TILL DEATH
Or a Little Light Maiming
DO US PART

Also by Kathy Lette

Puberty Blues
Girls' Night Out
Hit and Ms
The Llama Parlour
Foetal Attraction
Mad Cows
Altar Ego
Nip 'n' Tuck
Dead Sexy
How to Kill Your Husband (And Other Handy Household Hints)
To Love, Honour and Betray
Men: A User's Guide
The Boy Who Fell to Earth
Love is Blind (But Marriage is a Real Eye-Opener)
Courting Trouble
Best Laid Plans
After the Blues
HRT: Husband Replacement Therapy
The Revenge Club

TILL DEATH
Or a Little Light Maiming
DO US PART

KATHY LETTE



An Aria Book

First published in Australia in 2022 by Penguin Random House

This edition first published in the UK in 2025 by Head of Zeus Ltd,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Copyright © Kathy Lette, 2022

The moral right of Kathy Lette to be identified
as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be: i) reproduced or transmitted in any form, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by means of any information storage or retrieval system without prior permission in writing from the publishers; or ii) used or reproduced in any way for the training, development or operation of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, including generative AI technologies. The rights holders expressly reserve this publication from the text and data mining exception as per Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive (EU) 2019/790.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (PB): 9781035906321
ISBN (ePDF): 9781035901579; ISBN (eBook): 9781035901555

Cover design: Meg Shepherd | Head of Zeus
Typeset by: Siliconchips Services Ltd UK

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

MIX
Paper | Supporting Responsible Forestry
FSC® C019604

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited,
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

HEAD OF ZEUS LTD
5–8 Hardwick Street
London, EC1R 4RG

To find out more about our authors and books
visit www.headofzeus.com
For product safety related questions contact productsafety@bloomsbury.com

To B… (or not to B.)



PART ONE

1

Why is it that just when you think you have all the answers, life starts asking all the wrong questions?

The last few months have taken me on a hair-raising ride – a parachute-free plunge from a space shuttle re-entering Earth's atmosphere barely comes close to describing their intensity. So, adopt the brace position and please remain in your seat until I've brought this story to a screeching halt. And, once the smoke has cleared and the warning bells are silenced, you can pick your way through the wreckage to the carousel to collect your emotional baggage.

The whole surreal saga I'm going to tell you about kicked off one perfect Sydney winter morning. The crisp, cloudless July sky was electric blue, the spotlight of the sun turning everything golden and sparkling with promise. It was the day before school holidays, the winter break. I should have been planning HSIE assignments to hand out to my recalcitrant high-school students. Instead I was driving along mentally packing lingerie for a scuba-diving holiday with my husband. Yes, lingerie. I may be sixty, or 'sexty' as my silver fox prefers, but Jason and I had only been married for three years and Jason, well . . . he's a veteran Ironman

competitor, meaning the bloke is agile in places other men don't even have places. Imagine Chris Hemsworth, Hugh Jackman, Regé-Jean Page, Lord Byron and an army survival expert blended with a soupçon of poetry then sculpted into a six-foot, muscled mass of sensitive charm in R. M. Williams riding boots. And then you'd have Jason.

Velvety-voiced but craggy; brooding yet beguiling; capable but passionate; a bulging Mr Incredible with a novel in his back pocket; sensitive, emerald eyes but a beaming, cheeky smile, his look was kind of rugged, outback explorer-cum-English lit professor who played guitar in his spare time. It was hard not to imagine the sound of a revving fender Stratocaster heralding his arrival wherever he went. Many times, the mere glimpse of him, fresh from the sea in his tight Speedos, had caused a high-speed pile-up at my beachside Pilates class. I sometimes thought he'd been brought to life by a bolt of lightning.

I'd never got over the fact that Jason Riley had fallen in love with me, Gwendoline Brookes, a high-school teacher, mother and bookworm, average in most ways – 167 centimetres, size 10, mousey hair – as ordinary as he was extraordinary.

My heart had just started beating faster at the thought of the salted caramel tang of his skin, when a news bulletin came blasting out of the car radio. 'A Sydney man is believed to have been taken by a Great White near the aptly named Shark Island around seven o'clock this morning. The Ironman competitor was on a regular morning training session with a local swim team across the bay but did not make it back. Police are asking witnesses to come forward with any information . . .'

The air curdled. Panic sluiced through me. That was

Jason's swim team. Blindsided by a queasy swell of dread, I hit the brakes. The jolt lurched me forwards into the wheel but it wasn't the bump to my head I was worried about so much as the emotional impact. Where was my psychological airbag?

'Remains of a swimming cap, a flipper and a scrap of torn, blood-stained wetsuit were found near the island.'

Could it be Jason? I pictured him before his swims, windmilling his arms to get his circulation going, chiacking the other guys, cursing his slight hangover, betting his mates a bacon sandwich that he'd still make it back first.

As I clutched the wheel, my dazed eyes focused on a squall of dry leaves on the nature strip, fluttering like tiny frantic birds. On automatic pilot, I turned the car around and headed back towards the beach. My phone rang, pinging plaintively from the depths of my handbag in the back seat. It kept time with the drum solo my heart was beating out against my bra.

Swerving off the main road towards the southern point of the peninsula, I clocked the heavy swell rolling languidly towards the shore without a care in the world and drove towards a convoy of police, ambulance and rescue vehicles at the end of the thin prong of land between the bay and the sea. Lurching to a halt again, I scrambled out of the car, leaving its door flapping. I saw men, ten or so, huddled, draped in towels, one or two in those emergency silver foil blankets, talking to a police officer who stooped, head bent over his notebook. My eyes raked the crowd for Jason, searching for his loose-hipped, supple gait. Surely I'd see his head rising above the pack, flashing that smile that lit up my world . . .

'Gwendoline.' It was Harry, Jason's friend, a doctor and part of the swim team. He broke away from the sombre huddle and strode towards me. 'I've been trying to get hold of you.' He was using his caring voice, the one woven from gauze and cotton wool and Savlon, with sorrowful cadences and a puppy-eyed frown. I felt a squirm of nausea in my throat. I felt sure he only used that voice when he was about to make some devastating diagnosis.

My eyes ransacked the crowd once more. The fact that I couldn't see my husband wouldn't sink in; it just floated on the surface of a mind still buoyant with hope. 'Jason? Harry, where's Jase?' I called. Why couldn't I see him? It was ridiculous. Any minute now I'd spot his twinkly eyes and playful mouth, a mischievous laugh bursting like a tiny explosive before he scooped me up into those strong swimmer's arms.

Harry seemed unable to answer me, but he was pointing at something. Behind a stretch of blue and white police tape lay a towel. And on the towel was a ripped swimming cap the same colour as Jason's and a flipper, a flipper with the letter J painted onto it in my pink nail polish. When I saw that my heart plunged into an abyss. Next to the flipper was a bit of torn, bloodied wetsuit.

'Jason is missing,' Harry said. 'It doesn't look good, Gwen.'

My psyche was instantly incinerated by the hot flash of a nuclear blast. I became a shell of the woman I'd been just moments earlier. Heartbreak minutes are a lot longer than normal minutes. They stretch on for miles – an infinity of awfulness. I drew in a breath but the air didn't reach my lungs. I must have swooned because strangers were now

mosquito-ing around me, offering tea, blankets, a camp chair, mouthing at me like earnest goldfish. Police were telling me things: a search and recovery operation was underway; divers, helicopters, drones and rescue boats were combing the bay – with no trace so far. A great white shark had been spotted heading for the open ocean and Surf Life Saving had closed all beaches in the vicinity.

I ducked under the tape and snatched up Jason's flipper but an officer immediately wrested it from my trembling hands. So then I just stood there, stupefied by the power of death. The earth seemed to be having doubts about revolving. The thin chill of the sea breeze cut through my silk dress. My cardigan was in my bag on the back seat. I looked back at my car, at my former self who had been happily driving to school a million years ago. An imaginary camera slowly panned across the wasteland of my emotions. No man's land. Dumbfounded, I stared at the sky, waiting for an incoming asteroid.

And come it did – in the shape of a Boom Trike Mustang screeching towards us; a trike that mounted the pavement and skidded to a halt among the scattering crowd. A short, curvaceous, tattooed woman in sequinned purple jeans, leather jacket and high-heeled biker boots came barrelling towards the police, her face fierce.

'Where's my husband?' she shrieked.

When a policeman tried to calm her down, this sabre-toothed bikie chick charged towards him with cyclonic impact. 'It's my husband, ain't it?! Answer me, you maggoty mongrels!' The woman screeched as though she was on fire then dropped to the ground and writhed as if being tortured.

I automatically went into school-teacher mode, kneeling down on the grass and putting a reassuring hand on her arm. 'Calm down, it's okay.' Shell-shock had rendered me icy cool. 'It's *my* husband who's missing.' I could hear words coming out of my mouth as though from a ventriloquist's doll.

The writhing woman spotted the torn flipper on the towel. 'Sweet Jesus, no!' Again, the air was cleaved by her wailing.

'No, that belongs to *my* husband,' I told her, biting back a sob. 'My darling, darling husband . . . He swims here most mornings.'

'But look at the name tag, for chrissake! J for Jason.'

'That's right. Because Jason is my . . . hus . . . band,' I choked.

'Whatchaonabout? Jason's *my* husband!'

'*Your* husband? What on earth do you mean?'

The howling woman unzipped her leather jacket to reveal a bejewelled bustier. She yanked it up to expose the inky topography of her abdomen. Emblazoned there in an upwards sweep towards a pierced navel, a calligraphed flourish spelt out the name '*Jason*'.

Still kneeling, I rocked back on my heels, wondering what the hell was going on. 'Look, there must be two Jasons. But it's *my* Jason, my darling husband Jason Riley, who is . . . who is . . .'

'Jason Riley's *my fuckin' husband*,' the woman reiterated between moans. 'Jason *Riley*. He's been trainin' with his swimming mates.'

I gawped at the woman like a goggle-eyed bather about to swim the English Channel. It took a moment to actually

comprehend what she was saying, because her words suddenly seemed to be in Klingon. All I could hear was a kind of fizzing in my head as if a swarm of bees had flown into my ears. There was a long pause. Cogs turned in my brain. 'Why are you saying these dreadful things? Who the hell are you?'

'Who the bloody hell are *you*?' the wild woman spat back in my face.

'I'm Jason's wife.'

'Well, that's friggin' impossible. Because *I'm* his wife.'

My eyebrows were now in my hair. 'What? We've been married for three years as everyone here knows.' I gestured across to the swim team, who were looking back at me from a distance with shocked compassion.

The interloper's face crumpled like a paper bag. 'Are you for friggin' real? That two-timing sonofabitch! That lowly worm!'

As this fiery high-heeled terrier spewed out these words, my astonishment grew. I tried to take her in – her whisky-drenched voice, her muscular arms, her huge breasts encased in that diamante-studded bustier, the abdomen tattoo, her long, pointed fingernails with the purple painted tips, her earrings shaped like little champagne bottles. Her eyes were flecked with green and fringed with thick spikes of dark mascara; her gaze challenging, unwavering and furious. Was it possible to pull an eyelash muscle, I wondered, over-burdened as it was with all that make-up? Her hair looked as though it had made a forced landing on her head. The whole maroon-red mass was swept back from her forehead into a turban of tendrils. I didn't know who'd made her jeans but suspected there was a seventies surfie's shaggin'

wagon somewhere missing its seat covers. The whole look could be summed up as Vampire Barbie.

But what kind of scam was she playing at? I drew back. Clearly on her tax return the woman listed her occupation as 'Crazed Loner'.

The police were now speaking to the media. An officer's voice cut through the melee. 'In a tragic accident, it would appear that a man identified as Mr Jason Riley has been taken by a shark. We're using all assets available, including sonar, to locate Mr Riley.'

'Look,' I hissed to Vampire Barbie, 'I don't know who you are, or what you want, but if you don't leave now I'm going to have you arrested for harassment.'

The woman yanked her phone out of her jacket and thrust it into my face. Her screensaver was a photo of her cuddling a man who looked remarkably like my husband. They were smiling contentedly. My heart scrambled and foundered. I tucked my hands into my armpits to stop them from shaking.

Laser-eyed joggers and jaunty skateboarders wove around us, not a worry in their sunny lives. The crowd had now been swollen by reporters, all jostling for comment. My head throbbed with the measured insistence of a bass drum. It could not be true. My Jason was the sort of hero who volunteered for the surf lifesaving club. If he had any spare time, he'd be rescuing seals from clubbings. Or orphans from burning buildings. Not scraping the bottom of the biological barrel with a woman like this. My husband looked positively under-dressed without a halo. In fact, he'd haloed me in happiness ever since we'd met. His love shone

like a sun god, benignly warming and brightening my every waking moment.

I snapped out of my romantic reverie and steeled myself. This leather-jacketed lunatic must have stolen Jason's image and photoshopped his head onto some other hunk's body. But why? For what warped reason? Media attention? Money? Fraud? Was she a deluded psycho of some kind?

A police boat passed by the choppy point, heading towards Shark Island, its engine coughing smoke. The noise startled me out of my trance. I let out a harrowing, blood-curdling cry and threw myself at the woman's throat.

Harry and the rest of Jason's swim team immediately swooped down and scooped me up, cocooning me in their embrace. My voice, when I spoke, was scratchy as sandpaper. 'Get that woman away from me! Leave me to mourn in peace, you maniac!' I spat out syllables at the intruder like watermelon pips.

Just send her back to whatever sulphur-scented depths had spawned her, I thought as my heart cracked. My beloved Jason would never, ever deceive me . . . Right?