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A Mother's Story

Written by Amanda Prowse

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A Mother's Story

Amanda Prowse



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Prologue

There was a small camera winking at the duo as they waited to be let in. A woman half stood, raising her hand in recognition of Dr Boyd. She pressed a buzzer out of view and the door whirred open, admitting them to a large square hallway. The woman sat at a pale wood reception desk that curved round in an arc, with a large row of pigeonholes on the wall behind it. The decor was simple: mainly white walls, with brightly coloured accessories on the desk – red files, green pen pots – and a large yellow clock on the wall that ticked loudly. The place had the false gaiety of a children's hospital.

Without being told the drill, Dr Boyd signed a book for them both and waited. A heavyset woman of indeterminate age appeared, her demeanour telling anyone who cared to notice that this was not where she wanted to be. She ignored them and bustled past with an armful of files.

A smiley nurse then appeared. She searched Jessica's overnight bag and patted down her clothing. Jessica was quiet and polite; her earlier misgivings disappeared. She felt a sense of relief that she was going to find some peace in here. It wasn't as scary as she had anticipated, so far. The nurse seemed kind and business-like. 'We'll get you settled in your room, Jessica, okay?'

She nodded. Dr Boyd went into an anteroom off the reception area and she didn't see him again. She was taken deeper into the bowels of the building. Beyond the hospital-like reception, the facility looked a bit like a cheap hotel, the only difference being that instead of carpet tiles, the floor was grey linoleum. Chocolate-box-style pictures were screwed to the walls, depicting meadows abundant with flowers and the sun peeking over rolling hills. The nurse linked arms with Jessica as though she were elderly or infirm. This made Jessica smile. Despite being neither, she had to admit it was a great comfort to have this woman to lean on as they made their way to her room.

'Is Matthew coming here later?' she asked, realising that she hadn't said goodbye properly.

'No. Not tonight.' The nurse patted Jessica's arm.

'Tomorrow then?'

The nurse didn't answer. Jessica wondered if she had heard.

'Will he come and see me tomorrow?' she repeated, this time a little louder.

The nurse blinked quickly, but remained quiet. Jessica swallowed, wondering if she had said the wrong thing. She couldn't remember where Matthew was or why he wasn't with her, but judging from the nurse's silence, she felt it best not to mention him.

The woman's rubber-soled shoes squeaked as they made their way along the glossy linoleum. Jessica stopped and gasped as a deafening wail of distress hit her ears. She gripped the nurse's hand.

'It's okay, Jessica. It's just someone calling out. There's

nothing to be afraid of.' The nurse smiled and squeezed her hand, which helped a little.

The nurse pulled at a swipe card that was anchored to a spring-loaded cord and held it against a small black panel by a wide door; the door swung open outwards. Jessica found herself in another section of corridor. The strip-lighting overhead was too bright and the artificial glare made her eyes squint in defence. Jessica noticed the glass-fronted cabinet set high in the wall, full of phials and syringes; she tried not to think of when they might be needed and what they might contain.

They stopped abruptly. The woman again pulled on her card and swiped the panel by the side of another door. Jessica noted the little window near the top of the door. She wandered into the small room and cast her eye over the melamine-topped chest of drawers and the single bed in the corner. The window had bars over it and pale grey vertical blinds that reminded her of an office block. She sat on the bed and ran her hands over the blue blanket that was the kind she had only ever seen in hospitals; it was tucked neatly under the mattress and sandwiched between white sheets that were folded over at the top to form a thick white border. Here too, the floor was squeaky and dust-free. She liked how clean everything was, uncluttered. It made it easier to think.

Another woman came bustling into the room. She was less smiley than the first one and was holding a clipboard. She sat on the orange plastic chair, which creaked under her weight, and put the clipboard on her lap. 'I need to ask you some questions.' Her mouth was set in a sneer, as if she was irritated or in a hurry.

Jessica nodded.

'You know where you are, do you?' She spat the words.

Jessica nodded again.

'Go easy,' the smiley nurse whispered to her colleague.

'Go easy? You do *know* what she's done?' she fired back.

Jessica felt her body shake.

'Have you in the last twenty-four hours had any suicidal thoughts?' The woman stared at her in a way that made her feel very uncomfortable.

Jessica shook her head and looked down into her lap.

'Feel free to speak up, Jessica. We are here to help you.' Nice nurse spoke softly, kindly, in spite of the disapproving twist of her colleague's mouth.

Jessica had a sudden flashback to her wedding day. She remembered standing and trying to make Jake, and Matthew's other mates, be quiet so Matthew could speak. *'We all knew Jess wouldn't be able to resist getting involved during the speeches, right? Apparently the trick for me is going to be how to get her to shut up, not just today but throughout our married life. Roger has very kindly given me these for use in extreme emergencies!'* She pictured the ear defenders her dad had supposedly given him.

But now it was if she had stopped owning her own life. A decision had been taken without her consent, arrangements made without her involvement; people had started talking about her in hallways and into phones with palms cupped over the mouthpiece. From that moment, she had no longer been responsible for herself. At first she'd felt quite relieved and a little petrified. As time went on, she'd felt less relieved and more petrified. Because if she wasn't

responsible for herself, then how could she control what happened to her? And the answer to that was that she couldn't.

Her tears came quickly and without warning. She stayed silent, as her hot distress tumbled down her face and clogged her nose and mouth.

'Where have I gone, what has happened to me?'

One

It was a beautiful May day. Orange-tipped butterflies danced in the clear blue sky, kissing the sunny yellow flowers on which they rested. The apple trees were in full bloom, abundant with pink and white blossoms, some of which had fallen to form a floral carpet across which the guests tramped.

The crisp, clear sound of a fork hitting the side of a glass echoed around the marquee. Conversation levels dropped to a burble and those who had migrated to other tables, crouching on the coir matting to chat to their friends, made their way back to their own. Clusters of girls rushed back from the loo arm in arm, holding sparkly clutch bags and with perfume freshly spritzed. Three pretty waitresses navigated their way through the maze of tables, distributing chilled flutes of fizz in readiness for the toasts. Jessica felt a current of joy travel through her. Her day was perfect.

It was the kind of wedding she had seen in magazines, the kind of event that featured in movies – a million miles from what she had envisaged for a girl like her. Jessica, whose mum and dad thought pasta was an exotic food, who had grown up in a world of coupons, saving stamps and thrift, whose school uniform came from the second-hand

shop and who had received a book token for every birthday as far back as she could remember. She was at the most exquisite wedding she had ever attended and she was the bride! It was, as her mum had reminded her earlier in the day, like a blimming fairy tale.

Matthew's childhood had been very different. Jessica was marrying a man whose parents nipped to France in the way hers nipped to the supermarket. They were the sort who knew which wine to drink with fish, and at the supper table they made jokes about the cabinet of the day and shared amusing snippets they had picked up from Radio Four. It was a world away from her home life. When she'd been introduced to his family for the first time, she'd felt awe and fear in equal measures. One year on, both had subsided, a little.

Polly hurried round the back of the top table and placed her head on her best friend's shoulder. Her large green fascinator sent feathery fronds up the bride's nose, which Jessica snorted away. She could smell the boozy fumes that wafted from her friend's mouth. This was not unusual for Polly: since their teens, both girls had lived by the mantra 'it's wine o'clock somewhere!'

'There is something you need to know, Jess,' Polly said in a solemn whisper.

'What's that?' Jessica was intrigued.

'We probably should have discussed it before now, but the fact is, now that you are a married woman, your husband might want to do *S-E-X* with you.' The s-word was mouthed, not spoken.

'Really?' Jessica placed her hand over her mouth and widened her eyes.

'Yes.' Polly nodded. 'It's what married people do. My parents have done it twice, as I have a sister, and I don't think your parents have done it for a while.' Both girls glanced at Mr and Mrs Maxwell, sitting further along the table in their finery, and giggled.

'Stop laughing, Jess. This is very importatant, impor… tatant. Importatatnt.' Polly tried but failed to get the word right, making Jessica giggle again. 'Whatever! Doesn't matter.' Polly waved her hand in front of her face. 'The rule is: just lie back and think of England. Don't say a word, don't move and it should be over before you've managed to sing the second verse of "Jerusalem". In your head, of course – not out loud, that's a no-no. Got it?' Polly straightened up and kissed her friend on the cheek.

'I think so…' Jessica bit her lip. 'Is the second verse the "Bring me my bow of burning gold" one?'

'Yep. You might want to practatice.' Polly winked.

'Because it's importatant?' Jessica asked.

'Zactly!' Polly fired imaginary pistols at her mate as she backed away from the table.

Jessica laughed at her dear, sloshed friend, who had in fact, as a young teenager, been a mere two park benches away from her when she'd had her first sexual experience after a rather flirtatious game of rounders with the choir of St Stephen's. Things would have got a lot more steamy had it not been for the intervention of Reverend Paul, who had shown up at a crucial moment, shushing them from the park like an agitated giant crow, just in time to save their souls and their reputations.

Polly teetered across the dance floor in perilously high

heels. Jessica watched as she sucked in her stomach and jutted out her ample chest as she walked past Matthew's boss, Magnus, who she had a crush on. The fact that he was older than her father, married and rather arrogant didn't seem to deter her. Jessica loved Polly like a sister. Only last night they had sat in their pyjamas in Matthew's parents' spare bedroom and written a list of all their sexual conquests, each fondly remembering the lamest of victims that the other had conveniently chosen to forget. Rather embarrassingly, they realised that there were at least two shared names on their lists; this had sparked a fit of uncontrollable laughter, which even the smallest of things was prone to do. Polly, who jumped from job to job and was currently temping as a PA, made Jessica laugh like no one else could. So much so that sometimes Jessica barely made it to the bathroom in time, much to her shame.

Jessica patted her tiara, making sure the delicate headpiece and her perfectly curled chocolate-coloured locks were just so. Swallowing her nerves, she touched the pad of her middle finger to her bottom lip, which was still slightly sticky with gloss, meaning her mouth would shine during the close-ups that would inevitably be snapped during the speeches.

Looking at her mum, Coral, who sat a few seats away on the top table, Jessica tensed her cheeks and pulled a wide mouth, indicating both excitement and nerves. Coral winked at her daughter and took a deep breath. She too was trying her best to hide her anxiety. Jessica felt a wave of love for her mum, who she knew had been anticipating this day with trepidation, fretting over her outfit, her hair and what the rest of her family might do or say to embarrass them. It

was a minefield. Jessica had tried to reassure her that if Uncle Mike *did* decide after a couple of glasses to do his fart trick, it wouldn't be the end of the world. Both she and her dad had been sent into a tailspin wanting to contribute financially and yet not wanting to set a budget that might thwart Margaret's grand ambitions for her only son. Jessica had watched them trying to navigate the unfamiliar world of canapés, wedding favours and linen samples and knew it took all of her mum's strength not to suggest that she could make the buttonholes, write the place cards and knock up a platter or two of sausage rolls to save a few quid.

Jessica had, during the process of planning the wedding, learnt how to communicate with her mother-in-law. Quite unlike her own mum, Margaret didn't want to be bothered with detail; she simply wanted her decisions approved so that she could rush them into action with gusto. She raced everywhere, as though time was always in short supply, and she always, always looked neat. She was fastidious about her appearance, her little waist often emphasised by a huge tan leather belt that wouldn't have looked amiss on Lennox Lewis. Coral was the exact opposite, pausing often, sometimes lumbering and frequently distracted. She worried about whether a bow would sit right and whether Aunty Joan could manage to last all day with her dodgy hip, but the bigger questions left her in a state of flux, nervously chewing her nails.

Jessica looked out at the expectant faces of the beautifully turned-out guests who were all beaming in her direction as they sat in the elegant ivory marquee on her in-laws' lawn. She felt like a princess and couldn't help smiling as

she thought back to that fateful rainy day a year ago, sitting in Sainsbury's car park.

The rain was pounding on the car roof, sounding like small pebbles hitting metal. She'd watched as Matthew sprinted across the grey tarmac in his sneakers and tried the car door handle. Finding it locked, he knocked on the glass of the passenger window.

'The door's locked, Jess! Open up!'

She shook her head, which he may or may not have seen as she slunk down further into the driver's seat, her bony shoulders hunched and the sleeves of her sweatshirt pulled over her hands.

He knocked harder. 'Jess! I'm getting soaked, it's tipping down! Open the bloody door!' This time he bent down, joined his fingers in a salute against his forehead, then rested them on the glass as though it were sunny and not pissing down with rain. 'Jess! What are you doing? I'm getting drenched and so is the shopping.' As if proof were needed, he held up a soggy French stick that looked rather sorrowful and was bent in two.

Jessica folded her arms across her chest, which heaved in an effort to contain her tears. 'I'm not opening it. So go away!'

'What? For God's sake, Jess, look at me!' With his one free hand, Matthew pulled his sodden jersey away from his chest and watched as the waterlogged wool remained misshapen. 'Open the sodding door. This isn't funny.'

'Do I look like I'm laughing, Matthew?' she shouted as she leant across the passenger seat, her voice catching in her throat.

Matthew dropped the bag of groceries onto the ground and laid the soggy French stick on top of it. Then he skirted around the front of the car, squeezing through the space between 'Ross', his Fiat Panda, and the car in front. Bending down until his face was level with hers, he pushed the wet hair back from his forehead and tapped on her window. Jessica turned to face him and couldn't help the twitch of laughter on her lips as she watched the rain running off the end of his nose in a steady stream. He looked even sexier than usual, if that was possible.

'Go away, Matt!'

'What do you mean, "*go away*"? I nip into Sainsbury's to pick up some supper and by the time I get back I've been barred from the car? From *my* car!' he shouted and laughed, more than used to his girlfriend's slightly erratic behaviour. She was what Jake had described upon first meeting her as 'a bit of a handful'.

'I came in to find you, Matt, and I bloody saw you,' she barked.

'Saw me what?' Matthew raised his hands as he stuck out his bottom lip and tried to blow the rain away.

'Talking to Jenny! I saw you both in the *champagne* aisle.' She emphasised the word champagne, as though this gave the observation added salaciousness. How could she explain that she still felt nervous and inadequate around these posh girls whose confidence danced out of their well-spoken mouths, and that every swish of their blonde ponytails left her feeling insecure? This was especially so with Jenny, the sweet, leggy American, whose easy manner and fabulous teeth set her apart. Jessica doubted her child-

hood had been one of sitting on the step of the pub, sharing a packet of Hula Hoops while her dad played skittles in the back.

'That's because I was buying a bottle of champagne! And it was only Jenny, I've known her forever,' Matthew offered, shaking his head in confusion.

'Well I know that, clever clogs. As I said, I saw you! And it's not *what* you purchased that bothered me. It was Jenny throwing her arms around your neck, kissing your face. *And* she had her leg resting up on your thigh, what's that all about? And then I saw you look left and right to check I wasn't watching – well, I was – and then you put your finger on your lips as if to shush her. I'm not stupid, Matt. I know something is going on. Or are you going to tell me I imagined the whole thing?' Jessica felt her mouth crumple in the beginning of tears. This little development was no good at all. She really liked him, more than liked him, she loved him! She dug her fingernails into her palms as a distraction.

Matthew stared at her open-mouthed as if figuring out what to say next. There was a sudden thunderclap overheard. Jessica jumped. She hated thunder. Matthew ran back round to the passenger side of the car. He pulled the bottle of champagne from the bag and held it up to the window.

'You didn't imagine the whole thing. But I bought this for *you*, you idiot.' He smiled.

Jessica felt her stomach bunch, still unused to these extravagant gestures.

'Why don't you give it to Jenny!' She tried to halt the smile that threatened – he had bought her champagne!

'Jenny? No! You've got the wrong end of the stick.' Matthew shook his head and placed the bottle on the ground. 'If you're not going to let me in, then just open this window a little so you can hear me properly. Please. I hate having to shout, and people are watching,' he yelled.

'I don't care who's watching!' she shouted back, which was a lie. She cared a lot. She rolled Ross's passenger window down by two inches.

Matthew bent down and spoke through the gap. 'Thank you for opening the window.' He smiled. 'I bought champagne because we are celebrating; you and I. Jenny threw her arms around my neck because she *knows* we are celebrating. And the reason she knows is because she has spoken to Jake, who couldn't keep a bloody secret if his life depended on it.'

'What are we celebrating?' Jessica looked across at her rain-soaked, bedraggled boyfriend as he clung to the window, his fingers gripping the rim of the glass in a monkey-like pose, his body pressed against the side of his car in the driving rain. She watched as he arched his body backwards and reached into his wet jeans pocket. Using two fingers, he pulled out a small square red box.

Jessica flung her hand over her mouth as her tears finally found their release. *Oh my God! This is it!*

Matthew suddenly dipped down until all that was visible were his head and shoulders. He shook his head to rid his eyes of the rain. Jessica wound down the window fully, caring little that Ross's upholstery was getting a good soaking. Matthew pushed his forearms into the car and, leaning through the open window, carefully opened the

little red box that rested in the centre of his palm. In it nestled his grandmother's Art Deco engagement ring. The square emerald was flanked by two baguette-shaped diamonds and the whole beautiful composition sat on a worn platinum band. It was stunning. It was the ring she had admired when last at his parents' house. Now she knew why it had been sitting there on the mantelpiece, not waiting to be cleaned, as his mother had burst out, but waiting to be collected, by Matthew, in preparation for this moment. Although being locked out of the car on a rainy Tuesday in the car park had probably not figured in his plans.

'Jessica Rose Maxwell…' Matthew paused to compose himself. He gave a small cough and started again, seemingly unaffected by the rain that continued to plaster his hair to his face and his clothes to his body. 'Jessica Rose Maxwell, I love you. Even though you drive me crazy and are undoubtedly the most bonkers person I know. You are also the funniest and the most beautiful. I can't stand the idea of not spending every night with you or not seeing your face on the pillow next to mine when I wake up. I want you to have my babies. And I can't imagine any other future than one with you. I love you.' He pushed the box further into the centre of the car until his arm was fully outstretched. 'Will you marry me?'

Jessica opened Ross's door and tried to jump out, but was anchored by the seatbelt that had tightened across her chest. She laughed as she waited a second and then pushed the button for release. Slipping from the car, she ran through the downpour, edging around the bonnet and into Matthew's arms.

'This is just what I have always dreamt of, being proposed to in Sainsbury's car park!' She kissed him hard on the mouth. 'I love you too!'

'Is that a yes, then, Ms Maxwell?'

'Yes! It's a yes! Of course it's a yes!' Jessica jumped up and down in the rain until she too was soaking wet. She threw her arms wide. 'I'm getting married!' she shouted at the elderly man in an oversized high-visibility jacket and peaked cap who was collecting stray trollies in the car park.

'Congratulations!' he shouted back through the haze of droplets, and waved.

Jessica leapt into Matthew's arms; luckily he was used to this and caught her with ease.

'I'm sorry about your French stick.' She kissed him again.

'Jess, if that's the worst thing we have to contend with in our married life, then I'd say we are going to be just fine.'

Matthew lifted her higher above his waist and held her firmly, with her bottom resting in his hands, as she wrapped her legs around his torso.

'I love you, Matthew.'

'I love you too.' He smiled.

Jessica placed the flat of her palm against his cheek, her expression deadly serious. 'No, you don't understand. I love you more than I knew I could ever love anyone. I love you more than I will ever love another person in the whole wide world and I always, always will. The thought of you not loving me…' She drew breath as if she'd been struck.

'Jess, my Jess. There is nothing you can do, nothing that would make me stop loving you.'

She buried her head in his shoulder. They would wake

tomorrow knowing that they were going to be husband and wife, forever.

One year on, Jessica studied the plain platinum wedding band that now sat next to her engagement ring, on the third finger of her left hand. She splayed her fingers, admiring the new addition.

Matthew's father once again tapped the fork against the glass. 'Ladies and gentlemen, could I please ask you to be seated for the speeches.' Jessica caught the way Margaret flashed her husband a look, as if to say, 'Remember, short and sweet, this isn't your floor show.' As was his habit, he jutted his chin, shot his cuffs and ignored her.

Matthew's university chums threw back the shots they had lined up on the starched white linen tablecloth, knowing that time was of the essence. Who wanted to listen to speeches sober? Led, as ever, by Jake, they had long since shed their suit jackets and morning coats; their ties were slackened or absent, their sleeves unevenly rolled.

At twenty-three, Matthew was the first of the gang to marry and this catapulted him into the adult world. They saw it as their duty to both celebrate and mourn the fact that one them had been snared. Their girlfriends exchanged glances; the group of pretty plus-ones had little in common other than that their respective partners had all done very well at A-level, had read law at Nottingham University and were now sitting at the Pissheads and Reprobates table in this fancy tent in the Buckinghamshire countryside.

One of the Pissheads had won an enviable internship, the Chief Reprobate was studying for his Bar exams and at least

two of the others were earning mega-bucks in the City, but when the group reassembled, they threw off their career labels and behaved like the twenty-three-year-olds they were. Getting plastered, making crude jokes and trying to get laid became the order of the day.

Matthew's colleagues – or those in the Shark Pool, as the sign on their table tagged them – gripped their glasses of Pinot Grigio Grand Cru and Châteauneuf-du-Pape, carefully chosen to accompany the fish and venison. Their signet rings made pleasing clinks against the sides of the glasses. The practising lawyers eyed the young bucks on the neighbouring table with a mixture of disapproval and envy.

Anthony Deane stood at the top table and pulled his cream silk waistcoat down a fraction, trying to hide the bulge of good living that crept over his waistband with alarming speed year on year. He coughed and lifted his chin. 'It's wonderful to be able to host you all here today in celebration of the marriage of our son Matthew to the delightful Jessica. I would now like to hand the floor over to Jessica's father, Roger.'

Jessica didn't think of him as her father, he was Dad, her dad. A loud 'woohoo!' came from the back of the marquee. Anthony raised his glass. 'Well thank you, that man. One woohoo already and we are not even close to the finale – this bodes very well.' There was a ripple of laughter. Anthony sat and folded his hands across his stomach as all eyes turned to Roger Maxwell.

Jessica watched her dad stand. He smoothed his tie against his chest, removed his glasses from the case that usually sat on the arm of his favourite chair, and placed them on his nose. He pulled the folded sheets of A4 paper from his pocket. In no

particular hurry, he coughed to clear his throat. His words when they came were delivered clearly and sincerely. Jessica had to stop herself rushing over and holding him close. She felt a swell of affection and gratitude towards this man during his first ever public speech. She knew how nervous he was and loved that he didn't try to refine his Essex accent, proud of his roots and what he had achieved for his family with nothing more than hard graft and an eye for an opportunity.

Roger looked up at the assembled guests. 'I don't think I can go any further without mentioning quite how beautiful my daughter looks today.' This prompted a round of applause, in response to which, Jessica placed her head in her hands and tried to hide. Matthew pulled her hands from her face and encouraged her to stand. She felt the scarlet stain of embarrassment creep up her neck as she put her hands on her impossibly tiny waist and gave a half turn to show off her dress to its full advantage. The tiny crystals sewn into the delicate cream lace of her fitted bodice sparkled in the candlelight. She gave an awkward bow before resuming her place next to her husband and gripping his hand on the tabletop. Her action elicited numerous wolf whistles and cheers and to try and quieten her racing pulse, Jessica lay her manicured hand against her chest.

Roger paused to let the ruckus die down; he was handling the speech like a pro. 'I remember the quiet Saturday night we were watching the telly when Jessica came home and told her mum and me that she had met a man at a barbecue who had been so sloshed that he called her Joanna all night. I didn't think much of it, but three months later young Matthew was knocking at my door informing me of

his decision to propose to Jessica! I asked if he meant Joanna – I think that broke the ice a little.'

More laughter rippled across the room.

Matthew nodded; it had.

'The word whirlwind was invented for these two. My first question to Matt was, quite naturally, are you *mad*, son?'

'Oh, Roger!' wailed Jessica's mother, Coral. Then she laughed with her hand covering her mouth.

'My second question was, of course, who do you support?'

'Queens Park bloody Rangers!' came the shout from the Pissheads and Reprobates.

'Yes,' Roger answered, pointing at the rowdy table, 'and as a lifelong Hammers fan, let me tell you, those clearly weren't the words I wanted to hear. But it could have been so much worse. He might have been a Millwall fan or, worse still, been one of those blokes who only likes rugby!'

The room erupted into laughter. Anthony's passion for rugby was well known. Jessica beamed at her dad. He was doing great.

'I think this topic will only rear its ugly head if we are ever blessed with a grandson, when I will be charging up that maternity ward with a claret and blue strip. No arguments there, boy.'

'Ooooh! Harsh!' Matthew's friends heckled from afar.

Roger reached for his glass. 'But all joking aside, there is no finer bloke to whom we could entrust the care of our child. We are so proud of our beautiful girl, our clever girl, and an artist no less. We love all that she is and all that she will be. It feels like only moments ago that she was holding my fingers and taking her first steps along the path in our

garden.' He paused and swallowed the lump in his throat. 'From the very first moment I held you in my arms, Jessica Rose, I loved you and I will love you until my last breath. I know that Danny is looking down on you today and probably laughing at his old man done up like a kipper!' He plucked at his tie. 'Your mum and I wish you both every bit of happiness in the world. And if we can give you one bit of advice, it's this: nobody's life is perfect. Be patient on the dark days, because they pass.' The room was silent. 'No matter how dark it gets, sit it out. Even if you think you are alone, when the light comes back, if you are lucky, you'll look to your right and realise that the person you love was sat by your side, holding your hand, though you might not have seen them.' He stole a glance at his wife and smiled. Then he raised his glass. 'To Jess and Matt.' He took a sip and everyone followed his lead.

Matthew raised his wife's knuckles knitted against his own and kissed them. He would give her the ocean in a box if he could; nothing would ever be too much for this girl who he loved more than life itself. Jessica smiled at him, fixing him with a knowing look.

Coral cried. This was to be expected at the mention of Danny on a day like this. Jessica's girlfriends whooped and hollered on cue; in fact everyone on the Tarts and Slackers table was giving as good as they were getting in terms of banter. They were all, however, similarly affected by the words of Jessica's dad, which made their tears flow. They had all known Danny, remembered Jessica's quiet older brother who had now bizarrely become her younger brother, frozen aged fourteen. Polly in particular sobbed noisily into

her linen napkin, smearing it with lipstick and mascara in the process. Their collective outpouring was partly in response to Mr Maxwell's loving sentiments and partly because none of them could imagine how life might be now that Jessica, who in their school-leavers' yearbook was described as 'Little Miss Chatterbox, the girl who even talks in her sleep!', was a married woman. It felt like the end of an era and was a timely reminder that they too would be jumping off the ship that sailed on the sea of singledom sooner rather than later.

Matthew tried several times to begin his speech, but with the persistent chanting of 'Deano!', his student footballing nickname, it was almost impossible. Eventually Jessica stood and with arms outstretched and palms facing down, patted at the air, signalling for Jake and the boys to be quiet.

'You're so bossy, Jess!' Jake yelled. 'Poor Matt!'

'I am *not* bossy, I'm assertive.' She smiled at her husband's best friend.

'Thank you, my assertive darling.' Matthew kissed her forehead and she nodded gratefully in response.

'We all knew Jess wouldn't be able to resist getting involved during the speeches, right? Apparently the trick for me is going to be how to get her to shut up, not just today but throughout our married life. For the days when that proves impossible, Roger has very kindly given me these for use in extreme emergencies.'

Matthew bent down to reach below the table, then straightened up to reveal a pair of orange ear defenders in his hand. Everybody laughed and clapped, her parents included. Jessica thumped her groom on the bottom as he

continued. 'Wow! In all seriousness, how to follow that?' He looked at Roger. 'And I must say, a good summing-up from my father-in-law. Ever thought of leaving the sales game and taking up law, Roger? We could do with your sort in the courtroom!'

'Hear! Hear!' his colleagues concurred.

Jessica was happy beyond words that her dad and husband were friends. It would mean that all the Christmases, birthdays and holidays at the seaside that she pictured in her head, where they and her parents laughed as they played cards or ate fish and chips on a pebble beach, would come to fruition. Her stomach knotted in anticipation.

'I am quite possibly the happiest man on the planet today…' Matthew began.

Jessica smiled up at her husband on this, the happiest day of her life.