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Babymoon

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Extract

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Prologue

I was never one of those girls who always knew that they wanted to be a mother someday. I never leaned over prams and cooed at babies on the street or caught the gaze of their proud parents and offered them a warm smile. Through a mixture of disinterest, fear and, I have to admit, distaste, I rarely offered to hold the newborn offspring of friends and family. Dropping them on the crowns of their partially formed skulls was only one of my many concerns. Infinitely worse was the thought that at any moment I might be hit by a projectile form of liquid waste from either end.

In short, I wasn't really interested in babies. Babies can't tell jokes, they don't have opinions, they smell and they're more demanding than, well, I am.

Which was why I was now staring in abject terror at the newborn babe in my arms, wondering what the hell I was going to do with it.

Because, for once, I couldn't hand it back to its parents after the obligatory five minutes and a pathetic stab at which parent it most resembled.

This time it was different.

This time it was mine.

First Trimester

1
The Beginning

'God. Oh God. Oh! Oh! Oh! OOOOOOOOOOHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!'

After thumping the shopping down on the kitchen table, I went to investigate. It was as I had expected. Carlton were losing. Again. Why Jack didn't give up and support the local netball team, I had no idea. They certainly had a better chance of winning the Australian Football League Premiership one day. However, as Jack had sternly informed me at the beginning of our relationship four years ago, some things were genetically programmed into you at birth, and these included eye and hair colour, height and which football team you supported. To abandon Carlton simply because they were, without a doubt, the crappiest team in the League was unthinkable. The only flaw in his argument was that Jack hadn't been a Carlton fan from birth, as he had only discovered AFL when we'd moved from rugby-mad Sydney to Melbourne (the home of AFL) two years ago.

Jack had taken to Melbourne like a duck to water. Which was an appropriate simile because, it must be said, the defining feature of Melbourne is water. Not the sparkling blue Sydney Harbour type of water that he had grown up with and which I had become accustomed to during the four years that I had lived in Sydney, but

the grey, falling-from-the-sky-in-a-relentless-drizzle, Chinese-water-torture type of water. Jack loved the trams, the city laneways, the football code. He marvelled at the friendly staff in restaurants and cafés. For the first six months he had acted like a naïve farmhand, straight off the train from Albury-Wodonga. He was enchanted with everything and everyone Melburnian. Initially I was happy that he loved my hometown so much, but then it started to get a little annoying. The day that he had beamed at me and said, 'Will you look at that!' when another driver had courteously allowed us into their lane, I had come perilously close to pushing him out of the car and into the path of an oncoming tram.

We had settled in a rented house in the inner-city suburb of East St Kilda and publicly demonstrated our commitment to one another by adopting a dog from a shelter. Jack worked as a surgeon at the Royal Women's Hospital and I had a job at a very posh art gallery in Toorak, where all of the paintings had at least four zeros on their price tag and people who wandered in by chance got a very frightened look in their eyes as they took in the plush carpet, the soft music and the expensively lit artwork. They would then back out as soon as they reasonably could before they were coerced into putting a deposit on a painting that was roughly equivalent to what they had paid for their house.

Jack and I had had a complicated beginning to our romance. When we'd first met in Sydney, he had been a compulsive serial dater (he liked to date brunettes). As a brunette, I naturally caught his attention but initially I wasn't interested in him as I had been going through a rough patch following the break-up with my ex-boyfriend Charlie. For differing reasons, we then both lied to each other about our names, jobs and pets (leaving Jack under the impression that I was an air

hostess named Annabelle who owned a cat called Hamish, while I thought he was a stockbroker, surname Norbert, who possessed no less than four horrible miniature dogs). However, once we sorted out the truth, it took only a few dates for me to establish that Jack Boyd was the well-read, articulate, witty man of my literary dreams, while Jack was simultaneously reassuring himself that I was not the deranged, hair-brush-throwing, underpants-stealing, tutu-wearing, catastrophe-attracting lunatic that he had initially mistaken me for. From that time on, our romance had proceeded in a thoroughly satisfactory manner, entirely worthy of a horse-and-sunset-combination ending.

Notwithstanding our domestic bliss, we had no plans to marry, which suited me perfectly. While you would have been forgiven for thinking that a girl who was still hoping that archivists would unearth a happy ending to *Wuthering Heights* would be frothing at the mouth for a legitimate reason to don a hooped dress and tiara and swoon around carrying on about Wuv for an entire day, nothing could have been further from my mind.

For, despite being so in love with Jack that it wouldn't have surprised me to discover that I had a spider's web attached to my head that offered pithy comments on my love-struck state such as 'RADIANT!' or 'TERRIFIC!' à la Wilbur the pig from *Charlotte's Web* (although knowing my luck I would probably also have to endure 'SOME PIG!' hovering over me for an entire fortnight), I still hadn't entirely conquered my innate fear of commitment.

I had been in a long-term, live-in relationship before – with Charlie. I already knew what it was to plan a future with someone, only to have all of those dreams snatched away. I had also been in love before – as had Jack. And although it did feel different this time – I adored Jack and knew that we were far better suited than

Charlie and I had ever been – a stubborn doubt refused to budge from my suspicious heart.

I had been deeply committed to Charlie but he had left me alone in Sydney, with no warning, to pursue his career in Adelaide. Several months later I had discovered that long-distance relationships were not my strong suit when I embarked upon the one and only one night stand of my life. I had confessed to Charlie, resulting in the inevitable messy break-up over the telephone, and then, with what I still considered unseemly haste, Charlie had started a relationship with the oboe-playing Liesel (who I had instantly christened Sleazel). And my whole world had splintered.

While I had gradually rebuilt my life, first by myself and with my friends, and then with Jack, marriage remained a commitment that I still wasn't quite ready for. It was too final; too binding. (Well, it was unless you believed in divorce. Which I didn't.)

Anyway, given my mistrust regarding the permanency of relationships, it only made what happened next all the more surprising. Because I was about to embark on the most irrevocable relationship of my life.

I hovered in the doorway, taking in the scene before me. Jack was watching a pre-season Aussie Rules match on the television, while our dog Rufus was curled up near by, trying to sleep, but jumping out of his skin every time Jack yelled abuse at the umpires.

I knelt down beside Rufus, stroking his soft ears, and he looked at me wearily as if to say, 'Only seven months of football to go for the year.'

'Are they losing by less than fifty points?' I asked optimistically.

Jack grunted and then cursed as the final siren blew, signalling an end to his team's humiliation.

'Why on earth didn't you pick a better team? It's not like they were winning two years ago either, when we moved to Melbourne and you started watching footy.'

He looked at me scathingly. 'I work in Carlton. There are some things you can't choose, *they* choose *you*.'

'But we live in St Kilda and St Kilda win lots more than Carlton do,' I pointed out.

'Yes, but Bert goes for St Kilda.'

Bert was an obstetrician and a colleague of Jack's from the hospital who had also become his best friend in Melbourne. To the best of our knowledge, he was the only Bert under the age of sixty-eight in the whole of Australia.

'So?'

'So you can't barrack for the same team as your best mate. It's unheard of.'

I gave up. They had a whole elaborate system worked out. Whenever Jack called Bert's mobile phone, Bert had it programmed so that the phone played St Kilda's club song. Bert thought this was hilarious.

'They only lost by seventy points. I think they're reaching a plateau,' he said glumly, pointing the remote control at the television and switching it off.

'But last week you said that they'd reached their nadir. I don't think you can plateau when you're at your nadir.'

He looked at me accusingly.

'I just mean to say – a plateau suggests raised ground and a nadir is a low point so it doesn't really make topographical sense,' I explained helpfully.

'Belle?'

'Mmm?'

'You're not helping.'

He really did look miserable.

I gave Rufus a final rub behind the ears, as a plan to

cheer up Jack occurred to me. I disappeared into the bedroom, and five minutes later re-entered the living room.

Jack looked up morosely and then his mouth dropped open.

I smiled and sashayed over in as sexy a manner as I could while wearing nothing but a Carlton football jumper. I felt about as sexy as a used Band-Aid in a sweaty-smelling locker, but it was obviously doing it for Jack. His blue eyes had lit up and he opened his arms.

'Oops. Wait a moment.' To his consternation I stopped mid-sashay and headed back towards the door. I held it open and Rufus gazed at me pitifully. 'Sorry. Can't have sex in front of the dog. Way too weird. Out.'

Rufus heaved a sigh and then staggered to his paws and slunk out of the room. I closed the door firmly behind him.

I collapsed into Jack's lap and nuzzled his neck. 'Wanna play? You can be the doctor and I'll be the player with a groin injury.'

'Too much like work,' he murmured, running his hands up and down my back.

'Oh. Well, how about I pretend to be the naughty club mascot and you can be the strict umpire?'

'Carlton's mascot is a male puppet with an oversized head, called Captain Carlton.'

'Not so sexy?'

'Not so sexy,' he agreed. 'Honey?'

'Yes?'

'You look gorgeous. How about you just be you, only quieter, before you ruin the mood?'

Not being the maternal type, I hadn't given a lot of thought to the matter but I suppose I'd had a vague idea that conceiving a child would take place on a bed scattered with rose petals, surrounded by flickering candles

and that the lovemaking would be gentle and tender and like the sort of euphemistic sex they have in Mills & Boon novels where nobody ever grunts and the starring role is played by 'his firm manhood', because anything as vulgar as a penis must never be mentioned.

But as it turned out we had a raunchy session right there and then on the couch, with me in a football jumper and Jack with his trakky-daks around his ankles in a quite undignified manner.

Afterwards, we lay in each other's arms and he explained to me just why Carlton's coach ought to be sacked; I told him about the time my best friend Cate's dog had eaten a used condom out of her bedroom bin and she had taken him to have his teeth professionally brushed every day for three weeks and even then she had screamed when he licked her face. Then we just lay there quietly for a very long time, both of us secretly pondering what we had just done.

Of course, we hadn't just launched into a session of football-themed procreation with no prior discussion. Jack had (ahem) planted the seed about our having a baby for the first time about a year ago. While it had taken me a little by surprise, I had been reassured by the way that Jack had casually mentioned it then just let the subject drop, leaving me to digest the idea. Since that initial hint, our discussions on the topic had gradually grown longer and more frequent, until finally it had become accepted between us that we would try to have a child, without either of us ever actually having to say aloud, 'Jolly good, let's go forth and multiply', which was just as well, considering that the only thing that terrified me more than giving birth was mathematics.

One of the things that I loved about Jack was that, even though he had always made it plain that he wanted

kids one day, he didn't show it by behaving in a stupidly sentimental manner around other people's children. My closest friend from Sydney, Fran, had told me that, for months before they started to try for a baby, her partner attempted to cuddle pretty much any baby that they passed on the street, while heaving mysterious sighs. Fran had been quite sure that on at least one occasion he had come perilously close to being arrested.

I quite liked young children but babies remained a mystery to me. Their heads always needed supporting, which irritated me no end. It was as though they just couldn't be bothered. Nah, I think I'll just lie here and be floppy for another few months, if it's all the same to you. Now get me some more milk or I'll double your sleep deprivation.

The thing that worried me the most was that I had never been *certain* that I would have children one day. I had distinct memories of a conversation at a dinner party with a group of girlfriends when we were all in our mid-twenties. These were all party girls, mind you, whose idea of commitment at that juncture meant drinking only vodka and cranberry juice for six months.

But when the topic of motherhood came up, to my complete bewilderment, all of them confidently asserted their desire – no, their certainty – that one day they would be mothers.

'But how do you *know*?' I demanded.

Jayne smiled. 'I just know that it's something I'm going to do. I'd be miserable if I didn't have kids.'

'But what if you don't meet the right guy?'

She shrugged. 'I'll worry about that if it happens.'

And there was the inexplicable crux of the matter. These girls, who would go on to spend the better part of the next decade alternatively obsessing and despairing over meeting their real-life version of Fitzwilliam

Darcy, nevertheless retained an unshakeable belief in their maternal futures. It made absolutely no sense to me at all.

For me, having children had always been inextricably bound up with finding the person I wanted to have children *with*. Only once I was happily settled down with Jack I still didn't feel any impulse towards motherhood. Not only was my biological clock not ticking, I had apparently had a sundial inserted instead.

And then, one day, Fran rang me from Sydney to say that she was pregnant. We had become friends when we worked together at an art auction house in Sydney. Fran was an artist who worked part-time as the auction house's receptionist. She had been a hopeless receptionist but an utterly wonderful friend when Charlie had left me. We still emailed each other often and spoke on the telephone, but I missed her terribly.

She sounded very happy and I congratulated her and her partner who worked with computers but who had pretended to be a botanist when he'd first met Fran in order to impress her. Prior to meeting the fake botanist, she had always dated creative types, and there were still times when I wasn't entirely sure if she remembered that her partner was a fake botanist, such as now when she mentioned that it was auspicious that their baby was due in spring, and that its birth flower would be the aster, which symbolised patience. But, then again, botanical symbolism didn't have to be confined to professionals, so we spent the next few minutes coming up with names like Daisy, Violet and Lily.

But, after we'd chatted for a few minutes, my curiosity overcame me and I burst out, 'Frannie, I am happy for you, you know I am. I'm just … surprised, I guess.'

'Why?'

'Because – because *you* don't particularly like babies either,' I finished helplessly.

There was a pause, and in that pause I could practically hear Frannie smiling. 'I know,' she said mildly. 'But I'm pretty sure it's different when it's your own. And, anyway, it's not like they stay babies forever.'

In the scheme of things, it wasn't a particularly insightful or deeply philosophical comment. But, for me, it struck home. Babies, those alien creatures that, to be honest, I was quite fearful of, *didn't* remain babies forever. It was something that I hadn't really considered.

The second thing that helped to change my mind was the death of my grandmother. I had adored my grandmother and I missed her terribly. How much I hadn't quite realised until about two weeks after her funeral. Jack and I had gone over to my sister Audrey's house for dinner and I was reading a bedtime story to her eldest son, Felix. Felix was three years old and obsessed with *The Lion King*. So, for about the forty-fifth time, I was reading the story aloud to him.

Only this time, when we got to the part where the old lion king, Mufasa, died, all of a sudden I was bawling, sobbing my eyes out. I didn't want to upset Felix so I started to babble something about being hormonal, but then he asked me what 'hormonal' meant and I started to cry even harder when I envisaged the scene that would ensue if Audrey came into the room and caught me trying to explain the concept of female hormones to her three-year-old son. But, amazingly, Felix didn't get upset or start to cry. He simply crawled further into my lap, put his arms around my neck and said wisely, 'Don't be sad about Mufasa, Auntie Belle. It's the circle of life. Look, I'll show you.'

He flipped over the pages until he reached the very

end and he showed me the picture of Simba and Nala with their newborn cub, while Mufasa smiled benignly down on them all from the starry sky. I gazed at the picture through my tears and emitted a hiccup and a long, shuddering breath.

Felix was looking up at me patiently, smiling trustfully, as though waiting for me to realise there was really nothing to be scared of or sad about when it came to either birth or death.

I caught him up in a fierce hug. 'Thanks, Felix. Hey, do you think maybe your great-grandmother is up there in the stars with Mufasa?'

He looked again at the picture. 'Maybe,' he said cautiously. 'But I think lions eat old people.'

So that was the undignified way in which I started to embrace the concept of motherhood. Thanks to *The Lion King*, a three-year-old and Frannie all pointing out the obvious, something within my psyche began to shift and the idea that I might one day become a mother started to seem not so improbable after all.