

Chapter 1

Helena

She was still the most beautiful woman that my eyes had ever had the pleasure of viewing. Flawlessly awe-inspiring. Breathtaking. Her hair was a like a warm ray of sunshine. Her smile was the moon and all of the stars in the sky. She was the sun that my planet orbited. She was a dignified grace. A shining light. She was love. She was energy. She was home. The source of my unbridled admiration was my wife, Helena, who stood in the kitchen of our house with her back to the window. She smiled at our baby, Matilda, to reveal a set of impeccably pearly white teeth. I watched them from the kitchen table; the morning light illuminated Helena, putting the delicate features of her porcelain face in slight shadow and making her hair seem even more golden than normal. She was a natural beauty, tall and slender, and one who needed no make-up at all to appear beautiful – the result of an Anglo-Dutch ancestry that had ventured to the great southern land in search of greener pastures in the 1950s and eventually led to her culmination. The love that I had for her and Matilda was almost indescribable.

The first time that I ever met Helena was forever burned into the deepest part of my mind. Although versions of truth deducted from memories can sometimes be clouded by nostalgia and certain details can be shaped by our rose-tinted glasses over time, this was not one of those cases. It was a cold June night, Friday to be exact, when the warm glow of fate decided to shine upon me. I was at a bohemian establishment that was situated in

an industrial sector of Melbourne's inner east, as I found myself at the bar ordering some refreshments, ensconced in a familiar sensation of mild intoxication. I had reached a nice sweet spot, one where I could still engage in normal conversation and convey charm and valued opinion if required, but with an altered sense of confidence that I would not normally possess in a state of sobriety – 'Dutch Courage' if you will. There was no audible music playing; only the loud chatter of semi-drunken conversations and general merriment resonated around the room. I stood waiting for my order when I broke from my drunken daze and happened to glance at the person standing next to me. And there she was. Her eyes met my glance as she nodded politely in my direction. She wore a green, knitted jumper with black jeans and hooped earrings that dangled from her delicate ears, dancing with every movement of her head. Her striking blonde hair shimmered as it carved a path halfway down her back. As stated, I was filled with sufficient courage to engage in conversation with inflated self-assurance; something that I would most likely have not done if sober. The opening line was something that always made me cringe.

'I see you got the memo about the green jumpers as well.' I smiled, referring to us both wearing similarly coloured tops.

She returned a look that lit up her soft face, illuminating the most beautiful green eyes that gleamed with the light of the room.

'Yeah, I did,' she replied cheekily. 'Nice to meet someone who follows instruction.'

I was actually quite taken aback by her beauty as my mind scrambled to find a follow-up anecdote. Unfortunately, any further conversation was abruptly halted by the barman who served my requested drinks, which I then paid for and begrudgingly vacated my position at the front of the bar. I wished the gorgeous stranger a pleasant evening before bringing my collection of pint glasses filled with the amber ale back to the table where my thirsty friends waited in anticipation.

‘Did you blokes see the bird I was chatting to at the bar? Absolute cracker!’

‘Yeah, I did, but I’m that dehydrated from waiting for my beer I thought I was hallucinating. Not used to seeing you chat up good sorts!’ my mate Dennis replied in jest.

The remainder of the crew at the table chuckled at his facetious comment and we continued down the path of a more classically blokey chat. The beautiful stranger sat with her friends across the other side of the room and we exchanged fleeting glances with each other throughout the course of my pint. Eventually, the boys finished their drinks and placed them down on the table to signify a conclusion to the evening’s proceedings. It was then that I decided that I was not going to be able to forgive myself if I didn’t take a chance with the newly acquired apple of my eye. I obtained a serviette from the table and proceeded to write my name and number on it before emptying the contents of my pint with a few nervous gulps. When we all got up to leave, I strode over to the table where she sat. Her distracted eyes locked upon me; nerves began to fizz in my stomach. Before I knew it, I stood at the table with all of its members beholding me curiously. Thankfully, I didn’t falter at the realisation of this audience as a gutful of the good stuff had furnished me with a comforting bravado. I took the serviette, which I had folded up in my hand, and handed it to Helena.

‘I’m so sorry to interrupt but you dropped this before.’

Her eyes twinkled playfully as she received it and opened it to read. She then looked up at me with a blush-ridden smile; this was the first time that I ever noticed the slight flare of her nostrils whenever she was graced with excitement. I quickly turned and made haste to my friends, who were watching with large smirks on their faces. I had made it about two paces away when I caught my name uttered by the sweetest voice that I had ever heard.

‘Jack!’

I turned and looked at its source, who beamed back at me.

‘I’m Helena.’

I returned a close-lipped, cheeky grin and nodded, continuing my way in the direction of my friends. I remember hearing the members of her table react with a reprise of giggling, while I was greeted by my mates with a chorus of restrained drunken cheering and back slaps as we exited the venue. I was able to let my adulation become more apparent once we got outside.

‘Mate, I can’t believe I did that!’ I laughed with great satisfaction at my efforts.

Dennis put his arm around me and gave me praise. ‘Jacko, ya bloody legend! That was top-notch stuff there. It took guts.’

‘Thanks, mate! Now, just gotta hope she actually contacts me!’ I said as we made our way into the night.

She did contact me quite soon after that. In fact, it was the very next day that I received a text message from Helena that asked me how my night was and we made plans to see each other the following week. Our first date felt so organic and easy. The conversation flowed so seamlessly and the eventual kiss at the end of the night was equal parts tender and electric. From there our courtship blossomed. If we weren’t with each other, we were counting down the minutes until we were. The mundane became riveting. I wanted to be in her presence all the time and I wanted the world to know that she was mine. It seemed as if the caterpillars that had laid dormant in my stomach for 32 years had hatched and took flight whenever I was in her company.

I remember lying next to her one morning, breathing in her scent and thinking excitedly, *I’ve finally found her.*

I’d had previous relationships before her, of course. Ones where I had willed love, forcing myself to think that it was possible and then waiting intently for those feelings to arrive. But, of course, they didn’t, because they can’t simply be willed. They

can't be forced or coerced. In all honesty, sometimes they can't even be explained. It made me realise that in all of my previous relationships, something was absent. Something intangible. Something intrinsic. Something I wasn't aware I desired. Something that I had wanted my whole life but never knew what it was. And she made me realise those things; she was comprised of everything. Our love developed into the type where I didn't want to engage in sleep because it meant less conscious time with her, but when I slept next to her it invoked the most peaceful version of slumber. And on waking, I was so overjoyed to see Helena next to me; I could've just stared and studied every part of her face and body for hours on end. We were insatiable, the attraction and physical chemistry were unquestionable. Simply put, she was the most beautiful woman in the world and I wanted to be with no one else. We were existing in our own version of bliss.

However, it wasn't without faults or trepidation. We both had walls up, although hers did seem more substantial initially. But once she let me in to her world, there was nowhere else on Earth that I wanted to be. I likened it to the song that we had our first dance to at our wedding. It was Bruce Springsteen's *Secret Garden*, and to me, Helena's heart was a place where *'everything you want, where everything you need, will always stay.'*

I actually hadn't always thought a love like mine was possible. At the time of my life before I met Helena, I had shared a similar viewpoint to most individuals of my vintage. When some people crawl into their thirties and find themselves partnerless, they can begin to become clouded with a degree of scepticism and disheartenment at the reality of finding the love that they are searching for. I was in that cloud, albeit mildly. I wasn't hugely cynical or bitter, as my optimism definitely outweighed my cynicism – I was just realistic about it all.

As time elapsed, I was confronted by the possibility that the hypothetical perfect life partner that I had dreamed of, and

thought that I would definitely find one day, was not an inevitably forgone conclusion. I had even started to debate whether I was capable of finding love, speculating whether I was simply adept to being able to formulate those magical feelings for another person. I mean, I had never experienced them, so it was entirely feasible that it wasn't possible for me. However, I did believe that meeting a suitable partner and falling in love was influenced by two intertwined factors: the first one being timing. You both had to be ready for the love and commitment of a relationship to give it the greatest chance of success. I had never been one for tiresome old sayings like 'it will come when you least expect it'. I thought that those were said to people who required hope without truly thinking of the practicality of the saying itself. *So, I had to not expect it for the greatest chance of finding it? If I really wanted it, then was it less chance to come?* That didn't make a lick of sense to me.

The second factor was fear, which in my situation, played a big part. The overall impermanence of love that my experiences had provided me with scared me. *I mean, what were the chances of finding a love that endured my entire existence on this earth?* Love by nature could be quite fleeting for me. In so many past relationships, I thought that I'd discovered love, only to have those initial sparks fade in the blink of an eye. The vulnerability of it all scared me the most; the act of leaving yourself or another open to the torment of heartbreak. The profound fear of giving yourself wholeheartedly and then having it ripped away, only to be left utterly devastated, with a direly hopeless feeling of devastation. This was a frightening possibility that confronted a trepid romantic, and to find a person that made me ignorant of all of these fears was seen as no mean feat. I felt that she would've had to have been truly amazing, in fact, near on perfect. A seamless fit for me. The perfect mix of evergreen love and insatiable lust; profound enough to maintain its evergreen in the fade of youth and death of lustfulness, the journey through middle age and the inevitable dawn of old age. To be resilient enough as to endure a

lifetime of ebbs and flows. In reality, I felt that she would've had to have been an out-and-out game changer. And when I found her, she simply was. Undoubtedly.

It took me a couple of months to realise that I'd truly fallen, possibly due to my self-preserving, natural predisposition of not wanting to admit defeat at the hands of love or vulnerability. But true love found a way. It wasn't a romantic gesture that led to this profound moment either; it was quite the contrary. I awoke next to Helena in my old share house after an end-of-lease party that my housemates and I had thrown, with a hangover that indicated that I'd overindulged the night before. As I turned to her, I was greeted with the most beautifully tender smile. Her emerald eyes met mine and we stared so wondrously at one another. The window light at her back gave her a brightly warm luminescence and at that very instant, she truly looked like an angel. That was the moment I realised that I loved her. The moment that I realised there was no one else on the planet for me. I had found her, my soul mate. I could only describe it in words as the fuzziest of feelings in my heart, with my body experiencing a warmly contented glow. I articulated this affinity to her a couple of weeks later when I blurted it out at an airport gate as she left to board for a work trip. She didn't reply but rather just returned a longing smile with a gentle embrace, a courteous way of saying 'thank you'.

Despite this, I wasn't disheartened because somehow I just knew that she felt the same way too. She later clarified that she wasn't ready to declare her love at that moment in time, still quite timorous at the vulnerability that those words entailed. However, a week later she returned the favour as we lay in bed together. And with those three small words, our own little world had been conceived. We'd obtained our own version of perfection; a place where no one could ever maim us because we had each other for fortification.

Our bliss was sustained solidly for a year before I elected to

propose. I didn't really have the desire to engage in the traditional down-on-one-knee style phenomenon or undertake any form of grand gesture. Plus, I knew Helena had never coveted that either. So, I decided to do it one evening during a driving trip that we had taken across the United States, as we lay on a mattress in the back of the large van that we had commandeered for the expedition. In the campgrounds of Yosemite National Park, I passed her a note that I had written, which read:

*'Ain't got no money to buy you diamonds and pearls,
I would love nothing more than for you to be my girl.
I promise to shower you with hugs and kisses,
I would love nothing more than for you to be my missus.'*

She read it and stifled a laugh before looking back at me, as I sat up and turned to her, producing an engagement ring.

'Will you marry me?' I asked a little nervously.

Her eyes opened wide and she obscured her mouth to hide her astonishment as tears ran from her eyes.

'Of course, I will.' She beamed, kissing me with the softest of lips and squeezing me with all of her might.

About twelve months later we were married at a winery in an elegantly simple ceremony; neither of us had wanted a big hassle and Helena had never fantasised of having a colossal wedding like some women tend to. She wore the most stunning white dress without a veil, a nod to her practical yet graceful nature. I will admit that I cried when our eyes met for the first time as she walked down the aisle of the little chapel. I was purely overwhelmed by the happiness and perfection of that moment. Just as I was when Matilda was born a couple of years after that, having been overawed by the immediately unconditional love that had for the tiny creature that I held in my arms. She made me feel complete; my heart radiated with the love that parents constantly describe as one that you will never truly appreciate

until you bring another life into this world.

I was jolted from nostalgia to the present moment by a loud cry from Matilda as I left the table to pick her up out of her high chair. I rocked her from side to side and after a few moments, she stopped crying and looked up at me. Matilda appeared to have taken after her mother aesthetically at this stage of her existence and had not inherited any of my dark features. I was grateful for this, given how much I coveted my wife's angelic beauty.

'I love you, you little grub,' I said, planting a kiss on her forehead before placing her back in her high chair.

I returned to the table to collect my plate and then made my way into the kitchen to put it in the dishwasher.

'Alright, my darling, I gotta go and make some money,' I said, turning to Helena and wrapping her in an embrace as we kissed each other.

'I love you,' she whispered.

'I love you too,' I muttered, returning the proclamation tenderly before leaving, slightly unwillingly, for work.