

## *Joanna*

WHAT INCREDIBLE BAD luck. One drunken night with my best friend's husband and then this unwanted pregnancy. Wasn't it bad enough that I had been seduced? inveigled? into it. I could hardly believe I had let it happen, and then this. I didn't want Martin's baby. I didn't want any baby at that time, but especially not Martin's. I'm not sure that I even liked him and I'd certainly never entertained feelings of any kind for him. Definitely not romantic ones. I was on the brink of hysteria. If it had been any other man I could have wept on Louisa's shoulder, but not this time, this predicament.

I couldn't go on with the pregnancy: I knew that. I had always fought for a woman's right to choose, but never thought it would be something I had to do myself. I was glad I had taken a stand before it became relevant. The day after I had final confirmation, my boss called me in to tell me I was to go to England to continue negotiations with a publisher I had been involved with for some time. This was to be my third time in London. I had a good base

there, with an ex-pat who ran a bed and breakfast place near the Chalk Farm Underground.

Betsy had been living in London for years. She welcomed me these days more as a friend than another passing client. On my first morning there I went down to breakfast as usual, though I had hardly slept. I couldn't eat. My stomach heaved as I looked at the spread Betsy always provided; I had always tucked in with gusto, but not this time.

'You've gone quite green,' Betsy observed. 'Not at your best?'

I toyed with the idea of pleading jet lag, but in the end I just shook my head.

'Feeling seedy?' This time I just nodded.

'Know why?' Another nod.

'Need some help? I know a good doctor.'

For the first time in ages I was able to smile. 'You must be clairvoyant. Yes, I'd love some help ... to find the right doctor.'

'Fine. Drink a soothing cup while I make a phone call.'

I started to talk but she stopped me. 'No names, no pack-drill. You can tell the doctor whatever you want. All I need to be able to tell them is how many months.'

I told her two and she said, 'Great, shouldn't be a problem.'

The whole thing was arranged and over in a few days. The doctor I saw was like Betsy, asking no questions, though I would have welcomed the chance to pour out

my woes. If only Louisa had been there to hold my hand, it would have been easier. As it was, I knew I had done the right thing and I felt a great relief, but I couldn't help being sad. As I sat half-reclining in the recovery room waiting for Betsy to pick me up, I remembered how Lou had confided the story of her own ridiculous marriage predicament, and the other times we had shared our hopes and fears. Not this one, not the problem I'd brought on myself by being weak and drinking so much I hadn't the strength to push him away. Besides, I had been feeling sorry for him and hadn't thought he'd go so far. Missing Louisa, the sense of loss, brought tears to my eyes.

Another doctor talking to a patient nearby must have noticed.

'Are you okay?' he asked. His Australian accent made me smile.

'I'm fine. Sorry about the tears but I'm really doing well.'

'You don't look fine. Can I get you a hot drink, or some water? They make okay sandwiches here.'

I smiled. 'Thanks, but I'm really fine. Just a passing moment.'

Then Betsy arrived. 'Sorry I'm late. I see you've met Peter. Jo, this is Peter Matthews.'

He turned to the young woman he had been talking to.

'Jane, this is Betsy, an old friend from home. And ... sorry, I don't know your name.'

'Joanna. Joanna Leslie. You can probably tell I'm from

Oz as well.' Our eyes caught for a moment then he went on with introductions.

'That makes four of us. This is Jane Scott. She's from Sydney too.'

Peter and I smiled at one another. I thought, what a time to meet someone who is so nice and looks so right.

Peter said, 'Well, I can see you are in good hands, but I'd like to make sure. Can I check on you some time?'

'I'm taking her back to my place now,' Betsy said. 'Drop by when you like. Give us a ring.'

It was three days before he came. In between he'd rung four times. Betsy was impressed.

'I've known him since he came to London. All my friends think he's dishy, but he's never been easy to get to know. Perfectly friendly but not your run-of-the-mill, slap-you-on-the-back Aussie.'

He came late in the afternoon. I had been back to work but taking things slowly. Betsy let him in. 'Sorry I can't stay,' she said. 'But Jo's here.' He nodded; I knew he had come to see me.

We stared at one another. I saw a freckle-faced sandy-haired man, not particularly prepossessing except for the depth of his pale eyes. I suppose he saw a drained face, but with, I hoped, a welcoming expression. We could have stood there for hours till we heard Betsy calling her farewells and going out the door. I held out both my hands and he took them in his. Again we stood looking at one another. In the end I spoke.

‘It wasn’t an auspicious meeting, in the recovery room of an abortion clinic.’ I twisted away so he wouldn’t see my tears. He held on to my hands.

‘Depends,’ he said. ‘Depends on how you were feeling about being there. And it’s not just an abortion clinic. Jane was there to have a nasty injury fixed. You didn’t have to mention abortion.’

‘But I did have to. If we are going to see one another, I don’t want that to be unspoken between us. Unless I’m jumping in too fast and you are just being polite.’

He shook his head.

‘I hated being there, but tremendously pleased it was over, absolutely no regrets, but sad at the same time.’ I twisted back towards him but took my hands from his grip. He saw my tears.

‘You don’t have to tell me anything.’

‘I think I want to tell you. At least I want to talk to someone about it. I haven’t had a chance before. Oh, Betsy’s been terrific but she doesn’t want to know.’ I looked up into his eyes. ‘Perhaps you don’t want to either.’

His only response was to sit down. I sat in a chair opposite him, eyes on my lap, looking at my hands.

‘I’ve had a great friend since we met at school. I could never understand why we became so close. She was one of those popular girls everyone wanted to be with. Quite beautiful, with a great dress sense, while I was fairly invisible.’ I ignored his attempts to interrupt. ‘Anyway, we became really close and stayed that way for years. We

talked to one another about everything. She's the only person I've ever really exchanged confidences with. Lou – Louisa – married straight out of uni, one of our lecturers. They're still in love, but there are difficulties. I can't tell you about them. They're not mine to share.'

'Only tell me what you're okay with.'

'I never had a sister, and my mother died when I was young. I don't know what it would be like to have someone like that to be close to, but I think Lou and I were as close as any sisters would be.' I stopped, remembering all that Lou had been to me. Peter nodded.

'I know how you feel. I've only ever had one real friend, a school friend, but we've been pretty close. Not to the lengths of exchanging confidences, but lots of unspoken understanding, I think.'

'Well, Lou told me things about her marriage she didn't tell anyone else. One evening, to cut a long and horrible story short, I found myself alone with Martin. Lou was away, he was down in the dumps, so I stayed. We drank quite a lot.' I almost couldn't go on. The tears were close again. But I wanted to get it out. 'We drank too much. He ... I'd like to say he overpowered me, but it wouldn't be true. I was too drunk to do much more than try to push him off – I just let him. I was appalled in the morning. We both told Lou. I was mortified. What a clichéd situation: to go to bed with your best friend's husband.' I paused then raced on. The worst was over. Peter was looking at me steadily. 'Lou laughed when I told her, said

it was her fault for not telling me she wouldn't be there. She said it didn't matter. You have to know Lou to know how I could believe her. She said she hoped we could go on being friends. She helped me to feel better.'

'Pretty special friend.'

I looked up at him, meeting his eyes for the first time since I'd begun my tale. 'Yes, we're still close.' I dropped my eyes again. 'Then I found I was pregnant. I couldn't tell her. Not being able to talk to Lou was as bad as the pregnancy and the abortion. I think that's what the tears you saw in the hospital were about.' I looked up at him again, and when he didn't seem to be judging me I was able to say, 'You're the first person I could talk to.'

He leaned over and took my hands in his. He didn't say anything and neither did I. It was as though he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words. After a long time I said, 'I'm being a rotten hostess. Would you like a drink, or some coffee?'

'Can I take you out for a meal?'

'I'd like that.'

He smiled and his face was no longer plain. The sprinkle of freckles across his face were not just brown spots, but like a dusting of the dots one saw on the skin of ripe apricots. I wanted to touch them, but did not. There would be another time for that. 'Love at first sight' does happen. I thought of Louisa and Martin but that was different: their immediate attraction had been mostly physical. That's important yet only part of what was central for me. And

he hadn't said a word of disapproval, didn't even tell me it didn't matter, because of course it did.

'Then let's go. It'll give us a chance to get to know one another better,' he said.

'I have to go back to Sydney the day after tomorrow.'

'But you'll be back?'

'Yes, I think it'll be a longer stint next time. My company has been talking about a joint project with people here and I think I'll be the Australian on the ground.'

By the time dinner was over I had discovered that he was specialising in obstetrics, had another two years in England; that his parents were divorced; that his best friend was a philosopher; that he had lived most of his life with his mother, but had a good relationship with his father and his second wife; and that he'd never had a special girlfriend, just casual encounters. I liked him more as the evening went on. I already knew that I could tell him anything, just as before I could talk to Lou.

We walked back to Betsy's hand in hand. 'I won't come in. I have an early start in the morning, but I'm free in the afternoon.'

'I'm free after five. Could we have dinner again? Sorry I can't cook for you here, I'm not bad in the kitchen.'

'You'll have chances to prove that.'

We met in the city after work and walked down to the Embankment, holding hands. I couldn't believe I was so comfortable and yet so excited to be with him. We kept stopping and looking at one another, smiling and walking

on. I wondered whether this was how all young lovers felt, not that I was all that young. Why hadn't I felt like this before?

As if he knew what I was thinking, Peter said, 'I feel great.'

We walked as far as the Tate, took a bus back to Trafalgar Square then the train to Chalk Farm. As if we had agreed, we retraced our steps to the little place where we had eaten the night before. The waiter recognised us. We already had an established pattern.

'I can arrange to take some time off tomorrow. What time does your plane leave?'

'Early, I'm afraid. I have to be at Heathrow at nine for check-in.'

'I'll take you. That is, if you don't have other arrangements?'

'No but ...'

'No buts. I can be here in plenty of time.'

'Hardly seems worth your while leaving.' I looked at my watch. It was well after midnight.

'Why don't you collect your things now and come back to my place?'

I felt a slow blush rising from my neck and colouring my cheeks. Peter noticed at once.

'Hey, I'm not putting the hard word on you. It just seems easier than anything else. But of course I'll come back if you'd rather do it that way.'

'I do think it would be better. There's Betsy, and ...'

‘Sure. I’ll pick you up around seven-thirty in case the traffic to Heathrow is bad.’ He even seemed pleased that I was taking my time.

At the airport next morning, we could hardly pull apart. ‘You will be back, won’t you?’

My lips were trembling. ‘You’ll still be here, won’t you?’ I answered.

IT WAS SIX weeks before I was in London again; we talked on the phone almost every day and wrote each week. He suggested I might meet his mother in Sydney and although I was apprehensive, I agreed.

‘She’s a bit of an airhead,’ he told me. ‘But she’s good value. I’m sure you’ll get on.’

His mother rang me and I did find her delightful if sometimes embarrassing.

‘You must call me Petrina. If Peter suggested we meet, he must think we’ll be friends. I know it’s a ridiculous name,’ she bubbled on. ‘I hope if you have a daughter you don’t call her Petrina. I want you to know I won’t be at all upset; I’ll be pleased if you prefer something else; perhaps you have a family name you’ll want to carry on.’

I blushed. ‘I don’t think Peter and I are anywhere near ... He hasn’t mentioned ...’

‘Oh, have I put my foot in it? Peter will be furious. I so want him to be happy. Don’t tell him I said anything. But I’m sure it will happen. Peter is too serious to have suggested we meet unless ...’

I couldn't help laughing at her, or maybe with her. But I changed the subject. 'Peter told me you have a holiday house on the coast. Do you go there often?'

She sighed. 'Not as often as I would like. Would you like to come down with me sometime?'

She took me there the following weekend. It was enchanting. You could never get tired of watching the waves.

When Peter rang the next time I told him. 'What a perfect place. You must have had wonderful times there.'

'Not as wonderful as they will be when I'm there with you.'

WHEN WE MET at Betsy's again, I already knew we were about to become lovers. Betsy too seemed to expect it.

'I'll leave you two together,' she said as soon as Peter arrived.

We didn't rush it. We went back to the little restaurant where we had eaten before. The waiter had changed. We didn't linger.

I moved into Peter's flat in Belsize Park and within weeks we were planning our wedding. We wanted to get married though we couldn't exactly say why. It just seemed right. Petrina, long-distance, was as pleased as we were. Our pleasure was contained; Petrina's was not.

'I knew it would happen,' she told Peter on the phone. 'She's perfect for you. Now I'm waiting on a grandchild.'

Peter laughed. 'Give us a break.'