one more &

A struggle for self and soul

LYNETTE CHENNELL

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The Dance

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Chapter 4

Prince Charming

At some stage in their lives, most girls dream of a fairy tale prince, the one man who will sweep them off their feet and treat them like a princess. Together they will make a home and build a life.

I never had that dream. Instead, I was terrified of having to fulfil a man's expectations in a long-term situation. There was something threatening about it. Instinctively I must have known I pretended my way through life, and that I'd only be good for short-term stage performances.

I'd tried to imagine what it would be like to be married. I'd pictured the bedroom and shuddered with dread at the implication of having to perform over and over for the rest of my life. There would be no escape. The whole idea was too frightening.

I wanted to be loved, but I didn't know what being loved felt like. I only knew what it was like to have a man hurt me or want me for sex. I had no practice in what would be considered, 'normal life', so was not prepared for the way in which my life was about to change.

I'd left the Northern Territory and was working and boarding in the small hotel of a farming district. It was no different to any other place I'd been, and my reason for being there was no different. It was as good a place as any.

After settling in and the initial stimulation of yet another new place wearing off, I was more restless and empty than I had ever been before. I was now twenty-three and it seemed the older I got, the harder it got. I was getting tired of the way I lived my life.

I hadn't been in the town long when the local shire contracted the services of a foreman from the city to build a swimming pool adjacent to the local squash courts. He was put up as a guest in the hotel, and after work, he'd come into the bar and mix jovially with the people.

My first impression of him was unfavourable. There was something about him I didn't like, but eventually, we began talking. I was a very polished bar person and always chatted brightly with the customers. Both single, we began to spend time together, playing squash during the day and drinking red wine at night.

We talked about all sorts of meaningless things and within a few short weeks, our friendship unintentionally became a relationship. Lying on my bed, flirting and talking one night after I'd finished work, he asked me what I was thinking. Ever the lonely actress, I sheepishly replied that I wondered what it would be like to kiss him.

We spent the night together and I awoke the next morning to his assumption we were now an item. I tried to tell him it was a mistake, I didn't want to be with him that way, but I couldn't get the words all the way out. Each time I tried I felt overwhelmed by the fear of hurting his feelings. He seemed needy and boyish and his emotional reaction of hurt made me feel bad. Somehow, he was more valid than I was.

I pushed my feelings aside and became involved in the idea of having someone who really seemed to like me. He was kind and affectionate and listened to my poetry with attentive interest. As the weeks passed, I began to feel a sense of familiarity.

I let him move into my room. While I worked at night he would be upstairs doing my ironing. When my shift was over he'd be waiting with soft lights and my favourite Pan Flute track ready to play.

After a nice hot shower, I'd slip into bed and he'd gently put headphones over my ears and tell me to lay back and relax. It couldn't have turned out more perfect.

I came to like the attention, the affection, and the romance. It was a huge contrast to the way my life had been before his arrival. Until then, working behind the bar was the only place I didn't feel lost.

Sundays had been the worst days. I'd work the morning session and the afternoon, but in between it was as if I was the only person alive on the planet. The little country town went distressingly quiet, with families staying in their homes or congregating at the lake a few miles out of town. I would sit in my room or out on the balcony of the hotel and watch the dust get blown around by the dry summer wind. Sometimes, I got in my car and drove the bush roads and tracks, looking, hoping to find something. It made the isolation I felt even more piercing.

The thoughtful things being done for me now changed all that. My barrenness disappeared with something tangible to take its place.

I was beginning to feel special and sometimes wore one of his shirts, a statement of possession and belonging. But it was like I was playing in a game, not real life at all.

The affection I initially enjoyed soon became smothering. My boyfriend insisted we fall asleep at night with our arms and legs wrapped around each other. I'd wake in the morning to find myself on the very edge of the mattress facing away from him. I felt like I was being swallowed by his need for constant touching and closeness. Sometimes I got so agitated and angry I just wanted to explode, but I couldn't. I stuffed my feelings down instead and made little excuses about why I needed space.

Our relationship began to change. As I started to pull away in an attempt to keep my sense of separateness, the loving doting man slowly became jealous and possessive and a nasty side emerged. Our friendship began to explode with arguments and manipulations of my autonomy. Yet part of me felt grown up to be in a real relationship. I was especially dazzled by the fact that he even let me drive his car.

Not long after my boyfriend had moved into my room, I discovered he'd lied to me about being single. A woman in the city he'd told everyone was his housekeeper, turned out to be his partner and the mother of his two-year-old son. She had found out about me by coming across a poem I'd written for him, put away among his things on one of his weekend trips back to the city. All hell broke loose.

I knew he had been divorced and had a daughter from his marriage, and knew he had a child from a de-facto relationship, a relationship I had been told was long over.

But the woman was in fact still living in his house, still under the impression they were a couple, and still sleeping in their bed. The explanation I was given was that she stayed in his home under joint agreement as his housekeeper, so he could still have contact with his son. Christmas was coming up and he wanted to spend it with him. Their plan was that she would move out after Christmas into a place of her own. She did not still share his bed but had moved into the spare room. According to him, she was just jealous and trying to cause trouble.

I believed the story because I could not imagine he would lie about something like that. He was a caring man and loved children. He'd taken immense pride in showing me the little medallion hanging from his key ring with the inscription, 'A man never stands as tall as when he stoops to help a child'. He'd shed tears the day he told me about the daughter he'd lost to divorce.

Yet this woman was responding to our getting together like any woman would if she'd just found out her man, the father of her child, was cheating on her. I felt dazed and torn by the sudden turn of events. My quiet, lonely, country existence had become a soap opera, and I was one of the stars.

My boyfriend stuck with his story, stressing this woman was simply trying to break us up because she wanted him back. I received frequent abusive phone calls from her. She'd call me a slut and go into a tirade about what a bastard my boyfriend was, and how bad my parents must be for raising a daughter like me. It didn't make sense. If she loved him so much and wanted to be with him, why was she telling me so vehemently what a rotten person he was?

Her behaviour seemed to add validity to the story that she really was simply jealous and vengeful because he wouldn't take her back.

Christmas arrived. I went home to spend it with my family. My boyfriend went back to his place to be with his son, exdefacto, and another couple they'd previously arranged to have over for Christmas dinner. But on Christmas Eve night, I got a phone call from him saying there'd been a terrible fight. An hour later he pulled up skew whiff on my parent's front lawn, drunk but happy to be with me. My family made him welcome and he fitted right in, no questions asked.

Christmas day was fun and for the first time I had a partner to be my other half among the family. My boyfriend took an instant liking to my big burly brothers. The men drank and played pool, the women cooked, talked, and laughed at the antics of the men. It was a great day.

The festivities over, my boyfriend and I went back to our jobs in the country town. We moved out of the hotel and into a rented house. Our living together was now a more formal and public arrangement.

I began to play house. I bought pot plants, cooked and cleaned, and got a little gray kitten I named Smokey to complete the pretty picture. But even Smokey became a bone of contention as my boyfriend's continuing jealousy extended to me having a pet. I was blasted if I fed it in the mornings before making his cup of tea, and for loving and patting it too much or too often.

My boyfriend's changed behaviour baffled me. I thought it was my fault, and if I could just figure out what went wrong and how to fix it, we could get back to the way it had been in the beginning. But as the days and weeks passed, the fighting only accelerated. I was constantly being criticised, interrogated and accused of going behind his back with a local guy I'd dated a couple of times before we'd met. It made me feel crazy. In front of other people he was always so nice, but the minute we were on our own, he would become attacking, hurtful and nasty.

As distressed as I was about the eruption of hostilities and arguments, I couldn't leave. I was well and truly overcome and entangled in being responsible for the circumstances of my boyfriend's life and his feelings. He'd told me all about his ex-wife and the suffering he'd gone through losing his family, how she'd hurt him financially, and the history he'd had with the ex-defacto. They had always had an unstable relationship and for that reason he'd told her he would never marry her. According to him, she'd tried to trap him into marriage by getting pregnant with their son.

My birthday came around. I was about to turn twenty-four and to celebrate; my boyfriend took me away for an overnight stay at a beach resort. After a lovely romantic dinner, we returned to our hotel room and while wrapped happily around each other, he asked me to marry him. Without batting an eyelid, I excitedly said yes. I was so lucky to have someone ask.

The following week I was wearing an engagement ring that signified to me the beginnings of a normal life, the kind other people had. Once we were married, everything would settle down. The ex-defacto would be out of the picture and he would be nice again.

Of course, the illusion of better days didn't last. I found myself increasingly torn over the way I was being controlled and manipulated. The conflict and his jealousy worsened and as it did, I experienced shuddering moments of unnerving similarities to my last relationship, though without the physical violence, I couldn't quite pinpoint what they were. It was just an awful feeling that churned my stomach.

I constantly felt anxious and nauseated. What made it worse was the nagging suspicion I'd been lied to about the woman in the city. I spent much of my time in tears, oppressed and ensnared by my own stupidity.

I became emotional, weak, and tired as the barrage of sarcasm and belittling remarks wore me down.

Feeling ill and suffering sore and painful breasts, I went to the local doctor who put me on a supplement he felt might help with my breast tenderness. When it didn't I went back and was referred for a mammogram in the neighbouring town.

Once there, I was asked if I might be pregnant. That idea had never occurred to me, to my knowledge it was impossible. Sadly, after hearing about the severity of the infection I'd had when I was younger, my gynaecologist had told me it was highly unlikely I'd ever have children. He'd advised my tubes would have been too badly damaged. Still, this new doctor wanted to be sure, so did a pregnancy test.

After a five-minute wait in reception I was called back into the doctor's office. Feeling rather foolish I waited for him to speak. There was no way I could be pregnant. "Well, the result is positive, congratulations."

Not knowing what that meant I asked, "What does positive mean?"

"It means you're pregnant and calculated from your last period I'd say you're about six weeks."

Outside the surgery, I sat in my car in stunned silence. Pregnant! Disbelieving, I repeated the word out loud, over and over, until unexpectedly I broke out in a smile a Cheshire cat would have been proud of. I'd realised it had been six weeks since my boyfriend and I spent my birthday weekend at the resort. Our child had been conceived the night my fiancé proposed to me. It was so wonderfully romantic.

All the things wrong about my relationship and the situation I was in, disappeared. I was going to have a baby. I'd never been on the pill and had not fallen pregnant before. It just seemed as though this was meant to be, confirmation my fiancé was 'the one', handpicked by God himself. Patting my tummy, I resolved to put everything I had into making my relationship work.

My future husband was excited when he heard the news. The pregnancy brought our marriage plans forward. Invitations were sent out and the details attended to. But my determination to be happy soon crumbled as I began to feel more and more trapped with a man who made me terribly unhappy with his tantrums and dominating behaviour. I was filled with unease and fear.

Panicked, I asked if we could put the wedding off for a while, trying to buy enough time to figure out how I was going to save myself from the impending deadlock of marriage, but the response I received was one of outright anger. He was livid about the way it would make him look to his pommy friends back in the city, and said it was too late anyway, everything had already been organised.

In the face of his tirade and use of guilt to make me feel unreasonable and selfish, I settled to my fate, dropping any thought of not going through with the wedding. I prayed somehow it would all work out.

I couldn't turn to my family for support. I knew the sort of response I'd get if I did, especially from my mother. There would be no words of caring, concerned advice. The pain of being forced to have an abortion at sixteen resurfaced. I was not about to have another one. When I did tell her all she said was, "Well, he'd better marry you because you can't come here."

It suddenly dawned on me that now I was an adult. This time my mother could not control my body. It felt good to have a sense of being apart from her and out of her jurisdiction. For the first time I felt a degree of separateness from the power of my family.

They could not do anything to me anymore. I was coming into a life of my own. I had a man who wanted to marry me, and I was going to have a child.

Morning sickness struck and I was too ill to keep working at the hotel. The slightest whiff of cigarette smoke or stale beer had me dry-retching. I couldn't eat, couldn't drink tea or coffee, or stand the smell of my fiancé's shoes or his sicklysweet aftershave.

Pangs of fear surfaced about not being able to control the changes to my body, and my need to make myself vomit after I'd eaten became more frequent. It was something I'd been doing secretly for some time as a way of trying to manage my weight.

Everything was changing and seemed so fragile. I stopped playing squash and stopped doing my aerobics routine for fear of losing my baby. I was home alone all day feeling lost not being at work. It was all I knew.

My fiancé joined the darts club at the hotel and he'd come home from their practice nights reeking of the rancid smells of the bar. I'd feel violently ill and beg him to shower before coming to bed, but he'd refuse, telling me I was being ridiculous.

His unwillingness to care about my needs made me feel ugly and unacceptable. I had the idea that when a man loves a woman he cherishes her, and when carrying his child, it would be a special time of bonding and togetherness. But as the morning sickness worsened, I began to belch constantly with terrible indigestion. Instead of understanding and acceptance, I received disdain and was continually called a pig. When I cried from the hurt of his cruel remarks, I was told I was being pathetic.

I sold my car and put the money towards the wedding. My last source of independence gone, I was now well and truly stuck, miles away from everything and becoming more conquered as the days passed.

It seemed the only way I could get along with my boyfriend without conflict, was if I behaved in a way that was compliant, but I couldn't do it. I continued to argue for what I needed and thought we'd had before all the trouble started. The arguments always went around in circles, without anything ever being resolved.

My need to vomit intensified as the changing shape of my body brought on greater bouts of anxiety and panic. I couldn't cope with the way my tummy was expanding and not being able to do up buttons and zips on my jeans so easily. Everything was getting tight.

I was fat and ugly and nothing I wore could hide it. Having two things in my belly, food and a growing foetus, made me feel revoltingly full and heavy. Unwilling to get rid of the baby, I got rid of the food.

One afternoon, I was so lonely and in need of reassurance, I went to visit my boyfriend at the site where the swimming pool was being built. As I entered the office, the daughter of the couple who owned the roadhouse café made a sudden exit, and I felt distinctly uncomfortable, as though I'd walked in on something I wasn't supposed to see.

When challenged about it, my fiancé defensively denied she was anything but a friend. Anxious about what it might mean if I pushed it, I let the matter go. Better to accept the lie than blow apart my precarious existence with the truth.

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