

# Finding the lost woman

(book three of the lost woman trilogy)

august  
**XXIX**

Anna Buckley

WARNING – This book contains explicit sexual content and language that may be offensive to some readers.

This book is a work of fiction. All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Buckley is an author based in Melbourne, Australia. Her previous career was in design.

Her aim is to write books about women taking control of their lives, financially, emotionally and sexually. Her books are set across the world and feature art, architecture, design, fashion, food and wine.

Anna Buckley has a blog where she posts stories and pictures behind her books. Find it at [annabuckley.com](http://annabuckley.com)

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# Part 1

## Free

There was no sense of time or place. I woke in a sterile white room, confused. My body ached. Pain shot through my shoulder like a knife blade twisting between the bones. I began to retch, bitter tasting bile filled my mouth. My head throbbed with each involuntary spasm. The feeling was like no brain tumour hangover I'd ever had.

'Oh you poor darlin', here, let me clean you up,' said a kindly voice with a lilting Irish accent.

'There there, that's better,' she said as she wiped my face and brow with a cool cloth.

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'You've been asleep for quite some time. I was wonderin' what we might have to do to wake you up. Welcome back, Christina. There'll be a lot of people pleased to see you.'

The smell of disinfectant, the beep of monitors, the bland interior, told me where I was. Hospital.

Drifting back into sleep was my preferred state, but the nurse would have none of it and she began slapping, squeezing my hand and speaking more authoritatively.

'Christina, come on girl. It's time to wake up.'

'What happened, where am I?' I croaked, my throat parched, my lips painfully swollen, cracking as I tried to speak.

'You're ok, you're gonna be fine. You're in the best hands.'

She gave me some ice to suck to relieve the thirst and called the doctor in. As I tried to move, I realised my left shoulder was tightly bandaged, painful, preventing me from sitting up. The nurse helped me, propping me with pillows, giving me a better view of my surrounds. The doctor picked up the notes at the end of my bed and checked the monitors.

'How do you feel, Ms. Maxwell? It's good to see you awake, you've had a bit of a rough trot.'

He told me I was in hospital in Hobart. I had been shot in the shoulder, the bullet narrowly missing my heart. Shot? What was he talking about? Then the memories started to flood back. Moses, the shack, the beating, the fear, the betrayal. The guilt. My mind was racing. I didn't know how to process the confusion of thoughts buzzing round my head.

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'Please, I don't want to see anybody yet.'

'It's the middle of the night. Your family was sent home, we'll let them get some sleep. I'll call them in the morning when you'll be feeling a bit better.'

'No, no one, I want to be left alone.'

Thankfully she let me drift back into my comatose sleep. I would face my demons in the morning.

When I woke the same nurse was on duty. Emma was the name on the tag, pinned to her uniform.

'Mornin' darlin'. Feelin' better today?'

I rolled over to avoid her upbeat cajoling. I was no ones darlin' and still didn't want to talk to anybody. She was becoming concerned, saying there were many people wanting to see me. Wondered if I should talk to someone professional first? Thankfully she did not bring in the clergy. Some sanctimonious buffoon praying over me was the last thing I wanted. A tall, elegantly suited woman entered the room.

'Hi Christina, you've been through quite an ordeal. I'm told you don't want to see anyone yet. Do you want to talk about it?'

I resented her being there. Didn't want to play into the hands of some know all psychiatrist who thought she'd gotten her hands on a textbook case of Stockholm Syndrome. What happened between Moses and me ran so much deeper than that. Staring blankly at the wall, I was in no mood to be analysed. I hadn't decided how to process all the shit going on in my head and wasn't ready to talk until I had some answers myself. She sat waiting for me to open up. I rewarded her with silence. I didn't

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need to hear her patronising comments about how it would make me feel better if I started talking.

How could I tell her that I had rejected my daughter, my lover, my friends, my life? Betrayed all those around me for someone who I thought offered everything. That I'd felt real desire for a man who had forcibly held me captive. Who I had willingly fucked. A man who violently bashed me almost to death. How on earth could I tell anybody what had really gone on in that place where I'd been held prisoner?

'You cared for him didn't you?'

My eyes burnt with tears, she was right. I still didn't want to talk. 'Just let the nurse know if I can help,' she said as she stood, realising that her patient was not going to open up to her.

A new nurse came in and went about her tasks. Asking the same questions. Checking I was ok. Dressing the wound on my shoulder. Refilling the morphine drip I clicked endlessly. The thing was, that although it didn't really stop the pain, it helped me forget and I was happy to remain in my drugged haze for the rest of the day.

The staff had respected my wish to see no visitors, but they could not keep out the police. The detective spoke first.

'Ms Maxwell, the doctors have told us that you are up to giving a statement.'

I feared what Moses had already told them, tears filled my eyes. I felt panic, didn't know where to start.

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'It's ok Ms Maxwell, Christina, you've got nothing to fear. He can't hurt you now. We found his body yesterday. He tried to escape into the bush, didn't get very far. He'd been shot, bled to death.'

They had misinterpreted my reaction and, thank God, I now knew that Moses would never tell them the real story. I felt a great sense of relief.

The statement I gave was vague, I could never reveal all. I filled them in on my attempt to get off the island to get help for Adam, being lost, and of my eventual kidnapping. I told them I had been incarcerated in the cellar, tied up for a long time, heard the helicopters above, was powerless to get help. Told them enough to let them know that, at the beginning, I'd been a very reluctant hostage. They saw the bruising, my swollen face. I told them Moses had done this when he discovered my attempt to make contact with the outside world. I didn't tell them that, before the savage beating, he had offered me freedom and I had chosen to stay.

'Ms Maxwell, we have one more thing we need to do before we leave. We need to take some photographs of your injuries and remove the metal band around your ankle.'

I wriggled my foot and felt the heavy metal ring Moses had attached the chains to. I'd become so used to it I'd completely forgotten it was there. The nurse pulled back the covers and they photographed the bruises on my face and stomach and the rope burns around my wrists. So much of that last horrible hour with Moses was coming back to me in vivid detail. Then the detective consulted with a guy in overalls. They slid a protective cover between my skin and the metal and with a pair of bolt cutters, snapped off the ring and placed it in a clear plastic evidence bag.

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I was glad of the bruises and the metal ring, because this would be the evidence they needed to show I had not been a willing hostage.

'Thanks Ms Maxwell, that will be all for now. We'll take a more detailed statement when you're feeling a bit better.'

They got up and left the room.

I wept into the pillow for a man I'd grown to like, and for whom I'd almost been prepared to give up everything. His seduction had been so clever. He made me think I had all the control, that I would be with him by choice. And when he'd discovered that my almost forgotten plan had caught him out, he bashed me senseless, a clear message telling me exactly who was in charge. How could I have been so prepared to pretend that what Moses offered was love? Was it all the years I'd spent in a passionless marriage? Just like with Paul, the sex with Moses had been completely unfulfilling. I had tried to convince myself it would get better, that I could change this most fundamental flaw. Had I become so conditioned to this way of life, that it was my default position? The choice of a simpler life, when the one I'd created was getting too complicated? The sobs were now for the realisation of my own weakness.

Click, click went the button as I pumped in more morphine. Numbing the pain and the guilt.

A change of shift and another new nurse, observing my slowly healing body. Offering to help me eat my untouched food. Encouraging me to see the people outside.

Hours and hours passed and nothing changed.

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'Oh pet, look at you.'

The gentle Irish voice, that lovely nurse, Emma, had returned. Her motherly tone giving me a sense of security and trust.

'Darlin', you've not touched your food. How are you gonna get better if you don't eat?' she said fussing, stroking my forehead with her cool hands.

'Wouldn't blame you though, the muck they serve in here isn't fit for a mongrel dog. Just wait a minute, I've got something that might help.'

The creak and whoosh of the heavy door signalled her return. She sat me up and asked me to open my mouth. I reluctantly complied. Soup, chicken soup. That comforting and oh so familiar flavour my mother had given me when I was a child. Sick, upset or just out of sorts, she always knew it would cure all that ailed me. And here was this beautiful woman doing the same. I burst into tears, overwhelmed by the emotions it brought flooding back.

'There, there, sweetie, it's ok. Have a nice big cry. Just let it all out, it'll make you feel so much better,' she gently coaxed.

She was just what I needed, holding me close as the sobs convulsed through my body, releasing wave after wave of pent up emotion. She sat rocking me gently, like a baby, until I finally calmed.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to cry.'

'That's alright, sometimes it's good to get it out. Are you feelin' a little better?'

'Yes, a little, thank you.'

The soup was offered again and I wolfed it down. Emma looked on, satisfied that the healing process had finally begun.

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'Has anyone offered you a shower?'

'No. It hadn't occurred to me to even ask. I'm hooked up to all this stuff. I feel disgusting. Do you think it would be possible?'

'A good cry, chicken soup and now a shower. We'll have you dancin' around the room in no time.'

She checked with the doctor, then slowly started to pull out the tubes. A catheter had been inserted and I gasped at the strange and intimate sensation of having it removed. She took out the drip and mentioned something about not getting too attached to that evil little concoction. Then expertly covered my dressings with waterproof bandages. Carefully she helped me off the bed and supported me as we walked to the shower, my jelly legs barely holding up. She sat me down on a chair and let the hot water run over my body. Happy to stand by until I'd had enough. She towelled me dry and dressed me in a clean gown, making me sit up in an armchair as she stripped the bed and remade it with fresh sheets. She helped me back into the cool crisp linen, tucking the sheets firmly in a drill I'm sure some cranky old matron had taught her many years before. It made me feel secure.

She sat on the bed and looked me straight in the eye.

'Christina, I came from Northern Ireland, immigrated when 'the troubles' were at their worst. Lots of kidnappings. Worked in a hospital in Belfast and spoke to some of the people who'd been taken hostage. They told me they didn't always hate the men who'd taken them. Is this what's been troublin' you so much, darlin?'

I nodded unable to speak, choking back the tears. Emma was safe, she felt like the mother I'd lost. The protective shield wasn't just the

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result of my loveless marriage, it was a defence against the hollow loneliness of an orphan's abandonment.

'Big breath angel, your story's safe with me.'

She heard everything. I let it all come out. Telling her my innermost thoughts, relieving me of the torture of guilt. After what seemed like hours, she gave me something for the pain, something to help me sleep. She left, knowing that now I could begin to move on.

## Trust

When the surgeon did his rounds, he said he was pleased with my progress. The bullet had stopped at the bone and had been easily removed. It left only a small entry wound that he assured me was healing well, only a few stitches were needed. He was reluctant to let me leave until the swelling and bruising had gone down and was sure that the injury had not impacted on my heart.

'I hear you still don't want to see anybody,' he said, broaching the subject I'd been avoiding.

'I just need to sort out a few things in my head before I'm prepared to face the world. But there is someone who I would like to look after me. She is the only person I feel I can trust.'

Emma, the lovely Irish nurse, was that person. He told me he would see what he could do. By late afternoon all was in place. Emma would look after me in twelve hour shifts during the day, no other duties. A

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trusted night nurse would supervise during the evening when I slept. At long last, control was coming back into my life.

When Emma arrived the next morning it was as if a long lost friend had returned.

'Darlin', this business of hidin' yourself away is no good for you. I've been wondering why you won't at least see your daughter?'

'The newspaper articles, Moses showed me them all. Nobody spoke out, nobody defended me. It seemed that everybody had moved on. It made the idea of leaving them all so much easier. He'd convinced me that we were alike, so much of our pasts were similar, and I did feel a connection, us against them. I'd been trying to find where I fitted all my life. He made me think I could discard the people I loved and find sanctuary with him. The longer he held me captive, the more fond I grew of him, believed him, felt I belonged. And now I can't bear this feeling of guilt. The ease at which I could justify abandoning Kate, my friends, everyone and everything, to stay with him. I feel so ashamed.'

'You had no choice, and quite frankly you could not possibly have read all the articles. It was the biggest news, on the front pages for ages, it was covered by everyone. Lands End was a sea of reporters, people couldn't get enough of the story. Whatever that man showed you should have been enough to fill a library. Has it occurred to you he only showed what he wanted you to see?'

Slowly it dawned on me that what she was saying could be true. Why would Moses show me anything other than the stories that would support his claim on me and reinforce his hatred of Adam?

'Last night, when I was thinking about coming and working for you, I did a bit of research of my own. It seems that those closest to you spoke

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only through your blog. It pissed off some of the papers, they had to scrape the bottom of the barrel to get anyone to talk. Looks like that woman called Fiona had her fair share of rants. You must've done something pretty major to piss that one off! Look, here. You can see for yourself,' she said, as she handed me an ipad.

And it was all there. I scrolled down. Hundreds of pages, telling the whole story. Moses had most definitely only shown me a small piece of the picture. He'd cherry-picked the articles to manipulate me and my way of thinking. He'd managed to capture so much more than just me, he'd almost successfully captured my mind as well. I was a fool to think I had any control over him. He had been the master puppeteer all along.

What an idiot I'd been.

'Kate? How is she?' I croaked through shameful tears.

'She's been waiting outside everyday since they brought you in. I'll go and get her.'

Within seconds my gorgeous daughter ran to my bed, hugging me, crying, holding me tight, afraid to let go.

'I'm sorry darling. I'm so glad to see you. I love you very much.'

'It's alright mum, I'm here. I can't believe you're still alive, I love you, too,' she said quietly, choking on the tears.

When we had calmed down, Emma broke the intense emotional scene by making a cup of tea. She had an almost sixth sense.

'Kate, this is Emma, she has been wonderful.'

'I know, she's been keeping me informed of your progress. She is lovely, I don't know what I would have done without her. She even baked

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cookies for me yesterday,' said Kate, looking at Emma with an affectionate smile.

'She told me you were too fragile to see anyone, that your heart was in danger and that I would get to come in when you were no longer at risk. I knew you'd be ok, you're a fighter,' added Kate.

'They kept everyone away except me. There are reporters everywhere. It's complete madness outside, far worse than when you went missing.'

Emma was an angel beyond compare. I had no idea she'd been carefully filtering the information to Kate, protecting her and me from my irrational decisions of the last few days.

'Where are you staying? Is anyone looking after you?'

'Cindy, she's been great, she's organised everything. We have an apartment in a building connected to the hospital. She's handling the media, liaising with the doctors and police. Nothing is getting past her eagle eye. She's been holding everyone and everything together since you disappeared.'

We spent the next few hours talking about what had happened while I was gone. Kate was very careful not to pry too deeply about my capture. Again, Emma must have spoken to her. By lunchtime I was starting to doze off, a good time to say farewell. The return to normality had begun.

Cindy arrived in the afternoon.

'Bloody hell, you should've told me you needed a longer break!' she said, grinning with relief.

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'None of us at the office could accept you were dead. We didn't even entertain the thought, there was no plan B, we just kept on going,' she exclaimed.

'And of course boss, you hitting the headlines has been very good for business. Things are going crazy back in Melbourne.'

'Why don't you hook me up to my computer? I could write some stuff for the readers?'

'Tina, you nearly died... twice! They can wait. I'll write something brief, give a bit of a progress report, say Hi from you. Everything is under control, trust me. You need to rest now. Take your time. We just want you to get better, so you can eventually get back to the office and help us deal with the Tsunami you've created.'

It was good to be reminded of her no nonsense approach.

Emma suggested that I needed to have my wounds dressed and Cindy understood the hint. She left me with a phone.

'Use this if you need it, only Kate, Emma and I know the number. I've put in our details. See you later, maybe tomorrow?' she said cheerily as she walked out the door.

'Two down, one to go. You haven't mentioned Adam? Why don't you want to see him?' said Emma, as the door closed shut.

She had pointed out the elephant in the room. How could I see him? What did we have left? I'd slept with my kidnapper, been unfaithful, fantasied about an escapist life that did not include Adam. Pouring my heart out to Emma was the only way I was ever going to begin to unscramble this emotional torment.

'Well, do you love him?'

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'I don't know what I feel, he tears me apart. We've tried to be together, but things always get in the way and now I've committed a betrayal from which I see no redemption.'

'You weren't in your right mind,' she said consolingly.

'But I was, all my decisions were completely clear.'

'No, you're not looking at it logically. Take your mind back to the time before you were kidnapped. You were trying to get help. What would you have done if you'd made it back to the main road, to Moon Bay, to Joe's place? None of this other malarkey would've occurred.'

She had a point. I'd never thought of it that way.

'You should try to imagine what things would be like if you'd made it out safely and got help for Adam. What would have happened next?'

'We had talked about a life together...'

'Do I still sense your reluctance to think about what that might be?'

'Well yes, because we've never really had the chance to even begin.'

I told her about the unlikely way we'd got together. About the riots and the stranding on the island. She laughed with the absurdity of it all. But it wasn't just about the lack of time Adam and I had spent together in the real world. I told her about his fucked up family and the brother who would always come between us.

'Do you think you're the first woman to have ever encountered these issues? Family is often the biggest stumbling block, clashes of personality, simple misunderstandings. This fairy tale shite is hard wired into us. Don't you think Prince Charming had some annoying little brother in the background, getting in the way, pissing him off?'

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As usual she was right, it was a relief to be given a new way of thinking about things. Of what might have been.

'The one thing I don't understand is his silence? I feel like he let that bitch Fiona do all the talking, stomping all over me.'

'Perhaps he chose not to talk on their terms. He had no control over what others said. I think he works differently. He has made a very generous donation to the hospital, because of him you've been given these conditions. Don't get me wrong, I would've looked after you for nothing, but I've never seen the rules bent so much for anyone before. This room is on the top floor near the conference centre, away from the wards and the other patients. It's a suite that's usually used for visiting specialists. He paid for it to be fitted out while you were in intensive care. He's even made sure there are security guards preventing any unnecessary intruders.'

'But he's rich, anyone with that kind of money can do what he's done.'

'That's not all, while you were missing he organised the search to continue way after the police had given up. We'd see him on the television, directing the searchers. It was only when a shoe was found washed up on the beach a month later that he stopped.'

'He may not have talked to the papers, but his actions spoke louder than any words. That land at Moon Bay, he bought it. Sent out a press release saying it would be replanted. That it would be a fitting final resting place for a woman he loved deeply. That he had always felt a strong connection with the land. He even mentioned something about the two of you replanting trees. Everyone who watched that broken man knew his grief was intense.'

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The extent of Moses' clever brainwashing was now becoming evident. Even the story about mining had probably been fabricated. When I'd read through the articles on the search, the land at Moon Bay was always described as former forest, once owned by the bankrupt timber company, no mention of Adam's father. Surely the press would have had a field day with that story if all Moses told me was true? The only truth was that Adam had fought against the land being logged all those years ago. The press had mentioned this. And now I find out, Adam only purchased it after my capture. He hadn't lied about the land. Moses had probably seen the surveyors and knew it was being prepared for sale. In his sick mind he'd been able to create a plausible scenario he knew I'd accept. How close I'd come to falling into his trap. But now that I knew the truth and understood how cleverly I'd been manipulated, I could finally start to forgive myself. My heart flooded with relief, I was beginning to chart a course through this emotional minefield. Doubts about a future with Adam began to slip away. I would take Emma's advice and create a new beginning.

'Darlin' girl, I also think you've forgotten how to be loved,' said Emma. She was right.

'Tomorrow, tell him to come tomorrow.'

She let me sleep, it had been a truly exhausting day.

## Into the Night

The night light was on. How long had I been asleep?

'Now that's what I call a good rest. Would you like a shower, a cup of tea?'

'A shower would be great, maybe I could do it myself?'

'I don't see why not, here let me fix your dressings.'

Emma kept the door ajar as I luxuriated under the hot water. The toiletries were from his hotel, the towel not your usual hospital issue. I had failed to even notice such details last night. I called her to help wash my hair, still reluctant to raise my injured shoulder.

'Try lifting it a little, it's healing nicely, you need to get it moving.'

I cautiously stretched out my arm and fingers, pleased the bullet had not damaged the nerves. Slowly I lifted my shoulder and realised the pain was not as bad as I thought. Emma stayed and watched me tentatively begin to use my left arm.

'Good girl, they'll be letting you out of here before you know it,' she said and walked away confident I would be quite capable of showering without her help.

She had dispensed with the hospital gown and a beautiful pair of pyjamas, like the ones from The Imperial, lay folded on the chair. His presence was everywhere. I was beginning to feel human again.

A comb was found and I looked into the small mirror above the sink. A rainbow of bruises covered my face, my split eyebrow stitched neatly to close the cut. The reflection was hideous and I needed no convincing

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about the brutality of my abductor or the beating he'd given me. Moses was an animal and I hated him for what he'd made me become. I was no longer under any illusions about what had occurred and what it might have been like if I stayed.

It was getting close to the end of her shift, Emma must be getting exhausted. I had been a very demanding patient.

'Is there anything I can get you before I go?'

'Actually I'm starving. Could I get a bite to eat?'

'Already done. I've called up one of those fancy little restaurants off Salamanca Place, they're bringing over some food. Probably be another forty minutes. The night nurse will let them in.'

I thanked her and she winked as she left the room smiling,

'Just doin' my job darlin'.'

A quiet knock, I must have dozed off, the food was here. The waiter pushed the trolley towards my bed, I could barely see his face in the muted evening light. The aromas whetted my appetite. I was curious to see what Emma had ordered. He had his back to me as he lifted the cloches, assembling the food.

'It's ok, you can leave, it must be quite late, the nurse will help me.'

He silently shook his head.

Sitting up in bed, I closed my eyes, wincing at the discomfort of trying to move the shoulder. As the pain abated, I opened my eyes and gasped. He stared at me tenderly, it was Adam. I began to weep. He swept me up in his strong arms and held me close. I felt the trembling of his sobs. For

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what seemed like ages we didn't move, not wanting to let go. He gently kissed my bruised face, his lips brushing away the ugliness. I saw the anguish in his eyes, in his dark brooding, beautiful face and knew nothing could compare to this most visceral moment of love. Nearly lost, but breathtakingly found. He kicked off his shoes and climbed into bed with me, holding me, rekindling our connection. That is how we stayed all night.

No food was eaten. No night nurse knocked. I was now truly safe.

## A New Day

As the dawn light began filtering into my room, I woke to feel him against my back, cradling my body. I reached for his arm, running my fingers along his hand, intertwined, he squeezed back, awake. He held me, kissing the back of my neck, then sat up and brushed the hair from my face, staring intently, his eyes filled with the wonder of our reunion.

'Good morning,' I whispered, our first words, and smiled faintly.

'Good morning,' he replied.

'I can't believe I've got you back. I can't bear to think of what might have been. I never want to be away from you again,' he whispered.

'I need you with me, too.'

He touched my face, traced my lips with his fingers, reassuring himself that I was here. Real. We lay together silently until my stomach

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growled, reminding us both that we had not eaten, the trolley remained untouched.

'I'll see what I can salvage from last night's dinner,' he said getting up, a faint grin lifting the mood.

'Hmm, what have we got here? Some bread and butter, cheese, or perhaps the chocolate tart. What would Madame prefer?' he joked.

'All of it. I'm starving, it feels like I haven't eaten for days.'

Before too long we were interrupted by a knock at the door.

'Good morning, Tina. I see you have a visitor,' said Emma as she entered the room pushing a new trolley.

'How 'd you sleep darlin?'' she said as she checked the monitors.

'Best sleep yet. I feel much better, thank you.'

'I took the liberty of bringing in a decent breakfast for you both. I'll leave you in peace to eat. Just buzz me if you need anything.'

We were hungry and devoured the food, eggs, bacon, Danish pastries and hot coffee. It gave us the strength to talk.

'What day is it? How long have I been here?'

'December twenty eighth, almost the end of the year. They found you on Christmas Eve.'

'So I've been gone for almost two months. I left Melbourne at the end of October. How long were we trapped on the island?'

'About two weeks?'

'How long before they found you? How did you get off the island?' I asked.

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He told me of the shots that alerted Joe, being found, the search parties. Filling me in on what had been going on until a few days ago. He painted a very different picture to the story Moses had given me.

'But I read the articles, you let Fiona do the talking. Why didn't you defend me?' I pleaded, aware that the story he was telling me bore no resemblance to the few pieces Moses let me read.

'I was sick of them twisting the truth. It was better if I said nothing. The newspapers were pissed off that we weren't talking to them. I directed everyone to your blog. Fiona was the only one who would give the papers what they wanted. Our right of reply was always online, Cindy responded to everything. Even the bullshit Fiona was peddling. In the end Fiona started to look ridiculous and the newspapers stopped calling her.'

He continued to paint a clearer picture of what went on back in Melbourne.

'It was Cindy who got us all together. It was awkward at first, no one knew of our relationship. I had to be careful of what I said, I didn't want to upset your daughter. Cindy arranged for me to talk to Kate. I told her of my feelings toward you. She was surprised, a little bit reticent, thinking I would be like Justin, unsure of whether I could be trusted. Margot really stepped up, taking Kate under her wing. Something Margot said must have changed Kate's attitude and eventually she let me in. I would always speak to Kate first. Filling her in on all we were doing to try to find you, keeping her in the loop, trying to reassure her that we hadn't given up.'

'Do you know much of what happened that day we found you?' asked Adam, tentatively.

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'I remember being bundled into the back of his truck, speeding off, gunshots, helicopters and waking up here. The police were in, but didn't really say much. They told me Moses had eventually been found dead.'

'Yeah, he was hit, but managed to escaped into the forest. They found him the following day, he'd bled to death.'

I shuddered to think of what might have transpired if he'd survived. Only Moses knew what actually happened between us. I felt very relieved he wasn't alive to tell the real story.

'What made them come for me, find me after all that time?'

'I was at Joe's.'

'What were you doing at Joe's? The papers said you'd gone overseas and that you weren't alone.'

'Fucking papers! I'm sorry you had to see that photo, I know what it must have looked like. More of the bullshit stories they were making up. It was actually a picture of me dragging Georgina Snelling up the steps to the jet, away from the reporters she and her sister had been blabbing to. That was the last time I saw her. All that stuff about her being my girlfriend was a complete fabrication. It was hard enough losing you. Dealing with the lies being peddled in the press made it all so much worse.'

It had been that picture that had caused my sudden shift in attitude toward Adam. The first of the clippings that Moses had so cleverly let me see. I was shocked to think how easily I had been manipulated, shuddered at what might have happened if I'd stayed. My eyes filled with tears.

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'Are you ok?' he asked with a look of panic, as if he had said something to upset me.

'I'm fine. Just very emotional. Everything is still so raw.'

Adam held me, wiped the tears away and continued.

'I felt so helpless being confined to bed. Worked really hard to get walking again and was glad when they finally released me. After I got out of hospital, I realised the police had all but given up. I wasn't convinced you were dead. I got together my own team and we continued to search. The police tried to tell me there was no chance of you still being alive. When your shoe was found washed up on the beach, reluctantly, I had to accept what they were telling me.'

'I went back to Melbourne to try and get on with my life, but I couldn't concentrate, couldn't work, it all seemed so pointless. Each day I would ring Joe. I always hoped he might have some new information. Maybe a local had seen or found something. In the end he asked me to come back down to Lands End. Sam told me I should go. I'd always loved being around Joe when I was a kid and thought it would be good to just do some mindless work down there with him. Get myself together, be closer to you. It was the lead up to the peak tourist season. I knew Joe could do with a bit of help, things had been so disrupted. And quite frankly, I couldn't bear the thought of spending Christmas with my family.'

'Anyway, I'd been there for a few days, just sleeping on his couch, drinking too much whiskey, trying to drown out the overwhelming grief. Eventually Joe had enough and threatened to kick me out if I didn't do something. I started going over the books and was surprised to see Joe had been selling some of those obscure gourmet foods you'd found at my place. At first I was saddened by the reminders of you. I remembered the

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food you cooked and the meals we'd shared. So I said to Joe, "who's been buying all that stuff, tourist season come early?" and he tells me it's been Moses. Joe thought that maybe he'd developed a bit of a taste for fancy food. Moses had been eating with the search party. Some of the media guys wanted to get his story, took him out to dinner. Joe said he didn't really think much of it. Something wasn't right. I just couldn't imagine Moses, this wild man from the bush, suddenly becoming a cook.'

'Anyway, just as Joe's opening up for the day we see Moses drive in. I went to the back room and watched as he unloaded the dead animals into the cool room, but the man I saw was barely recognisable. He was clean shaven, civilised almost. I kept my distance, didn't feel like socialising and stayed hidden while the two men talked. Moses had some stuff to post, something about a Christmas present to his father, just small talk. Nothing out of the ordinary, until Joe makes this comment, "You got a woman up there Moses? I've never seen you look this good. Didn't know you were a sweet tooth, buying up all this chocolate. Where've you been hiding her?" And it hits me. It could be you. That prick from the bush had been buying the food only someone like you would know how to cook.'

'Moses didn't hang around, in fact he left abruptly, didn't even collect the paperwork for the carcasses he'd delivered. Something wasn't right, he seemed spooked. I quizzed Joe and the more we talked, the more he started to think. It wasn't just the food, but cleaning stuff, strange purchases Moses started making not long after you disappeared. And even on that day he'd bought shampoo, not something a man with a shaved head would need.'

'We had to act quickly. Moses had raced off because he knew we were onto him. We had no idea of what he might do to you. I called my mate,

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the detective from Melbourne and he pulled out all stops to get a team together from Hobart. I didn't care if they thought it was a ridiculous idea. I told them I would pay whatever it cost and within thirty minutes a chopper had left with a SWAT team. A ground crew from the nearest town was mobilised and on its way. The local cop who'd taken the call always mistrusted Moses and took little convincing about our need to get to the property fast.'

All along they thought I was dead. Adam held me as I wept. No one had seen the messages I'd been sending, no one but Adam.

'I'd sent Moses out for that food intentionally, the caper berries, all that unusual stuff you and I shared on the island. I'd hoped someone might notice.'

'I know, you were so clever. I'm sorry it took so long to see the signals you were sending. Something in me didn't believe you were dead, I couldn't get you out of my mind. And I was right, you weren't dead. I just didn't know where to look.'

'But you did. You found me, you knew. Adam I love you, I love you so much. Stay with me.'

'I'm not going anywhere, never again without you. I love you too, more than you can possibly imagine.'

We sobbed, his shirt wet from my tears and held each other as if letting go would mean a loss forever.

Over the next few days it was heartening to see all these people together. Adam and Kate joking like old friends, Cindy keeping them in line. My health improved rapidly, my heart was fine and the pain in my

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shoulder barely noticeable. By New Years Eve I'd been given the all clear and we were free to go home.

Although I was ready to get back to Melbourne, I was sad at having to leave Emma.

'You'll be alright darlin', you don't need me anymore. Look at these people around you, they'll make sure you're ok. They love you very much.'

She gave me a big hug and wiped away my tears.

'I'm only a phone call away,' she said, as we finally parted.

We slipped out quietly, the group had become very good at avoiding the paparazzi. The doctor's had agreed to tell the media I would remain in hospital for a least another seven days. They would give a press conference in one week's time to update everyone on my condition. It would buy us some time.

Adam's jet took us home.

## Home

We landed at the small private airport, away from the main terminal at Tullamarine and the gaze of curious onlookers who could easily alert the paparazzi of our arrival. Sam was waiting and quickly got us into the car.

'Welcome back Tina,' said Sam grinning.

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'Thanks Sam, can't quite believe I'm actually here.'

'Where to folks?'

It dawned on me I didn't really know where home was. My blank stare was met with Cindy's response.

'Your house is ready. Davina and Raphael have been pulling out all stops to get it just right for your return. You ready to see it?' she quizzed, with an excited look on her face.

I looked at Adam, he just smiled.

'Come on Mum, it's bloody amazing, you'll love it.'

And it was agreed, we would go to my new home.

Riding along the freeway, cutting through the park, past the zoo and into the familiar streets of Fitzroy, filled me with the blanketing warmth of returning home. Back to familiar sights and sounds, to a place where I belonged.

Sam drove us slowly past the simple white facade of the double fronted terrace that was my new house. And when he knew I'd seen enough, he drove down the hill and around the corner, through a series of labyrinthine alleyways, into the back lane and a row of almost identical garage doors. I couldn't tell which one was ours until Kate pointed the remote and we entered the ground floor. Eventually the doors rumbled shut, cocooning us in the sanctuary of my new home. Davina was waiting for us.

'Tina, as much as none of us gave up hope, I was starting to wonder exactly when this day would come,' she said, grinning, holding out her arms, embracing me warmly.

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'Lucky we put the lift in!' she joked, very aware I had only just come out of hospital.

Adam took my hand and pressed the buttons, the rest of the group ran up the stairs. Within seconds we reached the first floor. We walked into the main room and I was greeted by the Finestras, crying and smiling all at once.

'Bella, bella,' they chanted, hugging me, kissing me. All of us weeping with the joy of our reunion.

'Mum, do you love it, the house?' interrupted Kate enthusiastically.

'It's gorgeous, thanks Davina, Raphael, it really does feel like home. It's just so good to be here with you all, back in Melbourne, back with the people I love,' I blurted out through the tears, as I looked around the beautiful space.

'Darling we missed you so much. We won't stay long. We know you've been through a lot, but we just had to see you with our own eyes, back here safe with your family, with us,' said Gabriella.

The next hour was a bit of a blur. I sat on the couch, holding court, offering polite conversation to my friends. They told me some of what went on while I was absent. Light conversation, the joy of reunion. No one spoke of the abduction, of Moses. Only Emma knew the full story. Emma and Moses. And dead men don't speak. My secret was safe.

By late afternoon I was beginning to get very tired, the Finestras took this as their cue to leave. Cindy was next to go, mentioning that she had some things to catch up on.

'Surely you're not going to the office?' I quizzed.

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'It's New Years Eve, thought I might see what the town has to offer,' she said smiling.

'Come on Cindy, you should tell mum what's really going on,' said Kate.

'What?' I responded curiously.

'She's going on a date,' blurted out Kate.

'Oh shut up you, it's not a date.'

'Yes, it is, you're going out with that young detective, the cute one who was helping out with Mum's case.'

Cindy grinned.

'I'm only being polite, a kind of thank you for all the help he's been over the last couple of months,' she said defensively.

She wasn't fooling anyone and we let her go without any more teasing.

And I was quickly reminded of the resilience of youth when Kate too announced she was going to a party with friends. I gave her my blessing, it would be good for her to get out and have some fun. She and I had spent a lovely few days together, catching up, reconnecting. Kate threw a few things into a bag, gathered from the front bedroom she'd already claimed as her own, and let Sam drive her to her destination. The door clicked shut and finally Adam and I were alone.

'No more partying for you my darling,' said Adam, sensing my tiredness.

He picked me up and carried me to bed. He'd done this before. Contentedly I fell into a deep, satisfying sleep.

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I woke, naked and confused in this unfamiliar space. It was still dark. It took a while for me to get my bearings. I was at home in Melbourne and, like that first night when Adam had rescued me from the riots, he'd undressed me and left me to sleep. I reached out to find Adam next to me, fully clothed.

'Hi, how are you feeling?' he whispered.

'A little strange, like I'm in a hotel room, this place is so unfamiliar.'

'Don't worry, you'll get used to it. Davina's done a remarkable job. I'll take you on a proper tour tomorrow, in the daylight. We've got all the time in the world.'

'Speaking of time, is it midnight yet?'

'No, not yet, eleven fifteen. You've been asleep for quite a few hours. Want to go onto the rooftop and watch the fireworks?'

'Yeah, that would be lovely.'

Adam handed me a robe and told me to wait. I heard him clunking around in the kitchen, making a few trips to the top floor.

'Come with me,' he said, taking my hand, leading me to the corridor and into the lift.

The small glass capsule shot quickly to the roof. Keeping the lift had seemed like such an indulgence when Davina first showed me the original plans. A bit unnecessary for a forty year old, and about as sexy as a stair lift. She insisted I might want to consider it if I planned to grow old in this place. And she did mention this house was four stories high, a long way to carry champagne from the cellar to the roof deck. I only agreed when she let me look through a few catalogues and together we

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found one that was sleek, discreet and modern, hidden in the back wall cavity, not too ostentatious or obvious.

The last time I was up here, nothing had been completed, it was just a windswept barren concrete space that looked like a rooftop car park. Things had changed. We alighted into a large glass room. One side wall of cupboards hid a small, but functional kitchen. Ten black Philippe Starck chairs sat around a simple wooden table in the middle of the room. A long grey Florence Knoll sofa faced the spectacular views of the city. The bi fold glass doors were fully open on all sides. Open in summer or closed in winter, this room would be a great place to be all year round. The air was warm and sultry, beckoning us outside, perfect for watching the fireworks, with views unimpeded by the glass balustrade. On the cheekily astroturfed deck sat two orange Lettini sun lounges, their simple wavelike curves alluding to a day at the beach. The city skyline, the deck, the furniture all looked so beautiful. I liked being up here, it had such a good feel. I couldn't wait to see the fireworks.

'Sit down, I'll get you a drink.'

Adam brought back two glasses and a bottle. The popping of the cork my first reminder of what light hearted whimsy could be, lifting the serious mood of the last week.

I sipped.

'Prosecco, my favorite,' I exclaimed as the bubbles effervesced, teasing my nose as I sipped.

'Yes, I remembered.'

'Thank you.'

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Next he presented me with a platter brimming with yummy looking charcuterie.

'When did all this happen? The food, the wine, even my robe,' I asked, curiosity getting the better of me.

'When it looked like you were recovering, I rang Sam. He got together a team from the hotel, housekeepers, cleaners, gardeners, florists, who all worked together to make this somewhere you would want to come home to. Just the basics, a bit of food, sheets on the bed, wine in the fridge. He didn't tell them exactly when you were coming home, just told them it would be some time after the press conference next week. Davina and Raphael worked round the clock to get all the furniture in place, but there's still a bit to do. They knew you would want to add your own finishing touches. When the shops open again I'll take you out for a bit of retail therapy. Until then, Sam is happy to go out and get anything you might want.'

I was so touched at how aware he was of my need to feel that this was my home. He'd done just enough to make the place inviting, without being suffocating. Like the friends who greeted me with love and left before they'd overstayed their welcome. We sat quietly. We would need to learn how to become 'normal' again, have conversations not peppered with the wariness of what could or could not be spoken about.

An explosion in the distance signalled the onset of the pyrotechnic sideshow. We watched like awestruck children.

Kate texted. I wished her much love.

'Happy New Year,' said Adam, delicately kissing my cheek.

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'With you,' I said, touching his glass in a gesture of quiet celebration. I snuggled against his chest until the wine and the last of the drugs took effect. He took me downstairs and I crawled back into the bed.

'Should I stay?' he asked tentatively.

'Of course!' I replied, slightly confused as to why he would ask.

'It's just that I want to be respectful of Kate. I'm not so sure how comfortable she is with having me around, sleeping in your bed. I just don't know?'

He was genuine in his concern. I knew Kate understood the depth of his feelings, but he was right not to slap her in the face with it.

'She texted to say she was staying with friends. Won't be home for a few days, something about a music festival. I'll have a talk to her when she gets back.'

'Good,' he said standing at the foot of the bed, dressed and with the furrowed brow expression of concern that had become a regular part of our communication.

'Are you coming to bed?'

'In a minute, I have some work to do. The Chinese never sleep. I won't be long.'

Slightly taken aback by his rebuttal, I realised I knew absolutely nothing about his business and how he operated. I accepted we still had a lot to learn about each other. My weariness took over and sleep came quickly.

The morning light flooded into the gorgeous white bedroom. This time I knew where I was, but the man I expected to find next to me wasn't there. I got up, he wasn't in the bathroom, not on this floor. I

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grabbed a robe and went down stairs. He was sitting at the table in front of his computer.

'Hey, did you get any sleep?'

'Yeah, but you were dead to the world. I didn't want to wake you.'

His chest was bare. His sweats, hanging temptingly from his lean hips, showed me he'd changed out of the clothes he was wearing when I went to bed. But I had no memory of him beside me. Where had he slept? Surely he hadn't worked all night. He looked rested. That same apprehensive feeling came over me again. I'd felt it last night. Something wasn't right, but I didn't know how to talk to him about it.

'What you doing?' was all I could muster.

'Just reading the newspapers on line. Nothing much happening, just the usual boring bullshit. Babies, parties and stupid resolutions.'

I left him to read and ventured into my gorgeous stainless steel kitchen. After a cursory rummaging I found the coffee.

'Shit, shit, shit! How the fuck do you work this bloody thing?' I swore, exasperated at how difficult it was to use the state of the art coffee machine.

'Here, here let me,' he said getting up, nudging me to one side and efficiently letting the machine hiss away while it produced a cup of coffee.

'Is this what you were after?' he quipped playfully.

'It's a man thing,' I snapped back in frustration and made a mental note to buy a coffee plunger.

We sat and ate breakfast.

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'What would you like to do today?' asked Adam.

'You know, I would really love to go for a bit of a walk down Smith Street, perhaps even as far as Gertrude. I feel like I want to get back into things a bit. Wander down those familiar streets I've missed.'

'Sounds good. Why don't you go and have a shower?'

'Why don't you come and join me?' I teased playfully.

'I've already had one, you go, get ready. It's going to be really hot today, let's head out before the sun beats us.'

Don't over think it, I told myself as I walked away, feeling a little rejected.

He was right. A Melbourne summer sun was a biting hot assault on my pale skin, I thought, as I waited outside while he grabbed his wallet and keys. The door slammed and I turned to take his hand, but was shocked to see him carrying an ebony cane, a walking stick. He sensed my unease and explained.

'Distances, my leg is still pretty fucked up.'

'I'm so sorry, we don't have to go.'

It had been me who had been the hospitalised wounded. In my own self absorbed way I'd completely forgotten about his leg, the break, and how he'd been affected. He'd helped me to the plane, carried me to bed, given no indication that it was still a problem.

'No, no, I need the exercise. The surgeon said it would be awhile before the bone would knit completely with the steel plate they used to

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fix the leg. My physio and trainer are always on my back to exercise more. It will do us both good.'

And it did do us good, the familiarity of my old stomping ground was the best welcome home. The streets were almost abandoned, nothing much was open. It was New Years day, a public holiday, no one up this early, and Melbourne was in the middle of its usual holiday season hiatus. It was better for us this way.

I sat to rest on one of the park benches under the cedar trees on Gertrude Street and watched as he crossed the road to buy a paper from the convenience store. He looked sexy. The cane gave him a rather rakish air, like a pirate, devilishly handsome, desirable. My mind and sex connected and I felt the first flickerings of desire. I wanted to be fucked. My breath quickened with the thought of his body against mine. I knew the problem, he was too scared to touch me, frightened of my physical and emotional fragility. But he was misguided. He was the cure and I knew I needed him to make me whole.

## First Day

He could barely keep up, I was eager to get home, driven by the possibilities of how I might get this man back into my bed.

It was getting searingly hot and the sanctuary of the house was very welcome. But not quite cool enough. He sat down at the long dining room table, looking out towards the large interior courtyard. The double doors were pushed back, creating one huge indoor outdoor space. The

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swimming pool sat tantalisingly in the centre. Dark green weeping figs framed the area giving it a shady, oasis like feel.

At first he didn't notice, but eventually he looked up from the paper. I watched the expression on his face as I performed a very slow striptease. When completely undressed, I walked quietly into the pool, then swam under water till I emerged at the other end, to sit, facing him, wondering what would be the next move.

Adam remained still, so I got out and walked towards him. He would need some coaxing. As he sat, I unbuttoned his white linen shirt, running my fingers along his hard broad chest. Then I took his hand, gesturing for him to stand. One by one I released the buttons on his jeans and nudged his pants till they fell to the floor. Now he too was naked. I returned to the pool, dived, and again swam to the far side to watch.

He hesitated at first, then gradually took a few tentative steps till he got to the water's edge. He too dived and I watched as his strong muscular arms ploughed through the water to finally reach me. With great elegance and strength he pulled himself out of the pool and sat on the hard stone edge. I made my way towards him, keeping my head above water staring into his eyes, not breaking contact. I swam up to his legs and rested briefly between them as I caught my breath. Then I lifted his left leg till it was outstretched. I could see the vicious purple scar that tore through his perfect skin. I traced the line of the wound, then kissed it, his chest rose. He slipped easily back into the water, cradling me in his arms, staring intently, apprehension in his eyes.

'It's ok. I'm not fragile. I won't break.'

He paused, then slowly ran his fingers over the scar on my shoulder, just as I had done to him.

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'I need you to make love to me, feel you inside of me, make me whole,' I whispered.

His cock stiffened.

My torso bobbed on the surface of the water, my head rested in the crook of his elbow. The weightlessness allowed him to easily hold me, floating in front of him. He gathered me close and kissed with a passion I'd so achingly longed for. His mouth continued its exploration, along my jaw, down my neck, then sucking and biting my nipples till they stood firm and proud.

He carried me out of the water, out of the pool and across the courtyard, to the day bed under the shady trees and placed me gently down. Adam lay beside me, touching the fading bruises on my face. I didn't flinch, they no longer hurt. He ran his hands down my body, across my hips, then to the soft skin of my inner thighs. I eased my legs apart, inviting him to continue. His fingers danced playfully over my swollen sex, his thumb circling my clitoris. I reached for his hand, brushing his knuckles, encouraging him to go deeper. His fingers gently parted my labia and delicately entered me. I arched my back, groaning with desire. I needed more and firmly took his thick rigid cock in my hand, squeezing it, rubbing its length. He raised his body over mine taking his weight as he slowly let his cock slip easily into me, penetrating me, filling me. I wrapped my arms around his back, pulling him hard against me and he responded by thrusting firmly, deeply, my hips locked with his, encouraging the dance. My orgasm and his came quickly.

'I love you,' he pleaded breathlessly, as we lay together.

'I love you, too.'

The ache in my heart was beginning to lessen.

## The House Tour

We stayed this way for quite some time. A sense of relief, reacquainted familiarity and post coital satiation made me reluctant to move. The sun was the decider. The black leather sedan inappropriate for a languorous laze, too hot, too sweaty. We both laughed as we peeled ourselves off the couch. Adam picked me up and tossed me into the pool. He followed and swam lazily under water. I watched his muscles ripple as he moved, naturally elegant, like some exquisite marine creature. I forgave his impetuosity. I liked this frivolity, it was hot, the pool was perfect and my man was back. I loved the way the weightlessness made my damaged body feel so much better. Adam seemed to feel the same. He sidled up to me and we both draped ourselves over the steps, semi submerged just enjoying the playful decadence of this naked swim in the middle of the day, together.

'Do you know Ms Maxwell, that this spectacular house, built just for you, would be feeling very sad if it had a soul?'

'Why, what do you mean?'

'Because you've hardly seen any of it. Come on, let me take you on a tour,' he said, grabbing my hand as we got out of the pool.

'Hang on, let me get dressed.'

'No, you're not wearing clothes, we're doing the nude tour, no one will interrupt. I might just have to test some of the surfaces for comfort and durability,' he said, playfully slapping my bottom.

'Ouch, Mr Bossy!'

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There were four rooms at the front of the house. The three bedrooms, two up, one down all with ensembles were as I expected. The largest was Kate's, already scattered with her clothes, her things. She had claimed a piece of our home, her home.

But it was the other large room downstairs that held all the surprises. I opened it to find a gym and pulled back the curtains to reveal a view over the courtyard. Then through another door to a large utility room, glass fronted like the gym, with a washer, dryer and ironing board. On the far wall a bench, for the sorting of laundry, long enough to hold my sewing machine, set up and ready to use. Underneath, baskets for both clean and dirty clothes. A linen press filled with sheets and towels, all folded neatly, looking like a hotel storeroom, waiting for an army of guests to arrive. A door on the far side opened to a row of long washing lines. Davina had listened, I'd told her how much I loved the smell of sheets dried outdoors. She'd cleverly snuck this in, hidden from view with a slatted screen, I hadn't noticed it when we were outside. She'd even mounted a television on the wall. I could quite happily spend time here, watching crappy television whilst ironing. It must have seemed such an unglamorous, pedestrian place, but, with her attention to detail, to me it was one of the most delightful rooms in the house.

We crossed the courtyard and looked towards the main room, a massive space, kitchen across the back wall. A hidden butler's pantry to the left, a staircase, on the far right, connecting the three floors above. A wooden refectory table, surrounded by at sixteen of the Starck chairs, made me think of dinners, conviviality and friends. Two more Florence Knoll sofas were positioned in a prime place to sit and contemplate the view of the courtyard and would be wonderful when the glass was in place, northern sun streaming in on a cold winter's day.

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Adam told me to sit and wait. He had a surprise. After some time I heard the lift open and saw Adam enter the room, struggling under the weight of a gigantic brown paper package. I tore away the wrapping and was delighted by what I saw. An extraordinary piece, an orange Grant Featherston Contour chair.

'Do you like it? What's wrong?' he said noticing my saddened face.

'It's like the one in the painting.'

'Yes, I know, in my painting of you. I chose the chair, it's my house warming gift.'

'The painting you donated to the National Gallery, I read about it,' I said somberly.

'How could you have known? That article appeared when you were still in America?'

'The hotel, The Regal on Greenwich Street. I was staying there. I recognised the interiors, the furniture. Knew it had to be yours. Started to reconsider what I'd done, leaving you, ignoring your calls. I wanted you back, wanted to make contact. I googled your name and up came that photo of you with the gallery director and Sissy Snelling.'

'You were there at my hotel? When? I flew there after that disastrous time in LA. We could have been there at the same time.'

'It was about a week or so later, you were already back in Australia. That photo and the story about the painting made it very clear to me that a reconciliation was never going to happen.'

He came towards me and took my face in his hands, looked me in the eye and spoke.

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'When the time came to mount the exhibition, I couldn't do it. Couldn't bear to part with the painting, with you. The gallery understood. I gave them something else. Your picture's still hanging in my study. I would look at it and wonder how I might possibly get you back. That was at about the same time you rang and asked for an architect. Hearing your voice again made me realise I needed you more than ever, just didn't know how to get you back.'

He kissed me deeply. I kissed him back, smiled lovingly and we held each other, both so aware of how stupid all this game playing had been.

'Thank you. Thank you for so many reasons,' I whispered.

I remembered being invited to the opening of the exhibition, Tim's retrospective at the National Gallery. I'd scheduled a trip to Cambodia so I didn't have to invent some lame excuse for not attending. The truth was I feared seeing that portrait of me hanging so publicly, leaving me exposed, reminding me of Adam's rejection. At the time I had been surprised the press had not made the connection between the subject of the painting, Tina Maxwell, and the blogger Chris Brown. Now I knew the painting had never been exhibited. Adam couldn't let me go.

Eventually the intensity of the moment subsided and Adam playfully squeezed my bum.

'Hey, you should try it out, see if it fits.'

Teasingly I sat down and spread my legs over one arm, just like the pose in the painting.

'Like this I believe Mr Darcy!'

He looked towards me appreciatively, his penis ever so subtly firming. I got up before he reached me.

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'Not just yet, I believe you haven't finished taking me on the tour.'

A long raised kitchen bench divided the space, Johannes Anderson stools arranged so my guests might be able to sit and chat to me while I cooked. No overhead cupboards, just deep, under bench, drawers holding what had been unpacked from my meagre old kitchen. Two dishwashers and a massive commercial oven, all stainless steel, camouflaged in the industrial space.

The butler's pantry had been put together just as I had asked. Benches held the electrical appliances. Open shelves, like a small supermarket, were waiting to be filled with groceries. A giant commercial fridge and freezer, glass doors showing empty shelves, reminding me I needed to go shopping, to buy food to share with my family and friends. And at the far end, hidden from sight, the lift. I imagined the convenience of being able to ride up from the carpark, arms laden with shopping, and being delivered straight to the pantry.

'There's something down here I want to show you,' he said, taking me down the lift and into the basement. A wine cellar.

'I got the guys from that great little wine shop on Smith Street to put together some Italian wines, I know you like them. I thought it might also be fun to go on a few wine trips over the next few months, to South Australia, the Barossa, the Coonawarra. I hear the Clare Valley Rieslings are particularly good this year. We could have some fun stocking the cellar.'

'I would love to. Do you think we could take the jet?' I responded cheekily.

'No doubt.'

We returned upstairs to continue the tour.

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The splashback across the entire kitchen was an opaque white window, mounted on the back wall, allowing light to shine through, making the kitchen a lovely naturally lit space in which to work. I was feeling hungry just thinking about the possibilities.

Adam took me to the next floor, a vast library, like the original plan, complete with the bespoke timber shelving Davina had designed. A desk against a giant wall of glass overlooked the courtyard. I could imagine doing a bit of writing, quietly, away from the madness of a hectic working week. All the sofas were covered in a soft grey wool, good for curling up in with a good book. The floors were a dark native hardwood, a rich charcoal shag pile rug made me think of what I'd like to do on it with Adam. Didn't Henry mention that all work and no play would make me a very dull woman? Although vast, the space exuded a rich warm cosiness. I would look forward to unpacking my books.

The bedroom above held no surprises. The room was carpeted in a pale neutral wool and apart from two bedside tables, contained only the bed dressed in white linen. The walls were white and the sheer curtains were embossed with a subtle white, almost velvet textured abstract stripe, filtering the harsh summer sun. Heavy light blocking drapes disappeared into a recess in the wall. This would be my sanctuary. The simple functional white bathroom was as I had requested. The walk in wardrobe next to it was the size of my old bedroom. Someone had unpacked and hung my clothes.

Adam was keen to get us out of the bedroom and up to the roof deck.

'What's the hurry, we were there last night?'

'Come and see.'

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I wasn't quite sure what he meant. When we alighted into the glass pavilion on the roof, I could see the deck and the city skyline. He took my hand and led me out the front and around a wooden screen to the right of the room. I couldn't believe I had missed it last night. To my utter delight there was another glass room, a beautiful bathroom, just like the one I'd imagined. A giant white stone tub sat close to the windows, all of which opened to a lush tropical garden and high green wall. A long shower extended outdoors, again just as I'd fantasied. Another day bed suggested more of what we had just enjoyed downstairs. A simple open shelf held fluffy white towels and expensive toiletries. Huge glass cylinders were filled with flowers, white Christmas lilies, deliciously scenting the space. Adam turned on the taps to fill the tub, then left the room. I got in and luxuriated at the sheer decadence of bathing in full daylight with magnificent views of Melbourne and the skyscrapers in the distance. He returned, Champagne in hand, French, his favorite and joined me in the bath.

'Cheers my darling, to us.'

I smiled, 'To us.'

He appeared so content, so proud and comfortable.

'You know, I wouldn't let Davina show you anything until I saw it first. Getting this house built was my only connection to you. Working with Davina kept me in touch. Gave me hope that maybe one day things would change. I can't believe how much time I've wasted with my pig headed stubbornness, this idiotic pride that kept me angry and alone, without you, for so long.'

'Me too, I was just as stupid, I was just as guilty. I promise it will never happen again.'

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We spent at least an hour in the tub, just sitting quietly, comforted by the sound of his beating heart as I lay against his chest.

'You know I'm feeling really tired, I might just go back down stairs. I didn't get much sleep last night. Do you want to come?' said Adam, climbing out of the tub.

'No, not just yet, you go. I'll be along later.'

It was good he didn't feel the need to watch over me like a hawk, his fear was abating.

I sat back, feeling a lot more hopeful, confident even, that I could get over the ordeal of the last six weeks. That maybe all I needed to do was think about the future Emma had spoken of, one that did not include Moses. The future Adam and I had talked about on the island. A future together, in this house, his love letter to me.

## Sweet Dreams

My skin was beginning to wrinkle, I had no idea how long I had spent daydreaming. I padded down the stairs and into the bedroom. Adam was sprawled out on the bed, fast asleep, his chest rising rhythmically. He looked completely serene, relaxed. I stood and stared. He looked magnificent, he had the body of a young Adonis, his tan showed me he had an obvious predilection for swimming naked. His dark tousled hair fell across his eyes, his strong jaw darkened by the stubble of his unshaven face, his lips slightly parted, begging to be kissed. I quietly lay

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next to him propping my head on a pillow, just lying there mesmerised by his sexy masculinity.

He looked so utterly fuckable.

Carefully I lifted the sheet loosely draped over his torso. I didn't want to wake him. His cock was hanging languidly against his groin. Tentatively, I reached out and touched the soft velvety skin. It was beautifully formed, as if its smooth head was designed perfectly to enter me. I loved him being inside me. Just the thought awakened my senses, I breathed deeply. Not yet.

Without disturbing him, I eased my way down the bed to continue this voyeuristic curiosity, my face now close enough to his penis that I could see every detail. I became even more inquisitive. Leaning in, moving closer, I let my tongue reach out, cautiously touching the tip, probing the slit at the very end, a slight taste of saltiness. I was curious to see what he felt like soft, innocently asleep, unaware of my intentions. I opened my lips and let his flaccid cock fill my mouth, it felt wonderful and I just lay there transfixed by the intimacy of the gesture, my head nestled in his groin, not wanting him to wake.

My tongue pushed him to the roof of my mouth and ever so delicately I began to suck. Magically I felt the faint stirrings of his arousal. I increased the pressure and marvelled at how much bigger his cock became. I breathed deeply and swallowed, relaxing the muscles so that I could take him further into my throat. He was still asleep and my goal was to have him come before he was fully conscious. I now needed to work quickly, sucking hard, working my lips along his huge length, taking him deeper than I ever thought possible, increasing the pace till I tasted the first droplets telling me he was close. Faster I worked till I felt his thick vein pulsate, then erupt, pumping the rich salty nectar of his

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orgasm into my mouth. I swallowed, licking him to ensure that not a drop escaped. Then relaxed as his erection eased, delighting in feeling him soften, just like he'd been when I started. My head sank back against his thighs and I felt his hand sweep the hair from my forehead, caressing my face. I released him from my mouth and moved up his torso, greeted by his open arms that lovingly wrapped me up and held me close. He had not even opened his eyes. I felt the slowing beat of his heart and together we went back to sleep.

Once, I had found dusk a depressing melancholic time of day. Today was different. Waking, slowly, I now felt happy. Delighted in the feel of his strong body holding me, skin on skin, in our bed, for the first time since our reunion. He lifted my chin and greeted me with a kiss. Hugging me vigorously, no longer afraid I would break. New hope, new beginnings after our shaky start. I was bursting with happiness. He looked at me lovingly with the faint smirk of a questioning smile. I knew he wasn't exactly sure of what had just happened. I smiled back, it could remain a pleasant mystery. His very sweet dream.

It was another hot night, a late afternoon storm had left the air moist and steamy. Adam got up and surveyed the sky. Heavy purple clouds illuminated by flickerings of distant lightning.

'I love this weather,' he said.

'Me too, pity we can't open the windows, I love the smells and sounds of this tropical weather.'

Adam looked back at me mischievously as I lay draped over the messed up white sheets. He walked over to the wall and pressed a button, the low hum of a motor signalled the movement of the windows. Like magic the top panes folded away into the cavity wall and the lower

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pane was now a glass balcony stretching across the entire front of the bedroom. The smell of warm rain filled the air.

'Is this to your liking?' he said, grinning like a schoolboy.

'Very much,' I said and joined him, leaning out, filling my lungs with that sultry air. Looking out to the brooding clouds, expectant, about to erupt into a summer storm.

'This is amazing, did you think of this?'

'Yes, I did.'

'Boys and their toys.'

'My intentions weren't all that pure.'

'How so?'

'Davina told me about the bathroom on the roof deck and I started to think about you, naked, lying there in the tub. I fantasied about having hot steamy sex with you in the bedroom and thought these windows, opened wide, would be perfect to cool off afterwards.'

'You are so naughty! Poor Davina, she must have wondered about your intense interest in this project?'

'I told her that I was also sick of doing such large scale work and was interested to see what she would come up with. She told me you were a very easy client to work for and that you had both joked about designing dream houses when you were young kids. She loved coming up with ideas that referenced that same type of playfulness.'

'Before Tasmania I was thinking of ways I might chance upon you again. I'd hoped that maybe this house would help break down the barrier we'd both put up. I was planning all sorts of schemes that would

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see me 'accidentally' be on site, turn up instead of Davina, bump into you, making some lame excuse as to why Davina couldn't be there. Then, just as the project was finishing, she sent you away. I freaked out knowing the keys would be in your hands when you returned and I would no longer have this chance again,' he said, running his hands through his hair, in a somewhat exasperated manner.

'Well, I think I should come clean. I went to Lands End Lagoon to see your place because I too couldn't get you out of my head. I was frustrated when I couldn't look into those images at the exhibition. That I couldn't look inside and get closer to you.'

'What idiots we've both been. I'm so sorry about what this all led to.'

'You know the last bit was pretty fucked up, but imagine if I'd made it to the road? We'd be looking back at that time, reminiscing about the island and what we'd done there. About how much fun we'd had. It's been the only way I've been able to deal with what happened. It was Emma who taught me to think that way.'

He took me in his arms and held me close.

'You are amazing, so strong. I love you very much.'

'And I love you and how you didn't give up hope. That is what gives me strength about us and our future.'

He touched my face, tracing my lips, kissing me, groaning at the intensity of the emotions we had both just stirred.

'Come, there's still one thing I need to do,' he said, leading me back to the bed.

'What?'

And ever so tenderly we made passionate love.

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