

Love is the Answer



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Love
is the *Answer*

Tracy Madden



Dedication



To my first born grandson, Hunter Gordon Madden. Three and a half years ago you came into this world bringing insurmountable love into my life, enriching it beyond all belief in a way I could never have expected.

Through your eyes I have seen the world anew, with wonder, awe, enthrallment and excitement. You take me to places where imagination knows no bounds. Mystical rainbows now have colours I had never seen, caterpillars on the pavement are placed there for us to discover, the wind rustles the tree tops for our eyes only, and yes we can spend twenty minutes talking about why a leaf is the colour it is, or about how interesting a rock is we have found in the park, conversations that simply must be had.

You are my wonderful excuse to spend the day playing, something I had forgotten I loved so much. Why it took 53 years for me to take up the air guitar is beyond me, as I am so damn good at it. I dance with you like I have danced with no one before.

Finally, I have a mini wing man who loves my juices, smoothies, and super foods, listens to my stories about how good they are for us, loves doing our special yoga, and welcomes loving the day with me.

Thank you my gorgeous man, I cannot wait to see what new things your little brother Baby Boston Bear will teach me. You are both Gracy's greatest treasures.

Chapter 1

First a confession... I interviewed my husband's mistress for him. You might ask yourself *how could I?* Well I didn't bloody-well know, did I?

It's not what you think. I interviewed her for a position. Not that type of position, a position with our company. I thought she was a dream.

I thought she could replace me in the business perfectly. I just didn't expect her to replace me everywhere else as well.

Today was not a good day. Today was a doona day. Today I shed tears. Today I ate too much chocolate. Today I got angry. And today, I finally walked away.

On second thoughts, perhaps today was a great day.

*

One last time, I cast my eyes around our warehouse home, the decor uncompromising and modern, with free standing units and open chrome shelving, never my idea of how a home should look. *So...* it had come to this.

My eyes settled on a small crystal bird sitting atop of a gardening book, *Field of Dreams*. I thought of how the book had been *allowed*, as it was personally signed by the author, a so-called friend of Davis's. The crystal bird had been a gift from Davis in happier times. My mind went to the look on Davis's face as he had repeatedly moved the bird to my bedside table, out of range of viewing. He abhorred clutter, always telling me I had bowerbird tendencies.

For a few brief seconds, my hand hovered as I toyed with the idea of taking it with me. However, much like my old life, I no longer wanted it.

My eyes settled on the contemporary chandelier hanging

over the dining table. Really, how could you miss it? Six sheets of silver coated paper, it was truly ridiculous, looking more like an old fashioned flying machine. I wondered what our friends had thought.

And then something made me walk down the hall towards the master bedroom, a room I had vacated many months earlier, preferring the guest room. Hesitating at the door, I glanced around as if I was looking for something. Without knowing why, I walked over to what used to be my side of the immaculately made up sleek modular bed, and slipping my hand under the cool charcoal coloured top sheet, I reefed it back. Using both hands, I mussed the bottom sheet, and then pulled the pillow on an angle.

Standing back, I surveyed my handiwork. I may have been evacuating my home, walking away from my business, my life, and unwittingly giving *her* my husband, however I sure as hell wanted *her* to know some things *had* belonged to me. In fact, there was a half-eaten sandwich still on the kitchen bench. I wondered if she wanted that as well.

Dusting my hands, I walked back along the hallway. I paused outside another bedroom door. It was closed. My hand went to the knob. I hesitated, before wisely walking on. The nursery I had been readying was now packed up and in storage. The room was empty, much like my heart.

Seeing my coffee mug on the kitchen bench, I automatically picked it up, taking it to the sink to rinse. Running the tap, I reached for the sponge to wipe the tell-tale lipstick mark from the rim, when with mild satisfaction I left it on the drainer, lipstick mark and all.

With a snort of indignation, I shook my head at the memory of Davis many months earlier, during our one and only counselling session. In response to a question from the

counsellor, his answer had been that he didn't like the way I drank my coffee. Apparently he found it annoying when he saw the lipstick marks still on the rim of mugs after they had come out of the dishwasher.

Really! I wanted to shout to him now. *Tell someone who cares!*

Picking up my keys from the spotless plexiglass study desk, I stared out through the huge pane of glass at the top of the stairs. To the left, my eyes settled atop the massive Moreton Bay Fig trees at Davies Park. Each Saturday, those same trees canopied the famed West End markets. Although Davis used to tease me that many years earlier, the park had been owned by his family, and that is where his name originated from, I used to think of them as *my* markets. Now nothing seemed like mine. I felt misplaced, uncertain of where I belonged.

Turning to the right, I took in the impressive view of Brisbane city's skyline. Davis called it *the money shot*. I recalled the excitement we felt when we moved here. With a view like that we thought we'd had it made.

Exhaling heavily, I headed down the steel staircase, my purple suede Stella McCartney heels loud on each tread.

Halfway down, I caught my reflection in the huge round mirror from Space furniture, a mirror we had shopped for together to celebrate our first anniversary. How many times had I checked myself from this position one last time before heading out? Although, for the past eight months I had refrained, not liking what I saw. My normally filled out heart shaped face, had become a leaner version of its former self, the shadows under my eyes, smudges that didn't erase. For goodness sake, I was only 34.

Although I may have recently been *terra incognita*, when I glanced across, I noticed there was a small measure of the

real me returning, and although I saw relief on my face, my middle finger went to a small frown line embedded between my brows. I could not remember that being there a year ago.

Continuing the last few steps, my eyes cast down to the harsh pigmented concrete flooring spreading across the first floor entry. I could not help but be reminded of the amount of arguments we'd had over this floor, me wanting something welcoming and homely, Davis insisting on keeping the industrial look.

I glanced back the way I had come. This was it! We had shared hopes, dreams, sorrows, thoughts and memories, and now it was over. I exhaled, waiting for something to rear up. Nothing!

The thing was my new life was not apparent yet. I had to believe it would come to me.

*

Ten long weeks ago, which now seemed like eons away, my mother Bea, handed me a small blue card. Silently, I read: *Do you want to free up your body, heart and mind from years of old patterns and baggage? Are you ready to create a healthier, happier, more harmonious way of living?* I remembered looking at my mother. She shrugged, dusted her hands together, climbed into her white seventies Peugeot cabriolet and roared off down the street, without a backward glance.

I recalled watching her drive away, her brightly hued scarf billowing in the wind as if waving to me. Had she been wiping her hands of me, or simply feeling it was my choice? It was the same when my sister had her wrist tattooed. Bea had handed her a card and said, 'No doubt this will come in handy.'

The card had the name of a doctor who specialised in laser tattoo removal. Bea loathed tattoos, but she never bought the subject up again. She had done her job, much the same as

handing me the card that day. I will say, she was not wrong.

I studied the blue card, turning it over, reading the therapist's name, Emerald Green. *Pleeeeee! What type of name was that?*

However, I guessed if my rather unconventional mother was going to recommend someone, they certainly were going to be out in left field.

Emerald Green turned out to be a small wiry woman, dressed in army fatigues and a navy singlet top. She wore her shaved head well. However, like my mother, I was unsure of the tattoos on her wrists and foot.

Although not at first, I very soon came to love her piercingly beautiful green eyes and open honest face. While we were much the same size, I felt quite diminished beside her.

Emerald Green was clear on two things. In fact they were so non-negotiable that I was asked to sign a contract to agree to them. Firstly, I had to journal three pages each morning, and secondly, I had to take myself on a date each week.

'What are you talking about?' I had asked, regarding the later. And then I spoke very clearly, as if the poor woman was hard of hearing. 'I am living on own. I'm with myself all the time.'

She of the piercing green eyes nodded, pulled her tanned bare feet up and sat cross legged on the chair. 'Did you and your husband ever attend couples therapy?'

'Yes once... after the horse had well and truly bolted. Obviously it did not one ounce of bloody good.' I'm not saying I did not have attitude that day, and my tone was undoubtedly direct. 'What on earth has that got to do with it?'

'Did the therapist ask you how much quality time you spent together?' She joined her hands in front of her chest as if in prayer. 'Not just being in the same house, but proper

quality time?’

Puzzled, I had nodded.

‘Well it’s the same thing Peach. You have to take *you* on a date each week. Something that impresses *you*. Don’t take anyone else. Think of all the things you could do if you had the time.’

Obviously, the look of complete bafflement on my face became clear to her, because she threw her hands in the air, and began making suggestions. ‘Think Peach... walk on the beach, sit under a tree, ride the City Cats up and down the Brisbane River, attend the ballet, walk through Southbank and sit on Kodak Beach, browse art at Goma, visit the museum, the State Library,’ she rapid fired, ‘see a foreign film, volunteer at the RSPCA. These are meant to be *your* things... you’ll think up something. The point is find out who *you* are. It’s time to defrag, time to just BE.’ She gave me a determined stare. ‘Do you understand?’

I nodded and left thinking I would not return for the following appointment in three weeks. I knew eventually I did want to date someone, just not me.

To test her out though, I began to journal the three pages each morning. After all, what else did I have to do? The first week, I wrote cynical things such as: *I have nothing bloody to say! Here I am again, booooring. This is wasting my time. Blah, blah, blah... bloody blah... Happy now Emerald Green?*

Then something changed. I began to write about my feelings. I could not write fast enough. And the time flew. Each morning, I would write the last word on the third page, then raise my head as if only a few minutes had passed. I had bursts of tears and bursts of laughter. There were times when a certain giddiness overtook me, accompanied by a sudden loss. And I have to admit, there were ghastly moments when I felt

like an accident victim walking away from a crash.

I returned for visit number two with the green eyed therapist.

‘Welcome back,’ she had said, as if she had guessed my thoughts three weeks earlier. She hugged me tightly, surprising me. ‘What did you do on your dates?’

Sheepishly, I said, ‘I saw an Italian movie at the Palace cinemas in James Street. I took a long walk along Sunshine Beach. Plus I sat in New Farm Park among the roses, with a coffee and a Dello Mano brownie and read a book for two entire hours. To be honest, I cannot remember the last time I did something as frivolous as that. It was sheer bliss.’

‘Congratulations. You are getting to know *you* again,’ she had said. With her once again barefooted and cross legged, and me sitting primly on my chair, legs crossed, hands in my lap, we spent the next 90 minutes speaking to a pink crystal on the floor. In the third person! No I’s or me’s allowed. Depending on how you looked at it, it was either very interesting, or very odd!

By my third visit many changes and shifts in attitude had begun. Firstly, I hugged Emerald Green as warmly as she hugged me. Secondly, I began to uncover certain likes, such as I required nature, nature, nature; and dislikes such as the sound of the television, social networking - a necessary tool for my former business life, and probably every single thing about Davis. *What a relief.*

I soon realised I had blurred my uniqueness with overwork, underplay and under sleep, and living someone else’s dream.

After my fourth visit with Emerald Green, (I never thought of her as just Emerald, although she did tell me she had been christened Emily Green), I had this sudden epiphany that I needed to leave the warehouse behind. It was part

of my old life. As part of the settlement, I offered it back to Davis. There was tension and relief in my decision. Months of depression had eased, even though my new life was uncertain, I had thoughts I would spend time at my father's chateau in Provence.

I weeded through my belongings, old papers and my extensive wardrobe. Emerald Green had said I may have the impulse to dress differently. This had not occurred. And although her shaved head suited her, it would not me, nor was I into army fatigues. I still loved feminine clothes and that was not about to change, crossroad or no crossroad.

Bea suggested I come to her home. As I am in need of maternal guidance, I have accepted with pleasure, knowing full well there will be no maternal guidance. Although she will be there for at least a week, after that she is heading away on an artist's retreat to Byron Bay and requires someone to feed her dog. I have taken her up on the offer until I decide on my travel plans.

*

I slid the heavy iron door of the warehouse shut. It clanged with its usual metallic sound, giving a sense of finality. Briefly, I rested my forehead against it. I told myself that it was the last time my petite 157centimetre frame would ever have to wrestle with that door again. From day one, it had never liked me, always jamming in the tracks and making me drag it, using my entire body weight, almost pulling my arms out of their sockets. Was it any wonder I constantly had neck and shoulder problems? Wiggling my shoulders, I rolled my neck, reminding myself of the positives, as I was attempting to do more often these days.

Davis loved the door, said it gave the warehouse a sense of history. It made people wonder what was behind.

Swooping my flouncy Alannah Hill skirt under my legs, I slammed the car door and backed out of the driveway. I raised the back of my hand to my face and wiped a lone tear. Farewell, *adieu, aufwiedersehen*, goodbye. I attempted to busy myself thinking of my favourite childhood movie, “The Sound of Music”. With grim determination, I refused to look in the rear view mirror.

Heading up Boundary Road, I felt a sense of leaving everything I knew behind, and although I had a hollow feeling in my stomach from nerves, I could not lie, there was also the slightest tinge of excitement. On the right, I farewelled my regulars - the convenience store on the corner, my nail bar, the Swiss Gourmet Deli and The Avid Reader bookstore. On the left, Jam Jar - my coffee haven, and Charlie and Liz’s Fruit.

The eclectic and dynamic suburb of West End was extremely popular with young professional couples, just like us, looking for a lifestyle close to the city. It was a suburb known for its strong local identity, high street cafes, ethnic restaurants, interesting bookshops and proud local communities. The positive vibe was palpable and the people friendly. Although only three kilometres from the city, I had always felt as if we were somewhat separated from the rat race of the CBD.

Driving along Vulture Street, I raised my left hand and mouthed a silent goodbye to Southbank Parklands. It had been our favourite training spot. Three mornings a week, rain, hail or shine, we would run from home and meet up with our trainer at a designated meeting spot, under the curling steel columns of the magenta bougainvillea covered arbour.

The sight of that arbour had always bought me a feeling of happiness. However, I now wondered if I would ever be able to roam through the parklands without thinking of my former life with some regret.

The fact was, counselling aside, I *was* still getting used to my marriage being over. Part of me was afraid that I never would. He had been my best friend, my business partner, my partner in life. Together we were going to conquer the world. Well, that's what he used to tell me. I guess though, we could only conquer the world if I continued to dream his dreams, and not bother to have any of my own.

As little girls we were told we could have it all. Our feminist foremothers said so and even our mothers agreed, suggesting we could be loving wives, caring mothers and kick-arse bosses if we wanted. We could, they whispered, be *superwomen*.

So, I had this perfect life all set up. I wanted to find a partner of equal footing, one who made the good times doubly good and made the bad times better.

Davis was it. We had met at university. There were the three of us, Davis, Marty and me, the three musketeers. Even back then we had a business plan. While we studied, both of the boys worked for Davis's mother, Eileen, in her real estate business.

I, on the other hand, worked at a prestige cupcake shop. They weren't just any old cupcakes. They were glamorous, melt-in-the-mouth, special occasion cupcakes. I thrived on the creativity, and the nurturing of making edible love for people. I stayed on until I graduated from the University of Queensland with honours. I had a secret dream of one day owning my own cupcake emporium.

However, somewhere along the line I became side tracked. Davis had ideas and they sounded so big and grand, and mine sounded small and pathetic. I had to weigh it up: cupcakes or three million dollar properties. Hmmm? How many cupcakes would I have to sell to add up to three million dollars?

Before I knew it, Davis had me wanting his dream. That's

what happened to Marty as well. We went along with what Davis wanted. We opened a real estate business. He said it was time for some young guns to get into the industry.

Davis said the inner city suburb of West End would be our niche market, that it was about to hit its straps. He had done his research and felt that although it had originally been one of the poorer suburbs of Brisbane, the cottages that housed the working class and migrants all those years ago, were fast becoming coveted pieces of real estate.

It wasn't the way I had seen my life going, however Davis painted a picture so perfect, how could I resist? The boys knew I had a great business head. They said they needed me. Well, Davis did.

We all want to be wanted, and I was no different.

When I look back on those heady days, I remember nothing but the best. I had loved both of the boys. Physically they were quite similar. In fact, with their blonde hair and blue eyes, they could pass for brothers. However Davis was the one for me. He had charisma, passion and energy enough for all of us. Tall, broad shouldered, slim hiped.

Davis had the power, and power is a very seductive thing. He revved us up and got the dream going. Back in those early days we worked our butts off. No one kept track of the hours, we just did it. We had an absolute blast.

There was little time for seeing other people, but when we got the chance we did.

Who am I kidding? I barely saw anyone, however I pretended I did.

The boys saw plenty.

After a couple of years we moved our business to larger premises right on a prominent corner in Montague Road, where we had phenomenal signage, with our name, *Address*,

blazoned across the front. Our staff continued to grow. We were going somewhere. The boys bought in the sales and I grew the business.

The thing about being a passionate person is that they have their highs and lows. I always knew when it was my job to placate Davis. Marty would give me a look that said: *Get in there and do something, Peach*. At first I loved the power. I could pacify Davis Riding. Now you had to hand it to me *that* was pretty clever. To be honest, it was only in the last year or so that I really saw those highs and lows for what they truly were... tantrums! And tantrums aren't all that attractive. However, I didn't care.

They didn't stop me loving Davis. I loved him. Totally!

It took years for Davis to wise up to the fact. Marty caught on first. I loved him too, but differently. I loved *him* like a brother, a mate, a best friend. Not like I loved Davis. But Marty was a great salesman and excellent businessman, and was also incredibly insightful and sensitive. Somewhere along the way he let me know that he had picked up on my feelings for Davis. However, we both said nothing. Marty goes down as being one of those few friends that you take with you throughout your life. On the female side of things, he did pretty well himself, there was no shortage of girls lined up and I certainly understood why.

We'd had the business for about five years when finally Davis and I became a couple. Six months earlier, I had caught him studying me with an unusual look on his face. It was as if for the very first time, he had seen saw me as a woman and not only as a business partner. Because let's face it, with Davis, the business *always* came first. Unfortunately around that time, I also noticed Davis and Marty becoming snappy and argumentative with each other. It was a first in many ways.

I still shudder when I think back to a particular Friday night in the office. We'd had a gruelling week. We had been uncertain if a particular buyer, who we had spent months getting over the line, would settle on an extremely lucrative property. There we were, just the three of us, having a few drinks, when I came on to Davis. Glass of *pinot noir* in one hand, the other hand clutching a cheque with a sizable deposit scrawled across it. I pranced around gleefully waving the cheque at the boys. As Davis attempted to playfully take it from me, I quickly put it behind my back. As he leant closer, I went up on tiptoes and kissed his lips. Briefly!

I caught the look of fear in his eyes.

It was one of the most embarrassing moments of my life. Marty coughed and quickly began searching his desk for some miscellaneous nothing. While Davis told me, and he did it nicely, that he didn't want to spoil what we had. I agreed wholeheartedly, laughing it off, saying, 'God only knows what the hell I was thinking. Totally bad idea! The absolute worst! Quite funny really.'

I asked if he'd spiked my drink, as I slung my bag over my shoulder and then left laughing, glass of *pinot noir* still in hand.

Pausing long enough to leave the glass on the footpath, I laughed all the way home in the cab. I'll point out at this point we had parted company, so I don't know who the hell I was trying to kid, as I sure as heck knew the cabbie couldn't have cared less.

Looking at myself in the mirror in the elevator in my apartment building, I continued to laugh, shaking my head at myself, nervously playing with my hair, wrapping it around and around my index finger. A habit left over from childhood. In hindsight, I think I may have been a tad hysterical and at

one stage imagined slapping myself. However, it really doesn't work when you do it yourself. I've tried before.

Entering my apartment, I kicked off my fire engine red patent, bejewelled Mui Mui heels and then, dramatically leaning against the door, I cried with embarrassment and through my rantings told myself that it was because I didn't have long legs. That was definitely it. My legs were the problem.

To my utter dismay, somewhere around the age of 15, I realised I was never going to have long legs and I was always going to be curvy. I think a good description would be small but voluptuous, with my fantastic breasts... yes I do say so myself... svelte waist, curvy hips and rounded bottom. And can I tell you, I rather like the way I look. If I had lived in the 1940s, I would have been perfect movie star material. A bit short, however perfect, none the less.

And look, I make the most of it. With my well styled expensive suits I liked to wear low cut shirts and blouses to show off my assets.

I was well known for it. There were even times, when Davis, propped on the edge of my desk, would say to me, 'Seriously Frenchy, we need to pull out the big guns for this client... can you flash your tits a bit!'

He was the only person in the world who called me Frenchy, as most people were unaware, that my biological father was French. Davis, with his voice low, would literally breathe it, never failing to send shivers up my spine, so sexy was it.

Being vertically challenged meant that I had fallen in love with heels. They gave me confidence, made me feel taller, thinner, like I wasn't going to slip through the cracks of life, and that something fantastic was going to happen to me. Men turned to look at me. Hell, I turned to look at me.

They were such a weakness of mine. Jimmy Choo, Loubou-

tin, Manolo Blahnik, Ralph Lauren, Chanel, Sergio Rossi and Roberto Cavalli's were all friends of mine, paired beautifully, sitting on the custom designed shelves in my wardrobe. It wasn't actually a wardrobe, but the second bedroom in my apartment turned into a walk-in-robe. The boys often joked that my investment portfolio needed to include my terribly expensive, designer, killer shoes.

I kept thinking that in the right pair of shoes, everything would be alright.

Well moving right along... six months later precisely, there we were on another Friday night, jammed in along the onyx bar at the Cru Bar, among a sea of suits in navy and various shades of grey, and over his *pinot grigio*, Davis was crying on my shoulder after another blonde five foot ten... yes they were all tall and blonde... who had left him for greener pastures. Hang on, I lie, there had to be a couple of five elevens and even a six footer thrown in there – bloody Amazonian!

Anyway the thing was, on that particular night, although I was giving him the lip service he required, I didn't know why he was so upset. He didn't really spend that much time with any of his girlfriends. Truth be known, they were trophies for him. And I was bored stiff with hearing about them. Glassy eyed, I wondered how long I could stare at the Baccarat crystal chandelier, nodding my head, without him noticing, that *Hello, I'm not bloody interested.*

Elbow on the bar and propping his chin on his hand, out of Davis's mouth came the words, 'Frenchy... why can't I find someone just like you?' And then while I absorbed this bit of information, he lent closer. Narrowing his eyes, and with his wine smelling sweet breath cool on my face, he whispered, 'What are we doing Peach? You know you're the one.'

At the time, I had just taken a mouthful of my *sauvignon*

blanc, and I was so surprised, I sprayed it all over him. I mean literally. All over him. In his eyes, his face, down the front of his crisp white, double cuffed, business shirt, and violet pin striped tie. Did I happen to mention he was an impeccable dresser? I grabbed a white cloth napkin and with trembling hands busily attempted to blot the wine.

In my mind, I wanted to yell at him, “What do you mean I’m the one? I’m a five foot two, brunette. If you wanted someone like me, you’ve been bloody well looking in the wrong direction.” And then there was the other part of me, that felt all warm and fantastic, because how long had I been waiting for this?

So there we were at the bar, and finally after all these years, he has noticed me. He has said he wants someone like me. *Like me!* He has said I am the one. *The one!* Yes, I know I am repeating myself, but I could not believe it was actually happening, so every time I think of that night, I go over every detail, twice!

Reaching out, Davis touched my hair, delicately playing with one of my dark perfectly blow dried waves.

I didn’t look directly at him, just continued to fuss with the napkin and made a sound in the back of my throat, attempting a light hearted laugh, however it came out all wrong.

Gently, he took my busy hands in his, holding them quiet. I let out a deep breath and looked at him. I mean *really* looked at him and I saw it. *He actually loved me.*

I wanted to do that Sally Field thing where, at the Oscars, she had yelled, ‘*You like me, you really like me*’, but thought it a tad obvious and inappropriate.

And then he lent down and kissed my lips. Slowly. My God, how long had I wondered how that would be? Baby, he did not disappoint. I lost myself totally. Time stood still.

Pulling away, he looked at me once more and then kissed me again, longer this time. And look, there was absolutely no argument from me. And he knew it. Because at some stage I realised I had my hands in his hair, and I may have moaned.

Over his shoulder, I briefly spotted the smile on Marty's face. I could tell he was genuinely pleased for me... for us. I blushed and thought my world could not be any more perfect. In fact, I remember later thinking that I wanted to have a group hug with him as well.

And for some time, life went on like that. I had my apartment. Davis had his. In personal matters he didn't like to rush things. Business was different.

We were so loved up.

I once asked Davis about his reaction to my kiss six months prior. He explained that Marty, sensing his feelings earlier, had read him the riot act and told him he had to be absolutely certain.

Anyway Marty seemed pleased for us. And it appeared as if it was forever going to be us three musketeers, in between Marty's girlfriends of course.

I remembered it being nothing new when Davis dragged his feet on the two of us living together, however finally he got sick and tired of going between apartments. Mind you, it only took him another three years.

We had listed a superb modern apartment in a renovated warehouse building with lots of glass and glamour, not far from work. It provided the lifestyle that Davis craved. He felt it was the way we should be living and would look good for the business, for us to be a united front.

Now, you would think that I would have jumped at the chance and of course I wanted to. But I wanted it to be because of us, not because of the business. Up until this point of

time I had been an independent woman. I could have actually bought that warehouse on my own if I'd chosen to. For that matter, so could he.

Although, I was thinking different thoughts, I was thinking about the future. And by that I did not mean how much capital gain we would have on the property. Shame on me I know! Davis had recently had his thirtieth birthday and I was coming up to mine. At some stage, I did want a family.

The thing that did it in the end was when his brother Steve asked me to go to a PR conference with him to Paris. Months before, Steve booked the conference and paid for his partner, Thomas, to attend all of the dinners and partners' events. Because of the economic decline, Thomas decided that it wasn't timely for him to be gallivanting all over Europe and needed to stay put in his hair salon, keeping an eye on his staff and his clients.

Steve didn't want to go without Thomas, however having an alliance with a worldwide public relations company meant he had to attend a certain amount of conferences per year to stay in the association.

Plus, he could not get his money back on what he had already paid, and, if he was going to go to Europe, he sure as heck did not wish to go for five days only. I didn't even have to think twice when he asked.

Anyway, Davis and I were in the middle of something. The something was I didn't want to move in with him unless we were going to go forward in our relationship. In fact, if he didn't see us moving forward, I didn't see us having a future. Obviously, this affected us in more ways than one.

I told him we needed time apart and I needed time to think. Time away was exactly what I required.

I loved Steve almost as much as I loved Davis. In fact these

days, I do love Steve more. And if you had to pick someone to shop with in Europe then Steve would be it.

Steve was like a Staffordshire bull terrier: short, solid muscle, fiercely loyal, a loving family member, but ruthlessly tough and he knew when to stand up for his own territory. In his words: *He took no shit!* His wardrobe consisted of well-cut jeans and cowboy boots. He never walked anywhere but strode with sexy confidence... gay or not. He headed Brisbane's top lifestyle public relations company and did wonders for our business. Thanks to him, barely a week went by that one or another of us was not in a publication.

When Davis and I finally got together and Steve found out, he had thrown his arms around me and yelled, 'Bout bloody time. I was beginning to wonder if he was the poof!'

I loved Thomas equally as much. Although his uber-luxe hair salon, *Groove*, had quite a celebrity clientele, he still managed to keep all of our tresses styled as well.

Anyway *Groove* thrived. Whether it was imported beers, or the best herbal tea, or organic coffee and handmade biscuits, alongside the massage chairs and huge plasmas fitted throughout, he was a one man PR team for his own business. Personally, I would pay big money just to have him shampoo and condition my hair. There was something about those big powerful hands cradling my head and giving me the best scalp massage, it was positively erotic. I could moan now even thinking about it.

So back to the trip to Europe... yes I had to go. To be honest I was feeling a little down. Very down in fact. As much as I was excited about the trip to Paris, I knew that I had to do a lot of thinking while I was there.

To lift my mood I had set up appointments with Chanel, Lanvin and Dior. The House of Guerlain awaited my precious

skin. Plus I could not miss the opportunity to visit Laduree for possibly the best macaroons and their simply unforgettable thick hot chocolate.

While Steve was at his conference I would have time on my own, a good thing, and when he was finished, we'd play, another good thing!

*

I changed lanes on the Story Bridge, heading towards my mother's at New Farm. Although it was only a matter of kilometres as the crow flew, as I crossed the Brisbane River, I felt torn between leaving my old life and beginning a new one.

New Farm was not a love of Davis's, and I could never quite fathom why. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that if we lost a buyer to West End, it was often because they had gone to New Farm. Davis used to say that the *New Farmians* thought they were better than us. I don't believe the *New Farmians* gave it any such thought.

As I veered right at the end of the bridge, I was once again confronted by the huge sign someone had painted that said: *The more you think about it the bigger it gets*. What I couldn't help think, and not for the first time, was that every time I saw that sign it reminded me exactly of what I wanted to forget. *Blast it!*

I turned into Brunswick Street and pulled to a stop at the red light. With a French manicured finger tapping my top lip, for the millionth time, I wondered if there had been any way I could have fought harder. Who was I kidding? The relationship had been exhausted. We had spent long enough throwing the blame back and forth. Finally, it was time to exorcise all and move on.

It was unlike me, because usually I held onto things even after they were broken. As a child, I'd had a teddy called Fella.

Even after both of his arms, and then legs, had fallen off, I'd treasured him and taken him everywhere.

'Come on Peach,' my dad, Johnny, had insisted, attempting to prise my little fingers off him. 'Surely it's time to put Fella to rest.' However, I could not part with him.

'I don't care if he's broken,' I had argued, through my tears.

However, my marriage was more than broken. It was shattered into little pieces. One minute I had been young in love and planning a family, the next I was nearing mid-thirties and on my own. Where had my life gone?

Slowing the car, I passed Montgomery's on the left hand side of the road. I played the game that if there was a car park out front, I would stop for a well needed coffee and have a chat with Chilli, my dear friend and one of the owners. However if there wasn't, I was meant to head straight to my mother's. With disappointment, I noticed Montgomery's was as per usual busy, so I continued on. At the next set of traffic lights I checked my rear-view mirror, and saw a car pull away directly out front. However, as like other things, it was far too late.

Minutes later, I pulled into Bea's driveway. Checking my eyes in the mirror, I jumped when my phone rang.

It was Marty. He was running late to pick me up.

'Don't worry,' I told him. 'I think I'll walk down to the New Farm shops, pick up a couple of travel books from Mary Ryans, and have a coffee while I wait. Pick me up when you're ready.'

I didn't miss the concern in his voice when he asked if I was okay.

'Mmmm... just left the warehouse for the last time, that's all. I'll be fine,' I lied.

Chapter 2

Briskily stirring the satiny smooth latte on the table in front of me, regardless of my mood, I couldn't help but revel in its pervasive aroma. I took a tentative sip, testing the temperature, and relaxed visibly. Making an effort to remove the world-has-come-to-an-end look from my face, I sat further back in the chair.

The New Farm Deli owner placed a *cannoli*, a favourite Italian sweet, on the table in front of me. 'How are you Bella?'

I wondered if he too like the rest of the world, knew about my failed marriage, or was simply being polite. I attempted a smile and shrugged. 'Fine thanks Vince.' And then as an afterthought added, 'Maria good?' It was as much conversation as I could attempt.

Within our West End community, personal and professional, my humiliation had been great. There were days when I did not want to leave the house. Sometimes I had come over to New Farm to shop, grateful for the anonymity.

I flicked my long blow-styled locks behind one ear and absentmindedly fiddled with one of my earrings. The numbness I had felt since leaving was beginning to scare me. Shouldn't I be crying, weeping and wailing? Yet I didn't feel like hysterics. I felt devoid of everything

Swallowing hard, I attempted to distract myself. I smoothed my skirt, crossed my legs, and examined my impossibly high, black toe-peepers, bought all that time ago on the trip with Steve to Paris in a quaint little shop in *rue St Honore*. I had always loved the fact that as I walked the green sole could be seen from behind. Today, I was almost mesmerised by them, flexing my calf first one way and then the other.

The day I had bought them, I had been playing a game with myself. Again, if I found the right pair of shoes, everything in the world would be alright. I told myself later, they were definitely the right pair of shoes. Funny, I had chosen to wear them today.

*

Davis's proposal, when it came, was always going to be our special little story, the one that we would bring out and tell our grandchildren. Steve and I had spent four days in London and were on day three in Paris for his conference. Tired after a day shopping, I casually lingered in the restaurant downstairs in the *Hotel Meurice*. The tea was wonderful, a refreshing blend of green tea and Moroccan mint, scented with bergamot. I must admit, it wasn't just the shopping that had made me tired, my heart was heavy as well, and it took energy to put on a brave face each day, after I had spent the night crying into my pillow.

Steve called earlier to say that he would return to the hotel later than expected. Tonight we were free from the conference and I was looking forward to some fun, anything to take my mind off Davis. Even though I had said I was determined that if he didn't want our relationship to move forward, it was over for us, in my heart I knew I would be devastated.

On our arrival at the hotel there had been a dozen red roses waiting in my room from him. But I didn't call. What could I say? *Thank you for the roses and it's okay that after all of this time you're not sure about me.* The day before, a silver cake stand with delicate scented rose macaroons awaited me. Yes, from Davis. They *almost* had me at first bite, and although I faltered, I still didn't call.

After I had drained the last of the tea from the silver teapot, with heavy feet and equally as heavy heart, I wearily crossed

the grand foyer and made my way to my room. Immediately upon opening the door, my spirits lifted as my shopping, entailing different carrier bags with designer names emblazoned on the sides, had been placed by the concierge upon the pink brocade chair, in front of the ivory silk draped window overlooking the *rue de Rivoli*.

Kicking off my hot pink patent Pradas, I undid the gold buttons on my cream coloured Burberry trench coat and hung it in the wardrobe. As I closed the mirrored door, something on the bronze silk bedcover caught my eye. Another carrier bag! I swung around. It was not just any carrier bag, but a legendary Loius Vuitton carrier bag. I stopped in my tracks, narrowing my eyes. Surely it must be a mistake. Perhaps the concierge had delivered it to the wrong room.

Stealthily, I crept over to it, as if it might bite. I surveyed it for a few moments and then lifted the edge of the bag, peering inside. There sat the bag of my dreams... the gold mirror bag. I had been raving about this bag for months. Only this morning, I had visited the flagship store on the *Champs Elysee*, hoping that it was still available, only to be told that the last one had been sold earlier. This had to be it! *Oh bother...*

Seconds later, I picked the phone up, and dialled the concierge. ‘*Bonjour*, it is Peach Avanel speaking. I believe there has been an error. There is a shopping bag in my room that does not belong to me. I think it must have been delivered by mistake... Oh! ... Is that right? ... Are you sure? ... *Really? Merci boucoup.*’

I hung the phone up. I couldn’t believe it. The concierge said that he had delivered it personally. The next moment the phone rang startling me. It was the concierge again. He told me that there *had* been an error, and asked if I could bring the bag downstairs.

I took the Louis Vuitton carrier bag, my room key and my mobile phone, in case Steve should ring, and lethargically retraced my steps from only minutes before, thinking that really if there was an error, the concierge should rectify it, not me.

Crossing the grand foyer, once again I admired the luxuriousness and beauty of the colour scheme, a harmony of beige marble, accented superbly by tones of red and black.

‘*Oui Mademoiselle* Avanel, have you opened the bag yet?’ the concierge asked, his voice heavily accented.

‘Well no, as it’s not mine. I did look inside but that’s all. I assure you...’

Firmly, he held his hand up. ‘Perhaps we should look together to make sure all is well.’

‘But I assure you, I haven’t touched it.’

‘*Oui Mademoiselle.*’ Removing the gold handbag from its wrappings, and placing it on the desk between us, he admired it. ‘It is *tres magnifique.*’

‘*Oui*, it is very beautiful,’ I agreed.

‘Would you like to try holding it for a moment?’

I opened my eyes wide at him. ‘I don’t think so...’ my tone carried an air of humour.

He smiled and narrowed his eyes at me. ‘Really *Mademoiselle*, you should, just to see how it looks.’ He pushed the bag towards me.

I glanced around, uncertain of his strange behaviour. I took the bag and placed it over my arm briefly. ‘Very nice!’ I returned it to the desk top.

‘Ah *Mademoiselle*, you must have a better look. It suits you. Take it to over to the bar and look in the mirror there. The lighting will be better. You should see how *tres beau* you look.’

‘No really...’

‘You must! You must! Come along, I will come with you.’

Before I had time to say more, I was handed the bag once again, and escorted across the marble foyer into the spectacular Bar 228. It was impossible not to admire the work of the world renowned designer Phillippe Starck.

Lavish tobacco toned leather chairs, highlighted by the sparkle of rare crystal decanters, all to a backdrop of warm timber detailing, made me feel as if I had been transported into the finest gentlemen's club. This was the perfect place for drinks with Steve later that night.

The barman came towards us, a single glass of champagne on his tray. '*Mademoiselle,*' he offered.

Bewildered, certain there must be some mistake, I put my hands out and began to laugh. 'Look I'm not sure what's going on here, but this isn't my bag, and I didn't order any champagne.'

'But you must,' the concierge said, pulling out a chair and pressing me into it. 'You must sit here while I sort it out.'

Before I had time to protest, with a level of importance, he strode off. I glanced at both the bag, still on my arm, and the glass of champagne on the table in front of me. Completely baffled, I glanced around. *What* was going on? The poor man was definitely rather odd. I placed the bag on the table and studied it. Someone was lucky. My phone rang and I jumped in fright.

'Do you like it?' was all he said.

The moment I heard his voice, I felt the tears well in my eyes. '*Davis?* Did you do this? Is this from you?' However my heart felt heavy. It wasn't gifts I wanted.

'Open it.'

'Davis please... you're making this harder.' My chin quivered. 'It's not flowers or macaroons or handbags I want. Please don't do this...'

‘Open it.’

I exhaled heavily.

‘I said to open it,’ he insisted.

For a moment I sat doing nothing and then with the phone tucked up to my ear, I reached out, took the bag onto my lap and unzipped it. Inside was a small black velvet bag. As if bitten, I rapidly pulled my hand away and placed it to my mouth. ‘What is it?’ I murmured.

‘Have a look.’

I slid the drawstring open. Inside sat a ring box. My hands began to shake and emotion overtook me. ‘Davis...’

‘Stop crying and open it.’

I nearly dropped the phone, and once again tucked it tightly under my ear. ‘No, I can’t.’

‘Frenchy... open it.’

With trembling hands I opened the black box and there sat a stunning princess cut sparkling engagement ring.

‘Davis...’ I sobbed, too overcome to say more.

‘Peach Avel, will you marry me?’

‘Yes, yes I will...’

‘Stop crying, you’ve got mascara running down your face. You need a tissue.’

‘What...?’ Shaking my head, I jumped up from the seat and spun around. Davis was standing in the doorway. I gave a cry that sounded as if it had been torn from my heart and threw myself into his arms. They closed around me hard and strong.

I guess I wasn’t surprised that this was happening, although I was surprised at the way Davis had planned it. Any woman being presented with a beautiful diamond ring, as a girl you squeal with delight, you say you can’t believe it, but of course you can, it is exactly what you had hoped for.

Davis told me he knew he needed me the moment I flew out of Brisbane. He stayed with me two nights, and then was gone again.

We married eighteen months after that. I wanted a September wedding, but Davis said the following March was better. After all what was six months? I wanted something small and intimate. Davis wanted half the suburb there. He said it was good for business to have as many clients as possible.

However, my wedding day surpassed all that any girl could dream of: the romantic Vera Wang dress, the champagne toasts, the promise of time alone with Davis cruising the Maldives on our luxurious honeymoon. Although Davis was terribly handsome in his Hugo Boss tuxedo, I felt like the day didn't belong to us alone.

I wanted children straight away but Davis said he wanted me to himself for a while longer. Three years after we were married, I finally put my foot down. I told him it was now or never. He agreed.

I wish my body had agreed. Somewhere along the line it forgot what it was meant to do.

*

Shaking my head, I was instantly jolted out of my reverie by the sound of a tiny voice. 'But Mummy I want a baby chino.' As if waking from a sleep, I blinked and glanced around the surrounding tables. Tables spilled out from the inside eating area under an awning onto the pavement, where customers, just like me, perched to watch the passing trade.

'Emma sit up here and wait for Daddy to come,' the blonde, blue eyed mother gently coaxed.

'But Mummy... ' the little voice rose higher.

'Emma,' the mother's voice was firm. 'Daddy won't be long. You can eat your sultanas while you wait.' Snapping open the

hot pink Tupperware container, she handed it to the little girl who was dark haired and appeared to be of Chinese decent. I wondered about the father.

Holding the coffee cup to my lips with both hands, I sipped slowly, watching.

A tall fair haired man, dressed smartly in business attire, crept up behind the tiny girl and then hoisted her into the air up onto his shoulders, among squeals of delight.

‘Come on Miss Em,’ he said. ‘Come inside and help me order coffee and treats.’

I noticed the mother’s face as she watched her husband and child go into the deli, a child who I gathered was adopted. I wondered about it, the mother’s look was one of satisfaction. To have denied her the right to be a mother would have been criminal. And not for the first time, I pondered whether motherhood was a right or a gift. Suddenly I was reminded of my looming childlessness. Whenever it came upon me, like it did at that moment, it hit me in the pit of my stomach and I literally felt ill. I knew I was still in mourning. Not only mourning the person who I had thought was the love of my life, but also mourning the loss of my perfect dream, the expectation of becoming a mother soon, something I had been planning and dreaming of for years.

With some effort, I attempted to change my thoughts, knowing that thinking about my desire for children did me no good whatsoever. Emerald Green and I were still to work on that one. I had told her I was not ready. She had said soon. *Soon* was looming.

No amount of effort to re-direct my thoughts helped and I was reminded of those early days of finding out about Davis’s affair and the huge realisation that I was not headed towards motherhood. There were many nights where I lay in

bed feeling pain that was bigger than my body. A huge circle of pain encompassing not just me but vibrating through the air around me as well. My crying scared me. It was instantaneous and loud. I could not contain the sound. I would get out of bed and roam around, trying new places to sleep, another bedroom, one of the lounges. And then I would sleep a little again, only to repeat the performance a short time later.

*

Two women parked their loaded trolleys in front of my table before they entered the delicatessen. Earlier, I had chosen a table right at the end, pushed up against the window. Although out of the way, it seemed perfect to people watch. The two trolleys appeared to be filled with display paraphernalia, creating a wall that couldn't have hemmed me in any further if it was made from besser blocks.

I was miffed the two women had given me so little regard. Coughing, I attempted to attract their attention. However, as they were already inside joining the take away coffee queue, it did me no good whatsoever. Noisily, I slid my chair back, hoping the sound would show my plight. They did not even turn around.

To make it worse, while they waited for the coffees, the two women leant against the trolleys, and in voices that resembled fingernails on a chalkboard, loudly discussed the issues they had with a work colleague.

'... and so I told her, if she didn't *friggin'* get real...' came from the teased redheaded, her eyes rimmed in purple liner, lipstick in the corners of her mouth.

Not for the first time I had the feeling of being invisible. It hadn't seemed all that long ago that I was a well-known business identity around town. And now...

I glanced around to see if anyone else thought my pre-

dicament odd. However, the problem was I could barely see anyone else. My desolation returned and hung off me like a heavy cloak.

For an instant, I wondered if I could be the type of person who would down an entire bottle of sleeping pills. However, as I was on my third cup of coffee that day, I realised there was a good possibility that I would struggle to close my eyes. *Blast!*

Resting my chin on my hand, I exhaled heavily and stared down at the bottom of my now empty cup, thoughts playing out in my mind, replaying scenes from the past.

*

The moment I heard her voice, I knew it was her. I had forgotten how charming Felicity Best could be.

The tall striking blonde sailed towards me. ‘Helloooo darling! How are you?’ she sang as she air-kissed my cheek. Four of the first five minutes of meeting after nearly fifteen years, we conducted that catch up dance in which you move from subject to subject, leaping great chasms of time, while still in shock over the unexpected meeting.

Her hair was swept up in a platinum blonde Marilyn Monroe do, and her smile was pure Hollywood. A cloud of expensive perfume wafted around her. Even at that hour of the morning, she was wearing a blazing sapphire blue silk dress that rippled as she moved. I could tell that she was aware she had attracted nearly every pair of male eyes within cooee distance.

Images flashed into my mind of Felicity Best at school; on the netball court with her long tanned legs; sitting in the middle of a group of gobsmacked girls while she handed out snippets of her glamorous weekends. She was the queen. God, we all loved her. God, we were envious.

And even after all this time, and my own success, I felt

that same feeling of inadequacy come upon me again, as I stood there in my leggings and singlet top, waiting in line for a vegetable juice at some ungodly hour of the morning. Davis was away speaking at a conference, and rather than wash that bloody juicer yet again, I had stopped off after a session with my personal trainer to buy one.

Who was I kidding? The morning hadn't begun well and I was going straight for an iced chocolate mocha – a mixture of eighty percent pure chocolate, vanilla ice cream, espresso coffee and chocolate shavings. The mood I was in, if I could have taken it intravenously, I would have.

Twenty minutes earlier, my period had reared its ugly head once again. Another month had passed with no luck. I could not explain my complete disappointment and frustration. I held myself together at the trainers, and waited until I got in the car. Down the road, I pulled over, rested my head on the steering wheel and cried. I was feeling less of a woman every month and I cursed myself that we had waited so long.

The emotional journey was absolutely exhausting.

By the time I arrived at the juice bar in the James Street markets, I knew I wasn't a pretty sight. Actually, I didn't care how I looked, I wanted that iced chocolate badly.

Of all days, there was Felicity Best, looking like sunshine after the rain, still as gorgeous as the last time I had seen her. When you have legs that long, you always look gorgeous.

Afterwards, I called into my mother's.

'I ran into Felicity Best earlier. Do you remember her from school?'

I watched Bea as she sat in front of her old fashioned dressing table, wildly piling her blonde hair on top of her head and expertly wrapping a signature colourful silk scarf around it. Next to the mirrored jewellery tray, a cut crystal rose bowl

held the hugest bunch of overblown white roses, their fragrance filling the room.

‘Which one was she?’ Bea asked, absentmindedly riffling through her lipstick drawer, finally finding the perfect shade of red. She turned to me. ‘Darling, you should try this colour, it would give you a lift.’ She began to fill in her lips and then turned to me, eyes narrowed. ‘You mean the girl whose father was a barrister?’

‘No, Felicity Best, her father was an author.’

‘Oh of course,’ said Bea. ‘Jack Best’s daughter.’ Watching herself in the mirror, she paused while a small smile played about her lips. She played with her hair. Then she remembered something else. ‘The tall girl with the bleached blonde hair and the long legs? The one you all wanted to be?’

There was a moment’s silence while I registered this uncharacteristic insightfulness. I shrugged. ‘I’m not sure what you mean.’ But I did know what she meant. It’s not often you want someone else’s life. Back at school, I’d have given anything to be Felicity Best. She was our free one, our wild one, the one that got away.

From the dressing table, I picked up a bottle of Youth Dew, Bea’s signature fragrance. Removing the lid, I inhaled it directly from the bottle. Didn’t matter where in the world I was, the moment I smelt it, I thought of her. I spritzed my wrists.

‘Still the only one in the world is she?’ Bea asked, mascara wand mid-air, not taking her eyes from my face in the mirror.

‘What do you mean?’ There was silence.

‘*Oh darling...* I do know you all thought she was the coolest girl at school. The one all the boys liked, and she knew it.’ She paused for effect and then turned to look directly at me. ‘If I remember correctly, she was mean to you. Flavour of the

month one minute until someone better came along. Always wanting what everyone else had. I do remember the tears.’ She turned back towards the mirror.

Nonchalantly, I waved my hand at her. ‘I hardly remember that stuff. It was too long ago. But it was good to see her. She’s been living in London for the last ten years as a business development manager for a publishing group. Sounds like she has been rather successful.’

‘What’s she doing back here then?’

I shrugged. ‘It seems her love life has been rather turbulent.’

Bea raised her brows, which I wasn’t sure if it was in response to what I’d said, or if it helped her pencil them in.

I sat on her bed, and without looking at her, explained, ‘She’s terribly qualified. I’m thinking of offering her a job.’

Bea spun around again. ‘Do you think that’s wise?’

‘Look Bea, I’m never going to fall pregnant the rate I’m going. I need to take some pressure off. I want to take six months away from the business.’

‘And what has Davis said about that?’ she asked, looking down as she slid a huge aquamarine cocktail ring on the middle finger of her left hand.

I shrugged. ‘He’s been a bit funny, but I promised him I’d find someone to fill my shoes, and I have a strong feeling Felicity could be the one.’

‘Go steady darling.’ And then with a spritz of her perfume she was done. ‘And look, do take this lipstick, it could be just the thing you need.’

She glided across the room, our deep and meaningful over. My mother’s vanity and her meticulous attention to the details of her own appearance had always struck me as incongruous in a woman who lived such an alternative lifestyle and

bordered on being a hippy. However, she rarely left the house without lipstick, mascara and perfume, often stating, 'Just because you're different doesn't mean you can't look pretty.'

Later that day, Felicity phoned me. The old Felicity never phoned me. Years ago, I had always been the one who rang her, and then I'd walk over to her home to find someone else there. I remember feeling in the way and very much on the outer. But that was then.

Now, I set up a time for an interview. I had a feeling she could be the one.

She was.

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