

PART 2

SARAH: 6 MONTHS EARLIER

Chapter 4

The White Horse was busy as usual this freezing February Friday night. Jack had clocked off work early and was still in his chef's whites, nursing a pint and studying the pub menu, looking for ideas he could steal for Chalkie's. It was all the same old stuff – steak & kidney pie, chicken pie, shepherd's pie, cottage pie. Pies, pies, pies! Thai food was the big thing in town – red curry, green curry, Pad Thai, weeping tiger beef - something with a bit of a kick. But the pub trade was very slow to catch on.

No imagination, he thought, ignoring the fact that everyone around him was tucking into one pie or another, and seemed quite happy with their lot.

He looked at his watch. 8 o'clock. Rich and Sean had many faults, but timekeeping wasn't one of them. They were

always first to the bar, competing to flash their cash and buy the first round.

The door at the far end of the pub burst open and Jack could see Rich and Sean at the entrance, swaying.

‘Wa-hey!’ Rich cheered, sauntering to the bar. Jack waved over, but they hadn’t seen him yet. They were both clearly hammered.

‘Champagne, my dear chap,’ Sean waved his hand in the air, with a flourish. ‘Three glasses.’

Now it made sense to Jack. *He’s had a win*, he thought.

This’ll be a cheap night for me!

Rich staggered over to Jack’s table, by the unlit fireplace.

‘Good day at the gee-gees, boys?’ Jack asked.

Sean, a little unsteady on his feet, twisted the metal wire on the side of the champagne cork, tossed it aside, then with strong thumbs, eased the cork out of the bottle, with a gentle *plop*, without spilling a drop. He handed a glass to Rich, one to Jack, then flopped down onto the wooden bucket chair. Rich reached for his glass, and held it high.

‘A toast,’ he said.

Jack was taking this all in, amused and bemused.

‘A toast? What are we toasting?’ Jack asked. ‘Big win?’

‘Pretty big.’

‘Pretty big?’ Rich interrupted. ‘Fucking massive, more like.

Enough to pay for a boys’ weekend.’

‘A stag weekend!’ Sean added.

Jack was losing patience now. ‘Will you two stop talking in pissed up riddles and just tell me.’

Rich and Sean looked at each other, clasped each other’s hand’s in mocking affection, then said together: ‘We’re getting married!’

Jack raised his glass. ‘To Helen and Chloe?’

‘Yes, to Helen and Chloe. Who did you think?’ Sean said.

‘Well, then...cheers!’ Jack said. ‘That’s brilliant news.’

‘Yes. And I want you to be my best man,’ Sean said.

‘No – we want you to be *our* best man...’

‘...?’

‘...because we’ve decided we’re going to have a double wedding. It’ll be brilliant. And it’ll be cheaper, too. We can split the costs down the middle,’ said Rich.

‘And the stag weekend. That’s coming out of today’s winnings. The horses. Two and a half grand.

Blimey! They *were* being serious. A variety of emotions rushed through Jack, confusing him. He was delighted for his friends, of course he was, but he felt envious, too. Left out, because Rich and Sean were doing it together, typically, but envious that they clearly felt so certain about their futures with Helen and Chloe that they wanted to make the ultimate commitment. He felt the same way about Sarah. Sadly, she didn’t feel the same way about him. Not yet. ‘It’s still early days,’ she said, when they went out to celebrate their first anniversary last week.

He didn’t want to throw a dampener on their joy, but...’Are you absolutely sure about this?’ he said. ‘I mean, you are really, very pissed. Have you told the girls? Are you sure they’ll be up for it?’

‘Oh don’t worry about them, you miserable bastard,’ Rich said. ‘They’ll go along with whatever. You know that. Putty in our hands.’

Which was true, though Jack could never fathom it.

‘So whaddya say?’ Rich asked.

‘Yeah. It’s a no brainer, isn’t it?’ Sean said.

‘Well, I’m flattered, honoured, privileged, but....’ He paused for dramatic effect. ‘....yes, of course I’ll do it. It’ll be amazing.’

‘It’s a lot of pressure, a lot of responsibility,’ Rich said.

‘Yes, especially organising the stag weekend,’ Sean laughed

‘I won’t let you down,’ Jack replied.

‘We want to do it quickly, too,’ Rich said. ‘In a month. A lovely spring wedding.’

‘Yeah. Pressure’s on now, Jackie Boy,’ Sean added.

‘Like I said, I won’t let you down.’

The friends smiled and raised their glasses. ‘Cheers,’ they said in unison.

Another bottle of fizz later, the trio left the pub, bear-hugged for what seemed like forever, declared their undying drunken love for each other, then went their separate ways. *Must tell Sarah*, Jack thought, reaching into his jeans pocket for his mobile.

He heard the ringing tone, then it went to voicemail. *She's working. I'll go and see her.*

Mussel Beach was only a few minutes walk from the pub, so Jack wandered along the tree-lined street of three-storey houses, most of which had been knocked into flats. He had a spring in his step. He couldn't wait to tell Sarah. *She'll be chuffed!*

Ever since he'd set eyes on her, across the table of the late-night café where local chefs hung out after their shifts, he thought she was *the one*. She was an Aussie, all passion and fire and opinions. She was intense and driven, bossy and strong-willed. Quite the opposite to him, in fact. He watched her holding court with fellow chefs, hands and arms waving, eyes blazing, straight blonde hair fronds slashing at the air

as she made her point about something or other to the three men sitting with her, who seemed to sit in silent awe.

She was gorgeous. And he had to have her.

He'd gazed at her with such intensity from across the room she could almost sense his azure eyes pleading to be noticed, and when she had looked his way, she smiled. He had a nice face, a kind face, an unthreatening face, she'd told him later, so when he had asked her where she worked, and then if he could buy her a drink, and then if he could walk her home, and then if he could take her out on a date, she happily, almost passively, went along.

Jack had that way with him. He was easy company, effortless to be with. One minute you would barely notice him in the room; the next, he was part and parcel of the fabric of your existence. That's how it had always been. At school, he never got into fights, never fell out with the teachers. He wasn't particularly brilliant at anything, but he wasn't especially bad, either. Boys liked him, girls liked him. And when he grew up, men loved him and women loved him.

Because quite simply, there was nothing to dislike. He would go with whatever flow was flowing to wherever it was headed, using his disarming charm, flahbulb smile and George Clooney eyes to ease his passage. For Jack, the journey was more important than the destination. Except where Sarah was concerned.

He'd never met anyone like Sarah. The various flings he'd had over the years were just that: flings. Women quickly fell in love with him – he was 'a catch', the ideal man to take home to their mothers – but he quickly tired of their dotting. He wanted a woman with fire and feist to inspire him, keep him on his toes.

In Sarah, he thought he'd found his soulmate.

A mad crush quickly turned to soulful love for Jack, and he planned the various stages of their relationship on a map of love which he kept very securely under lock and key in his own head.

Stage 1: A month of dating: make love.

Stage 2: Three months: talk about a future together.

Stage 3: Six months: ask her to move in.

Stage 4: One year: propose.

Stage 5: Two years: get married.

Stage 6: Have kids.

Stage 7: Live happily ever after. Just like his Mum and Dad.

Unfortunately, he was still stuck at Stage 3. He'd virtually begged Sarah to move into his one-bedroom flat, but she either changed the subject, or flatly refused.

'It's early days,' she'd say. 'We've got our whole lives ahead of us,' she'd argue. 'We barely know each other,' she'd reason. 'We need to establish our careers,' she'd state. Until finally: 'No, Jack, Just drop it. Please, You're giving me a headache.'

But this news about Rich and Sean might chivvy things along a little. She didn't really know the guys – she thought they were 'dickheads', if Jack was honest – but she knew how close he was to them, so she tolerated them and made an extra effort for them and their girlfriends if ever they showed up in the restaurant.

When Jack entered Mussel Beach, his eyes immediately locked on to Sarah, through the porthole of the kitchen door, her face flushed, her brow beaded with sweat. This was when he fancied her most, not all dolled up and ready for a night out, but like this – working, buzzing. She wanted to have a restaurant of her own one day, and he had absolutely no doubt whatsoever that she would do it.

He ordered a bottle of lager and sat on a stool at the bar.

‘Hi Jack. Waiting for Sarah? Want me to go and get her?’

Steve, the waiter asked.

‘No. Don’t bother her. I’ll just wait.’ *And watch!*

At 11pm, the kitchen door swung open and Sarah emerged, taking a red and white checked bandana off her head and wiping her forehead with her sleeve.

‘Busy night?’ Jack asked.

Sarah looked startled, then smiled, a huge beaming smile.

‘Wotcha, love! How long you been here?’

‘Half an hour, not long.’

He stood up and towered over her petite frame, put his arms around her, brought her close and kissed her on the lips. She responded in kind, put her arms around his neck, looked into his eyes.

‘I’m starving. Whaddy say he go and grab something to eat?’

‘Or I cook you something at mine? I’ve got some exciting news to tell you.’

‘Ooh, goody, I love surprises,’ she clapped her hands together, a sarcastic little girl gesture.

They left the restaurant hand-in-hand, chatting about the service and the various obnoxious customers that had been in that night, including one who complained about being allergic to seafood. ‘It’s a bloody seafood restaurant,’ Sarah laughed.

They caught a bus the six stops to Jack’s place, walked through the communal car park and up the three flights of stairs, and into Jack’s flat. An after-smell of cooking always lingered in the air. Last night he’d brought home some

leftovers – lamb meatballs in a spicy tomato sauce – from Chalkie’s and had enough to put in the microwave and serve up with leftover rice and a couple of warmed-through naans. After a hard day slaving over hot hobs, chefs loved nothing more than a convenient ready-meal!

Sarah took off her coat, left it in heap in the hall and headed straight for the fridge. She retrieved a three-quarters’ full bottle of Chardonnay from the door and filled them each a glass as Jack waited for the microwave to ping.

‘So what’s the exciting news then,’ he stroked his back, reached up on tip-toe, lifted his thick hair overflowing onto his collar to kiss the back of his neck.

‘Mmm, that’s nice,’ he said. He turned to kiss her, tasting the wine on her lips and breathing in the scent of her day of toil. ‘You smell gorgeous,’ he said, meaning it.

‘I smell disgusting. I should have a shower.’

‘No. Not yet. Let’s eat first. You’re hungry.’

Sarah reached up onto the top of the fridge-freezer to get a couple of lap trays while Jack piled the piping hot food onto

plates. Sarah tore a couple of paper towels from a roll to serve as napkins. Jack put knives, forks, a teaspoon and a jar of mango chutney on a tray. Unthinking, effortless teamwork.

They went through to the living room, with its re-upholstered sofa and faded colour armchair, sat opposite each other, smiled, air-kissed, tucked in.

‘So, this news?’

‘You know Rich and Sean?’

‘Yerrssss? You mean, like, your best friends? Yes, Jack, I know them,’ she said, sarcastically.

‘They’re getting married. And they’ve asked me to be their best man.’

‘...!’

‘It’s great news, don’t you think?’

‘Is that it? Is that the big surprise?’

Jack’s face fell.

‘Well, you don’t have to be so rude about it.’

‘I’m not being rude. Sorry. I was expecting something...’

‘Something what?’

‘Well, something more interesting.’

‘Like what?’

‘I don’t know. Something surprising.’

‘This *is* surprising,’ Jack said.

‘Not really. They’ve been with Helen and Chloe forever.’

‘Yes, but they’re getting married together on the same day.

And they want me to be the best man.’

Sarah wiped the sauce from the plate with her naan and shovelled it into her mouth, then washed it down with a gulp of wine.

‘Look love, you’re very sweet, and I can see you’re excited, and yes, it is lovely news for you, and for them. But they’re your friends. I hardly know them. I’ve only met them three times, and I was always working at the time. I’ve hardly even said hello to their girlfriends,’ Sarah said.

‘Still....I thought you’d be pleased.’

‘I am pleased. I’m just not ecstatic.’

She put her tray down, left her seat and dropped to her knees on the carpet with a soft thud. She walked over to Jack on her knees, removed the tray from his lap, and squeezed her slight body in between his thick, trousered thighs. She caressed his leg with one hand, touched his face with the other.

‘You know what makes me ecstatic, don’t you?’ She leant forward, brushed his lips with hers.

‘I just thought it might make you think...’

‘Think...’

‘Think about us.’

‘And what about us?’ She was cupping his face with her hands, blowing softly on his face, tugging at his lower lip with hers.

‘You know, the stuff we’ve talked about before. The future. Marriage, babies and all that. We could make it a triple wedding.’

She pulled his head towards hers, kissed him passionately, pulled back.

‘The future can wait, babe. We’ve had this conversation before. Too many times. It’s getting boring. It’ll happen. When the time is right. When things are more sorted. Just not yet.’

She raised her left finger to his lips. ‘Now, sssh.’ And kissed him passionately on the lips.

I can wait, Jack thought. She’s worth waiting for.