

Not Precisely
Mr. Knightley

The Silver Teapot Series

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Carolyn Miller

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Dedication

To my Aussie author friend Jenny Glazebrook—thank you for being a legend. I hope you enjoy this Aussie take on *Emma*!



Chapter 1

Emma-Jane Bennett, handsome, clever, and wanting to be rich, with a loving family, comfortable home, and optimistic disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence. EJ, as she was known to her friends, had lived nearly twenty-eight years in the world with very little to distress or vex her. Apart from (of course) an incessant desire to show that she was the smartest member of her family, through the financial—and otherwise—success of her matchmaker app, Dream Match.

Proof that God was real was shown in the worldwide success of this app, with testimonials coming in from all corners of the globe, such as the most recent email that had just pinged its arrival.

EJ placed her bowl of chicken Caesar salad on her office desk, leaned back in her chair, and read it again, sighing aloud with pleasure.

Jordan Knight peered around the side of his computer monitor, holding his usual lunchtime go-to of turkey on rye. “Someone sounds happy.”

“Someone *is* happy.”

“Another success story?” He took a bite of sandwich.

“Yep.” She swished dark strands of her sharp bob back behind her ear.

“Where from this time?”

“A little place called Trinity Lakes, in southeast Washington, USA,” she read from the screen. “A woman named Jessica just wrote to say she’s now married, thanks to Dream Match.”

“True love, huh?”

“You know it.”

He studied her a moment longer, his lips pulled in an uneven smile that suggested wryness. He’d done that a bit lately.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said quickly. “So, um, have you had any more thoughts about what you’re going to say to Dean?”

Her elation quickly soured, and she glanced out the office window, catching a glimpse of white yachts sailing across Sydney Harbour. Dean Donwell wasn’t the kind of boss to appreciate one of his employees having enough spare time to develop an app on the side. His mantra had always been *business, business, business*. And while she was definitely committed to making money and looking good, lately the demands of this job were starting to pall. Who would’ve thought a person’s reputation as a cutthroat business professional hung on the angle and sheen of one’s hairstyle? Dean Donwell did. And while she agreed that perceptions were everything, and Donwell Enterprises didn’t subscribe to the theory that all tech-heads should look like slovenly escapees from a nineties Star Wars frat party, she also didn’t like most of the micromanaging that went alongside it that sometimes made her wonder just who she was these days.

She glanced back at Jordan, his blonde hair trimmed short, his slightly freckled face giving him a youthful edge he’d probably always wear, like one of those eighty-year-olds who still looked forty, but Botox-free. Unlike some people she knew—ahem, yes, herself—Jordan had never cared too much about appearances. He was simply comfortable in his own skin, his small-town roots showing in his R.M. Williams boots that he wore more because of his family’s farming legacy than because Hugh Jackman was paid to advertise them.

Jordan might wear a crisp white shirt to keep Dean Donwell happy, but he’d paired it with dark jeans—so, as ever, Jordan was staying true to himself. Unlike her. She wiped her hands down her knee-length skirt, a Prada knockoff that still did her plenty of favours. The expectations for Donwell’s

employees were that they'd dress in a suit and look smart, and "demonstrate what Donwell is about," another often-intoned Deanism. That way clients could be assured that projects were "done well" and the employees were trustworthy and authentic and professional. Yet it sometimes felt ironic when she seemed to be the most dressed-up individual here, and a long way from the girl who'd grown up in small-town Wattle Vale.

She frowned, as she often did when she thought of her hometown. Not that she had anything in particular against it. It was simply that small towns were just so. . .small. With few options, fewer prospects, and even fewer dateable men. Which, even if true, sounded petty. And made her wonder if maybe her parents were right and this job wasn't healthy for her.

"What's that look for?" Jordan asked.

"Oh, nothing."

But when he tilted his head and studied her, she knew her best friend wasn't going to give up so easily.

"To answer your question—"

"Finally."

She rolled her eyes. "No, I haven't figured out what to say to Dean. But I know I need to do it soon. Depending on how the performance review payouts go next week, I might say something after that."

"After that last account you landed, he should be paying you out big-time."

"Right?"

They swapped grins, and that unsettling moment from before disappeared. This Jordan she could deal with. The one who'd been her friend since childhood, the one with whom she'd competed for top student awards every year through school, the one who understood her like nobody else. Well, maybe Olivia, her older sister, could, but nobody else had ever really understood what made her tick. *Especiallly* not her mum. About the only thing EJ and Elizabeth Bennett shared was a last name and a penchant for romance, although EJ's was strictly of the professional kind. EJ didn't have time for a boyfriend, not while there was a corporate ladder to be climbed. Even if a big part of her had been long tempted to jump from the current rung she stood on to see if she could live off the earnings of her baby, Dream Match.

"Ahem."

Her attention snapped up to her line manager, Lionel Campbell, whose leery expression made her sit up straight and long for a jacket or thick woollen jumper instead of this silk blouse that suddenly felt a little thin. Lionel was another reason she wished to leave Donwell. It was hard to complain to HR about her supervisor's unwanted comments when her supervisor was supposed to be in charge of HR. Lionel's icky attitudes displayed an unfortunate reversion to pre-2000s workplace practices, creating an environment where guarding women's feelings of safety was definitely *not* done well.

"Did you want something, Lionel?" she asked.

His eyes gleamed, and she *refused* to think of what he might want.

Jordan stood abruptly and cleared his throat, forcing Lionel's attention his way. "Lionel, I was wondering if you could take a look at this."

Jordan gestured to his computer monitor, then winked at EJ as Lionel moved to his side, thus allowing EJ a moment to escape.

Her fingers clenched as she grabbed her plastic bowl of salad and hurried to the kitchenette, where she scooped up the remains of her salad and finished her lunch with only the fridge keeping her company. Not how she'd planned her midday break.

She didn't like feeling like she was prisoner to Lionel's fancies. And while she appreciated Jordan's protectiveness, neither did she enjoy feeling like a distressed damsel needing a man to rescue her. And lately, it seemed like Jordan had been doing a lot more rescuing. Was that because he thought she was incompetent, or something else?

"You're a strong, independent woman," she muttered to herself. "You've worked hard. You're successful. You don't need a man to rescue you." Especially not her childhood friend.

She stabbed at the last remaining crouton with her bamboo fork. The tines snapped. Her nose wrinkled. "Great."

"What's great?"

She jumped. "Jordan! What are you doing here?"

"Getting a coffee. And letting you know he's on his way," he added in a lower voice, just as Lionel appeared.

"Ah, there you are."

She didn't bother to hide her sigh this time. Better that than the sarcastic "and there you are." She'd uttered that once in the past, which Lionel

seemed to have taken as some kind of flirty invitation. No way. Nuh-uh. He was the last man on earth to interest her. Even a childhood friend was a million times better than the man for whom HR seemed to stand for Highly Repellent. Not that she could afford to say that. She might be blessed enough to live rent-free in her elderly great-aunt's harbour front flat, but she still needed to eat and pay the ferry fares, so she couldn't afford to quit just yet.

"So, EJ, what are you doing in here?"

Wasn't it obvious? She swallowed and straightened. "I'm just finishing my lunch, Lionel, as I'm entitled to, seeing that this is my *lunch break*." She stared at him steadily, eyebrows raised slightly in the way she'd overheard him say before was intimidating.

He finally looked away, mumbling, "Uh, sure."

Jordan's arms crossed as he watched Lionel amble away. "You need to report him."

"For what? Staring at me?"

"Making you uncomfortable," Jordan said quietly.

Her skin prickled. It sometimes made her uncomfortable how well Jordan knew her, like he could almost read her mind. *Could* he read her mind? She sure couldn't read his. His face might often be an open book, but even though they'd been friends forever, she still didn't know what he thought sometimes. And lately it was getting more confusing. There'd been times recently when he'd looked at her in a way that if they hadn't been such friends she'd start to wonder if he liked her or something. Which was *ridiculous*, but there, she'd said it. Or at least thought it. Which now made her triply uneasy in case he could read these thoughts too.

She plucked out the fork-resistant crouton and swallowed it, then winced as the dry bread scraped her throat, triggering a coughing fit.

"Here." Jordan handed her a glass of water, which she drank, clearing out the crumbs.

"Thanks." She placed the glass in the sink. She couldn't look at him, knowing she'd see kindness, and possibly something else there too. Ugh. *Thanks, Mum, for giving me that gene with an overactive romantic imagination*. "Excuse me. I'd better get back to work."

And she hurried away without a backward glance.



Jordan watched EJ leave, her new fancy haircut swinging sassily around her chin like nobody's business. And while he knew it certainly wasn't any of his business to be admiring his friend and coworker this way, these days it was like his brain had lost all capacity to tell his heart what to do.

He didn't really know when it had happened, but somehow in the past few months he'd started noticing his childhood friend as something. . .more. More than just his childhood friend. More than as his coworker. More than simply his BFF. Which was unfortunate, as she seemed to have zero interest in returning the favour or showing any interest in him as a man. She seemed content to keep things at best friend status, which he supposed was something, at least. It wasn't like her head had been turned by another man, so he figured his chances were as good as anyone's.

Besides, he was a patient man. EJ had always bucked at being handled, manipulated, or controlled. She'd dig in her heels if she felt that way, stubbornness being one of those qualities that might be great for making apps a reality—but it had its downside too. And while EJ might generally prefer up-front honesty, he'd learned that sometimes she responded to a gentler suggestion, which was why Dream Match, EJ's baby, now wore so many of his own fingerprints.

Emma-Jane Bennett had always owned a certain confidence, an attitude his father called brazen but his mother called vivacious. Probably because Mum had known Elizabeth Bennett for the past thirtysomething years, and together they had raised their children in a small town and become solid friends with a history spanning decades. Just like he and EJ had, their history on display in photos while each inside their mum's proud pregnant belly, to playgroup, school years, youth group, university courses, and now here, working at Donwell Enterprises.

"As different as night and day," some people joked. Others said that Jordan was the brother EJ had never had, while yet others hinted that EJ and Jordan appeared a little too close. Which was crazy, but whatever. They'd never worried about that, as they just clicked. And as Jordan considered EJ his best friend, and she'd often said Jordan was her bestie, then it didn't matter what anyone else thought. They both knew they'd always be each other's best mate forever.

Until recently it seemed like they didn't, and he was starting to wonder if she'd ever see him as something more.

His phone buzzed with a message from his housemate and university friend, Aidan Quinn, who had recently met a girl in Ireland. Looked like he wasn't the only one starting to think about the future and settling down.

"Yo, Knight, are you coming to the meeting?" Dallas Valiskirous called. "Be right there."

Whoops. He should've locked the meeting in his brain rather than concentrating on EJ. He strode to the conference room, trying to make it look like he wasn't hurrying. He veered to collect a folder from his desk, his detour meaning he had to follow EJ's shapely legs to a meeting guaranteed to draw a yawn or two.

She glanced behind, murmuring, "Are you ready to say goodbye to another hour of your life?"

"You know it."

She chuckled then winked.

Heat flushed through his cheeks, and he coughed in a desperate attempt not to seem flustered.

She paused. "You okay?"

"Yep." Well, he would be. One day. Maybe. If he ever got over this stupid infatuation with his best friend. Friends shouldn't wink at each other if they didn't want the other person getting ideas.

"Come on." She clasped his arm and tugged him toward the conference room, then pushed him down in the faux leather chair next to her.

Which made it difficult to concentrate on what was being said, as he was too busy trying not to inhale the subtle perfume she wore, something that smelled like daffodils looked, like sunshine waving in a gentle breeze.

Ugh. Things were getting really bad when a man started thinking thoughts like that. Any second now and he'd be making up poetry! Jordan bit back a groan and leaned forward, elbows on the desk, head in one hand as he covered his peripheral vision to block his view of her. This was torture.

"Did you say something, Jordan?" Dallas had always possessed an unfortunate tendency to hear *everything*.

"Uh, no." His cheeks heated again. Fair skin did not make hiding his blush easy, something EJ had always teased him about. It was one reason why he'd always been up front with her, as he knew his face could never get

away with lying, even if he wanted to. Their friendship had experienced ups and downs, but trust had always been key. He'd tell her what he thought, she'd do the same to him, and everything was sweet: open, clear, honest. Until these feelings had crept in, almost overnight, stealing his ability to be honest because he didn't know how to handle the roller coaster of highs and lows of wanting more than having to wrestle with being content with less.

She tapped Jordan's arm again, but he shook his head slightly at her, unable to face her. Not yet, anyway.

Somehow he made it through the next hour and even managed to contribute a couple of comments he hoped showed he was a team player. EJ wasn't the only one waiting to get a bonus next week.

He was among the first to escape when EJ caught up to him.

"Oh my goodness, I'd be so happy to never sit through another Dallas lecture again."

"If you tendered your resignation, you wouldn't have to," he murmured.

She peered at him. "You know, if I was insecure, I might think that sounded like you are trying to get rid of me."

"Of course not. But I think we both know that you're wasted here. The sooner that payout comes through, the better."

She nodded but kept watching him with those blue eyes that always seemed to have Superman laser-like intensity, like she could see straight past his flimsy walls of self-denial. And while he'd silently applauded many times when she'd fixed them on others, it wasn't as fun when he was the object of her scrutiny.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Of course I am," he blustered. "Why do you ask?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. You just seem a little off somehow."

He lifted a shoulder, echoing her. "I'm fine. Maybe a little tired, but that's nothing new."

Her lips tilted. "Let me guess: another late night watching *House Hunters Australia*?"

He wrinkled his nose at her. "Look, not everyone gets to live beside the harbour with a view of the Opera House."

"You remember that it's my great-aunt's place, right?"

"That she's left to you," he pointed out. Proof of the closeness of their

families: He was privy to the intentions of EJ's great-aunt's will. And sure, EJ's great-aunt Marion was still with them, in a nursing home, but seeing she was past ninety years of age, it was only a matter of time before EJ owned a piece of property worth at least five million dollars. "Not all of us have rich relatives."

"Yeah, she's not that rich. Her parents bought that place back in the eighties when it cost a lot less."

But behind her disclaimer, he could see the twitch of a smothered grin and glint of delight, which drew a pang within. EJ was generous, proved in the huge list of children she sponsored and good causes she supported. But she'd also always had a thing for the finer things in life, something that was shown by her wannabe-designer clothes and focus on money, money, money so she could afford the lifestyle to which she'd like to become accustomed. It was enough to make him wonder if she'd ever get past that stage to appreciate less mercenary things. Okay, to see humble him. After all, he knew appearances mattered to her. And while she'd always said she'd rather make money than make time for romance, he wasn't oblivious to the fact that he didn't own the looks that turned her head. He'd seen her head turned by actors and those handsome lawyer and businessman types who wore a level of slick professionalism he'd never own. He might be paid well, but in essence he was a coder, a computer geek who had helped his friend with some of the background coding that had led Dream Match to attain global success. He was ordinary; he'd never be glamorous. He swallowed a sigh. *Lord, help me to be patient.*

She raised her eyebrows at him, reminding him it was his turn to speak.

"Anyway, some of us have to think about such mundane things like where to live."

She winced. "I wish Aunty Marion would be okay with you staying there with me. The flat is big enough."

He shrugged. "She's got her reasons." And they were good ones, all of them. EJ's great-aunt Marion was a stickler for a moral code that most of society didn't follow these days. And men sharing houses with women they weren't related or married to was a big fat *no* in her book, or so EJ had once explained. And Jordan was totally okay with that. He knew staying with EJ—even in a purely platonic friendship—was a recipe for trouble.

"So..." She eyed him playfully. "What *are* you doing about a new place?"

Ah, the million-dollar question. *Lord, I'd really like an answer soon, if that's okay.* "I don't know."

"I can't believe James decided to get married and kick you all out."

"Right? It's hard to believe that newlyweds don't want to share a house with three single guys," he said dryly.

Her lips perked in amusement; then she studied him, head tilted. "But seriously, what are you and Aidan and Ben going to do?"

"I told you that Aidan has met this girl in Ireland, and the way he talks, I think he'd like to move there one day." At her nod, he continued. "But for me and Ben, I honestly don't know. I've even contemplated moving back home to Wattle Vale, working remotely and taking the train in to the city for important meetings."

"What?" She stared at him, horror etched across her features. "I can't believe you'd even *think* that."

"Not all of us secretly call Wattle Vale Hick Vegas."

"I don't say that," she protested.

He raised his eyebrows.

She bit her lip. "Okay, I have said that, but not *that* many times."

His brows arched higher.

"So maybe I have said it a few times, but come on. Your parents are great, but who really wants to move back in with the parentals when they're nearly thirty?" She shuddered. "I sure don't."

His lips pressed together. He knew EJ's mother wasn't as easygoing as his own, and that EJ and her mum had clashed a few times over the years. He might be a man of patience, but EJ didn't have much of it. Which might be partly why they'd made a good pair over the years.

"Besides, you don't really want to live there. Not when you could live here." She gestured to the window, where the sparkling harbour promised a lifestyle he might occasionally dream about but could never really afford. He'd have to work at Donwell a solid ten more years to earn enough to buy one of the small boats that EJ often had wished aloud she could enjoy.

"Hey, I don't mind small-town life. It's certainly a lot less hectic than here."

"True, but it's also a lot more boring, don't you think?"

He chewed his bottom lip. She'd made a bunch of similar statements lately, like the girl who'd been all wide-eyed wonder all those years ago

had become a little jaded, a little more cynical, needing more and more to be happy. Which mightn't be nice to admit about his best friend but was honest.

Her eyes narrowed. "What is it you're not saying?"

He held up his hands. Pointing out EJ's discontent shown in her constant need for excitement sure wouldn't be an easy conversation. "Hey, I just don't think you should be so quick to dismiss Wattle Vale. It's got a lot of good qualities."

"Like what?"

"Like your family, for starters."

"Oh."

"And The Silver Teapot."

She sighed. "Well, yes, okay, that's true. But The Silver Teapot can hardly compare to dining at the Sydney Opera House, now can it?"

Jordan grimaced as Lionel drew near, demanding their attention. Questions about exactly why she felt dissatisfied looked like a conversation to have another day.

Or maybe never.



Chapter 2

“Well, here goes nothing, Charlie.”

The tortoiseshell cat watched from his favourite position on the back of the lounge. One of the biggest hardships for her great-aunt moving to the nursing home was that Auntie Marion’s cat wasn’t allowed. EJ had promised to take good care of him, and she enjoyed the company when Charlie so deigned to grace her with his presence. He was something of a communal cat, with various other residents in the flats taking turns looking after him. But somehow he always knew when EJ might need a cuddle—or at least a visit and reassurance from a fellow living creature, even with his at-times unblinking stare.

EJ tapped on her laptop and opened the link to the family video chat. Sunday evenings in Australia meant Sunday mornings in England, which was where her elder sister, Olivia, lived these days. Who knew that a trip overseas to care for their grandmother would result in Liv finding an English boyfriend whose redbrick manor house might just have been used as Pemberley in the 2015 film production of *Pride and Prejudice*? Not that she was jealous or anything.

Her two younger sisters said hello—whimsical Katie and artistic Elinor, whose blue-streaked hair was now dyed dark purple but cut in an asymmetric style like you might get from a funky Newtown hairdresser. “Mum’s just coming.”

“How’s Dad?” EJ asked. Their father had suffered a heart attack at Christmas last year, which had led to an immediate flight home for Liv. For once EJ had been glad she only lived two hours away, not in New York like she’d dreamed of doing one day.

“He’s doing okay. The doctor has him on new heart meds. He’s hoping to join the chat.”

Katie nodded. “He’s running late because he wanted to get some baking prepped for tomorrow.”

“I thought the doctor told him he needed to give that up.”

“He’s as much of a workaholic as you,” Elinor said.

Hmm. True. When her father had been forced to resign from the police due to stress, he’d thrown himself straight into Mum’s pet dream of running a quaint café, which meant he could show off his baking skills. An anomaly, they all knew, but she didn’t mind returning from Wattle Vale laden with baking samples, even if later that week the scales weren’t so kind. The Silver Teapot Café was an institution in their small town, right there on the main street near the primary school, the café’s famous English silver teapot in pride of place on the faux mantelpiece. Mum’s mum—their grandmother, Veronica Hastings—had given her the teapot when she’d moved to Australia thirtysomething years ago.

The computer screen buffered then split to show another image, then another. Her mum was in a different screen box to both of EJ’s younger sisters, Elinor and Katie, the background images suggesting they were both in their respective bedrooms of the family home. Liv looked to be in the dining room at Gran’s place, complete with Laura Ashley wallpaper in the background.

“Hi there!” Liv beamed.

Was her accent sounding more British by the day? “Hey you.” EJ saluted.

“Hey, sweetie!” Mum waved, but to which daughter, EJ couldn’t tell. Probably Liv, though, as the two of them began to chat like the rest of them didn’t exist.

Since Liv had found herself a titled boyfriend—like, for real—it was as if she could do no wrong. Which was awesome, as Liv totally deserved it, and Liam was pretty cool. EJ had offered to put Liv in her dating app and see what the algorithms could come up with, but to be honest, EJ couldn't have chosen better herself. Liam was Liv's perfect dream match, even if Liv had managed to find him all on her own. Although, from some of the hints their grandmother dropped, perhaps some of the villagers had helped the romance along too.

Regardless, Liv was deliriously happy. It was good to see, and the fact that she was happy made Mum happy. Which—honest talk—was not that strange anyway, as Liv had always been the golden child of the family. And Mum, with all her pride in her Elizabeth Bennett name and girls, had always been eager to see her daughters achieve respectable marriages. Not that Liv and Liam were engaged, but from the way Liam always seemed to be hovering near Liv, they all suspected it was only a matter of time before he popped the question. It was surprising he wasn't on this call yet.

"How are you, EJ?" Katie, her youngest sister, finally asked.

"Good, thanks." She coughed to clear the gruffness in her throat. Katie had always possessed a soft heart and a soft spot for those who might feel on the outside. EJ, who had always been more business minded than tenderhearted, had often wondered what kind of career Katie would end up in. With only a few more months of university studies, Katie still didn't seem to know, which was a worry. Surely by now she should have some idea, but no. All she seemed to think about was boys, and just who might be a potential boyfriend. She'd even overheard Katie joke about being a gold digger, wanting a rich husband, which left EJ conflicted. She knew—well, hoped—that Katie was joking, as that attitude seemed like ten steps back for women's lib and girl power and smashing the glass ceiling. Given the slim pickings of their small-town, Katie seemed destined for disappointment, and EJ had offered to help Katie find a man via Dream Match, but even Katie refused to use EJ's dating app, saying "it just takes all the romance out of romance."

Which, to be honest, was not the first time she'd heard such things. Apparently some people seemed to trust mystical Cupids shooting arrows of love rather than solid psychology, math, and probability that had seen thousands of solid relationships formed over the years and resulted in

hundreds of marriages. But hey, if people preferred to try to find love themselves, good luck to them. They'd need it. How anyone could dispute the success of Dream Match was beyond her, but then, the longer she'd been in this business, the more she understood that people were weird.

Case in point: their mother, with her singular obsession to see her girls settle down. Not for her contentment in careers. Oh no. She was all about finding what she called "eligible gentlemen" for her daughters. And considering that Katie was as romance minded as Mum, EJ shouldn't be surprised that she was so weirdly focused on finding her Mr. Right. Not that EJ could throw stones, given the years she'd invested in developing this app that literally—technically—meant she was as heavily invested in love and relationships as her mum and sister. If not more. Which was why she *really* needed that bonus to come through to keep the bank manager happy.

Soon the conversation was buzzing as they all talked over and across each other as was usual in these female Bennett video get-togethers.

"Oh, before I forget, I need to change the time of next week's video call. Liam is taking me on a date." Liv smiled. "Oh, and Gran says hello. She's got a meeting with Tobias about the church hall, so she's not here today."

"Is she well?"

Liv nodded, then reported that Gran was very well, and still leading tours around Hartbury Hall, Liam's centuries-old family home.

"And how are things going with Liam?" Mum asked quickly.

"Fine. He's happy. Things are now finally settled with the trust, so he's not feeling hamstrung by them anymore."

"That's good," Elinor said.

Their mother kept on about Liam and Hartbury Hall, as expected. Most of Mum's conversations these days managed to mention wonderful Liam or his wonderful title or his wonderful English manor. And while EJ loved her sister and was genuinely happy for her, she wondered if others appreciated the constant references to all these wonderful things on the other side of the world and whether Mrs. Bennett found anything wonderful closer to home.

"Hey, how are things going with you, Ellie? Have you found a full-time job yet?" Liv asked.

Elinor's nose wrinkled as she shook her head. "I knew when I graduated that it would take a while to find something that would fit my skills,

but this feels like it's been taking forever.”

“Keep trusting God,” Liv encouraged.

Hmm. And that comment was why Liv truly was the best sister, the good one who remembered to say things like that. EJ spent so much time in her own head she barely had time for others, let alone what God might say. She still believed in God, but He seemed pretty removed from her normal thoughts and actions. She frowned. Which probably wasn't exactly what a Christian should do, come to think of it, and something both Great-Aunt Marion and Jordan had commented on before. . .

“You okay there, EJ?” Mum asked now.

So she was now finally getting a scrap of attention. “Yep.”

“How is work?” Katie asked.

“So-so.” So boring. And so frustrating. Why was she still working there? Maybe she should just hand in her notice, once and for all. Except if she did that, she'd miss out on the bonus, and it'd be really helpful to be in a position where she could afford to be choosy about who signed on as a potential investor. Some days she really wished she didn't have this burning desire to prove herself and could just let the app keep ticking along. It'd be nice not to have any more investors, even despite this being what Maurice, her business lawyer, had advised to see the app take the next leap forward.

The conversation quickly veered back to Katie, who was finally finishing her last university subjects and hoping to graduate in a few months' time. And yes, Katie might be nearing twenty-five, but it had felt like forever before she'd finally settled on a study path. Unlike Katie, EJ had earned a double degree in business and computer science, culminating in an MBA at twenty-three.

Elinor was now talking about her graphic design job, and Liv was encouraging her to put her skills to use on Etsy, saying, “People just love the map you designed for Hartbury Hall.”

“I'll give it some thought.”

That was Elinor for you. She was always the most cautious of the Bennett sisters, and practical as all get-out, even with her purple-blue hair. She was harder to read than both Liv and Katie, both of whom tended to wear their emotions on their faces. Elinor was most like EJ in that they both tended to guard their hearts. EJ studied her, wondering what kind of man would be the one to make Elinor sparkle with the kind of happiness Liv

showed these days. Maybe Elinor was like EJ and would—eventually—be more career focused and not need a relationship at all. Well, maybe one day a relationship would be something to think about, like in ten years' time. Just not now.

Dissatisfaction rolled through EJ at the fact that her sisters seemed to be moving on with their lives while she still felt trapped at Donwell. And while there was a lot to appreciate about her job, her role there now felt like a puzzle piece that no longer fit. She was tired of working at a tech start-up when she'd rather be working for herself at her own tech start-up.

"Emma-Jane?"

Mum's voice snapped EJ's attention back to the conversation. "Yes?"

"Are you *sure* you're okay?" Mum's forehead wore a crease. "You've seemed very distracted."

"Yep. I'm fine. Oh, I visited Aunty Marion yesterday." As she usually did each Saturday. Her dad's maiden aunt remained as gentle and quietly spoken as ever. "She sends her love to everyone."

"We should go see her again soon," Mum said. "I'm glad she's doing okay."

"Is Jordan okay?" Katie asked.

"I guess." EJ frowned. "Why would you ask me that?"

"Because you and he. . ." Katie's brows rose.

"Because me and he what?" EJ demanded.

Katie smiled smugly, in a manner exactly like Mum's, which was uncanny sometimes. And unwelcome right now, as it seemed that all of her sisters were now staring at her with the same expression.

"What?"

"You know he is very fond of you," Mum said.

"We're friends, Mum. That's all." She withheld an eye roll. How many times had she doused their persistent comments over many years that friendship wasn't all that Jordan felt for her? Which was ridiculous. They'd been friends forever, so no way.

Except. . .

Lately there had been those moments when she'd started to wonder the same. Was that only the power of suggestion, because her family had placed these niggling doubts inside? Or was it because she was finally starting to see what everyone else had noticed and commented on for years?

The discontent from before rose again. She liked Jordan—okay, loved him, but *only* as a brother. It would be one hundred percent weird to think of him in any other way. He was already too far entwined in her life, in her home life, her thoughts, her work. . .

Clarity rose. There was one way she could finally do something about that and put some distance between this weirdness that was developing between them. She didn't want to lose her friend, but he was making things weird, and even though this seemed drastic, it was what he'd advised many times.

"Actually, come to think of it, I do have an announcement," EJ said.

"You do?" Katie clapped her hands. "Has Jordan finally asked you out?" Katie's eyes might as well be heart shaped.

"No! Don't be so ridiculous," she said firmly, even as a tug within wondered if that would be so ridiculous, after all. She blinked. Now *that* thought truly was ridiculous, and the fact her sister's romance-riddled brain was starting to affect her meant it was high time to put an end to this unnecessary speculation.

EJ straightened, resuming the sharp-eyed poise that intimidated Lionel and made colleagues like Dallas flinch. "My announcement has nothing to do with Jordan." Although a tiny part of her protested, as technically that was a lie since he worked with her and had encouraged her to take this step many times.

She shook her head. He really needed to be shaken out of it. "Actually, work hasn't been so great lately, so I feel like I should let you all know"—here went nothing, then—"I've decided to quit my job."

There. The words were out and could never be stuffed back in.

Her mother's eyes widened to the size of the saucers she used at the family café. "Tell me you are joking, Emma-Jane."

"Sorry, Mum. Can't."

"But. . .but you can't just quit!"

"I'm handing in my resignation as soon as the latest round of staff bonuses come through."

"When is that?" Elinor asked.

"They've said it should be by the end of this week." *In Jesus' name.*

"But. . .but what are you going to do?" Mum asked anxiously.

Great question. With an even better answer. "You know I've been

working on Dream Match, and it's finally at a position where I can really monetise it." She explained about some of the you-beaut new functions and in-app features she'd been working on. Jordan had been encouraging, agreeing that these features would level up the app and draw in a new realm of clients who could afford to pay. "And I think it's now at a point where I really need to add these features, which takes a lot of work I just can't manage if I'm still at Donwell."

"But you'll lose all your employee benefits," Mum protested.

Hmm. How to tell her mother that if the app developed the way EJ hoped, then she could well and truly afford all the kinds of employee perks Donwell offered and more. Much, much more. Especially if, as she hoped, she could finally get some more investors and one day take Dream Match to list on the stock exchange, something guaranteed to make her very, very rich. She gulped. Certainly huge dreams for a girl from Wattle Vale. Huge dreams for a girl who'd worn an op-shop find to a party as a teen, only to be laughed at by Alissa, her schoolmate and the party's host, because she'd recognised the dress as one she used to own. In that moment of excruciating embarrassment, which she'd never told a soul, she'd determined never to be treated as a second-class person again. And now, with the way things were tracking for Dream Match, she might finally be able to lay those demons to rest once and for all.

She lifted her chin. "I think I'll be fine, Mum." Despite the number of times EJ had tried to explain, Mum had never really understood the scale of Dream Match, often dismissing it as a hobby. Therefore, telling her mother just how much she was potentially worth was probably not worthwhile right now. Nor wise, either, as she shouldn't count unhatched chickens. "But I'd appreciate your prayers, because there is a lot to deal with right now."

"Of course we're praying for you," Liv said, as Elinor nodded.

"Thanks," she muttered. Mum still looked aghast. She might've risked all she'd known moving out to Australia to follow her heart, but heaven forbid that EJ follow hers.

"We'll pray for Jordan too. He won't like you moving on," Katie said.

Irritation rose. Why did her decision have to affect him? "Actually, he's the one who has encouraged me to leave."

"What? I thought..."

Her sister's stunned look was almost enough to make her smile. Almost.

"So, like I said, this is a big step for me and for the business, so I'd appreciate your support."

"Of course!" Liv said. "That's so exciting for you."

That was more like it. Almost as exciting—and daunting—as the day she and Jordan had launched the privately held company of Woodhouse-Knightley five years ago.

Elinor nodded. "You won't be moving from Auntie Marion's flat, will you?"

"Nope. Still here." She gestured to the Monet painting on the wall, the print of the famous water lily scene the same as they'd always known, its beauty matched only by the fabulous view out the window.

"Well, I'm excited for you," Liv said, as Elinor and Katie agreed.

Elinor might understand some of the complexity of what was involved, but EJ was fairly sure the others were simply being encouraging. Mum wasn't being encouraging, and Dad still hadn't appeared, which meant it felt like it was time to go, so she said her love-yous and goodbyes and ended the call.

She drew a blanket around her, tracing a finger over the photo frames of her eight sponsored kids, shooting up a prayer that God would keep them safe. Her nose wrinkled. Some might call her selfish, but more money meant more children who could be rescued from poverty, or women saved from sex slavery. It wasn't just about designer clothes and shoes.

The view from the balcony beckoned, inviting her to linger, so she studied it as Charlie wove between her legs. Sydney's Opera House would light up in mid-May for the Vivid festival, where buildings throughout Sydney's historic Rocks region and the central business district would have images projected on them, drawing tourists from far away. The annual event had always made getting home from the office a challenge as workers battled the crowds in downtown and at Circular Quay.

Except this year she'd be here, in her aunt's apartment, not needing to go to the office at all. Her lips lifted as a cool breeze snuck under the blanket and teased strands of her hair. Because maybe, finally, the next step of her dream would be coming true.



“So you’re serious? You’re finally going to bite the bullet?”

EJ nodded, her look shy, tentative, but Jordan recognised that glint that indicated determination.

“I’m so proud of you.” He grinned, drew close, and hugged her, wrapping her in a light brotherly squeeze as he’d done a million times before. Except this time she stiffened. Huh. So maybe this wasn’t like a million times before. He should probably hide the exuberance and not make this more awkward than it already was.

He backed off, patted her shoulders twice, like an aged uncle might when presented with a young child he didn’t know how to interact with. Yep. Way to go not making things awkward. “So, uh, when are you going to speak with Dean?”

“The email about our performance payouts said they’d happen this Thursday, so I’m hoping to talk to him on Friday.”

“As soon as the money is banked.”

She nodded.

His lips tweaked. “You know that as soon as you list Dream Match on the stock exchange it’s going to go gangbusters, and you’ll be making a ton of dough.”

“That’s what Maurice said.” Her eyes gleamed.

Maurice, the card shark of a lawyer who EJ trusted implicitly. She might be savvy in nearly all things business, but she seemed to have a blind spot where that man was concerned. Jordan still wasn’t too sure about it, because as soon as it was publicly listed, it would get increasingly hard to keep their Christian values central, given they’d need to listen to investor concerns. And while he’d mentioned this before, it was her baby.

“But I like certainties in life, not maybes.”

“Except we don’t get a lot of certainties in life,” he said gently. “Except death and taxes.”

“And hard work and its reward,” she shot back.

“But even hard work doesn’t always reap the rewards we might want,” he cautioned.

“Come on, Jordan. You know this is what I’ve dreamed of, what we’ve both worked so hard towards. It’s not wrong to want to be successful. Why

are you being so negative?”

Disappointment slid inside. He didn't like to admit it, but his best friend's Achilles' heel was her fixation on money and status. Sometimes it seemed like seeing Dream Match succeed was more her god than Jesus.

“I'm not being negative,” he explained. “I'm just wanting to make sure you keep the main thing the main thing. Remember why you started this thing in the first place?”

She sighed. “To help Christian singles find their ideal partner without all the yucky stuff of other dating apps.”

That slogan had helped them find those first brave investors before she and Jordan realised they needed to spruce up their marketing and assume a more professional presentation to get the next round of investors to believe with them.

“EJ, I've been with you in this since the beginning. You know I'm on your side. But I wouldn't be a friend if I didn't tell you to be careful not to hold this too tightly. God is still in control, isn't He?”

But from the way she looked at him, the mutinous tilt to her chin that he'd also seen a million times before, uncertainty streaked through him about just what she did believe these days. Just what was Maurice filling her mind with?

“Isn't He?” he prompted again when she still didn't return an answer.

“Yes,” she finally muttered.

Hmm. That didn't sound like she truly agreed. And while he knew EJ had workaholic tendencies, he knew his duty as a friend meant that he needed to speak up when things didn't seem right.

“EJ, are you doing okay?”

“Of course I—”

“God-wise, I mean?”

She huffed out a breath. “Come on, Jordan. You know me. I'm a Christian.”

“But are you trusting God with this, or are you mostly trusting EJ?”

Another breath loaded with frustration escaped as she rolled her eyes. “I really don't need your negativity with this.”

“Is it negativity for a Christian to want to encourage his Christian friend to keep putting God at the centre of her life?”

She studied him a moment, and then the tension in her face evaporated. “Sorry. Okay, I guess I needed to hear that. I know I’ve been pretty preoccupied lately.”

“God loves you, and He’s got good plans for you, regardless of whether Dream Match gets listed on the stock exchange or not.”

“But just think of all the good I could do if it was.”

Her teasing grin drew one from him, and he sensed she wouldn’t be receptive to any more hints, subtle or otherwise, to focus on God. This was new territory for both of them, and he needed to tread gently, to keep from straining this friendship more than he’d already stretched things in recent weeks.

“So, how about we book a table for Friday night so we can celebrate your resignation properly?”

Her face lit, the sparkle in her eyes a welcome sight after the earlier storm. “I’d love that! Do you think we could go to Bennelong?”

The five-star restaurant at the Sydney Opera House was bound to be booked up at this short notice, but it had always been a dream of hers to eat there. “I’ll see what I can do, but I don’t like my chances.”

She smiled, her face so full of affection that it felt like the challenges of earlier were far away. “I’m sure you’ll manage something amazing.”

“Because that’s the kind of guy I am, right?”

“That *exactly* the kind of guy you are.”

His heart squeezed. The kind of guy who was awfully close to being in love with his best friend.