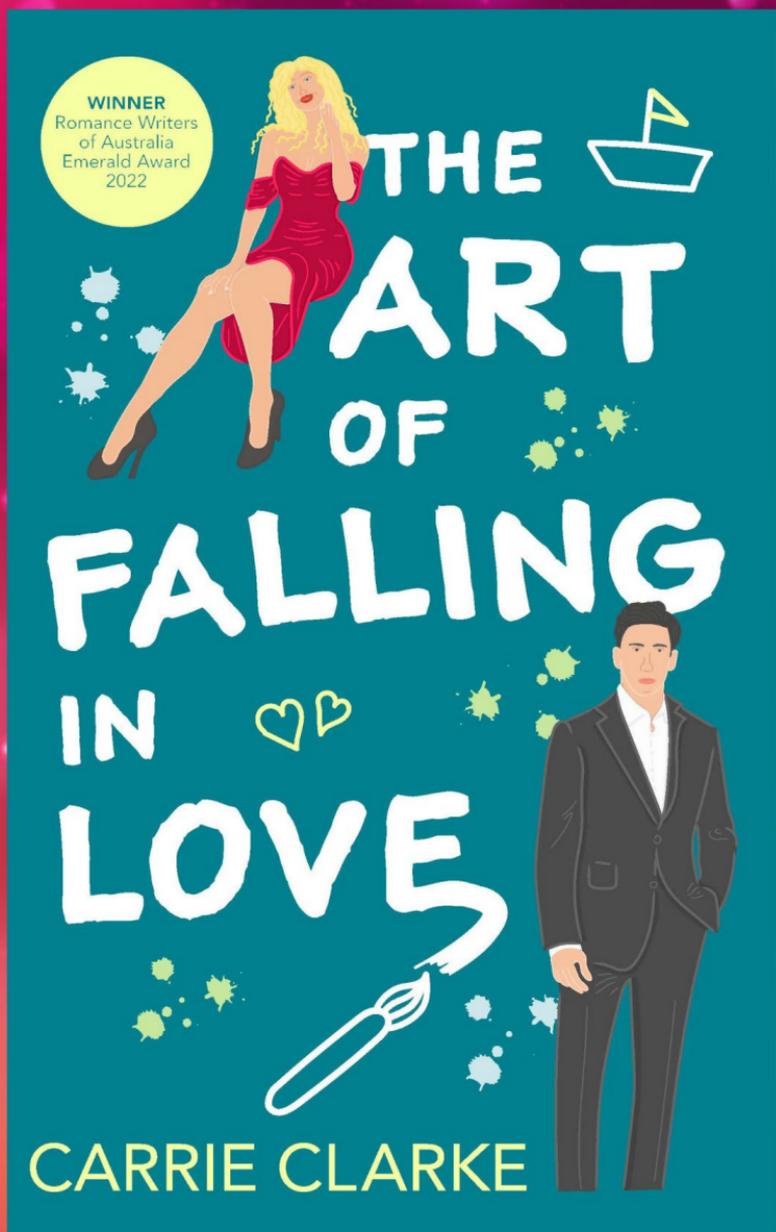


Bonus Content



Isla the Wonderchild...

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For my lovely readers.
Thank you for your support. It means the world.

CHAPTER ONE

NICK

“**N**ick, how many dummies did you pack in the carry on?” Lulu calls from Isla’s room. Her voice falls somewhere between fondness (I hope), humour and exasperation.

“It’s a very long flight.” And that’s a question I don’t really want to answer. I’ve learned a thing or two since being with Lulu. Number one is, have the conversation you want to have, which is not always the one presented to you.

“Because I count twenty. Really? You think we need twenty dummies?”

“Possibly. What if we drop one? Planes are full of germs. And if she decides she’s had enough of air travel halfway to Sydney, we’re going to need them.”

“Firstly, they’ll have boiling water. So if worst comes to worst we can always get the stewards to sterilise them. Secondly, if she gets fretful I’ll just pop her on the boob. Problem solved.”

I can hear her pulling the dummies out of the bag and dropping them in their container on Isla’s dresser. Joke’s on her though. I have an even dozen in my own carry on. This might be our first international flight as a family, but it’s not my first rodeo going on an outing with my girls. And I’d rather be prepared than caught short at thirty thousand feet, ten hours from touchdown.

Isla is lying in her portable baby bed beside my suitcase, which is open on our bed, her face turned towards the sound of Lulu's voice.

"Don't worry precious, Daddy's got you covered. You won't run out of dummies." She smiles up at me and blows a giant bubble, which is clearly agreement that I'm right.

Not that I think Lulu is a negligent mother. Nothing could be further from the truth. The love and devotion she showers on Isla—and on me—is nothing short of amazing. She's just a bit more, well, relaxed, than I am.

I hear the ancient floorboards in the hallway creak and quickly flip my own carry on closed. What she doesn't see won't hurt her.

Slender arms slide around my waist, and those lush breasts press against my back.

"You're such a worrier, Nick Pierce. We'll be fine. She's a good baby. And she'll need to get used to the long-haul flights sooner rather than later."

Whose idea was it to split our time between Skye and Sydney again? Oh, yes. Mine. An idea which might be revisited after our flight tomorrow. Perhaps I'll look into a cabin on the QE11 for our return. Although, what if she gets seasick?

It might sound like I don't want to go back to Sydney, and that's not quite true. I can't wait to see my sister again. And introduce Isla the Wonderchild to Harry and Stella and Will. But I can't say I'm looking forward to the flight. Lulu, on the other hand, is completely chill about the whole thing.

"Come on, stop checking and rechecking. You have everything. It's Sydney. Not the Kalahari Desert. There's shops if we forget something."

"I just don't want to be caught short on the flight." Even I can hear the whine in my tone.

"Hmm." Lulu picks Isla up and heads off to her room. "I'm going to feed her and put her to bed. We have an early start tomorrow."

Twenty minutes later I've triple checked the dummies, clothing, wraps, nappies and wipes in my carry on and am cleaning my teeth ready for bed.

"Oooh. Early night for Mummy and Daddy too." Lulu waggles her eyebrows and slides closer, slipping her hand over my boxers. As always it only takes a nanosecond for me to respond.

"Yes. We'll be travelling for two days. I need to stock you up on orgasms so you don't miss out." My gaze meets hers in the mirror and the temperature in the little bathroom doubles.

"What? No plans for a Mile High membership?"

"I'd be up for that, but I expect Duncan might get a bit suspicious if we both disappear and leave the baby with him." Lulu's father is coming to Sydney with us for a brief visit before leaving us there. We have no idea when we'll be heading back, and he can't leave the farm or the new distillery for any longer than a couple of weeks. I'm not sure if I can either, but for different reasons. He has responsibilities here, I, on the other hand, have fallen in love with the farming life. And of course, my mother is in Sydney. Another good reason to stay away.

"I'll let you in on a secret. He knows what we do in here. The walls aren't that thick." Lulu is leading me by the cock towards our bed.

"They are that thick. And are you trying to ruin the mood?" As if she could. My hands are already at the zipper on her jeans.

CHAPTER TWO

LULU

The last time I did a long-haul flight I cried all the way, and Isla was nothing more than a brand-new idea I hadn't come to grips with yet.

This time, she's a living breathing human with a personality twice the size of her tiny body. We get a lot of side-eye as we straggle into business class. And in truth we must make a strange sight. Nick, all neat and tidy and stern. Dad all rumpled and paint stained and, no matter how hard he tries, smelling faintly of sheep. Me, sleep deprived but comfortable in yoga pants. And last but certainly not least, Isla the Wonderchild, smiling at everyone she sees, shameless in reaching out to tug on hair or touch fluffy jumpers, even kissing cheeks that venture too close.

Most business travellers hate to see babies in business. Nick has warned me. Pre-Isla his stomach dropped if ever he spotted anyone under voting age at the pointy end. They expect her to cry. And scream. And stink out the cabin with her nappies. But I know my baby and she won't. Well, maybe that last one she will. But there'll be no crying or screaming.

And sure enough, less than an hour in the air and the flight attendants are stopping by to flirt with her. The guy across the aisle is pulling faces to make her laugh and the woman behind me has offered to hold her if we need a break.

Three hours in and she's out cold in the flight cot, bum in the air, face smooshed against the mattress, snoring her little baby

snores. I can feel the collective disappointment of those around us as they wait for her to wake up and entertain them again. Bad news for them. She plays hard, she sleeps hard. And she won't be waking up any time soon.

"Why don't you get some sleep, Interloper? I'll take first watch." Nick whispers, brushing his lips over my ear. I love it when he calls me Interloper. It reminds me of how far we've come, and how much fun it's been. Mostly.

"Are you sure?" I try and fail to stifle a yawn. Because I'm the mother of a five-month-old whirlwind.

"Absolutely. I've got this." And I know, without doubt, he does. Because if there's a better, more devoted, more capable, more loving father out there than Nick Pierce, I'd like to meet him.

So with a grateful kiss on his cheek, I lay my massive business class seat back, slip on a sleeping mask and prepare to sleep my way through the knowledge that in less than 24 hours I'll be face-to-face with Nick's mother again.

CHAPTER THREE

NICK

There was a time when I wasn't sure I would ever see this place again, and as we stagger into the lift, which is still covered in the wild, bold flowers Lulu painted, my heart soars.

"This is where Mummy and Daddy fell in love, Isla," I tell her as I carry her through the red door and into Lulu's beloved loft. Sadly, she's more interested in pulling my hair. But Lulu looks at me with those bright blue eyes and the flow of electricity takes me right back to the first time I came here.

Not telling Mum what flight we were on, or the day we were arriving, was a brilliant idea. Dealing with her right off a flight from Scotland would have been too much. We have two days to sleep off the jetlag and acclimatise to the Sydney heat before presenting ourselves for 'luncheon'. In the meantime we'll catch up with Rosanna, and my sister Claire on the sly.

There was some debate about where we should stay when we arrived. Duncan is staying with an old friend in Coogee, apparently looking forward to being near an ocean that's not too cold to swim in. So this is the first time, other than the odd weekend away, that we've been entirely alone as a family. My old apartment is bigger, and Isla could have had her own room. But for me, this is our Sydney home.

It's been empty for nearly a year, and I expect it to be a bit dusty, but I underestimated Ro and my sister. The place is

sparkling clean, there are fresh sheets on the bed, food in the fridge, and an enormous vase of flowers on the kitchen counter.

Sometime while we're here we'll have to decide what to do about our living arrangements. It's ridiculous to keep two apartments. But for now, we feed and settle Isla, make ourselves a quick sandwich, gulp down a cup of tea, which is something I've developed a taste for in Scotland, and climb naked into Lulu's comfy bed.

"Are you tired?" I nuzzle the back of her neck. Being in this bed is bringing back all kinds of memories, and despite the jetlag I'm already hard just spooning Lulu.

"It would appear you're not," she whispers back, her hand reaching for my cock.

"Can you be quiet enough not to wake Isla?"

"Me? Can you keep the dirty talk quiet enough?" Her hand glides up and down my length, and I can't help the low groan.

"I guess we're going to find out." My hand slides over her hip, fingers dipping between her legs and finding her wet and ready, as always.

"Fuck, Lu." It's barely more than a whisper, but I thank the universe that Isla is a sound sleeper. She's either on or off. No in between.

"Yes, please." Lulu presses her lush arse against my length and with a deft and well-practiced flick of the wrist she's lining me up at her entrance. We got a lot of practice at this during the later stages of her pregnancy when this was her favourite position. The bed squeaks quietly in time with my strokes, slow at first and speeding up till the squeak is so loud we both start to laugh.

"Choosing to stay here might have been a mistake." Lulu says as I pause, listening intently for any sign of stirring from the travel cot.

"I'm going out first thing tomorrow to buy some WD40." I groan. "And then I'm going to find a house for us to buy. With lots of bedrooms."

“In the meantime ...” Lulu slides off the bed and rifles through her luggage, plugging the as yet unneeded baby monitor in before she holds out a hand. I follow her into the bathroom. “I’ve always loved shower sex.”

“Now why didn’t I think of that?”

I’m deep inside my beautiful wife before the water is even fully hot.

It’s fast and furious, Lulu leaning against the tile wall as I fill her from behind while rubbing her clit with one hand, holding her steady with the other.

She comes with a quiet, strangled moan, and I follow suit seconds later.

“It’s so good to be home.” I push her mad hair out of the way and run my lips along the top of her shoulder.

Lulu turns in the cage of my arms and kisses me.

“Anywhere is home as long as you and Isla are there.”

We dry off and climb back into bed.

“I love you, Interloper,” I murmur before I realise she’s already asleep. And it reminds me of the first time I said those words to her. She slept through them then, too. The difference is, now she knows it. And I’ll make sure she never forgets.

None of us stirs until the clanking of the old lift wakes us in the morning.

“I’ve missed you so much,” Lulu cries as she hurls herself at Rosanna, while I crush Claire in a hug before we swap. It’s less than five months since we’ve seen them both, and we video call all the time, but it’s not the same.

Alerted to the excitement, Isla sits up in her travel cot, squealing, arms outstretched and of course Ro and Claire nearly trip each other up to get to her.

One of the things we have planned while we’re here is an Australian wedding. Rosanna and Lulu have been planning the dresses, which I imagine are in the giant garment bags Ro brought with her. Once we’ve devoured the danishes they brought, Isla and I are kicked out so fittings can commence. I’m

happy to go for a walk and stretch my legs, so I strap my little darling into the carrier on my chest and we head out, enjoying the feel of late spring in Sydney on our faces after the cold of a Scottish autumn.

We pass the café where Lulu and I first had brunch together and I make a mental note to bring Lulu back tomorrow. Also to take her and Isla out on the boat. And not to turn this visit into too much of a trip down memory lane. Because since having Isla it hasn't escaped my notice that I've become a sentimental sook. And that's so not sexy. Although Lulu doesn't seem to mind.

CHAPTER FOUR

LULU

“Stop fussing. She looks gorgeous. As always. And so do you,” Nick says with what I recognise as his indulgent smile as I straighten Isla’s cute little romper for the tenth time.

“I just hope she doesn’t spit up on her outfit.” Now I’m straightening my own conservative linen sundress.

“If she does you’ve got three more in her nappy bag. Which might be overkill since you also have six bibs.” It’s not lost on me that this conversation echoes the one we had about dummies before we left Scotland. Only the shoe is on the other foot now.

Flying for over 20 hours from Scotland to Sydney with an infant? Piece of cake. Lunch with Nick’s mother? Not so much.

She hates me.

At least there’ll be plenty of people there who do like me. Harry, Stella and Will. Dad and Rosanna and Claire. Nick’s old assistant Mandy. And a couple who don’t know me. Harry and Stella’s daughter Greer and their pseudo-son Josh.

Nick rings the bell. I’m clutching Isla so tight she starts to squirm and I force myself to relax. I don’t need to be tense. Because whether or not Mary Pierce likes me, Nick Pierce loves me with everything he is, and that’s the only thing that matters.

The door flies open and there she is, dressed as though she’s going to a garden party at Buckingham Palace.

“Nicholas,” she says, with as much warmth as a public servant calling ‘Next’ at the Department of Motor Transport.

She turns and spots Isla, who as usual is grinning from ear to ear at the prospect of a new person to enchant. I would have bet that was beyond even Isla's skills, and the poleaxed look on Mary's face suggests I'm right.

With a trademark squeal Isla throws her arms out, straining forward and reaching for Mary's cheeks. I have no choice but to hand her over or risk her toppling out of my arms, and I watch in horror as Isla mashes her lips to Mary's in a sloppy, slobbery baby kiss.

Nick is no help at all as he snorts out a stifled laugh. Fortunately, I hear familiar heavy footsteps.

"Is that my wee angel I hear? Come to Grandpa," Dad bellows, reaching for his favourite person in the world. Normally, Isla would be all over that like bees on honey. Not today. Today, Mary is the target of her undivided attention.

Unoffended, Dad just laughs, and despite the fact this is not his house, opens the door wide and ushers us inside while Mary stands frozen with a babbling Isla in her arms, clearly unsure what to do with her.

I've never been here, but it looks exactly as I imagined it would. Perfect and beautiful and sterile. More like a museum than a home. Which makes sense of the apartment Nick lived in when we first met.

The pristine back garden is full of people laughing and chatting while servers—yes, she employed a catering company—circulate with trays of champagne and tiny appetisers.

I barely have time to whisper to Nick, "Save the baby" before Harry just about bowls me over.

"Lulu. It's wonderful to see you again." He pounds Nick on the back. "And you too, son." Nick staggers under the unexpected blow. All his concentration is on his mother, who has emerged from the house clutching Isla uncomfortably, as though she's an octopus in a string bag. Which, to be fair, she does sometimes imitate.

Rosanna picks up on my distress and makes a beeline for Isla, who reluctantly allows herself to be passed over.

Don't get me wrong. I don't imagine for a second Nick's mother would do anything to harm Isla. It's just that Mary is not known for her maternal instincts, and as much as we adore our little girl, sucking kisses and hair pulling from a baby may not be top of Mary's favourite things to do.

I'm momentarily distracted by more greetings and introductions, and the next time I check, Isla is back with Mary. Sitting on her lap, attempting to get her fingers into Mary's glass of wine. This time it's Claire who spirits her away before there's a loud squawk and Isla is again reaching for her grandmother.

I don't know who needs rescuing more, Isla or Mary. No, that's not true. It's definitely Mary, who clearly has no idea what to do with a determined almost-six-month-old.

I'm introduced to Greer and Josh, who are laughing their heads off.

"She's like a cat. She's picked the one person here unlikely to want to give her a cuddle and is determined to win her over," Greer says, wiping tears from her cheeks.

Now Isla's got her hands on a tiny little crabmeat tartlet.

"Oh dear god, Nick, quick. She's going to ..." and before I can get another word out Isla has shoved the tartlet at Mary, missing her mouth completely and smearing it up her cheek and into her hair. Mary couldn't look more shocked if one of Da's sheep had stepped out onto the terrace.

"I think I'm going to pee my pants," squeals Claire, in such a close imitation of Isla's squeal you can tell immediately they're related.

By now, the whole party—even the very proper servers—are laughing. All except Mary, who is trying to wipe crabmeat off her cheek while Isla tries to pull herself up to stand on her lap. Using Mary's hair to steady herself.

I look at Nick, who has made no effort to save his mother from our marauding daughter.

“Oh my God. This is a disaster.”

CHAPTER FIVE

NICK

Lulu looks stricken. I know how important it was to her to try and forge some sort of peaceful relationship with my mother.

And I wish I could help. I really do. But it's taking every ounce of concentration I have not to roar laughing.

"Do something. Please," Lulu begs. But Isla won't be deterred. She's having a ball.

"Just leave her, Nicholas." Mum says as I try, without success, to pry Isla away. Because every time someone takes her from Mum, she squirms and strains and grizzles until she's back on Mum's lap. It's impossible to tell the depth of Mum's annoyance, because she's got her poker face on.

By the time lunch is served, the crabmeat on Mum's face has been joined by tomato in her hair and cheese on the sleeve of her no doubt dry-clean-only silk blouse.

Not content with sitting in the highchair we brought for her, Isla settles in on Mum's lap, intent on feeding both of them. What a shame she can't quite find either mouth.

Mum has barely spoken but everyone else is having a whale of a time. Especially Isla.

"I cannot believe that child," Lulu wails as Isla attempts to drink water from Mum's glass and pours it all over both of them.

Now it really is time to step in, although I have to admit, I've been enjoying the spectacle.

I hoist Isla out of Mum's lap and the three of us traipse upstairs to get cleaned up.

On the way back down Isla is still determined to get to Mum. I try and wrangle her, but she's climbing me like a monkey up a tree. To my surprise Mum's having none of it.

"Oh, for goodness sake, just give her to me." She whips Isla out of my arms and as she walks down the stairs ahead of me Isla looks back over Mum's shoulder with a grin that, had it been on anyone other than a toothless baby, I would have described as a look of triumph. The little tyrant got exactly what she wanted.

As I reach the bottom I swear I hear Mum whisper to her granddaughter "I never really liked that blouse anyway."

Coffee is served in the sitting room, and Mum wisely declines.

Without the entertainment of food or drink, Isla turns her attention to Mum's jewellery.

She's wearing her great grandmother's locket, a beautiful antique made of gold softened and worn down with age, and decorated with rows of seed pearls. The ring holding it on the chain rattles as Isla shakes it back and forth. I'm about to warn Mum to be careful when, quick as a whip, Isla stuffs the locket into her mouth and bites.

"Nooooo," screams Lulu, leaping in what seems like slow motion across the carpet towards the scene of the crime.

Isla grins as Mum yanks the locket from her mouth. When she turns it over we can all see, clear as day, the dent made by a tooth none of us realised had come through. The entire room holds its breath, Lulu on her knees in front of my mother, Isla beaming shamelessly.

"I guess she's got her first tooth," Mum gasps. And for the only time I can ever remember, my mother throws her head back and laughs.

And Isla laughs with her.

CHAPTER SIX

LULU

I smooth my hands down the lush fabric of my dress. Rosanna has outdone herself. This creation is nothing short of a work of art.

The dress itself is heavy silk satin. The colour of crushed raspberries, just like Nick the Romantic requested. The full skirt folds over itself. Over and over again, until it resembles a rose halfway to full bloom.

Underneath is layer after layer of the most delicate silk tulle ranging from palest cream to pink to raspberry, so it looks like the luscious fruit has been folded through whipped cream. My back is bared by a deep vee, anchored at the waist by an enormous sash fashioned in a half-bow. Trailing from the centre, on the finest green silk cord are fat, overblown silk roses in creams and pinks. I feel like I should be coming down the steps of a castle, or stepping onto the set of a Baz Luhrmann movie.

In contrast to my over-the-top creation, Rosanna's dress is a strapless cream silk satin sheath reminiscent of Dior of the 50s. Simple and elegant it provides the perfect contrast to my extravagant gown.

"Oh, mo chridhe, you look ..." Dad chokes, unable to finish his sentence, and snuffles into his hanky.

"Ro, you're a genius. I've never seen anything so beautiful." Claire whispers, fussing with the wayward curls that are escaping my updo. "Nick is going to swallow his tongue."

Tears are sparkling in Rosanna's eyes and she slides a folded tissue under her bottom lashes trying not to smudge her make-up. But I can't keep the smile off my face. Not even the prospect of seeing Mary, who will no doubt hate my divine dress, can dampen my joy.

"Let's get this show on the road before my mascara ends up dripping off my chin," she grumbles.

Sydney has put on her best weather for us and the sky is streaked with pink, orange, and purple as I emerge into the garden where all our friends and family are waiting. But all I really see is Nick, under an arch of creamy roses and trailing greenery, our baby in his arms. Both of them are beaming from ear to ear, and even from this distance I can see the tears in his eyes. So different from the man I met in the lift not so long ago.

Dad is a blubbering mess by the time he hands me over to Nick, and takes Isla from his arms.

Nick and I were keen for Harry to marry us, but his mother put on such a production about what people would think that I capitulated—much to Nick's annoyance—and a dusty old minister was dug up from somewhere to do the job. I really don't care. What I care about is our commitment to each other, and to Isla. And no ceremony or piece of paper or man of the cloth could eclipse the commitment we've made in our hearts.

I was worried I might cry during my vows, but what I do is laugh. The joy Nick has brought to my life can't be contained by something as small and fragile as a human body. It's enormous, and all encompassing. As it turns out, it can't even be contained by a laugh, because before I know it, I'm laughing and crying at the same time. Which sets Nick off laugh-crying too.

With perfect timing Isla, who has developed an inexplicable devotion to her prickly grandmother, squeals until Dad hands her over to Mary, who looks like she just sucked a lemon. Almost. Because lurking deep in her eyes is a softness Nick claims he's never seen before. And there must be something to it be-

cause she hands over her now dented antique locket to Isla's grasping fingers with a long-suffering sigh.

"That's it, Interloper. You can't escape me now. I've married you twice," Nick whispers against my lips as we kiss to deafening hoots and hollers from our friends and family.

"Oh, I don't know. I'm friendly with a couple of good lawyers that could probably get me out of it if you don't behave yourself, Nicholas the You-Don't-Fool-Me-Anymore," I respond, my lips grazing his ear and raising a shiver across his skin.

"Wouldn't work. Because wherever you go, I'll just follow you. I did it once, I'd do it again."

And then there's no more need for words, just kissing. We're the centre of the storm as pandemonium continues around us. And as long as we're in each other's arms, that's the way it will stay.

AFTERWORD

Thanks for reading the Bonus HEA for *The Art of Falling in Love*. I hope you liked it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

I can't wait to bring you Josh and Greer's story, *Blueprint for Falling in Love*.