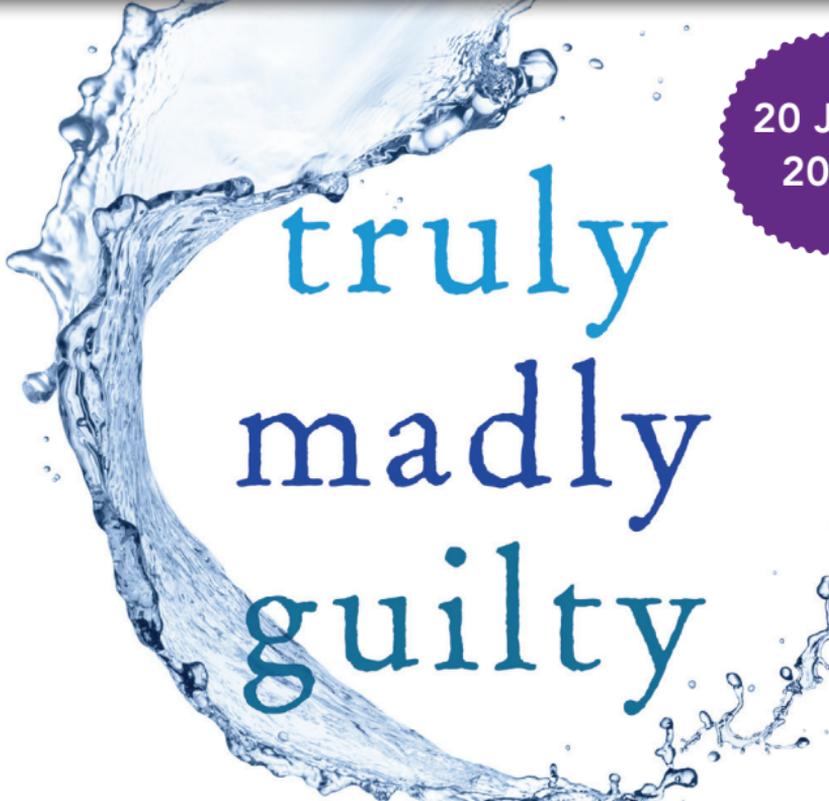


CHAPTER SAMPLER

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truly
madly
guilty

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MORIARTY

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Chapter One

‘This is a story that begins with a barbeque,’ said Clementine. The microphone amplified and smoothed her voice, making it more authoritative, as if it had been photoshopped. ‘An ordinary neighbourhood barbeque in an *ordinary* backyard.’ Well, not exactly an ordinary backyard, thought Erika.

She crossed her legs, tucked one foot behind her ankle, and sniffed. Nobody would call Vid’s backyard ordinary.

Erika sat in the middle of the back row of the audience in the event room that adjoined this smartly renovated local library in a suburb *forty-five* minutes out of the city, not thirty minutes, thank you very much, as suggested by the person at the cab company, who you would think would have some sort of expertise in the matter.

There were maybe twenty people in the audience, although there were fold-out chairs available for twice that many. Most of the audience were elderly people, with lively, expectant faces. These were intelligent, informed senior citizens who had come along on this rainy (yet again, would it ever end?) morning to collect new and fascinating information at their local ‘Community Matters Meeting’. ‘I saw the most interesting woman speak today,’ they wanted to tell their children and grandchildren.

Before she came, Erika had looked up the library’s website to see how it described Clementine’s talk. The blurb was short, and not very informative: *Hear Sydney mother and well-known cellist,*

Clementine Hart, share her story: 'One Ordinary Day'.

Was Clementine really a 'well-known' cellist? That seemed a stretch.

The five-dollar fee for today's event included two guest speakers, a delicious home-made morning tea and the chance to win a lucky door prize. The speaker after Clementine was going to talk about the council's controversial redevelopment plan for the local pool. Erika could hear the distant gentle clatter of cups and saucers being set up for the morning tea now. She held her flimsy raffle ticket for the lucky door prize safely on her lap. She couldn't be bothered putting it in her bag and then having to find it when they drew the raffle. Blue, E 24. It didn't have the look of a winning ticket.

The lady who sat directly in front of Erika had her grey, curly-haired head tipped to one side in a sympathetic, engaged manner, as if she were ready to agree with everything Clementine had to say. The tag on her shirt was sticking up. Size twelve. Target. Erika reached over and slid it back down.

The lady turned her head.

'Tag,' whispered Erika.

The lady smiled her thanks and Erika watched the back of her neck turn pale pink. The younger man sitting next to her, her son perhaps, who looked to be in his forties, had a barcode tattooed on the back of his tanned neck, as if he were a supermarket product. Was it meant to be funny? Ironic? Symbolic? Erika wanted to tell him that it was, in point of fact, idiotic.

'It was just an ordinary Sunday afternoon,' said Clementine.

Noticeable repetition of the word 'ordinary'. Clementine must have decided that it was important she appear 'relatable' to these ordinary people in the ordinary outer suburbs. Erika imagined Clementine sitting at her small dining room table, or maybe at Sam's unrestored antique desk, in her shabby-chic sandstone terrace house with its 'water glimpse', writing her little community-minded

speech while she chewed on the end of her pen and pulled all that lavish, dark hair of hers over one shoulder to caress in that sensual, slightly self-satisfied way she had, as if she were Rapunzel, thinking to herself: Ordinary.

Indeed, Clementine, how shall you make the ordinary people understand?

‘It was early winter. A cold, gloomy day,’ said Clementine.

What the . . . ? Erika shifted in her chair. It had been a beautiful day. A ‘*magnificent*’ day. That was the word Vid had used.

Or possibly ‘glorious’. A word like that, anyway.

‘There was a real bite in the air,’ said Clementine, and she actually shivered theatrically, and surely unnecessarily, when it was warm in the room, so much so that a man sitting a few rows in front of Erika appeared to have nodded off. He had his legs stretched out in front of him and his hands clasped comfortably across his stomach, his head tipped back as if he were napping on an invisible pillow. Perhaps he’d died.

Maybe the day of the barbeque had been cool, but it was definitely not *gloomy*. Erika knew that eyewitness accounts were notoriously unreliable because people thought they just pressed ‘rewind’ on the little recorder installed in their heads, when in fact they constructed their memories. They ‘developed their own narratives’. And so, when Clementine remembered the barbeque she remembered a cold, gloomy day. But Clementine was wrong. Erika remembered (she *remembered*; she was absolutely not constructing) how, on the morning of the barbeque, Vid had bent down to lean into her car window. ‘Isn’t it a magnificent day!’ he’d said.

Erika knew for an absolute fact that was what he’d said.

Or it may have been ‘glorious’.

But it was a word with positive connotations. She could be sure of that.

(If only Erika had said, ‘Yes, Vid, it certainly is a magnificent/glorious day,’ and put her foot back on the accelerator.)

‘I remember I’d dressed my little girls extra warmly,’ said Clementine.

Sam probably dressed the girls, thought Erika.

Clementine cleared her throat and gripped the sides of the lectern with both hands. The microphone was angled too high for her, so it seemed as though she were on tippy-toes trying to get her mouth close enough. Her neck was elongated, emphasising the new skinniness of her face.

Erika considered the possibility of discreetly edging her way around the side of the room and zipping over to adjust the microphone. It would only take a second. She imagined Clementine shooting her a grateful smile. ‘Thank God you did that,’ she would say afterwards, while they had coffee. ‘You really saved the day.’

Except that Clementine didn’t really want Erika there today. She hadn’t missed the horrified expression that flashed across Clementine’s face when she suggested she’d like to come along to hear her speak, although Clementine had quickly recovered herself and said it was fine, lovely, how nice, they could have coffee in the local food court afterwards.

‘It was a last-minute invitation,’ said Clementine. ‘The barbeque. We didn’t know our hosts that well. They were, well, they were friends of friends.’ She looked down at the lectern as if she’d lost her place. She’d carried a little pile of handwritten palm-sized index cards with her when she walked up to the lectern. There was something heartbreaking about those cards, as if Clementine had remembered that little tip from their oratory lessons at school. She must have cut them up with scissors. Not her grandmother’s pearl-handled ones. They’d gone missing.

It was odd seeing Clementine ‘onstage’, so to speak, without her cello. She looked so conventional, in her blue jeans and ‘nice’ floral top. Suburban mum outfit. Clementine’s legs were too short for jeans and they looked even shorter with flat ballet shoes like she was wearing today. Well, it was just a fact. She had looked

almost – even though it seemed so disloyal to use the word in relation to Clementine – *frumpy*, when she'd walked up to the lectern. When she performed she put her hair up and wore heels and all black: long skirts made out of floaty material, wide enough so she could fit the cello between her knees. Seeing Clementine sit with her head bowed tenderly, passionately towards her cello, as if she were embracing it, one long tendril of hair falling just short of the strings, her arm bent at that strange, geometric angle, was always so sensual, so exotic, so *other* to Erika. Each time she saw Clementine perform, even after all these years, Erika inevitably experienced a sensation like loss, as though she yearned for something unattainable. She'd always assumed that sensation represented something more complicated and interesting than envy, because she had no interest in playing a musical instrument, but maybe it didn't. Maybe it all came back to envy.

Watching Clementine give this halting, surely pointless little speech in this little room, with a view of the busy shopping centre car park instead of the hushed, soaring-ceilinged concert halls where she normally performed, gave Erika the same shameful satisfaction she felt seeing a movie star in a trashy magazine without make-up: You're not that special after all.

'So there were six adults there that day,' said Clementine. She cleared her throat, rocked back onto her heels and then rocked forward again. 'Six adults and three children.'

And one yappy dog, thought Erika. *Yap, yap, yap.*

'As I said, we didn't really know our hosts, but we were all having a nice time, we were enjoying ourselves.'

You were enjoying yourself, thought Erika. *You* were.

She remembered how Clementine's clear, bell-like laughter rose and fell in tandem with Vid's deep chuckle. She saw people's faces slip in and out of murky shadows, their eyes like black pools, sudden flashes of teeth.

They'd taken far too long that afternoon to turn on the outdoor

lights in that preposterous backyard.

‘I remember at one point we were listening to music,’ said Clementine. She looked down at the lectern in front of her, and then up again, as if she were seeing something on the horizon far in the distance. Her eyes were blank. She didn’t look like a suburban mum now. “‘After a Dream” by the French composer Gabriel Fauré.’ Naturally she pronounced it the proper French way. ‘It’s a beautiful piece of music. It has this exquisite mournfulness to it.’

She stopped. Did she sense the slight shifting in seats, the discomfort in her audience? ‘Exquisite mournfulness’ was not the right phrase for this audience: too excessive, too arty. Clementine, my love, we’re too *ordinary* for your high-brow references to French composers. Anyway, they also played ‘November Rain’ by Guns N’ Roses that night. Not quite so arty.

Wasn’t the playing of ‘November Rain’ somehow related to Tiffany’s revelation? Or was that before? When exactly did Tiffany share her secret? Was that when the afternoon had turned to liquid and began to slip and slide away?

‘We had been drinking,’ said Clementine. ‘But no one was drunk. Maybe a little tipsy.’

Her eyes met Erika’s, as though she’d been aware of exactly where she was sitting the whole time and had been avoiding looking at her, but had now made a deliberate decision to seek her out. Erika stared back and tried to smile, like a friend, Clementine’s closest friend, the godmother of her children, but her face felt paralysed, as if she’d had a stroke.

‘Anyway, it was very late in the afternoon and we were all about to have dessert, we were all laughing,’ said Clementine. She dropped Erika’s gaze to look at someone else in the audience in the front row, and it felt dismissive, even cruel. ‘Over something. I don’t remember what.’

Erika felt light-headed, claustrophobic. The room had become unbearably stuffy.

The need to get out was suddenly overpowering. Here we go, she thought. Here we go again. Fight-or-flight response. Activation of her sympathetic nervous system. A shift in her brain chemicals. That's what it was. Perfectly natural. Childhood trauma. She'd read all the literature. She knew exactly what was happening to her but the knowledge made no difference. Her body went right ahead and betrayed her. Her heart raced. Her hands trembled. She could *smell* her childhood, so thick and real in her nostrils: damp and mould and shame.

'Don't fight the panic. Face it. Float through it,' her psychologist had told her.

Her psychologist was exceptional, worth every cent, but for God's sake, as if you could float when there was no room, no space anywhere, above, below, when you couldn't take a step without feeling the spongy give of rotting *stuff* beneath your feet.

She stood, pulling at her skirt which had got stuck to the back of her legs. The guy with the barcode glanced over his shoulder at her. The sympathetic concern in his eyes gave her a tiny shock; it was like seeing the disconcertingly intelligent eyes of an ape.

'Sorry,' whispered Erika. 'I have to –' She pointed at her watch and shuffled sideways past him, trying not to brush the back of his head with her jacket.

As she reached the back of the room, Clementine said, 'I remember there was a moment when my friend screamed my name. Really loud. I'll never forget the sound.'

Erika stopped with her hand on the door, her back to the room. Clementine must have leaned towards the microphone because her voice suddenly filled the room: 'She shouted, *Clementine!*'

Clementine had always been an excellent mimic; as a musician she had an ear for the precise intonations in people's voices. Erika could hear raw terror and shrill urgency in just that one word, 'Clementine!'

She knew she was the friend who had shouted Clementine's

name that night but she had no memory of it. There was nothing but a pure white space where that memory should have been and if *she* couldn't remember a moment like that, well, that indicated a problem, an anomaly, a discrepancy; an extremely significant and concerning discrepancy. The wave of panic peaked and nearly swept her off her feet. She pushed down the handle of the door and staggered out into the relentless rain.

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