

Fiona
PALMER

*Secrets Between
Friends*



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*To Rachael Johns - thank you for
asking me to go on a cruise with you!*



Prologue

THE TV BLARED LOUDLY WITH MALE VOICES WHILE ON THE screen tiny men in white clothes stood on a green field. Jessica's dad sat in his tattered brown chair directly opposite with a can of beer in his hand. She'd learned quickly that this position meant he didn't like to be disturbed. Don't ask him questions, don't tell him you're hungry and don't ask if he'll come to watch you ride your bike. But Jess badly wanted to show her dad how well she could ride her bike now, even if it was only up and down their driveway. She was nearly six and wanted to ride on the road like the boy down the street, but her mum wouldn't let her.

'Chris, keep it down, buddy!' shouted her dad as Chris started to throw his toys out of the box again.

The booming voice made Chris pause mid-throw and then sit down to play quietly in the corner. Dad liked Chris, because he was a boy, but still Chris knew when he had to be good. Dad's voice was always a second away from a growl.

Jess went into the kitchen, where her mum was cutting up a carrot on the green bench top.

‘Mum, can I go ride my bike?’

‘Sure, honey, just stay on the driveway,’ she replied without looking up from her task.

Jess badly wanted to tell her dad she was off to ride her bike but she didn’t want to bring out the bad dad. The one that moved like an angry bear, throwing around its strong arms dangerously and spitting from the mouth, teeth glistening. Jess was scared of that dad and so she left him be and kept her lips pressed tightly as she walked past to the front door.

Outside, it was warm but not too hot; just right for riding her bike. It sat where she had left it, propped up against the fence near the yellow Holden. The bike had only two wheels; her mum had taken off the trainer wheels a while ago. The bike hadn’t been new when she got it, she could tell, but it had been repainted and on the handlebars sat pink tassels that fluttered as she went faster and faster. Jess climbed on, the torn black seat no longer prickling her bottom now that her mum had covered it with tape. Mum had watched her ride that day. If only dad would. Maybe if he saw how well she could ride he’d be nicer?

Down the driveway she swerved around the grass that grew through the cracked cement, pretending it was her own special race track. Only once did she miss a tight turn and end up on the scraggly, weedy lawn. Mum was always asking her dad to mow it.

She quickly righted her bike. The driveway was so small and boring; she wanted to be a big kid and ride their street.

It was quiet, their house was at the end of the road, so cars didn't come along very often.

Jess glanced back at the house and then rode down the driveway onto the road before turning back to the driveway. Nothing bad happened, so she did it again, this time going further, and this time seeing the boy who lived further along the street. He was on his bike too, riding on the road, but she could see his dad sitting by their square mailbox watching.

She gritted her teeth and pushed hard on the pedals. Down the street she flew as if she owned it, all the while smiling, almost giggling with the feeling the speed brought.

It took a moment to realise she'd fallen off, that she was lying on the road, her bike was on top of her and parts of her body hurt. She began to cry.

'Are you okay?'

She opened her eyes to see the boy leaning over her. He went to pick up her bike but then his dad took over and lifted it off like it was a feather.

'Are you okay, sweetie?' said the man. His voice was soft and gentle.

It made Jess stop crying but her tears still ran down her face.

'Oh, you've hurt your knee,' said the boy as she sat up.

'Come and sit on the curb and I'll get you a Band-Aid, maybe a few,' said the boy's father.

Her skin was scraped from her knee, burning as if it were on fire. Jess sniffled as her bottom lip quivered.

The nice man had helped her walk to the edge of the bitumen and laid her bike down. The boy sat beside her.

'So, you're a girl?' he said as he looked at her. 'I only have a brother.'

‘Me too,’ said Jess. ‘He touches all my toys.’

‘So does mine. I’m Peter,’ he said holding out his hand.

Jess just continued to hug her legs until he dropped it.

‘You’re supposed to tell me your name. I’ve seen you at your house, riding your bike. You’re getting really good.’

Jess sat up straighter. At least someone had noticed. ‘I’m Jess. Why are you so nice?’ Jess was only used to her dad and Chris; so far boys weren’t much fun.

‘Nice? I’m just trying to be helpful. Dad always says I should be kind and helpful to girls ’cause my mum is a girl. Do you go to school? I do, I’m going to be in year one next year.’

Before Jess could reply, his dad came back and carefully put the Band-Aids over her sores. ‘There you go, now that’s better, isn’t it,’ he said in a soothing voice.

‘Dad, this is Jess. Can we ride together?’

Jess looked down at her feet, her face heating up.

‘Hi Jess. I’m Mr Wellstead. You can ride together, if it’s okay with Jess’s parents.’

Jess swallowed and quickly muttered the words, ‘I’m not allowed to ride on the road. I’m supposed to stay on the driveway.’ Jess squeezed her eyes shut and pulled her shoulders towards her head, bracing for a clip over the ears or some form of punishment. But none came.

‘Hmm, I see,’ said Mr Wellstead. ‘Shall we go and speak to them?’

Jess’s heart raced at the thought that Mr Wellstead would dob her in and then surely she would get a wallop.

She stayed silent as Mr Wellstead walked her back to her house, Peter pushing her bike. The closer they got to home the slower her movements became.

‘It’s okay,’ said a soft voice suddenly. ‘You won’t get into trouble.’

She looked up slowly. Mr Wellstead’s face wasn’t like her dad’s. It wasn’t red and blotchy, and he smiled a lot.

‘Come on,’ he said softly.

Mr Wellstead knocked on their door as if there wasn’t a care in the world.

Her dad came to the door.

‘Yeah?’ was all he said, can of beer still in his hand.

‘Hi. I’m Edward Wellstead from down the road. I was just wondering if Jess was allowed to ride on the street with my son Peter. I’ll keep an eye on them both.’

Jess saw her mum walk up behind her dad as he looked from Mr Wellstead, to Peter and then to her. ‘Please, Dad,’ she said. ‘I’ll be good.’

He shrugged and disappeared back to the TV.

Her mum, still standing behind the flywire door, added, ‘Just for half an hour then come back for dinner.’ Her eyes flicked back to Mr Wellstead. ‘Thank you,’ she added then watched them leave.

Jess turned as fast as she could, not quite believing that they hadn’t noticed the Band-Aid on her knee.

‘Off you go,’ Mr Wellstead said with a smile. ‘Just always check for cars down the end of the street and come straight to the footpath when you see one.’

Peter gave her the bike and ran along the pathway back to his own. ‘Yay, this will be so much fun. My brother can’t ride a bike yet. We’re going to be friends, Jess. I know it.’

Her sore knee was forgotten as she climbed onto her bike, and she laughed when Peter lifted his feet off the pedals. ‘Look at me!’

‘I can do that too,’ said Jess, following suit.

Jess rode her bike and not once did she think of her dad. Of what might come later.

Today was the best. Being with Peter was the most fun she’d ever had. And he said they were going to be friends. Her first real friend.



1

Abbie

ABIGAIL SHELDON STEPPED OUT OF HER CAR AND MANAGED to lock it, tie her hair up and keep her handbag on her shoulder all in one movement. She was in deep trouble. No thanks to the thick traffic due to the Sculpture by the Sea exhibit on the beach. She'd actually gone to see the seventy six sculptures over the weekend, more so to distract herself but had been pleasantly surprised and had loved walking the white beaches with the Indian Ocean crashing at her feet as the sun set. It had been the best afternoon she'd had in ages. If only she could go back to that moment now. Half an hour late for work already and she still had to get from the parking area up a flight of stairs to the office. Those stairs seemed like Mount Everest lately. As fast as her tired legs could go she headed to the main door, thankful she'd worn flats. They didn't look as nice as her black heels did with her pencil grey skirt and sleeveless white shirt, but in the Perth heat and her current mood, she was too tired to care. Although she shouldn't complain, if she lived further

north, the dry heat would be a constant, or at the tip of Western Australia where it was a sweaty hot in the tropics. Luckily the cruise she was about to take was going south of the state to lush green areas and sky blue seas.

‘Hi Abbie, just getting in?’ said Nita. Her chestnut hair was pulled back tightly into a bun and her heels click-clacked against the cement floor as she made her way past carrying a folder. ‘I’m off to the open house in Cottesloe. Park Street,’ she said, the corner of her mouth curling up ever so slightly.

Abbie forced a smile to her face. Nita knew that house was in Abbie’s portfolio, and the fact she was politely rubbing it in made Abbie hate her fake smile even more. ‘Good luck,’ Abbie replied in her best sing-song voice as she pushed open the glass doors and headed for the stairs. Nita was hardly out of earshot before Abbie was swearing under her breath as she took each step.

‘Abbie, nice of you to join us,’ said Derek, her boss.

He stood at the top of the stairs with a smug look on his Botox-filled face. Abbie bet he’d seen her car come in and had been waiting for this moment.

‘Sorry, Derek, I got held up with traffic again. I wanted to check the Park Street property was all set for the open house before I came to work,’ she said breathlessly, which was odd for someone of her slender, athletic build. It seemed like only days ago Jim had told her she was looking all willowy like a runway model; only now did she realise maybe it wasn’t a compliment. ‘Also, I have a doctor’s appointment at one. Hopefully it won’t take too long. I really need to sort out this flu, I can’t seem to shake it.’

Derek's face reddened slightly – he knew she'd had a few doctor's appointments lately – as he stepped back so she could pass. Her last boss has been a flexible guy who rewarded hard work. Derek, on the other hand, wanted all work with no bend. Strike one was her forced absences due to this ongoing flu; strike two was her lateness, even though she'd checked the house this morning which was work related. He'd been so close to firing her the second he saw her today, she could tell. His right eye twitched and his face was still red. She'd stretched her welcome these past few weeks but had put in plenty of overtime so her work hadn't suffered. Her clients came first. With her breath back, Abbie stepped around him and headed to her office.

'Nita is doing the Park Street house. It's too important,' he said before clearing his throat.

Abbie heard his reprimand loud and clear. She wanted to tell him where he could shove that Park Street house, but instead she just nodded.

The day her boss had retired and Derek had taken his place had been the beginning of the end. At least it had helped make up her mind about starting her own business, something she'd dreamed of since entering the real-estate market and quickly climbing the ranks. She had the knowledge and the determination. Her last boss had been so supportive, helping and guiding her in the right direction. Derek didn't want to hear about it. He wanted her under his thumb.

Abbie just needed the energy to walk away, she thought, sitting down in her chair and letting her handbag slide from her shoulder as if it weighed a tonne. Bending down, she pulled out her make-up mirror from her bag. She could hardly see her

eyes for the dark circles around them. *Derek probably thinks I'm on drugs*, she thought. Being late meant she'd skipped the full face of make-up, which was a mistake. Concealer had been her best friend lately. Putting her mirror away, she glanced at her neat desk.

A yellow sticky note grabbed her attention like a flashing neon light. Scribbled in neat writing was the date and time she was due to meet Peter and Jess.

For the first time that day, she smiled. It would be so good to catch up with her friends again and talk about their trip. Abbie was so excited about their upcoming boat cruise reunion. Ten years since they'd graduated high school together. With everything that had been going on, the cruise was her beacon of light. Three days of nothing but fun, friendship and relaxation. Depart Fremantle, sail the seas in comfort plus a day stopover in gorgeous Albany where the white beaches are so crisp, before floating back to Fremantle. *The place to leave your troubles behind*, the glossy brochure had boasted.

She could still remember the time she first met Jess. It was the fourth week of year eight and she'd noticed the girl, who was in most of her classes, hanging out with a year-nine boy. Normally it would give a girl some school credit, but this boy was gangly and geeky and the other girls started to tease her. 'Is that your *boyfriend*, Jessica?' they would taunt, and Jess would deny it, saying he was just her friend, which only made them tease her more. It annoyed Abbie but she didn't do anything about it – not until one day when Jess caught her up in the corridor.

'Abbie, Abbie, sorry but you dropped this,' she'd said holding out a bit of paper that Abbie had scribbled notes on during

class. Not really notes, they were love hearts with *Abbie & John* in them. The year-eleven head boy. Her secret crush. Yet Jess handed it over, even after seeing what was written on it, and with a smile walked off. Not a word was uttered about it, no gossip spread. From that moment on Abbie knew that Jess was a girl she could trust. So, when the other girls teased her about the boy a few days later, Abbie stepped in and told them to grow up. ‘Come on, Jess, they’re just jealous because they don’t even know how to talk to boys, let alone have one as a friend.’ Abbie had taken her hand and led her away from them.

Hell, where had the time gone? Abbie was twenty-seven with not much to show for it. Yet another thing to add to her list of failures. It was growing day by day. If it kept up like this she might need more note paper.

She twisted the end of her long black hair as her eyes moved across to another bright sticky note. *One o’clock, Doctor Rikes.*

God, how she hated that sticky note. It had tortured her from the moment she stuck it up on her wall. Not even the bright pink could sway the feeling of dread it brought. But today was the day. With some luck she’d get some answers.

Abbie let her head fall to the desk and rest against the cold melamine. She just had to get through the next few hours without screaming, swearing at Derek or curling up in a ball under her desk.



2

Ricki

‘HI RICKI. READY TO HEAD HOME?’

‘You bet,’ said Ricki Van Leeuwin as she passed her colleague Jolene in the hospital corridor.

Ricki stifled a yawn as she headed back to the nurses’ desk to prepare for handover. Pulling out her phone, she read the message from Peter.

Hi honey, I have dinner sorted, dishes are done, and so is the washing. See you soon.

Ricki smiled. How would she cope without Peter taking care of her? The best thing she’d done was move in with him after a year together; he was the yin to her yang. Ricki was slack when it came to housecleaning and was quite happy to live off frozen dinners and two-minute noodles, but Peter cooked and cleaned as well as ran his own business. This last year living together had made her life so much easier and happier, yet her teeth automatically grated together as she felt something deep down that wanted to dispute it.

‘Rickster!’

A hand curled around her arm and stopped her next step. Ricki turned to see Teresa, an enrolled nurse she spent many shifts with, who was smiling much too brightly for someone who was also at the end of her shift. Teresa’s blue uniform had light blue strips around the V-neck and Ricki’s was white to distinguish their roles.

A nurse was the only thing Ricki had ever wanted to be. Since that day in year eight, when she’d witnessed Jess accidentally catch her sleeve on fire with the Bunsen burner, nursing had been her calling. Ricki had felt compelled to rush to Jess’s aid back then, working on instinct she’d helped put out the flames and then dragged her to the sink to put her arm under the tap. ‘Are you okay, Jess? Does it sting?’

Ricki had looked into Jess’s eyes and seen how hard she was fighting to keep tears at bay.

‘You know my name?’ she’d said softly and then smiled. ‘Thanks, Ricki, I think I’m okay. It hurts but I’ll live.’

‘Hey, you know my name too. Cool.’ The teacher asked Ricki to take her to the nurse’s office. ‘I think it’s not that deep a burn, it’s when you can’t feel it that it’s a deep burn.’

‘Thank you for helping me, and for keeping me company. You’d make a great nurse, Ricki,’ Jess had said grinning. ‘You seem to know so much.’

For the first time in weeks, at the new school, Ricki had felt like she had a real friend. Her primary school was a long way from here and none of her friends were at this high school, which had made her feel lost, like a ping-pong ball bouncing from place to place. Yet helping Jess had felt right, and she

was so nice; it became the beginning of a close friendship and the direction of her career.

Ricki smiled as she adjusted her uniform and looked at Teresa, who was now by her side. ‘What’s up?’ The hospital seemed quiet for the moment; usually that meant the calm before the storm.

‘You’ve got Miguel for handover. Lucky girl. Can I tag along?’

‘You wish.’ Ricki dug into her pocket until she found the last piece of chewie and popped it in her mouth.

‘Did you just come from Mr Chan?’ added Teresa.

‘Yeah, nasty infection and the skin is going necrotic. Smells foul.’ Luckily the chewie was removing the smell that had seemed to lodge itself in her nasal passages and throat. ‘I’ve got to go, I want to pick up some paperwork before handover.’

Ricki waved goodbye as she continued on her way down the corridor. She didn’t want Teresa tagging along – she was younger and prone to flirtations when attractive nurses or doctors were nearby. Not that Ricki wanted Miguel all to herself; he was gorgeous with olive skin, thanks to his Brazilian heritage but it was more about hearing his stories. He was new, filling in for one of their regulars who had taken maternity leave, and Ricki had learned he’d been volunteering overseas in places like Cambodia. That had been her dream.

‘Hello Ricki, how was your day?’ His voice was warm, deep with only the faintest accent. Miguel’s parents moved to Australia before he was born so even though he looked exotic he was still Aussie.

He was leaning against the high desk. Only he could make the nurse’s uniform look sexy. Or maybe it was his smile. Or the neatly clipped dark hair.

Ricki reached up to her high ponytail, now a droopy mess. Her long blonde locks were normally her best feature – just not at the end of a shift. Why couldn't Miguel be the one taking her through a handover instead of the other way around; then she'd be looking fresh and her lip gloss would still be on her lips.

'Long, as usual. So, how are you settling in? Different hospital same job?' Ricki leaned against the desk beside him as she reached for her paperwork.

Miguel's lopsided smile revealed his perfect white teeth. 'It's okay. I'm very adaptable.'

'I bet. So, you worked in Cambodia and Peru? Do you mind me asking you a bit about your work over there?' He shook his head, so she fired off a question as she finished her paperwork, her eyes on the notes but her ears taking in his words. 'What made you go?'

He shrugged. 'I just knew I wanted to go overseas. I grew up with trips to Brazil as well as seeing family in Peru and it was mainly in Peru where I saw the sick children. It struck a chord with me and my mum said if it worried me that much I should do something about it. So I studied to become a nurse and a uni friend told me about GGC Volunteers. I have been volunteering for them ever since.' His hands came together, as if he were praying. 'It's amazing, Ricki. Truly.'

They started down the corridor to visit the patients she was handing over to Miguel for his shift.

'Will you go back to Cambodia?'

'For sure,' he said. 'I'm planning my next trip now.'

His dark, almost black eyes hit her with such intensity it was like looking up at the night sky with all its infinite possibilities and uncharted territory.

‘Seeing the slums was a shock. I don’t think anyone could really be prepared for the sights and smells. The main entrance is generally covered by fetid sewerage water, which the kids use as a pool.’ Miguel screwed his face up. ‘We provided medical care to all members of the community, not just the kids. I stayed in Phnom Penh and the clinic is sixteen kilometres away. It’s a modern house just a couple of hundred metres from the slums.’

They paused the conversation as they came to their first patient. ‘Mr Gow has come in so we can help him manage his Type One diabetes. How are you feeling, Mr Gow?’ she asked.

‘Food’s not great,’ he said with a frown.

Miguel looked at his charts as Ricki added, ‘I’ve just done Mr Gow’s blood levels and they’re within parameters as authorised by his GP. BGLs are due again pre-dinner and his insulin is due at dinner time.’ Ricki introduced Miguel. ‘Mr Gow sadly lost his wife recently,’ she said while gently holding his frail hand. Ricki knew that Mr Gow’s wife had looked after him well, and without her he was struggling to control his diabetes.

‘I bet she was a marvellous woman, right, Mr Gow?’ Miguel said, giving him a wink. ‘Kept you on the straight and narrow, no doubt?’

‘That she was and yes she did,’ said Mr Gow. ‘She was a hard woman at times, but I know it was for my own good. She had a heart of gold, my Meryl. She ran a tight ship.’

‘And I bet you feel like your ship’s lost its anchor and you’re floating out to sea?’

Mr Gow turned his sad grey eyes up to Miguel and nodded.

‘She’s still with you, in here,’ said Miguel touching his chest. ‘So, you’ve got to look after yourself. Imagine what she’d be saying about this.’

Mr Gow's eyes widened. 'She'd be none too pleased. My ears would be ringing.' He chuckled, smiling for the first time today.

Miguel pressed the old man's shoulder gently and smiled. 'I bet you know exactly what she'd say. You should still listen to her, she's right,' he said. 'I'll be back to check on you later.'

Seeing Mr Gow smile was the best thing Ricki had seen all day, and she couldn't help her own grin as she saw the way Miguel had with people. It wasn't just his open face and good looks. He had a big genuine heart.

They continued on their rounds, and in the moments between the patients Ricki probed Miguel for more information. 'So, what kind of cases did you see over there?'

'Diarrhoea, chest infections, broken arms, eye infections, fevers, skin conditions, infected wounds.' Miguel stopped walking and almost squinted at Ricki. 'You know, you should go. They're always looking for volunteers, and it will change your life,' he said smiling. 'Google GGC Volunteers tonight.'

'What a challenge! You make it sound so amazing,' she said, almost gushing.

He smiled and it made her pulse flip. Teresa was right, he was gorgeous.

'That's because it *is* amazing. Really, do yourself a favour and check it out. I'm going back soon. You could come with me?'

Ricki laughed. 'I'll check it out,' she said.

As for the rest – well, that was just a pipe dream.



'Hey Ricki, how was your day?' asked Peter as he opened the front door.

Ricki kicked off her shoes outside – they never went inside the house if she could help it – and Peter pulled her into a hug, but she quickly drew back. ‘Ew, germs on my clothes. Wait till I’ve had a shower, babe. My day was okay. How was yours?’

‘Didn’t get electrocuted or sued,’ he said with a smile. His standard reply for his work as an electrician.

He was changed out of his work clothes, showered and in black shorts and a surf singlet. Peter was handsome. He was tall, with blond, almost shaggy hair and a lean, tanned body that came from all the surfing on the weekends. A stark contrast to the lanky boy she’d met through Jess at high school. It sometimes seemed like yesterday when Peter had come up to Jess at lunchtime asking if she was okay, wondering why she hadn’t met him for lunch.

‘Oh, it’s okay, Peter,’ she’d said. ‘I’ve found some friends. This is Abbie and Ricki.’

His face had been very pimply but he was thoughtful in the way he looked out for Jess. But they didn’t become good friends with Peter until they started hanging out together. It was Peter who told them that Jess’s home life wasn’t ideal.

‘So, a good day then.’ Ricki smiled too. She couldn’t help it. He always knew how to brighten her mood. ‘I’m dying for a shower. How long till dinner?’

‘Ready in forty, I just want to crackle up the roast.’

‘Oh yum.’ Ricki groaned as she headed towards the bedroom while Peter went into the kitchen.

She emptied out her pockets with the usual – scissors, Micropore tape, two black pens, IV cap, alcohol wipes, notepad and chewing-gum wrappers – before dumping her uniform in its special basket and heading to the shower.

After a good long soak, she dressed in shorts and a T-shirt and went into her office.

Within seconds she'd found the page. As she read the stories from the volunteers in Vietnam and Cambodia, she felt the stirring of old dreams and desires deep in her chest. She went to the bookcase and withdrew a file, a collection of letters in separate labelled partitions, each holding information on her World Vision sponsor children. The first – Sainatu from Malawi; then Gertrude from Zambia. As a child she'd written to them regularly and kept their letters even though in the beginning they were few and far between. As she got older she sponsored more: Siyabonga from Zimbabwe was six; Ezekiel from Tanzania was seven. This was why she became a nurse, to help disadvantaged children. In high school, second year, they'd had a nursing student talk to their class about her overseas work. She'd shown photos of a small village with sick kids, and from that moment Ricki's path had been written for her. Maybe it was the exotic location or the adorable kids or maybe the way the nurse spoke so passionately about her role – it didn't matter, Ricki was smitten with the whole idea. She'd done the first part: become the nurse, working hard towards her goal, but somehow she'd got stuck, the rest of her dream incomplete.

'This is what I love about you,' said Peter suddenly from the doorway, his face aglow.

'What?' she asked curiously.

'Ricki, you're a messy kind of girl – clothes usually lie where you take them off, towel left on the bed after a shower, your stuff scattered everywhere – and yet those folders of your kids' letters are so immaculately organised. I love how much they mean to you.'

Peter held steady eye contact, pupils large and shining with adoration. Ricki knew how much he loved kids too, it was one thing they shared. Only, she didn't really want her own, not yet.

'I know, I'm a strange one,' she said closing her folder and running her hand over it, over the photos of the kids on each cover.

'Come on, strange one, dinner's ready.'

Ricki exited the website, glad that Peter hadn't noticed what was on the screen. Maybe she'd bring up the subject, just test the waters and see how Peter would feel about her going overseas for a little while. Yet just the thought caused the hair on the back of her neck to prickle. Peter loved their life just as it was; she couldn't imagine how he would cope with her going overseas for a year or even six months. With a sigh she got up. She knew what had happened to her dream, to a degree. Peter had happened. Not that she blamed him, how could she when he was such an amazing man. Peter had compassion and loyalty in spades. He was the guy mothers wanted their daughters to marry, her mum included. But deep down she felt the regret and wondered if she could live with it.

The upcoming cruise was a bright spot, though; it was exciting just thinking about it. She missed her friends, saddened by how easily the routine of life got in the way of the time they used to spend together. This trip would be great, help them renew and strengthen their friendship. Just what she needed.



3

Jess

‘BYE, MISS RANDALL. SEE YOU NEXT TERM.’

‘Goodbye, Matilda. Have a great break.’ Jessica Randall smiled at the enthusiastic seven year old who was still waving.

As Jess packed up her desk she mused that Matilda wasn’t the only one happy for a break from school. Teaching was what she loved, but that didn’t mean it was easy, especially because she was also raising a sixteen-month-old on her own. But Jess refused to let her life derail because of her son, instead she’d been determined to get back to work and had found a great shared job in Wandering, a tiny country town an hour and a half from the city. She shared teaching the year ones with another working mum, Janice, and so far they had made a success of it.

Jess brushed a hand through her straight shoulder-length blonde hair; it had once been quite long but she’d opted for an easier style after Ollie was born. Quickly she moved around the small classroom, pulling down the last of the decorations

for this term's theme of Australian Animals. Next term would be a new one, which she and Janice were planning together.

When everything was packed up, Jess put her hands on her hips and surveyed the quiet, empty room. It had been a relaxed day with lots of sport, so she'd worn shorts, a light blue polo shirt and her running shoes. She did love Fridays the most.

'Rather sad like this, isn't it?'

Jess smiled at the school cleaner who stood in the doorway watching her pack up. 'It is a bit. I'm all done if you wanted to make a start in here, Thea?'

'Righto, thanks. So, all set for your cruise?'

Thea wheeled in a big vacuum cleaner and put it in the corner by the power point.

'Not really. It'll be the first time I'm away from Ollie,' said Jess truthfully. In just two terms she had come to love the people of Wandering; the small, close-knit community had been so embracing and concerned for her and Ollie's welfare. It had been the right decision to move here from Perth. It felt like she had a family, and lots of people were happy to help watch Ollie if she needed. She never had time to feel alone or isolated when there was so much to do. Like the book club, the crochet club, playgroup for Ollie, reading time at the CRC Library, plus throw in her school work and Jess just didn't have much time left to dwell on her situation. No wonder people always talked about the benefits of living in a small community. In a way this town had saved her.

'Ollie will be fine with your mum. She'll spoil him rotten and he'll hardly miss you.'

'It's not Ollie I'm worried about,' said Jess with a laugh. 'I know he'll be fine. Not sure I'll cope.'

‘You deserve a break, so make sure you make the most of this trip.’

Jess put her handbag in the box of classroom items and picked it up. ‘Thanks, Thea, you have a good break too. I’ll see you next term.’

It was only a few minutes’ drive back to her house. It was an old three-bedroomed building but it was perfect for just the two of them. Her neighbour Marian helped her keep the garden nice and babysat Ollie when she had to work. Jess was just sliding her box onto the kitchen bench when Marian came through the front door.

‘Yoo hoo, it’s only us.’

Marian entered the kitchen, with Ollie on her hip. Jess smiled the moment she saw her boy with his curly blond mop and vibrant blue eyes. His little chubby cheeks melted her heart and his arms immediately reached out for her.

‘Hello, my Ollie,’ she said pulling him into her arms and covering him in kisses until he wiggled in annoyance. ‘Thanks, Marian. Would you like a cuppa?’

Marian was in her sixties, her husband had passed away a year ago and she’d been rather melancholy. But Ollie had been her saving grace, if Jess believed what the locals told her. Looking after him had given her something to brighten her day, especially with her family in the city.

‘No thanks, love, I’ll let you unpack your school things and get ready for your holiday.’ Marian smiled. She brushed back her short grey hair and turned her eyes to Ollie. They shone bright with love for him. ‘He was a wonderful boy for me today, even had a sleep. I’ll miss you both.’

Jess hugged Marian. ‘We’ll miss you too. Thanks, Marian. I couldn’t do any of this without you.’

‘My pleasure. And don’t worry about a thing while you’re gone. I’ll keep an eye on the garden for you.’

Jess didn’t know what she’d done to deserve Marian or the life she’d made for herself in Wandering. If only Mum was more like you, Jess thought and then felt shame burn her cheeks. Her mum had done the best she could, and if having a child had taught Jess anything it was that people shouldn’t judge. Motherhood was hard and it didn’t come with an instruction manual. Having a difficult husband hadn’t helped her mum either.

After Marian went home Jess left the box of unpacking and lay on the floor next to Ollie while he played with his toys. He was the most important man in her life. Ollie held out a red block for her and she took it, watching him stack the rest. Then he stood up and staggered off to his pop-up tent in the corner of the lounge room. She still marvelled at his new skill of walking. How quickly he was growing up.

Her phone rang and as she reached for her mobile she watched Ollie pick up a block and hold it to his ear, mimicking her.

Jess smiled when she saw the caller name. ‘Hello Peter Pan.’

‘Hi Jess.’ His voice was smooth and warm like melted chocolate.

‘Are you packed yet?’ he asked.

‘No. I just finished school. Gee, give me time. I’m not coming to Perth till tomorrow.’

‘Are you still up to help me on Monday? I can’t do it without you. You and Abbie know Ricki probably better than I do.’

‘Peter, you’re the one who wants to marry her. I really think it should be something that comes from your heart, not what

we think.’ Just saying the word *marry* made Jess uncomfortable. It was strange; she’d got used to her best friends dating, even moving in together, but marriage? Something about it made her heart race. If she hadn’t borne witness to Peter’s parents’ happy marriage, she wasn’t sure she would believe in it at all.

‘I know, but I want it to be perfect.’

‘She’ll marry you regardless, Pete. You could get her a ring of copper and she’d say yes.’ *She’d be bloody mad if she didn’t*, thought Jess. Pete was the catch of the century.

Ollie came up to her, still talking on his pretend phone. He dropped the block and held out his hand. ‘Ta. Ta,’ he said.

‘Is that Ollie?’ said Peter. ‘Can I talk to him?’

‘Sure,’ said Jess holding her mobile up to Ollie’s ear. ‘Say hello to Pete.’

Ollie tried to hold the phone. She could see his eyes light up as Peter spoke to him but he didn’t answer. Jess laughed and brought the phone back to her ear. ‘He’s like a deer in the headlights, the moment he gets a chance to talk on a phone he goes all quiet.’

‘I miss the little guy. Can’t wait to catch up with you both. It’s been ages. This cruise is going to be awesome,’ said Peter.

Jess wished she could share his enthusiasm. Something niggled in the back of her mind and she couldn’t shake it. Fear? Anxiety? She’d been excited about the trip since its conception, so why the sudden worry? She didn’t want to dig further and find out why. Not yet.

In year eight they’d gone on a school camp to Albany, around five hours’ drive from Perth through wide open countryside, to see Whale World and the Princes Royal Fortress, which was now home to the award-winning National Anzac Centre. It had been

the few days there that had cemented their newfound friendship into best friends; from that moment forth Abbie, Ricki and Jess were inseparable. Over wine and cheese about six months ago the topic of school had come up, and the fact that it was ten years since they had graduated, and Jess suggested they re-do their trip to Albany. Abbie, who for all her frank and forward personality was quite sentimental, had whole-heartedly agreed. It was a pretty place with beautiful beaches and green hills that remained a special place for all of them.

‘We should go by boat. It would be perfect for us. No long drive in the car – instead we can drink and eat our way to Albany!’

‘I’ve always wanted to try a cruise,’ Ricki had said. ‘There’s something magical about the idea of sailing out on an endless ocean.’

So, it was set. Abbie took the lead and booked their tickets. A three day trip. No turning back.

But now with Peter coming along it didn’t seem as exciting. He’d convinced them all to let him come, promising to give them space. But he wanted to use the cruise as a romantic way to propose to Ricki. Who were Jess and Abbie to refuse him?

‘Yeah, the trip will be great,’ said Jess, remembering Peter was still on the line.

‘Too right. Well, I’ve got to go, I’m still on a job. I’ll see you next week. Love you, Jess,’ he said, his usual sign-off.

‘Love you too, Pete.’

And it was the truth.