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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Tea Chest

Written by Josephine Moon

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# *The* TEA CHEST

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ALLEN&UNWIN

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*For Alwyn, who believes in dreams.*

*Judy, I realise it will come as a shock that I have decided to leave my share of The Tea Chest to Kate and not you. But I know you, Judy. And I know you won't allow The Tea Chest to continue to grow. I know you never wanted to be involved. And I wish to thank you, sincerely, for helping me realise my dream. I do acknowledge that The Tea Chest wouldn't exist today if you hadn't stepped in when you did.*

*Family and business is never an easy mix. And ours certainly wasn't.*

*Kate, I've never been more proud. You have been the model employee and a dear and trusted friend. Equally, The Tea Chest wouldn't be what it is today without your vision, talent, commitment and passion. I know from the bottom of my heart that you will take it to new heights. This is a big responsibility. I know that.*

*Other people will tell you that you can't do it, but you can.*

*Trust yourself.*

*Simone*

# 1

Kate Fullerton's second home for the past six years had been The Tea Chest. It sat in leafy Ascot and was the original store, opened long before the Sydney one. It was nestled between a boutique Brisbane fashion label, specialising in hats and fascinators for the nearby racecourse, and a fine-dining restaurant with crisp white linen and spotless glassware. An enormous, gnarled jacaranda tree, planted on the footpath decades earlier, sheltered the entrance to the store and laid a soft, purple carpet at its feet every October.

Kate turned the key and opened the white French doors, letting the river breezes enter the shop, pick up the scents of bergamot, Indian spices, lemons, rose and caramel and swirl them towards her in a morning greeting she would never tire of.

Susan wasn't far behind. She clicked her way across the polished wooden floor to put her things down behind the counter and clipped on her Manager badge.

'Morning,' she said.

'Good morning to you too,' Kate said, and gave her a hearty smile. Susan had been a bit tetchy of late, understandably. Simone was gone; Kate had been propelled from the role of tea designer to equal owner of the company; and the future of The Tea Chest was in doubt. She could appreciate why Susan was nervous but it wasn't helping Kate to find her own feet in this new world in which she'd landed.

The prospect of going to London and opening a new store from scratch was alarming. Possibly crazy. And undoubtedly life-changing.

It didn't help that no one had confidence in Kate's ability to pull it off, including Kate.

'I had such a great weekend,' Susan said now, going to the storeroom to switch on the urn and get the teapots and teacups ready for tastings.

'Tell all,' Kate said, turning on the fairy lights that were strung around the room.

'I met someone,' Susan said, poking her head out of the storeroom and fastening her white frilly apron around her waist. 'At the pub, of all places.'

Kate let Susan talk on, half listening to the life of a fellow thirty-something and musing on how different her own life could be if she were still single with no children. The other half of her attention was busy working on a solution for her current problem—how to save The Tea Chest, her career, the employees in both Sydney and Brisbane, and Simone's legacy.

She loved it here—not just her job, but the actual store itself. The Tea Chest was a wonderland. Circular walls gave the impression of being inside a giant teapot. Fairy lights twinkled from the ceiling. Concentric circles of products filled the belly

of the room. White porcelain bowls contained tea for customers to shake and smell. Rows of teapots and Turkish tea glasses were laid out for taste tests. Toasted coconut marshmallows, chocolates, gingerbread men, Turkish delight, chocolate-coated raspberries, crystallised ginger and truffles all sat in tall glass jars. Melting moments were piled high on cake stands under glass domes with gold handles.

There were teapots, silver spoons, giant cups and saucers, diffusers, strainers, napkins, lace tablecloths, sugar cubes and books about tea. The teas themselves were stacked from floor to ceiling. They were in glass jars for display, as well as in boxes of pale pink, yellow, rose red, powder blue, white and gold to take home. Each was tied with a bow, the ribbon stamped in silver with the logo of an open antique tea chest.

The walkways had the effect of directing customers in dream-like wandering. Patrons paid for their goods at an enormous clunky old-fashioned cash register and left with their parcels hand-wrapped in gold paper and rich ribbon.

It was simply too special to lose.

The bell above the door tinkled and in walked Priscilla, a regular at The Tea Chest.

'Good morning,' Kate greeted her.

'Kate,' Priscilla said, breathless in her designer jogging outfit. A slight sheen of sweat sat atop her makeup. 'I'm so glad you're here today. I'm hosting a baby shower this weekend and I want you to design an individual blend for each of my guests.'

Since she'd started offering individually designed blends, her fame had spread quickly through the city. The *Brisbane News* had featured a full-page colour photo of her, dressed in the white shirt and apron she wore to The Tea Chest each day, surrounded by porcelain bowls of tea ingredients.

The service had been a hugely successful addition to the business and it wasn't just Brisbane that had embraced it. She even took Skype, phone and email consultations to come up with special blends. And customers were happy to pay handsomely for them too. Handing over the beautifully wrapped boxes and special labels filled Kate with pride for days and reaffirmed to her, and hopefully to Judy, why Simone had hired her to be the company's lead designer all those years ago.

Then again, Judy seemed to get that loud and clear, if today's voicemail was anything to go by.

*Kate, really, we need to wrap this up. Every day that passes loses us money. You've said it yourself—you're a designer, not a business owner.*

'How many guests?' Kate said, reaching for her notebook.

'Twenty-two,' Priscilla said. 'Will that be okay? I know it's a lot and it's short notice.'

'No problem at all. It's my absolute pleasure. This is what I do best.'

It was true. She could say with pride that she was a talented artist and she loved her career with all her heart. But she'd never thought of herself as a business person. She'd always dismissed 'that side' of things as something other people did, declaring she had no talent for numbers, spreadsheets, projections or management.

Was she really cut out to take on Simone's vision for The Tea Chest and launch a new store in London followed by more in other countries?

Both Judy and Mark kept asking her that same question but for different reasons. Judy wanted out. Mark was worried for their family and his own career.

But the real question, she was coming to see, was whether she had allowed a lack of confidence to limit herself to a smaller life

than she might have had. And was she brave enough to take a chance on herself now to find out?



Leila stared at the semicolon.

It was wrong.

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

Just like it had been the first three times this document had passed through her in-tray. Just like another dozen errors she'd already corrected but were still on the pages in front of her.

She took a deep breath, letting it out in a controlled fashion, trying to release the fury that was twisting like a python around its prey. She could simply take her red pen and mark this page again. She could put it back in the folder, enter her remarks in the database for this project and shuffle it off her desk and back to the writer for the eighth time since her team had taken it on.

She could also stick needles in her eyes and set herself on fire.

While she debated her options, the voice of the writer himself floated to her from three cubicles away.

'I know, George, I know. But it's these editors. What can I do?'

Leila's heart rammed against her chest. Her skin flared hot. Her head swam.

*Our fault? How is this possibly our fault?*

'I'm up against a rock and a hard place, Georgie Boy. I know it's past the due date but I can't release it until these girls sign off on it. Quality assurance process and all that.' He sighed. 'I don't know what's up with them. It's a no-brainer.'

Leila could imagine Carter leaning back in his chair, the look of an innocent child on his face, nodding in agreement with the long-suffering customer.

*You incompetent, sexist, geriatric fool. YOU are the idiot standing in the way of this document being finished.*

She tapped her pen furiously against the desk, her breathing sharp and painful.

'I'll take it to my manager, Georgie Boy, and see what we can do about them.'

*No you don't.*

Leila threw the pen down with a clatter against her keyboard, picked up the document and marched to Carter's desk. Towering over him, she pursed her lips, tilted her head to the side and glared at him, hoping steam was shooting from her nose.

'George, I'll have to call you back.' He chuckled nervously and hung up the phone.

Leila threw the pages onto Carter's desk, knocking over the last of his coffee.

'Listen, cutie,' he said, jumping out of his seat and pushing his glasses up his nose.

'Don't *cutie* me. I've had enough of you. How dare you blame this crap on us?'

Frustratingly, she felt her throat tighten and her eyes sting. She was half a second away from bursting into hysterical sobs. Dimly, she was aware of people gathering behind her, heard Lucas's voice ask if everything was okay. Her ears filled with noise. Black spots appeared in her vision. She registered Carter's sneering smile and watched his eyes travel to her breasts for the hundredth time.

Something cracked.

It was a loud popping sound and it might actually have come from inside her.

She shoved him, pushing the heel of her hand hard against his chest to get his lecherous self away from her body. He fell backwards into his chair and rolled away from her.

'Leila.' Lucas was behind her.

Normally, his voice would have made her warm and tingly.

But she was lost. Lost to rage and frustration and deep unhappiness. She grabbed Carter's stone paperweight and threw it. She threw it as hard as she could, feeling power roar through her while regretting she couldn't throw it even harder and straighter.

But it was hard enough. The paperweight smashed into the floor-to-ceiling window of the ninth floor and it cracked in a lightning bolt from top to bottom. There were gasps and exclamations from people in nearby cubicles.

'What the hell are you doing?' Carter bellowed.

Leila's knees went weak as the adrenaline flooded through her. Her arms began to shake and her breath rattled as she wheezed and gasped. She felt sick.

One thing she knew for sure: she was fired.

So if she was going to lose her job, then she might as well finish off this knob standing in front of her.

She lunged for Carter. He shrieked like a little girl and covered his face with his hands.

'Leila.' It was Lucas again. He grabbed her around the waist to pry her off the cowering Carter. Then he took her by the elbow and led her away.

She laughed hysterically.

'Get a grip,' Lucas hissed.



If Elizabeth had known today was the day she would appear on Brisbane's nightly news dressed only in her lingerie, she might not have got out of bed. As it was, when she awoke, she chose to shower and put on a brand-new cream chemise, brush her teeth

and climb back into bed beside her sleeping husband. She laid her long body against his back, reaching around him with her left hand to stroke the hair on his chest, and nuzzled his ear.

It was not that she was overcome by a surge of passion for his body, limp as it was with sleep and odorous with morning breath; her enthusiasm was thanks to the results of the test she'd just taken. Today, she was ovulating.

Twelve hours later, she checked into the Stamford Plaza, still wearing nothing but her chemise and wrap, handed over her husband's credit card, silently thanked the reception staff, who asked no questions, and retired to her own king-sized bed, with a minibar and a range of pillows to choose from.

She lay in a bubble bath, drank vodka, cried, pummelled pillows and roared like a bear, slept a little, then spent the rest of the night in a chair by the window, watching the lights in the street below.

If only she had known this morning what she knew now.

She might have at least put on jeans.