

PROJECT

*Tiffany*

*Three Friends  
Two Diamonds  
One Tiffany*

JO LOUISE

# PROJECT TIFFANY

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*For Briell and Jadin – my precious diamonds*



## JESS

A big yellow envelope lay silently on my dining table, cruelly mocking my dread. Here it was: the final nail in my coffin. Yes, here lay the dearly departed dream of my happily ever after.

Four plastic shopping bags slipped from my grasp. There was a dull splat as my boysenberry ice cream tub hit the tiled floor. I stood frozen, unable to do anything except stare back at the envelope. It was a scene from a western, where the sheriff and the outlaw stare at each other, preparing to duel, knowing that the first one to flinch would be dead. In this case, the envelope wasn't budging so I knew I was going down.

After twenty years of wearing faux leather shoes instead of Jimmy Choos, who would have believed that the payoff for sacrificing good taste would be adios, adieu, sayonara. Yet here it was, the envelope of divorce papers to sign so that he could go and marry Miss Teen Queen Taylor Swift lookalike. God, she had perfect teeth and masses of wavy blonde hair that she flipped like an overpaid celebrity in a L'Oreal ad: "Because I'm worth it." Bitch.

Why would she want my Craig anyway? He wasn't such a great catch. Sure, he was a good dresser with that whole metro-sexual David Beckham thing going on, but had she really fallen in love with a man twenty years older than herself? I guessed she had daddy issues or some instant Catherine Zeta Jones loves Michael Douglas

attraction. More likely the sweet ka-ching of dollar signs filled the empty space in her head supposed to be occupied by a brain.

The door slammed and shocked me out of my mental meandering. I seemed to go off into lalaland all the time lately, imagining different scenarios that played out like alternative endings to a movie.

“Mum, snap out of it. Did you see the envelope? Dad dropped it off this morning and said he wants you to sign the papers.” Tiffany didn’t care anymore. She just wanted it over with so we could all move on with our lives. Cue the violins, a prolonged pause and a stare off into the distance, a la *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

Tiffany had just finished her last year at school and was deciding whether or not to accept a university scholarship for an immediate start, or to defer for a year and to work and travel across Europe.

She looked at my petrified face and then down at the shopping bags. Melted ice cream had seeped out all over the floor.

“Come on, Mum, just get it over with. Just sign the damn things and I’ll take them to the lawyer for you. Then it’s over and done with.”

Don’t you love generation Y. It’s all black and white. Easy. Short term. Temporary. Fast. They want it, they get it. They hate it, they dump it. They start relationships online and end them by text.

How do they do it? Virtual lives are lived from the comfort of a sofa. Tiffany sits with her computer on her lap researching an assignment, while listening to music on her iPhone. She simultaneously checks Facebook on her iPad, while watching an episode of *Vampire Diaries* recorded on TIVO.

Is this multitasking gone mad? What confounds me is that without a word uttered or actual eye contact made, conversations are apparently occurring with a ridiculous number of supposed friends. Seriously, who actually knows the 896 friends they have on Facebook? It’s the cyber place where the whole world is accessed from something that fits in the palm of your hand. What next? Dick Tracey wristwatch phones?

This generation doesn't just think they know everything, they know they know everything; well at least how to Google everything, and, in Tiffany's opinion, Mum was losing it big time and needed to be treated like a five year old.

"Earth to Mum. Give me those bags and I'll clean up the mess. You go soak in a bath or something."

She shoved me off upstairs, shaking her head with a look that said, I can't believe I'm having to freaking take care of you.

So, this was the way it was going to be. I knew it was inevitable, but the twelve-month separation period had kept the finality of it all way out there, far away. Anything could have happened in twelve months. Miss Teen Queen could have changed her mind like she changed her outfits. Or maybe some talent scout could have picked her out of a crowd and whisked her off to New York as *Australia's Next Top Model* winner.

But of course none of these things happened: instead, she got pregnant.

When Tiffany broke the news to me over a huge tub of cookies and cream from Baskin Robbins (Craig was too chicken to face me himself), I had to admit I thought it was all a very bad joke. But then I realised there's no way Tiffany would buy me a tub of cookies and cream unless it was for real.

A baby. At his age! Didn't he realise that in a few years time his new family portrait would look like Rupert Murdoch's? Except without the private jet and media empire that made Rupert look cool.

I turned off the bath tap and sank into the too hot water. For a very long sixty seconds, I thought it might just be easier to slide under and not come back up.

And then my phone rang. Insistently. Saved by the phone. You know you're not quite ready to go when you're thinking about drowning yourself and you stop to see who's phoning you.

It was Stella. That woman was determined to single-handedly crash through all glass ceilings and be the first female to conquer the



universe. Stella had it all. Think Sofia Vergara: impressive cleavage, lithe legs, and luscious hair — a woman used to making heads turn. You know the type. And while you're processing that thought, add this — Richard Branson's entrepreneurial business brain. Beauty and brains — God was in a damn fine mood the day he made Stella.

Stella had certainly made the most of her gifts by founding Australia's premier PR and event management consultancy. If she had her way, we'd soon be saying the World's Greatest PR and Event Management Consultancy.

I grabbed my towel and dried off one hand to answer her call.

“Hey, Stella.”

“Sweetie, are you OK? Of course you are. Don't even waste another second thinking about that loser. Pull yourself together and get dressed. I'm taking you out to celebrate your freedom. You need to know I've cancelled my dinner with QANTAS so I won't take no for an answer.” Stella never took no for an answer. Even when we were ten years old selling fundraising cookies, Stella never took no for an answer.

“But, Stella, I just got in the bath and...”

“Get out right now. I'm picking up Lilli on the way and will arrive at your front door in thirty minutes. Don't make me phone Tiffany to drag you out of that tub.” The phone clicked off. Stella had hung up; she had issued her commands and expected them to be obeyed.

There was no use stalling. My two best friends in the world were staging an intervention and I was going to let them.

# STELLA

Bloody hell. Did she have to fall apart today?

I knew Jess would be a car wreck and should have co-ordinated the date with her lawyer so I could have scheduled it in more conveniently. Not to worry; I rebooked with the QANTAS CEO for Friday... he'd be more relaxed and loose with a few after work drinks in him. It would make getting that uniform launch event just so much easier. Taking candy and all that.

Dear sweet Jess. She fell for the old picket fence routine, hook, line and sinker. What could possibly make any girl think that the only guy she's ever dated is "The One"?

Jess was, hands down, the prettiest girl in school. Her bobbing blonde ponytail, blue eyes, fresh face and perfect features made her every boy's wet dream. And Craig, well of course he was the school's rugby star and had the ego to match.

And so the Disney plotline continued when they married straight after finishing school. Despite the head-butting parental lectures, nothing was able to knock any sense into them.

Oh sure, Craig promised her the world. She wouldn't have to be anything but his special little princess because he was going to be Mister Hot Shot Lawyer and give her the perfect life. And so it was for twenty years. She raised the perfectly stunning Tiffany, and he worked his way up the ladder and became partner in his dream law firm, Schuster and Clark.

Which left Jess completely unprepared for this moment.

Jess had been somebody's daughter, somebody's wife, and somebody's mother. But now all the people that defined her life were leaving her and she was nobody's anything.

Time for an intervention, and that's exactly what I intended to do.

Lilli would know how to handle her. Whenever there's been some emotional issue to deal with in the past, Lilli has always been the one to make it better. Both Lilli and Jess have made it abundantly clear that I have the emotional sensibility of a blunt axe and I know they're right, but for god's sake, I really can't see the point.

They cry at chick flicks, get overwrought at the mere thought of injured animals, and seem to have an endless capacity to endure the *Days of our Lives* sagas of friends and strangers alike.

I hit the horn outside Lilli's house to let her know I'd arrived. Lilli's house was a total reflection of Lilli herself. A cute, but ramshackle cottage with an astounding amount of greenery growing over and around it, the charming little home would have looked quite serene on a lush green hill in the English countryside. Instead, it was sitting between two double storey monstrosities inhabited by Gen X IT gurus and several noisy offspring.

Lilli was constantly fighting off the starry eyed young couples who implored her to sell so they could knock down her home and build their dream mansion.

Lilli, in her wisdom (or lack of), was not budging. This home had been in her family for three generations and she was sure as hell that Nanna was still hanging around guiding her even though she passed over ten years ago.

But that was Lilli. The herbalist. The healer. The helper. Lilli had a heart as big as a hot air balloon and she was going to save the world — or at least as much as she could get to in one lifetime.

# LILLI

When I put down the phone after Stella's exasperated phone call, I knew I would have to save Jess from Stella's over-zealous need to fix things.

I guess that is why the friendship between the three of us has lasted all these years. Whenever one of us was having a crisis, the other two would know what to do.

Like when I graduated from high school and was accepted into the prestigious medical program at Sydney University. I declined in favour of studying naturopathy and homeopathy. Dad just about excommunicated me, but somehow Stella managed to get him to come around.

He would have been so much happier if Stella been his daughter instead of me. Miss Superstar Stella and my dad were cast from the same mould. I was the complete opposite — a throwback to Nanna, and that's why she had left me her beloved home.

Nanna read tea leaves, drew up astrology and numerology charts, had tarot cards on her dining table, crystals for psychic channelling and angel cards for inspiration.

She had a remedy for any ailment and was an expert in growing herbs and creating concoctions that would make you want to throw up after you swallowed them (if you could get them down in the first place), or pass out from the smell. But if you could get them

into you, you would end up feeling a whole lot better, a whole lot quicker.

Nanna took me on as her junior apprentice. I soaked up all her knowledge and she patiently answered all my annoying little questions.

Nanna left me her diary and I treasured every word. It was A5 size, with a red leather cover, wrinkled and worn bald in spots that had been constantly handled. The diary was more like a personal cookbook of recipes created over a lifetime. Nanna's notes were scrawled in the margins and bits of dried flowers stuck out between favourite pages.

Today's intervention with Jess was going to require some rescue remedy. Some Star of Bethlehem for shock and Rock Rose for terror and panic. That should take the edge off her immediate state, and then, well, a couple of strong cocktails wouldn't go astray.

I packed the rescue remedy into my handbag as Stella blasted the car horn — so impatient. I loved her like a sister, but seriously, that girl needed an emotion transfusion. Empathy and compassion were not in her DNA.

Greeted with Stella's "what took you so long?" look, I smiled and settled into the passenger seat.

"Hello, Stella". We did the air kissing thing to avoid lipstick on cheeks — mainly hers on mine.

"Lilli, darling, well at last. I told Jess we'd pick her up five minutes ago so let's not keep her waiting any longer". Stella pounded the accelerator.

"Stella, let me handle things," I pleaded. "Jess needs love and support right now, not a ten-point solution on how to fix her life, OK?" I thought it better to try and get Stella on the same page before she started to do a self-help seminar. An Anthony Robbins devotee, Stella expected everyone to Access their Unlimited Power and Awaken their Giant Within.

"I get it, OK. Jess needs you. I'd already decided that you should

handle this situation. I'm just making sure you get to her so she doesn't sink into a black hole."

We both knew the depths of despair that Jess could go to if her life fell apart. For a short time in Year 11, Craig had decided that they needed to "take a break" and "meet other people". Well, we all knew what that was code for: I want to date the busty French exchange student so I am dropping you, Jess.

The French girl was really something, there's no doubt about it. Every guy in school was lusting after her, doing panting dog impressions whenever they got within a three-metre radius of her luscious blonde hair and D-cup bra.

Jess was understandably devastated. She curled up into the foetal position and stopped all forms of social contact. Jess did a marvellous impression of a sleepwalking zombie going through the day like the living dead.

We tried everything to move her on, but she was not going to have any part of it. Craig was her one and only true love, and if he didn't love her back, then life wasn't worth living. She would just wait for the day when he would come to his senses and realise that she was the only girl in the world for him.

When the exchange student finally went home to France, every female in our school was visibly relieved — now the rest of us girls had a fighting chance of attracting some attention.

For Jess, her prayers were answered. She got her man back and took him in with open arms, as if nothing had interrupted their true love.

And that's why we knew that when Craig left her this time, she would live in denial until those final papers came to be signed. Now they were here. This time, he was not coming back.

# JESS

I hauled myself out of the bath, despite the fact that every fibre of my being screamed with desire to stay cocooned in the water. It reminded me of my recent step class with Hitler's drill sergeant posing as my gym instructor. After being bullied into straining every muscle in my body, I managed to haul myself out of bed the next day despite my body's tortured protest.

How random. My true love was gone, and here I was comparing my current mental state to a few sore muscles after a workout.

I wanted to be a pathetic, blubbering idiot all on my own. Maybe sit in front of *The Notebook* with a box of tissues, lots of wine, chips, popcorn and any other form of carbohydrate I could get my hands on because it always made me feel better, consequences be damned.

But no, it was not to be. They were on their way. Stella to lecture me about the virtues of taking control of my life and Lilli to just love me no matter what.

I stood in front of my wardrobe not wanting to decide what to wear. All I saw was Craig's favourite LBD. He loved me in this one. It was a divine little Collette Dinnigan number: lacy and racy. The tears welled up in my eyes again and I dropped to the floor in a heap with those ugly sobbing sounds coming out of my mouth as my chest heaved up and down.

Tiffany, god love her, just held me. Somehow, she'd managed to get Craig's emotional stability — total head over heart control.

Unlike her mother who led with her heart and hoped that logic would follow.

Once the heaving got under control, I managed to get most of my face on except for the mascara. My unsteady hand was creating more of a black eye rather than extended lashes. I opted for a few drops of Visine instead.

Armed with a handbag full of Kleenex, I headed down the stairs, forcing one foot in front of the other.

The doorbell ding-donged and Tiffany opened it to find her Claytons aunties: the aunts you have when you don't have any aunts. Both Stella and Lilli had been a huge influence on Tiffany's life and she adored them.

Stella marched through the door and air kissed Tiffany's cheeks. She placed her index finger under her chin in order to tilt Tiffany's face up for closer examination.

"Tiffany, darling, you must start using concealer under your eyes. Those dark circles aren't doing you any favours. You know I've got an excellent make-up artist who could give you the most fabulous makeover. You'll certainly need one if you're going to be a model, which of course you should." Stella would have exploited Tiffany as a baby if I'd let her. My gorgeous daughter had all of Craig's Mediterranean features: suntanned olive skin from his Italian mother, thick wavy hair, and deep chocolate brown eyes that drew you into him. God I missed him so much.

"Sure, Auntie Stell, I'll defer for a year and you can set me up and send me all over the world," teased Tiffany, knowing full well Stella would be onto it.

"You just say the word, darling, and you'll be Italy's next Megan Gale if I have anything to do with it." I could see Stella in star maker mode, charting out Tiffany's modelling career in her head.

Pleased to have Stella otherwise occupied, Lilli focussed fully on my needs. Her arms wrapped around me and I leaned into her soothing embrace. There was something so comforting about Lilli's touch. No wonder she was in such demand by her clients.



Lilli put drops of something under my tongue. Whatever it was, it had better damn well work because I was sinking fast.

I rested my head on Lilli's shoulder and let the sobs and shudders reverberate through my body. They peaked and ebbed, like waves lapping on the sand — huge sobs crashed loudly, then gradually faded away.

# STELLA

We didn't go anywhere that night. My plan of a good night out on the town with a few too many Caprioscas would have made Jess forget things for a little while, but let's face it: I couldn't take the girl anywhere in that condition. There wasn't a bar in town that would put up with the sound of her sobbing.

Every woman has a different way of laughing, and a unique way of crying. Some, like Lilli, cry quite silently, with tears that seem to just leak out of their eyes. Jess, on the other hand, was louder than a troop of horny howler monkeys on heat.

As per the plan, I let Lilli handle Jess. A very good decision as far as I was concerned because my reflex reaction would have been to slap her across the face and tell her to snap out of it because she was better than that. Then I would have given her my "Don't Let the Past Rule Your Future" seminar, which, by the way, was a huge hit at the Real Estate Salesperson of the Year Awards.

Jess could have done anything, but she chose the profession of trophy wife, housekeeper and mother.

Now don't get me wrong. I respect everyone's right to make choices, good or bad. What I objected to was Jess losing herself in the process and allowing her identity to disappear into couples land. She went from Jess to Cress, aka Brangelina, or Robsten, and Jess ceased to exist.

So now, with Cress gone, we had to help her see that she could be Jess again.

I felt for Tiffany too. Well at least I could do something there and make sure she had an awesome life. But Tiffany was nothing like her mother. I smiled to myself, knowing that Auntie Stell had seen to that.

Tiffany's world had been turned upside down and suddenly the two people she relied on were out of action. One out the door, and the other needing to be taken care of! And yet she was handling it all with the calm and composure of, yes, I had to admit it, Craig.

For all his shortcomings, Craig had been a good father and an excellent lawyer. A partner of his firm in record time, Craig was a charmer and there was no denying that Tiffany was a mini Craig.

Well Auntie Stell would be there for Tiffany. In fact, Auntie Stell just had a thought that might be exactly what the doctor ordered.

## LILLI

What a night. I really should have tucked into bed early to prepare myself for today.

At least I'd calmed Jess enough for sleep. Thank god Tiffany was there for her. I would check on her between appointments.

It was going to be a hectic day with two Reiki clients this morning and then a teaching class in the afternoon. This all before what I imagined would be the most daunting night of my life.

I'm not a planner. It's all I can do to keep my client appointments sorted in my hand-written diary. Stella knows that if she wants me somewhere, she needs to phone me as a reminder, or personally pick me up.

It's not that I mean to forget or anything. It's just that I get so wrapped up in whatever I'm doing or whoever I'm with, that I lose track of time and everything else. It's a Piscean thing, but, hey, sometimes you just have to go with what you feel.

But the feelings I had about tonight were making my stomach churn wildly. Tonight I was going to meet Alex's mother, Minerva.

Now I'm sure Minerva is a perfectly lovely woman, but no one is ever good enough for one's son, especially not a free-spirited hippie chick like me. The photos I'd seen of Minerva reminded me of HRH Queen Elizabeth II. You know the look — an exceptionally well tailored structured suit in an overly bright shade of yellow, with

two rows of brass buttons and accessorised with a large brooch and pearl earrings.

Minerva had raised her only son, Alexander, as her personal pride and joy. He was groomed from the moment of exiting the womb to one day take over the running of Northern Star Newspaper Group, founded by his now dearly departed father.

Full credit to Alex for following the path laid out for him. He'd attended Trinity Grammar College, excelled at swimming and won an academic scholarship, which I really don't get because shouldn't free passes be given to the kids who's parents can't afford it?

Anyway, he'd done everything expected of him and I really did admire Alex for that. In something that resembled a bad Bollywood movie, he even went through with the marriage Minerva arranged for him. Jayne was a real beauty, judging by the gorgeous offspring they had together. An absolute catch as far as Minerva was concerned because Jayne had a few drops of royal blood in her, being the Queen's uncle's second cousin thrice removed. Pretty impressive stuff when you consider she once watched Prince Charles play polo.

When I met Alex, Minerva was still in denial about the fact that her match made in heaven was not working out. Alex and Jayne lasted twenty-five years and produced two stunning children, but the marriage had been dead for at least fifteen of those years. Even when Jayne fled back to the UK, vowing never to return, Minerva still insisted to anyone who asked that Jayne was simply on an extended stay abroad with her sick mother — and that was ten years ago.

Alex had insisted on custody of Mark and Vanessa. Jayne was thrilled to be free and took off. I heard that she reconnected with her high school sweetheart and now they are happily attending polo matches again and hobnobbing in the right social circles.

Meeting Alex was not love at first sight. He was under stress from Minerva and coping with being a single parent of a teenage son and

a particularly precocious daughter. Alex's personal assistant had come to me for an iridology and naturopathic consultation and was feeling a lot better for it, so she booked Alex in to see me.

As you can imagine, Alex was raised with the understanding that the only medicine that works is prescribed by a doctor with at least one degree. If it doesn't come from the chemist as a tablet in a little white bottle with your name printed on it, then it's all voodoo witch doctor stuff.

He entered my beautiful, character-filled cottage with a look of pure disdain. I could see it written all over his handsome face: "What the?#@!"

Fortunately, his assistant had warned me that she was forcing him to come. She told me he probably wouldn't like it and I told her that he didn't have to like it for it to work, so she sent him anyway.

Alex sat down in my favourite armchair, narrowly avoiding my sweet little silver doll-faced Persian cat. He wrinkled his nose and clearly wanted this session over with as soon as possible.

I tried to be professional and ignored his "I'm only here under duress" attitude. By the end of the session, I knew I'd won him over and he agreed to take my homeopathic drops to ease his stress and to deal with some minor digestive issues that had been bothering him.

That appointment led to several follow up consultations, and even though we came from completely different worlds, we really started to grow on each other. Yes, it's a cliché, but opposites do attract, and it was exciting for me.

We've been seeing each other for over a year now and I would have to say that it's moved to another level. And I'm not sure if I'm ready for it. It's all well and good when he stays over at my place, or we go away for the weekend, but it's a whole other thing to think about something more permanent.

Besides, we had to consider his kids. Mark was a chip off the old block: twenty-one, athletic and a genius. Despite her runaway act,

his mother Jayne had pulled strings and got him into Eton College. Who knows, with any luck he'd meet a princess and do a Kate Middleton.

Mark did not have any issues with me. He'd been old enough to know what was going on through all of Alex and Jayne's screaming matches and door slamming episodes to realise that Mum and Dad were not happy. He could see that his parents were much better off not being together, and accepted me as the person who made Dad happy now.

Vanessa, on the other hand, saw me as a version of Cinderella's wicked stepmother, not in a "she's so mean to me" way but in more of a "she's so embarrassing" way. She couldn't believe her Dad would be with someone who "talks to dead people and lives in a shack". Or "who doesn't even own a pair of Christian Louboutin pumps." I didn't know why I needed to own pumps but I was reliably informed by Stella that these were shoes every girl just had to have.

I was obviously not stepmother material. So now you know why meeting Minerva at Vanessa's sixteenth birthday party was totally freaking me out.

## JESS

I woke up with the sun streaming through my bedroom window and refused to open my eyes. It was all way too bright and cheery and the pounding in my head was getting worse. If only I was Samantha on *Bewitched* and could twitch my nose to make the curtains close and leave me in darkness.

If I were Samantha, I'd do a whole lot more than close a few curtains. I'd have cast a spell over Darren or made me a new man. What mortal wouldn't take advantage of being married to a perfectly good witch? We're talking unlimited wishes, 24/7.

Imagine, I could put Craig under a spell and make him adore me. The way I was feeling now though, I'd probably turn him into a frog and make a new boyfriend out of a Ken Doll, or maybe a GI Joe. I've always fantasised about having an action man with great guns. Na, I'd just get my Craig back 'cause I just don't know how to exist without him. I don't know how to be alone.

My bedroom door opened and Tiffany arrived with a breakfast tray of tea and toast. Thankfully, she pulled those curtains across so I could finally open my eyes, then left me to my thoughts, knowing I was in no state for conversation.

I sipped the tea, and immediately felt a little better as the hot liquid restored me. I gratefully swallowed the two aspirin Tiffany had placed on the tray and nibbled on the toast.

Wallowing in self-pity was not an option. I had to pull myself



together for Tiffany. She was an angel and needed at least one parent to be sane and available.

The big hole in my heart was not going to go away, but maybe I could fill it with other things that would distract me from it. Focussing on Tiffany's needs might be a place to start.

Fifteen minutes later, Tiffany poked her head into my room and was clearly pleased to see me attempting to rejoin the human race.

"Hey, Mum, you look better." Tiffany was a good liar in the nicest possible way.

"Hey, sweetie, it's OK. I bet I look awful if I look how I feel. Come on in."

Tiffany came in and sat on the edge of the bed. I moved the tray to one side so we could give each other the big hug we both needed. We would be OK — we had each other. After a few minutes, Tiffany released me. I loved the close connection we had right now because it really hadn't been that way until recently.

Tiffany had always been Daddy's Little Girl. She would leap into his arms every time he walked in the door, beaming like it was Christmas. Daddy was the fun guy, the one who adored her right back and spoilt her with gifts, and special dates to the park, the zoo or the beach. Tiffany had her Daddy wrapped right around her little finger and nothing was too much trouble for his darling princess.

I loved that special relationship but couldn't help being a little jealous. Mum was for everything else except the fun stuff. You know, hurry up and get dressed or we'll be late for school; no, one ice cream is enough; make your bed and tidy your room now; no you can't go to Luna Park without parental supervision even if there are six of you going because you're all only ten years old; etc. etc.

Something funny happened when puberty kicked in. Suddenly, she needed Mum as a confidante a little more than Dad. Hair started sprouting in all the wrong places, zits that could hardly be seen were declared volcanic eruptions, and: "Mum, how on earth am I supposed to get this tampon up in there?"

These and many other equally difficult-to-talk-about questions

caused the balance to shift slightly in my favour, and I was thrilled. About when Tiffany turned thirteen, Mum became the go to parent and Dad was very happy to let me do all the explaining.

So now, as Tiffany held my hand, she was holding her breath and couldn't look me in the eye. I knew that look. The one that says I need permission to do something you are not going to approve of. Like when she was fifteen and wanted to have a sleep over at her friend's house while her friend's twenty-one-year-old brother was having a party: not happening.

"What's on your mind?" I was very curious.

"Well, I know this isn't really a good time, and I'm as upset about Dad as you are, but it's been a year Mum. I think it's a great time for you to consider doing something for yourself, and for me to do that too." Who stole my baby and replaced her with this grown up?

"OK," I agreed. "What are you thinking?"

"Well, Auntie Stell phoned me this morning, and she wants us to meet for lunch today."

Stella. Oh, I could hear it now. No doubt she had promised Tiffany the world, got her hopes up and then who would be there to pick up the pieces?

"Sweetie, what has she been saying to you?" Don't you love it when your best friend meddles in your child's life without talking to you about it first? But then why on earth am I surprised — she'd been doing it for Tiffany's entire life.

"Now don't get upset you know she only wants to help. Nothing's set in concrete yet, and of course she wants to talk to you about it first, but I think you're going to love the idea." Tiffany was way too enthusiastic for my liking.

"Don't keep me in suspense. Spill it." I braced myself.

"I had to promise to let her tell you herself, OK. She even booked Sails so you have to come."

Sails. The dreamy Patrick James. Oh, now she was playing dirty. No matter what my state, she knew I couldn't resist my favourite chef in my favourite restaurant. Sails has the most stunning views

of Sydney Harbour, extraordinary cuisine, and an owner and head chef who has X Factor in spades.

Tiffany had thrown down the trump card (as orchestrated by Stella), knowing full well I'd fold.

With a reason to get out of bed, I dressed with intent, just in case the charismatic Mr James was in town.

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