She'd heard that cold water was meant to be good for you. It did feel penitential, and that was what she needed right now: to be punished for all her failings. Gutless, mean, heartless, thoughtless, jealous, selfish, cruel, cowardly: with every stroke she came up with another character flaw, braiding them into a cat o' nine tails to whip herself with. She'd let Kat down, behaving so immaturely over something so momentous in her friend's life. She hadn't called Imogen, too ashamed and embarrassed to know what to say to her. She was stuck at Gladstone & Smith, and Ewan had been right: she wasn't brave enough to back herself and start somewhere new. Beating herself up in her own head while submerged in the icy water felt like she was doing the right thing, and she pushed her body on, harder and faster, over more and more laps.

Finally she paused, breathless, her heart racing, at the end of the pool, and rested for a moment, raised up on her forearms and staring out at the waves breaking over the rocks. The sun was up now, inching its way into the cold sky.

Suddenly someone stepped in front of her, standing on the concrete edge, their bare feet centimetres from her face. Affronted, she tipped her head up to see a silhouetted Ollie looming over her, smiling. He wore dripping Speedos and had a towel slung over one shoulder.

'I thought that was you,' he said. He looked, disappointingly, much as he had five years ago.

'What are you doing here?' she said.

'Wim Hof.'

Textbook Ollie. Whatever Wim Hof was, the way he said it suggested it was obvious, and implied Willa was a fool if she didn't know what it meant. Some sort of aquatic martial art maybe? The Willa she'd been when they were together would have bluffed her way through this conversation until she figured out from context clues what he was talking about. Now she just stared at him. 'What?'

'The Iceman?'

She shook her head.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘It’s probably a bit esoteric for you. Wim Hof is a Dutch guy who has developed this method of teaching your body to withstand extremely cold temperatures. There are three pillars of the practice: cold therapy, meditation and breathing.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s amazing for waking up your immune response. It’s all to do with firing up your parasympathetic nervous system. Great for mental clarity. Increases strength, induces calmness which means you can handle any kind of stress without registering it as stress. It’s a spirituality, really: it exists beyond ego.’

‘You finished all the levels of ego, did you? Needed something beyond it?’

He gave a bark of laughter that she remembered as his default response to being made fun of. It was a little warning, and in the past she’d always heeded it. He jumped into the pool beside her with a big splash. When he bobbed up he flicked his hair away from his face, whipping her with a spray of water.

‘The science behind it is pretty complex,’ he said. ‘It can take a while to get your head around it.’

Putting her down intellectually had always been Ollie’s go-to. She hadn’t seen it at the time, but after their break-up she and Kat had pinned the corpse of her relationship to a board and dissected it thoroughly, and that had been one of the big revelations for Willa. Kat had built her back up, making her understand she wasn’t actually Ollie’s inferior in any way at all, and certainly not intellectually. He was close to her now, treading water.

The thought of Kat made saltwater prickle Willa’s eyes. Ollie was exactly the punishment she deserved right now. She’d been cruel to Kat, so here was Ollie sent by the universe to remind her how cruelty felt.

She shivered. Because she felt cold and angry and a bit dead inside, she leaned in and kissed him. Because she missed Ewan and she'd been horrible to Kat, she didn't pull away when Ollie kissed her back.

A calm sadness overtook her, and when Ollie pointed to the house on the clifftop above them and said he was staying there for the weekend with friends who weren't arriving until later that morning, it felt as if she was smashing a glass case over her heart and pressing a button marked *self-destruct*.

She climbed out of the pool and stood dripping and freezing in front of the worst man she'd ever dated. 'Then you'd better get out and invite me up for a coffee,' she said. 'See if you can make me understand the science behind why I've just frozen my tits off in there.'

* * *

Lying beneath Ollie fifteen minutes later on the king-sized bed in the master suite of the holiday rental she'd only ever looked at from the pool at the bottom of the cliff, while new and unexpected, was not fun. She'd felt drawn to him like he was the last cold chips in the box. No longer appealing, but still there.

He still had the bony hips she'd had to make her peace with when they'd been a couple, and they still poked her uncomfortably. He kissed her a bit when they were starting but took the hint and stopped when she turned her head to the side. Her body felt numb — whether still from the cold water or as a method of detaching herself from the experience she was forcing herself through, she couldn't tell.

As they screwed, she wondered who the friends were who were joining him here. It was a big house. It must be a good-sized group. She hoped he would wash these sheets before they arrived but was pretty sure he wouldn't.

What felt like a century later, Ollie came, groaning and slumping onto her. Willa sighed and pushed him off. Her swimmers were on the polished wooden floor in a damp heap,

and she carried them with her into the en suite bathroom, where she stared at her face in the mirror. The face of an idiot. A stone-cold sober idiot. She couldn't even blame alcohol for this.

She ran the shower and stood under it, letting the warm water wash away the salt, the chill, and the smell of Ollie.

'Hey,' he called through the door. 'I've got your beach towel here. Want me to bring it in?'

'That's okay. There are towels here.' Two plush white towels hung on a rail, one still neatly folded. 'I'll use one of these.'

'Can you use the one I've already used?'

'What? Why?'

'Well, the other towel is for . . . the others. They're the ones who organised the house so I kind of want things to be nice for them when they arrive.'

Willa turned off the water. 'You should have thought of that,' she said, taking the fresh towel and drying herself, 'before you brought me back here for a fuck.'

'Please, Willa,' he wheedled. 'Just use your own towel, or mine. That's really inconsiderate.'

When she laughed out loud at his request her voice bounced off the tiles. It was clear what was happening. In the group coming for the weekend away was his girlfriend. His girlfriend who didn't trust him, for good reason, and who would be checking up on things like the number of used towels. God, what a catch Ollie was.

She squeezed as much water as she could from her swimmers using Ollie's towel and put them back on. Her tracksuit pants, top and sneakers were still down beside the pool. Now she'd have to climb back down the hundred metal stairs in her wet cossie.

Ollie was still outside the bathroom, leaning against the wall and picking his cuticles when she emerged. He'd put on

jeans and a black jumper.

‘Hey, can you go down and get my stuff from the park end of the pool? It’s quicker to get to my car if I don’t have to go back down there first.’

For a moment she thought he was going to refuse, but something like fear flashed across his face and he nodded and left through the sliding glass doors they’d come in. She watched him trot across the cold, damp grass in his bare feet, and disappear down the steps. He was scared of her. She had power. Astonishing. She hadn’t had any power in their relationship. Now she couldn’t give a shit what he thought of her, and he was doing her bidding.

Why was that? Was it like with dogs, and Ollie had wanted her to be the alpha in their pack? Kat had explained that when Billy Jowl was a puppy, she’d needed to make him understand who was boss, because that was what dogs wanted. A boss. During their relationship Willa had been trying to put Ollie in charge of her when really all along he wanted her to take the reins. She was probably reading too much into this. Kat would be able to help her see if — oh. No she wouldn’t. Kat hated her.

A pang of hunger gnawed at her belly and she went to the kitchen. There wouldn’t be any food. By coming down a night early on the train instead of in a car, Ollie would have managed to strategically avoid doing the big shop that was required for a weekend away. He’d be leaving that to his girlfriend and whoever else was coming. She opened the fridge and saw eggs, bacon, a loaf of bread, two tomatoes and some butter. The traditional bed ’n’ breakfast pack. Perfect. She buttered two slices of bread and took a knife from the drawer to cut up one of the tomatoes. Being a holiday house knife, it was plastic handled, poorly weighted and blunt, only good for bruising the skin of the tomato and never slicing through, so she picked up the whole fruit and bit into it.

The move could have been sensual, even erotic, if the man watching her from the doorway hadn’t been Ollie, she hadn’t

remembered quite how much she hated him, and the tomato hadn't been a juiceless facsimile that had spent much of its life wrapped in plastic on a foam tray in the refrigerator of the local supermarket. Instead it flicked a switch in Willa. Enough. Having self-flagellating sex with her worst ex was one thing but eating a terrible tomato was taking it a step too far.

'Gross.' She spat the floury mouthful into the pedal bin and threw the rest of the tomato in after it.

'Here,' Ollie said, holding out her things.

She took them without thanks and pulled her tracksuit on over her soggy swimmers. She'd probably get a yeast infection. At least they'd used a condom, so with a bit of luck she'd avoid anything worse. It had been a bit last minute though, her request that he use protection. Maybe even, technically speaking, a tiny bit after the last minute. But it was on for the finale, and that was what mattered.

Slipping her feet into her sneakers without untying the laces, she slid her phone into her pocket and tossed her mum's keys in the air, catching them with her other hand.

'I'm off. Don't want to be here when whoever your latest victim is arrives.'

Ollie shuffled his feet and ran his hands through his long fringe. 'Running into you today was a powerful moment of serendipity, Willa. Revisiting old loves can be magical. It's like we unlocked a special vault from the past, and now we must lock it again.' He mimed turning a key in his heart, removing the key and holding it in his palm.

She gave a hollow laugh, took the invisible key with her forefinger and thumb, dropped it into the sink and ran the tap on full for a few seconds. 'You were, as always, an unexpected item in the bagging area, Ollie. Let's never do this again.'

Chapter 30

Armed with two takeaway coffees and a box of chocolate croissants, Willa knocked loudly on the front door of her grandmother's retirement village unit. She hadn't called to say she was on her way, but it was still only seven thirty in the morning — where else would Ruth be but at home?

'Ruth,' she called. Then more loudly, 'RUTH!'

She heard movement, and the door opened. Her grandmother, who seemed smaller than she had the last time Willa had visited, wore beige trousers, a blue shirt and a deep frown.

'What?' she said, then she peered more closely at Willa and the frown fell away. 'Willa!'

'Surprise!' said Willa. 'I've come with breakfast.'

'Terrific,' said Ruth, turning back and leading the way inside. 'You can get this awful plant down for me.' Willa followed her through the open screen doors to the balcony and saw her grandmother pointing up at a wilted cyclamen in a hanging basket.

'What happened to it?' Willa reached up and removed it from the hook.

'I didn't water it.'

'On purpose?'

Ruth shrugged. 'Who can say? It was a gift from your aunt Jenny when they were here, a few weeks back.'

'You saw them then? After the we—' Willa cut herself off, not sure whether her mum and Jenny had decided to keep the whole wedding fiasco from their mother or not.

‘The wedding, you were going to say, before you were so rudely cut off by yourself.’ Nothing got past Ruth. ‘Yes, wasn’t that a business? I’d like to hear more. Imogen was very vague about it all. They thought I’d be cross I wasn’t asked to come.’

‘They don’t really know you at all, do they?’

‘Sometimes seems that way.’ Ruth gave her a wry look. ‘Bring that thing inside and we’ll throw it in the bin. Is one of those coffees for me?’

* * *

They sat together in Ruth’s living room and Willa filled her in on what had happened to Imogen. Far from being offended at being left off the guest list, her grandmother’s disdain was reserved entirely for the institution of marriage itself.

‘Hmmm,’ she said when Willa finished talking. ‘She’ll get over it. It was a lucky escape. She messaged me yesterday. Says she’s going to Bali with some friends. I transferred her a bit of cash. It was more than I would have given them as a wedding gift.’

‘I feel so bad for letting her get involved with him.’

‘Oh, Willa, you don’t control the world. You’ve always tried to claim responsibility for things you shouldn’t.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Just what I said. Even when you were a kid you seemed to have a weight on your shoulders. Anything that went wrong, you thought it was your fault. You’d apologise for the rain. You always had this idea of how things were supposed to go. As if there’s any rhyme or reason to life and why things turn out like they do. I’ve often thought that’s what drew you to those books you publish.’

‘Because I’m a control freak?’

‘You like predictable outcomes. You like people to end up happy, and for everything to work out.’

‘That’s normal. That’s what everyone wants.’

Ruth shrugged and took a small bite of her croissant. ‘Not everyone. This obsession people have nowadays with finding the narrative in everything is highly problematic. It’s everywhere.’

‘Ruth, I did not invent the western narrative tradition that favours the happy ending.’

‘I’m not saying you did. But all these stories where the lovers always end up together. It promotes unhealthy attitudes.’

‘You mean hope?’

‘I mean the belief that a woman needs a man to be happy.’

‘I do queer love stories too,’ Willa replied indignantly.

‘It’s all the same though. They end up with the one they love. That becomes normalised. People think there’s nothing else to strive for in life. No other path to contentment and a valuable life.’

Willa sighed. There was no point trying to change her grandmother’s mind.

Ruth settled back into her armchair and stared into the middle distance. “‘The world is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy for those who feel,’” ‘she said. ‘Horace Walpole wrote that. I’ve always thought it referred to the way people are driven to seek out a happy ending. Quite often, to see a happy outcome they have to think very hard to make it so in their minds. It sometimes — quite often for women — means deciding, in their thoughts, that a man and marriage and children are their desired outcome. Because that’s so often what’s available. But if people let themselves *feel* their way through life, things might turn out quite differently.’

‘It would end in tragedy, if that quote holds up,’ pointed out Willa.

‘Well yes. But not tragedy in the way newspapers use it nowadays — you know: *Tragedy struck today when a sinkhole*

opened up in the freezer aisle of Aldi. I think it's tragedy in the classical sense of death: it comes for us all. In the end there's never going to be a happy ending, is there? Even the ones who find their so-called true love and live happily ever after, that's not really ever after, is it? One of them will die, and then the other will. If you don't follow a religion with a heaven concept, then you must believe all lives end tragically.'

'I knew you'd know how to make me feel better,' said Willa.

For several minutes they sat in silence. That was one of the best things about Ruth: the way she was happy to just sit and think with you. She'd done a lot of it in her life — sitting quietly and thinking her own thoughts. There weren't many people around any more to discuss her views of the world with. Ruth had been married at twenty, widowed at forty-four, and she'd lived alone since her children left home. Her kids didn't like to acknowledge that, in addition to raising them and working full-time at the local library, she'd also been a leading light of the local free love community. Willa, on the other hand, found it fascinating and would listen for hours to her grandmother's stories.

'Do you think wanting to be happy is the same as looking for a happy ending?' she asked, finally.

'Not at all. Seeking pleasure is the most natural thing in the world. We've talked about this before.'

'What if the person you think might make you happy has a different vision for their life from what you want?'

'Life's very long, Willa. There's time to try things.'

'Everyone else says life is short.'

'Everyone else isn't as old as I am.'

'Fair point. You know I don't want kids.'

'I seem to remember it coming up once or twice.'

'Do you think I'll regret it if I don't have a baby? Because I don't want to have one but, like you say, life is long.'

‘You might. But regret’s not the end of the world. You’ll regret things you do, and things you don’t do. It’s part of the marvellous insanity called the human condition. You can’t win. Don’t try to outflank it.’

Ewan had said the same thing the night of his parents’ party. Willa wasn’t sure. Regret seemed like something to avoid, not seek. Ruth put her plate back on the side table.

Willa glanced at it. ‘Are you all right? You’re not eating much.’

‘I can’t eat many delicious things any more. One of the worst parts of being old, Willa: your bowels wear out before everything else. People can live for a long time but they have to spend the last twenty years eating so much bran that sometimes it doesn’t seem worth the trade-off. Appetite stays strong, but the body is unwilling.’

‘Do you regret many things?’

‘So many things.’ Ruth leaned forward and took Willa’s hand. ‘I regret, but I don’t wish I hadn’t done them. There is a difference, you know. I regret certain relationships, certain friendships. But if I could go back I’d still do them again. I have a wonderful catalogue of regrets I’m very proud of.’

‘I regret something I did this morning. And I wish I hadn’t done it.’

‘What’s that? Not coming to see me?’

‘No, earlier I went swimming and then had sex with Ollie, a man who used to be my boyfriend.’

‘The floppy-haired buffoon who fancied himself an academic?’

‘The very same.’

Ruth looked at her watch. ‘You must have been up with the birds.’

‘I couldn’t sleep. I behaved very badly to my friend Kat yesterday. I felt so guilty.’

Ruth smiled. 'Do you feel better after seeing Ollie?'

Willa scrunched up her nose. 'Much, much worse.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

'He's awful. I must have been trying to punish myself. Stupid, right?'

'Unnecessary, I'd say. Unhelpful. But what's done is done. Next time you might just try apologising to your friend.'

'It's not as simple as that.'

'Everything's simpler than you think,' said Ruth. 'Now, it's time for you to go. I have aquarobics in an hour and it takes me that long to get into my togs.'

Willa hugged her. 'Do I get a cash bonus to escape my woes on a tropical island, like Imogen?'

Ruth snorted at her. 'You do not. Your woes are your own doing. Sort them out yourself.'

* * *

Willa drove back through the lush green valley to her parents' home. She found them sitting at the table on the back deck with the weekend papers spread out, alongside a plunger of coffee, toast crumbs and a nearly empty pot of marmalade. With an ache, Willa recognised it as one of Ewan's.

Her father looked over his reading glasses. 'You were up early.'

'I went for a swim and took some brekky round to Ruth.'

'You're a good girl, thanks for visiting her,' said her mother, and handed her a cup of coffee.

'It's not a hardship. She gives good advice.'

Her mother turned a page of the paper. 'What do you need advice about?'

Willa was suddenly irritated. Was it any wonder she was dreadful at relationships when her own mother was so hopeless at communicating, so blind to when something was

wrong? Why couldn't she have had one of those mothers who wanted to be involved in their child's life? 'Um, only everything in my whole stupid existence. Not that you'd know because you never ask me anything about how I'm going. Because I'm not a run-over wombat.'

Her mother looked taken aback. 'I beg your pardon?'

'You know exactly what I mean. You don't know anything about my life because you never ever ask.'

Her mother made a face that had made Willa want to burn down the house since childhood: her mouth set in a way that clearly said, 'I'll play along with your nonsense.' It was so patronising.

'Well, I'm asking now.'

'I'm not telling you now. Not while you're making that face.'

'What face? This is my face.'

'That is her face,' her father agreed.

'Fine, do you really want to know? I've fucked up literally all the things. My job, my friendships, my love life. I am thirty-six, and I have no partner, a job I love but which I probably have to quit, my best friend hates me, I make bad decisions all the time, I am a terrible judge of character, I have no car, I feel unsupported and I really really don't want to have a baby, which I think means maybe I'm going to end up alone forever, publishing stories about love, making money for a man who destroyed my cousin's life.'

'Why do you have to quit your job?' asked her father.

'Because I shouldn't work for Gladstone any more, should I? That's what Mum thinks. And because I only had two real friends there, and now they're both gone.'

Her parents looked puzzled. 'Imogen and who else?' asked her dad.

‘Ewan?’ said her mum, tapping the marmalade jar with her spoon for unnecessary emphasis.

‘Yes, Ewan,’ Willa replied tersely. ‘He quit in protest.’

‘That’s very principled of him. Quite a gesture of solidarity with Imogen.’

‘It’s fine for him. He’s rich. He can make great gestures of solidarity and not get evicted and end up on the streets.’

‘Where is he working now?’ asked her dad.

‘I don’t know. We’re no longer in touch,’ she said haughtily.

‘Don’t be silly,’ said her mum. ‘You always know. It’ll be on Facebook or Instagram, or LinkedIn.’

‘Why do you care?’

‘We always give him our oranges, for his marmalade. I mean, we don’t have the whole orchard now, Iris and Tom do, but we’ve still got those two little trees down the back there.’ She pointed towards the fence, where two small orange trees were heavily weighed down with almost ripe fruit.

‘I unfriended him on social media,’ said Willa. ‘I don’t care what he’s doing. He can buy his own oranges.’

‘That seems a bit baby with the bathwater, if you ask me.’

‘I don’t remember asking you.’ Her mother was so annoying. It was the best anti-aging treatment around, staying with your parents when you were heading towards middle age. Nothing made you feel more like a shitty fifteen-year-old.

‘Whose buttons do you push when I’m not here?’ Willa asked irritably and folded her arms. She hated when her mum was right.

Her parents sat in silence. Willa leaned forward and rested her head in her hands, watching her fat tears plop onto the table, darkening the wood.

Finally her mother spoke. ‘Sorry, sweetheart. I didn’t want to pry. I thought you’d say, if there were things you wanted to talk about. I suppose I could show more interest without prying.’ Reaching across the table, she squeezed Willa’s hand. ‘Sorry.’

A bleat from her mother’s phone signalled a new text message, and Willa saw her eyes flick towards it. ‘Read it, Mum, it might be important.’

With a grateful smile, her mother looked at the message. ‘I’ve got to drive up to Robertson to see a flying fox. Will you come with me? We could talk in the car.’

Willa nodded. ‘Just let me get out of my swimmers first. I’ll be two seconds.’

Chapter 31

There had always been something about driving with her mother after an argument that could make Willa open up. She had almost forgotten it worked like that, but she was glad her mum hadn't. It was easier to talk to someone side by side than face to face, and having other things to rest your eyes on, other points of discussion, was some sort of magic formula for easing conversation. It was a shame it only seemed to work after they'd had a blow-up. She wondered whether, far from being uninterested as charged, her mum had engineered the conversation about Ewan and the oranges just to piss her off and get her to crack. She wouldn't put it past her.

By the time they'd reached the top of the winding road up the escarpment, Willa had fully apprised her mother of the seemingly innumerable errors she had made in her quest to lead an adult life. Each time she thought she'd reached the end of the tale, she remembered another 'and then', which she tacked on, making her sound like a small child trying to delay bedtime with a never-ending story.

She even told her about Dougal's proposition, and when at last she reached the part about how she thought she might be in love with Ewan, she looked out the window as she spoke, wiping away the tears she couldn't stop. They so rarely talked about this sort of thing. Her mum didn't say much, just a few nods and 'right's and 'wow's.

They pulled off the road, making their way along a corrugated driveway towards a small house. Her mother pulled on the handbrake. 'Want to come in?'

'Can I just wait out here?' Willa didn't feel like facing a stranger. Her face was puffy and tearstained.

‘Of course.’ Her mother leaned over and planted a kiss on her forehead then went inside.

She wasn’t gone long, returning a few minutes later, empty-handed.

‘Where’s the flying fox?’

‘The great fig tree in the sky.’

‘Oh. Was it already dead?’

‘Not quite.’ Her mother put the car in reverse and backed up the driveway.

‘Did you have to . . .?’

She nodded.

‘What with? I mean, how did you . . .?’

‘Hammer,’ she said grimly.

‘Jesus. Why don’t you just volunteer at the op shop or something? Wouldn’t you prefer a less blunt-force-trauma-heavy way to serve your community?’

‘It doesn’t always end like that. There are good outcomes too. And even though I don’t like it when an animal doesn’t make it, there’s something about those bad outcomes. I’m not sure what it is. They remind you that life’s fragile. And that we’re all just little tiny parts of a big system. None of us is so important, really.’

Her mother’s words echoed what Ruth had said about tragedy. Willa didn’t like that thought at all. How could it be a comfort to realise that in the grand scheme of things you were of no consequence? If you didn’t matter, then what was the point?

She stared out the window at the bush as they drove home. Now that she’d unburdened herself, she could see things a little more clearly. She wouldn’t go so far as to say that sharing the problems had halved them, but they were at least slightly diminished in awfulness.

A misty rain had enveloped the valley by the time they reached the bottom of the mountain. It was getting colder, and the thought of deciding what to do next weighed on Willa. Her parents would no doubt have plans for the afternoon. They always did. They would be gardening, or stopping in to see a friend, picking up Ruth's laundry or doing the grocery shopping. Willa could work, read a book, go for a walk in the rain or watch something on TV. Alone. The loneliness would be unbearable.

To her surprise, as they approached the driveway her mum said, 'Shall we curl up and watch a movie this afternoon? Doesn't look like this rain is going anywhere.'

'Which movie?' Willa asked.

'Do you still like *Much Ado About Nothing*?'

Willa looked sharply at her mum to see if she was being made fun of. Long ago she'd told her about how the beginning of the movie made her feel, and how she had started to use it in her decision-making at work. Her mother had shaken her head in bemusement, and after that Willa hadn't mentioned it again. Her mother, she had long understood, was as romantic and sentimental as a fatal blow to the head with a hammer. As a kid she'd wondered if perhaps her parents didn't really love each other. They never kissed in front of the kids or gave each other flowers or cards on Valentine's Day. They rarely went out together without friends or their children. They gave each other things like humane animal traps for Christmas. Sometimes she wondered if the way she leaned towards romances was a direct result of having the most deeply unromantic woman in the world as her mother.

'Sure. It's okay.'

'I haven't seen it for years, but I found your old DVD when we moved. I'll make popcorn.'

* * *

The curtains drawn, bowls of buttery popcorn on their laps, Willa and Jo settled themselves on the sofa and Willa pressed

play.

The familiar music washed over her like Valium, instantly relaxing her tight shoulders, and when Emma Thompson began to speak she breathed out more deeply than she had for weeks.

‘Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more.

Men were deceivers ever.

One foot in sea and one on shore

To one thing constant never:

Then sigh not so, but let them go,

And be you blithe and bonny,

Converting all your sounds of woe

Into hey nonny, nonny!’

Then there were the men riding, and the trumpets blaring, the curls bouncing and the splashing, just as always. But this time, the feeling of elation and thrill didn’t come. Only calmness. The images floated past Willa’s eyes, but her mind was on the words. That poem. It had been so many years since she’d considered the meaning of what Beatrice was saying. Men are full of shit, was the gist of it. They are tricky and faithless. Don’t let it get you down. Be happy anyway.

Suddenly she recognised something new in the words. Fear. Those were the words of someone terrified of love. That attitude of ‘boys will be boys, don’t let them get you down’: she’d been living by that for so long. It was defensive, and it protected the heart, but it was tiring and so lonely.

The film continued, and it was like watching a new movie. Where in the past Benedick and Beatrice dancing around their feelings for each other, their battle of wits, had made her heart soar with delight, now it infuriated her. They both knew how they felt. Why didn’t they just admit their love and have done with it? The things keeping them apart were such manufactured obstacles.

Of course she understood that was how romance stories worked: fate threw problems into the path of two people in love until they could overcome them. The end.

She thought of all the things she'd told her mum in the car that morning. Were the reasons she had given for not being able to be with Ewan real? They felt real. The baby thing was huge. But was it huge enough? Or was it just an excuse, a way of throwing spikes in front of her own tyres? A creeping feeling inside suggested that perhaps, in some very slight way, Ewan might have been right when he said she was scared.

She watched the story play out on the screen. The conspiracy to break up Hero and Claudio's wedding, Claudio's callous abandonment of his bride, Hero's father turning on her — every plot point stemmed from fear or jealousy.

Recognition slid its arm uncomfortably around Willa's shoulders. That was her. Fear and jealousy were leading the way in all she did. She loved Ewan, and she loved Kat, and the way she was treating them both stemmed from the way fear had somehow seized her, dragged her into an alley and was holding its hand over her mouth.

There was honestly nothing to stop her from going to Ewan and telling him she felt the same way he did. The same applied to her work. She could resign at once and the world would not stop turning. She could throw herself in abject apology at Kat's feet. None of those things might work out, but it couldn't feel worse than sitting here wondering why she had so comprehensively mucked up her life.

The film ended and she turned to her mother. To her surprise, Jo's face was streaked with tears.

'Why are you crying?'

'Because it's such an awful, awful story,' she said. 'They're all angry at each other for the wrong reasons. There's so much miscommunication. And don't get me started on the parenting. I don't think there's a worse father in Shakespeare than Leonato.'

‘Lear’s pretty rubbish.’

‘Leonato’s daughter gets slandered and he attacks her? He believes the men who accuse her of premarital sex, doesn’t listen to a word she says, and only when it’s proven by a bunch of other men that she is innocent does he believe her. But then he keeps torturing poor Claudio and saying Hero is dead. What’s that about? Claudio was only as terrible as Leonato at that wedding. What a bloody disgrace. And then, *and then*, his solution is to pretend Claudio’s punishment is to marry Beatrice. I mean, what? Why does Beatrice go along with that? What a truly deranged story.’ She paused to wipe her eyes angrily. ‘And why is it called *Much Ado About Nothing*? Is it saying this story of all these people’s lives that are being played with, means nothing? It’s only some women’s future happiness and reputations that are at stake. Nothing important. Just trivial matters. Good god, I mean, how dismissive of women can you get?’

Willa started to laugh. ‘Did you like the Beatrice and Benedick love story?’

‘They drove me utterly batty, if I’m honest. I hate it when people are dishonest about their feelings. I mean, what’s the point of all that gameplaying? How does that help anyone? I told your father I loved him the moment I knew I did. It saved us a lot of time.’

‘Did you?’ This was news to Willa. ‘How did you know you loved him?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Like, what happened, what was the event or the occasion? What did he do that made you go “Oh my god, I love you”?’

‘Nothing.’ Jo looked confused. ‘It wasn’t like in a book or a film. Nothing happened. I think we were having a beer beside the river. I realised I loved him very much and I thought he was terrific, so I said that. Why are you laughing?’

Willa was doubled up on the sofa. ‘I don’t know,’ she said through gasps of mirth. ‘It’s just funny. It’s so fucking simple.’

‘It should be, yes,’ said Jo, wrapping her arms around her daughter. ‘And more often than people let on, it is.’

Chapter 32

A powerful need to see Ewan gripped Willa. Now she felt the urgency she had always thought was missing from their friendship. It was fortunate then that there wasn't a train leaving Kiama for another hour, because although she'd showered after her encounter with Ollie that morning — was it only that morning? It felt so far in the past — she felt like there ought to be a minimum of two showers between sexual partners. Not that she was assuming she and Ewan would fall straight into each other's arms and then pants. But she wasn't going to rule it out. Having spent so much energy quashing her feelings for him, like sitting on an overfull suitcase and trying to zip it up, she now revelled in letting those thoughts burst out and was astonished to find how many of them involved Ewan's trousers falling to the floor.

Her plan, such as it was, involved clearing her conscience before she got to Ewan. She would apologise to Kat and beg for her forgiveness. Kat would be all right. She'd understand it had been shock that had caused Willa to be so mean the night before.

Then she would go to the office and resign. Ideally she'd march in with a printed letter and hand it to Gladstone in person, explaining with great eloquence that she could no longer in good conscience work for someone who had treated her colleague and cousin with so little respect, and who had enabled and encouraged his sons to do the same. Not to mention the way he was acting like the business was still the same old manual-producer it had historically been, with a side of romance books, when in reality her books were the only thing making them any money. She deserved more respect for her work than that. She would not be a sidebar.

It was not on, Ewan had been right, and Willa could see that now. No matter what it did to her job prospects. Bravery and elation boosted her optimism on that front, and she could absolutely see herself presenting her romance imprint to one of the big publishers and being snapped up at once. Maybe they'd even fight over her.

Unfortunately it was late Saturday afternoon and no one would be at work to resign to. And her only access to a printer was the one in the office, which would rather dampen the dramatic effect of storming in with the letter.

Instead she would email her resignation. That would work perfectly well. As she dried her hair and dressed, she figured out the running order of her return. The letter could be written and emailed to Gladstone from the train, and then she would call Kat. Even if there were other people in the carriage she would do it. On arrival in Sydney, she'd have cleared the decks for Ewan. His house was only a few minutes' walk from Newtown Station.

As she slung her overnight bag and laptop case into the boot of her mother's car, her father pulled up in his ute. Her mum started the engine.

'You heading off already?' He sounded disappointed.

'I'm sorry, Dad. I've got to see a man about a love story. Mum made me understand. I have to seize the day and stop being afraid and just admit that I am in love with Ewan.'

'Your mum —' he raised an eyebrow '— made you realise that? She's not normally one for a grand dramatic gesture.'

'She's more romantic than I thought. She told me about how she told you she loved you for the first time, down by the river, drinking beers together. That's pretty bold and wonderful. I wouldn't have thought it of her.'

He pulled on the parking brake and unclipped his seat belt. 'Did she tell you that I said it first?'

'Oh. No. She didn't mention that.'

‘Yes well. I did. And I’d been saying it to her for weeks. That was just the first time she reciprocated.’ His eyes twinkled. ‘But I’m glad that whatever she said had this effect. If you feel like that about Ewan, you should say so.’

She hugged him tightly through the window and climbed in beside her mother. ‘To the station, please, and don’t spare the horses.’

* * *

As they approached the drop-off bay at Kiama Station, Willa’s heart sank. A coach stood idling, meaning only one thing: track work or industrial action meant the train wasn’t running, at least for part of the journey, and she’d be on a bus for some or all of the way. She got sick if she read or typed on a bus.

‘Do you want me to run you up to Wollongong?’ asked her mum.

‘No,’ she said, ‘I’ll be okay. I’m sure it won’t slow me down too much.’ She checked her phone. ‘It’s still leaving at ten past five, so I should be back in town no later than seven thirty.’

‘Good luck, Willa-Chinchilla,’ her mum said, using the pet name she’d had for Willa since she was a baby. ‘I hope all’s well that ends well.’

* * *

The bus was packed, but it didn’t matter. She had gathered momentum, and she wasn’t going to let a small thing like a smelly teenage boy sitting beside her on a coach and sneaking not very subtle looks down her top put her off what she had to do.

First she drafted her letter to Gladstone, before the motion sickness could kick in and render her unable to look at a screen. The words flowed, and before they’d reached Wollongong she had a two-page letter detailing, in what were admittedly somewhat haughty tones, all the reasons she could no longer continue to work for him. One page probably would have sufficed, but once she got going with the sorry tale of

Imogen she found it hard to be succinct. She proofread it twice and pressed send. There. Now Ewan couldn't accuse her of being spineless. She'd done what he had and quit, and in her case without the safety net of owning her own home.

A small surge of panic attempted to make itself known, but she forced it down. She was very good at commissioning and publishing romances. People loved her books and bought them in respectable quantities. So what if she hadn't engaged with the rest of the publishing community at all? So what if she'd been too shy to network and meet other people who did her job? It wasn't too late to start. She was already feeling stronger and braver, and once she had Ewan at her back, she would be unstoppable.

Next on her list was Kat. Mercifully the rail replacement bus finished at Fairy Meadow and the train restarted. She sat upstairs by a window and took out her phone. Before she could talk herself out of it, she tapped on her favourite contacts and pressed her friend's name.

Voicemail. She hung up. This wasn't a matter for voicemail. Over the next hour, she called every ten minutes. Finally, as the train approached Central and she rose to get off, someone picked up.

'Willa,' a gruff male voice said.

'George?'

'Yep.'

She took a deep breath. If Kat wasn't even prepared to talk to her, this was worse than she'd thought. 'Can I talk to Kat? I know she's angry at me, but please, I want to apologise. Please can you put her on?'

'She can't talk right now.'

'Oh George, please, please tell her to talk to me. Will you put the phone on speaker? She doesn't have to say anything, she can just listen. I know you're both mad and you have every right to be. I was so selfish and mean. I know that. I was awful. I was scared and jealous and a very shitty friend, and I

am so sorry. Please just get her to hear me out. Even though I know I don't deserve her friendship.'

George sighed. 'God, Willa. Not everything is about you. She can't talk right now because we're at the hospital. It's nothing to do with you being an asshole.'

Fear coursed through her. 'What happened? Why is she in hospital?'

There was a muffled sound on the other end of the phone. 'Are you sure?' she heard George say, and then came Kat's voice down the line, tiny, scared.

'Willa? I need you to come.'

'What's happening? Are you all right? Oh Katty, I'm so sorry for what I said.'

'It doesn't matter. Please can you come? I think I'm losing the baby. I'm bleeding.'

Willa was furious. First this baby showed up and caused her to ruin the best friendship she'd ever had, and now, just when she was going to accept its presence in their lives and love it, like Kat clearly did, it was just going to fuck off and leave Kat heartbroken? Oh no. That was not on. 'What are they doing? Have they done an ultrasound? Are they stopping the bleeding? Put the doctor on. Where's George? Is he getting a doctor?'

More muffled sounds, then George came back on. 'She wants you here,' he said. 'Can you come?'

'Yes, yes of course. Where are you?'

'Emergency Department at Royal North Shore Hospital. We were at Bec and Ralph's when the bleeding started.'

'I'm at Central now. I can be there in half an hour.'

'Good. And Willa?'

'Yes?'

‘You and me? We’re not okay. What you said to Kat was not okay. But we will deal with that once we know what’s happening here.’ He hung up.

* * *

The next thirty minutes felt endless as Willa dashed to the platform for the north shore train, waited, boarded, and watched as the dark city crawled by. Then they were in tunnels and stopping at every station until they flashed across the Harbour Bridge, before there was even more stopping. At St Leonards she was out of the doors as soon as they opened, and at an awkward run, carrying her bags, she followed the signs out of the station, across a road and up the hill to the hospital.

She hadn’t been there since Bec had the twins. No, she remembered, she’d been back once since then, with Ralph when Quinn had stuck a frozen pea so far up his nostril they’d had to have a doctor remove it. Please, she begged any power that might exist and be listening and not have written her wishes off because she was a terrible person, please let this baby be okay. Please let it still have a heartbeat and grow and be born and stick peas up its stupid nose.

The automatic doors to the Emergency Department opened as she approached, and a couple walked out. Willa was moving so fast she almost didn’t register that it was Kat and George. She came skidding to a halt before them.

‘Is it all right?’ she wheezed, as she dropped her bags on the footpath. ‘The baby?’

Kat gave a little nod and a big smile. ‘We saw it on an ultrasound. The heartbeat and its little giant head. It’s as big as a prune and it already has elbows,’ she said proudly.

Willa flung her arms around her friend and cried with relief. ‘I’m so sorry. I was so mean to you. I’m glad you’re all right. You’re both all right. But why are you bleeding?’

Kat pulled back and put her hands on her stomach. Her smile had gone. ‘It just happens sometimes. I need to take it

easy for a little while, but it should stop soon. They said to reduce my stress,' she added pointedly.

Willa looked down, shamefaced.

Kat went on. 'You were horrible yesterday. That was a fucking terrible thing to say to me.'

'I know. I felt betrayed and left out and like I wasn't doing the right thing with my life. But that was wrong and stupid. Your life is your life, and I love you and I'll support anything you want to do. I hope you can forgive me. And you, George. I promise I will never, ever do anything like that again. I will love your baby as much as I love you, Kat. I can't wait to hear everything about it. You can brag about how clever it is for having elbows to me, always. How many elbows does it have?'

'Two,' said Kat, smiling properly now. She pointed to the bags on the ground. 'Are you running away from home?'

'I'm not sure. I might be running towards home.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'I'm going to tell Ewan that I love him.'

Kat's eyes widened. 'Whoa. Wait, what?'

'I didn't tell you. On the day of the not-wedding he said he loved me. It was out of the blue, and I — and brace yourself, because this will come as a shock — I said all the wrong things. I was scared and mean, if you can even believe it.'

George snorted. Willa gave him a sorrowful look, and he gestured to a nearby bench. 'Sit down, you two. I'll go get the van.'

They sat together and Kat turned to face Willa. 'How did you get past that to now telling him you love him?'

'It was partly Ollie's doing.'

Kat frowned. 'Ollie-Ollie?'

Willa nodded. 'I ran into him this morning and accidentally slept with him, and it made me realise that I've had all these relationships with people who are just rubbish holiday-house knives.'

Kat looked like she was going to laugh. 'You have to explain that, but I already know that when you do it will make perfect sense.'

Willa laughed too. 'You will understand. See, you know how in holiday houses the kitchen knives are always cheap and nasty? No heft or substance, not sharp, not straight, not weighted correctly. The sort of thing that doesn't matter if it breaks or gets nicked? Well, Ollie, and Dan, and really all the people I've been with until now, they've been holiday-house-knife boyfriends. They look like a knife, do the job of a knife, sort of. But not well. And you take no pleasure in them. A crappy plastic version of a knife. You can stand them for a bit but not forever. Eventually you need a real knife.'

'And Ewan is a real knife? An expensive knife you'll have for the rest of your life? An investment knife?'

'Exactly! I knew you'd get it. And I was scared of accepting that he might be the knife for me, because I know he wants kids and I don't, and because I'm so frightened I'll fuck things up with him and hurt him, but I still want to try. He needs to know I love him. We can figure the rest out, can't we? Surely there's hope even for someone like me?'

George's van pulled up and he got out.

'A knife block for every knife,' said Kat, and she took Willa's hands. 'Yes, there's hope. Especially for someone like you, Willa. You're a very odd fish, but you're wonderful when you're not being awful.'

'I remain unconvinced,' said George, but there was a softening to his face. 'Kat, we need to get you home to bed.'

'Yes! Home with you!' said Willa. 'I'm going to get on the train, go back to Newtown and bare my soul to the man I love. And hopefully also my tits.'

‘Christ,’ said George.

Chapter 33

Newtown was humming with Saturday-night energy when she climbed the steps from the station and emerged onto King Street. Willa let the crowds sweep her along until the lights at Erskineville Road, where she turned off and threaded her way through the quieter back streets.

She peered into brightly lit front rooms as she walked, catching glimpses of families eating dinner, couples snuggled together on sofas in front of the TV, and lots of desks, where a lone person had repurposed their living room into their office during the pandemic and never switched back. Some people were still working, typing, peering at screens.

Ewan's house was a tiny, single-storey terrace, the second in a row of four. Willa paused when she reached the first house in the line. She hadn't really prepared what she was going to say. The way the scene had been playing out in her mind since she'd left her parents' house was that she would open his gate, walk the three or four steps to his front door and knock. She'd hear his footsteps approaching the door, and then it would open. She wouldn't even need to speak. He would take one look at her, she would drop her bags — again, and considering one contained her laptop this probably ought to be the last dramatic bag drop of the day — and before she could speak he would have wrapped his arms around her and they would be kissing. They would stumble into the house, into his bedroom and there would begin the unbridling of the passion that had lain dormant in them for so long. No matter how long their lovemaking lasted — and she anticipated great things on that front — no one would have nicked her laptop when she eventually went back out to the front step to retrieve it.

Of course that was the fairy-tale version. She wasn't a fool: she knew real life didn't work like that. There would be awkwardness, defensiveness and apologies. She would have to explain that she'd resigned, and that she'd lied when she said she didn't love him. That she had, as he had observed, been afraid to take a chance. There was no point going into the whole kids-or-no-kids thing right away. No point at all. They would come to that. Then, surely then, they would fall into each other's arms. And it would be like nothing she'd known before. Because this time, he'd been her friend first.

She took a deep breath and walked towards his house, past the hedge that gave his little front garden a modicum of privacy from his neighbour, and stopped in her tracks.

A sign was cable-tied to the fence. *For Lease*, it read, along with the details of a local estate agent. Willa stared at it in confusion. Undeterred, she pushed open the gate and knocked on the door. She heard the knock echo through the house. No footsteps came.

She'd only seen him two weeks ago. He wouldn't have moved and not said anything. That assumption was wrong, she chastised herself: clearly he had. His house was empty and up for lease. He'd gone somewhere without telling her. Taking out her phone, she called his number. It took ages to connect, and when it did it was a strange tone that rang in her ear. It was not the double 'ring ring' of a phone that was in Australia, but the long, mournful tone she remembered from Seattle. To an Australian ear it wasn't dissimilar to a busy signal, but she knew this was not the same. Ewan's phone was in America, and it wasn't too massive a leap to assume that Ewan was too. As soon as she recognised the tone she hung up.

She was too late. He had gone to get Winter back. That was the only explanation she could think of. A several-months-late version of the airport dash. It was a thing, she admitted to herself. Not an uncommon trope in romances. She had been right: he hadn't been in love with her, he had been on the rebound from Winter.

She sat down on the cold front step of the house that Ewan didn't live in any more. So, was that it? Was there anything else to do? Confirm he'd done what she thought he had: that would be the sensible thing to do. She should call someone and make sure he hadn't actually died in a terrible accident. Dougal was the only person in his family she thought she could bear to talk to, notwithstanding their most recent awkward encounter.

He answered on the first ring. 'Willa.' He said it like he'd been expecting her. It occurred to her that maybe he thought she was calling to say she'd changed her mind about his offer. Shit. She didn't want to hurt him any more than she already had.

Get straight to the point, that was the best way to proceed. 'Dougal, hi. Um. I'm at Ewan's house. I'm looking for Ewan. But he doesn't seem to live here any more. Do you know where he is?'

A pause. 'Did you try calling him?'

'I couldn't get through,' she lied.

'Right. Um, he's taken off for a bit.'

'Oh.'

'What did you want him for?'

Nothing much, just to be my one and only true love. To spend the rest of my life with him. Forsaking all others. Only that. 'I . . . wanted to tell him something.'

'Do you want me to pass on a message when I talk to him?'

'No, that's fine.' She forced her voice to sound light. 'It's not urgent. I'll text him.'

'Okay. Well, I guess I'll see you on Monday.'

She took a deep breath. 'I'm not coming back to work. I resigned a couple of hours ago.'

‘Oh. Because of what I said? You don’t have to. I won’t make things uncomfortable for you.’

‘No, it’s not that at all. It’s just time, for lots of reasons, for me to move on. Like you said, the business is winding up in every way except the books, and the books are just me, really.’

‘Will you go work for a publisher, like a real one?’

‘I’m going to try. I have lots of experience now, and I guess since there won’t be anyone left to publish their books, my authors’ contracts will have to be cancelled. Maybe they’ll follow me wherever I wash up.’ The last thing she wanted to discuss right now were the ins and outs of the contracts of her authors. She hoped they’d be all right. Few of them had any experience with other publishers either. Was she going to show up at a fancy office building in the city with her ragtag bunch of writers and stories, and try to sell them to a huge multinational corporation as a job lot, like a set of outgrown clothes on a neighbourhood buy, swap and sell page?

‘Well, I’m sorry you’re going,’ he said sadly, and her heart ached a little for him. He was a good man as well as a beautiful one, and she hoped he’d find someone who could love him like he deserved. ‘I wish things had worked out differently. Goodbye, Willa.’

And with that he hung up. She stared at the phone in her hand.

She felt the courage and bravado that had driven her all day draining away. Just as the last vestiges vanished, she typed a text into her phone and sent it. Even if he never replied, at least Ewan would know she had tried, that she hadn’t let fear win.

Chapter 34

The weeks that followed felt like an unending hangover. Willa watched a lot of TV, ate a lot of toast, and spent hours in the bath. Where this differed from a hangover was in her newfound attitude to regret. Ruth's words, echoing Ewan's, rang in her ears every time she started to beat herself up about not having come to her senses sooner. 'Regret's not the end of the world,' she'd said. 'You'll regret things you do, and things you don't do. It's part of the marvellous insanity called the human condition.' And besides, she kept telling herself, if Winter was really who he wanted, he would have come to that conclusion eventually and gone to try and get her back. At least this way Willa didn't have to live through that.

Gradually she stopped feeling her heart leap every time her text alert sounded, and message by message began to accept that Ewan wasn't going to reply.

The day she heard her phone ping in the kitchen and went on watching the episode of *ER* she was engrossed in, not even bothering to check it until some hours later, she felt like she had won a Nobel Prize for Moving On. As the days passed, the idea of Ewan calling, and what she would say if he did, seemed more unlikely, until she reached the point where she wasn't sure what she'd say to him at all. All the various iterations of her great speech only worked in the heat of the moment, with the fire of urgency behind them. If he called back now, she would have the feeling you get at a dinner party, where someone remembers you'd been trying to get a word in edgewise five minutes before, circles back to ask what it was you wanted to say, but now the discussion has moved on.

Kat was feeling well, her bump was growing and she'd had no more bleeding. She and George were merging two small

vintage-wares dealerships into one slightly larger vintage-wares dealer, even throwing around the idea of opening their own shop.

To Willa's astonishment, Gladstone had replied to her email with an offer of a redundancy pay-out. He'd decided to close the business altogether. Willa was certain that wasn't how redundancy worked — you weren't supposed to get it if you'd already quit — but if Gladstone wanted to wind up his weird pretend business and pay her out, she wasn't going to say no. It wasn't a massive sum, but he had said that since he would have to cancel the contracts with the authors whose books hadn't yet come out, he didn't mind if she continued to work with them. The profits from the books she'd already published would continue to go to Gladstone, but anything from here on was for Willa, or whichever new publisher her authors went to.

Their email interaction was the last contact she'd had with any of the Smiths. She'd wiped the rest of the family from her social media late one night, terrified of seeing Fiona announce a vow renewal for Ewan and Winter, or — worst of all — that they were having a baby. Unfriending them wasn't going to stop those things happening, but she could live without knowing the details.

Imogen was recovering from her wedding day ordeal. Her trip to Bali had given her a taste for travel, and she was back living with her parents, working at a riding school while she saved up to move to Argentina for a year. They didn't talk very often now: so much of what had made them close in the time Imogen was in Sydney had been Smith-related, and now they tried not to talk about that. Imogen did tell her that she'd received a letter from Gladstone, with a cheque enclosed. Willa had been outraged: this was clearly Gladstone trying to stop Imogen from reporting the assault to the police, which would have had serious repercussions for Alistair. Surely there should be some punishment for Alistair. But Imogen had been sanguine. She had no desire to go through a court case, and she seemed to believe that Jim Beam wasn't an inherently

dangerous man, that he had believed Sylvia when she told him Imogen fancied him. And Alistair, according to Gladstone's letter, was being made to go on a father-son bonding trip with Gladstone, walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain for a month. It was, they realised, as much of a punishment as the Smiths would ever inflict on one of their children. Imogen deposited the cheque and added three months to her budgeted stay in South America. None of that sat comfortably with Willa, but she admitted that long term Imogen was probably right to just get on with her life. Her path now was going to make her much happier than an early marriage to Angus Smith ever could have.

Gradually the Smith family faded from Willa's mind, until the time she'd known them began to feel more like a long-running soap opera she'd watched as a teen than real people most of whom still lived only a few kilometres from her home.

Kat, George, Ralph and Bec followed Willa's lead and mentioned them less and less, as though an unspoken agreement not to talk about the Smiths had grown up like the forest around Sleeping Beauty's castle.

* * *

After the redundancy payment appeared in her account, Willa began to put out feelers for work. She slid into the DMs of competitors, the people she had stalked for years on Twitter half out of spite since failing to be employed in assistant roles eight years earlier. To her astonishment, several of them replied, inviting her to submit her CV, to have coffee and conversations about her books and the authors she'd nurtured.

It took a couple of months, but eventually she was offered a maternity-leave cover position as a commissioning editor with a medium-sized publisher. Not a huge multinational, though neither was it a made-up business with only one person doing her job. But the job wasn't in the fiction department. It was a non-fiction role.

When the letter of offer arrived in her inbox, she was picking her way across the remains of a blanket fort in Bec

and Ralph's front garden, on her way in to have dinner with them. She read it twice, then put away her phone. A romance fiction detox. At least in her professional life. She wasn't sure if she could do it. Would there be such a thing as a non-fiction book that filled her with delight and joy in the way that her romance novels did? The publishing list she was being asked to cover was heavy on true crime and sport, with a little light self-help for good measure.

She picked up the sofa cushions that littered the path, slung what she recognised as the doona from Bec and Ralph's bed over her shoulder, and rang the doorbell.

Usually that sound provoked a calamitous rush for the door, but this evening she heard only gentle pattering approaching, followed by an odd tapping and scrabbling in the region of the handle. The lock clicked open and a pair of small hands reached around to pull the door inwards. There stood Arlo and Quinn, beaming.

'Hello,' said Willa suspiciously. 'How did you open the door? Can you reach the handle now?'

Quinn shook his head, while his brother bounced up and down on the spot, his hands clasped in front of him in delight. Willa looked at the inside of the door. Hanging from the handle was an umbrella.

'Oh geez,' she said, locking the door behind her. She dropped the bedding, tucked the umbrella under her arm, scooped the boys up and carried them through the house to the kitchen, where she found Ralph making drinks while Kat, Bec and George crowded around the other side of the island looking at something on a laptop screen.

'Hi,' she said. 'Were you aware that the chimps can now use tools to open the front door?'

Ralph and Bec both looked up, stricken.

'No,' said Bec. She gave them a stern look. 'Boys. How did you open the door?'

'The 'brella,' said Arlo proudly.

‘Yeah, you might have to start locking that door with the key when you’re home,’ Willa told them, putting down the children and the escape umbrella.

Ralph shook his head in dismay. ‘Probably won’t help. They’ll just build a glider in the attic like at Colditz, or tunnel out with spoons or something. Hey, boys. No more umbrellas. No more umbrellas!’ he shouted at their backs as they ran up the stairs.

‘What are you looking at?’ Willa asked Kat. ‘And where’s Perce?’

‘At a party,’ said Ralph. ‘She’ll be back in a bit.’

‘Come see this,’ said Kat, her face bright with excitement.

George moved aside to let Willa in, and Ralph handed her a gin and tonic. On the screen were photos of a shop. It was beautiful, with original full-length glass bay windows on either side of a glass door, and what appeared to be a flat above.

‘For you guys?’ she asked.

‘We signed the lease today,’ said George proudly. ‘We’ll have the shop downstairs, and we can live above it. There’s even a parking space for the van out the back.’

Willa’s feeling of envy at hearing this news was, she felt, admirably minor. She’d come a long way. When she hugged and congratulated Kat and George, it was almost entirely sincere. She was as happy for them as anyone could reasonably be expected to be.

‘Any luck on the job front?’ asked Ralph. He had helped her craft her resume before she started looking, and now seemed as invested as Willa in the success it brought her.

‘Funny you should ask,’ she said. ‘I had an offer a few minutes ago. But I don’t know if it’s for me. It’s in non-fiction.’ She outlined the situation for them.

When she finished, they were silent. She sipped her drink and waited for a response. They all looked at each other, as if

silently electing a spokesperson. Things were getting awkward by the time Bec finally spoke up.

‘I think non-fiction would be a great fit for you.’

‘But I’ve never done it. I don’t even read non-fiction. It would be such a leap from what I know.’

‘You’d bring a fresh eye to it. It might be good for you to take a whole new approach to your work. You’d need to find something other than the old *Much Ado* technique, a new way of assessing submissions.’

Willa had to admit that since she’d watched the film with her mother, it no longer resonated in quite the same way.

‘And maybe if you’re not constantly immersing yourself in stories about love and trying to capture that feeling you’ve always talked about, you might see things differently.’

‘What sort of things?’ Willa knew exactly what Bec was getting at, but something in her wanted to force them to say it out loud.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Bec, losing courage and turning away. She opened the dishwasher and moved around some dirty glasses on the top rack.

‘Willa,’ said Kat, her voice kind but firm. ‘You know what she means. You can’t do anything without narrativising it. There’s no way for us to know if it’s because of your work or that’s just what you’re like, but steeping yourself in romances, day in, day out can’t be helping. If you took a break from those sorts of stories, maybe you might learn to just live your life and stop thinking about where everything fits into your story. You don’t get to decide that. Life just goes where it goes. Always seeking some sort of ultimate happy ending can stop you from enjoying the life you’re living right now. You’re not a girl in a book.’

Willa shifted uncomfortably and loudly crunched an ice cube from her drink. She was used to discussing her romantic manoeuvres in front of Kat, Bec and Ralph, but George’s promotion to this level of friend — in which she had not had

any say — still felt strange. After she'd discovered that Ewan had presumably thought better of his declared love for her and fled the country, her friends had respectfully steered their conversations around that situation as if it were a snake on the road that no one was sure was alive or dead. She thought she'd done a decent job of emotionally boxing up everything to do with the Smiths and leaving it out for the hard rubbish. Just because she hadn't been out dating up a storm and shagging all the men didn't mean she hadn't moved on, or that she was pining for Ewan. She was just taking her time.

'I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about,' she said indignantly. 'I fail to see how my non-existent love life has anything to do with this job.'

'I think it has a lot to do with it. If you constantly think in romance-novel terms, that becomes your framework for life. Let romance be a theme in your story, a subtle image that runs through it, not the whole narrative thrust.'

'I'm not the one thrusting romance into this conversation. You guys are. And I don't see my life as a love story. You make me sound pathetic. I can separate real life from fiction. So things didn't work out with Ewan. I got over it. Do you see me lying on a chaise longue all day, wasting away with desire for my one true love? No, you don't. I've learned from it. I have moved on. I'm trying to be braver and better and next time I get an opportunity for love I hope I can take it, even if that looks to you like I'm grasping for a happy ending.'

Kat bowed her head, slightly shamefaced. 'Sorry, Willa. We didn't mean it like that.'

'You kind of did. And I know it's annoying from your point of view, all coupled up and happy, to have me still single.'

'No,' Bec said, 'it's not annoying. We just thought if you didn't have to have love stories on the brain all day for work that it might take the pressure off having one in real life, that's all.'

‘Also if you publish non-fiction maybe you’ll meet famous people and become friends with them and then we can too,’ said Ralph encouragingly.

‘Dave Grohl has written his autobiography already,’ she told him. ‘I can’t see him doing it again.’

‘Ian McKellen hasn’t.’

‘You want me to work in non-fiction on the off-chance Ian McKellen writes a book and I publish it and I can introduce you to him?’

‘Not exclusively for that reason, but it wouldn’t be a bad thing.’

‘What would you even talk to him about?’

‘Tolkien. LGBTQ activism. Patrick Stewart. We’d get along brilliantly.’

Willa shrugged. ‘I suppose this is all academic really. I mean, it’s not like I have a lot of choice, is it? I’ve hardly been flooded with offers so it isn’t up to me whether I continue in romance or not. I need a job. This is a good job.’

‘I think you should take it,’ said Kat.

‘I will. I guess it’s good to try new things. But there’s something about it that feels like starting all over again, you know? I was running my own show before, and I didn’t really have to answer to anyone. Now I’ll have a real boss, and colleagues who aren’t related to each other and stuff. I don’t know how to work in a normal office. Will I have to provide my own marmalade?’

‘From an occ-health perspective,’ said Ralph, ‘I think sharing jars of marmalade like you all did was a disgusting practice. We actively discourage that sort of thing at my work. I once made some laminated signs for the kitchen warning against it. I had little pictures of jars of peanut butter and Vegemite and jam, with the slogan *That’s How Germs Spread*. Get it, spread?’ They all made the impressed sounds he appeared to be waiting for. ‘But spreads aside, I think you’ll be

surprised,' he went on, 'at how pleasant it can be to work somewhere that's more distinct from the rest of your life. It's like the separation of church and state: things just work more smoothly when that's in place.'

'Our new home-shop-family being the exception that will prove the rule, of course,' said George, and he rubbed Kat's rounded belly.

'Of course,' agreed Ralph. 'Newborn babies in the workplace are a famously good idea.'

Kat smacked his arm.

'Ralph,' Willa said, 'you don't have to worry about me getting involved with anyone at this new job. I'll be putting my own HR policy into place regarding dipping my pen in the company ink.' She finished her drink. 'Now, are we going to order some Thai or am I going to have to eat bum chocolate for dinner?'

Chapter 35

Perce was delivered home by her friend's parents just after the food arrived, and she joined them at the table. Bec hauled an ornate silver candelabra out of a locked cupboard and placed slim candles into it. 'We never use our nice things,' she said. 'I'm always so worried about what the twins will do to them. But I think if we have five adults and Perce around the table protecting the open flames, then there's a lot less chance they'll burn down the house.'

Moments after she lit the tapers and sat down, their teenaged kitten leaped from the kitchen island to the table and skidded into the candelabra, spilling molten wax into the pad thai and causing Perce and Willa to dissolve into giggles. Ralph locked the cat in the laundry and Bec calmly picked the wax from the food.

As they ate, Willa watched her friends closely. She saw how Bec's peaceful resignation balanced Ralph's constant air of slight panic. Kat picked every bean sprout out of her dinner — Willa knew their tails always made her think she was eating a hair — and George didn't bat an eyelid. She was reminded again of what she had always hoped for in a relationship. It was the openness and honesty, like all these people had with one another. The way she saw them behave with their partners was who they truly were. There was no artifice. No pretence. That often came with time, but Kat and George had it already.

She'd never had it with Ollie. He'd always made her feel self-conscious about something or other, from her hair to her book choices. She'd had it with Ewan in their friendship; they'd just both briefly mistaken it for something more. It was probably for the best that the moments when they'd individually confused it for something more hadn't been

simultaneous. No doubt their bad timing had saved them from a painful landing. If they'd actually gone out together, become a couple, everything would have been weird. She would have felt compelled to show up as Willa On A Date, rather than Willa, Your Mate From Work. They were two different people and Ewan probably wouldn't have been into Willa On A Date. Although given that he had been friends with Willa From Work, maybe she could have tried just being herself if they had gone out. But that was all academic.

Bec bit down on a large chunk of chilli and her eyes and nose started to stream. Ralph lunged for the tissue box and handed her one without even putting down his fork. She blew her nose mightily; he slung his arm around her neck and kissed her hair. Ralph and Bec were the same. They were so open and true with each other. That honesty blew Willa's mind. They had all somehow managed the ultimate transformation: that leap from being their best selves on a date to being their actual selves. How did anyone do that successfully?

The conversation meandered from the cat to the food, to the twins, to the party Persephone had come from, to Kat and George's baby. It was the size of a turnip now, apparently.

'I don't even know what a turnip looks like,' said Perce.

'Yes you do,' said Ralph, 'it's long and white. They have them at the Japanese supermarket.'

'That's a daikon, it's a kind of radish,' Perce corrected him.

'Oh, yeah. I don't know what a turnip looks like either. Why don't they use a comparison anyone knows for baby size?'

'Like what?' said Kat.

'McDonald's chips? I'm just spitballing here,' said Ralph. 'Your baby might be a medium now, and then in a few months it will be a large McValue meal. That's a much more universally understood measurement system.'

The others wasted no time in dismantling his theory, and Willa felt bathed in the glow of friendship. So what if she didn't know how to love anyone romantically? She'd spent years studying the way love stories worked, and she felt no wiser now than she had been at sixteen when she'd first watched *Much Ado About Nothing* and felt the flutters of warmth and joy, combined with growing sexual awareness and heart-stirring music, that had set her on the absurd path that had led her here. She had friends. They would see her through.

* * *

George and Kat drove her home after dinner. When the van pulled up outside her flat, she leaned forward to kiss them goodbye but Kat unclipped her seat belt too. 'I'll walk you up,' she said. 'I need to pee.'

'And they say chivalry is dead,' Willa said and kissed George on the cheek.

While Kat used the bathroom, Willa took off her jacket and hung it on a new hook she'd hammered into the wall by the front door. Her keys and bag went on another hook beside it.

The toilet flushed and Kat came into the living room, looking around admiringly. 'It's very tidy, Willa. What's happened?'

'It's just something I'm trying,' Willa said. 'A few changes. Trying to be someone who hangs their stuff up, you know. An adult. I'm just trying to be a bit less . . . Willa.' Suddenly she thought she might cry. She bit the inside of her lip hard.

'You goose,' said Kat. 'I'm all for you being less slovenly, but you're joking, right? Why would you want to be less Willa?'

She shrugged, embarrassed. 'I'm just trying to have better habits and be better generally. So if one day I find someone I like, that there's a better chance I won't disappoint them. Because I'm not sure I know how to love, and so if I'm more

lovable maybe someone will love me and I'll figure it out from there.'

'What the fuck are you talking about?' Kat looked baffled. 'No one loves more than you. You're a love machine, you madwoman.'

'I haven't loved anyone since Ollie. And I don't even know if that was love. It was pretty grim.'

'I notice you're editing Ewan out of this version of your life.'

'I didn't love Ewan. That was a friendship that got a bit confused by me reading too many romances.' She couldn't look Kat in the eye when she said that. Her friend's truth detector was too strong.

'Hmm, that's debatable. But putting Ewan to one side, you're excellent at love. You've loved me for years. And your parents —'

'Parents don't count. Everyone loves their parents.'

'Well, no, they don't, but that's another matter. You love your parents, and Andy, and Ruth and Imogen, and you love Ralph and Bec and their kids. You'd be as broken if something happened to me or Bec or Perce as Bec would be if something happened to Ralph or the kids, or I would be if something happened to George or Medium Fries here.' She patted her bump. 'You're unstoppable at love.'

Now Willa was crying. 'But what if I disappoint someone again, like I disappointed Ewan? He tried to love me but I couldn't love him back, give him what he wanted. He gave up on me. I drove him away. Back to Winter.'

'Don't be silly,' Kat said. 'You disappoint me all the time and vice versa, and we don't stop loving each other. People are allowed to do stupid things and make mistakes, and still be loved. What has made you think that's not the case?'

'I don't know. I'm pretty confused about a lot of things.'

‘You certainly are.’ Kat wrapped her in a tight hug. Willa felt the hard bump separating them. ‘You need to take a step back from all your books and stories and things you’ve been attached to forever, and rules you’ve made for yourself and have a go at just living your life. As it *is*, not as you think you should or you think other people think you should. No more worrying about not wanting a kid. So you don’t want a kid? It’s okay. That doesn’t define you. And it doesn’t mean you have to be alone.’

Willa sank onto the couch. ‘I do love you. So much, Kat. When I saw you at the hospital, after your scare, I was so relieved you were all right that I nearly spewed. I’ve never felt like that before. I’ve never let myself have that depth of feeling with anyone I’ve gone out with. Isn’t that fucked?’

‘It’s not at all fucked. I’m significantly better than anyone you’ve gone out with.’

Willa snort-laughed through her tears. ‘It was so scary. It feels like deep water, a kind of love where you can’t see the bottom.’

Kat nodded. ‘That’s exactly what it’s like. That’s how I feel about George, and Medium Fries. And about you, but not quite as much as them. No offence.’

‘None taken.’

‘It is more frightening, loving like that, but it’s worth it, in my opinion. If you let yourself go deeper than that butterflies-in-your-tummy part, into the bit where it’s murky and cold sometimes, and you’re not really sure which way is up — that’s the good stuff.’

Kat was making falling in love sound appealing, in a sort of extreme-sport, free-diving and cold-water-swimming way. But her taste wasn’t necessarily to be trusted: she also liked West German pottery, George and having a baby.

Willa thought about Ewan. He wasn’t coming back. It still hurt to think that, but it was time she accepted it. She visualised her heart in her chest, a fragile lump, bruised from

the past months. But the heart was only a metaphor for love. To think of it as broken or damaged wasn't helpful. She'd googled enough lately to know that the pain she thought she felt in her chest wasn't really coming from a piece of cardiac muscle, it was just sadness and anxiety, a cascade of biological responses triggered by the emotional insult she'd endured. Whether this pain would harden or soften her, that was the real question, and there was only one way to find out.

She sighed deeply. 'I suppose I'll get myself back on the apps. Are there any new ones? Is there one called Settle? Where you can go to find other people who've more or less given up?'

Kat smiled sympathetically. 'It won't be that bad.'

'They're awful. Do you remember what they're like? They make you feel the same way as when you say a word too many times and it stops making sense. And then you suddenly can't remember if thirsty, or whatever the word is, is a real word, or if you've made it up. If you say the word "thirsty" thirty times, it doesn't seem real. The same goes for men on dating apps. Eventually they stop making sense. You think, are these face-shaped things, with the eyes and the mouth and the teeth, supposed to be attractive to me? Are they real?'

'Thirsty doesn't even seem like a real word if you say it once.'

'No, you're right, that was a bad example. But do you get what I'm saying?'

Kat squeezed her hand. 'I do. You could not do the apps. Try and meet someone the old-fashioned way?'

'Twist my ankle in a storm and see who helps me home?'

'That, or go to a pub, or meet someone through your new job, or take a night class.'

'A night class?' Willa was aghast. 'In what? Might As Well Be Dead For Beginners?'

Kat stood up, pressing her palm into the small of her back like she was her own forklift truck. ‘Oof. I’ve got to go. If I stay here any longer helping you figure out how to meet someone my own someone will have given up on me and left.’

‘Go.’ Willa kissed her. ‘Bye Katty.’ She bent towards her friend’s belly. ‘See you, Medium Fries. Don’t give her any trouble or you’ll have to answer to me,’ she warned the unborn baby.

From the window she watched Kat and George drive off.

As much as she had denied it earlier, there was a grain of truth in what her friends had said about how she viewed her life. She hadn’t really noticed before, because she’d been so bold and defiant about marriage being off the cards, but finding someone — a Happily Ever After — really had been important to her.

Maybe she would try what they’d suggested, to stop seeing her life as a straight linear narrative, with a series of obstacles to overcome before a happy ending. She might instead look at it like something by Virginia Woolf, or Gertrude Stein, allowing her existence to be impressionistic and plotless, focussing more on the distinctive nature of reality. For a few moments she drifted down this stream of thought, before becoming snagged on the idea that while it was all well and good to try not to view life as a romance, basing her existence on the formlessness of a modernist narrative would likely render her unemployable and the sort of person who forgot everyone’s birthdays. There was surely some sort of happy medium.

It was late now but she sat down at the table, opened her laptop and wrote an email accepting the job offer. After she pressed send, she closed the computer and sat in the quiet of her flat, liking herself a tiny bit more than she had when she woke up that day.

Chapter 36

Six months later

Willa walked along King Street, Newtown, hand in hand with Perce, weaving their way around the ambling Saturday afternoon shoppers. Her other hand rested gently on the downy head of the baby strapped to her chest.

A warm breeze tickled the back of her neck, freshly exposed after her recent pixie haircut. Chopping off most of her hair was something she'd wanted to do for years, but she only ever thought of it after a break-up, when it seemed pathetic and ill-advised.

After reading an article on Facebook late one night that contained the shocking revelation that sometimes hair lasted as long as seven years, she'd become appalled that she still had hair from when she was dating Ollie. The next morning she'd taken herself off to a hairdresser recommended by one of her new workmates, and after answering a series of questions to confirm that she was indeed *not* motivated by a recent heartbreak, a man called Damien had agreed to cut off her long brown locks. Watching her hair pool around her feet, she'd felt like a snake crawling out of a too-small skin, a chick hatching from an egg, and Dolores O'Riordan from the Cranberries, all at the same time.

As she paused on the doorstep of Gelato Messina to let Perce go in ahead of her, she dipped her chin and sniffed the tiny soft head. 'You are the sweetest baby that ever I looked on,' she whispered.

Perce took her time poring over the display case, reading out the flavours as if she were being forced to choose her favourite child. The pain in her voice was palpable, and Willa waved several other customers ahead of them while Perce's

agonising decision-making process continued at the pace of a Russian novel.

She looked down again and her heart flooded with love. For six weeks this had been happening and it hadn't yet failed to blow her away. He was perfect. Life was very strange.

‘Can I please have two scoops?’ asked Perce.

‘Always. They don't call me Willa Two Scoops for nothing.’

‘Who calls you Willa Two Scoops?’

‘It's not widely in use yet,’ she admitted. ‘I'm still hopeful it will catch on. Can you help?’

‘Okay, Willa Two Scoops. Thanks. Mum and Dad never let me have two scoops.’

‘That's because, as we have discussed before, your parents are scumbags. Mean old single scoopers.’

‘Will you let Henry have two scoops when he's big enough for ice-cream?’

‘Absolutely. But by then you and I will be having three scoops. He'll never catch us up.’

Perce caught the server's eye. ‘May I please have one scoop of cookies and cream and one scoop of banana, in a cup? Willa, what are you getting?’

Willa put her hand on her stomach and considered her options. Life was short.

‘Two scoops please, in a cup. One of chocolate and the other also of chocolate.’ If it turned out that life was in fact long, like Ruth maintained, she'd do some sit-ups or something.

A stillness in the moving stream of passers-by outside the picture window caught her attention and she glanced at the figure who'd stopped to look in at the ice-cream. It was the angle of his cheekbones, the fall of his hair, that she recognised first, that made her feel like she'd backed into an

electric fence in the rain. Ewan. In the instant between recognising him and thinking it might be better if he didn't see her, he looked up and their eyes met. One second later he looked away, turned back to the street and was gone. She stared at the place where he'd been.

'Willa? Willa.' How long had Perce been saying her name? Willa looked down and Perce pointed to the man in the apron who was patiently holding out her cup of gelato.

'Oh, thanks, sorry.' Flustered, she tried twice to pay with her phone's camera before eventually landing on the correct app. Had Ewan recognised her? He must not have. She did look different now. He would have said something. He wouldn't have seen her and run off. She didn't even know he was in the country. When had he come back? Was Winter out there on King Street too?

She scanned the people around them as they continued their walk. Ewan's hair was shorter than when she'd last seen him. His face had seemed thinner, older. It had only been eight months. Maybe he hadn't changed. Maybe she'd just forgotten.

'Who was that?' asked Perce as they walked.

'Who was what?'

'That man outside the ice-cream shop. He looked at you.'

'You don't miss a trick, do you?'

'Mum says that too. Why was he staring at you?'

'Because I'm extremely beautiful. People find it hard to take their eyes off me.'

'No, he looked like he knew you.'

'I do know that man,' confessed Willa. 'I don't know why I lied. That was silly. His name is Ewan and I used to work with him. And all his brothers and his dad. Do you remember my cousin Imogen? She was meant to marry one of his brothers last year but it didn't work out.'

‘Oh, yeah, because the one she was marrying called her the S-word at their wedding.’

Willa was shocked. ‘How do you know that?’

‘Dad told me. But he wouldn’t tell me what the S-word was.’

‘Quite right too. You don’t need to know. It’s an ugly word that used to just mean an untidy person. Now it means something cruel and stupid and it’s been ruined for messy people. It’s not a useful rude word like the F-word or the SH-word. You know them, right?’

‘Fuck and shit,’ Perce whispered.

‘Correct.’ Willa licked a mound of ice-cream from her plastic spoon. ‘Want a taste?’

‘Not right now. Have you had a husband before?’

‘No. I don’t want one.’

‘What about a boyfriend?’

‘This is my boyfriend.’ She gestured to the baby with her spoon and a drip of chocolate landed on his soft fontanelle. She licked it off.

‘No, a real boyfriend. I mean, I know you don’t have one now, but have you ever had one?’

‘Yes, I have,’ Willa said indignantly. ‘I have had many, many boyfriends.’

‘Was Ewan your boyfriend?’

‘No.’ She ate another mouthful of gelato. ‘Just my friend.’

‘Are you still friends?’

Willa felt a twinge of sadness. ‘Hard to say, Perce. We had a bit of a quarrel. I haven’t seen him for ages.’

‘Do you think he’s mad at you? Is that why he didn’t speak to you just now?’

‘I hope not. I hate it when people are mad at me. But maybe. It would explain why he just disappeared.’

‘What did you do? What did you argue about?’

‘It’s a long story, but I made some mistakes and I think I disappointed him, so he stopped liking me as much. Maybe he stopped liking me at all.’

‘That’s not fair. My teacher last year said mistakes are our friends. You can only make mistakes because you try something hard. It’s all right to get things wrong. You have to, to have a growth mindset.’

‘To have a what?’

‘A growth mindset. My school is obsessed with having a growth mindset.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘If you get something wrong, or you say you can’t do something, you get in trouble and they say, “No, you just can’t do it yet.” They say “yet” a lot.’

‘Huh. That’s quite a nice way of looking at things, I suppose. So is it about keeping on trying, even when you make mistakes?’

‘Yeah. They say mistakes make your brain grow.’

‘That’s why I have a brain as big as a whale’s.’

‘Whales’ brains are smaller than people think.’

‘See? Another mistake!’

Perce didn’t answer, she just leaned over and kissed the baby’s pudgy hand, with its wonderful inverted knuckles.

Willa thought about what the child had said. ‘Perce, you can make mistakes other ways than trying things that are hard. Sometimes you can make a mistake by not trying something at all.’

Where King Street met Australia Street they turned off past the stalls of vintage clothes outside the neighbourhood centre and crossed the road after the police station. Willa paused to look up at the sign outside Kat and George’s shop.

And her shop too, technically, though it was more theirs. She only had a little room of books. The sign looked good. Perce looked up too.

‘*Furnish Me Tomorrow*,’ she read. ‘That’s a weird name. Why is it called that?’

‘Do you know who Shakespeare is?’

‘Sort of,’ said Perce. ‘The *Romeo and Juliet* guy?’

‘Him. He wrote a lot of plays other than that, and one of them is very special to me. Well, the movie of the play is. It’s called *Much Ado About Nothing*, and your mum and Kat have always made fun of me about it. Kat bet me I couldn’t come up with a name for the shop from *Much Ado*. Anyway, “Furnish Me Tomorrow” is a phrase from the play.’

‘What did you win?’

‘That. The naming rights to the shop. I didn’t think she’d go through with it, but actually we all like it. It works.’

A melodic tinkling welcomed them when they pushed open the door. The antique shop bell was Willa’s shop-warming gift to George and Kat, and their gift to her — a neon sign that said *Happy Endings* above an arrow, salvaged from a massage parlour that closed down — glowed from beside the doorway to the tiny side room where she sold books. At their entrance, Billy Jowl woke and rose from the bottom step and wandered over to greet them.

Willa and Perce chose two armchairs and sat in one of the little pretend living-room scenes that George had set up in the window. She unclipped the baby from the carrier and held him in the crook of her arm. He stayed asleep, full of the large bottle he’d had before they left to get gelato. The dog flopped down at her feet.

They began one of their favourite games: furnishing their imaginary house together.

‘Can we have that lamp?’ Perce pointed to a purple mid-century Italian glass number.

‘Of course we can,’ Willa said. ‘Why wouldn’t we? Money is no object in our new house.’

‘The twins would break it.’

Willa chewed her lip thoughtfully. ‘Let’s have it anyway. We deserve beautiful things, even if there’s a risk of them getting smashed by Thing 1 and Thing 2.’

‘There’s also this,’ said George, coming in from the back room. He opened his hand to show Perce a lump of something that looked like Blu Tack. ‘It’s called Quakehold. You can use it to stick breakable things to the surface you want them to stay on. Be careful of my chairs with that ice-cream.’

‘She’s always careful,’ Willa said.

‘I meant you,’ he told her pointedly and Perce snorted.

‘Rude,’ said Willa, and surreptitiously wiped a drop of chocolate off the wooden chair arm with her fingertip. ‘Is Kat awake?’

‘Yeah, she just woke up.’

‘Here,’ she said, passing the baby to him. ‘Take this guy up for a cuddle.’

George kissed Henry’s forehead as he carried him from the room.

Willa sat back in her chair and returned to the almost-melted dregs of her ice-cream. ‘So,’ she said to Perce. ‘Where is this house of ours going to be? Rome? Kenya? Alaska?’

Perce said nothing but inclined her head slightly towards the window. Willa followed her gaze, and there on the footpath outside, wearing jeans and a faded Deus ex Machina T-shirt that shouldn’t have made him look a tenth as good as it did, was Ewan.

Chapter 37

Willa waited a second to allow her feelings to load, expecting a wave of excitement, or terror, or sadness. She felt only an odd sense of pause, as if all her emotions were holding their breath. She met his gaze and waited to see if he'd acknowledge her or run off again.

He broke into a smile, and she smiled back. She pointed to the door, and haltingly, like a packet of chips that needed an extra bump to free it from a vending machine slot, he came in. The bell rang. He closed the door, respecting the *Air conditioning* sign George had posted. He'd put it there to replace the one Willa made that said *We're not paying to air condition the entire suburb. Shut the door.*

Perce got up from her chair and discreetly slipped upstairs, raising her eyebrows at Willa as she went.

Willa looked at Ewan. 'Hi,' she said, standing up and moving from the window display to the shop floor.

'Hi. I was just passing, and I saw you through the window there.'

'I know, I saw you too. We just did an awkward amount of staring. Did you follow me from Gelato Messina?'

He laughed nervously. 'Sorry. I should have come in then and said hi. I was surprised, that's all. Surprised to see you.' Billy Jowl wandered over to him and sniffed his jeans. Ewan bent down and ruffled his head.

'Well, likewise. It's been a while. How are you?'

'Good, fine, can't complain. Looks like you've been busy.'

'Me? Yeah, there have been a few changes.'

‘I saw,’ he said. ‘Big changes.’

‘Yeah, biggish.’ She ran her hands through her cropped hair.

‘But good changes? You’re happy?’

It had been a long time since anyone had asked Willa that question, and she took a moment to consider her answer. She wasn’t where she imagined she’d be at her age. Her life looked different from how she’d thought it would. It was close to unrecognisable from her life a year ago. But it was a good life. It was a life rich in all the things that mattered: people, opportunities, ice-cream, babies, haircuts, books. Mistakes. Perce’s teacher would say it was rich in mistakes. ‘Yeah, I am. I am happy. I mean, life’s full-on right now, but mostly in a good way. Work’s good.’

‘You’re still working?’ He sounded surprised.

She frowned. ‘Yep. Still working. Some of us have to: it’s not a cheap place to live, Sydney.’ She paused. ‘How are things with you and the family?’

‘The family are all right. I guess. Dougal’s working as a management consultant. He has a girlfriend now: another rock climber. And the twins . . . to be honest I haven’t seen much of them for quite a while.’

‘Oh right, because you’ve been in America.’

‘I have. How did you know?’

Willa panicked. How embarrassing to admit that despite defiantly unfollowing and defriending every member of the Smith family, she still, when a couple of margaritas deep, had a tendency to look at Fiona’s Instagram page from a private browser. The truth, she thought. Always the best line of defence.

‘I stalk your mother on social,’ she said boldly. ‘It’s part of my counselling homework. My therapist calls it exposure therapy.’

He looked unsure if she was joking. ‘Um, right. Well, yes, I did go back.’

‘And was that a success?’

‘Depends on your definition of success.’

Why couldn’t she just come out and ask? Surely he knew she was asking about Winter: if she had been the one for him all along. Why did he have such a weird look on his face, half wistful, half bitter? Was he going to mention her text message, the one she sent the night she realised he’d gone back to America? Half of her wanted him to at least acknowledge how brave she’d been to send it, while the other half wanted it never to be brought up. It had been a bit cringe, sending him that line from *Much Ado*, where Beatrice says to Benedick, ‘I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.’ That was all she’d written. And he’d ignored it.

‘I’m glad you changed your mind, Willa. For the right person, whoever he is. It looks like you’re a beautiful mum.’ He pointed to the baby carrier now only attached to her by the waist strap, hanging down like the front of a pair of overalls.

Willa felt every muscle in her face go slack. ‘Ewan, you don’t think that baby is mine, do you?’

Embarrassment and confusion flashed across his face, leaving only a furrowed brow in their wake. ‘It’s not?’

She shook her head. ‘That’s Kat and George’s son, Henry.’

He broke into a relieved grin. ‘Oh. I didn’t know they’d had a baby. That’s great. Amazing. I thought he was yours because you looked so comfortable carrying him, like a natural.’

‘I’m a hell of a lot more comfortable carrying him than Kat. He broke her pelvis on the way out, and then when he was three weeks old she had a massive postpartum haemorrhage and we all thought she was going to die. I’ve been helping them out, a lot. And despite both attempting to murder my best friend and being a baby, which is two strikes against him, I really love him.’

‘When did all this happen?’

‘A few weeks ago. I thought you knew. Didn’t Dougal tell you? I started a crowdfund to try to get enough cash for George to take time off and for all the physio costs and stuff, and Dougal made a very generous contribution. I assumed he’d have mentioned it.’

‘He never said anything,’ said Ewan. ‘So, you’re still in touch with Dougal.’

The smallest hint of jealousy had crept into his voice, startling

Willa.

‘Not really. I unfollowed you all but he was still following me. I hadn’t heard from him until then.’

He didn’t answer, and the shop became humid with things unsaid. A storm needed to break, but all Willa could muster was a drizzle of small talk. ‘What are you doing for work now? Have you started another imaginary business with your brothers?’

He gave her a little smile. ‘I’m in marmalade these days.’

‘What does that mean? Do you sell it at a market or something?’

‘A bit bigger than a market. I’ve started a social enterprise where I’m employing refugees to make marmalade, and we sell it to cafes, and online. I set it up remotely when I was away. It was complicated to do from overseas, so I’m back now to scale it up in a more hands-on way.’

‘Clever,’ she said. ‘Refugees and marmalade. Like Paddington Bear.’ It gladdened her heart that he’d found his own peculiar, sticky niche in the world. ‘My mum will be happy she can get her hands on your marmalade again. She’s missed it.’

‘Have you missed it?’

‘I’ve moved on to peanut butter on my toast,’ Willa told him airily. ‘I’m over marmalade. Which is a good thing because there’s never any in the cupboard at my new work.’

‘Where are you working?’

‘A publisher. I work in the non-fiction publishing team, with actual colleagues and everything. I’ve ended my addiction to romances and marmalade.’

‘Cold turkey?’

‘I’m still addicted to cold turkey.’

He guffawed at her joke, and all the missing she’d been pretending she didn’t feel burst out of her heart like an extended family at a surprise party. She let only a flicker of a grin show.

‘Really though, you’re done with romance novels?’

‘Well,’ she admitted, ‘I don’t publish them right now, but I do sell some of them. Second-hand. In here.’ She turned and pointed to the side room. ‘I’ve curated a collection of love stories. Some are traditional romances, but others are just books I love, or books about people who love things. And one day I’ll publish them again. When the time is right.’

From upstairs came George’s voice. ‘Willa? Can I leave Henry with you and Perce for a bit? I need to collect a sofa.’ His footsteps clattered down the wooden stairs, followed by Perce’s lighter tread.

‘Oh sorry,’ he said, seeing she wasn’t alone. ‘Didn’t realise there was a customer. Are you finding everything okay?’

‘George, you remember Ewan. Ewan Smith?’ Willa reminded him.

‘Of course. Hi!’ George passed her the baby and shook Ewan’s hand. ‘Good to see you.’

‘Congratulations,’ said Ewan. ‘Sorry to hear Kat’s not been well.’

‘Yeah, thanks. It’s been a bit dramatic, but things are looking up. At least this guy’s fine, and we have the two best nannies on the planet.’ Perce reddened with pride. ‘Willa, he’s just had another massive bottle so he might go full Vesuvius on you.’

‘I tried to burp him but he only did a little one,’ added Perce.

‘He’s so uncooperative.’ Willa rolled her eyes at Perce. ‘You really need to train him better.’

Perce smiled.

George looked at Willa, then Ewan, and back at Willa again. ‘Perce, can I borrow your muscles for this sofa? Willa, can you cope with the baby if I take Perce with me? It’s only in Annandale; we won’t be long.’

‘Sure,’ she said, shifting Henry up onto her shoulder and patting him on the back. George put his arm around Perce and ushered her out the front door, which tinkled as it closed behind them. The shop was silent again, except for the tiny snuffles coming from Henry, and the gurgles of his stomach.

‘Shit, Willa,’ said Ewan. ‘I can’t believe that happened to Kat.’

‘No kidding. It’s been pretty hectic. In fact, it was the most frightening thing I’ve ever been through. We nearly lost her. I nearly didn’t have Kat any more.’ Willa shook her head. It was still panic-inducing to consider how close they’d come. She squeezed Henry.

‘How did you think this was my baby? It’s only been eight months since you saw me.’

Ewan shrugged. ‘Maybe you were already pregnant when I left. I thought that could have been why you quit.’

‘Yeah, because single pregnant women are so employable. I left Gladstone and Smith because you shamed me into it. Don’t get me wrong: I’m glad you did. I needed to get out of

there and I was just being a wuss about it. It wasn't because I was secretly pregnant.'

'I realise that now.'

Willa wasn't ready to let this go. 'In your weird brain, who did you imagine had fathered my baby?'

'I don't know,' he said, tetchily. 'You were always dating. Maybe the submarine man?'

'What submarine man?'

'There was more than one?'

A vague recollection wafted into Willa's head of an evening in the office kitchen, back before everything went wrong. 'That guy was made up.'

'Were you only dating made-up people?'

'No, many were real. But that one was pretend.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. It was after Winter left, and you were hooking up with that pretty teacher. Imogen was engaged. I felt embarrassed that for years I hadn't even had a proper boyfriend, let alone been married. Honestly, don't read too much into it.'

'But you always said you didn't want to be married.'

'I never said I didn't want a partner.'

For a moment they were silent.

'Enough about what I haven't been doing, tell me about you!' She forced lightness into her voice. 'How was America?'

'Complicated.'

What wasn't he telling her?

'Ewan,' she said, and he looked straight into her eyes. 'Just tell me.'

He took a deep breath. 'I have a kid.'

Willa's chest tightened. She'd been right to keep the armour around her heart. It made sense now, why he'd thought she had been pregnant. Because that's what had happened to him. Winter must have been pregnant when she left. Fuck, what a mess. No wonder he'd ignored her embarrassing declaration of love.

'So, I guess you didn't need that divorce after all. That's wonderful. Did you have a boy or a girl? How's Winter doing?'

'He isn't Winter's. She and I got divorced. Grayson Presley won her back.'

This was confusing. 'Then congratulations to you and whoever your baby's mother is. I know you always wanted a baby.'

'No, I don't have a baby.'

She couldn't stand it any longer. 'Ewan, do you have a head injury? Will you please just explain in words of one syllable what the fuck you're going on about? Do you have a baby or not?'

'Can we sit down?'

She waved at the room. 'Nothing but places to sit. Take your pick.'

He moved to a flocked 1940s club lounge and patted the seat beside him. Billy Jowl followed him and lay on Ewan's right foot. Reluctantly Willa joined them, still holding Henry over her shoulder and patting his back.

'It turns out,' Ewan said, 'that I have a teenage son. He's nineteen.'

Henry let out a resounding belch.

'I beg your pardon. Nineteen?' echoed Willa. 'But you're only thirty-six.'

'His mother was my girlfriend when I was in Year Twelve. She was a French exchange student.'

Willa opened her mouth, then stopped.

‘What?’ prompted Ewan. ‘What were you going to say?’

‘Nothing.’ She shook her head. ‘Go on.’

‘Yes you were: what was it?’

‘*Ooh la la,*’ she muttered.

He started to laugh. ‘Oh my god, I’ve missed you. I have really, really missed you, Willa.’

‘Really?’

‘Of course really.’

‘Oh.’ She nodded and steeled herself. ‘Did you . . . did you ever get a text from me? Around the time you left the country without saying goodbye, after I turned you down? Like, the sort of really embarrassing text a person might wish they had never sent?’

He nodded. ‘I got it. It’s what kept me going this whole time, while I was tracking down Winter to arrange the divorce, and flying to France to meet Roland.’

‘Didn’t you think maybe it would be a good idea to, oh I don’t know, reply? Even give it a thumbs up or a thumbs down?’ She couldn’t bring herself to look at him, so she lowered the baby to her lap, lying him down on her thighs. She held Henry’s little hands and stared hard at his soft face.

‘I wanted to sort things out. I was going to reply once the divorce was sorted, but then I got the email about Roland from Nathalie — she was the exchange student —’

‘Thanks,’ Willa said dryly. ‘I got that from context clues.’

‘— and I found out she’d been pregnant when she left Australia. She had Roland and she was scared I’d try to make her move to Australia with him or something, so she waited until he was eighteen to tell him about me, and then he chose to get in touch. I flew to France when I found out, and we’ve been getting to know each other. And divorces are a massive ball-ache. Ten out of ten do not recommend. They take ages. I

didn't want to come back until there was nothing in our way, no reason for us not to be together.'

A sensation like sugar melting began in Willa's stomach. She tried to ignore it and focus instead on feeling indignant. 'Weren't you worried I'd have been snapped up? You're very sure of yourself.'

'Have you been snapped up?'

'I've been dating,' she told him coolly.

'Anyone serious?'

'Not really. I went back on the apps a couple of months ago. This time I've been more specific and honest. It says in my bio that I'm child-free by choice. It's brought a whole new category of men into my life. Mostly divorced fifty-five-year-olds with kids at uni, unfortunately, but at least I'm not running up against the baby conversation very often.' She wondered if he'd remember an old joke of theirs, from back before he married Winter, when they used to regale each other with their dating adventures. 'The older ones are great in the sack.'

He batted back their punchline. 'Yeah, but who wants to do it in a sack?'

She slowly turned her head and met his gaze.

'Do you think you'd have room in your schedule for a drink with me, sometime?' he asked tentatively.

Willa looked at his face, beautiful and earnest, and forced herself to say what she wished with all her might she didn't still have to say. 'Just as friends? Because we still don't want the same things. You want babies and marriage. I truly don't. I do want love though and I did fall in love with you. I loved your bravery when you said you loved me. I wasn't brave then, and I know I disappointed you, but I am braver now. And, I think, less disappointing, just generally. We were almost right for each other. It kills me how close we came to being right. But now I know what to look for. Now when I meet people I mentally hold up a template of you and I see if

they will fit it. But without the bit that wants babies. And preferably not related to your family in any way.'

His eyes were glistening. 'Willa, I want you more than anything or anyone. You said you were in love with me too — at least you texted me a line from *Much Ado About Nothing*, which I'm sure was your way of saying that's how you felt. If you think there's a chance you could feel like that again, would you take it? Because I already have a child. He's not a baby, but I can still try to be a parent in his life, in some way.'

Could this really be happening? It was almost Shakespearean: this sudden appearance of Ewan's son, the removal of the one obstacle keeping them apart. She laughed out loud at the absurdity of the situation.

But this wasn't a Shakespearean comedy: it was her life. She stopped laughing and looked solemnly at Ewan's beautiful face. 'Are you sure? As you say, a grown son isn't the same as being there from the start and raising him. Are you absolutely sure you can live without that?'

'Please, Willa, stop trying to find reasons not to love me.'

A crow landed on the footpath outside beside a dropped sausage roll fragment. It cawed loudly, waking Billy Jowl, who leaped up and barked furiously at the window. The baby threw his arms out like a startled starfish but didn't cry.

'I'm not finding reasons not to love you. I just don't want to ignore the fact that you've always wanted a baby and I always haven't.'

'I don't want a hypothetical baby as much as I want to wake up next to you every day for the rest of my life.'

'Every day? For the rest of your life? That might be a long time.'

'I'm aware of that. Think of all those books you published. All those happy endings. Don't you want one?'

'But they're not real, Ewan,' she said. 'They're fantasies. There's no Happily Ever After. If there were, the people who

buy those books, one after another, over and over, they wouldn't need them, would they? They'd be off living the happy endings. Romance novels are aspirational.'

'Well,' he suggested, 'maybe we could aim for "happily on an ongoing basis to be reviewed when either party requests, and with allowances for periods, up to one week, of unhappiness"?''

Willa shook her head. 'We were friends for so long. If we were meant to be more than that, it would have happened by now. Wouldn't it? How do you know we're not just reading too much into a friendship? When does it ever work, transitioning from friends to —'

He reached for her hand and held it in both of his. The thrill that ran through her answered her question. 'To lovers?'

She swallowed hard. 'If anything were to happen with us, and I'm not saying it will, it would only be with a firm understanding that no one is to use the term "lovers".'

'Then let me rephrase that. I think what we have here is a significant friendship. On par with what you have with Kat, and Bec, but with more . . . pants business involved.' He looked worried. 'Am I wrong? About the pants business?'

'No,' she said. 'You are not wrong. There is a significant pants element to whatever this is.' He leaned in and kissed her, his hand cupping her face, his lips soft and warm, and she felt relief and love and his hunger for her. The pants business was definitely not theoretical. She wanted to never stop kissing him. She wanted him to undress her right there on the shop floor. Her brain fizzed with lust, but it was lighting up with something else too, a feeling she didn't usually associate with these sorts of activities. It was the steady glow of deep happiness. These were entirely inappropriate feelings to be entertaining while holding a six-week-old baby.

She pulled away and looked at him. They were both breathing like they'd run for a bus. 'I'm going to return this

baby to his mother. Can you wait for me, right here? Don't leave the country again.'

'I'm not going anywhere.'

She carried Henry upstairs and into the bedroom where Kat was lying at a strange angle, her head off the pillow and pointing towards the door.

'What are you doing?' Willa asked. 'Why are you lying like that?'

'I'm trying to hear what is going on down there,' Kat hissed. 'Would it kill you two to speak up a bit?'

Willa grinned and helped reposition her friend more comfortably. 'So much is going on down there. I can't even tell you.' She handed Henry to Kat.

'You *can* even tell me,' begged Kat. 'Give me the very abridged version and then get back down there. One sentence.'

'He loves me.'

Tears sprang into Kat's eyes. 'And in one more sentence, can you tell me you're going to accept his love, and not find any more reasons to make life harder than it has to be?'

'I will.'

For a moment more, they held each other's gaze, before Willa turned and ran back down the stairs.

* * *

Ewan was standing now, and she went straight into his embrace. Finally she paused for a breath. 'What happens when the sizzling pants business wears off?' she asked, frowning slightly.

'I can't see that happening,' he said, leaning back in to drop gentle kisses down her neck and along her collarbone, but she stopped him with a hand on his chest.

'That's because we're both currently overcome by pants business. But that might not last. Then what happens? Will

you ever be able to see me just as your friend again?’

‘I don’t think we’re friends at all any more,’ he said, his face serious now. ‘We haven’t kept in touch since we stopped being workmates. I mean, I ignored your last text for eight months. That’s not how a friend behaves.’

‘No,’ she said, a smile slowly creeping across her face. ‘And you didn’t say hi when you saw me in Gelato Messina earlier. What kind of friend does that?’

‘A terrible friend.’

‘The worst friend ever.’

He pulled her a little closer. ‘See? We haven’t got a friendship to ruin.’

She raised her hand to his face and ran her forefinger across the light stubble on his jaw.

‘Willa,’ he whispered.

Her name was a question and she answered it with a kiss.

Acknowledgements

Gratitude's a funny thing. I never thought I would be grateful to the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic, but nothing could have done a better job of reminding me how much I love writing fiction than those months of trying to be a primary school teacher instead. Writing this book was significantly more fun than trying to navigate Google Classroom.

Much more straightforward thanks, huge and heartfelt, are due to my wonderful editor and friend, Kate O'Donnell. Katie brings such care, energy, sensitivity and wisdom to her work and makes me a better and more courageous writer. I am terrifically lucky to know and work with her.

Many thanks also to my brilliant publisher, Anna Valdinger, for her patience and kindness when I decided to write a romcom during a time when it felt like life contained very little rom or com, and for her instincts for what the story needed to make it sing. Her team, including editor Rachel Cramp and proofreader Pam Dunne, were clever, skilled, swift and professional, and I'm very grateful to them. Thanks also to Hazel Lam for yet another gorgeous cover, and to Kate Butler, Lucy Inglis and the media, marketing and sales teams at HarperCollins Australia.

A stroke of great fortune led me to my agent, Pippa Masson, just before I started writing this book, and I thank her and the team at Curtis Brown Australia for their unflagging enthusiasm and hard work on my behalf.

A special thank you to the friends and family who read drafts of this book, or said they did: Drew Truslove, Carol Dettmann, Peter Dettmann, Jessica Tory, Ellie Parker, Ariela Bard, Ella Ward and Kimberley Allsopp. Your feedback was

always valuable and insightful, or would have been if you'd read it.

My parents, Nick and Carol, and my brothers, Sam and Pete, were, as always, my rocks: thank you, and I love you, and you should all get more kittens.

More general thanks are due to the rest of my friends and family, who have supported me by providing love and good humour, calming words, meals and plot ideas, and (the great majority of them) by not dying. You're the best. Please move back to Sydney/closer to my house as applicable.

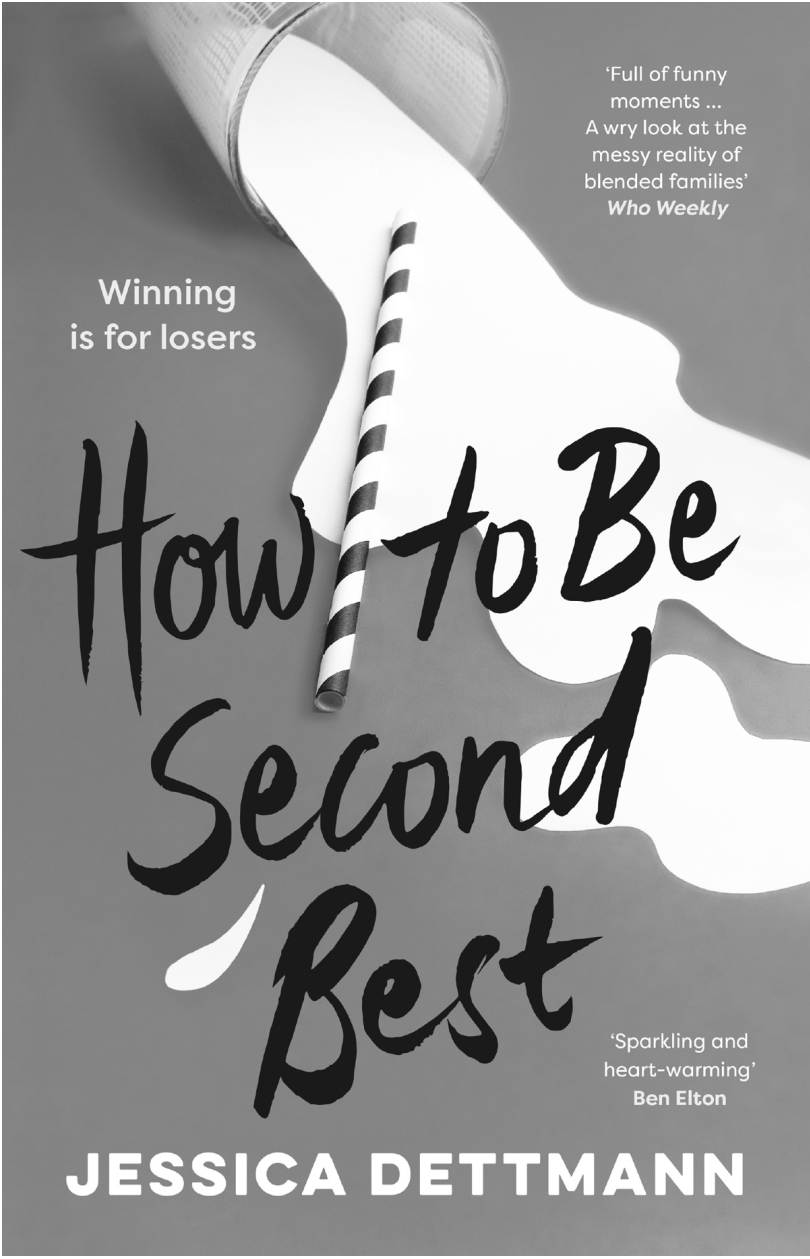
Thank you to my friend Steve Murdoch for his generous donation to the Twitter fundraiser #AuthorsForFireys during the 2020 bushfires. His winning bid won him a character in the book named after him, and I threw in a freebie for his mother Rosalind.

Thanks to all the writers, booksellers and readers who have championed my books by giving me cover quotes, reviews and recommendations: you are wonderful and generous and the writing community of Australia is as strong as it is because of you. Thanks especially to Sally Hepworth, Tim Minchin, Mia Freedman, Tori Haschka, Holly Wainwright, Ben Elton and Kathy Lette.

The article about Mosman Willa refers to is Elias Greig's 'The Whale Ghosts' (*Overland*, Issue 244, Spring 2021). I urge everyone to read this. It's brilliant.

Book acknowledgements are nearly always full of thanks, but in this case I also want to acknowledge a regret: that my darling friend Aimée Halley did not live to read this, or any of my books. We were together when we saw *Much Ado About Nothing* for the first time, on the big screen at Greater Union cinema in Mosman in 1993, and I hope she would have loved this book as much as she loved that movie. Thanks to William Shakespeare, Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson too, for the film. Imagine how grim this book would have been if you'd made *Titus Andronicus* instead.

Finally, to my dearest Drew, April and Teddy: thank you for always supporting me in doing what I love, even when I don't appear to love what I do. It's complicated, and you guys get it. I am teaching you resilience. Oceans of love to you, always.



Winning
is for losers

How to Be Second Best

'Full of funny
moments ...
A wry look at the
messy reality of
blended families'
Who Weekly

'Sparkling and
heart-warming'
Ben Elton

JESSICA DETTMANN

How to Be Second Best

A hilarious and heartwarming novel that captures the dramas, delights and delirium of modern family life.

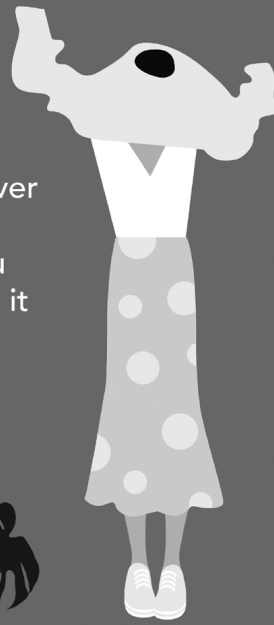
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Family is forever
and there's
nothing you
can do about it



'A totally
engaging and
disarmingly
charming writer'
KATHY LETTE

This Has Been Absolutely Lovely

JESSICA DETTMANN

This Has Been Absolutely Lovely

Family is forever, and there's nothing you can do about it.

Molly's a millennial home organiser about to have her first baby. Obviously her mum, Annie, will help with the childcare.

Everyone else's parents are doing it.

But Annie's dreams of music stardom have been on hold for thirty-five years, paused by childbirth then buried under her responsibilities as a mother, wage earner, wife, and only child of ailing parents. Finally, she can taste freedom.

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This Has Been Absolutely Lovely is a story about growing up and giving in, of parents and children, of hope and failure, of bravery and defied expectation, and whether it is ever too late to try again.

'Dettmann nails the funny, sad and bizarre nuances of family life in this gripping novel that will appeal to fans of Liane Moriarty, Jojo Moyes and Marian Keyes' — Sally Hepworth

Without Further Ado Sample Book Club Questions

1. Willa is accused by her friends of seeing her life like a story. Is this a reasonable accusation? Do you think this is something people inevitably do?
2. Willa's attitude to the movie *Much Ado About Nothing* changes a lot during the year or so over which the book is set. Why? Did your attitude to the movie change as you read this book?
3. What was your favourite movie or book at sixteen, and can you see any ways it has influenced your life?
4. How does Imogen's experience as a young woman compare to Hero's? How much has or hasn't changed in attitudes to women since Shakespeare's time?
5. Did Ewan ever really love Winter? If not, is that why she left him?
6. To what extent is class a factor in how the Smiths react to what happens to Imogen? Do you think their wealth insulates them from consequences?
7. Gladstone and Fiona see their children through rose-tinted glasses. Is this universal for parents or does their wealth impact this?
8. Why is Willa's desire to be child-free so difficult for her and those around her?
9. Which character did you dislike the most and why?
10. Who is the best character in this book and why is it Ruth?
11. There is no way to make wedding style truly timeless. Discuss.
12. If you could run a business with no regard for whether or not it made any money, what would it be?

About the Author



JESSICA DETTMANN is the author of two other novels, *How To Be Second Best* and *This Has Been Absolutely Lovely*, and one children's book, *There's No Such Book*. She previously worked as a book editor and her blog, *Life With Gusto*, turned a sharp but affectionate eye on modern parenthood. She lives in Sydney with her family.

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‘Has a natural knack for humour’ Better Reading

‘Jessica Dettmann has a knack for combining family drama, biting wit and unexpected twists and turns’ Mamamia

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‘Sharp and witty. An absolutely delightful, funny and touching read’ Nicola Moriarty

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How to Be Second Best

This Has Been Absolutely Lovely

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This book was written on the traditional lands of the Wodi Wodi and Cammeraygal peoples, and set on the lands of the Wodi Wodi, Cammeraygal and Gadigal peoples. I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of these lands — the original storytellers — and recognise their ongoing connection to the land, water and community. I pay my respects to Elders past and present.

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First published in Australia in 2023

by HarperCollinsPublishers Australia Pty Limited

Gadigal Country

Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000

ABN 36 009 913 517

harpercollins.com.au

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ISBN 978 1 4607 6096 3 (paperback)

ISBN 978 1 4607 1406 5 (ebook)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

Cover design by Hazel Lam, HarperCollins Design Studio

Cover images by shutterstock.com

Author photograph by Sally Flegg