



Summer Daze

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Georgina Penney &
Vanessa Stubbs*

Six bite-size chick lit treats!

SUMMER DAZE



SIX BITE-SIZE CHICK LIT TREATS

CARLA CARUSO, SARAH BELLE, LAURA GREAVES,
GEORGINA PENNEY, VANESSA STUBBS & SAMANTHA
BOND

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BOOK BOYFRIEND BY CARLA
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BOOK BOYFRIEND

CARLA CARUSO

Two whole weeks of summer stretched out luxuriously before Laila Leighton. A fortnight of languid days to fill however she liked. She virtually skipped along the concrete path that Saturday morning in February, her ponytail and calico bag swinging and her destination in sight.

A pair of seagulls squabbled to her left — so very Aussie — and the sun's rays did a good job of trying to penetrate her sunscreen-coated, freckled arms. Nearby a creek babbled. This summer was already shaping up to be a huge improvement on last year's.

She knew exactly what she wanted to do with her three-hundred-and-thirty-odd hours off work from the printing company. And her vision didn't involve a surfboard or a murder of mates like it would for her younger brother. Living near the beach had had little impact on her.

Laila was just metres from the seventies-era, flat-roofed building in her line of vision now. The way the sun hit its apricot bricks reminded her of her hair hue. (Another area where she and her brother differed: he'd inherited their mum's blonde, blue-eyed, olive-skinned genes.)

Automatic glass doors whooshed open for Laila's arrival, blasting her with artificially chilled air. She entered, pausing for a moment on the turquoise patterned carpet, listening to the ping of barcode scanners, the clatter of keyboards, the muted chatter. She instantly felt at home.

Her local library in the 'burbs (its location made her think about

the Tom Hanks film of the same name, but she digressed...) *Books*. Much maligned chick-lit in particular.

That was how she intended to spend her two glorious weeks of summer, guilt-free (sometimes while sweating it out on her dad's exercise bike so she didn't turn into a gooey marshmallow). Devouring all the comfort reads she never had time for during the working year, immersing herself in fictional worlds where happy endings were a given and any jerks got their comeuppance. Retro Sophie Kinsella, Maggie Alderson, Cecelia Ahern, Marian Keyes ... and the odd Tom Hanks/Meg Ryan movie when her eyes tired, but only from the eighties or nineties.

Sweet Jesus, did her lady parts actually tingle, just thinking about all the book candy? It had been so long for such feelings, it was hard to be sur—

‘Lai-Lai! I wondered how long it'd be before you showed up.’

Laila's best friend from primary school stood in her path, hands on hips that were scrawny despite subsisting on doughnut-topped milkshakes and sprinkles-laden pancakes. Pinkie was the antithesis of how a librarian — and someone with her nickname — should look. She'd been a princess girl as a kid (hence, the nickname), but now favoured black, her fringed bob included, plus vintage knot headbands and unconventional nail polish shades. Her real name was Alice, but that didn't suit her either. She liked being a librarian, as she said, because cataloguing appealed to her anal retentive side and she got first dibs on any new graphic novels out.

‘Hello! Seen anything good being returned?’ Laila could hear the childlike hope in her own voice.

‘Our definition of “good” is a little different, remember? But I did spy a few things coming through earlier that *you* might like.’

Laila followed Pinkie to the help desk. Pinkie waved at an old woman with a lavender rinse leaving the bank of self-service machines. ‘Hi, Mrs Benedict.’

‘Morning, Pinkie,’ the woman said primly, before scurrying away, a stash of paperbacks tucked under a bingo-winged arm.

Pinkie quietly chuckled, whispering to Laila, ‘Ever since the library went self-service, Mrs B’s been borrowing Mills & Boons by the truck-load. Though when she had to face us, it was all intelligent book club-type novels. I like to let her know I haven’t missed a trick.’

Laila pulled a face, joking, ‘You’re terrible, Muriel.’

Truth was she could have done with the self-service counters being around when Danny deserted her. Who wanted to shuffle forwards in the queue with titles like *Who Am I Without You?* and *You Can Heal Your Heart* and try to keep their chin up? But anyway, that was last summer.

Pinkie showed Laila the gems she’d unearthed, all with appropriately pink, sparkly covers (her inner princess must have had a radar for them). Only one book Laila had tried before and passed on, but the rest added a comforting weight to her library bag. She was off to a cracking start.

Seemingly hours later, Laila emerged from the rows of shelves, drunk on the book candy she’d discovered and the scent of well-read pages. She always put a few titles on reserve, but also adored treasure-hunting direct from the shelves. Laila buzzed the books through, feeling like a fisherman tallying up the day’s massive catch.

Just one book couldn’t fit in her bag — her only trashy beach read, Jackie Collins’ *Hollywood Wives: The New Generation*. She’d added it in to mix things up. She hugged the hardcover leopard-print tome to her chest, looking forward to lying on the library’s emerald-green grass, her nose in a book, until Pinkie’s lunch break rolled around.

With a spring in her step, Laila headed for the security gates. A tall, skinny guy with light brown, wavy hair to his shoulders, was already strolling through. Even from behind he looked too cool for school with his battered skateboard under one arm, grey tee, black skinny jeans,

and haversack. She trailed behind him. Maybe he'd come in needing directions to the nearest second-hand music store.

The dry heat and traffic noise hit Laila as soon as she stepped outside, *Hollywood Wives* growing sweaty in the crooks of her arms. Not wanting to look like she was stalking Mr Too Cool, she slowed her steps as he threw down his board — how else *would* he get around? — and readjusted the bag on his back.

Just as he was about to climb on-board, he glanced back. And he didn't look through her with his dark chocolate eyes, as expected, but seemingly straight into her soul. The amalgamation of his curved, questioning eyebrows, full lips and goateed jaw almost took her breath away.

If only this wasn't real life, and she was his type.

Turning away again, the guy jumped on his board and took off with the ease of someone used to being endlessly cool and coordinated. She tried to avert her gaze as he sailed over the creek's bridge.

Shit. Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she'd seen something tumble from his half-undone haversack. She glanced up again. Yes, something paper-like was lying on the wooden planks. But Mr Too Cool kept going, oblivious, disappearing across the main road. What could he have dropped? Handwritten lyrics to the world's next biggest song?

Curiosity — and guilt — got the better of her. Darting looks around her, certain she didn't have any onlookers, she headed for the bridge.

Well, her guess hadn't been completely off the mark. A rolled-up copy of *Rolling Stone* magazine was slowly unfurling on the wood. Laila shifted *Hollywood Wives* under one arm to pick it up, Miley Cyrus licking her own shoulder on the glossy's cover (as you do). As Laila stood back up, a small rectangle of cream paper fluttered from the pages.

A library receipt. Brilliant! She could return the mag and never

have to think about the guy's dark chocolate eyes again.

She bent again to grasp the silky-soft scrap of paper and glanced at the list of things he'd borrowed, smugly predicting all CDs, DVDs and large print books. Though she really should have been impressed he had a library card at all.

Danny hadn't.

Then her heart stopped... *Grumpy Cat: A Grumpy Book* (Mr Too Cool was a cat person!), *Turner & Hooch* on DVD (a Tom Hanks fave of hers, even with the slobbering dog), a vegetarian cookbook (she'd given up meat two years ago), a volume of classic love poems (hello!), and the *Rolling Stone*. Her gaze flicked up to his name. 'Lester, Andy'. Well, that in reverse. Even his name wasn't as cool as predicted. She was sure he'd be called Dashiell or Stellan or something.

On paper, he was her perfect man. Unlike Danny.

Her other half. Just with better fashion sense.

She shoved the receipt in a pocket of her cargo pants and nearly fell over her feet to get back to the library, barely noticing her bag strap cutting into her shoulder now.

Pinkie, re-shelving books in the young adult section, assessed Laila with an arched eyebrow as she approached. Well, Laila *imagined* her friend's brow was arched at least, behind her impenetrable fringe.

'Forget about a Lauren Weisberger book you just had to have?'

Laila shook her head, feeling as woozy as if she'd just experienced a 'book hangover' — when you've finished a book and suddenly return to the real world and it feels surreal. Words temporarily escaping her, Laila rested *Hollywood Wives* on a shelf and shoved *Rolling Stone* into Pinkie's mint-green manicured fingertips.

Pinkie glanced at the magazine cover. 'Thanks. Miley's fun, but Death Cab For Cutie are more my style.'

Laila found her voice again, albeit a huskier version. 'A guy dropped

this. A young guy. Tall, thin. Long hair. Skinny jeans.'

'Oh, the Jim Morrison wannabe? There aren't too many customers who fit that description. He's been in every Tuesday and Saturday lately. I'll look him up and get the mag back into his hot, not-so-little hands.'

Laila wrenched the glossy from Pinkie's grip with more strength than she credited herself as having. 'No.'

Both Pinkie's eyebrows had disappeared from view now. 'No?'

Laila fumbled in her pocket for the receipt, dismayed it was now slightly crumpled. She held it up like evidence in court. 'Pinkie, he's The One.'

Her friend took the receipt, her expression even more incredulous. 'Exsqueeze me?'

'Look at what he borrowed! He's, like, my mirror image.' Laila began stabbing at the receipt with a finger. 'A Hanks movie. A vego book. *Grumpy Cat!*'

'Classic love poems?' Pinkie jumped in, her skepticism now off the Richter scale. 'Sounds like someone's out to impress. You sure he didn't drop the magazine on purpose?'

Laila stilled for a moment, contemplating the idea. 'Well, even if he did, I wouldn't mind. He's worked me out perfectly.'

'You know, I'm very different from you and we still get along. Opposites *can* attract.'

Laila flicked her ponytail. 'But I don't have to *date* you. It's different when you're in each other's pockets romantically speaking.'

Pinkie twisted her mouth. 'He's not even your usual type. Clean-cut and all that.' She still seemed afraid to say Danny's name out loud.

'Maybe that's precisely the point.'

Pinkie sighed. 'Okay, so what's the plan?'

Laila swallowed hard, an idea crystallising in her mind. ‘I’m going to return the magazine to him. In person. Right here. And ... and let things take their natural course.’

She wasn’t normally so brave. Danny had been the one to pick her up many moons ago. At a rooftop bar in the city. Maybe the altitude had played tricks with her mind — she was in too deep before she realised their vast differences, from him loathing Tom Hanks films to his thinking that bringing in more income meant doing less housework and that devoting his weekends to spectator sports, rather than with her, was A-Okay. Differences that led to tiny niggles, then full-blown arguments, then heartache. Maybe, in the beginning, she’d mistaken hatred for love.

Laila grabbed back the receipt, returning it to her pocket. ‘When did you say the guy comes in again?’

‘Tuesday and Saturday mornings,’ Pinkie repeated. ‘Ten-ish, usually.’

Laila stilled again. ‘Oh no, you haven’t had *your* eye on him, too?’

Pinkie rolled her crystal-blue peepers. ‘Nope, I’ve just been lucky, or not, to answer his calls when he books time on a computer. Maybe he’s allergic to home Wi-Fi, who knows? But everyone’s a creature of habit around here. Besides, you know geeky guys are my catnip. That guy’s too hip for my tastes.’

‘That’s what I thought. Until now.’ Laila’s voice turned dreamy. ‘How does he sound on the phone?’

‘Intelligible,’ Pinkie deadpanned. ‘But, hey, why don’t I look up his number and you can find out for yourself? Bitch-face Myra isn’t around today to sneak looks over my shoulder — I’m in charge — so it’ll be fine.’

‘No, no.’ Laila stood tall. ‘I want things to be more ... organic.’

Pinkie tilted her head, looking like she was trying hard to contain another eye-roll. ‘This isn’t *Sleepless in Seattle*, you know. Even in

You've Got Mail they used email.'

Laila lifted her chin. 'I thought you'd be encouraging me.'

Funnily, to her, the whole scenario made more sense than anything had that past year.

Pinkie let out a breath. 'You're right. I should be cheering you on. I just wouldn't want you to get your hopes up only to be let down. He could have a girlfriend for all you know. Or a boyfriend ...'

Laila scooped up *Hollywood Wives* again. 'Well, I'll just have to take that risk and find out. I've already hit rock-bottom, I'll be fine.'

With that, she spun around, finding an acned girl with glasses hovering behind. Had she been there the entire time?

The girl cleared her throat. 'Hi, um, I was just trying to get to Suzanne Collins' shelf.'

What was it with teens today and their thirst for dystopias and fight-to-the-death battles? Laila wanted to point the kid in the direction of Meg Cabot and *The Princess Diaries*, but instead said a feeble 'sure' and moved aside. After all, she had a 'book boyfriend', come to life, to daydream about, along with a bunch of fictional ones.

'The temperature just keeps climbing.' Laila's dad shook his balding head from the depths of the six-seater lounge, pointing at the telly that evening. 'Thirty-eight degrees Celsius tomorrow. Thirty-nine Monday. And *forty-three* Tuesday.'

Horror and excitement somehow mingled in his voice. Her dad spoke like he didn't work in an air-conditioned post office all week, and drive there in an air-conditioned car.

'Summer will do that to you,' Laila murmured, wandering past to grab an apple from the fruit bowl in the kitchen area.

She'd temporarily moved back in with her parents after Danny broke up with her. That had been a year ago.

Her mother was preparing dinner at the island bench (chicken schnitzel, being Saturday). She looked like the perfect eighties housewife with her brassy-blonde crop of curls, pale green eyeshadow, and golf ball-sized sparkly earrings. Pity it was the twenty-teens.

‘That sort of weather is criminal,’ her mum crowed. ‘Just criminal.’

Her parents were *always* on the same page. It seemed to be the secret to their twenty-eight years of marriage.

Laila bit into the apple, which looked like her mum had shined it up with Mr Sheen. In fact, she wouldn’t put it past the woman. It tasted okay, though. She headed to the lounge, slouching in a seat next to her parents’ old tabby cat, which was as fluffy as a koala.

Trying to read in the solitude of her bedroom had been useless. Lindsey Kelk, Jane Green, Zoe Foster — none had worked their usual magic. Ordinarily she’d never have that problem, but her mind had been a-swim with all things Andy. It had to be the real thing. So what if she hadn’t spoken to him yet? In *Sleepless in Seattle*, Meg Ryan’s character didn’t meet Tom Hanks’ until the very final scene!

Resting her gnawed apple on the coffee table, she pulled the receipt from her pocket again, stroking the paper like it was Andy’s hair. Maybe it’d be a memento she’d show their grandkids one da—

‘Your library list!’ Her brother’s cocky voice sounded in her ear, making her jump and signalling he was back from the shops or his mate’s or wherever he’d disappeared to last. ‘I thought you might have actually got a guy’s number or something the way you were staring at that paper.’

‘Emerson, cut it out,’ her mother warned, though there wasn’t any real threat in her voice. She always wrote off Emerson’s behaviour as cheeky larrikinism. Hence why Emerson did the complete opposite of what he was told, jumping over the back of the couch to sit beside Laila.

A sun-bleached spike of his hair almost took out her eye. ‘So what

porn have you been borrowing lately?’

‘Emerson,’ her dad cautioned this time, though he was more intent on the cricket results on TV.

Laila scowled, thinking a monosyllabic, less classy name would have been better suited to her brother. He’d never even attempted leaving the family home, just used the place like a motel.

‘You’d do well to read something beyond Facebook,’ she retorted.

‘You’d read it more if you had actual social plans to make.’ Emerson sprang up onto his feet again. *Relief*. ‘Which reminds me. I’ve got to go wash up and douse myself in Joop! for another night of chick-pulling.’

Chick-pulling. Yep, he’d actually said that. How they shared a gene pool, Laila still wasn’t sure.

Emerson winked at her. ‘Tell me you’re not spending another Saturday night in with a crappy book?’

‘We’ll be here, too,’ their mum unhelpfully piped up from behind them.

Laila bit her lip. Pinkie was off on a Tinder date or else she *would* have had company. Though, only hours ago, books had seemed more than enough.

‘You know, some of us have actual thoughts in our heads to entertain us,’ Laila shrilled. ‘Don’t need constant doof-doof music to fill the void.’

Emerson just made a loser sign on his forehead, then winked at their mum. ‘Save me a plate, Ma. I’ll eat and run.’ Their silly mother, elbow-deep in breadcrumbs, looked pleased.

Laila watched her brother disappear down the hall, knowing the bathroom would be out of bounds for at least the next hour. He spent more time getting ready than her.

Neatly folding the receipt, Laila reached to put it in a zip pocket of her handbag on the rug. For safekeeping. Just wait until she brought a

guy as hip as Andy home — Emerson would be eating his words along with his schnitzel. And when a parent innocently enquired where the pair had met, Laila would oh-so-casually say: ‘The library.’

In the Arctic air-conditioning of Brightcliff Library, Laila’s ‘amazing’ plan suddenly seemed crazy. Far-fetched. Like something that would only happen in a movie. Or a book.

She sat in the reading area Tuesday morning, staring at what seemed to be a two-headed horse-fly on the desk, trying *not* to gawk at the nearby computers awaiting Andy. She’d already given up pretending to flick through a year-old issue of *Empire* magazine. And Pinkie had sailed past, miming drinking from the cocktail bottle on the back of her phone cover, in an attempt to make Laila laugh. The time had both crawled and sped.

Laila gnawed at her bottom lip. Maybe Andy had contracted kissing disease and wasn’t coming in, despite Pinkie’s assurance he was pencilled in as usual. Or perhaps he *was* coming in, and as soon as he took one look at a nervous Laila, he’d jump on his skateboard and hightail it out of there—

Oh god! That wasn’t a two-headed horse-fly. It was *two* such flies mating like total love bugs, their behinds to one another and their silky wings overlapping. Well, at least somebody was getting something...

She allowed herself yet another teeny look up and froze, in spite of the forty-three-degree heat just outside the library’s walls.

Because, suddenly, there he was. Like Tom Hanks’ character walking through the party door in a white tux in *Big*. Or Billy Crystal’s character jumping into Meg Ryan’s car for their fateful trip to New York in *When Harry Met Sally*.

Andy Lester. *Her* Andy Lester, waltzing towards the computers, with his haversack and skateboard in hand.

He looked even better than she remembered, with his black V-

neck's sleeves half-rolled up and his skinny jeans tucked into camel desert boots. Her heart bounced about in her chest. This was it. It *it*. She could return his magazine to him and encourage fate, or forever be stuck in limbo, licking her wounds over her breakup with Danny and living at home with her olds. And Emerson.

With resolution, she shot to her feet, reaching to run a hand over her ponytail before remembering she'd worn her hair down that day. It was time *she* was Meg Ryan, not the side character no one remembered. Bridget Jones, not her best friend. Laila wiped her hands down the front of her pale pink pencil skirt, then fumbled for the *Rolling Stone* in her library bag. Got it. A quick check revealed Pinkie was tied up with a customer at the help desk. Good! Laila didn't need an audience. Okay, *breathe out*, one step in front of the other. One step in fron—

'Excuse me.' A grey-haired bloke with obvious nose hair stepped in her path. 'Could you point me in the direction of the war history books?'

Gawd, she should have known that teaming her skirt with a white blouse would make her look like a librarian (and not the Pinkie sort). There went hours of trying on appropriately casual-yet-pretty outfits.

'Um, check out the nine-forties in non-fiction,' Laila murmured, having wandered past the military stuff on the way to the ladies before. Then she forged ahead before the nose hair bloke could ask her to repeat herself.

She hovered by Andy's desk, unable to believe she was really going through with things, and cleared her throat. *Nothing*. Shit, he'd slipped in white earbuds. She floated her free hand over his shoulder, breathing in a whiff of his earthy, spicy cologne. Or maybe that was just the way he smelle—

'Hello?'

He'd turned before she could make contact, popping out an earbud. His voice had a deep, almost familiar timbre. She fell into the black-

brown wells of his eyes.

‘Hello,’ she managed.

He squinted at her, saving her from having to attempt more words just then. ‘You were here the other day.’

He remembered!

She clutched onto this thought and ran with it, finding courage. ‘Yes. And ... and I saw you drop this.’ She held up the magazine, waving it about like she was selling it on a street corner.

He reached for the glossy, rescuing her from embarrassment again. His fingers were long, slender, slightly roughened. Guitar hands.

Danny couldn’t even play air guitar.

‘Oh, thanks. I was looking for that.’ Andy glanced up from the magazine again, an eyebrow slightly arched. ‘Though, you know, you could have just handed it back to the library...’

She could feel her face altering hue as speedily as a colour-changing Coca-Cola bottle. ‘Well, you know, people are creatures of habit,’ Laila echoed Pinkie’s words, trying for a nonchalant shrug. ‘I knew you’d be back soon enough. And I-I like to be efficient.’

His eyes smiled, along with those perfectly formed lips. ‘Well, I appreciate it. Thanks again.’

Laila fumbled in her brain for more words, certain any second now he was going to swivel back around, dashing her one chance with him forever.

‘Would you go out with me?’

Yup, she’d said it. Blurting out the question before she had time to properly think it through. She could almost feel Pinkie’s eyes boring into her like lasers from across the library.

‘Like, on a date?’ Laila clarified, having dug herself in this deep now.

Please may the Japanese student to his right not speak much English!

If he turned her down, she'd be too embarrassed to step foot in Brightcliff Library again. Which was looking likely. He hadn't yet moved a muscle or uttered a single wor—

‘Yes.’

Laila stood under the jetty at Brightcliff Beach, watching a kayaker slice through the blue-green water the next day. If Andy — or ‘AJ’ as he'd introduced himself, though she knew better — didn't show up, she'd read on the sand. She wouldn't waste the time at the beach if he'd since rethought things or only really agreed to go out with her as a prank.

Even if the sky was a constipated grey. According to the weather bureau, the cool change wasn't coming until later. She had Nicola Doherty's *The Out of Office Girl* in her handbag, tempting her with its suave Vespa-riding Italian fella on the cover. She'd be fine. More than fin—

A scream escaped her lips, her knees turning jellyfish-like. From out of nowhere, a muscly black dog was charging towards her, though this wasn't an off-leash beach. A Staffordshire Bull something. She clung onto a wooden jetty post, feeling frozen in a nightmare.

‘Laila, hey!’

What!? Andy — or AJ, she had to remind herself — was with the dog. And it *did* have a leash, which AJ was hanging onto, just one of those tricky, near-invisible ones. AJ paused on the sand, the dog's teeth within chomping distance of the frill on her green floral sundress.

Obviously AJ just liked *Grumpy Cat* for the humour then. There went that similarity! Why did she think a beach walk would make for a simple date?

‘Sorry. You're not a dog person?’ AJ guessed, his face awash with

concern at least. ‘Marley’s really a pussycat, I promise. All bark, no bite.’

AJ was wearing a chambray shirt with tight, dark denim jeans. Another look that suited him. There was no sign of the skateboard or haversack.

‘I-I have a bit of a phobia,’ Laila stammered, the words tumbling out. ‘My mum got bitten by a Doberman when I was a toddler and she was taking me for a pram walk. And I got chased by a Great Dane once walking home from school.’

AJ slowly nodded. ‘That’d do it. By the way, I wasn’t planning on having Marley stick around. It’s just when he heard me say “beach” he got all excited and I couldn’t leave him at home.’ AJ looked into the distance, past the beach railings. ‘Hang on, there’s my housemate. He said he’d take Marley off my hands once he got himself into gear today.’

‘Oh, sure,’ Laila mumbled as AJ took off at a sprint, Marley in tow.

Soon enough AJ was back, dusting his hands on his jeans, barely having worked up a sweat. Laila fell into step beside him, heading under the jetty. Her heart rate wasn’t quite normal yet, though she could no longer blame Marley.

‘So, um, you don’t live far from here?’ Laila probed.

They hadn’t had much of a chance to talk yesterday when she’d asked him out. Something it was still hard to believe she’d even done. More so, that he’d said yes and agreed to a date so soon! AJ had had to rush off to work, wherever that was.

‘Yeah, I’m just a street away from the esplanade,’ AJ said. ‘It’s a pretty sweet spot. Been renting there about five months. Though it’s about time I got a place of my own. What about you?’

Urgh, now wasn’t the time to bring up she was back living with the ‘rents. So instead she said simply, ‘I’m at the other end of Brightcliff. A few streets from the library.’

AJ shot her a crooked smile that made her stomach flip-flop. Maybe she could get used to Marley. 'Strange we've never crossed paths before.'

'Yeah.' Laila shyly ducked her head.

'So what fills your days when you're not at the library?' AJ asked, seeming truly interested.

She was glad they were skirting around the issue of why she'd asked him out in the first place.

'Um, I work for a printing company, doing business cards, corporate brochures, that sort of thing. Which means I'm sort of using my graphic design degree.' She smiled, offering a small shrug. 'And I like to read, hence the library visits.' It felt safe to admit it, seeing as he was obviously a bookworm, too. 'What about you?'

AJ bent up an arm, scratching his neck. 'I'm working a few jobs right now actually — retail for a streetwear store and as a projectionist at a cinema. I've been coming into the library before my shop shifts to work on a start-up business plan, too. Marley knocked over my printer, killing it, or else I'd be doing the work at home.'

Aha.

'What's your start-up idea?' Laila asked, though she was really stuck on how cool it was that he worked as a cinema projectionist. That movie buff thing!

'Ah, it's kind of hard to explain. It's an app for pubs to book local bands for gigs and stuff.' A corner of his mouth kicked up. 'I also used to be in a band in another life.'

Bingo! He had been a muso.

They were nearing the gaudy beach sideshows now, where attractions included a carousel, dodgem cars and mini golf. It reminded Laila a little of the opening carnival scene in *Big*, which, okay, might have been why she picked the location for the date.

AJ turned to her, his eyebrows quirked. 'You hungry? It's nearly lunchtime. We could maybe grab hot dogs or something?'

Laila's throat tightened, her brain screaming, '*What about your vegetarian cookbook?*'. All right, all right, maybe he was *transitioning* into the lifestyle. She knew she'd had a few false starts when she'd begun.

'Um ... I'm vegetarian.' She couldn't help saying the last word pointedly.

'Oh, right, that's cool. Maybe just gelati then?'

She was about to answer when a fat drop of water exploded on her forehead. Then another, and another. Sugar. The weather bureau had lied (which wasn't the first time). Here came the summer storm. Her hair, ordinarily somewhere between straight and wavy, would be frizz central. She scrambled in her handbag for *The Out of Office Girl*, using it in place of an umbrella. A girl had to do what a girl had to do.

AJ crouched under the far end of the book with a grin. 'How about we forget the gelati? I've got a better idea.'

'Okay,' she breathed. Then he grabbed hold of her hand and her heart pitter-pattered like the rain on the book. He paused for just a moment. 'You know, your eyes remind me of marbles I had as a kid. Sea-green with a swirl of gold at the centre.'

His words were pure poetry.

Then off they ran, hand in hand, trying to dodge the raindrops. They only stopped once they'd swung through the doors of a 1920s art deco cinema off the main street.

'My second job,' AJ explained, catching his breath, somehow looking even sexier when rain-mussed. 'It'll be quiet this time of the week. We should be able to get our own theatre. And choc-tops.' He issued another swoon-worthy grin. 'What do you want to watch? They play a lot of classics here for the oldies, as well as arthouse stuff.'

'Seriously?' Excitement made Laila's voice rise in pitch. All her

Christmases had come at once. ‘Um, they wouldn’t happen to have anything starring Tom Hanks?’

Parallel lines creased AJ’s forehead. ‘I haven’t watched any of Hanks’ movies, but I’ll take a look.’

Laila’s stomach turned to cement as AJ took off to organise a theatre, barely a queue at the counter.

He’d never watched a Tom Hanks flick? What about *Turner & Hooch*?

Ringling sounded from Laila’s handbag, piercing through her fog of thoughts. She fumbled for her phone, feeling all thumbs. It was Pinkie.

‘Lai-Lai, you’re not going to believe who came in to borrow books just now!’ Pinkie spoke like every second word was underlined.

Laila’s chest heaved up and down. ‘Andy Lester?’ she guessed in a whisper.

‘Dead right,’ Pinkie dryly confirmed. ‘Middle-aged Mr Lester, borrowing stuff for half his family on his card. The guy you’re supposedly meant to be with right now. Tell me, what was the date on that library receipt you found?’

Laila scrabbled for the slip of paper in her handbag. Her temples pulsed. ‘The seventeenth of January. A month ago.’

Dates were always blurry when she was on holidays.

‘It must have been an old receipt stuck in the magazine,’ Pinkie stated the obvious. ‘How did we both miss it?’

‘I don’t know,’ Laila whispered.

Emerson would have a field day if he knew what had transpired!

Laila bid a hasty goodbye to Pinkie, saying she’d keep her updated, as AJ — *not* Andy — reappeared. He had an eager look on his face and choc-tops in his hands. ‘We’ve got cinema five.’

How could she turn him down?

In the darkened cinema, as the usual animations of movie studio logos played, AJ turned her way. Laila still didn't know what they were about to watch; she hadn't unwrapped her choc-top either.

AJ's eyes glinted in the semi-darkness. 'So what made you ask me out yesterday anyway? Is picking up library customers a regular thing?'

Laila shook her head, glad for the gloom, and decided to just go with the truth. What did she have to lose? 'I found a library receipt in the *Rolling Stone* you dropped and thought, from what you'd borrowed, we might be similar. But I've since realised it wasn't your receipt.'

AJ raised those expressive eyebrows of his. 'You're kidding me?'

'Nope.' She hurried on before he could question her more. 'What about you? What made you say yes ... to *me*?'

AJ smiled. 'Well, I saw you holding a Jackie Collins book that first day I saw you. My mum used to read her novels and I remember they were pretty racy.' He gave Laila a teasing nudge in the side. She didn't mind the contact. 'I thought you might have something interesting to say. Plus, I don't know, there was just something about you I liked — that peculiar mix of nervousness and boldness.'

'I don't usually read Jackie Collins,' Laila breathed.

AJ shrugged. 'Then I guess we've still got lots to learn about one another.'

Music swelled onscreen and Laila realised *Sleepless in Seattle* was playing. Danny wouldn't have even tried sitting through the romcom. Maybe her ex hadn't just been a mismatch for her, he'd been a knob.

Before AJ could take a bite from his choc-top, Laila gently nudged his jaw her way with a finger and laid a kiss on his lips, her heart pounding away in her chest. Thankfully, AJ went with it, kissing her back, and it was perfect. Dreamy. Earth-shattering. A first kiss worthy of any chick-lit novel or chick flick.

As she nestled into his shoulder to watch the movie, feeling at peace

again, she realised she might have to extend some of the loans on those library books. Her next few weeks of summer were looking busier than expected...

THAT VOODOO THAT YOU DO
BY SARAH BELLE



THAT VOODOO THAT YOU DO

SARAH BELLE

Lila was desperate enough to try anything. Nothing was too ridiculous. She'd tried crystals, scented candles, positive affirmations, even a daily prayer ritual over the last year. All because she couldn't bring herself to make a pass at perfection personified.

But nothing had worked. Captain Wonderful – Ben – had not fallen madly in love with her, nor swept her away to a life of mutual adoration where the only air he inhaled was hers, simply because he didn't know she fancied him. She was an unintentionally stealthy blip on his love radar; completely invisible.

But this time it was going to work. She felt it in her invisible bones.

Lila withdrew the voodoo doll kit from the padded envelope and wondered whether her crawling stomach was due to anticipation, trepidation or last night's pizza. One thing she knew for certain: in her 30 years on earth, she'd never done anything this insane before.

The ocean breeze drifted through her partly renovated townhouse, bringing relief from the north Queensland summer. A rain depression had drenched Townsville for a week, followed by days of merciless sun. Consequently, steam rose from the roads like reverse-rain and the air was denser than a Kardashian – it was the ideal time to create some voodoo magic.

She sat alone in her white stone kitchen, the clatter of palm fronds in the wind her musical score for the evening, and finished her second Vodka tonic. She needed a little courage, and Mr Stolichnaya was always a willing enabler. Thankfully, assembly of the dolls – his and

hers – didn't require an engineering degree, unlike flat-pack furniture. Her wardrobe inserts weren't even remotely similar to the images that came with those instructions, and considering she was delving into the dark art of voodoo, mistakes weren't an option. She reached for the Stoli and refilled her courage.

But this was a scam, for sure. Nothing about the pile of cheap, D-grade craft supplies suggested voodoo. The two gingerbread man-shaped white and red felt cut-outs stitched in black wool could have been bought from Lincraft. It was hardly worth the expense of having it air-expressed from the US of A. But that was what unrequited love did to a woman; it made her cough up big dollars for a tiny slither of unfounded hope.

The anatomical correctness of the male doll had surprised her, and she hoped the doll was to scale. She read the instructions aloud.

'Write your name on the ribbon and secure to the doll's penis. This will prevent sexual activity.'

She followed the directions, careful not to tie the ribbon too tightly; it would defeat the purpose if his love stick dropped off.

Despite being cautious, she'd snipped the Ben-doll's right hand with the scissors. She assumed the doll's energy would be activated over time, not immediately, so the cut seemed unimportant. The instructions recommended she fasten the dolls together in a symbolic binding. Hair was best, but her jaw-length caramel-coloured bob was insufficient, so she wrapped her sexiest panties around the dolls, their bellies touching in a kind of stand-up sex position, his ribbon-endowed penis pressing into her doll's girly bits. It worked for her, even if it was only figurative.

Another two glasses of courage later, the dolls were finished, with 'Ben' written across the chest to identify him as the target.

There was something very military about referring to Ben as a 'target', but seeing as he was an Army Blackhawk pilot, and Lila a Defence civilian, it was quite apt. His beachy glow, sterling-grey eyes,

toffee coloured hair she'd longed to clutch during orgasm, shoulders wide enough to hide behind in a blizzard, and sprinter's legs were definitely her target.

She'd only ever gone out with one military guy before, and that ended with her transfer to another base and his hastily arranged posting to Sydney, all at his behest. Apparently it was easier to manipulate the inner workings of a complex bureaucracy and relocate his entire career than to inform her that their year-long relationship was over.

She'd sworn off military guys after that, but there was something about the way Ben wore his uniform that left her completely useless. It was like the combination of a caffeine overdose, a hangover and brain tumour. She jittered, had verbal diarrhoea, couldn't remember her own name and walked into walls immediately after seeing him. His smile was humble, genuine, his ego lacked the over-inflation of many pilots, and his voice was mellow, like a balmy summer evening.

What she really adored about him was that, unlike many officers, he bucked the system and clashed with his superiors with his insistence that soldiers be treated like human beings rather than disposable minions. Hence his name: Captain Wonderful. It wasn't just a physical attraction; she admired his temerity and honour in a system that rewarded blind obedience.

He'd been posted into the regiment a year ago, in the middle of their stickiest summer to date, and she'd watched him attempt to acclimatise to the wet season with all the other newbies who had no idea they could expel their own body weight in sweat each day and still have a pulse.

The way he sucked on his water bottle was sensual, hungry; she would have sold both kidneys to feel the suction of those lips. Of course, they'd spoken often; her role as Resource Manager meant she approved his requisitions; however his demeanour suggested his feelings were friendly, but professional. That was why she'd been

driven to this extreme – there seemed no other way to get his attention.

A cool breeze brushed against her bare arms and she wondered, once more, if using voodoo was pushing her desire for Ben just a little too far.

Monday was Lila's favourite day of the week. While her colleagues were slumping into their lattes and groaning about the full week ahead, she arrived at work with the grin of a village idiot. Monday was the duck's guts for two reasons. Firstly, it had been two long days since she'd seen Ben. Monday meant she had another five days to worship him up close. Five whole days! It was heavenly.

Secondly, Monday was a Physical Training day, which meant that Ben would be performing miraculously sexy manoeuvres wearing the high-cut runner's shorts and singlet that constituted the Army's PT uniform. The only benefit of her teeny-tiny office, in the oldest building on base – the only one yet to be demolished and rebuilt – was that it overlooked the PT area. Powerful thighs, a flash of butt, grapefruit-sized biceps, defined shoulders and tasty triceps were an orgasmic visual she never failed to appreciate. The day could fall to shit after that, she didn't care. Thankfully, PT was compulsory on Monday, Wednesday and Friday – God bless the Army and its narky, inflexible routines.

After she'd perved as much as was dignified, and then a little more, she shifted her focus to ensuring the voodoo dolls were still bound and safe in her handbag, and then christened her new lipstick. She'd wondered if the Paris-red would suit her I-work-indoors-complexion or clash with her sea green eyes, but it was a Chanel, so she wore it with reverence.

Her day went from awesome to fan-freaking-tastic when she found Ben in the Neolithic-inspired kitchen. The army's idea of groundbreaking interior design was to paint the walls beige instead of

khaki, however, the walls remained bare because Blu-Tacked posters slid off the plaster in the humidity. It was the sparsest room imaginable, but Ben's presence made it boudoir-chic. She did her best to act like an adult, but her fingers jiggled like restless snakes, and her heart rate danced to a techno-beat. Arrhythmia was developing.

'Hey, how are you, Lila?' he said. 'Did you have a good weekend?'

Breathe. Just breathe.

'Yes, thanks. I... ah...' *Made a doll in your effigy so you'd love me.*
'Had a quiet one. How about you?' *Take part in any voodoo yourself?*

'I went camping at Paluma. Have you been there?'

'A few times, yep.'

'Of course, you're a local, aren't you?'

Ooooh, he remembered!

'I am a local, but don't hold that against me.' *But you could hold that delectable body against me anytime. I'm ready. Bring it on.*

Lila noticed a bandage on Ben's right hand, the same spot where she'd snipped the doll during its assembly. 'What happened to your hand?'

He held it up. 'Not sure. I probably did it camping.'

Uh-oh! The voodoo had already started. And it seemed whatever happened to the doll also happened to Ben. *Mental note: keep that doll safe. Ultra safe.*

'Tell me, how long does it take to acclimatise? I thought I'd conquered the humidity, but apparently not.' He ruffled his singlet for ventilation. Lila could see the hair smattered across his pecs. She'd never seen a chest so defined, not in real life. It was impossible to look away, she even felt the corner of her mouth slacken, and some drool accumulate and escape. She now understood men's reactions to boobs.

He stopped ruffling his singlet and tilted his head, obviously waiting for her reply.

She forced her eyes away from his chest, and attempted to answer him. 'You are so hot.'

His blush enhanced his gorgeousness. Lila wanted to sigh out loud and gaze at him in wonderment, until she realised her internal thoughts had been verbalised. *Shit!*

'I mean, you must be hot after PT. You know, 'cos physical training is really...' She cleared her throat and twisted her fingers into pretzel-shaped knots. 'Physical.' *How eloquent. He must be so enamoured by my charm.*

'I guess they've named it correctly then,' he said, followed by a laugh.

He smiled and the stars fell into perfect alignment. If the universe imploded at this very moment, Lila couldn't give a toss. He'd smiled and hadn't run screaming at her accurate, but completely unprofessional and inappropriate declaration of his exquisiteness. She could die happy now.

She forced her lips to curve upwards just a smidgeon; of course they wanted to zip right up to her eyebrows, but that would be creepy. Little steps. She let her face relax enough to return his dazzling smile and saw his eyes move to her lips. It was just a fraction of a moment, but it was long enough. The voodoo was working. She was such a genius to think of it. It was a masterstroke of love brilliance.

'Yeah, Paluma was great. I read, had a few beers and chilled,' he said.

'Were you alone?' Oops! She had no idea it slipped out until it was too late. 'Sorry, that's nosey of me.'

He took the spoon out of his tea and rinsed it under the tap before drying and replacing it in the cutlery drawer. Ben used two teabags and left them in, just like her. She hated insipid tea. What was the point if it didn't kick you in the pants?

His smile returned. 'There's no one special, but it would be nice to

share it with someone.'

Lila could feel her face launching into creepy smile position. She fought to keep her facial muscles under control, but they were determined. She offered the giggle of a ten-year-old girl instead. *How pathetic.*

'I've been meaning to ask you, if you'd like to...I mean, if you've got nothing planned ...' he started. Lila's heart stopped dead. It went from beating at the speed of light to nothing in a nanosecond. 'Maybe we could go—'

'Attention personnel! This is a fire alarm. Evacuate the buildings immediately and assemble at the evacuation point. I say again, this is not a drill.'

Hell no! No, no, no! For Christ's sake! Her dream moment had gone up in flames – literally.

'I'm a fire warden, I'd better run,' he said. 'Will you be okay?'

'Yes, I'm a warden too. Gotta get these people to safety,' she said with forced enthusiasm. She'd almost let everyone burn to crispy critters if it meant hearing the end of that sentence. *We could go...?* Get married? Have beautiful babies? Make lurve under the stars?

She resisted the urge to secure her lips to his. Instead, she left the kitchen to find her red hard hat and herd the cattle to safety. Minutes later, they were safely ensconced at their evacuation point when she remembered the dolls.

She ran back to her office to retrieve her handbag. She would chance death to save those voodoo dolls. Clearly they were working: they'd had a full conversation that was edging towards a proposition of some kind. Hopefully a very dirty, erotic proposition that necessitated the exchange of bodily fluids. Also, the doll and Ben were linked, as evidenced by his cut hand. She had to save those dolls.

'No, ma'am. I'm sorry, no one is to enter the building,' said the young Corporal.

‘But it’s my bag. It’s important,’ Lila said, trying to push past the six-foot-four wall of muscle.

‘I’m sorry, ma’am. CO’s orders.’

‘But... I’ve got to get in there. It’s literally life and death!’ She hoped to sway him with her 1950’s curves; she thought her bum too fleshy, however her boobs granted instant access at nightclub doors. They were so good, they looked fake. But he didn’t waiver. Instead she removed her sunglasses and exuded the air of authority she used during meetings with senior staff. Damn it, he still didn’t waiver.

If the dolls burned, Ben would spontaneously self-combust. It would be all her fault; she made the doll and linked it to Ben. She had to get that doll out of the building.

‘Please! You don’t understand.’ She tried to push past, but seeing as she was almost a foot shorter than him, and lacked all athletic abilities, there was no hope of a bypass.

‘Ma’am, you are not gaining access to the building. Please return to your evacuation area or I’ll have the Military Police escort you off base.’ He spread his legs wider and gripped his rifle in a show of authority. There was no hope. She’d have to find another way.

‘Fine, okay.’ Her hands signalled surrender. *Shit!*

The guarded front entrance meant she’d have to climb through a window instead. It was her responsibility to ensure Ben didn’t suffer the fate of those dolls. *They’re made of cheap-arse felt, for God’s sake. He’ll burn like tissue paper.* For the first time, she regretted buying the dolls.

The building’s side was unguarded, so she slithered in through her office window, fell to the ground and crunched her elbow. She didn’t care about the pain, because the dolls had somehow fallen out of her bag, off the table and were in the bin, which had a whiff of smoke coming out of it.

No! Ben’s on fire!

She swooped in, not caring if she was burnt in the process. The priority was to save Ben. Carefully, she extracted the dolls. The binding-panties were a little singed, and Ben was smouldering, his right forearm alight. She hit the doll against the wall and smothered the tiny flame under her shoe. She then took the fire extinguisher off the wall and sprayed the small fire in her office. Once it was out, she gathered her bag, slipped out the window and rejoined her colleagues.

Out the corner of her eye she saw Ben with a medic – being treated for a burn to his right forearm.

Holy, holy shit! No way. She scrambled over to him.

‘What happened? Are you all right?’ she wheezed. Clearly watching others slog through PT three times a week didn’t make her fit by osmosis.

‘Yep, all good. Just a small burn and a knock to the head. I fell against the wall on my way out. What a klutz.’

Lila re-lived the moment she found the doll alight, particularly the technique she’d used to extinguish the smouldering – she’d hit it against the wall and then stood on it. *Oh my god!* That voodoo was some powerful shit, and she’d messed with it, and now Ben was injured. From now on, nothing happened to the dolls, they stayed in her bag until she could deactivate them. Who knew what the consequences would be?

‘I feel like I was stepped on. Is that a footprint?’ he asked, pointing to his bicep. The imprint looked suspiciously like the Nine West wedge Lila was wearing.

‘Oh my God! I’m so sorry.’

Ben looked surprised. ‘It’s not your fault. I know you didn’t light it. We’re each other’s alibi.’

‘Captain, we’ll need to do a few tests at the base hospital for your head injury.’ The medic tried to move Ben on.

‘But it’s just a bump,’ Ben said. ‘It’s nothing.’

‘Sorry, sir. You know the rules.’

Ben sighed and nodded. The guilt was choking her. Damn her stupidity and those voodoo dolls. The objective was to get his attention, not kill him.

All personnel were sent home while the building was assessed. The fire was superficial; apparently started by faulty wiring. Ben stayed in hospital on account of his concussion, so Lila visited her sister, Terri. She needed to confess her foolishness and seek absolution. More importantly, she needed to deactivate the dolls. Not that Terri would know how, but they’d always been partners in crime.

Over an icy lemonade in Terri’s industrial-style kitchen, Lila explained what she’d done, and why, and what the consequences appeared to be so far. Terri sat at the large oak table, unable to speak while she processed the information dump. Then she erupted into hysterical laughter, accompanied by tears, snorts and loss of breath.

Lila remained calm until Terri regained her composure. It took a while.

Their mother’s 947-year-old Chihuahua entered the room.

‘Hello, Gypsy,’ Lila said. She scratched his ears but recoiled when the dog snapped and growled at her. She didn’t like the dog, no one did, not even their mother. It was a cranky, snarly rodent that humped everything in sight, peed everywhere and shat without regard.

‘You got Gypsy again?’ Lila asked.

‘Yep, Mum’s away. Do you want him?’

‘Not a chance in hell,’ Lila said, as Gypsy wandered off to shit, piss or hump something in another room. He’d ruined enough of her soft furnishings. Terri could keep him.

Lila held up the dolls. They smelt like toasted marshmallows. She unbound them and shoved her panties back in her bag.

‘Handbag undies!’ Terri said. ‘How I miss those days.’

‘Me, too. Why do you think I’m in this mess? So, what do I do?’ Lila asked.

‘Google it. I’m sure plenty of other loons have messed with voodoo. There’s probably a support group.’

While Lila researched on her phone, Terri inspected the doll. ‘Oh my god! It’s got a penis! And a ribbon... with writing...’ She tilted her head sideways to read the ribbon. ‘Is that ... is that your name?’

Lila pretended not to hear her sister.

‘You wrote your name around his penis?’ Terri erupted into hysteria again, and slapped the table with her palm. ‘You really got caught up in this voodoo thing, didn’t you? How much did it cost?’

‘You don’t want to know. Urrrgh!’ Lila growled. ‘Why is your phone reception so crap?’

‘It’s better outside, near the back fence.’ Terri pointed out the window.

Lila made her way to the Townsville ‘hotspot’ and continued her research into deactivating voodoo dolls.

Minutes later, Lila heard, ‘No, Ella! Stop! Put the dolly and the scissors down!’

Uh-oh. This couldn’t be good. Ella was supposed to be having her midday nap, like all angelic toddlers. Lila’s legs crumpled as she made her way into the house, only to be confronted by a little girl holding a pair of scissors to the penis of the doll.

Oh my God! This cannot be happening.

Terri adopted the hostage-negotiator pose; her back against the kitchen drawers, feet spread, arms wide open in front of her. ‘Sweetie, listen to Mummy.’

‘Mummy, this dolly has a wee-wee.’ Ella looked at the doll in disgust.

‘Yes baby, it does,’ said Terri. ‘Boy dollies have wee-wees.’

Despite the air-conditioning, Lila’s body was covered in a glossy sweat that dripped like rain from her fingertips to the polished concrete floor. Her heart rate had surpassed arrhythmia and was hurtling towards cardiac arrest. *As if being cut, burnt and concussed wasn’t enough, now Ben was about to be castrated by a toddler?*

‘I want to make it a girl dolly.’ Ella brought the blades closer together, the doll’s willy flattened between them. *Jesus! Think, woman, think!*

‘Ella, sweetie, Aunty Lila has a present for you. Would you like to see it?’ Terri said.

Yes! Brilliant. A distraction.

‘Look at this present, Ella!’ Lila rifled around in her bag, pains like flashes of lightning in her chest. The coronary was coming, she was sure of it, but it had to wait until the doll was safe. All she could find was half a packet of peppermint Tic Tacs and tampons – neither enticing enough. *Shiiiiit!*

‘Ella, baby. Here’s your present, but give the dolly to your mum first.’ Lila tried to stall.

‘No. Present first.’ Ella was a hard negotiator.

Lila laid her hand on her Chanel lippie. She’d saved up for months, but her mortgage and renovation costs chewed up her income. It was a rare extravagance, and she’d only used it once, but would gladly sacrifice it to save Ben’s willy. Lila whipped the shiny black and gold lippie out and displayed it on her palm.

‘Oh! Pretty!’ Ella said.

Lila’s hope rose, sure that the crisis was over. That Ben would be safe.

‘That’s it, baby. Hand mummy the scissors,’ Terri said. The gap between them lessened.

Ella focused on the Chanel; she was a girl after all. She dropped the doll and scissors and moved off in a trance to collect her new present.

Terri swooped and collected the scissors, but wasn't fast enough to beat Gypsy, who clamped the doll between his jaws and scarpered around the corner into the lounge room.

Terri and Lila looked at each other, eyes wide.

Shit!

Lila envisioned Ben writhing in his hospital bed, nursing a cut, a burn, a concussion, having just felt the release of sharp pressure against his willy, only for it to be replaced by the sensation of sharp teeth, various bodily excretions, and a tiny but insistent Chihuahua dick nudging its way into any orifice. How could she have made such a monumental mistake? Why the hell had she insisted on using voodoo?

'You go to the left. I'll round him up from the right,' Terri said. Thank God she was a problem solver; Ben's life was at stake.

Both women rounded their respective corner, with Gypsy in the middle. The doll flopped, spread eagle, out of both ends of his petite but ferocious mouth. His teeth were like razor wire; Lila had been bitten by this little rodent frequently and bore many scars from his attacks. Ben had no hope. For Gypsy, there was no way out; Lila and Terri had come for the doll he now considered to be his. It was like a confrontation in a spaghetti western, and Lila could tell from the malevolent look on that little bastard's face that he wasn't going to admit defeat until the doll was nothing but scraps of red felt entwined in black wool; he'd go down in a blaze of voodoo glory before he'd surrender.

'Shhhh, don't freak him out,' Terri whispered, crouching down and smiling at the little sucker.

Lila followed suit. 'Sweet little Gypsy,' she purred.

Gypsy growled and sunk his teeth into the doll's midriff. Lila imagined Ben doubled over in pain, doctors frantic to figure out the

cause but unable to find anything until it was too late.

A migraine was emerging, crushing her brain within the confines of her own skull. Although her muscles were tenser than rock, she set her chin forth; Ben was not going to die today. No damn way.

Gypsy eyed both women, turned on the spot and scrambled behind the cream leather couch, a place impossible to reach. Terri and Lila raced to either side of the couch; Gypsy dropped the doll on the ground. He looked up at them. They looked down at him. It was a standoff.

‘Move the couch forward,’ Terri whispered. ‘Slowly.’

Inch by inch, they shifted the couch forward. Gypsy backed up behind the doll and stomped his paws on its shoulders, pinning it to the ground, its arse stuck up in the air.

Terri’s mouth opened in a perfect O and her eyes widened. Lila knew her face mirrored her sister’s; their synchronised gasp broke the silence. Gypsy squinted, bit the back of the doll’s shoulders and thrust his tiny pelvis back and forth into the arse end of the doll with a pornographic gusto that would have made John C. Holmes proud. He worked that doll good and proper, grunting and wheezing like an emphysemic Neanderthal, the doll’s head thrashing in time with each frantic thrust.

Terri’s hand covered her mouth. Lila was unable to speak, and without warning, launched herself on Gypsy, and wrapped her hand around his shoulders. He wasn’t getting away this time. Gypsy snarled at her and struck at her fingers. She took every little snap, tear and nip he had to offer, but she wasn’t letting go. On the flip side, Gypsy was still humping like thunder until Lila got to her knees and Terri was able to extract the doll from his mouth. Lila dropped Gypsy, who scurried off, and focused her attention on the doll.

‘Is he okay?’ she asked Terri.

Terri flipped the doll over in her hands. ‘There’s a few teeth marks,

a lot of dog saliva and a fair bit of wear and tear in the arse region, but other than that he looks fine-ish. You need to deactivate the doll before you kill this guy,' Terri said, handing the damp doll back to Lila.

'I'm right on it.'

Lila raced to the hospital. She had to see Ben and confess what she'd done. If they were going to fall in love it would be because they were meant to, not because of some stupid doll. A relationship had to start with truth, right?

Her elbow still ached and now her neck was cricked. She must have given herself whiplash when she crash tackled Gypsy. Throwing herself on the floor wasn't an everyday occurrence. Or perhaps it had happened when she climbed through the office window. Today had been so crazy, there was little chance of pinning her injury to a specific event. A bath with salts would see her right, after she'd confirmed Ben was okay and deactivated the dolls.

She went straight to his hospital room, and found him sitting up in bed watching television, enjoying the arctic air-conditioning as opposed to his sauna-like office. He appeared to be in one piece, she couldn't see any additional scratches or puncture wounds from Gypsy's teeth. He was sitting on his butt, which suggested no injury there. So far, so good. If he was able to feel Gypsy's thrusting, there's no way he'd be able to sit down, certainly not without a donut ring, a shite-load of dissolvable stitches and a generous suppository.

'Hi!' he said. 'This is a nice surprise, come in.'

His smile dispelled her doubts. He seemed genuinely happy to see her.

'I was in the neighbourhood and thought I'd call in,' she said.

'Trying that old chestnut, are you?' He laughed and his eyes crinkled at the edges.

She let out another pathetic giggle. 'Are you okay?'

‘I’m fine, thanks. I’m in overnight because of the concussion, and apart from a bit of muscle soreness, I’m good to go.’

‘Muscle soreness?’

‘Yeah, my shoulders and back are strained. Must have been PT this morning.’

Was he being brave?

‘So, no other injuries?’ Her eyes focused on his groin region.

‘No. Should there be?’ He winced as he shifted position on the bed.

Lila shook her head. ‘I guess not.’ She wasn’t about to ask about his willy. Besides, hopefully she’d see it for herself soon enough.

‘Come sit down, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask, but never worked up the courage until this morning,’ he said.

The arrhythmia made a return. She moved his PT bag from the chair to the floor, and sat down.

He took a deep breath, looked her in the eyes and said, ‘I was wondering if you’d like to go on a picnic to Paluma? Just the two of us.’

Lila suppressed a squeal. The voodoo worked!

‘I’d love to.’ She knew it was uncool to answer so enthusiastically and so quickly, but she was through with games. After today’s events, she needed to tell him the truth. She had to know if he truly liked her, or if his attraction was voodoo-inspired. ‘But there’s something I need to confess first...’ *Even though you’ll think me certifiable and cancel our date. It will all have been for nothing. Ready to make a fool of myself in 3...2...1.*

She paused to gather her courage, and spotted something very familiar in his PT bag. Two gingerbread men-shaped dolls made out of red felt and white felt, with black woollen stitching, bound together in a stand-up sex position by an Army issue khaki tie. The white one had ‘Lila’ written on it. It was wedged between his shoes, toiletry bag and

sports drink, the neck and elbow at odd angles. That explained her injuries.

Oh. My. Freaking. God! No way! I've been lusting after a voodoo user? He's nuts...completely insane ... certifiable.

But then again, I'm no better.

Unsure of what this revelation meant, if their attraction was real, if it was a perfect match, she smiled, and displayed both sets of dolls.

'Ben, I think it's time we both stopped playing with dollies.'

SUNNY, WITH A CHANCE BY
LAURA GREAVES



SUNNY, WITH A CHANCE

LAURA GREAVES

I was doing just fine until The Sun disappeared. Well, I say ‘fine’... if I’m being brutally honest, ‘hanging by a thread’ is probably a more accurate description. But I was on my way to being fine, for sure. I’d been in my ever-so-elegantly dilapidated cottage in the mountains for three months, and I was painting every day as I basked in a mercifully temperate summer far away from Sydney’s relentless humidity, from its permanent, stifling miasma of exhaust fumes and backyard barbeques – and from *him*. ‘Fine’, it seemed, was at last within my reach.

And then The Sun vanished.

She’s probably sniffing around by the dam, I told myself. Or she’d be down by the woodpile near the rickety back fence. Half the reason I’d moved us to this bushy five-acre block was to give her room to run, after all. After spending five years in an inner-city terrace house with only a postage stamp-sized courtyard to call her turf, she deserved that much.

‘Sunny!’ I yelled from the back step. ‘Here, Sun-sun!’

I raised a paint-spattered hand to shield my eyes from the harsh summer sun as I searched for signs of movement between the tall gums that dotted the property. Sunny with a chance of afternoon showers, today’s weather report had said. But the sky remained a cloudless blue and the fierce, dry heat persisted. Everything the late afternoon light touched was cast in a coppery glow, which made it that much harder to spot my cheeky red Kelpie.

Sunny had a mischievous streak, and she loved to explore, but she *always* returned to me when called. It was one of Mike's conditions when he reluctantly agreed to us adopting a dog: she had to do what she was told. So I'd spent every Sunday morning with her at the local obedience club, not yet realising that Mike expected the same degree of compliance from *all* the females in his life.

I called out again. Nothing. Not a flicker of motion among the trees. No din of rustling leaves and snapping twigs as Sunny bounded back to me. The only response was the shrill chorus of cicadas that heralded the arrival of twilight each day.

I managed to remain calm for approximately three more minutes before total panic set in. *What if she's fallen in the dam and can't get out? What if she's wandered onto the road and been run over? What if she's lost in the bush? Paralysis ticks! Fox baits! SNAKES!*

I needed backup. I darted into the cottage and snatched my mobile phone from the kitchen table, praying the area's notoriously patchy cellular coverage wouldn't let me down when I needed it most.

'The Sun's gone!' I wailed the second I heard my brother's voice on the line.

There was a pause, then, 'I dunno what sky you're looking at, Bry, but it's still pretty damn sunny here. It's, like, thirty-eight degrees!'

'No, dopey. Sunny! I can't find her anywhere.'

'Oh, shit,' Scott replied. 'Have you tried calling—'

'Yes! I've called and called, but she's not here. *She's gone!*'

I heard the jingle of keys at Scott's end. 'I'm getting in my car right now, Brydie. I'll come up and we'll drive around, and if we don't see her we'll figure out what to do next. Try not to freak out, okay?'

Try not to freak out. He might as well have told me not to have freckles or not to love country music. Some things are just beyond our control.

I hung up and grabbed a torch. It would take Scott at least an hour to drive up from Sydney; I'd use the time to scour every single centimetre of my land, gathering darkness be damned. I had to do something; I couldn't just sit around and twiddle my thumbs.

Deep down though, something told me Sunny wasn't there. And I didn't want to think about what would happen if I couldn't find her.

What self-respecting single guy throws a housewarming dinner party anyway? And on a Saturday night! Dinner parties are for retirees and bored married couples. I should just have had a house party, with a few bowls of chips and plenty of booze. But I got carried away with my newly minted status as 'Leo Warburton, sophisticated homeowner', and sophisticated homeowners have dinner parties.

Sometimes even I roll my eyes at how pretentious I surely seem. Then again, after everything I went through to get this place – to get *any* place – maybe it's okay if I indulge in a little pretense every now and then.

Sweat trickled down my back. The forecast cool change hadn't yet materialised and it was absolutely stifling inside. Sunny with a chance of rain, they'd said yesterday. They lied. It was still dry as a bone.

This was one of the 'joys' of inner-city living I hadn't anticipated: the concrete and dearth of trees magnified the summer heat by about a thousand percent, and these terrace houses definitely weren't built to capture the breeze (on the rare occasion there actually was one). Having the oven on at full whack in the tiny galley kitchen wasn't helping the temperature situation either. I would have installed an air conditioner – if buying the house hadn't completely cleaned me out.

I checked my watch. T-minus 10 minutes until everyone was due to arrive. I had to get some air circulating through the place. The bi-fold doors leading onto the miniscule courtyard were already open, so I walked down the narrow hallway to open the front door as well.

And that's when I discovered the dog.

Stretched out across my doorstep, apparently sound asleep, it was a working breed of some sort – but that was about all I could make out thanks to the heavy cloak of dirt and dust it wore. It was small and wiry, with two absurdly large, pointed ears, and appeared to be red, but it was hard to tell for sure since it was absolutely filthy. I could see the pads of its front paws looked raw and blistered.

'Great. This is just what I need right now,' I muttered as I pushed open the screen door. My friends were mere minutes away, my *salmon en croûte* needed to come out of the oven any moment, and now I had this mangy mutt to deal with.

The dog raised its head at the sound of my voice and fixed me with a pair of unearthly amber eyes. It was like looking into two frosty pints of beer on a sweltering February afternoon.

'Hello,' I said, because the dog seemed to expect a greeting.

By way of reply, it hauled itself to its feet and pushed past me, limping into the house and up the hall.

'Oh, no! No-no-no!' I yelled, trotting after it. 'This house is a dog-free zone, my friend. Out!' I pointed back to the front door in what I hoped was a commanding manner.

The cheeky bugger paused, cast a defiant look over its shoulder – *her* shoulder, I could see now that she was standing up – and sprang lightly onto my sofa. A plume of dog dust rose around her as she made herself comfortable.

She sighed and closed her eyes, and within seconds was breathing the slow, steady breaths of a soundly sleeping animal. For the first time, I noticed she was wearing a collar with a tag that appeared to have a phone number etched on it. I crouched down beside the sofa and leaned in to get a better look.

I'm Sunny. Please take me home!

Cute.

Sure enough, there was a mobile phone number on the other side. But because timing is everything, in the next second the oven timer beeped just as a tinkly ‘Hellooo!’ issued simultaneously from the front door.

Arrghh. ‘This isn’t over,’ I hissed at the dog. Sunny didn’t even stir, and for an instant I wondered if she was okay. Her paws looked pretty messed up, and she was obviously, ahem, dog-tired. Maybe she should see a vet?

‘Leo! Are you gonna let us in or what?’

Sigh. Sunny seemed content enough, snoozing deeply in a cloud of her own grime. I’d call the number on her tag just as soon as dinner was over.

I went back down the hallway to welcome my *invited* guests.

‘I think you know what you have to do, Brydie.’

The expression on Scott’s face was grave, because he knew what he was suggesting was serious. The *most* serious, in fact. He was telling me to do something that three months ago I had vowed I would never, ever do.

‘I can’t.’ I buried my face in my hands, rubbing my eyes. They felt gritty and sore, no doubt because I’d only had about forty-five minutes’ sleep in the past 36 hours. That, and all the crying. ‘I don’t ever want to speak to him again.’

Scott awkwardly patted my knee. He’s a great big brother, but he’s never been one for affection. ‘I know you don’t. I wouldn’t mind a few words with him myself, but that’s beside the point,’ he muttered darkly. ‘The point is Sunny’s been missing since Friday night and here we are, Sunday morning, and there hasn’t been a single sighting of her. You’ve got to consider *all* your options.’

‘Mike wouldn’t take Sunny, Scott. He never even liked her.’
However messy our breakup, I just couldn’t imagine Mike would stoop

so low.

‘But he knows how much *you* love her, and he’s a controlling, petty jerk.’

Apparently my brother wasn’t so magnanimous.

Scott was right, though. I owed it to Sunny to investigate every possibility, to do everything in my power to bring her home. Because if I couldn’t do that, then I would be truly lost. I’d realised in the last two days that Sunny was the glue holding this precarious life of mine together. I’d bought this property because of her. I got out of bed every morning, and I painted until the sun went down, so that I could afford to live on this property I’d bought because of her.

When we’d first moved up here I’d been in a daze, sleepwalking through each day, playing the part of a functioning human being out of pure necessity. But there was nothing forced about Sunny’s embrace of our new existence. She was ecstatic to be out of the city, to breathe in the clear mountains air as she ran and ran and ran. I guess her enthusiasm was infectious, because as the days turned into weeks I started to wake up and notice all the possibilities this new way of living offered.

Sunny *had* to come home. She just had to.

So I picked up my phone.

And it rang.

‘Argh!’ I dropped the phone onto the knotty boards of the back verandah, where it landed with a clatter and a fresh crack across its screen. As I sat momentarily frozen, Scott scooped it up and answered the call.

‘Yeah?’ He listened for a moment, frowning. Then he spun to face me, his eyebrows arched at such an extreme angle I thought they were going to rocket right off his forehead. ‘My sister does,’ he continued excitedly. ‘Just a sec!’

Scott thrust the phone at me. ‘This guy says he’s got Sunny!’

I almost dropped the phone again in my rush to grab it. ‘Hello? You have Sunny? You have my dog?’

‘I have *a* dog and she’s wearing a tag with this number on it,’ said a resonant voice.

‘Can you describe her to me?’

‘She’s red. Kind of a cattle dog, I guess? Beer-coloured eyes.’

‘Yes! She’s a Kelpie. Wait... Did you say *beer* coloured?’ Come to think of it, Sunny’s eyes did have a lager-ish hue to them.

‘Yeah,’ the guy chuckled. ‘Sorry, I can’t think of a better way to describe them. She’s a cheeky bugger, too. Strolled right in, climbed up on the sofa and went to sleep.’

‘That’s my Sunny!’ It felt like my heart was about to catapult out of my chest. ‘Thank you so, so much for calling. I’ll come and get her right now.’ I raced inside and rummaged in my handbag for a notepad and pen. ‘What’s your address? You can’t be too far away if she just walked onto your property.’ I had a vision of my dog hanging out at the neighbours’ place the whole time, and felt suddenly foolish.

‘I’m in Erskineville,’ he said.

I wrote *E* on the paper, then froze. ‘Where?’

‘Erskineville?’ he repeated. ‘It’s in the inner west.’

‘I know. I used to live there. Which street?’

Scott looked quizzically at me.

‘Robson Avenue,’ the guy said warily. ‘You know it?’

‘Number sixteen?’

There was a pause. ‘Yeah.’ And then another. ‘What’s happening now?’

‘You live in my old house.’

‘Ohhhh!’ Understanding dawned. ‘So you moved, your dog got

confused and came back to her old digs.’ He paused to chuckle at his dog pun. ‘That’s pretty awesome. You’re a clever girl, huh?’ I heard the soft *clink* of Sunny’s collar as the guy gave her a scratch. ‘Where do you live now?’

My eyes stretched as round as dog food bowls as I looked at Scott and said, ‘Um, I live at Blackheath. In the Blue Mountains. About a hundred and ten kilometres from you.’

Brydie had said on the phone that she was two hours away, though judging by the urgency in her voice I reckoned she’d be at my place in 90 minutes tops. So I’d figured that gave me an hour or so to find a vet that opened on a Sunday, and get Sunny’s feet seen to. It seemed the least I could do.

After talking to Brydie, Sunny’s battered paws suddenly made perfect sense. And I suddenly felt like a real tool for choosing my pompous dinner party over taking the poor girl straight to the vet.

Could she really have *walked* all the way to Erskineville from the Blue Mountains? The state of her feet – not to mention the dirt still falling from her coat like rain – seemed to suggest that was exactly what had happened. But how had she managed it? How had she not been seen and picked up by someone? How had she crossed freeways without being bowled over? I wouldn’t have thought she had a chance.

I was filled with a newfound respect for the dog, even though she’d curtailed my housewarming – no one was particularly eager to hang out in the living room after dinner with smelly Sunny sprawled across the sofa – and ruined my linen seat covers. But it was hard to begrudge her a comfortable place to sleep after what she’d apparently been through.

Sunny still seemed exhausted as we returned from the vet, lying regally on the back seat of my Audi with her paws dressed and bandaged. It was another scorching day, and she reveled in the air conditioning. But as I pulled up in front of the house – and saw the

gorgeous, curly-haired blonde pacing back and forth on my porch – the dog launched herself at the rear passenger window.

The woman on the porch – Brydie, I assumed – virtually flew to the car, her loose dress and array of brightly coloured scarves trailing behind her. She yanked open the back door before the car had even come to a complete stop. Woman and dog tumbled onto the footpath.

‘Sun-sun!’ she cried, burying her face in Sunny’s still-putrid fur. ‘Where have you been, you silly sausage?!’

I got out of the car feeling strangely awkward, as if witnessing something I shouldn’t. Brydie and Sunny lay on the sun-baked footpath for what seemed like years, before Brydie finally dragged her hazel eyes away from her dog and looked at me.

‘Sorry!’ she said, laughing, as she got to her feet. ‘I got a little carried away there. I’m Brydie.’ She extended one lightly freckled arm, while the other kept a firm grip on Sunny’s collar. She had a cool geometric outline of a Kelpie tattooed inside her forearm.

I shook her hand, which was covered in dried flecks of paint. ‘Leo,’ I said. ‘It’s nice to meet you, although admittedly under pretty unusual circumstances.’

‘I know,’ she said, shaking her mop of curls. ‘I just can’t believe it. You can’t imagine all the horrific scenarios I’ve played out in my mind. But I never, *ever* would have thought she’d come back here.’

Brydie looked at the house, and I swear she shuddered.

‘I didn’t realise this place had been co-owned. I thought the vendor was just that one guy. Mike, was it? Your...’ I risked a quick glance at the hand holding onto Sunny. No sign of a wedding ring. ‘Boyfriend?’

‘No!’ she said, with unexpected vehemence. ‘Um, we’re not together anymore. And technically I wasn’t a co-owner. I mean, I paid half the mortgage, but it was all in Mike’s name.’ A stony look crossed Brydie’s face. ‘He liked to be in control.’

There was a moment of charged silence before the cloud passed.

‘Anyway,’ she said brightly, shaking her head again as if to dislodge an unpleasant memory. ‘Thanks again for calling me. I can’t tell you how much it means to have my girl back.’

She bent down and hoisted Sunny into her arms.

‘Sure. Hey, listen, um, do you have to go right away, or would you maybe like to get a coffee?’

I couldn’t quite believe the words had come out of my mouth. Had I just asked this woman on a date? This mountain-dwelling, tattooed hippy with a recalcitrant dog who, not thirty seconds ago, had hinted at some pretty serious relationship baggage?

Yes. I had. Because she was adorable and I was totally intrigued.

‘Oh! Um. Well. Um,’ she said, sounding slightly panicked.

Not exactly the enthusiastic response I’d hoped for.

‘I think I should get Sunny home. It’s been kind of an ordeal and everything...’ Brydie stared down at the footpath for a long moment, Sunny lolling at ease in her arms. ‘But perhaps... a drink sometime? Maybe... if you want.’ She shrugged and blew a curl out of her eye.

‘Yes! Absolutely. That would be great. I’ll call you. Can you leave Sunny’s tag so I’ve got your number?’

She laughed. ‘Sure, I’m going to have it tattooed on her anyway.’ She started to walk towards her car, a battered ute parked a couple of doors down. ‘Oh, and thanks for taking Sunny to the vet, by the way. You really didn’t have to do that.’

‘It was really no trouble. When she turned up last night all she wanted to do was sleep, but after we talked this morning and I realised how far she’d travelled, I figured she had to be in a bit of pain.’

Brydie froze. ‘Last night? But you called me this morning.’ The stony expression returned.

‘Yeah. I found her on the doorstep about eight o’clock, but I was having a...’ And that was the precise moment I realised my mistake.

‘Party.’

Brydie narrowed her eyes. ‘So I’ve been going out of my mind since Friday – that’s *two whole days* imagining goodness knows what,’ she spat. ‘And you could have saved me at least twelve hours of anguish, but you didn’t because it interfered with your social life?’

When she put it that way, it did sound pretty bad. I didn’t know how to respond, which didn’t matter because Brydie wasn’t interested in an explanation.

She settled Sunny into the car, strode around to the driver’s side, slammed the door and left.

‘Can you believe he actually had the nerve to call me after that?’ I scrunched my face into the most incredulous expression I could muster as I loaded a moss green oil paint onto my palette knife. ‘And more than once! He’s been bugging me for a week now.’

‘Yes, I can believe it, Brydie. The guy liked you. He felt bad. He wanted to see you again.’ Scott shifted uncomfortably in his seat. For a long-limbed guy like my brother, the cramped shed I used as my studio wasn’t the most pleasant place to spend a hot summer’s afternoon. ‘It’s not that complicated.’

‘Good. He *should* feel bad. Waiting so long to tell me he had Sunny,’ I muttered. ‘And hold still or I’ll never get this right.’

Scott scowled. ‘I still don’t know how you convinced me to let you paint my portrait as my anniversary present for Rachel.’

‘Because she’s your wife and you love her and it’s a very thoughtful gift,’ I said, rather enjoying my brother’s obvious awkwardness. ‘It is complicated, by the way.’

‘Huh?’

‘The thing with Leo. It would be totally complicated.’

‘Why?’

I lowered my brush. 'Seriously?'

'Seriously. Explain to me why having a drink with someone you find attractive, who clearly also finds *you* attractive, would be such a bad thing. And don't tell me you don't find him attractive, because you wouldn't have spent the last week talking about him if you weren't into him.' Scott punctuated his speech with a self-satisfied smile.

I rolled my eyes in reply. Just because Leo had slate grey eyes and shaggy hair the colour of dark chocolate, didn't mean I was going to fall at his feet. Just because he had full lips and a chin dimple and... Whatever. So what if standing outside his house on that muggy Sunday afternoon, talking and joking, had made me feel as dazed and dreamy as a long day in the sun. None of that mattered.

'Scott, how could I possibly go out with a man who lives in the house I shared with my ex-boyfriend? And ex-boyfriend who, in case you've forgotten, made that house a very unhappy home for me.'

'I haven't forgotten,' Scott said.

'Let's say I did go out with Leo, and things went well and we started seeing each other. How could I stay the night in a house where, after I told him I wanted to quit my soul-destroying finance job and paint full-time, Mike took a knife to every single one of my paintings?'

'There's no question that Mike's a terrible human being, Bry. But maybe Leo's *not*. Eventually you're going to have to take a chance.'

I didn't reply. I knew Scott just wanted me to be happy, wanted me to move on from my trainwreck of a relationship with Mike. I wanted that, too – but it would be impossible if I dated Leo. Aside from his unfortunate address, the fact that he could even afford the place – not to mention that shiny new Audi he drove – undoubtedly meant he worked long hours in some soulless corporate job and was obsessed with money. Mike had been exactly the same and he wanted me to be that way, too. But as I learned to my extreme detriment, corporate slaves and artists make very uncomfortable bedfellows.

And if I had thought about any of this in those few moments after Leo asked me out for coffee, I never would have suggested we have a drink. I think I was just flattered by the attention, and flustered to find myself standing on the footpath outside a house I never thought I'd see again. Plus there was Sunny's miraculous journey from my place to Leo's. Who wouldn't want to believe such a serendipitous tale could have a happy ending?

'I will take a chance, Scott,' I said softly. 'I'm not going to grow bitter and lonely. But Leo's not the right guy. For now it's just going to be me and Sunny.'

Suddenly, Scott stood up and stretched. 'Sorry, I can't sit still for another second. That'll have to do for today. Where is that renegade fleabag, anyway?'

'She's confined to the verandah while I'm working these days,' I said as I shoved my brushes into a jar of turpentine. 'I rigged up some old fly screens to enclose it. I feel really guilty that she can't roam, but until I can afford to get the whole boundary properly fenced, I can't risk her taking off again.'

'You don't think she learned her lesson the first time? Her paws still haven't healed properly.'

I shrugged. I never imagined Sunny would disappear even once; I wouldn't put *anything* past her at this point, and I couldn't bear to lose her again.

'Fair enough. I'll tell her you still love her when I go inside to steal a beer from your fridge. I reckon I've earned it.'

'Grab me one, too?' I said as Scott pushed open the studio door, allowing a listless puff of warm summer air to drift in. At least it wasn't humid. Heat I could handle; humidity was a curly-haired girl's worst enemy.

A moment later, I heard a sharp cry from the house. I poked my head through the doorway to see Scott sprinting towards the studio,

looking positively stricken.

‘She’s gone!’ he shouted.

Despite the heat, my blood instantly ran cold.

‘What?’

Scott reached the studio and clutched my arm. ‘The fly screens are torn to shreds and there’s no sign of her. Sunny’s gone, Bry. Again.’

I would have been less surprised to see a Kardashian at my front door at nine o’clock on a Tuesday night.

‘Brydie?’

‘The Sun is on her way.’

‘Okay... Is that, like, a secret password? Are you a spy?’

Brydie scowled. Clearly she wasn’t in the mood for excellent jokes. ‘Sunny has gone missing again. You remember Sunny? My dog? The one you failed to tell me was snoozing on your couch for 12 hours?’

‘I remember,’ I said, feeling irritated by her attitude at the same time as being really glad to see her. ‘She’s not here now though.’

‘I know that,’ Brydie snapped. ‘She only disappeared this afternoon. But she’s on her way. I’ll wait.’ She cocked her head toward the scruffy overnight bag at her feet.

I didn’t know what to say. It seemed preposterous that Sunny would somehow be able to make the 110km journey from Blackheath to Erko once again. The odds had been stacked against her the first time; surely she’d have no chance the second time around. And if Brydie was holed up at my place for days, waiting, she wouldn’t be out looking for Sunny in places she might actually be.

But behind her flinty glare, there was a hint of desperation in Brydie’s gaze. She needed to believe The Sun would come out again in Erskineville.

There was also the not-insignificant fact that I hadn't been able to get this woman out of my head for the past week. Having her turn up on my porch and demand to spend the night was way more than I could have hoped for. I'm not the kind of guy who squanders opportunities.

I stepped aside. 'Well then, I guess you'd better come in.'

Ugh. I'd forgotten how hot this place was. I started sweating virtually the instant I stepped foot in Leo's house. I couldn't believe I'd endured five sweltering Sydney summers in this greenhouse. I would have melted if Mike and I had stayed together much longer.

'Since you're here, how about that drink you promised me?'

I turned around to see Leo leaning against the kitchen counter, proffering a glass of white wine and wearing an optimistic smile. In spite of myself, I felt the corners of my mouth twitching upwards.

No. I was not going to get involved with this guy.

'This isn't a date, Leo. I never promised you anything,' I said as sternly as I could manage.

Leo's breath whooshed out in an exasperated sigh. 'Look, Brydie,' he began. 'I'm very, very sorry I didn't call you the instant Sunny made herself at home on my sofa two minutes before all my friends arrived for my housewarming. And I don't mean to be blunt, but your dog is actually not my responsibility. She's yours, and yet you were the one who let her vanish from your property, not once but twice.'

Ouch. His words felt like a slap to the face, and they smarted all the more because they were absolutely true.

'Furthermore, I would point out that I did, in fact, contact you as soon as it was practical to do so. And in closing, I would also remind you that I took Sunny to the vet to get her poor little paws treated before you arrived to collect her.'

‘Furthermore? In closing? What are you, a lawyer?’

‘Yes, actually. I am.’

My heart sank. Another corporate drone. I knew it.

‘I’m sorry, Leo,’ I said. ‘You’re right, I was unfair. You did the best you could for Sunny, and I do appreciate it.’

Leo’s stormy face brightened. ‘So how about that drink? I don’t think I’m being too presumptuous when I say I think we like each other.’

In spite of myself, my heart gave a little lurch at his words. ‘We do. I do, but...’ I shook my head. ‘I just can’t.’ I told Leo what I’d confessed to Scott earlier that day – how I couldn’t date a man who lived in the house I’d shared with Mike, especially one who seemed just like Mike. ‘Your house is haunted, Leo, and I’m afraid of ghosts.’

‘So you think I’m a materialistic workaholic who wants to tell you how to live your life? Like your ex, right?’

‘Am I wrong? You’re a lawyer who lives in a million-dollar home, drives an Audi and throws dinner parties.’

Leo chuckled ruefully. ‘I *knew* that dinner party was a bad idea. But other than that, yes, you are wrong. I’m a lawyer who works in socially deprived areas, mainly with refugees and asylum seekers. I bought this house with the proceeds of 15 years of *seriously* hard work, and a small inheritance from my father, who died when I was twenty-three. The Audi is a company car, and I feel ridiculous every time I drive it.’

‘Oh.’

Leo set the wine glass on the kitchen bench and strode towards me. He placed his big hands firmly on my shoulders. ‘I have no interest in controlling you, Brydie, and I doubt very much that I could even if I wanted to,’ he said. ‘I’m not your ex. I only want to get to know you.’

My head was spinning. Leo’s face was so close to mine, I could feel his warm breath on my skin. I wanted to kiss him with an intensity I

hadn't felt in a long, long time. *Damn it!* I was doing just fine until The Sun disappeared. Now I scarcely knew which way was up.

Leo's arms slipped from my shoulders and encircled my waist as he lowered his lips toward mine. *Oh, bugger it. I'm just going to kiss him.*

And then my mobile phone bleeped.

The sound was so intrusive, it might as well have been a chainsaw.

'Leave it,' Leo murmured, making no move to let me go.

'But it might be Scott,' I whispered.

'Scott?' he said sharply, pulling away.

'My brother. He's at my place, looking for Sunny.'

'Oh, right,' Leo said. He looked sheepish, as though embarrassed that he'd jumped to the wrong conclusion. Welcome to my world, buddy.

I fished my phone from the side pocket of my bag and read the text.

**She's back, Bry! Got herself shut in next door's garage.
Taking her to my place til you get back. S xx**

In an instant, I felt all the tension drain from my body. My girl was home. Again.

'Good news?'

'The best,' I told Leo. 'Sunny's back, and my brother's looking after her until tomorrow. So...'

There was a very long, very loaded pause. Was I still going to stay the night here, in this house that cost me so much, in so many ways?

Leo broke the silence. 'So how about I drive you home?'

'But my car is here.'

'I know,' Leo said. He picked up my keys in one hand, and my overnight bag in the other.

'But if you drive me home in my car, then I'll have to drive you back

here later on.'

'Or tomorrow morning.'

Ohhh. 'Okay.'

Then he kissed me.

AWKWARD CHOCOLATES BY
GEORGINA PENNEY



AWKWARD CHOCOLATES

GEORGINA PENNEY

‘How are you getting on, Tom? The trick is to rub it a bit and make it kind of big, but not so big that it’s strange.’

Tom McGregor looked at himself in the bathroom mirror, his expression a picture of incredulity as Mary’s voice came through the locked door. ‘This is *not* happening, Mary.’

‘What do you mean? Am I embarrassing you?’

‘You could say that.’

There was a moment of silence on the other side of the door. After a while, Tom breathed a sigh of relief. She had left.

He squared his shoulders, tried a couple of facial expressions in the mirror and held up his phone, taking two pictures before an unfamiliar sense of panic overwhelmed him. Should he make himself a bit bigger? Was it a full hard-on or a semi? What if Claire didn’t like the picture? What if he’d read the text wrong and he was about to make a total idiot of himself? And why had he made the mistake of asking John what a dick pic was in Mary’s company? After she had finished Googling and lecturing him, it had just seemed easier to escape to their bathroom to get away.

‘Although, if it’s small, you might want to go the whole way and make it as big as possible. I read that some men stick beer bottles next to theirs to show size. You know, so people can see proportions and things.’

Tom squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn’t believe he had gotten

himself into this situation. He briefly wondered what Steph would have thought of this. He could just imagine his wife in Heaven in this moment, nudging his Nan in the ribs as they laughed at his current predicament.

‘Tom?’

He rolled his eyes. ‘Mary, I’m fine. I can do this on my own.’

‘I can get John to come in there and help you if you need.’

Tom’s eyes widened in horror. ‘No! Just leave me alone for a minute—’

‘JOHNATHAN!’

‘What?’ came John’s distant reply.

‘Tom is having trouble taking the picture. Can you come up and help?’

‘No, he doesn’t need to come up here. *I’m fine—*’

‘And don’t take the picture straight from the top or it will just look like a sausage. Try being a little artistic—JOHNATHAN! Are you coming or not?!’

‘Oh for God’s sake, Mary. Let the man have some peace!’

An argument ensued on the other side of the door, resulting in Mary stomping down the stairs.

Tom breathed another sigh of relief.

He raised his phone to take another picture, and realised that whatever effort he’d gone to get himself hard had worn off. He looked down, focusing on his pants pooled around his ankles and only now realising that he was standing on a faded Peppa Pig bath mat. ‘This is *ridiculous*.’

‘That’s what I said, mate,’ John said from the other side of the door.

‘I mean, whatever happened to flowers, chocolates and getting drunk before falling into bed?’ Tom muttered.

‘Exactly my views on the subject. You decent?’

Tom pulled up his trousers and opened the door to find John on the landing, holding a beer out to him.

‘Cheers.’

‘Don’t mention it.’

‘Trust me. We are never mentioning this again.’ Tom followed his friend back downstairs to the living room. Mary could be heard pointedly banging pots and pans around in the kitchen. He’d probably have to apologise later.

John took a seat, picking up the TV remote. ‘So when are you seeing this woman who wants the picture? You met her online, didn’t you?’

Tom focused on the TV. It was easier than looking John in the eye. ‘Aye. Tonight. We’re going to the Jane Austen thing at the castle. I was looking forward to it until I got that text just now.’

John looked out the window. ‘You’ll need wet weather gear. Maybe thermals.’

‘I know.’ Tom sighed. ‘Typical Scottish summer. Can you recommend a florist?’

‘Chocolates are your best bet. Try the place in Kinmoriston.’

‘What place?’

‘The sweet shop on the corner.’

‘Oh, I know the one. Never been there though. Cheers.’ Tom focused for a moment on the rain battering the cottage’s windows and, not for the first time today, wondered how the dating scene had changed so dramatically in the twelve years he’d been out of it.

‘Don’t wear that!’

‘Why?’ Claire Smith threw up her hands in exasperation, glaring at

her sister, Iona. 'What's wrong with it? It's warm! I'm not going to be sitting next to a log fire or anything. I'm going to be out in the weather and I don't want to catch a cold!'

'But it's not sexy! It's summer. Wear a dress for God's sake.' Iona's expression clearly said 'duh.'

'Coughing and blowing my nose isn't sexy either, and that's what I'll be doing if I get a chill.'

Iona ignored that, flopping on Claire's bed and holding her nails out to inspect them. 'Did he send you the picture I texted him for?'

Claire added another thermal undershirt to the one she had just put on, telling herself that at least it was bright red. Red was sexy, wasn't it?

'Aye, but I don't want to look at it because it's so embarrassing knowing that he sent it without *me* asking for it!' Claire heard the note of hysteria in her voice and told herself to calm down.

Tonight was going to be okay. She and Tom had talked online for weeks. He was a nice man. They were just going to a nice play at the castle. It was all going to be *nice*. Or it would have been if Iona hadn't interfered. Now Claire had a picture of Tom's willy on her phone and everything felt weird.

Iona gave her a smug smile. 'As far as he's concerned, you *did* ask for it.'

'Because you stole my phone this morning! What's the point of a willy without a man attached to it?'

'The POINT is that he would have thought you were behind the times if you didn't ask. And do you mean to tell me that you haven't sent him anything back? *Nothing?*'

'NO! Because I didn't know what to say! And how would *you* know what's behind the times and what isn't? You've been with Garry since high school. I don't know where you get all this stuff from!'

Iona rolled her eyes. 'The same place you would have gotten it from if you weren't such a shy idiot. I read it in a book.'

'What book? *The Illustrated Book of Penis Portraiture*?'

'No. It's called *Finding Your Bae: The Guide to Dating NOW*. Bae is spelt B-A-E, by the way.'

'And just what is a bae? A misspelled type of tree? A window? The sound a hound makes?'

'It's what the kids are calling each other, apparently.'

'I'm a thirty-two-year-old woman, not a kid, and I don't need to find my *bae*. I just need to find someone who is nice, likes cats, knows which knife and fork to use in public and can tolerate my crazy sister!' Claire threw one of the light summer dresses Iona had dumped on the bed at her sister.

Iona caught the dress and threw it right back. 'Ohhh, look at Miss High Standards.'

'Look at Miss Realistic! What if he asks me what I think of the picture? Or worse, what if he works out that I didn't ask for it and feels really bad?'

'He won't feel bad unless you tell him. Or I tell him, which I'll do if you don't calm down.'

Claire growled. 'I should have gone along with that plan to bash you to death with my teddy bear when I was two.'

Iona snorted. 'I would have liked to see you try.'

'Don't push it. I just might try again.' Claire took one last look at herself in the mirror as she pulled on a bright red raincoat. After two hours sitting in the inevitable summer downpour that happened during the Austen Theatre Company's yearly performance of *Pride and Prejudice*, she'd be grateful for it. She just hoped Tom didn't mind her looking like a giant tomato, and that he wouldn't want to talk about what she was thinking of as 'The Picture'.

Tom's palms were sweating, his stomach was roiling, and he felt so disoriented he almost missed the turn to Claire's home.

He tightened his hands on the steering wheel. For a man that routinely handled dangerous machinery in his sawmill, this was something else entirely.

Claire hadn't replied to the picture he had sent her. Had she hated it? Or worse, had she found it funny? What if she showed someone else and it got around? He could just see the headline in the local paper now. *'Check Out This Local Lumberjack's Chopper!'*

No, when he'd talked to her online and on the phone, she hadn't seemed the vindictive type. She'd seemed nice. Sweet, even. Which was why the text had taken him by surprise. He wasn't conservative by any means, but he much preferred getting to know someone before getting into something as intimate as sending pictures.

Maybe Mary was right and he was behind the times.

Moments later, Tom was standing on Claire's front step, trying not to make eye contact with the twenty or so garden gnomes massed there.

Not a good sign.

Why didn't dating profiles include important information like garden gnome fetishes? Or phobias. He'd had a fear of garden gnomes since he was five, when his grandfather had tripped over one and died. Tom knew intellectually that the heart attack Grandad had been having at the time had been the real cause, but still...

He made the mistake of looking directly at the nearest gnome.

It looked belligerent.

'Get away from there!' Claire whispered to Iona who had bolted for the living room window the minute they heard a car approaching and was now peeking through a miniscule gap in the curtains.

‘Oh! He’s handsome! Tall. Nice coat. You should look at that picture. I think he’s got a big one.’

‘Stop it!’

‘Here he comes! He’s holding a big box of chocolates, too. It looks like he brought them from your shop. He knows you own it, doesn’t he?’

‘No. You told me not to tell him where I worked until I met him in real life, remember? Just in case he turns out to be a stalker. He must have bought them this afternoon after I left.’

‘Oh aye. I remember. You should pay me for all this intelligent advice. Now that I’ve seen him, I wouldn’t mind him stalking me. Oh, now he’s looking at the house and... Okay, that’s weird.’

Claire paused in her hunt for her house keys. ‘What? What’s weird?’

‘He’s staring at one of those horrible garden gnomes Mum keeps giving you. I don’t know why you don’t donate them to charity or something.’

‘Because Mum volunteers at the charity shop and she would know. I’m leaving now.’ Claire retrieved the picnic basket she had prepared earlier and darted through the front door, more nervous than she had ever been in her life. The feel of her phone in her pocket reminded her that she had a naked picture of Tom in her possession, and taking in his dark brown hair, brown eyes and lumberjack body, she was beginning to wish she’d taken a better look at it. Although Iona had been right; he was giving that garden gnome a very strange look.

‘Talk to him!’

She heard Iona’s hiss from the window, built up her courage and spoke.

‘Hello!’

Tom started at the sound of a musical female voice and realised

he'd just been caught eyeballing a garden gnome instead of pressing Claire's doorbell.

'Claire?' He took in a pretty, curvaceous woman, much like the picture on her profile, with the exception of her hair. It had looked blonde in her picture, but it was actually light brown. She was clasping a picnic basket to her chest. It had a thermos sticking out of it.

He felt a spark of hope. Despite the constant threat of rain, summer picnics in Scotland were one of his favourite things.

'Tom, I take it?' She gave him a smile that was endearingly shy. He tried to put it together with the raunchy text message he'd received, but came up blank.

'Aye. Ah. Here.' He thrust the box of chocolates at her. 'This is for you. I, ah, well... Did you get the picture?' He cleared his throat, felling his face heat up painfully.

He watched as a blush almost as red as her raincoat travelled from her neck to her hairline. 'Aye! Ah, aye, I did. Uhm. Thanks.' She looked down at the chocolates, her voice full of forced cheer. 'These are great! About that picture—'

She hated it. You've made a total idiot of yourself. Tom tried to ignore the voice in his head, but he was having trouble. 'I haven't sent one before, so if you didn't like it—'

'No! I mean, *yes*. Thanks for sending it though. I mean, I like looking at... I like... but—' She blew out a breath. 'Okay, this is awkward.'

'Aye.' The garden gnome caught Tom's eye again. If anything it looked even more belligerent, like it was telling Tom to get his act together.

There was a sound from inside the house, kind of like a snorting groan.

'Excuse me.'

Before Tom knew it Claire had thrust the picnic basket at him and had darted back inside the house again. There was a dull thud, a yelp, and then she reappeared, brushing her hair out of her eyes. 'Sorry. My sister is a pain.'

'She's here?' Tom caught the curtain of the nearest window twitching.

Claire's smile looked faintly manic. 'Aye, I'm afraid so. Shall we go? I don't think the weather is going to get any better, but they usually perform holding umbrellas if it gets really bad. The show must go on!'

'Maybe I spoke too soon.' Claire stood at the top of the hill overlooking Drumfriar's Castle. There was a stage set up on the lawn, the same one the Austen Theatre Company used every year. It comprised of a shoestring plywood drawing room scene, complete with two benches and cushions that already looked saturated from the steadily falling rain.

There was already a crowd of people huddled under umbrellas on picnic blankets, sipping out of plastic wine glasses. Seeing them left Claire with a warm feeling of pride. Sunshine might be optional for a Scottish summer, but her people knew how to enjoy themselves.

She looked at Tom. While he'd been polite during the drive, he appeared to be the strong, silent type. She just hoped he didn't mind being wet. 'I don't think there's anywhere left to sit that isn't in a puddle.'

'There's a spot next to the stage. Will that do?'

'It will have to.' She gave him a smile and felt a wave of relief wash over her when he smiled back.

Before tonight, Tom would never have thought sitting in an inch of water, sipping wine and eating soggy scones while watching actors in sodden period clothing bellowing their lines over the sound of rain and wind would be romantic. But it was dawning on him that he was

having fun, and most of that fun was coming from watching Claire watch the play.

She obviously knew the story by heart, having confessed to seeing the play four years in a row, but here she was hanging off every word, ignoring the rain or the fact that the actor that played Mr Darcy was also playing Mr Bennet. It was all a little odd for Tom, especially when the actor forgot to take his 'Mr Bennet' glasses off when Mr Darcy kissed Elizabeth at the end.

When they had first arrived, Tom had sat down next to Claire with a few inches between them, but before he knew it Claire was snuggled up to his side, all soft and warm. Without thinking about it, he was soon bracing himself on a hand on the watery ground behind her hip. He was cold, saturated and enjoying himself more than ever. The play ended, and finally Claire turned her attention to him, giving him a wide smile. 'That was fantastic!'

'You think so?'

'I do.' She looked down at herself. 'I didn't realise how wet we were getting though. What are we going to do now? We're going to have to go somewhere to warm up. A hot shower wouldn't go astray.'

Thinking of being in the shower with Claire brought up the memory of taking that picture this morning. She hadn't really said anything about it. If anything she had looked embarrassed by it. What if she hadn't liked what she had seen? Worse, what if things had changed in the bedroom in the time Tom had been out of the dating scene? What if Claire expected things and he didn't meet those expectations? He had always felt confident about being able to show a woman a good time, but it had been years since Steph...

'How about I take you home?' he said finally, forcing a smile.

Claire grinned. 'That sounds great!'

'So?'

‘What?’

‘Don’t “what” me. How did it go?’ Iona’s voice took on a buzzsaw edge.

Claire gnawed on her lower lip. ‘It went... fine.’

‘Fine?’

‘Fine. We watched the play. We got rained on, and then he took me home.’ Claire held the phone to her ear while she opened a bag and scooped in lemon drops until her scales registered two hundred grams. She added another scoop for good measure, giving wee Matilda Mathews a wink. Matilda didn’t notice; she was too busy examining a giant jar of sherbet.

‘And?’

‘And that was all. We couldn’t talk during the play, and by the end of it we were both shivering—’

‘So that’s when you should have asked him in so you could get naked and share your bodily warmth!’

‘I know. I should have but he didn’t seem... I don’t know.’

‘What do you mean, you *don’t know*?’

‘It was kind of weird. Thank you, Matilda. Have a nice day now.’ Claire took Matilda’s money, handed her the lemon drops and waved her out of the shop.

‘What do you mean, *kind of weird*?’

‘What is this? An interrogation?’

‘Aye! What’s wrong with you? He owns his own business, he’s tall, dark and handsome, and from what you have said before, he’s nice. What more do you want? I picked Garry because he could kiss all right and knew how to open a wine bottle, and look where that got me? Two kids, a nice house and great sex when Garry and I can be bothered. It’s not rocket science, Claire. You said you were lonely. You’ve met a man. Now make it work—’

Claire felt frustration rising. ‘It’s that message you sent! It’s made things awkward. Every time I look at him I think of his willy! While we were watching the play I could distract myself, but when we got in the car—I don’t know, it was just... *there!* His pants were wet and fit him well, and I couldn’t help thinking about it and that picture he sent me. I mean, what if he thinks I’m kinkier in the bedroom than I am because of it? What if he wants pictures of me? What am I supposed to say? What if he wants me to get a Brazilian wax or something? I mean, I would, but with Auntie Elizabeth being the only beautician in the village... And I think he wants me to tell him what I think of the picture, but I haven’t looked at it properly yet and... And it’s *awkward!*’ She winced as she realised she was yelling when two elderly ladies gave her a sharp look through the shop window.

‘Well un-awkward it! Meet his willy in person while you’re both naked and then it won’t be so weird.’

‘You’re no help!’ Claire hung up the call and slumped down on her chair behind the counter, resting her head in her hands.

The shop doorbell rang but she momentarily ignored it, pretending she was looking through the box of stock on the floor. Edinburgh Rock in its multiple colours stared back at her.

A man’s voice, obviously talking on the phone filled the shop.

‘I know. Aye. Aye, Mary, I appreciate the advice but—chocolates. Aye. I’m getting her some more chocolates and I’m going to call her—’ He made a low groaning noise, almost inaudible. ‘No, I haven’t sent her another picture! Why? Because one made it weird enough. Anyway. Have to go. Thanks, Mary. Thanks. Bye.’

Claire bobbed up like a meerkat. ‘Tom?’

‘Claire?’ Tom spun around. His expression of wide-eyed horror looked completely incongruous on such a big man.

She fluttered her fingers in a wave. ‘Ah... Hi?’

‘You work *here?*’

‘I do actually. Well, not quite. I own the shop.’

‘You do?’

‘Aye.’

He closed his eyes briefly, and she was relatively sure that was a rude word he’d just mouthed. ‘So the chocolates I gave you the other day?’

‘Were from here, aye. You must have stopped in to buy them after I had left for the day. Stacey would have served you.’

She watched as a blush travelled up his cheeks. ‘So, ah, did you hear what I said on the phone?’

‘I did.’ Her smile turned rueful. She looked out the window and then at the clock on the cash register. It was five minutes from closing time. She replayed in her mind what she’d heard him say on the phone. Just hearing what he’d said about the picture told her she needed to come clean if this was going to go any further.

‘Now that you’re here, there’s no need for you to pick me up from my house, is there? Why don’t we go to the pub for a drink? Or we could go to the café for a coffee. There’s something that I have to tell you. It’s not bad. I don’t think it is at least. It’s ah... I’d just like to have a chat. We didn’t have a proper one at the play. The rain and everything.’

Tom looked at her warily. ‘All right.’ He looked down at the chocolates he was holding in his hands. ‘So, I suppose it would be strange if I bought these now?’

Claire’s mouth twitched in a smile. ‘Maybe. But then again, I’ve never said no to a handsome man holding chocolates. So did you want the café or the pub? If you don’t mind, maybe the pub is better. Do you drink?’

‘After the scare you gave me just now, I could definitely do with a beer.’

‘You said you wanted to tell me something?’ Tom asked moments later, after placing their drinks on the table, a pint for him and a Prosecco for Claire.

‘Oh, well, aye. There is something.’ Claire took a sip of her drink, thinking that this was a lot harder now they were looking at each other. ‘That picture I—that picture you sent?’

He took a gulp of his beer. ‘Aye. I’m sorry if it, ah, wasn’t what you wanted. I wasn’t sure how to give you what you were asking for.’

‘Well, this is going to sound very strange, but I didn’t ask you for it.’ She knew she had said the words wrong the minute she caught the look on Tom’s face. He leaned back in his chair, his expression impassive but for the flush.

‘But I liked it... I mean, I really liked seeing... oh, this is such an awful conversation, but if we’re going to...’ She paused and drew a deep breath. ‘Look, my sister stole my phone and sent the text. She got this book about dating and decided that you and I – or more to the point, *I* – was doing it wrong, and was trying to help. At least, I *think* she was trying to help, and I didn’t know how to tell you before that it wasn’t me. It was Iona. Although I really... Thank you for sending the picture. I was just too shy to know what to say. I’m afraid I’m not up to date with how to do this. I’d rather see someone naked in person instead of in a picture for the first time, and I have no idea what to do to “*find my bae*” and—’

Tom frowned. ‘What’s a bay?’

Claire threw up her hands in the air. ‘Exactly what I asked! Anyway, she sent the text, and you sent the picture, and I looked at it just now and it was very sexy. Although, the Peppa Pig—’

Tom groaned, covering his eyes. ‘This has to be the most embarrassing conversation I have ever had.’

‘I know! Me too!’

Tom lowered his hand and they made eye contact. Tom's mouth twitched. 'You know, your text came through as I was visiting my friend and I didn't know what to make of it. But the short story is that I took that picture in his bathroom with his wife, Mary, on the other side of the door trying to give me advice—'

'*You didn't!* Was that her on the phone just now?' Claire burst into laughter.

'Aye.' Tom began to chuckle. 'It had to be one of the most awkward moments of my life, but I did it because when we had chatted I liked you and I didn't want you to think I was uncool. It's been years since I dated anyone and—'

'You didn't want to seem like you didn't know what you were doing?' Claire slumped in her chair in relief. 'Me too.' She reached across the table, covering Tom's hand with her own. 'Thank you though. I really appreciate you trying.'

'You do?' Tom looked down at their hands.

'Aye. Although, maybe without Peppa Pig next time.' Claire erupted into a fit of giggles. 'Thinking of it now, you in your friend's bathroom. It's so funny! I mean, oh my God!'

'You know, this should be making me feel offended now.'

'But it's not?'

'No. It's silly now. I tell you what, why don't we try something?'

Before Claire could say anything, Tom had abruptly stood up, taken hold of his pint glass and walked over to the bar. She watched him go, feeling confusion and a sudden spark of worry that she actually had offended him. She craned her head, looking for him, but he had rounded a corner.

Should she follow him? She began to feel genuinely worried.

She began to collect her bag, getting ready to slide out of the booth. Maybe she should call him first, or maybe she could find him if she was

quick enough—

‘Excuse me?’

She looked up and Tom was back again. He was standing next to the table, giving her a sexy sort of smile. What was going on?

‘Tom, what—’

He spoke before she could finish the question. ‘Aye, see, I was just at the bar there and I saw you sitting alone. Are you with anyone?’

Claire’s eyes widened. She suddenly felt warm all over. ‘Ah, no, actually. Well, there was someone here before, but he’s gone. There was this whole awkward chocolate thing—’ She huffed out a breath, giving him a rueful smile, realising all she had to do was play along. ‘No, I’m alone. Would you like to take a seat?’

‘That sounds great.’ Tom slid into the booth across from her and held out his hand over the table. ‘I’m Tom.’

‘Claire.’

‘So Claire, do you live around here?’

She stifled a burst of laughter. ‘I do. I own the sweet shop on the corner of the high street.’

Tom’s eyes widened theatrically. ‘Oh really? Because I was just there and the woman who worked there said that these might be a nice gift for someone special. What do you think?’ He picked up the chocolates he’d left the table.

‘I think they would be lovely.’

‘It wouldn’t be too awkward if I gave them to you?’

‘Well, I never say no to chocolate.’ Claire laughed. ‘Thank you.’

‘My pleasure.’ They both shared a mutual grin.

It was Claire who spoke next. ‘So, ah, Tom, why don’t you tell me about yourself?’

‘I can do that. Well, I own the sawmill in the next village. I’m thirty-five and I have a phobia of nude photography, garden gnomes and Peppa Pig bath mats.’

‘Oh, you do? Well I’m thirty-two and I have a huge collection of garden gnomes, because my mother loves them and keeps giving them to me. I don’t have much of an opinion on Peppa Pig bath mats, and I’ve recently seen a nude photograph that I think is quite hot. In fact, I think it’s *really* hot.’

‘You do?’

‘Aye. Definitely.’

That earned her a slow, sexy smile. ‘Well, I’ve got this reservation at the restaurant next door for two. I kind of made it on an impulse just now, and I could do with some company. Want to join me?’

‘Definitely.’

LILY AND VIV BY VANESSA
STUBBS



LILY AND VIV

VANESSA STUBBS

Teddy Moss stood in front of the small caravan mirror. The day was hot as hell, and there was a salt haze across the glass. He could hear the roar of the ocean behind him, punctuated by laughter as his mates drank beer in the afternoon sun. He pulled off his eye patch. The skin around his bad eye was ghostly white. Other blokes had watch or t-shirt tan marks; he had a patch mark.

It'd been two years ago that he'd started hiding his eye. He was 16. A fancy dress party his parents had made him go to. His mum had bought him a pirate suit, complete with puffy satin pants and a plastic sword. He'd grumbled something about 'not wearing that effing pussy outfit', but he'd kept the patch. He still remembered the first time he'd slipped it over his face, felt the now familiar pull across the back of his head, the disorientation of seeing half the world.

There was something so absurd about wearing an eye patch, and his default reaction to everything back then had pretty much been 'screw it', so he'd worn it to the party and then to school the next day. It was stupid, really. It wasn't like he was blind ; it was just a lazy eye. It didn't bother him, but sometimes when he was dog tired it slipped about like a marble in a pinball machine, twisting and rolling with a mind of its own. He could still see okay, but it wasn't seeing that was the problem.

He scraped a sun-browned hand through his hair. It felt like saltbush. That's what happened when the surf spray was your shower, and all you had was time and the endless curve of blue sky above you.

Teddy splashed his face and neck with cool water and pressed the heels of his palms into his eye sockets. He straightened and looked at himself again. He looked so weird and lopsided with the patch off. It had become such a part of him, maybe the main part. He was 'the dude with the patch.' People he'd never met had heard of him.

He thought back to the first day he wore it to school. There had been sniggers, but no more than usual. There had been lame pirate jokes, and Dave Boyd had snatched it off his face during chemistry and everyone had laughed. But being called a pirate was better than what they usually called him. He'd stuck with it. He bought one made of tooled black leather. It sat better on his face and let in a bit more light. It was also the year his lankiness filled out. He started to wear his hair longer, the salt making it a bit wild. He got his first surfboard and spent longer and longer out in the waves. He was a decent surfer, but mostly he didn't have to deal with people. He started to believe that he cared less about what they thought, that he was free. But the thing about people was that they got into you, like a hook through the jelly of an eyeball. Even when you tried not to care, deep down you still did.

Sometimes he wished he could just leave it off. When dawn was just cracking open the day and it was him and the waves, not a soul on the beach, he sometimes left the patch rolled up in his towel. Those mornings were magic. He could see for miles. He could see the way the earth rounded at the edges of the horizon, like a glass dome. But a flick of panic would always get him when he came in. There was always some deep, lingering fear that Jasper Parkins or Dave Boyd or Viv Wylder had stolen it and thrown it into the sea, and he'd have to walk with his bad eye exposed to his car. He pulled it back over his face.

'Teddy! Teddy! Teddy!' He stepped out of the caravan to the sound of his name being chanted by four guys with a case of beer already sunk. They were arranged in a semi-circle, their legs too long for the fold out chairs. They were supine already, worshipping at the shrine of beer, which sat in the middle like a campfire or a religious icon. It was still hot, the air humid and weightless, like a warm bath. Behind them

the sun was tinged with red as it slipped behind the line of gum trees. Someone was cooking steak nearby and the smell of it made Teddy's mouth water.

Mark pressed a six-pack into his stomach. 'You've got some catching up to do.'

Teddy sat on the empty chair and obediently cracked open a beer. He enjoyed the cold burn of it in his throat. He didn't mind a drink; he just didn't get how the others all drank 'til wipe out. He wanted to be out on his board, not sleeping till midday.

'So, who's the chick?' said Mark, loudly, so they all heard.

Teddy felt his face, already hot from too much sun, redden. He shrugged. Lily was her name. She drove her grandfather's old Valiant. It was the car he'd noticed first – aqua and looking like how summer tasted. The tip of her surfboard stuck out the open back window like a cheeky tongue.

'She a sort?' Pete was already slurring his words. 'You know some of the hot ones from school are going tonight?'

A picture came into Teddy's mind. He knew the kinds of girls they were talking about. Everything about them was smooth. Their straight hair, their teeth and skin. Their voices. He didn't trust these women. There was nothing real, no texture. They were transparent and cool, like holding a jellyfish in your palm.

'Yeah,' he said, nodding. He knew his mates didn't care about this stuff. All they wanted was to get laid, preferably with a hot chick.

Mark winked at him. 'Reckon you might be in there. You teaching her to surf or what?'

Teddy smiled, thinking about her coming off her board just this morning. The way her eyes flashed with defiance and she got back on and paddled out to the next set. She might have had the right car and a cool, beat-up vintage surfboard, but Lily was the antithesis of a surfer. Her skin, for starters. She was pale under the dark meat of her wetsuit.

She wasn't made for being dumped, either. Her lips quivered and the cold made the freckles on her nose stand out like sand specks.

They'd sat on the powdery sand as the sun rose into the sky. They angled their faces towards it, drinking in its warmth. He could see her shivering under the faded blue towel she always used, but neither of them wanted to go yet. He wished he had the huge blanket from the caravan to wrap around them.

'So, how long have we known each other?' she'd asked.

He could practically count the hours, but feigned indifference. 'A couple of days. Three? Four maybe?' It was four.

She shrugged her towel higher on her shoulders and shot him a coy look. 'Is that enough time for you to mind if I ask what happened to your eye?'

He picked up a fistful of sand and let it drain through his fingers, hoping she couldn't hear the thump of his heart in the still air. People didn't usually ask about his patch. Maybe that's because he didn't meet that many new people, or maybe they were too embarrassed.

'What do you mean? I'm a pirate,' he deadpanned.

She blushed, the colour creeping up her long, pale neck. She wrapped the towel around her tighter and laughed nervously. 'That's cool. I'm way too nosy anyway.'

He didn't know why but he wanted to tell her the truth: that the patch was just to hide a part of him that was embarrassing, that technically there was nothing wrong with his sight. He wanted to describe the feeling of freedom he got with it off. He wanted to ask her why she was hanging out with some random with an eye patch every morning this week. But he wanted her to like him. He couldn't be that freak everyone had hated.

He shrugged, 'An accident when I was a kid.' He'd figured out a long time ago that this usually shut people up. They didn't push him to show them, they didn't ask more questions. All he had to contend with

was their lowered eyes, the embarrassed twitch of their mouths. And it was kind of true anyway. He got the unlucky roll of the genetics dice.

‘What about you?’ He laughed, desperate to change the subject. ‘Not that you have any, you know, physical deformities.’ He cringed at the lame things coming out of his mouth.

‘What about me, what?’ she said.

His mind scrambled for the right thing to say. ‘Why do you want to learn to surf?’

She looked out towards the ocean, her eyes a paler shade of green on dry land. ‘I’m really smart,’ she said, almost to herself. She looked at him and her face broke open into a smile. She had really even, pretty teeth, if teeth could be pretty. ‘Sorry, um,’ she shook her head, embarrassed. ‘Sorry that sounded really arrogant, didn’t it? What I mean is, I’m a checkout chick in a health food shop. I’m really into health, I’d like to be a naturopath, start my own business but...’ Her voice trailed off.

‘But what?’

She looked into his eyes. ‘I didn’t try at school, no one did. I don’t know if I’ll ever get out of this place. I think surfing makes me feel like anything’s possible. Everything’s simple. Simpler.’

He knew exactly what she meant. ‘You want to go to Sydney then?’

She nodded. ‘None of my friends understand. They want to stay here, party, smoke weed, go to the beach. I don’t know anyone in Sydney. I know it’s only four hours south but it feels like another planet. And my gramps would be devastated.’

‘You live with him?’

‘Yeah, it’s his car, his board. He’s cool. He gets up and has a cup of tea with me before I come down here.’

He wanted to know what happened with her parents, but if she confided more in him he might be expected to reciprocate.

‘It’s alright. Everyone always asks about my parents. They didn’t die or anything. They just had me really young and couldn’t, you know, cope. Mum works as a teacher in Dubai and who knows where dad is.’

‘And your gramps raised you?’

‘Pretty much. I ate a lot of toast growing up. Probably why I’m so into nutrition now.’

He laughed. ‘That’s cool.’ He felt saddened by the image he had of her eating Vegemite on toast for dinner while her mum did other, seemingly more exotic things in Dubai. ‘Do you miss them, your parents?’

‘Not really. It seems so weird to me when people talk about their mum or dad. It’s probably the same for you. You adapt. You probably have better eyesight from your one eye than I do from both.’

He felt a chill down his spine and shivered. He didn’t want to talk about it. Having absent parents was one thing. Looking different was something that marked you in a way that you could never escape. It *was* you.

‘Yeah, maybe. Look, I’d better get back.’ He scratched the back of his neck. ‘My mates will be wondering where I am.’

‘Yeah, sure.’ Her voice had a false note of brightness to it that made him feel bad. ‘Well, I might see you down here tomorrow.’

Coward, he said to himself. He wanted to make her swear on her gramps’ life that she’d be back tomorrow. He wanted to tell her how he felt about her. That she would know someone in Sydney – him. But he stood and picked up his board. He turned back once as he walked up the beach to the caravan park. She was still sitting in the same place, her hair was like luminous tendrils down the back of her back.

‘You gettin’ your act together or what?’ Mark’s voice was loud in his ear and he snapped back to the hot afternoon. ‘We’re going already. You can’t wear your boardies. We might go to a club or something.’

The last thing Teddy felt like doing was going clubbing. A big

bonfire on the beach and maybe a guitar when he'd had a bit more to drink was more his scene. But he nodded. 'Okay. I'll just get some shorts on, wait for me,' he said.

The club was really just the local hotel. It was an odd mix of ageing locals and ring-ins like him and the boys. There was a small beer garden out the back with garish lights strung from the metal roofing and tinny Asian pop playing. He noticed it doubled as a Thai restaurant. He could smell oil frying in the kitchen and ordered chips and spring rolls, enough for everyone. They had no interest in food but they'd thank him later.

They settled into the green plastic chairs, pulling on their sweating beers and making jokes about the music and decor. It was as though all the heat of the day had been trapped under the metal roof. He could feel the sweat trickling down the sides of his body.

Teddy couldn't imagine the girls coming to a dive like this. But Mark would know. He was always hooking up with girls in that effortless way some guys did. Teddy supposed the name for that was 'jock'. It was weird Mark had chosen him as his best mate. He could have chosen anyone. But Teddy would never forget that maths lesson where Mark had stepped in.

'Hey, pirates are with me ya'll,' He'd said. And with that the teasing had stopped and it never started again.

Teddy supposed they were friends. Yeah, they were friends. They hung out, awkwardly at first, and then they surfed together. There was nothing too serious about it. They didn't talk about much other than surfing, but there was a kind of quiet companionship between them. And Mark laughed at Teddy's lame ass jokes and so everyone else did. That made him more confident, and somehow Teddy had become someone in his own right. Not that he'd ever had much confidence around girls. He stayed under the radar. He liked it that way. As long as didn't get teased.

He felt the atmosphere in the beer garden change, like the sudden

dip in air pressure as a southerly swung in. And then he smelled them, not storm clouds but flowers and sweet alcohol. He recognised their faces in the way of minor celebrities. Mark had been right. The girls perched around the table like rare birds, fluffing their hair and checking their phones with shiny nails. It was decided somehow that they were all going to the next town where there was a nightclub that served cocktails. Teddy was past tipsy now. Tipsy was three stops ago on a long and windy road. He never would have spoken up otherwise.

‘Hey, what about we get a bonfire going down on the beach. We’ve got fire twirlers. Some chicks left two near our campsite. And pot,’ he added as a sweetener.

He could feel everyone look towards him, then towards Mark. The girls looked towards their leader, Viv Wylder with her long brown legs and white denim cut offs.

‘I love fire twirling,’ she said, looking at Teddy with an expression he couldn’t read.

Mark slapped him on the back, hard. ‘Only if you get on that guitar of yours, mate.’

Viv ordered girls with shorter legs and less glossy hair to procure Midori and lemonade and plastic cups. Teddy couldn’t help but feel the warmth of their acceptance. Maybe he wasn’t that different to them. Maybe it was time he forgave the past and moved on.

It was a perfect night on the beach, still warm, with the air smelling of barbecues and sea salt. A swollen moon lit the soft waves. They collected wood from the bush behind the caravan park and brought the rest of the beer onto the sand. The fire took a while to light but Teddy felt good to be able to get it going. All those years of camping with his family were paying off. Everyone hooted when the flames sent sparks crackling into the air. It smelt like freedom.

He lit the fire twirlers for Viv Wylder and Hayley Smithers, and the

smell of kerosene mingled with the smoky air. The girls squealed dramatically as they tried to twirl the sticks around their bodies. They were pretty hopeless, but he gave them credit for having a go. He had thought them too staged and self-conscious to make fools of themselves.

He'd never used fire sticks before, but he'd seen it done plenty so he showed them how you had to loosen your grip, your hips, to avoid being singed. Viv Wylder must've been drunk because she grabbed his hand when he was showing her and threaded her fingers through his. He was so shocked that he just stood there, looking at the shiny silver rings on her fingers. This was the girl who had thrown a full Coke can at his head on the bus once. Her eyes twinkled at him in a way he'd only seen in movies made in the 1980s.

'So, where's your guitar? I've heard you're pretty good.'

She was still holding his hand. He willed the words to come out of his mouth but he just stood there, dumb. She must've realised he wasn't going to answer because she let go of him and started up the beach towards the caravan park. She flipped her long, dark hair, and gestured for him to follow. The guitar was on his bed. He wanted to call out to her to come back. He wanted to turn around and head back to the familiar warmth and smell of the fire, but he could feel their eyes on his back. Viv Wylder was a big deal and she'd chosen him.

His legs pumped in the soft sand and he caught up with her. He was breathless and not just because of the short sprint.

'I don't know what you've heard but I'm not that good,' he said.

'Can you play *Smells Like Teen Spirit*?' she asked as they came off the soft sand into the caravan park. He could, but he didn't say anything.

'Is this yours?' She indicated to the beat-up little caravan that had become their home. 'It's so cute and retro. You're sharing with Mark, aren't you? I'm surprised you're not chucked out to sleep on the ground each night. Does he really have a new girl every night?'

‘Ah, no,’ he said. Though he knew Mark had already slept with Kelly White on the beach, twice.

The van was unlocked and she went in. Girls like Viv Wylder did everything as though they owned it. The inside smelled of this morning’s bacon and tonight’s deodorant. He cringed, seeing what she must see. Stuff everywhere. Clothes, towels, mugs half full of coffee. He felt a surge of anger, quick and hot. Why did he care what she thought? He’d had an egg-sized lump just behind the hairline for a week. He had daydreamed that the can of Coke had caused some kind of brain haemorrhage and she’d been imprisoned for manslaughter. He’d imagined her pretty face twisting in distress, how bad she’d feel. Back then he’d wanted to die. Now her pretty face beamed at him from his bed.

‘This one has the guitar on it. I take it it’s yours?’ she said, slowly pulling the instrument onto her lap and thrumming it. She looked up through a veil of hair. She was sexy. It was something about her eyes. They were huge, too big for her face and heavily made up. He imagined what it would feel like to kiss her, feel her body under her clothes.

And he thought for a second beyond that, too – to be the guy who had slept with Viv Wylder. The kudos. Even Mark would be wowed. Maybe she was nicer now. He’d been impressed with her fire twirling, hadn’t he? He sat down next to her, feeling the heat of her body, the naked run of her leg alongside his. All he would have to do was to place his hand on her thigh, turn and kiss her.

Then he thought of Lily and a pain shot through him as though someone had stabbed him in the sternum. He couldn’t face her again if he did this. And he wanted her. He wanted Lily, with her physical vulnerability and mental strength and kindness. He didn’t want someone with a hard little body and harder little heart.

She kissed him then. There was an aggression in her that didn’t surprise him at all. ‘Who would have thought an eye patch would be so goddamn sexy?’ Her voice was husky now.

‘Not you not that long ago,’ he wanted to say, but instead he was drawn into the heat of her mouth. She tasted like coconut oil on salty, sun-warmed skin. He felt his whole body react to her.

But he drew back abruptly. It took her a moment to realise what was happening. For a second he thought she was going to grab him again. He saw something in her eyes and he realised he’d seen it before. Was it anger? Spite? Cruelty? Or was it hurt? His heart jumped, not wanting, even now, to hurt someone. But then she shook her head and smiled a joyless smile, and he saw it was all a game to her. He saw that there would be a consequence now because he’d rejected her.

There was a split second where their bodies were still touching and he knew he could save himself. Would it be so difficult to have one night with this girl? They didn’t have to take it further. She probably didn’t even want to. But he wasn’t like Mark. He wasn’t like any of them. He was different. The knowledge of this slammed into him at the same time as Viv slammed the caravan door shut and the night quietened around him.

He must have slept late because the cabin was hot and bright. The sun made his pupils contract, his eyes ache. A bolt of panic shot through him as he felt for the familiar leather over his eye. It was gone. At home he took the patch off to sleep, but while he’d been here he’d kept it on. Maybe he’d taken it off without realising. He searched the sheets frantically. He searched under the beds and the floor. It wasn’t here.

He could hear the others outside having breakfast in the annex, voices deep and hungover. Rattling laughs. No. Any punishment but this. Walking out among them, all exposed, with the ridiculous tan mark around his pale, weak eye. He felt like an animal, trapped in the dense heat of the van. He ran his fingers through his hair as he scrambled for a solution. There must be a \$2 shop in town. Or maybe Coles would have a toy section. He just needed a hat and sunnies to get out past them all to the car. He never wore sunglasses and couldn’t find Mark’s pair, but he found Mark’s baseball cap and pulled it low.

He looked in the mirror. Yeah. It was going to be okay. His heart was raging in his chest, but he tried to breathe. He'd just pretend he was desperate for coffee, totally trashed from last night. He braced himself at the door. He felt eyes on him as he came out.

‘Hey, my man. Sleep in much?’ said Mark.

Teddy didn't dare make eye contact. He shoved his hands into his pockets and tried to look normal and hungover.

And then he heard her voice.

‘Missing something?’

He had to look up. Viv Wylder stood there in the same white denim shorts from last night, his eye patch swinging from her index finger. He felt sick. He wanted to bolt to the car. But to go where? Was he really going to come back with some plastic kid's toy over his eye? Everyone could see through him now. He could smell his own desperation, under the glare of their judgement.

He looked at Viv then and saw something that shocked him. He saw, in the jut of her hip and the cruel smile, the same desperation. It was seething out of her, and for a second he felt sorry for her. And then it hit him. The pathetic way he was acting. For what? Approval? A piece of black plastic wasn't going to save him. It wasn't it going to keep his scars hidden. It wasn't going to keep him popular.

He took his hands out of his pockets and straightened. He curled one hand into a fist and gripped it hard with his other. His voice remained strangely calm.

‘Yes, I'm missing something, Viv, but it's not you.’

There was a frisson through the group, a kind of primal fear at the order of things shifting.

‘I guess you want to know why I didn't sleep with you, Viv.’ He said her name gently, as though she were a child. ‘It's because you threw a Coke at my head once.’ He shook his head. ‘You probably don't even remember it, but really, what kind of person does that? Oh, and you

made my life generally shit for about two years. So I have zero respect for you.'

Her large eyes blinked. 'Whatever. Damaged goods.'

His voice was louder now, stronger. 'What, you mean this?' He looked up and pointed to his eye. He knew how it looked, pale and hopeless and rolling around, but he didn't care. He was sick of fighting it, sick of hiding it. Damn it, he wanted to be able to see properly. If they didn't like it they could all go to hell.

There were sniggers from some of the others and Viv's eyes widened in disbelief as she spoke. 'Oh my God. Such. A. Freak.'

'Yeah, freak. That's what I am.' It felt good to say it, to own it. He didn't damn well care anymore.

He turned around and his heart dropped. Lily was standing there behind him, her hair wet, her board under her arm. He hadn't met her on the beach this morning. She must've come up to the caravan park to find him. He was standing here, completely exposed. He couldn't let her see him like this. That scared, small part of him wanted to grab the patch from Viv and pull it over his face. To run.

'You think an eye patch makes you cool? No.' Viv laughed cruelly. 'It was Mark that was making you cool. God knows why he wanted to be friends with such a loser.'

Lily had been standing very still, but now he saw her move. She stepped forward, slowly so that she was standing beside him, very close. She smelt like the ocean. He turned to her so that they were face to face. He waited, his heart stilling in that one, long moment before she spoke. For a second he panicked as she reached towards his face, but she gently peeled the cap from his head.

'Hey,' she said gently, smiling, as though he were just waking up and she didn't want to startle him. 'You know that vegan café I was telling you about? They do a mean quinoa porridge for breakfast.'

'Why would you choose that over Viv Wylder?' someone said, but

he didn't even bother to turn to see who it was. All he could see was the sun shining in his eyes and the whole world opening up, like a spectacular ocean dawn.

And her.

He heard a voice behind them. It was Mark. 'Hey, wait up guys. Love me some quinoa for breakfast.'

KILLER HEELS BY SAMANTHA BOND



KILLER HEELS

SAMANTHA BOND

Summer sunlight glints off the metal stiletto heel of my snakeskin-patterned pumps as I clamber from my car. I squint, momentarily blinded, then stand straight and the glare disappears. I've just parked in the shade of a large Gum tree on the side of a dusty, unsealed country road. Pebbles crunch beneath my luscious, pointed-toe, needle-heeled shoes, a present to myself for mustering the gumption to leave the law firm and start my own PI company, X-Files Investigations.

Now, standing at the edge of seemingly endless paddocks bleached to the colour of straw, dense bushland scrub beyond and the red-roofed farmhouse visible on a hill behind them, it occurs to me that I should have worn flats. Oh well, too late for practicalities. Besides, I'm known for my incredible high-heeled shoe collection. That, and my designer suits. What would clients think if they rocked-up to an appointment and I was suddenly six inches shorter? Not that the trek I'm about to embark upon is of the appointment-based variety. In fact, stealth is now the key. From here, I hike or risk being seen.

Time to embrace my inner farm girl.

An hour later, I'm drenched in sweat, blisters weeping all over my feet, and I've only just reached the edge of the scrub.

'Dammit, RJ!' I curse my petty drug-dealing client-cum-source. This is all his fault.

Another hour of trekking cross-country in humidity worthy of a sauna wearing the most inappropriate footwear on earth and I'm ready

to give up. That's when I hear it — shrieking, followed by the sickening waft of swine. RJ warned me about Horace the Horrible and Co., but I hadn't totally believed him. Now it hits me that perhaps I really *am* heading towards human-eating pigs in a feeding frenzy.

I shudder. 'Get a hold of yourself, Scully,' I whisper, conjuring my alter ego. 'Scully' is the very inventive nickname bestowed by former colleagues, who found it terribly amusing on account of my red hair and tendency towards wild speculation — and the fact my birth name is Gillian Anderson. But the joke is on them— it's an excellent gimmick for my new business.

Pushing on through the bush, I emerge from the grey-green dimness at the top of a cliff, the pigs' screaming now ear-splitting. Below me, about twenty metres down, a pen full of muddy, stinking pigs crowd on top of one another as they tear... something to pieces. From up here I can't be sure, but it looks like Horace and Co. are devouring a human torso. My stomach lurches and I fight to keep my lunch down, focusing on my mission: collect evidence to clear my client's name. If I can do that I'll be famous and, more importantly, my business will attract enough clients to be viable. Logan might even forgive me.

The thought that I'm almost there makes relief wash over my tired, sweaty body. Then, almost instantly, it evaporates. There's a click, like metal on metal, and something hard presses against my back.

Stifling a scream, I crane my neck to see who I'm dealing with, and whether the cold hard thing is — as I suspect — a gun.

'You!'

My assailant jabs the cold hard thing, which is indeed a gun, in harder and points at a dusty, overgrown path sloping toward the pigpen. 'Move!'

I dig my formerly stylish heels into the ground —no way in hell I'm going down there.

‘I said *move*.’ He pushes me and I stumble a few steps.

Think, Scully, think! I’ve seen what short work Horace can make of a person; perhaps I stand a better chance against this guy than the pigs? Gritting my teeth, and relying on the element of surprise for advantage, I dart forward, then dive for cover behind a tree. There’s a shot, but it misses me. *I’d been right about my chances with the gun.* Yes! Belting forward again, I turn and head for the protection of the denser bushland. There’s another shot, the air swooshing as the bullet passes my arm. I hurl my handbag over my shoulder, kick off my shoes and pitch one, then the other. The second one scones him in the head.

‘Fuck!’ he screams, grabbing his brow. Blood drips between his fingers.

Then I run like I’ve never run before.

The trees are closing around me and I’m starting to think I’ve lost him when there’s another shot. I stumble, and my knees hit the hard ground before hot, searing pain attacks my thigh. Blood darkens my tan skirt and my vision blurs.

For a second, I can’t tell which way is up or down—there’s green and brown foliage above me and under me. Then footsteps crunch through the undergrowth and my survival instincts order me to hide. With all the strength I have left, I bum-shuffle to a large bush behind a hollow, fallen log and slide underneath. Biting my lip against the pain and ignoring my inner voice that says there’s probably snakes under here, I hold my breath. The footsteps are getting closer.

It’s growing dark; stars are twinkling in the purpling sky, winking down at me through the foliage. Crickets and frogs have begun their night-time symphony, and the humidity of the day has been replaced with brisk air. If I can hold on just a little longer until it’s totally dark, maybe he won’t be able to find me. Maybe I’ll lie here and bleed to death instead.

The crunching stops, his boots visible in my periphery. ‘Scu-lly,’ he calls in a sing-song tone. ‘I’m coming to find you.’

That morning, I'd sat behind my desk watching Ethan Pouty, my first ever PI client, blub into (and ruin) an expensive new cushion that he'd tucked into his lap. I decided to forgive him on account of the ten grand retainer he'd transferred into my bereft operating account and the fact that his wife— rich, glamorous lifestyle-blogger extraordinaire, Gwendolyn Pouty— had been missing for a week.

'I don't know what else to do.' He implored me with lost, hopeless eyes. 'The police questioned me, seems all her psycho fans think I'm behind it... I just want Gwendolyn home.'

I assumed the 'psycho fans' were devotees of Gwendolyn's website, *Gloup*. Gwendolyn was infamous as a proponent of natural health, 'gentle fitness' and organic everything. Sugar, of course, was concentrated evil. Ethan told me that he'd last seen his wife on Thursday morning before her daily yoga class at Inca, and begged me to find her quick. I'd promised him an update before the day was out.

'Thank-you,' he said on his way out. 'Miles gave you such a high recommendation that I know you're the right person to help me find my wife. He said you once tracked down a bail jumper who'd otherwise have cost the firm fifty grand, and you weren't even a PI at that stage, just his secretary.'

I hung onto his words as I ushered him from the arctic air-conditioning of my office into the oven-like conditions outside. This was exactly why I'd started X-Files Investigations — I didn't want to be 'just a secretary' anymore. If I'd been an actual PI when I caught that jumper instead of a salaried admin employee, I would have earned myself quite a tasty little reward. Instead, Miles had simply treated me my morning latte —and forgotten the extra vanilla. Not so tasty.

Once he'd left, I hit Google. It delivered hundreds of images of the couple, and beautiful, blonde Gwendolyn solo. In every photo, there was an energy in Gwendolyn's smiling blue eyes that transcended my laptop screen. For an optimistic second, I entertained the possibility of

finding her alive and returning her to the loving arms of her husband. Then I nixed it. As a legal secretary in a seedy criminal law firm for over a decade, I knew these things never ended happily. Best I could do was give her poor husband some closure.

Next stop, *Gloup*. Gwendolyn's last post was titled: '*Greening for good – five ways with kale, spinach and watercress.*' Mmmm, yum. But there were plenty of groupies.

'Awesome recipes, Gwendolyn,' wrote Riley85 in one comment.

'Love your posts,' enthused Lucy074.

I scrolled down, skimming over other similar, obviously false endorsements of the truly fantastic taste of green gunk in a blender. I was about to skip to an earlier post, when Tuesday's Child appeared.

'Gwendolyn, I can't thank you enough,' her two cents' worth began. *'Your blog is a wealth of inspiration. It has changed my life. You have changed my life. Thanks to you, I finally know happiness and have a true purpose. You are a goddess incarnate.'*

I could feel my eyebrows rising and pulling together at the pure ick-factor that was Tuesday's Child, and made a conscientious effort to relax my forehead. One of the perils of giving up steady employment to start one's own business was that little luxuries like Botox went by the wayside.

I quickly searched *Gloup* for other posts by Tuesday's Child. More popped up. Many, many more, all in a similar disciple-ish vein. I wondered if Tuesday's Child's 'true purpose' in life was in any way connected to Gwen's disappearance, like perhaps murdering her idol and assuming her identity? I'd seen similar occurrences at the law firm, but for perfectly sane reasons like collecting their victim's welfare payments.

Did Tuesday's Child have any real world contact with Gwen, I wondered? A quick further search revealed TC's Facebook was private, but luckily her Twitter profile wasn't. About ninety percent of TC's

Tweets were retweets of Gwen's, and in the other ten percent it appeared she (I assumed it was a she) was doing her best to impersonate Gwen by posting similarly saccharine, wellbeing nonsense. And wouldn't you know it? TC's public profile picture was an Incan eye, just like Gwen's yoga studio.

Then there was the money tweet: *'Gwennie he's no good for you #asshole #leavehim #embracethelight'* The tweet was posted Thursday, the same day as Gwen's fateful last yoga class. I punched the air with glee. This was looking like the easiest case ever.

I was about to do a little happy dance (and maybe celebrate with a mid-morning Tim Tam) when my Spidey Senses kicked in. Perhaps this was a little *too* easy. If I'd jumped to this conclusion so quickly, why hadn't the cops? Police were, by and large, the best at detecting possible suspects, it being their job and all. So why hadn't they pulled Tuesday's Child in for questioning if she was suspicious? Spidey Sense two kicked in: perhaps they had. The thought made me groan, for I knew what I had to do – and I really did not want to speak to Detective Logan Hall.

Two minutes later, after I'd devoured that Tim Tam for courage, he answered my call.

'Hall speaking.' His voice was gruff, annoyed, like it always was with me lately.

'I gathered,' I said. 'I called you, remember?' There was more sarcasm in my tone than I'd intended.

'What do you want, Scully?' I hoped the irritation in his voice was more than he'd intended, too.

'I've got a lead on Gwendolyn Pouty's disappearance.'

'Scully.' He sighed and I could almost see his eagle-tattooed chest deflate. 'What the hell are you up to?'

'My job,' I snapped. 'I'm "up to" my job, which I know you hate, but it's not illegal, which means you're not the boss of me, Mr Policeman!'

There was muffled laughter, then not at all muffled laughter, then out-and-out hysterical guffaws. ‘How old are you? For chrissake, Gillian.’ Use of my real name meant I was in trouble. ‘This is exactly why I said starting your own PI business was a mistake. You’ll get yourself in trouble, real actual danger, and then you’ll be wasting my publicly funded time saving your arse.’

‘You’re wrong!’ My forehead felt so contracted I doubted even Botox could have kept it smooth. ‘I need you for absolutely nothing!’

There was more laughter. ‘Then why are you calling me?’

I went to speak, to put the insufferable man in his place (firmly beneath the stilettoed heel that only weeks ago he’d begged me to wear to bed, along with a cowboy hat and nothing else), but only silence ensued. So what if I’d hoped he could tell me if the police had questioned Tuesday’s Child? I’d find out all on my own. And with that, I took enormous satisfaction in hanging up on Detective Logan Hall, my recent ex and the man I’d once thought I’d marry.

Unclenching my fists, I examined the half-moon indents my French polish had left in my palms, and told myself to breathe. My heart galloped, but really I was getting much better. I hardly felt like vomiting at all this time. If only I didn’t still completely love him.

Next, I called my most reliable criminal informant. I’d met RJ years ago, when he was a repeat client of the firm on account of his drug-taking ways. In recent times, he’d conquered his habit and now ran a successful multi-pronged criminal business. You wanted info on any underworld activities, RJ was your man. And I was someone he enjoyed flirting with and extorting money from in exchange for said info.

We spoke briefly and I promised him I was good for his ‘entirely reasonable fee’ in exchange for any leads he could give me on Gwendolyn’s disappearance. I didn’t mind the cost. Without RJ, I’d be like every other PI — spending hour upon tedious hour sitting in cars

and up trees spying and waiting for something to happen. Criminals were so much more useful than telescopic lenses.

Call done, I decided to drive to the posh suburb where the yoga studio was nestled amidst a strip of boutique shops on a street lined with money and lurid purple Bougainvilleas. I parked in a ten-minute loading zone right out front of Inca. A class was in session, so I crept from the uncomfortable warmth of outside, into the even more uncomfortably warm, wooden-floored studio. The scent of sandalwood hit me like a gentle punch in the face. Around twenty upside-down faces appraised me from between pairs of parted legs, backsides high in the air. A lithe-limbed instructor unfolded and righted herself.

‘Continue with your sun salutations at your own pace, everyone,’ she said in a honeyed voice, weaving between bodies on multi-coloured mats until she was beside me. ‘Namaste.’ She placed slender hands together in prayer position and gave me a little bow.

‘Namaste,’ I replied, momentarily shocked into prayer-bowing back.

‘I am sorry,’ she said, ‘but you’re too late for this morning’s class. There is another this afternoon, and several this evening. Would you like a timetable?’

There was nothing I’d like less than a timetable for human-pretzel classes, but I focused on matching my voice to her serene demeanour. ‘Thank you, but no,’ I said. ‘I’m actually here because I’m aware that Mrs Gwendolyn Pouty attends this studio. You may have heard that she’s missing?’

‘Are you with the police?’ A slight crack appeared in her tranquillity mask.

‘Not exactly, but I am investigating the matter. I don’t suppose you know if there’s another person who attends your classes who goes by the online name Tuesday’s Child?’

Shutters slammed down, all serenity gone. ‘What’s your name?’

Who sent you here?’

I pulled out a business card and handed it to her. ‘My name is Gill Anderson. I’m a private investigator. Unfortunately I can’t divulge who my client is. I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name...?’

She flipped my card several times, then looked up at me with a gaze so angry there’d have been lightning flashing in her eyes had she been a cartoon. ‘It was Ethan, wasn’t it? It was that disgusting prick of a husband who sent you here!’

I took an involuntary step backwards, then another as she placed her hands on my shoulders and ushered me towards the door with freakish concealed strength. ‘I suggest you leave now, Ms Anderson.’

‘Fine, fine!’ I held my hands up in surrender. ‘I was just hoping you could help me find Gwendolyn.’

‘If I knew where Gwennie was, don’t you think I’d have told the police?’ Her eyes flashed lightning at me again. ‘And by the way,’ she threw the door open in case I was in any doubt about which was the exit, ‘my name is Shanae Borg, owner of Inca. And *I* am Tuesday’s Child.’

‘Oh yeah?’ I yelled at the glass door slamming behind me. ‘Well, you’re also an idiot.’ I gave the door an ineffectual thump. ‘It’s summer. Get outside and enjoy nature if you want to sweat, you pompous wankers!’ Neither the door, nor those behind it responded. With a loud exhalation, I slumped against my car, and gave myself a mental upper cut. That was bad behaviour, perhaps the heat had melted my brain. And what did this mean? That Gwennie, ah, Gwendolyn, was some kind of devotee of Shanae, aka Tuesday’s Child? Shanae obviously didn’t think much of Ethan —perhaps she wanted Gwennie all to herself? I didn’t have long to stew in this new mental obstacle course before my phone trilled.

‘RJ.’ I was surprised and relieved to hear from him so fast. ‘What have you got for me?’

‘Don’t say I don’t ever do nuthin’ for ya, babe,’ came RJ’s voice. He was grinning, I could tell.

‘Never, RJ.’ I unlocked my car and slid into the driver’s seat.

‘I did a bit a askin’ around for ya about that Gwendolyn chick. Seems she was real close to this dude, Farmer Joe.’

‘Farmer Joe?’ I glanced once more at Inca. Behind the ground-to-ceiling window, the class was again in full swing, another impossible contorted position involving a sumo-squat in progress.

‘Not his real name,’ RJ said. ‘He runs a pig farm up in the hills outside Strath. Supplies pork to Woolies.’ He gave me the address, which I scribbled down. ‘Multi-talented professional, though. Got himself a lab onsite and I hear that natural energy thing Gwen had going on weren’t the result of chickpeas and lettuce leaves alone. Word is that chick was one of his best customers.’ He took a breath. ‘Oh, and he charges \$20k a pop for human disposals. Got this beast of a hog, Horace the Horrible.’

I blasted the horn in shock, startling the contortionists impersonating Japanese warriors.

‘This man feeds people to pigs?’ Images from every Guy Ritchie movie ever flooded my brain. ‘Are you kidding me?’

‘Hey, babe, if I were kidding, I’d have begun with “a pig walks into a bar”, know what I’m sayin’?’

Rarely, if ever, I thought. ‘So, you’re telling me that Gwendolyn had an illicit drug habit and her dealer runs a human disposal farm?’

‘And supplier of fine meats.’

I shuddered and made a mental note to never again eat pork.

‘Look, babe, do with this what you will, but thought it might be worth you checkin’ out. If she pissed the guy off, didn’t pay her bill, got too mouthy or whatever, Horace is right there begging for a tasty, organically-fed girl snack. But these are dangerous dudes, they ain’t

fluffy kittens like me. Reckon you'll need back-up. Perhaps take that doesn't-know-what's-good-for-him cop of yours. At least he's got a gun.'

RJ hung-up, and for the second time that day my heart contracted at the thought of the doesn't-know-what's-good-for-him cop. Things *had* been good. No, they'd been wonderful.

Logan Hall had the sexiest neck. Perhaps it was his particular brand of pheromones, but I just couldn't resist nibbling it. His eyes would roll back as I kissed and licked and bit my way down. He'd freeze, all six foot three of him rigid with expectation, until I'd unbutton his police shirt and free the eagle. Then, unable to hold himself back, he'd press me to him rip my top off, desperate to feel my skin, his lips hungry for mine.

Our foreplay had always been hot. That is, right up until I'd announced I wanted to be more than 'just a secretary' and setup as a PI. After that, it was the arguments that were fiery.

'I don't understand your problem with it,' I'd shouted at him after about the tenth disagreement in a week.

Logan had sighed and run a hand through his dark hair, messing it up and making it look even sexier. 'It's dangerous, that's my problem with it. You'll be doing dangerous work, dealing with scumbags, and I'll worry about you all the time.'

'What about you? Your job is dangerous.'

'I have a gun, and I'm *trained* to take down scum.'

'I'm *trained*!' I'd retorted.

'No, you've done a half-day course in useless self-defence that gives you false belief in your ability to take care of yourself. And there's nothing as dangerous as someone who can't look after themselves but thinks they can.'

'Useless and dangerous, am I? Don't you think that's a slight contradiction, or do you need a dictionary to understand that word,

detective?

It hadn't improved from there. He'd moved out days later, his Powerade blue eyes sad, not angry.

'I wish I could stay,' he'd said squeezing my hand for the last time. 'It's not that I don't... It's just... Oh goddammit, you're Gillian, not some indestructible TV character!'

'I may not be Scully,' I'd said, wishing he wouldn't leave, but refusing to beg, 'however, I do need my partner to believe in me. Just a bit.'

Our only conversations since then had been those necessary to exchange forgotten possessions and transfer utilities.

Pushing the miserable memory aside, I focused on an indigo scarf adorned with the turquoise Incan eye fluttering from the handle of the yoga studio door as I contemplated my next move. So she'd been snarky, but if Shanae/TC and Gwendolyn were pals, I really needed to talk to her again. See if she knew about Gwen's 'hobby', and any sleazebags she hung around with. Once the class ended, I'd adopt my most convivial persona to woo the bendy nutter into being a little more forthcoming.

So I waited, then I waited some more. Just as the class was at the point where everyone mimicked a corpse, from behind me came the blue and red flashing of lights and the woo-woo of a police siren. The patrol car slid to a halt and two policemen alighted. One of them was my ex. Marvellous.

Throwing open my car door, I clambered out onto the road, the asphalt sticky from the heat. 'Are you stalking me now?'

Detective Logan Hall removed his mirrored sunglasses. 'I'm doing you a favour, Scully.'

'By what, persecuting me?'

'By personally responding to the report of you abusing the proprietor of this establishment, then loitering outside, rather than

letting one of my colleagues deal with you.'

'Me? Abuse *her*?' I stabbed my index finger in the direction of Inca, rage and humiliation making my cheeks and forehead hot. 'It was that hippie contortionist who laid hands on *me*! I've done nothing wrong.'

'Boss?' The young constable beside him pointed at the loading zone sign under which I was parked.

'Right,' said my ex. 'Report was made twenty minutes ago and you're parked in a ten-minute zone, so I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to move on and stop disturbing the peace.'

The patience in his tone was maddening. 'You're the one disturbing the peace.' I knew it was juvenile, but I couldn't help it. 'Why don't you book me while you're at it?'

'Boss?' said the constable again. Logan gave him a curt, irritated nod and the constable produced a notepad, scribbled on it and handed me a ticket.

'A fine? You're fining me?' I took a step closer to Logan, ignoring the delicious Hugo Boss aftershave he was wearing and the fleeting — but visceral — memories it conjured involving the cowboy hat. 'How can you be such a prick? Especially when you know it's my first job.'

'I'm just doing *my* job, Scully.' He slipped his sunnies back on so I could no longer read his eyes.

For some reason, that made me even madder. I don't know why I did it, I swear it was pure reaction mixed with my mixed feelings for him, but next thing, I'd stamped on his foot.

'Ow, Jesus!' He hopped on one foot, bent and rubbed his toe through his thick boot. 'What the hell?'

'Oh, you pussy,' I panicked. 'You're being a drama queen.' *Please god I hadn't hurt him.* 'How could you even feel that through those clod hoppers?'

'Because,' he pointed at my feet, 'those things on your feet are

goddamned weapons! Cuff her, Constable.'

'What? Are you serious?' The rest of my words were lost as my arrogant, pain-in-the-arse ex-boyfriend read my arrest rights, citing loitering, disturbance of the peace and assault of a police officer, while his child sidekick wrenched my arms behind my back and shoved me into the back of the patrol car.

This was the worst first day of work ever.

Two hours later, I emerged from the hot-as-hell police holding cell full of frontal lobe rage and one thousand inventive ways in which I wished Logan Hall dead. Immediately, I hailed a taxi to take me back to my illegally parked car, and left a voicemail for Ethan Pouty that I was on my way to check out a dodgy farm in the hills. My car's windscreen was a papier mache of additional tickets. Now not only did I need to make rent and pay RJ his 'entirely reasonable fee', but I also owed about a trillion dollars in parking fines. Wonderful.

Leaving the sticky asphalt roads of the city behind, I directed my car toward the rustic farmlands of Strath. The rural landscape bordering the South Eastern Freeway zipped by, grazing livestock a mere blur, while I planned how I'd scope the farm and collect evidence (human hair, teeth, the general bits piggies can't digest, even tummy or poop contents) that would force Detective Logan Hall's hand to issue a search warrant. If Farmer Joe had fed Horace a Gwendolyn treat, all I needed was enough to convince the police to dig through the pigpen.

In the fading evening light, the boots near my head pause, then retreat. The crunching of leaves becomes less crisp, until I can't hear them at all. I wait for what seems an hour, but is probably five minutes, then I slide out from under the bush and peek over the log. What the hell is Ethan Pouty doing here, and why had he just tried to kill me? The answer is as bleeding obvious as my bleeding leg. He killed Gwendolyn, I've stumbled onto his method of disposal when I wasn't meant to, told

him I was coming here, and he's here to stop me finding anything. So much for Miles and his glowing reference. Bet the asshole told him I was a lipstick-loving bimbo who'd come up empty handed.

Something colder than rage burns inside me. I will not lie here, bleeding to death, waiting for a homicidal bastard to find me. I remove my jacket, bite a loose thread under the armpit seam and tear at it with my teeth. There's a heart-breaking rip as the beautiful jacket comes apart. With trembling hands, I tourniquet the mess that is my thigh and tie the cloth tight. Next, I stand-up and put some weight on the limb to gauge my chances of hobbling through the bush back to the main road. White-hot pain sears, but I will do this. I will get away from my mad client and live to hand him over to Logan.

I'm hallucinating, I think. The blood loss and shock is making me visualise Logan because, as I stumble through the bush, he appears in the distance, barely discernible in the last light of dusk. I grab at the nearest tree trunk. Hallucinations mean you're close to death, don't they? Then comes a voice.

'Scully, I know you're hiding.' It's Ethan. I'm not hallucinating 'You were supposed to point the finger at Shanae, not the pigs.'

I duck behind the tree trunk. Somehow, Logan is here and Ethan has got him. Leaning out as far as I dare, I can see Logan slumped on the ground, propped up against a tree. His wrists are bound, blood runs down the side of his face and a rope circles his neck.

'Scully, get the fuck out here or your lover swings.' Ethan pulls on the end of the rope, which is looped around a high branch. Logan lifts off the ground a little.

My heart wallops and I take back every one of those thousand wishes for his death. *Think, Scully, think*, I berate myself for the umpteenth time today. Then Logan's irritated voice from earlier floats back to me: *'Those things on your feet are goddamned weapons!'*

With as much stealth as I can muster with a gammy leg, I retrace my steps to the place where I'd pitched my shoes at Ethan. It takes

precious moments in which I can hear Ethan ranting, berating my beautiful man. Then, miraculously, I stumble across one terribly battered stiletto. One is all I need.

Again mustering the stealth, I hobble back to where Ethan is in the process of hanging my future husband.

‘You don’t understand, Scully,’ Ethan shouts. ‘The bitch was impossible. I couldn’t eat anything. No salt, no sugar, no fricken’ meat! All while she’s off her fucking rocker. But that’s OK, it was part of her *enlightenment*. Her and that off-her-tree yoga nut who’d convinced her to divorce me. If she’d done that, do you know how broke I’d be? This was the only way.’ He’s waving the gun around, hoisting Logan higher and higher until only his tiptoes touch the ground. Then he stops and points the gun at Logan’s face.

‘Last chance to save your man, Scully. Come out, come out, wherever you are.’

This is it. It’s all I’ve got. I bend over, grab a handful of dirt, then step out into the open.

‘Well, well,’ says Ethan. He drops the gun to his side and ambles toward me until he’s standing a mere arm’s length away. ‘I thought a newbie on her first job was a guarantee of incompetence and Miles promised you were an airhead. I hired you to make me look good. Convince everyone how much I loved the stuck-up bitch. That I did absolutely everything I could to find her.’ There is a mad glint in his eyes. ‘You almost did find her, you know? Horace wouldn’t have quite digested her yet. But he’ll be hungry again soon. Good thing I have you and your lover to feed to him.’

‘I’m an acquired taste,’ I say, and hurl the fist-full of dirt into his eyes.

Ethan’s hands fly to his face. He bellows.

Adrenaline driving me, I slam the pointed heel of my stiletto into the skin between his neck and shoulder. He bellows again, doubles

over, drops the gun. I'm on it instantly. Then I'm running to Logan, pulling frantically at the rope around his neck until it loosens enough that I can get it over his head. He reels and we both slide down the white tree trunk. I train the gun on Ethan, but it appears there's no need. Ethan is flailing, cockroach-like, blood pooling around him as he tries to extract my killer heel from his shoulder.

I untie Logan's wrists, take the police radio from his belt, press it into his hands and he calls for back-up.

'Are you all right?' I finally ask.

'Swell,' he coughs, rubbing his red-raw throat. 'You?'

'Awesome.'

Logan leans over to inspect my leg.

'How did you know I was here anyway?' I ask.

His gaze turns guilty. 'Your phone. I put tracking software on it about a month ago. I knew I'd end up saving your arse.'

'Except you didn't,' I point out.

'No.' He half-smiles. Then, after a moment, 'Think maybe we could save each other's arses from now on?'

I'm about to tell him that I think this is a most excellent idea but, as he leans forward, he presses against my leg and I yell.

'Oh for god's sake, Scully. It's just a flesh wound.' He's grinning now. 'You're such a drama queen.'

I smile back. 'Would you have it any other way?'

By way of reply, his lips meet mine.

ABOUT CARLA CARUSO

Carla Caruso was born in Adelaide, Australia, and only ‘escaped’ for three years to work as a magazine journalist and stylist in Sydney. Previously, she was a gossip columnist and fashion editor at Adelaide’s daily newspaper, The Advertiser. She has since freelanced for titles including Woman’s Day, Cleo and Shop Til You Drop. These days, in between writing romantic comedy novels (sometimes with a touch of cosy mystery), she plays mum to twin lads Alessio and Sebastian. Her books include the Astonvale rom-com mystery series (kicking off with A Pretty Mess), Catch of the Day, Starcrossed, and Cityglitter. She’s also an editor of the Romance Writers of Australia journal, Hearts Talk, and writes a monthly column for the Australian Romance Readers Association. Plus, she’s obsessed with running, horoscopes, fashion, trashy TV, and cats.

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ABOUT SARAH BELLE

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

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ABOUT GEORGINA PENNEY

Georgina Penney lives with her wonderful husband, Tony in a cozy steading in the Scottish countryside. When she's not swearing at her characters and trying to cram them into her plot, she can be found traipsing over fields, gazing at hairy coos and imagining buff medieval Scotsmen in kilts (who have access to shower facilities and deodorant) living behind every bramble hedge. She has three books in publication with Penguin Australia and you can learn more about them by visiting www.georginapenney.com

ABOUT LAURA GREAVES

Laura Greaves is an award-winning journalist, author, runner, 1920s obsessive, crazy dog lady and *Anne of Green Gables* tragic. Her first romantic comedy novel, *Be My Baby*, was published by Penguin in 2014, and her second, *The Ex-Factor*, followed in March 2015. For the past seven years she has freelanced for virtually every magazine and website under the sun, and is currently working on a non-fiction book of amazing dog stories, to be published by Penguin in late 2016. Laura also profiles change-making Australian women at her blog, www.grassrootsgoddess.com.au. She lives in Sydney with her family and two incorrigible pooches. Find out more at www.lauragreaves.com and www.facebook.com/lauragreaveswritesbooks.

ABOUT VANESSA STUBBS

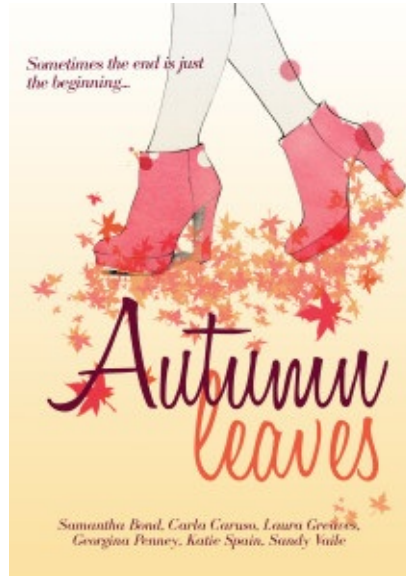
Vanessa Stubbs is a journalist and author. She's spent more than a decade as a features and entertainment reporter, writing about style, travel, food, health, music, film, and occasionally interviewing the likes of Daniel Craig and Hugh Jackman. She's written for *The Daily Telegraph*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *mX Newspaper* and *Sunday Style*. Her first novel, *Star Attraction*, was published by Penguin. She lives in Sydney with her husband and daughter in a romantic old house perfect for the writing of stories.

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ABOUT SAMANTHA BOND

Samantha Bond is a reformed corporate lawyer, now writer and public servant. Her creative work has been published in numerous national literary journals, anthologies and magazines. She has an Advanced Diploma of Professional Writing, winning the award for Highest Overall Achievement for her graduating class of 2014, and now tutors in that course. Her first novel, *Just Sleeping*, was short listed for the Olvar Wood Fellowship Award and she is now working on a Crime series. Samantha also writes reviews for the *Indaily* and *Glam Adelaide*, and between these two publications has had more than 200 reviews published. Samantha does freelance corporate writing work as well as creative writing mentoring and if you'd like her services, she's contactable through her website (www.samanthastaceybond.com). Finally, Samantha is a busy mum of two littlies, is an unapologetic chocolate addict, believes that Buffy would so slay Edward (which perhaps shows her age) and is a writers' festival groupie.

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