

'Funny, heartwarming, honest . . . I smiled  
the whole way through' Rachael Johns

# The Paradise Pact

Heartbreak is out,  
holidays are in . . .



Anita Heiss

## Chapter One

‘I’m devastated!’ I sob uncontrollably into my margarita. ‘All that hope and time devoted to a positive future, and the emotional investment—’ I take a long sip, ‘—only to be left with the disappointment of a lifetime.’ I thump the oversized cocktail glass back onto the table

‘I agree, Abbey,’ I know Caitlin is being serious because we only use each other’s full names when it’s important. She’s Cait and I’m usually just Abs. ‘But,’ she continues, ‘don’t forget that 6.2 million Australians voted *yes* in the referendum, and we need to focus on *them* moving forward.’

I immediately feel a pang of embarrassment, then guilt. Cait and Stevie think I’m talking about the devastating defeat in The Voice referendum when I’m actually referring to breaking up with Robert, my committed partner of the past five years. After these women, he was the next person I confided in and shared everything with. He, too, was my chosen family, even though we kept separate residences. I need to think fast, to demonstrate the

appropriate amount of disappointment around the referendum outcome, when all I really want to do is wallow in misery and all the regrets weighing me down.

‘I was thinking of you the whole day, Abbey. I knew you were out at a polling booth, working on last minute votes.’ Stevie is the least political of the group, but the biggest supporter of everything I do. ‘I shared your TikToks and Insta posts, even though I never really did much else.’

We’re enjoying the sunset by the plunge pool of the house in Byron Bay we snaffled for a bargain price on girlstrip.com in aid of celebrating my fifty-fifth birthday. But the last thing I feel like doing is partying, especially about turning another year older.

Silence hangs over the space for too many seconds before Cait prompts, ‘What is it, Abs?’

‘Umm, speaking of the referendum . . .’ I pause, trying to link the pain of the referendum with the pain in my heart. ‘It was largely about truth-telling, and I’ve got some truths of my own to tell you.’

The other women sit up straight on their sunlounges, glasses poised, offering undivided attention.

‘I should’ve told you when it happened last month, but . . .’ I choke up, swallow hard and add, ‘Robert and I broke up.’

‘Oh darling, I’m so sorry to hear.’ Cait’s words are kind, but her tone is unsympathetic. ‘But you know what Doris and I say, what will be, will be.’

I feel tears start to well again, as they have every day since he said goodbye for the last time; me disappointed, he looking like it was almost a relief.

‘Are you okay?’ Stevie asks, topping her glass up with home-made lemonade from a chilled blue jug.

'I'm really upset.' I look straight at Cait, so she understands my pain. 'My heart feels heavier than it did when Chad and I broke up, and I had to start again with two young boys in tow.'

'Chad was a decent bloke, you were young when you got together and turns out he wasn't right for you in the end.'

'Yeah, I wouldn't change the past at all.' I smile weakly. 'He's a great father, and the grannies love him, but we just grew apart, as the saying goes.'

'Why is it harder this time around, Abs?' There is so much warmth in Stevie's concern it brings tears to my eyes again.

'Because I thought we had something meaningful, then it was over so swiftly and he posted about it on Insta. We're not teenagers. Adults keep that shit private, don't they?' A lone tear falls down my cheek and I swiftly wipe it away. 'I'm a business-woman. And worse, it reads as if it was *his* decision, and he's already posting pics on his stories with someone else. Someone much younger than me.' I pause to consider Robert's new woman; porcelain skin, petite build, flat-chested with poker-straight, blonde hair, false eyelashes and fillers. So cliché, I think to myself, and completely opposite to me, what with my olive skin and deep brunette, wavy hair that is unruly most days and needs to be pulled back. At five foot eleven, I'd be an amazon next to her.

'He's a dickwad. He was *always* a dickwad, and he'll always *be* a dickwad,' Cait says. 'And now, I can say it without feeling guilty! *Dickwad.*' Cait's honesty has always been one of her most endearing qualities as a friend, but I wish she would be a little less brutal today.

'I don't know who says dickwad these days,' Stevie chimes in, 'but I agree. He's a dickwad.'

‘Hang on, where did this gang of dickwad haters come from? I didn’t know you felt that way about him, Stevie. Cait?’

I watch them shrink a little at the disappointment in my tone.

‘If we’re doing truth-telling,’ Cait says, ‘then my truth is that he creeped me out. I don’t know why. Maybe because he’s so much older than you.’

‘I must admit, I felt a little the same too, Abs.’ Stevie shrugs apologetically. ‘I don’t want to sound judgemental, but I never understood how you slept with him.’

‘Maybe old people are one of your phobias,’ Cait responds.

‘I do *not* have gerontophobia,’ Stevie snaps back. It’s an aggressive declaration for our normally calm sister. I can’t imagine what she’d be like if she drank cocktails if she can fire back like this sober, though, it would undoubtedly make the phobias that sometimes control her life much worse.

‘You know my phobias are real, Cait; my fear of flying, my fear of falling, my spatial disorientation.’ I’d forgotten about Stevie’s fear of getting lost; it’s why we always track her on our phones, just in case she *does* get lost. ‘And I don’t need you giving me any more to deal with, Cait. I spend enough time and cash on therapy as it is.’

‘Jesus, I was kidding.’ Cait’s words come with laughter. ‘I didn’t even know you could have a phobia about the elderly.’

There’s a look of almost disbelief on Stevie’s flushed face. ‘None of this is funny, Catilin. It’s a *phobia*, a fear of something, and I am not *afraid* of old people. All I meant was that I can’t imagine sleeping with someone that much older than me.’

There’s a glimmer of regret in Cait’s green eyes that pop against her dark skin. We all know how debilitating Stevie’s phobias

can be. On Cait's thirtieth birthday she got halfway up the Harbour Bridge before her basophobia got the better of her and she froze. The strength in her muscly running legs meant nothing that day, and as tears began to flow, and her usually slick black bob stuck to her face, we knew our tidda was suffering. It took almost forty-five minutes of calm talking by the group leader, and affirmations from Cait and I, to get our tidda to take controlled steps back to the safety of the start of the climb.

For a moment, I'm grateful the conversation has been diverted away from me sleeping with Robert who, though he was only five years older than me, looked fifteen years my senior. And that's a lot when you're as fit and fabulous as we three are.

My gratitude has come too early. Cait, who normally prides herself on being the peacemaker, is topping her glass up with tequila and turning back on topic. 'Don't blame age, Stevie. That's got nothing to do with it. You're just so sexually repressed thanks to the church that you don't sleep with *anyone!*'

*What the . . . ?* I feel sick to my stomach as Cait's low blow lands. I look at Stevie, who wraps both her hands around her glass of lemonade, staring into the liquid.

Before Stevie has the chance to pull her thoughts together and respond, Cait is on her feet and moves swiftly to sit next to Stevie. She places her arm over Stevie's shoulder and pulls her close to her.

'I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry. *Please* forgive me. It's the tequila, I should *never* drink it.' She moves her hand to Stevie's head, motioning her to lean on her shoulder. Stevie resists, sitting upright. Christ, today might be the day that our group starts the batshit crazy behaviour you see on reality TV. And I'll blame Robert for it, for sure.

‘No, you’re right. I *am* repressed. I want to have sex again before I die. But I’m not manifesting some saggy, grey-haired balls coming anywhere close to me.’

A moment of silence passes before we all crack up. When the laughter settles, Cait returns to her lounge and resumes her position. She roughly squashes her shoulder length, frizzy auburn hair under a straw hat, grabs her margarita, and questions me as if I’m on some American talk show with a live studio audience wanting all the gory details. ‘So, tell us what happened, Abs.’

I take a deep breath, preparing for the painful retelling. ‘I was at his place and I was clearing the table for dinner and was moving his mail to the sideboard and atop the pile of papers was a tax invoice for a donation to the Liberal National Party.’

‘What the fuck?’ Cait asks then sips.

‘He what?’ Stevie follows suit.

‘You *hate* the LNP!’ Cait exclaims. These women know me.

The sense of betrayal bubbles up inside me again. ‘Yes, I hate the fucking LNP, so now I must hate him too! One wonders if he gave my feelings or opinions any thought at all.’ I take a sip, eyes focussed on the salt on the rim of the glass. *Cait does make a deadly margarita.*

‘What did he say? I mean did you confront him?’ Cait takes a long sip and drains her glass.

‘Of course.’ I think back to my questions and Robert just standing there, almost smirking at me, like I was a child there to amuse him.

‘And? What does the donation mean?’ Cait asks.

‘He said it was a form of tax deduction and just brushed it off. But we know it means he supports a party that delights in screwing things up for our mob.’ I shake my head and sigh. ‘And you know

he never bothered to donate to any of the causes I talked about. Or any charities that could use support. Not one. Ever!

‘Well, that’s just fucked!’ That’s our Cait, always short and sweet – or short and crass.

‘Yep, turns out I was literally sleeping with the enemy.’ I feel so stupid for not seeing we were at different ends of what I call the ‘morality spectrum’.

‘Do you reckon he gets anything out of it for his own business?’ Stevie asks, eyes wide.

It’s a question I’d asked him straight up. I wanted him to admit that there was an ulterior motive. ‘Considering he’s rich and the LNP favours tax cuts for the wealthy, I’m sure he’s not donating without there being something in it for him.’

‘Double fuck!’ It’s as if a lightbulb goes on above Cait’s head. ‘Ricky’s in real estate, and we know dodgy deals are done all the time at all levels of government. I bet he donates to the LNP too.’ Now she’s shaking her head as if it’s a fact. I know she’s going to give Ricky a grilling, and he won’t know what hit him.

‘I read somewhere that a few state premiers have massive real estate portfolios. Just saying.’ We know exactly what Stevie is suggesting.

‘Fuckity-fuck!’ Cait is getting distressed now, and I need to get her mind off her man.

‘Five years is a long time to share a life and a bed with someone,’ I say. ‘There’s a lot of memories, but just as many questions. I had three choices: pretend I didn’t know about it, pretend it didn’t bother me, or say goodbye.’

‘So, trade off your values or be true to them?’ Stevie nailed it.

‘Exactly.’ I shake my head at my naivety, my ignorance of the truth of our relationship. ‘I just thought he was a bit conservative,

you know? Not . . . that level. I mean, he knew what my politics were. I talked about the different policies that affected our mob all the time. He never argued with me. When I think about it, though, I talked. He listened. I just assumed his silence meant agreement.’ I exhale. ‘Never assume anything, right?’

The others nod in agreement.

I take a final long sip, emptying the glass and licking the salt on the rim from one side. ‘I think it’s fair to say Robert was *not* one of the 6.2 million voters on our side. I don’t know why he wanted to be with *me* in the first place.’

‘Back up, Sista. Firstly, he is *never* going to meet a woman like you. *Ever*. Cultured, interesting, dynamic. You’re drop-dead gorgeous. *And* how many deadly Black women do you reckon he knows?’ Cait makes me smile.

‘And don’t forget, you are AMAZING! Strong, fun, fabulous, and passionate. He was attracted to you because of everything you are.’ Stevie lays her hands out in front of me, as if in offering. ‘He wanted all of this!’ Stevie is boosting my self-esteem, and I feel tears well with the beauty in her believing me to be all those things.

I wish I believed them too.

Cait puts her hand on mine. ‘Of course he wanted to have you in his life. What man wouldn’t?’

I’m crying at the words of affirmation, the unconditional love shown by Cait and Stevie, because I know they are an attempt to remind me of my worth. I want to believe all those qualities about myself; that I am strong and loveable. I know somewhere within that I believe them to be true, but not today. And not since our relationship ended. Being disappointed by someone you trust and care about, the one person you have been completely vulnerable with, is the death of self-esteem.

I feel this way every time a relationship is over. Spiralling into the depths of ‘what is wrong with me’, ‘why aren’t I enough’ or ‘why aren’t I *good* enough’ is a ritual. I’ve lost track of how many times relationships of varying lengths have ended and I’m right back to the start line of finding all the reasons I can to blame myself: I was naive, stupid, too political, too young, too old, too fat, too fit, too much, too little, too trusting, not trusting enough.

‘I don’t know if I can trust myself to have another relationship.’ I didn’t realise I’d said it out loud till Stevie responds.

‘Well, you can trust me when I say you don’t have pistanthro-phobia.’ Both Cait and I look at Stevie, confused. ‘It means a fear of trusting others. But you, Sis, you are trusting *and* trustworthy. You’re just hurting right now and figuring out your next move. And we’ve got your back while you do.’

I *am* hurting, and I know they have my back, but I’m not sure I will ever trust again. I nod to appease Stevie, swallowing the emotion.

‘How do you feel about him now?’ Stevie asks cautiously, putting her right hand to her heart.

I look at my friend, who has been chasing unrequited love for some time with a fella in her running group in Brisbane, and I want to reach out and ask her how *she’s* doing.

‘Abs?’ she pushes.

‘All I know is that when I think about him now, I feel angry and confused. I don’t understand the disconnect. Dating me but donating to the LNP. I probably should’ve seen the warning signs.’ I’m searching through memories, beating myself up as I start to untangle his actions, or lack thereof, from the way I’d loved him, every part of him. ‘He never came to any of the marches on Invasion Day, or even the NAIDOC events I went to over

the years. And he didn't turn up for Gaza either. He was always happy to pick me up, drop me off. I thought it was because his love language was acts of service. Now I know it was because he cared about *me*, but not the things *I* cared about. He didn't share my values, my world views.' It hurts to say it out loud. 'I see that now. But before I think I was just comfortable with having someone in my life.' I feel ashamed for being so naive.

The women nod knowingly; they've been there too at some stage. I'm not special that way.

'Now, I just feel sad.' I wipe the tears away, sniffle then say, 'But mostly I want to peel my skin off, knowing his politics.'

'Fair enough.' Cait raises her glass in a toast.

'And I want to uppercut myself for being so stupid.' Even as the words come out, I know I'll be chastised for them.

'Stop saying you're stupid, or *I* will uppercut you!' Cait jokes, making us both smile.

Despite feeling lighter in this moment, I push on because Robert has inadvertently dug up a lot of stuff in me, stuff I wasn't thinking until now, but the break-up had caused me to re-examine. 'All I've done the last few weeks is overanalyse everything in my dating history, even with Chad.'

'And?' Stevie and Cait say in unison.

'I realise now, I was always trying to make the unworkable work. So many times, I tried convincing these men that we fit together, that we were right for each other, that I was right for *them*. I can see now, with some distance, they were never right for *me*. And the worse thing is, in every situation, including with Robert, I cared about them deeply.' I stop before repeating my 'stupidity mantra', because I know in my heart that it's not stupid to believe, or hope, or want to be loved.

‘But, Sis, you’ve always been like that. You *feel* deeply and that’s why you *hurt* deeply.’ Stevie’s words bring tears again. My beautiful friends, always seeing me for who I am, what I offer, how I feel. ‘And you shouldn’t change from that.’

Chad got me, even though it didn’t work out, he saw me, he understood me. But I wonder if Robert ever saw me the way Stevie and Cait see me.

I look to the skies. I know the Ancestors have a plan for me, and Robert clearly wasn’t it, but I’m trying to figure out what is the lesson here. What good is going to come from the pain?

‘Robert was affectionate with you. I saw it, we both saw it.’ Stevie says, speaking for her and Cait. I know they want to reassure me that, despite it all, he did care for me in his own way. Even if it doesn’t feel that way this minute.

‘There was affection, yes. But in hindsight, I think he considered himself woke being with a younger Black woman, even though I don’t think he really gave a rat’s arse about social justice or anything that didn’t impact him directly. And his mates . . . well, they probably had plenty to say about his march-going, flag-waving activist girlfriend.’ Now I’m getting fired up, thinking about what our relationship must have looked like to others, something I never thought or cared about before.

‘I saw the way he looked at you, Abs. He adored you.’ Stevie is sitting on my sunlounge now, smiling and passionate in her positivity. She believes everything she says with her whole body. ‘As for his mates, they would’ve been so jealous that you even gave Robert the time of day. I mean look at you: hot Pilates body, eyes like the ocean, a smile that could slay any man. Trust me, Robert’s cronies will be shaking him for letting you go.’

I know they're both trying to make me feel better – feel less a fool, less lost – but it's too soon. I need to sit in the pain, reflect on my mistakes and all the emotions that come with a failed relationship. 'I just can't help feeling I wasted the last five years of my life.'

'Stop right there. Regret is a wasted emotion when there are so many more beautiful feels to swim in. Drown in, in fact. Focus on five years of being loved-up. Think about all the fancy restaurants he took you to. He promoted your business amongst his networks. That meant he supported your dreams, Abs. He *did* want to be part of your journey; he wanted *you* to be successful. But it's okay to let him go. But don't let go of the good memories, because there *were* many. Don't completely rewrite that history.' Stevie is right, her wisdom priceless.

I suddenly feel overwhelmed by the discussion, and I break down again, like the fifteen-year-old who had my heart broken for the first time back in the 1980s. I ask Stevie and Cait the same thing I asked my mother back then: 'What's wrong with me?'

The pair move swiftly and cover me with loving arms from both sides. It makes me cry harder. I feel so stupid, a woman of my age crying over a man. And then blaming myself!

'Nothing is wrong with you! I was joking about the obsession,' Stevie says.

'I'm not worried about that.' I gently nudge Stevie. 'I'm worried that I keep making the wrong choices, telling myself I can make things work, that I can fix any problem with any fella, when they are nearly always the wrong fella for me to begin with. The whole "I can" mantra has ruined me and my relationships. And now I'm left feeling that no-one will ever love me enough to want to commit to me forever.'

'Forever is a long time,' Cait offers.

'You're right, Cait!' I start to cry again. 'If I can't have forever, I just want to be loved, for me, for a little while.'

Since Robert and I broke up, the feeling of being alone is stronger than it has ever been in all my single years. I'm not sure if it's age, or that my kids now have their own families and don't need me as much. It's forced me to consider what I need, what I want.

I want the depth of knowing someone intimately, sharing the minutia of each day, while also experiencing the comfort of silences, because you are so completely in sync. Significant values aside, it's the commitment to the other person, regardless of whether you agree on every little thing, and knowing that you will never walk away when things get tough.

And yet *I* walked away from Robert. Going by my own rules, some may say I didn't try hard enough, that I'm a hypocrite. But I didn't leave the relationship over a little thing. My politics are born out of my values, and my values are ingrained into the way I view the world, the way I behave and treat other people. My values are my culture; they define the way I live.

Am I trying to convince myself with all my overthinking? Or am I finally being honest with myself?

'I want to get married,' I blurt out, surprising myself and the others. It's not something we've ever really talked about.

'Woah, that's a big call,' Cait says, sounding concerned after spending years recovering from a messy divorce. 'Is this a birthday resolution? Because we can always brainstorm something, less, um, life-changing?'

'I don't know, I've just been reflecting a lot on what I want in a relationship, what companionship and commitment looks like to me, how I want it to look like moving forward.'

‘I never understood why Chad didn’t asked you to marry him, even before the boys were born.’ Stevie was raised in a strict Catholic household and had always believed in marriage but had mastered the art of unrequited love. She didn’t even get the chance to *try* to make it work and then fail, like I did.

But she’s forced me to think back to my first true love, the father of my sons. ‘Chad and I were so passionate about everything back then.’ I think about our days as uni students, studying political science and history, marching with the young socialists, attending student union meetings, talking about Black politics into the early hours. ‘We were crazy about each other, until I fell pregnant. Then everything changed. It was all about working and providing for the kids. Marriage wasn’t a priority then; we were so busy just making a living.’

‘You never talked about it?’ Stevie asks.

‘On the odd occasion I broached it, Chad dismissed the idea as something only whitefellas did, or as just a piece of paper. I’ll never forget, one day he said if I just wanted to be a bride, he’d buy me a dress and throw me a party, but a marriage certificate was a legal document. That it was just another way the State had some kind of control, just another way to regulate us, or some bullshit.’ Maybe I was naive *and* needy back then.

Cait’s eyes are wide. ‘Woah, that’s one way to take the romance out of getting married.’

‘Yep. And now he’s married to whatshername.’ They know I’m talking about the significantly younger woman Chad married, much to my great despair at the time. But they make a solid couple, and we all get on well, not just for the sake of the kids, but because we all understand that relationships are complicated, and we are adults.

I never saw myself as a hopeless romantic – that was Stevie’s role in our group – but now that I was past the half-century mark and my kids were finally out of home with their own families, the idea of a marriage licence with a wedding ceremony and sharing my life with someone who’s there for me every day has made its way back to my list of life goals. And then I realise, that Robert and I never talked about marriage either. He’d been married, paid maintenance, and was happy to keep going along the way we were, until we weren’t.

Stevie holds her left hand up to shade her eyes from the afternoon sun as a whistle blows for a game of soccer in the park across the road. ‘Darling, the man who will adore every wonderful aspect of you *is* out there. Maybe he’s here on Bundjalung country at the pub tonight!’ She has hope in her eyes, but I shake my head with a grin.

‘Maybe. And I know I’m not everyone’s cup of tea, but I don’t think I’m needy.’

‘And the reason you will never be anyone’s cup of tea is because . . .’ Stevie pauses, waiting for me to finish the sentence.

‘I am not everyone’s cup of tea because,’ I smile, and raise my glass in the air proclaiming, ‘I am champagne, *darling!*’ I look to my drink and smirk. ‘Well, maybe some days I’m a margarita. Still better than a tea bag.’

We all clink glasses in a toast and repeat together, ‘I am champagne, darling!’

‘It wasn’t all bad, you know; he could be attentive at times. I miss the attention.’ I hate that I can feel myself slipping back into sadness.

‘Attention is great, Abbey, but it’s not love, and attachment is not connection.’ Cait is being brutally honest again, and I’m not sure how much more truth-telling I can take.

‘I know,’ I say as the tears begin to fall again. ‘I just . . . feel a bit broken right now.’

Cait rubs my back. She’s had her share of useless men over time, including her ex-husband who Cait now refers to as the ‘cheating, spineless loser whose name is never to be mentioned’.

‘Is it too much to want a man who says, “You mean more to me than anything else”. Is that too much to ask?’ I’m genuinely wondering.

‘No, it’s not, Abs.’ I love Stevie.

‘A man who shows I am worth fighting for?’ I ask.

‘No! Abbey, you deserve a man who makes you feel appreciated and valued every single day. We all deserve that.’ And I love that Stevie still believes we’re all worth it.

Even though I’m not so sure I can be loved the way Stevie believes, I simply say, ‘I know. I know.’

I can hear myself and my lame responses, but I’m drowning in my low self-esteem right now, and deep down I worry that what I *want* and what I *deserve* may not align.

My problem has always been accepting less than I deserve, or taking on unnecessary challenges because I’ve always believed I can fix things, that I can make almost any situation ‘work’. Now, I just want to grow old with someone. Is that too much to ask? And am I too old to get married, even without the white gown?

‘I still want to get married one day, even if I’m fifty-five,’ I say out loud before I can stop myself. ‘Is there something wrong with wanting that? Why should those dreams only be for young people?’

‘There’s absolutely nothing wrong with wanting whatever makes you happy. But don’t forget you have two beautiful sons

and three gorgeous grandkids who all adore you, which is more than I have.’ Cait couldn’t have children and while she’s always said it worked for her because she’s not maternal, I’ve seen her with my grannies, and the love she has for children is incredible. ‘I’m not the romantic of the group,’ Cait smiles at Stevie, ‘but I believe in love and fidelity and being with someone who brings out the best in you.’ She sips. ‘I also believe that great sex is essential.’

Cait’s glowing with positive energy, or maybe the glow is from the tequila. Either way, I want to uppercut myself again, for lacking gratitude for everything I have in my life.

‘And we love your boys.’ Cait looks from me to Stevie. ‘You know they’re *our* family too.’

‘Of course I know that, and they love you both back.’ I feel like I need to explain myself further though, because our face-to-face get-togethers are so rare and it’s the only time we can deep dive into all that’s happening in our lives, on every level. ‘The truth is, as lame as it sounds in 2025, I want to get married and have the big fat Koori wedding of the year.’

‘Oh yes, we need a HUGE fucken wedding,’ Cait slurs dreamily. ‘Under the stars, with fairy lights, and long trestle tables and candelabras, and hot groomsmen to perv on.’

‘And a Koori band,’ Stevie adds.

‘Maybe you two could have a double wedding?’ There’s a sparkle in Cait’s eyes, as if she’s plotting something

‘Hang on a minute, cupid.’ Stevie pretends to fire an arrow at Cait. ‘I want a relationship, but I’m not that fussed on the marriage thing. When Harry died, so did the dream of the wedding, I guess.’ We are all thrown back in time to when the father of Stevie’s daughter, Anthea, died, how Cait I were there as much

as we could be to support Stevie and every text message ended with #cancersux. We just look at each other knowingly because sometimes words aren't required. When Stevie is ready, she turns to me and says, 'I do like being a bridesmaid though.' She winks with a smile.

'Of course, you'll both be in peach taffeta.' The threat had always been there, and the laughter has finally returned. 'Okay, so that was my dream in the 1980s. Now you can wear whatever you want. As long as you're both there. And the man. I just need one man who wants to make a commitment and believes we can be together for eternity or believes he can at least love me for a length of time.'

'Sorry, Sis, but I'm not sure men today are capable of that,' Cait says. 'I haven't been to a wedding in years. It's not like when we were younger and people were getting married, everyone just lives together these days.'

'Or so many just live on Tinder, maybe to avoid the heart-break.' Stevie shrugs.

'So, dickwad wasn't marriage material, but at least you got to go to a lot of good restaurants, and we know you love a good feed.' Cait, as always, is practical and knows my dietary habits well.

'True.' I rub my Pilates belly that hides a lot of my eating sins, and I can't help but think about the countless times Robert and I dined in lavish restaurants throughout the city, and in Melbourne when he took me on some of his business trips. It was always a good chance to grab a cuppa with Cait too. I'll miss that lifestyle, and the physical connection – the sex was off-the-charts fantastic – but in hindsight, the mental stimulation was always lacking. 'The truth is, we had nothing in common, aside

from the love of a good pinot noir and a well-cooked kangaroo steak, which I introduced him to, of course.'

'Of course.' Cait nods and refills my glass.

'At least he knew what he was doing compared to some others who acted like finding my G-spot was like looking for something lost in the Bermuda Triangle.' I can't help but chuckle.

When Cait spits her drink across the table, I nearly choke laughing and Stevie immediately springs into action, cleaning it up.

'So, I guess I'll miss the sex.' I look off dreamily, remembering our last night together, making love in a hotel room with the curtains open and the rain lashing the windows. I'd always wanted to make love in a field in the rain, but Robert wouldn't let himself go enough for that. I'd lost count of the times I'd watched the scene of Noah and Allie kissing in the rain in *The Notebook*. They were also from different social backgrounds and faced many barriers, with societal pressures forcing them apart. In some ways, their situation was like mine and Robert's. The difference was, Allie and Noah loved each other. I think maybe I just loved the idea of love and Robert, as it turned out, only loved the physical. And although he had kids, he'd never been married either.

'He says he wants to be friends, but what's the point?' I ask seriously.

'Ask yourself this, Aunty: will your life be better, worse or the same if he's not in it? It's the kind of question I would ask my students if they were confused about someone or something.'

'That's a really good way to look at the situation, Stevie.' Now being able to look at my relationship with Robert, I don't think there's any real benefit for me in us remaining friends. I'm not interested in friends-with-benefits.

‘You know being friends means you must forgive him, right?’ Cait doesn’t say it, but I know she’s not a big fan of forgiveness without a meaningful apology, and the actions to accompany it.

‘I know, and I need to forgive myself too. *Apparently*, forgiveness relieves you of your pain and resentment, so that’s a good thing, I guess?’

‘Agreed,’ Cait and Stevie say in unison.

‘But,’ Cait adds, ‘don’t make the mistake of being so understanding that you overlook how you feel, or that he also funds the LNP!’

I sigh for the umpteenth time, conscious of how much time I am monopolising this afternoon with my boring situation, but our times away are about just this: unpacking our lives, sharing the highs and the lows, our challenges and dreams. So, I let it all out. That way it’s done and we can move onto discussing someone else’s dysfunction or supreme excellence.

‘I know I can be too much for some people. I have strong beliefs. I’m passionate, and I’m not quiet about the things I care about.’ There are many things in life I will not be silent on and I will never apologise for. ‘And I know Robert was uncomfortable when I mentioned sovereignty and self-determination. When I think back now, it seems it was always a one-sided conversation, and over time, rather than having to self-censor or tone-down my words, I realise I ended up saying less.’

‘That must’ve been so hard, Abs.’ Stevie is leaning forward, listening intently.

‘*And*, I know it bothered him whenever I wore my Dark+ Disturbing tees.’

‘How? What did he say?’ Stevie asks.

‘He never commented on what any slogan said, he’d just suggest I wear a jacket, even when I was already breaking a sweat on a hot day.’ Stevie rolls her eyes while Cait raises her right hand to sip her drink, and her left to flip the bird.

‘*And*,’ I pause, because I know this will tip the girls over the edge, ‘he told me I was high maintenance . . . more than once.’

‘Stop right there!’ Stevie says in a rare forceful tone.

Cait steps up. ‘That’s bullshit! Any man who says you are high maintenance does *not* see your value.’

‘You are top shelf! And *anyone* who thinks you are “too much”,’ Stevie does air quotes with one hand as she’s holding a bowl of pistachios in the other, ‘are not *your* people. *We* are your people, and you have plenty of people *without* Robert. Good riddance, I say.’

Cait takes the bowl from Stevie, and adds, ‘And we are *all* on that top shelf together.’

I can hear the love and logic, but it’s still Robert’s words that play on a loop in my head. ‘When I questioned him about his politics, he said he didn’t like my attitude.’

Stevie is incensed. ‘Attitude? You don’t have *attitude*. You have boundaries, standards, a moral compass and *dignity*.’ She stands up on the last word as if in protest and announces, ‘I officially hate that dickwad. And you both know I am not a hater.’

‘Except for your phobias!’ Cait sings out.

‘Correct. And if there was a phobia for hating, I would have that! But today, I just hate the dickwad formerly known as Robert.’ Stevie and Cait high-five each other and I laugh at the scene that’s unfolded between us today.

‘You two are the *only* people I know who use the word dickwad.’

‘That’s gonna have to be our word for the day,’ Cait laughs. ‘But not sure I’ll be able to find a Wiradyuri translation for dickwad.’ Ever since we started learning Wiradyuri online, Cait has made an effort to teach us a word every day, sending it via text or Messenger. Aside from my kids and grannies, hers are the one personal message I always respond to before I turn my phone off at night.

‘You look for the word, Sis, and I’ll organise some music.’ Stevie starts bluetoothing her phone and switching through playlists. ‘We need to spark this day up.’

I take the moment of quiet to contemplate if I should tell them my self-esteem is at an all-time low, that the fear of never being loved again is overwhelming. That maybe I *am* high maintenance; too much work for any man to love me for who I am. Maybe I am too emotionally damaged, too mentally screwed up. And maybe, when I am naked, I am not the sexy being I once thought I was. Memories of being a teenager and sticking my finger down my throat appear for the first time in decades.

I swallow these thoughts and stand up, a bit wobbly from the too-strong margaritas. ‘I think I need to lie down for a spell and then do some stretches before we hit the dance floor tonight.’

Stevie turns the volume down. ‘I suddenly feel tired too. But we *will* celebrate your birthday tonight, Abs, right?’

‘Okay, if you insist.’ I start to clear our glasses, glad my birthday is 1 October, because it falls on a long weekend some years and, as I get older that extra recovery time is appreciated.

‘Before you two nannas go take your naps,’ Cait calls us to attention. ‘Today’s word of the day is ngumambinya. It means trust.’

Stevie and I have a few attempts at saying it under Cait’s instruction.

## The Paradise Pact

‘I want you to trust that you will love again, Abs. That you will be loved, and you will one day get married, if that’s what you really want. Okay?’ Stevie squeezes my hand.

‘And I love that you have enough trust and belief for the both of us today.’