

MARIGOLD THE CAT: CHAPTER ONE

LOUISE ROTONDO



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One



THE TAIL

The ballroom appeared to be packed, which brought a smile to Eamon's face. He was glad that there had been a big turn out to celebrate Laura's ninetieth birthday, although he wasn't surprised—in the two years that he had known her, it had become apparent that Laura was universally loved. He stood just inside the doorway, Libby beside him, and scanned the room looking for the rest of his family. They had all decided to make the trek up to celebrate this milestone, which was fantastic, but the downside was the sheer number of them, which did lead him to wonder how it was that he couldn't find a single one of them at the moment. He was pleased about how the two sides of the family had accepted each other so quickly and really made up for lost time. For his own part, Eamon had become very fond of Laura over the last couple of years, and he and Libby had made a few trips a year to North Queensland to see her.

Initially though, when he and Libby had arrived back in Sydney, married and with Laura in tow, they had been met with shock over their marriage announcement and peppered with questions on the situation with Laura, their grandmother, the family feud and why he and Libby had taken off to North Queensland without sharing the reasons with the whole family. His grandmother's death, shortly after being reunited with

Laura after over sixty years of separation, had eclipsed the commotion surrounding their return to Sydney and after the funeral the previously hot topics had just seemed to drift into acceptance.

Over the time that he had known Laura he had picked up enough of the story to realise what a strong bond the two women had shared to have continued a friendship despite the seemingly insurmountable obstacles of a family feud where they had been forbidden to see each other, and the tyranny of distance in an era without telephones or the social media of today, which made keeping in touch so easy. To give both women credit where it was due, they had overcome the impossible and sustained a friendship where most would have let it die. Their reunion had been touching, albeit sad given that Nan had passed away within hours, but if he were being honest with himself, he wouldn't have wished to prolong Nan's life with the dementia that had claimed her. His only wish was that after travelling so far to see her, Laura could have had more than a single visit, but it hadn't turned out that way and there wasn't anything that anybody could have done to change that.

Eamon's eyes continued to survey the room. It took a few more seconds of searching but he spotted Janet first, surrounded by people over near the bar. He held back a grin. At the moment, the bar sounded like a great place. He wasn't a lover of crowds at the best of times, and whilst his relations probably accounted for a large component of the group, there were still a large number of strangers.

Libby gave Eamon's hand a quick squeeze, jolting him out of his thoughts and he met her gaze before nodding in Janet's direction. He saw the moment she recognised Janet and they started across the room. Eamon snuck a quick look at his daughter who was cradled in the crook of his left arm as they made their way through the throng of people. He was completely besotted with the tiny bundle, and had been since he first held her in the birthing suite, a fact which had both

shocked and amazed him immensely. He had never expected the moment to be so intense.

She'd well and truly been a surprise, for both of them, and it had taken him quite a while to get his head around the idea that he was going to be a father. It wasn't that he didn't like children, he had quite a lot of nieces and nephews and he enjoyed them immensely, it was simply that at the end of the day, he got to give them back—all fun and no responsibility. The news that he was going to join the ranks of fatherhood had stunned him, but like countless fathers before him, one look at his newborn daughter and he had become a marshmallow. As far as he was concerned, she was the best surprise ever, but one who was already making a few changes of her own to their family dynamic.

They'd arrived a little late for Laura's party; for once not due to Libby's perpetually late habit. This one could be chalked up to young Matilda and if Eamon wasn't mistaken, she seemed to have inherited her mother's gene in that regard. They'd been on target to leave with heaps of time, as was his preference, until around ten minutes before they were due to walk out the door, when the newest member of their family, two weeks old in fact, had kicked up an almighty fuss. She shouldn't have been hungry, but as it turned out she was, and she had ensured that they weren't going anywhere until she wasn't.

Eamon caught Janet's eye as she laughed with one of the guests. Her eyes widened when she caught sight of the little one and the instant she was free she came over, greeting Libby and Eamon with a kiss on the cheek and bending in to peer closely at the now sleeping Matilda. Her eyes were full of tears when she straightened and looked at them both.

'She's lovely. So delicate. Congratulations to you both. Mum will be so excited to see her.'

At that particular moment, Matilda opened her eyes as if sensing that she was missing out on her praise. Janet broke out in a full smile.

‘Look at that, the little darling.’

Eamon grinned at Janet.

‘Would you like a cuddle?’

Janet didn’t hesitate in responding.

‘Never knock back the chance to cuddle a newborn.’

Eamon passed Matilda over, surprised again at how easy it was becoming to handle her. From the beginning he had expected to be unsure and clumsy, with her being so little and his hands so big, but that hadn’t turned out to be the case. He smiled as he watched Janet. She was looking down at Matilda and gently running her finger down the side of the little one’s face. Matilda kept her eyes open for a moment, ostensibly looking at Janet, before yawning and closing her eyes again.

Eamon chuckled softly.

‘You clearly haven’t lost your touch.’

Something approaching a snort erupted out of Janet.

‘Not that my kids have given me any to practice on. So far, Suzanne’s Tara is it, although their second child is due any tick of the clock.’

On cue, Suzanne appeared at Libby’s side, one hand holding Tara’s much smaller one and the other resting on the very prominent bulge.

‘Actually, this child was due a week ago. He or she just needs to get out already.’

Libby gave a short laugh before she replied.

‘I fully understand, not that Matilda went over, but by the end I just wanted her out too. I can’t believe you are going back for another go. It’s the farthest thing from my mind at the moment.’

Suzanne looked down for a moment and slowly rubbed a circle over her stomach before meeting Libby’s gaze, a knowing look on her face.

‘Give it a little while and you won’t think that way.’

Janet changed position slightly to show Matilda off to Suzanne who leaned in and placed a kiss on both Libby and Eamon’s cheeks, smiling widely as she drew back.

'Congrats. She's lovely.'

Eamon chuckled as he replied.

'Thanks, I think, although I do remember you telling me that all newborns are butt ugly when you had Tara.'

Suzanne grinned cheekily before she continued.

'You can take my word for it based on experience. She's lovely. Had she not been I would have skirted the issue and complimented her another way, such as telling you she has the tiniest little hands, or something along those lines.'

Eamon chuckled and Suzanne shrugged.

'You know the deal, pick something else to deflect attention away from what you haven't said.'

Eamon's chuckle escalated into a hearty laugh.

'I'll remember that next time somebody tells me she's tiny.'

One half of Suzanne's mouth lifted into a grin.

'I'd like to be there to see that.'

Suzanne looked briefly down at Tara.

'Glad this time that both sides of the family didn't decide to have babies on the same day. I caught up with Catriona before and oddly enough, her Tara and mine still look quite similar. I thought that it would have changed as they've grown. Quite bizarre really.'

All sets of eyes dropped to Tara who was looking quite adorable in her pink organza party frock, her hair caught in pigtails that had curled into single ringlets. Suzanne looked at Janet.

'Has Nana seen her yet?'

Janet shook her head slightly as she replied.

'Not yet.'

Suzanne's gaze went to where Laura was sitting at one of the tables, surrounded by people.

'Let's go show her. She's been so looking forward to the birth of the little one, although she did express her disappointment that neither of us chose to have our baby on her birthday.'

Suzanne rolled her eyes in mock exasperation.

'Like you get a choice in when they pop out!'

With that, the little party made their way over to Laura. It took a few moments for her to finish what she was saying to one of her older friends before she realised that they were there, but when she did, the happiness that lit up her face was genuine and she clasped her hands together in front of her.

'Pass her over. I'm so glad you could make it up. I was so excited when you rang to tell me you had a girl and I've been looking forward to meeting her.'

Janet passed Mattie over to Laura, who looked at first Eamon, then Libby.

'Oh she's just the sweetest little thing.'

She lifted her and placed a kiss on her forehead. As she lowered her, Mattie's lips puckered in her sleep as though she were about to give a kiss herself. Tears glistened in Laura's eyes as she looked back at Eamon and Libby, a soft laugh escaping.

'Would you look at that.'

Libby reached over and placed the gift that she had been holding on the table behind Laura with the others and leaned in to place a kiss on Laura's cheek.

'Happy Birthday.'

Eamon followed suit and leaned in to kiss Laura's cheek. She patted his hand where it rested on her shoulder.

'Thank you, but you shouldn't have. I insisted on no gifts and it seems nobody listened.'

She waved her hand in the direction of the sizeable pile of gifts behind her on the table.

'At this rate I'll be 91 before I manage to get them all open.'

Laura looked down at Matilda.

'A cuddle of this one is the best gift anybody could have given me.'

She sent an amused look at Suzanne.

'I just need to hang on until your little one decides to make an appearance and I can die a happy woman.'

Suzanne's eyebrows drew together.

'Nana, no more talk of dying. There's a heap of years left in you.'

Laura shot an exasperated look at Eamon.

'I'm an old woman. You'd think that as a nurse and a doctor, she and Hayley would understand that I have had a pretty good innings. You're the numbers man, maybe you can explain to them that 90 is old and I'm lucky to have reached that.'

At that point Hayley joined the little group her gaze taking them all in as she spoke.

'Who's explaining what to me?'

She changed tack as she spotted Matilda.

'Ohh, how lovely is she? I want a cuddle when you're done Nana.'

Hayley leaned in and placed a quick kiss on both Eamon's and Libby's cheeks.

'Congratulations.'

Laura gently patted Hayley on the arm to get her attention.

'Hayley love, at the back of the gift table is a large envelope. Would you fetch it for me?'

Hayley reached over the table and grabbed the envelope.

'Geez Nan, what's in there? It's heavy.'

'That's a little something I put together for Eamon.'

A look of shock was on Eamon's face and Hayley grinned at him and handed it over.

'All yours. From the feel of it, I think Nana has taken to putting bricks in envelopes.'

Eamon's face lit up in a huge grin whilst Laura tutted away Hayley's comments.

'What need would he have for bricks. No, this is my little gift to you.'

Eamon looked confused at her statement. Laura continued.

'As this party shows, I'm not getting any younger and family history tends to be lost unless it's recorded. So that's what I have tried to do for you.'

A mixture of surprise and pleasure washed across Eamon's face and Laura gave a short laugh.

'I've tried my hand at story telling. I don't make any claim to being good at it, but inside the envelope is the story of the years before Elena and Albert moved to Sydney and we all lived in the same street. Really, it's the story of Marigold the cat.'

Tears filled Eamon's eye and he was lost for words at the enormity of Laura's effort. Libby took one look at him and stepped into the breach in the conversation.

'That's amazing. How long did it take you?'

Laura gave a short chuckle.

'A lot longer than it would have taken one of you young ones. Around six months. I had a lot of help from Claire, the Dial-an-Angel nurse, who comes to see me a couple of times a week.'

With his emotions under control, Eamon leaned in and pressed another kiss to Laura's cheek, giving her a lingering hug.

'Thank you. It's very thoughtful of you to share the story with me.'

As he leaned back, Mattie squirmed and opened her eyes, looking straight at Laura, a delighted smile adorning the older woman's face. A brief smile curved Mattie's lips and Laura gave a short chuckle.

'That's very well-timed wind smile little one.'

Laura stroked Mattie's cheek. Hayley had pulled out her iPhone and snapped a shot before calling out, 'Nan,' and snapping another one as Laura looked up. Hayley grinned at him.

'I'll text them to you.'

Eamon returned her grin.

'Thanks.'

He was grateful to Hayley for having thought to capture the moment. It pleased him that he would have a photo of Laura and Mattie together, but it would also be a record of this moment, when he was so very touched by, and appreciative of, the generosity of Laura in sharing her story and the hard work that had gone into it. It may be the celebration for her

ninetieth birthday, but the gift that Laura had just given him was priceless.