

Love
WITH A
CHANCE of
DROWNING

a memoir



TORRE DeROCHE

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summerdale

PRAISE FOR LOVE WITH A CHANCE OF DROWNING

'A funny, irresistibly offbeat tale about the risks and rewards of living, and loving, with an open heart'

Kirkus Review

'The story of how DeRoche overcame her fears, her self-deprecating humour and her way with words would have been enough to make this a great story. The fact her Argentinian boyfriend combines the passion of a Latin lover with the grit and spirit of a Scandinavian seafarer makes this book a Hollywood dream come true.'

Sydney Morning Herald

'By turns gripping, laugh-out-loud funny, moving and uplifting... Almost any reader with a sense of adventure or a desire to confront their fears should love it.'

Australian Bookseller & Publisher

'Wow, what a book. Exciting. Dramatic. Honest.'

Australian Associated Press

'DeRoche has penned such a beautiful, thrilling story you'll have to remind yourself it's not fiction. Her language is effortless.'

Courier Mail

'I was hooked from page one! Love with a Chance of Drowning is an epic tale of love and fortitude that will thrill its readers. Torre is a natural storyteller with a knack for extracting the dramatic, comedic and romantic from every incident. An incredible journey, both literal and metaphorical – will sweep you away ... fresh, funny and exhilarating.'

Veronica Henry, author of *The Long Weekend*

'I loved this book. With a great deal of humour, Torre takes the reader on a sometimes terrifying, always entertaining trip into the high seas. An inspiring read about facing your worst fears – in the case, deep oceans, sharks and falling overboard.'

Karen Wheeler, author of *Tout Sweet*

'Love on the ocean waves... daring, romantic and uplifting.'

Emma Woolf, author of *The Ministry of Truth*

'If I could give it ten stars out of five, I would. I loved every single page – Torre's writing is hilarious, beautiful, poignant.'

Jenny Blake, author of *Life after College*

'... a compulsively good read. I was positively swept away by this large-hearted, hilarious story about how deeply and unexpectedly a person can be transformed by love.'

Suzanne Morrison, author of *Yoga Bites*

'A gripping romantic adventure – with laughs (and whales).'

Maggie Alderson, author of *How to Break Your Own Heart*

'I found myself laughing out loud as often as I was turning the page to find out what happens next.'

'Here's a book for those who have been swept away by love and adventure – and for those who one day hope to be.'

Rachel Friedman, author of *The Good Girl's Guide to Getting Lost*

'A hang-onto-your-seat, laugh-out-loud, emotional roller coaster across the Pacific Ocean.'

Danny Bent, author of *You've gone too far this time, Sir*

'Torre's book is more than just a love story. It's a story about conquering the fears that keep you from living your dreams.'

Matthew Kepnes, author of *How to Travel the World on \$50 a Day* and blogger at nomadicmatt.com

'An armchair voyage [with] all the perfect ingredients for a sweet love story, above and beyond the adventure of it all.'

Tania Aebi, author of *Maiden Voyage*

'A story of finding courage when your gut clenches and all you want to do is go home.'

Normandie Ward Fischer, author of *Becalmed*

'You'll get a lot of things out of this book, I promise you. You will ask questions about your own life, your fears, your ambitions and your spirit. But at its heart this is a love story that will keep you turning the pages and leave you feeling bereft as you finish the last line.'

The Modern Woman's Survival Guide online magazine

'wonderfully written... a tale of an amazing journey that will sweep you away.'

bookdout.wordpress.com

'Luminous, sparkling... Those words describe the spectacular waters she visits and sails, but they also describe Torre herself as she lets us in to her inner world.'

bukinan.blogspot.com

'The best travel memoir I have ever read, hands down.'

theartofslowtravel.com

'If it's not the best travel book I've read this year, I don't know what is.'

whatsdavedoing.com

AMAZON REVIEWS

'a little work of magic'

'Her memoir will be one of the best books you read in your life. It is truly unforgettable and her message of living fearlessly to experience life and love is something we all need to be reminded of.'

'Whether you are a fellow traveler, need a swift push to tackle a dream or just in need of a good old-fashioned adventure story, Love with a Chance of Drowning is the book you need to read this summer!'

'Could. Not. Stop. Reading.'

'I think we've all got a fearful adventure inside of us and reading this book might just inspire you to start yours.'

'Be warned, this book may stir up a yearning for adventure somewhere deep in your soul; your desire might not look the same tomorrow.'

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Summersdale Publishers Ltd
46 West Street
Chichester
West Sussex
PO19 1RP
UK

www.summersdale.com

eISBN: 978-0-85765-882-1

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'Now it is the story between Joshua and me, between me and the sky; a story just for us, a great love story that does not concern the others any more.'

Bernard Moitessier, *The Long Way*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a true story. All of the events and embarrassing mishaps recounted in this book are authentic. In some cases, names were changed to protect the identities of certain oddballs encountered en route, and in order to spare the reader from unnecessary backstory, one minor character has been composed from two people. In an effort to pull the reader into the experience, much of the story is told through dialogue and, while it's not verbatim, conversations have been reconstructed to remain true to either actual discussions, or to articulate the actions and motivations of each person represented. Some sequences of events were shifted for pacing, and a few voyage destinations were omitted in order to capture a three-year experience into a concise read.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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PART ONE

FIRE

*'Love is a fire.
But whether it is going to warm
your hearth or burn down your house,
you can never tell.'*
Joan Crawford



ONE

A BEAM OF MORNING sun pierces my closed eyelids and draws me from the dark depths of a hangover. Memories race in from last night. 'I'll have a dirty Martini.' What was I thinking? I score myself as the bass amp is turned up in my head, reverberating through the soft tissue of my brain. But I have worse things to worry about right now than a hangover. Like the fact that I've just woken up in a stranger's bed. Naked.

I hear a shower going in the bathroom. Good – there's time to work out how I got here. Memory flash: stormy green eyes, dusty blond hair, an overall appearance too stylish and clean to be straight. I thought he was gay. This is San Francisco, after all.

'So are you going to tell me your name?' he asked.

'I'm Torre.'

'Nice to meet you, my name is—'

I snap upright in bed. *Oh my God, I don't remember his name!* Important information has been drowned in gin and vermouth. I'm not the kind of girl who forgets the name of the guy she's just gone home with... in fact, I'm not the kind of girl who goes home with a man she's just met.

The name 'Ivan' rings from a neglected corner in my brain, scattered with dust bunnies and useless trivia. I frantically scan the bedroom for clues – an electricity bill, a degree hanging on the wall, a dusty old sports trophy – anything to save me from certain awkwardness.

Bingo. A wallet on the bedside table. Would that be wrong?

I hear the shower stop. John Doe will need to towel off and dress, which leaves at least sixty seconds to find out who, exactly, I just slept with. I nudge the wallet with the tip of my index finger, hoping to 'accidentally' flip it open and spy his name through the licence window, but, poking with sharp jab, I'm only inching it farther away. My opportunity is ticking by, so in one clean swoop, I snatch up the wallet and locate his licence.

I remembered right, he *is* Ivan. Ivan Alexis Nepomnaschy. It seems he was named by a cat walking across a keyboard. When I try to pronounce 'Nepomnaschy' out loud, my mouth sounds like it's full of peanut butter. Six feet tall, blond, green eyes, thirty-one – seven years older than me. His headshot is handsome, just as I remember thinking before I guzzled that damn Martini like a cold beer on a hot day.

A cupboard door slams in the bathroom, and I flinch, guilty and nervous. I work fast to slip the licence back in the wallet, fumbling as I imagine what I'd say if caught. 'Yes, good morning, Ivan. What's that? Oh, you mean this wallet? Ha ha, no, I wasn't stealing anything, I just couldn't remember your name, so I... Oh, no, please don't call the cops!'

I don't even know myself right now.

The licence slides back in and I toss the evidence away. But he doesn't come out of the bathroom, so I collect my clothes from beside the bed and throw them on – a pencil skirt, a turquoise silk blouse, a black sateen blazer – feeling odd to be wearing yesterday's work attire at 8:30 a.m. on this Sunday morning.

Head pounding, I collapse back into bed and try to work out when my memory became fragmented.

It all began with a phone call. I was leaving a job interview when I heard an annoying ringtone following close behind me. Just before I spun around to see who was there, I noticed the ringing was coming from my handbag. The annoying ringtone was mine.

It was my housemate calling – the only friend I had made since moving to San Francisco on my own from Australia a month before. A few weeks earlier, while staying in a hotel, I'd come across an ad for a shared house in the Western Addition. A seedy neighbourhood, as it turned out, but after meeting the three down-to-earth housemates (plus a fourth four-legged roomie named Disco Dog), I decided to take it. Anna, a psychology student my age, won me over immediately with her odd ability to combine crass candidness with compassion.

I flipped my phone open, silencing the annoying ringtone.

'Torre!' Anna hollered down the line. 'What are you doing right now?'

'I just had a job interview,' I told her.

'On a Saturday? I thought you had a job already.'

'I do, but this was for a position with *The Onion*. I couldn't resist applying.'

'Oh, dude, I totally want to make babies with that newspaper. So you nailed it, right? I bet they swooned over your Aussie accent. Americans dig that shit.'

'Yeah, it went well, but it occurred to me mid-interview that I can't spend my days designing black and-white graphics.

I'll go stir-crazy without colour.'

'Well, lady, you're in the right city, then. Now listen up! I want to introduce you to San Francisco. Come to Oysterfest and meet some of my friends. They'll adopt you immediately if you just shake their hands and say, "Throw uh-nu-tha shrimp on tha bah-bee." Got it?'

She gave me directions and I hung up the call, smiling.

At Oysterfest, the sun was shining, and apart from the gritty, oversized D-grade shellfish, my day was going superbly. The fun continued when Anna proposed a guided tour of the city's bars and restaurants, so we sipped our way across town, sampling everything from hot coffee mixed with vodka to sangria floating with fruit.

After the last six months of stressing over whether or not I'd be able to land a job, find a home, make connections and survive in a foreign city with only two suitcases and my entire life savings of \$3,000, my anxieties were being silenced with clanking glasses and the laughter of new friends. Life was clicking into place.

We had dinner in a Haight-Ashbury restaurant and, when the time came to go home, I congratulated myself for remaining clear-headed despite a day full of drinking. But that was about to change.

As we were trying to hail taxis home on Haight Street, we passed a Persian-style cocktail bar spilling light onto the footpath, where hippies sprawled playing guitars, burning sage sticks and hawked crafts for dope money. I was tired from a long day, yet a spontaneous impulse urged me into the bar.

'One last drink?' I asked Anna.

She checked her watch and returned an uninspired frown.

'Just one,' I said, darting inside before Anna or her boyfriend could say no.

Inside, candlelit lanterns cast patterns across the walls. Persian-style archways led to nooks for mingling in the dimmed light. It was cheesy and charming at the same time.

'What are you having, Torre?' Anna asked, putting her order in with the bartender.

'I'll have a dirty Martini,' I said, quoting *Sex and the City*. Freshly arrived from my almost exclusively beer-drinking homeland of Australia, the only cocktails I was familiar with were the ones I'd seen Carrie Bradshaw drinking.

I sipped from my stemmed glass, feeling elegant in my sleek outfit with a Martini in hand, until the

olive toothpick stabbed my lip. While rubbing my injury, I noticed a guy on his own across the bar leaning over his cocktail as though he were wearing an invisible backpack loaded with the weight of all the world's sorrows. *Why is he so sad?*

I reminded myself to steer clear. I hadn't travelled to San Francisco to hook up. In my US arrival documentation, I could've written 'Finding myself' as the reason for my visit, but not only would that have baffled the Department of Homeland Security, I would have overwhelmed myself with self-imposed pressure. So, taking a less existentialist approach, I kept my plan simple: leave my comfort zone, work in a foreign city, enjoy some uninhibited fun and return home in one year. My mum, dad and five sisters sent me off with two requests: (1) Please do not fall in love with an American man and never come home, and (2) Please come home in one year.

Having five sisters is like having five best friends who also moonlight as your surrogate mothers, and when they – along with my parents – spoke up with what must have been the only request ever made of me over the course of my liberal upbringing, I listened.

'*One year, no American men,*' I'd promised them. And it was a promise that I had no desire to break. But how could I forgive myself if I stood by and watched a handsome young man wallow miserably on his own? Plus, in his neat leather jacket and tidy shirt, I'd have sworn he was gay.

Feeling tipsy and daring, I separated from Anna and her circle and made a beeline toward the stranger, sat down on the empty bar stool to his left and leaned over to him. 'Why are you sad?' I asked, skipping the small talk, or even a polite greeting. I sipped my Martini, carefully navigating around the sharp toothpick.

He looked up and I took in his appearance: light complexion, defined nose, full lips, chiselled jawline, the exaggerated chin of a superhero, undeniably handsome. His serious, stormy green eyes softened when they met mine. 'I look sad?' he said.

'Well, maybe not now but you did a second ago. You were staring into your drink, all sombre and serious.'

'That's strange. I don't feel sad.'

'You're sad,' I said with an insistent nod.

'Okay, well... Um, let me see. I suppose maybe it's because I just broke up with someone. I've moved to San Francisco and I don't really, like, know anyone yet.'

I noticed he spoke with an Antonio Banderas accent, peppered with iconic Californian Valleyspeak.

'You're not American!' I declared. I'm sure he already knew this, but his accent took me by surprise and I felt the need to broadcast this news aloud.

'Right. I'm Argentinean.'

Excellent, I thought to myself, *he's not an American man. Technically, I'm not breaking any promises then.*

'Why are you in California?' I asked.

'I immigrated here with my family when I was seventeen. You're not American either. Hmm... let me guess. Dark hair and light green eyes, exotic, but too fair-skinned to be Latin. You remind me of Monica Bellucci, so—'

'Who?'

'Italian model-turned-actress.'

'Ha! I think you may have lost a contact lens in your cocktail.'

'I'm going to guess you're British.'

'Australian, actually. I'm only staying one year, though,' I said, reciting my family-imposed terms and conditions upfront. 'I'm going home in December.'

'Are you working or travelling?' he asked.

'Both. I've been travelling around the US since late December, but I've been living in San Francisco

for four weeks now, since the start of March. I have a design job with a start-up and I'm settled here until the end of the year.'

'So then you're an artist?'

'Kind of. Graphic design and illustration, which generally involves selling my soul to the corporate devil.'

'You and me both,' he said. 'You travelled to San Francisco alone?'

I nodded.

'Awesome. So you're an artist on a solo adventure in a new city. I'm very impressed.' He raised the rim of his cocktail to clink with mine. '*Salud.*'

He shifted on his bar stool to face me and we began chatting away, waltzing from families to musical tastes to exrelationships. I mentioned that I'd just ended a long-term relationship in Melbourne and we began to connect on the topic of our failed relationships. With the help of some liquid courage, our conversation quickly turned intimate and reflective.

'My ex lacked motivation,' Ivan confessed. 'She showed an interest in studying film and I thought *Great! Ambition!* She couldn't afford school, so I paid for her college tuition with the money I was earning from my first IT job. Turns out she wasn't into it, and when I started doing her homework just so she'd pass, I realised: you can't force traits on to someone else. Things had basically fallen apart between us and I needed to get away.'

'I know exactly what you mean,' I said. 'My ex wanted to be a Disney animator and he had the talent to be a shoo-in. But instead of following the dream, he perfected the art of avoiding it – course menial jobs, phantom ailments. Walt Disney himself said, "If you can dream it, you can do it," but that means nothing if you don't have courage. He was afraid to try new things and he'd let that dictate his life. I once chased him around the house with a spoonful of homemade pumpkin soup because I wouldn't taste it – not even once – and for some reason that infuriated me. It was really delicious! And I guess I knew that if he wouldn't try something as minor as soup, then our life together was going to be extremely limited. Rather than acknowledge that red flag, I chased him with the spoon, yelling and cursing like some sort of demonic incarnation of Nigella Lawson. "TASTE IT!" That was *not* one of my most shining moments.'

Ivan laughed. Even though I knew I was oversharing with this man from the bar, verbalising my relationship breakdown for the first time felt good, and since this almost-anonymous stranger was listening and nodding and replying with comments like 'That would bother me too,' I kept going.

'The soup was just the beginning,' I said. 'It only got worse. Moving in together was a problem. Travel was a problem. Doing anything impulsive was a problem. Every step forward was an uphill battle. After five years, I gave up. I told him: "I can't be with someone who won't go after his dream." He immediately applied for a job at Disney and got it, but unfortunately it was too late for us by that stage. I'd spent years ignoring the fact that we were a bad fit. So when he moved to Sydney for the job, I decided to follow my own dream. Since I was little, I've wanted to live a year in the States because my parents are American. So, yeah... here I am.'

Meanwhile, in between the divulging, I guzzled distracted sips of Martini, losing track of just how many sips, exactly. Which explains why, after exchanging tales of love and woe, my memories of that night become a series of tungsten flashes.

'Your English is perfect,' I told him.

'*Gracias.*'

'Speak Spanish for me.'

'*Tenés ojos hermosos.*'

'Which means...?'

'You have beautiful eyes.'

He asked me to speak in Australian English and I said, 'You're a *spunk*,' which I translated in American by telling him it means he's hot.

He put his hand on mine and electric sparks shot up to my already-dizzy head. It was then that reminded him again of my plans to return to Australia. 'I'm not kidding,' I told him. 'I'm going home in December. I can't meet anyone, not even you.'

'Okay,' he said, before leaning in to kiss me.

MY PHONE RINGS, bringing me back to the present. I lean over the side of Ivan's bed and dig through my handbag for the phone. It's Anna calling.

'Torre! Oh, thank God, you're okay. I was totally worried you'd gone home with some nutjob last night, like the dude from *American Psycho*. Where are you?'

'I just had my first one-night stand,' I whisper.

'Get! Out! With Patrick Bateman?'

'With a man called Ivan Alexis Something-Something.'

'You're still at his house?'

'Yep, in his bed.'

'Um, Torre... hello? You're doing it wrong. When you have one-night stands, you're supposed to bail out right about now, not hang around and wait for him to offer you a breakfast buffet. Come home. I'll take you for dim sum if you tell me all about your Mr Something-Something.'

I hang up the call and muffle my grin with a fistful of bedsheets.

Ivan is still in the bathroom and I feel silly lying in bed wearing yesterday's wrinkled outfit, so I get up and wander around his small apartment. One thing is immediately evident about this Ivan fellow: he's an extreme minimalist. Apart from the bed and two white armchairs facing a TV, the apartment is crisp, white and empty. His personal effects consist of a world globe, a model ship sitting on the mantel and a big book of world maps with the dust cover missing. This kind of freakishly stark minimalism can mean one of only two things: (1) Ivan moved in here yesterday, or (2) I just slept with Patrick Bateman.

The bathroom door opens and Ivan walks out, interrupting my paranoid conjectures. He smells of divine lavender aftershave. Dressed in jeans, a white T-shirt and stylish brown boots, he looks even more attractive than his licence photo. I almost tell him this, but I catch myself right before blurting out that I went through his wallet.

'Good morning,' he says. 'Can I make you some eggs? A smoothie? I make an awesome smoothie with frozen strawberries. Coffee?'

'No, thank you,' I say, entranced by his eclectic accent. The words 'frozen strawberries' comes out in a staccato *fro-zin strabe-riz* while 'awesome' is elongated and entirely Southern Californian.

'So,' I say, 'I guess you just moved into this place?'

'Yeah, I did.'

Phew. He's normal.

'Well, actually,' he continues, 'that was, like, six months ago now.'

'Six... months?'

He nods.

Where the hell is his furniture? I stare at him, waiting for more information as to why his apartment is psycho-killer minimalist. He doesn't expand, so I don't probe, I just grow insanely curious. Perhaps his rage-filled ex-lover cleaned him out? He did say he'd just ended a relationship...

'I'm really sorry, but I have to go,' he says. 'I'm going to DC and I've got a flight to catch. I have a meeting there first thing Monday morning. Can I drive you home on my way to the airport?'

In his car, I catch a glimpse of myself in the sun-visor mirror. Yesterday's slick ponytail is now

mane of dark, wavy locks. The collar of my blazer is wrinkled from being tossed aside in the heat the moment. My cheeks are flushed and my lips – rubbed crimson from so much kissing – are fixed a delighted expression from last night's impulsive escapade. One groomed eyebrow arches up mischievously and I try to poke it down but it refuses to cooperate. The last time I looked, I was lanky, downhearted twenty-four-year-old girl, but the woman in the mirror looks daring, sensual and alive. I hardly recognise her.

I direct Ivan to my terrace house in the Western Addition. He pulls over by a car with a smashed window that sits outside of the public housing building adjacent to my home. This car's alarm woke me late one night and, from my bedroom window, I watched two thieves clean out the subwoofer. You don't need a TV when you have *CSI: Western Addition* live outside of your house.

Ivan taps my number into his phone and gives me a quick peck just as I'm stepping out of the car. 'I call you,' he yells from his window as he speeds away.

Standing on the street, I touch my lips as I surrender the devilish grin I've been holding back all morning. My Latin lover may never call, but either way I'm thrilled with myself. What's the harm in having some fun? That's precisely why I travelled here, after all, to live a little.

WHEN I FIND myself at work a few days later google-stalking Ivan, I can't deny the truth: he's on my mind. His lavender aftershave has permeated the collar of my jacket and I've been unable to control my foolish grin for days.

Normally, I'd feel bad for doing this at work, but I've been hired into a design role that doesn't yet exist. In a revamped warehouse downtown, the design team waits on standby for an anticipated flood of work, hoping it'll put an end to the tedium of staring at sand-blasted brick walls and exposed plumbing. My colleagues are a team of talented people, but only the account managers are busy, and they generate leads. Meanwhile, in order to appear somewhat deserving of my paycheck, I sit behind my Mac – legs crossed, back straight, skirt smoothed, brow furrowed, fingers on keyboard – and go busy looking up the guy I slept with last weekend.

Since I have no chance of remembering his last name, I decide the best alternative is to read up on Argentina, hoping that if we meet again, I can charm him with mind-blowing grenades of knowledge or – more specifically – conceal the fact that I know nothing whatsoever about his home country.

I discover that Argentina is a beef-steak-shaped landmass on the southern tip of South America – a fitting form since Argentineans eat the most steaks per capita of any region in the world. The national beverage is a herbal tea called *maté*, which is sipped through a straw from a piece of apparatus that looks illegal. I wonder if Ivan drinks *maté*. I'll ask if I see him again.

Only, it's now Wednesday, and I've given up on the idea of hearing from him ever again. According to the non-existent (but widely referenced) *Complete Compendium to Dating*, Wednesday is the final deadline for receiving a phone call after a weekend hookup. The same guide also claims you can't meet a man in a bar and that all the good ones are gay or taken. To make it worse, the rules state that guys only pursue women who play hard to get.

I've breached every rule.

Having had only one boyfriend in my life, and being single for the first time since I was nineteen, my inexperience with *The Dating Game* is showing.

I e-mail my mother with a chatty update just as I've done every day since I left Australia, and then I shut down my 'work' for the day before walking to Market Street to wait for my bus.

The city is alive with office workers, aimless tourists and shoppers carrying handfuls of bags. My eyes wander in the direction of Union Square and I contemplate an expedition to Macy's for a new set of lacy underwear. I've never owned nice lingerie, but I'm feeling the urge to shop for some now.

My handbag buzzes.

It must be Ivan!

I fumble through my oversized bag. Novel, purse, umbrella, tissues, lip gloss. Fourth ring... fifth ring, I'm going to miss the call! Sketchbook, pen, one earring, AH! Side pocket? Yes!

Flip. 'Hello?'

'Good. Afternoon. Ma'am. How. Are. You. Today. I'm calling today to let you know that you have won our sweepstakes and we would like to give you a pair of...'

'No thanks.' *Flip.*

It rings again.

Flip. 'Hello?'

'Latin lover hasn't called yet, has he?' It's Anna.

'How'd you know?'

'You answered your phone in, like, one nanosecond. Give it a few rings before you pick up or you'll come off as totally *desperado*.'

'He's not going to call anyway,' I sigh. 'It's Wednesday.'

'Right. He missed the deadline. But don't worry, I have the perfect fix. Tonight, I'm going to introduce you to Godzilla. Best sushi ever.'

I hang up the phone and throw it into my bag.

Give it up, Torre, I tell myself. You let yourself get giddy over some guy from a bar. Yes, he was interesting, gorgeous and smelled lovely, but you don't want to get into a relationship right now anyway, remember? The last thing you need is some guy complicating life when it's time to return to Australia, back to your friends and sisters and your mother, who you e-mail every day with a thousand words just because you miss her so much already. Remember? Stick to the plan. A year in San Francisco, an experiment in independence, a taste of a different life, then home. Remember the rule: *Do not fall in love and never come home*. I make a pact with myself: if Ivan calls, I'll turn him down.

My handbag buzzes again.

Rummage, grab, flip – 'Hello?'

'Torre? Hi. It's Ivan. I'm sorry – I meant to call earlier. I missed my flight to Washington after I drove you home the other day.'

'Because of me?'

'What was I going to do? Make you catch the bus home? I had a really nice night with you, by the way.'

My cheeks flush. 'Me too.'

'So then I almost missed my flight today too! I was waiting to board at Washington airport and finally had a spare moment to call you. I reached into my pocket and realised my phone was missing because I'd left it at security. My flight started to board, but I had to get the phone because I couldn't lose your number, so I took off running, caught a train across the airport, ran some more, found the phone at security, then sprinted back to my boarding gate and scraped past the doors just as they were closing. So anyway, I wanted to call you earlier, but I had to wait to land in San Francisco.'

'Wow,' I say, visualising the whole story, starring Ivan dressed as Indiana Jones.

'Can I take you out to dinner tomorrow night?' he says.

'Absolutely.' I clap my phone shut and spin on my heel in the direction of Macy's.

MY DOORBELL RINGS. I check my outfit in the mirror for the tenth time: tailored pants, a scoop neck knit top and my favorite boots. I smooth down my glossy, freshly straightened hair, smack my rosy lips and nod once for courage at my reflection.

Ivan stands outside, clean-shaven and dressed – once again – as a stylish gay man. 'Hi,' he says. 'You look beautiful.'

'So do you. Uh, I mean you look handsome.' Blood rushes to my cheeks. I'm confused about the protocol—~~are we lovers? Or strangers? We've already slept together, so do we kiss and hold hands, or do we act first-date awkward?~~ I'm bad at this.

'Hey,' he says as we walk toward his car. 'Do you mind if we go to the Golden Gate Bridge before dinner?'

'Sure. I'm easy,' I say, turning densely red at my poor choice of words. This is awkward: *we're strangers.*

We drive through a roller coaster of streets and come to a beach that overlooks the bridge. I've never been to this part of the city and I haven't seen the Golden Gate this close.

Ivan parks the car and I open my door to blustery wind. As we start to walk, he wraps his arm around my shoulders, pulling me close. We don't speak, we just walk in comfortable silence, humbled by the red bridge, which is partially lost in fog. The view is stunning.

I notice that, in my heeled boots, I'm just a little shorter than his six feet – a nice fit under the crook of his arm. I breathe in his aftershave, a smell that is both foreign and familiar. *We're lovers*, I realize with a smile.

'So what made you decide to move to San Francisco?' he asks, breaking the silence.

'This city has always appealed to me. It's full of culture and creativity – similar in many ways to Melbourne. I love Melbourne too, but I just felt like my life there was getting a bit, I dunno, dull.'

He nods. 'I cut through corporate red tape for a living. I know what dull looks like.'

'I'm kind of embarrassed that I haven't asked this yet, but what do you do for a living?'

'Project management. IT stuff. I won't bore you with all the geek speak. I work an hour away from Silicon Valley. Actually, I usually don't get out of work this early, so I never get to see the bridge in sunlight. By the time I get home, another day has disappeared into darkness.'

'That's sad,' I say. 'Don't you think it's weird how, when you're young, people always tell you, "The world is your oyster, *blah, blah, blah.*" But then you go into the world and you find that the "oyster" is actually just politics, an angry alarm clock, bumper-to-bumper traffic—'

'And a dreary office with no fresh air,' he adds. 'Surprise! Here's your grand prize for sixteen years of education.'

'Would you like a mortgage with that?'

Our laughter is whipped away on a strong wind, which drags along the steely blue water under the bridge, churning it up into a mass of white crests.

'It kind of makes you wonder, doesn't it?' I say. 'Like, what is the point of life? But when I say that out loud, it makes me sound depressed, doesn't it?'

He turns and fixes his eyes on mine and I feel like I'm oversharing again, but this time without the help of liquid courage. Instead of shutting up like I probably should, I begin babbling self-consciously. 'Maybe I *was* depressed in Melbourne, or just chronically disappointed, or... I don't know. Shouldn't there be something more than working to live, living to work? Why do so many people settle down in shitty relationships and never leave the town they grew up in even though they hate it? That isn't enough for me. There's a whole world out there. Just look at this bridge! Bloody hell, I'm really sorry I don't know why I'm complaining about all of this in your ear, it's just... What were we talking about again?'

'Chronic disappointment.'

'Right. Anyway, I guess that's why I came to San Francisco: to see if that's all there is to life. Work. Sleep. Work. Sleep. Sorry. Please stop me if I'm rambling.'

'Actually,' he says, 'you're making perfect sense.'

We get back in Ivan's car and drive to a tapas restaurant in the Mission District. Flamenco guitar, noodling and warm lighting set the scene. I open the menu and panic internally to discover the menu

in Spanish and there isn't a single food item I recognise.

'I can order if you like?' Ivan says, intuiting my dilemma.

A leader. I like that.

He calls the waitress over with a flick of his hand and speaks to her in fast-paced Spanish. He points to the menu: *uno, dos, tres*. He oozes a certain kind of chutzpah that I find irresistible, and if he's trying to impress me with his Spanish, it's working.

The waitress brings a jug of sangria and Ivan pours two glasses. '*Salud*,' he says, clanking my glass. 'That's how we say "Cheers" in Argentina.' He takes a sip and then bashes the base of his glass into the table, momentarily silencing the restaurant. He's clumsy – how adorable.

'So, that tea you drink in Argentina,' I say, 'how do you pronounce it? Is it *mate*? As in "G'da mate"?'

His eyes light up. 'Maté? How do you know about maté?'

'I... just do. So you say *mah-tay*? Like that?'

'That's right. You've tried it?'

'No, but I'd like to.'

'Oh, I'll make it for you.'

I smile at his offer.

'Americans don't often know what maté is,' he says. 'I once had a cop pull me over at nine in the morning. I had my maté in the cup holder and the cop looked at it and he was, like, "Would you please step out of the car, sir?" I got the full sobriety test – "Please walk in a straight line, sir. Please touch the tip of your nose, sir" – all that crap at nine a.m. just because I was drinking green tea from an unusual cup.'

I'm giggling as the waitress delivers our first dish.

'This is called "ceviche",' Ivan says. 'Raw fish marinated in lemon with a little onion and coriander. Oh, I forgot to ask if you like raw fish.'

'I love it,' I say.

'Awesome. Do you like sailing?'

I pause, confused by his non sequitur. Sailing? Why is he asking this? Sailing is about as appealing to me as tap dancing in steaming piles of cow crap with brand-new shoes on.

'No. I don't particularly enjoy sailing,' I confess.

'Oh, so you've tried it?' he asks.

'Once as a teenager. It wasn't my thing. I get seasick and the ocean scares me because of, you know, sharks and stuff.'

'You're scared of sharks? Why?'

'Um... have you seen their teeth?'

He returns a perplexed stare.

'I don't know why I'm afraid of the ocean,' I continue, 'but I don't think there's anything in the world that I'm more scared of. It's so dark and creepy. Everything that hangs out in seawater is horrible – claws, urchins, stinging barbs, poison darts, teeth, tentacles, suction cups, giant squid, jellyfish, those deep-sea creatures with fangs and lightbulb thingies on their heads...' I pause to shiver. '... Tentacles are so creepy crawly *wet* things. It's safe to assume I'm scared of pretty much anything that would fall out of the sky if you turned the ocean upside down and shook it. That's why I won't swim at the beach, not past my knees, anyway.' I fork some raw fish into my mouth and bite down. 'It tastes delicious, though.'

'Wow, that's... a lot of fears to have.'

'Great start to a date, huh? "Hello, I'm Torre, I'm extremely neurotic. Let me brief you on all my fears."'

'Well, everyone is scared of something,' he says with a laugh.

'So then what are you scared of, Ivan?'

His eyes drift off as he thinks. 'Housing estates and shopping malls. Umm... theme parks, crowded places,' he says with a firm nod. 'Oh, and dictatorships.'

'Wow, you're quite the neurotic yourself,' I tease.

He laughs. 'But I love sailing. Actually, I have my own sailboat in LA. Whenever I have time, I go see her.'

Her? He owns a boat and talks to *her* with affectionate language?

The waitress interrupts to serve more plates, leaving me a moment to reflect on how this date is going so far. The stylish outfit, the romantic stroll, the alluring Spanish – something has to be wrong. A yacht owner, at his age? I know the type: On weekends he wears deck shoes, anchor-patterned shirts, white slacks and pastel sweaters tied at his neck. He hangs out at the marina and talks in nautical jargon to anyone who'll listen, but he never leaves the dock in case his sweetie gets scratched. A bored IT yuppie who's married to a fancy boat. Not my type.

The waitress leaves and Ivan walks me through the tapas. '*Albóndigas a la española, y pulpo a la plancha*. Meatballs in tomato sauce and barbecued octopus.'

I pause my critical judgement to hear his Spanish, the lisps and silent letters merged together in long, silken ribbons. His full lips move differently when he speaks his native language.

'My boat is called *Amazing Grace*. Well, that was the name she had when I bought her, but I like to call her Gracie.'

'Gracie'? Yep, 'she' is his sweetie all right. I take an extra large gulp of sangria and snatch a coverlet. I glance at my watch, wondering how long this guy is going to talk about yachting.

'I've thought about moving Gracie to San Francisco, but the weather is warm and mostly calm in LA, which is better for sailing. And my parents live close by to the boat, so I can visit them too when I go down there. I sail to Catalina sometimes.'

'Sounds like fun,' I lie.

'You should come sometime. You'll love it.'

'I dunno, maybe,' I say, feeling slightly irked. 'As I said, I'm not really an ocean person.'

'I'll take you to Catalina Island,' he says, running away with my 'maybe.' 'It's six hours from LA and is incredibly beautiful. If you sail there during the week when there are no crowds, it feels like you're arriving in a secluded paradise.' He sips his drink and clanks it back down onto the table, full of enthusiastic energy. 'Actually, I'm planning to sail Gracie around the world next year.'

I pause, a forked meatball in front of my mouth. 'Sorry... what did you just say?'

'I'm going to sail around the world. My boat's pretty much ready to go. I just have to finish up the project I'm managing and then I can start getting my boat ready for a solo circumnavigation.'

'Wait,' I say, putting down my fork and leaning in close. 'A circumnavigation? You're planning to sail around the world? *Alone?*'

'Uh-huh. Mostly I want to sail through the islands of the South Pacific. They're supposed to be really beautiful. But I'll have to, like, sail all the way around to get home again.' He chuckles, dismissing two-thirds of planet Earth as a minor commute.

'So, you're sailing around *the world?*'

'Well, yeah. I want to travel and a sailboat is a great vehicle for seeing the world. I'm leaving early next year when the weather is best.'

I stop myself from asking the same question again. I'm having trouble digesting this. I sit with my mouth in a dazzled 'O' while Ivan explains the details of his plan.

He tells me that seven years ago while he was a student living in LA, he noticed the sailboats off Santa Monica Beach while rollerblading and then he looked out at the horizon and began to ponder the places he could take a boat. He booked sailing lessons and, not long after, bought his first boat. For

five years, he's been saving, planning, researching, studying, route-mapping, and, now, his dream ripe and ready for plucking. Three years ago, he crossed the Atlantic Ocean, crewing with two others on a yacht delivery from Spain to Florida to gain experience and see if he liked ocean sailing.

'What was it like?' I ask, enthralled.

'I forgot my sleeping bag, so I had to sleep under garbage bags the whole way. I froze my arse off and got sick with the flu, but the trip was incredible. When we spotted land for the first time in twenty-four days, I didn't want to come back.'

A crevasse of difference cracks open between us and all I can do is stare with wide eyes. Twenty-four days on the open ocean with a garbage bag blanket and he calls it 'incredible'? I had him all wrong. He's not a bored yuppie. He's a man with wild ambitions. I've never met a real-life adventurer before. I've only ever seen them on the breaking news report, generally being dragged from catastrophes.

'So that explains why your apartment is empty!' I say.

He lets out an embarrassed laugh. 'Yeah. When I moved here from LA six months ago, I gave everything to my brother. Figured I wouldn't need it on the ocean. Actually, Mum offered to buy me Italian leather couches. I told her thanks but no thanks.'

'You refused free couches to live in an empty apartment?'

He shrugs. 'I think she was trying to keep me from taking off sailing. I guess she thinks it's harder for me to leave if I own quality Italian furniture. She drives me crazy. She's Jewish.'

'Oh, your family's Jewish?'

'No, no, we're atheist.'

I consider this for a moment, confused. 'So then, your "Jewish" mother wanted to buy you the couches as an anchor to stop you from sailing the world?'

'Yes, exactly – an anchor. My family doesn't really say much about my trip, but when they offer to buy me large furniture goods instead of stuff I can actually use on a boat, I figure they don't support what I'm doing.'

'Maybe they're just afraid for you? It's pretty dangerous. I'd be scared if I was your mother.'

'Yeah, well, it annoys me. But let's not talk about my family dramas. Would you like to come back to my place for tea?'

I really like this guy, I think to myself. He's so interesting – a sailor, a dreamer, a leader, a visionary, a unique soul. And the best part is, since he's leaving, it's a commitment-free relationship. We can date, have fun, and then go our separate ways at the end of the year.

'Can we drink maté at your house?' I ask.

'Sure, if you like.'

But, back at Ivan's apartment, we find far more interesting things to do than sip tea.



TWO

I SMELL LAVENDER AFTERSHAVE. My eyes open to Ivan's face inches from mine, just visible in the dawn light. For the last two months, I've woken in his apartment more often than I have in my own. Anna sends regular texts, asking where I am, and I explain that once again, I'm with 'The Man from the Bar.'

'Invite him over,' she keeps insisting. 'We'll have a dinner party. Then we'll do what all good friends do for each other: we'll size him up.'

But I'm trying to keep a safe distance between my friends and Ivan. I don't want to overcomplicate the situation by taking him to parties because The Man from the Bar is supposed to be a casual, commitment-free fling. Only, Ivan is making that difficult...

'Good morning, baby.' Ivan drums my face with a thousand quick kisses. This man is a woodpecker of affection.

On the bedside table sits the first sign that things between us are threatening to become serious. It was Ivan's gift for my twenty-fifth birthday last week. He told me he'd take me anywhere, so I chose the artists' open studios in Sausalito, where we watched ceramicists and painters working on their crafts. There, from a gifted ceramicist, Ivan bought me a sculpture of a mermaid. This generous gift tells me that, if we're still seeing each other in seven months when Ivan moves onto his boat – just as I'm due to leave San Francisco and head home – our fling won't be ending with a quick squeeze and a *adios*. Ivan's enchanting mermaid is seducing me toward a rocky shore.

'Hey, I have an idea,' he says between kisses.

I pull the covers over my head and speak through muffled layers of sheets and blankets. 'An idea? Now? It's so early. Let's go back to sleep.'

'I was thinking, if you want, we can call in sick and go on a road trip to LA for the weekend. I'd love to show you my boat.'

'Don't you think it's a bit soon to be introducing me to your other woman?'

He laughs. 'Don't be nervous. She'll love you.'

I check the time: 6 a.m. I have another hour until I have to get ready for work and catch a short bus ride downtown. Ivan is usually showered, dressed and gone by the time I wake up because he has a ninety-minute peak-hour commute to Silicon Valley, the IT capital of the world. There, he wrangles his subordinates in line by waving a stern finger and threatening overtime to the chimps on keyboards while he paces the aisles, whipping the slackers with obsolete cables. 'That's supposed to be C, colon slash, slash! Not C, slash, slash, colon!' At least, that is the vision I drift into when he goes on about project management, software implementations, telecommunications and other jargon that sifts through my Swiss-cheese artist's brain.

'Monkeys,' I say, dazed in sleepy thoughts.

'What?'

'I said okay.'

I cough down the phone line to my boss, then I shower, slip into a summery cotton dress and pack my weekend bag. I toss it in the back of Ivan's car and open the passenger door to find a travel pillow and

a fleece blanket carefully folded on my seat.

'It's a seven-hour drive,' Ivan says. 'So I want you to be comfortable. I've packed sandwiches, drinks and snacks. There's a cappuccino for you in the cup holder.'

'Thanks.' My heart beats a little faster.

He jumps in the car with his maté gear. Before he starts the ignition, he pours hot water from a Thermos into a carved wooden cup half filled with green tea leaves. We've spent all this time together and I still haven't had the chance to taste maté.

'Can I try?' I ask.

He hands me the cup and I suck tea up the straw. I recoil, first at the boiling water in my mouth, then at the bitter taste.

It's disgusting.

'Well?' Ivan says. 'What do you think?'

'Can I be honest?'

'Of course.'

'It tastes like ashtray.' I take another small sip to be sure. 'Yep, ashtray mixed with soil. Sorry.'

'That's okay. It'll grow on you in time.'

We leave the city behind us as we speed down the 101 South. San Francisco merges into green rolling hills, then into farmland. I pull the blanket around my shoulders and snuggle into the pillow brimful with happiness to be swept away on a whim.

I BECOME AWARE of a dampness on my right cheek. Damn, I've been drooling on my travel pillow. I wipe my face and turn to see if Ivan has noticed.

'Welcome back,' he says, looking right at me. 'You've been sleeping since Santa Barbara. You're so cute when you sleep.'

I go pink in the cheeks. I don't know what he saw, exactly, but I bet it involved a spreading of knees, an open mouth, gurgling noises and lots of misplaced saliva. Who looks like Monica Bellucci now, huh?

I notice we're almost there when we turn off the Santa Monica Freeway exit. Los Angeles is everything I imagined: grey buildings, air pollution, traffic congestion and thin palms reaching up vertically as though they're trying to breathe fresh air above the smog cloud.

We emerge onto a road that trails the ocean and the concrete claustrophobia diminishes. Masts tell me we've reached the marina.

Walking along the dock, I notice all types of boats, from waterlogged skiffs to pimp-daddy mega-yachts. Marina del Rey is a place where A-list celebrities' yachts are forced to mingle with the commoners': there's no Bel Air to separate the grotesquely rich from the floating vagabonds.

My eyes dart around, excited and nervous like I'm meeting a member of Ivan's family for the first time. He's told me all about his boat, how he searched for a year before he found his perfect match in San Francisco, how he sailed it down the coast, even though the forecast predicted a gale and advised all small crafts to stay off the ocean. I asked him what it was like being in bad weather and he said he felt alive and happy, despite his seasickness.

'There she is,' he says. 'Gracie.'

Amazing Grace is twenty-six years old, one year my senior, but much older in boat years, and shows through her greying hull and worn teak that's flecking varnish like it's seen too many dark summers. Despite her years, she looks strong and capable, and there's something in her canoe-like shape that reminds me of a majestic Viking ship. She doesn't look old, she looks wise, and if she could speak, I'm sure she'd have many stories to tell.

'Come up,' Ivan says, boarding the boat with a gazelle leap.

I cling to the railings and haul myself aboard, eyeing the black-green water below like it may jump up and swallow me.

I'm treated to the grand tour of the boat and Ivan rattles off jargon that goes over my head: *rolling furling jib, double line reefing that leads back to the cockpit, lazy jacks, wind vane*. I tell him I'm very impressed, but I have no idea what he's talking about.

'Basically, she's all rigged up for solo sailing,' he says. 'I can set the sails from the cockpit. Most boats need two or more people to make sail changes – Gracie can be sailed by one.'

He leads me down the stairs and into the homey nest of her cabin. She smells of diesel and kerosene and the papery pages of old books. The late 1970s design shows in the brown, tan and orange decor. Teak lines the walls, aged to a deep shade of fine-wine red. It's warm and cozy inside the belly of the ship.

The kitchen is tiny and basic, and adjacent to it is a navigation station for plotting maps, controlling switches and all that boat business. A switchboard of mixed breakers is labeled with functions: *Bilge Pump, Aft Lights, Engine, Water Pump*. Wires are visible in the back as though someone overstuffed the cupboard with electronics and quickly closed the door.

The middle part of the boat is the living area – the salon. Two sofas run up either side, both upholstered in an awesome hue of orange vinyl that begs to be accessorised with a lava lamp.

Farther toward the front of the boat, Ivan points out a potbelly fireplace, which strikes me as both darling and deadly. 'For cold regions,' he says. 'This boat is so strong, you could take her to Antarctica.'

I inspect Ivan's library on the small bookshelf. *Sailing Alone Around the World* by Joshua Slocum, *The Long Way* by Bernard Moitessier, *Taking on the World* by Ellen MacArthur, *The Incredible Voyage* by Tristan Jones – there isn't a single novel among all the sailing nonfictions.

'Got a bit of tunnel vision, do you?' I tease.

'You could say that. I haven't read anything except sailing books for the last five years. I've read some of those books twice. Those people have all done what I want to do.'

'They're your heroes?' I say, sliding a book out to flick through.

'Sort of, but I don't believe in having heroes, I believe in accomplishing your own things in life rather than envying someone else's life from your armchair. I suppose you'd call them my inspiration.'

'Fair enough. You must like this Moitessier guy; you have four of his books.'

'Yeah, I've read him so many times, I feel like I know him, like...' Ivan lets out an embarrassed laugh. 'This may sound strange, but sometimes I feel like he's my best friend. He's my greatest inspiration. Have you heard of him?'

I shake my head.

'He probably would've been the first guy to ever solo sail the world nonstop – in 1969 – but he abandoned the race in the last stretch. After he circled the globe, all he had to do to get the record and prize money was return to his starting point to finish the loop. He got close, but he decided not to return to land. Couldn't hack going back to civilisation. His wife and children were waiting for him and everything, but he turned his boat around and just kept going. He ended up doing another half-circumnavigation to get to Tahiti. Meanwhile, another dude got the world record and the five thousand-pound reward.'

I get a chill thinking of the sailor's wife onshore, scanning the empty horizon for a boat that would never come. 'He just left his family at the dock? Why?'

Ivan shrugs. 'That's just the way Moitessier was. He'd sailed the world with his wife before, for the honeymoon. But she had kids from another marriage and when she left them in boarding school to sail, she missed them the whole time. She wanted to get home, but Moitessier wanted to keep going. When he went to sea again, he went alone. And he never came back for her.'

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