

5

Ben

Ben watched Jessica walk like a baby giraffe toward the Peugeot 308—overpriced piece of crap—parked at the gate, engine running. One of the Peugeot’s brake lights was gone and the muffler looked like it was bent, no doubt from that dirt road. The lady behind the wheel was leaning halfway out her window, practically falling out, waving wildly at Jessica as if she couldn’t be more pleased to see her. Why didn’t she just open her car door and get out?

It looked like the health resort was closed. A burst water main? A mutiny? He could only hope.

Jessica could hardly walk in those stupid shoes. It was like she was on stilts. The heels were as skinny as toothpicks. She would twist an ankle any minute.

Ben squatted down next to his car and ran his fingers over the paintwork, searching for stone chips. He glanced back at the road they’d just come down and winced. How could a place that charged eye-watering rates have a road like that? There should have been a warning

on the website. He'd thought for sure they were going to bottom out on some of those potholes.

No scratches that he could see, which was a miracle, but who knew what damage there was to the undercarriage? He'd have to wait till he could get it back up in the workshop, take a look. He wanted to do it right now, but he was going to have to wait ten days.

Maybe he should get the car towed back to Melbourne. He could call Pete's guys. It wasn't the craziest of ideas, except that he'd never hear the end of it if any of his former workmates saw that he'd driven *this* car down *that* road. He suspected his ex-boss would cry, literally cry, if he saw what Ben had done.

Pete's eyes had gotten suspiciously shiny after the scratch incident last month. "Scratchgate," they all called it.

"Jealous fuck," Pete said when Ben showed him the long deliberate scratch left by some evil person's key on the passenger door. Ben couldn't work out where and when it had happened. He never left the car in public car parks. It felt like it had to be someone they knew. Ben could name multiple people who might resent him and Jessica enough to have done it. Once he would have found it hard to name a single enemy in his life. Now it seemed they had a nice little collection. He knew Jessica thought it was Ben's sister who had done it, although she never accused Lucy out loud. He could read her mind by the thin fold of her lips. Maybe she was right. It could have been Lucy.

Pete fixed the scratch with the same care as if he were restoring a priceless painting, and Ben had been vigilant until right now, when he'd put the car at huge, unforgivable risk by driving down that hellish road.

Ben should never have given in to Jessica. He'd tried. He stopped the car and told her, calmly and without swearing, that driving a car like this down an unpaved road was *negligent* and that the consequences could be catastrophic. They could, for example, rip out the exhaust system.

It was almost like she seriously didn't care about the exhaust system.

They'd yelled at each other for ten minutes straight. Proper yelling. Spitballs flying. Their faces red and ugly and contorted. The head-exploding frustration he'd felt during that argument was like something half-remembered from childhood, when you couldn't express yourself properly and you had no control over your life because you were a kid, so when your mum or dad said you couldn't have the new *Star Wars* action figure you wanted with all your heart you totally lost your shit.

There had been a moment there when he'd clenched his fists; when he had to tell himself, *Don't hit her*. He hadn't known he was capable of feeling the desire to hit a woman. He folded right then. He said, "Fine. I'll ruin the car. Whatever."

Most guys he knew wouldn't have even stopped for the yelling. They would have just done a U-turn.

Most guys would never have agreed to this crazy idea in the first place.

A *health resort*. Yoga and hot springs. He didn't get it. But Jessica said they needed to do something dramatic and this would fix things. She said they needed to detox their minds and their bodies to save their marriage. They were going to eat organic lettuce and get "couples counseling." It was going to be ten days of pure torture.

Some celebrity couple had come to this place and saved their marriage. They had "achieved inner peace" and got back in touch with their "true selves." What a load of crap. They may as well have handed over their money to Nigerian email scammers. Ben had a horrible feeling the celebrity couple might have got together on *The Bachelorette*. Jessica loved celebrities. He used to think it was sweet, a dumb interest for a smart girl. But now she was making too many life decisions based on what celebrities did, or what it was reported they did; it was probably all crap anyway, they were probably getting paid to support products on their Instagram accounts. And there was Jessica, his poor innocent, hopeful Jessica, soaking it all up.

Now it was like she thought she was one of those people. She was

imagining *herself* at those trashy red-carpet events. Every time she got her photo taken these days she put her hand on her hip, like she was doing the actions for “I’m a Little Teapot,” then turned side on and thrust out her jaw with this maniacal smile. It was the weirdest thing. And the time she took setting up these photographs. The other day she spent forty-two minutes (he’d timed it) taking a photo of *her feet*.

One of their biggest fights recently had been about one of her Instagram posts. It was a photo of her in a bikini top, leaning over, pushing her arms together so her new boobs looked even bigger and pouting her puffy new lips at the camera. She’d asked what he thought of the photo, her face all hopeful, and because of her hopeful face he hadn’t said what he really thought—that it looked like she was advertising a cheap escort service. He’d just shrugged and said, “It’s okay.”

Her hopeful face fell. You’d think he’d called her a name. Next thing he knew she was screaming at him (these days she could go from zero to a hundred in a second) and he felt sucker-punched, unable to understand what had just happened. So he’d walked away while she was in the middle of yelling and went upstairs to play the Xbox. He thought walking away was a *good* thing to do. A mature, manly thing to do. To disengage and give her time to calm down. He kept getting these things wrong. She ran up the stairs after him and grabbed the back of his T-shirt before he reached the top.

“Look at me!” she screamed. “You don’t even look at me anymore!”

And it killed him to hear her say that, because it was true. He avoided looking at her. He was trying *really* hard to get over that. There were men who stayed married to women who were disfigured by accidents, burns or scars or whatever. It shouldn’t make a difference that Jessica was disfigured by her own hand. Not literally her own hand. Her own credit card. Willful disfigurement.

And then all her stupid friends encouraged her, “Oh my God, Jessica, you look incredible.”

He wanted to yell at them, “Are you blind? She looks like a chipmunk!”

The thought of separating from Jessica was like having his guts ripped out, but these days being married to Jessica was like having his guts ripped out. Whatever way you looked at it: guts ripped out.

If this retreat worked, if they got back to the way they used to be, it was even worth the damage to the car. Obviously it was worth it. Jessica was meant to be the mother of his children—his future children.

He thought of the day of the robbery, two years ago now. He remembered the way her face—it was still her own beautiful face back then—had crumpled like a little kid's, and the rage he'd felt. He'd wanted to find those fuckwits and smash their faces.

If not for the robbery, if not for the fuckwits, they wouldn't be at this place. He wouldn't have the car, but at least he wouldn't be stuck here for the next ten days.

On balance, he still wanted to smash their faces.

"Ben!"

Jessica beckoned him over. She was all social and smiley, like they hadn't just been yelling at each other. She was so good at that. They could drive to a party and fight all the way, not say a word to each other as they walked up someone's stairs, and then the door of the apartment opens and—bang—different person. Laughing, joking, teasing him, touching him, taking selfies, like they were so having sex tonight, when they were so not having sex tonight.

Then, back in the car on the way home, she'd *restart* the fight. It was like flicking a switch on and off. It freaked him out. "It's just good manners," she told him. "You don't take your fight to a party. It's no one else's business."

He straightened up, adjusted his cap, and went over to stand beside Jessica to perform like her monkey.

"This is my husband, Ben," said Jessica. "Ben, this is Frances. She's doing the same retreat as us. Well, probably not exactly the same . . ."

The lady smiled up at him from the driver's seat. "That's a very fancy car, Ben," she said. She spoke as if she already knew him. Her voice was snuffly and hoarse, the tip of her nose bright red. "It's like

something from a movie.” He could see straight down the huge chasm of her cleavage; he couldn’t help it, there was literally nowhere else to look. It wasn’t *bad*, but she was old, so it wasn’t good either. She wore red lipstick and had a lot of curly gold-colored hair pulled back in a ponytail. She reminded him of one of his mum’s tennis friends. He liked his mum’s tennis friends—they were uncomplicated and didn’t expect him to say much—but he preferred them not to have cleavage.

“Thanks,” he said, trying to focus on her very shiny, friendly eyes. “Nice to meet you.”

“What sort of car is it?” asked Frances.

“It’s a Lamborghini.”

“Ooh la la—a Lamborghini!” She grinned up at him. “This here is a Peugeot.”

“Uh, yeah, I know,” he said, pained.

“Don’t think much of the Peugeot?” She tilted her head to one side.

“It’s a heap of shit,” said Ben.

“*Ben!*” said Jessica, but Frances laughed delightedly.

“I love my little Peugeot,” purred Frances as she caressed her steering wheel.

“Well,” said Ben. “Each to their own.”

“Frances says nobody is answering the intercom,” said Jessica. “She’s been sitting out here waiting for twenty minutes.”

Jessica was using her posh new voice, where she made each word sound as fat and round as an apple. She was using it almost exclusively now, except when she really lost her temper or got upset, like last night, when she forgot to be posh and yelled at him, “Why can’t you just be happy? Why are you *ruining* this?”

“Have you phoned them?” he said now to the cleavage lady. “Maybe there’s something wrong with the intercom.”

“I’ve left a message,” said Frances.

“I wonder if this is like a test,” said Jessica. “Maybe it’s part of our treatment plan.” She lifted her hair up to cool her neck. Sometimes, when she spoke normally, when she was just being herself, he could

forget the frozen forehead, the blowfish lips, the puffy cheeks, the camel eyelashes (“eyelash extensions”), the fake hair (“hair extensions”) and fake boobs, and there, for just a moment, was his sweet Jessica, the Jessica he’d known since high school.

“I thought that too!” said Frances.

Ben turned to look at the intercom.

“I could hardly read the instructions,” said Frances. “They were so tiny.”

Ben could read them perfectly well. He punched in the code and pressed the green button.

“I will be absolutely furious if it works for you,” said Frances.

A tinny voice sprang from the intercom. “Namaste and welcome to Tranquillum House. How may I help you?”

“What the hell?” Frances mouthed in comical disbelief.

Ben shrugged. “Just needed a man’s touch.”

“Oh *you*,” she said. She reached out of the car and flicked his arm with her hand.

Jessica bent down next to the intercom and spoke too loudly. “We’re here to check in.” It was cute, like Ben’s grandma on the phone. “The name is Chandler, Jessica and Ben—”

There was a burst of static from the intercom and the gate began to creak open. Jessica straightened, tucked her hair behind her ear, worried as always about her dignity. She never used to take herself so seriously.

“I promise you I pressed that code correctly, or I thought I did!” said Frances, as she buckled her seatbelt and revved her tappety little engine. She gave them a little wave. “I’ll see you in there! Don’t try to race me with your fancy-schmancy Ferrari.”

“It’s a *Lamborghini*!” protested Ben.

Frances winked at him, as if she knew that perfectly well, and drove off, faster than he would have expected, or recommended, on this road.

As they walked back toward the car, Jessica said, “We’re not telling anybody, right? That’s the deal. If anyone asks, just say the car isn’t even yours. Say it belongs to a friend.”

“Yeah, but I’m not as good a liar as you,” he said. He meant it as a joke or even a compliment, but he was leaving the interpretation up to her.

“Fuck you,” she said, though without much heat.

So maybe they were okay. But sometimes the embers of a dying argument sparked without warning. You never knew. He would stay alert.

“She seemed nice,” said Ben. “The lady. Frances.” That was safe. Frances was old. There could be no possibility of jealousy. The jealousy was a fun new development in their relationship. The more Jessica changed her face and body, the less secure she got.

“I think I recognized her,” said Jessica.

“Really?”

“I’m pretty sure she’s Frances Welty, the writer. I used to be crazy about her books.”

“What sort of books?” asked Ben. He opened his car door.

She said something he didn’t catch. “Sorry, what?”

“*Romance.*” Jessica slammed the passenger door so hard he winced.