

Chapter 1

The Hang Up

Jess had been gone for over a year now. When she first went to LA she'd ring almost every second day. We'd talk for hours. She'd tell me what she'd been up to, the music she'd been working on, the people she'd met. But as time went by her calls became further apart, our conversations shorter and shorter. Her phone calls would stretch out to once a week then once every couple of weeks then once a month. Now it'd been nearly two months since I'd heard from her. We used to be so close, we used to share everything. Now I found out more about what she was doing through friends or through the newspapers magazines or on the TV than I did directly from her.

In just one short year Jess had set the music scene alight with her amazing voice her warm and inviting stage presence and her smouldering beauty. It seemed she was on the cover of every magazine on every newsstand I happened to pass – with headlines like 'Pop Sensation Jessica Smith scores another number one hit across America'. So I guess I did get to see quite a bit of her – but not the way I would have liked to. And of course I'd pick up the magazines and devour what they'd written about her, knowing most of it was crap but still wanting to read it just to feel as if I was still somehow a part of her life.

I was relaxing in my old recliner rocker taking in the amazing view I had across the Derwent River when my mind drifted back to something Jess had said even before we'd put Constellation J together.

She'd said. 'You and I are gonna do great things together, Jordie. We're gonna conquer the world.'

I guess she was right. We did conquer the world. We wowed 'em from San Francisco to New York and beyond. Constellation J's whirlwind tour of America had been an unmitigated success, more than we could have even dreamt of. And it had set Jess up for where she was at now. My mind then wandered to the first few weeks after we'd returned home from Constellation J's 'Hello Goodbye' tour. We, or more accurately me, had decided to call an end to Constellation J prior to taking our first and last album 'Universe' on the road in America. Thinking back that was probably a mistake. Not because I was missing the adulation, and I definitely didn't miss the constant touring, but because it cut the chains that tied Jess to the band which subsequently led her to where she was today. Which was to her benefit. But unfortunately it also led to her and I drifting apart. Which was to my detriment.

I remembered how, not too long after we'd returned, I'd asked Dave, our manager, to organise a get together, so the five of us could discuss where to now in regard to our musical exploits.

'Jordie Harper! Hey Jordie how ya doin'?' Jesus mate, are you a friggin' one man army or what!' Bernie the barman had shouted as Jess and I made our way through the bar of The Beltana to meet up with Dave Vince and Kate. 'Bloody hell mate, if ya not fightin' off bikies ya takin' out fuckin' hijackers! Excuse my French, Jess. But we've been followin' you guys, been readin' all about the adventures of Constellation J in the newspapers. Bloody charmed life mate – charmed life!'

Not sure exactly what Bernie meant by 'charmed life' and I didn't ask him knowing that when it came to talking away the time of day Bernie was up there with the best of them and I had other things on my mind so I flashed a smile his way as Jess and I made our way through. I was aware of how the local media had painted us following 'The Hello Goodbye Tour'. It

made good reading but in reality we were just reacting to circumstances. The bikies were gonna fight us so we fought back, it's what you do if you or yours are threatened. Same with the hijackers!

'Like I've said before, Bernie, don't believe everything ya read in the newspapers, mate.'

'Jordie Harper, the reluctant hero. Welcome home, mate. Ya friends are waitin' in the lounge,' Bernie had smiled.

For the first few weeks after the tour Jess and I had spent most of our time catching up with family and friends. But strangely I was already missing Constellation J. For the last few years we'd had a clear picture of what we'd be doing and where we'd be at any given time. Now every day was just another day, I had no plan of where I was going or what I wanted to do. That's the reason I'd asked Dave to organise a meeting. I'd wanted the five of us to share face to face what we had in mind for our musical futures.

I remembered how Jess had suggested, almost pleaded with us to put the band back together.

'We could all dress in black and call it the Back in Black tour,' she'd laughed.

Kate and Vince loved the idea, but I wanted to take another direction, do something new and exciting. Constellation J had been great but it was, at least in my eyes, time to leave it behind. I wanted to search for a more mature sound. Something a little more R&B, a little more blues. I didn't want to be singing 'Hearts are trumps – thump – thump – thump' for the next twenty years. But I guess that meeting was the beginning of the end for Jess and me. Not long after she took up an offer to work in LA with Max Out, our producer on 'Universe'. And not long after that Vince Kate Sarah Jade and I hit the road in Australia with our new band 'The Hang Up' playing our new R&B sound at selected clubs and pubs. It's what I'd wanted to do since the early days of Constellation J. Play small intimate venues. Venues with

atmosphere so thick you could almost cut it with a knife. That was the area of the live music arena that I'd always wanted to inhabit.

It was Dave who'd come up with the idea to put a band together – and the name, 'The Hang Up'. Jess had left a few months earlier for LA and Dave and I were sitting around in his office. He'd been running through some of the financials for setting up the recording studio with all the latest high-tech recording gear I'd ordered from America. Dave and I were partners in it. We already had the premises, an old run down warehouse in North Hobart that for the past few months we'd been renovating, getting it ready for when all the gear arrived. I guess I wasn't listening to closely to what Dave was saying. I think I must have been quietly wallowing in self-pity.

Out of the blue and completely out of left field I blurted, 'Fuck Dave – can't life change in a flash, mate.'

Dave shot me a puzzled look as he raised his eyebrows and tilted his head as if to say, 'continue'.

'Ya know, mate,' I did continue not really caring if Dave wanted to hear what I was about to say or not. 'I've known Jess since we were both in grade five, shit we've been soul mates since our first year at high school. She's been a part of my life almost since I can remember. Same with Marty! Now neither of 'em are in my life. I miss 'em, mate! I really fucking miss 'em!'

Poor Dave he must have been thinking, 'What the fuck am I gonna say here. In the space of a few months Jordie's lost his two best mates, Marty and Josh. Both in the most tragic of circumstances, Marty in a million to one white water rafting accident in Peru and Josh in a jail beating here at Risdon jail. And Robbie, the last of The Fearless Five gang and close mate, was touring Australia with the Holden Racing Team, which meant these days their

paths rarely crossed. And to top it off, Jess, the love of his life had left to forge a career of her own in LA.’ What could he say!

‘Ya know what you need to do, Jordie,’ Dave responded after a few seconds thought. ‘You need to hit the road again. You need to play all those clubs that you’ve always wanted to play.’ He paused for a moment before laughing, ‘You’ve always had a hang up about playing those clubs with, as you put it, atmosphere so thick you could cut it with a knife. Well what’s stopping you? You could put a band together – call yourself ‘The Jordie Harper Hang Up’,’ he laughed out loud. ‘Why not get Kate and Vince on-board, they’d play with you again at the drop of a hat.’

‘I like the name, Dave,’ I laughed back. ‘But not sure I wanna put my name in front of it. That sounds a bit me – me – me to me!’

As usual Dave was right. And that’s exactly what I did and not long after that discussion we hit the road as ‘The Hang-Up’. I loved playing those venues, and I loved playing with Kate and Vince again. But not a day went by that I didn’t miss Jess.

As I sat there staring at the mirror flat deep blue expanses of The Derwent I suddenly got all melancholy. Then something happened, something that hadn’t happened in a long time, a few lines for a song, a song about Jess began bouncing about in my head. I grabbed a pen and began to write them down.

‘Miss you babe
miss you so bad
I think of the good times
but they just make me sad.’

I sat there for a second then thought, ‘This has got potential. I’ve gotta get this down on tape’, so with pen and pad in hand I bolted for my studio. I grabbed one of my guitars and began working on a melody to accompany my lines. It was almost as if this was meant to be,

like it was divine intervention or something because in no time I'd worked out an entire verse and chorus. And I'd come up with a melody that just seemed a natural fit for the words.

'Yes,' I shouted as I punched the air. 'Now I've gotta get this down.'

I spun around – flicked the record switch and began playing the intro leading me into singing:

'Been walkin' around - the streets of this old town

draggin' my feet across the ground.

The streets are lonely now.

I see places I know – places we used to go

they're empty now.

I hear your laughter in the air – see your smile everywhere

I turn around but you're not there.

Why is love so unfair.'

A quick guitar bridge to lead into the chorus before I continued:

'Miss you Babe

miss you so bad

I think of the good times

but they just make me sad.

Wanna hold you babe – wanna touch your face

wanna feel the love in your warm embrace.

Wanna kiss you babe – wanna rock you through the night

make you scream with pure delight.

That's what I wanna do.

Miss you – babe.

Miss you.'

As I took off my headphones and reached out to flick the record switch off a voice filled the air from behind me, a voice so familiar I thought I must be imagining it.

She said, 'I've missed you too, beautiful boy. And I want you to make me scream with pure delight!'

I spun around and there, standing in the doorway was Jess. She looked even more beautiful than I remembered her.

I don't remember my feet touching the floor as I flew across it and gathered her up in my arms.

'Fuck, Jess! Jesus - far-out babe! What a beautiful surprise! Fuck it's so good to see you again. So good to hold you again! God I've missed you, babe. Fuck Jess – I've missed you so bad!'

I pulled her in tight as the tears began welling up in my eyes. We both stood there, locked in each other's arms, both crying and neither of us able to speak. Eventually I released my grip and took her beautiful face in my hands.

'Fuck Jess – I've missed you like you wouldn't believe, babe. So many times I thought of flyin' over to meet up with you but I didn't want my insecurity to get in the way of what you were doing. And then, well when I hadn't heard from you for months, well I figured you'd moved on from us.'

'I haven't moved on from us, Jordie. I've been missing you like crazy too. I thought of phoning you a thousand times – and I did phone you many times but there was no answer. You must have been out, or out here in your studio. We've been moving around so much, it's been a new city or a new country almost every day for the last couple of months. Often I'd pick up the phone then think – I can't call now it's probably three or four or five o'clock in the morning in Tasmania.'

'Can I kiss you,' I whispered.

That beautiful smile that only Jess could smile lit up her face, ‘Of course you can kiss me, Jordie. You can kiss me all over – all night long.’

I wiped away the tears from her cheeks and gently pressed my lips to hers. It had been over a year since I’d felt her lips on mine, since I’d ran my hands across her skin, felt the softness of her beautiful jet black hair and yet the sensation of all that flooded back to me in seconds.

We kissed and then we kissed some more, we looked deep into each other’s eyes without saying a word before I eventually asked, ‘So how long had you been standing at the door?’

‘I heard you sing from ‘Been walkin’ around the streets of this old town - to Miss you’. From the moment you started recording to the moment you stopped. What a beautiful way to be welcomed back into your life.’

‘You ain’t seen nothin’ yet, Jess. I’m gonna love you so hard and so long you’ll be beggin’ me to stop.’

‘I won’t be begging you to stop, Jordie. I’ll be begging you for more!’

Two hours of rolling like thunder in on and around my big brass bed followed. I was so hungry for Jess that the only thing that could quell my appetite was total exhaustion.

As I lay on my side, totally spent, looking deep into her eyes I whispered, ‘God I love you Jess. I love you like I’ve never loved anyone or anything in my life.’

‘I love you too, beautiful boy,’ she smiled back.

‘Let’s take a shower together. I wanna wash you all over, make love to you in the shower just like we used to,’ I grinned. ‘And then I wanna take you out to dinner. And then I want you to come play with us tonight. We’re playin’ The Bagdad Blues Club down on Salamanca Place. Remember when we saw that place for the first time? Remember the wall of guitars? Remember that’s where we met Vince for the first time. Kate and Vince are gonna be so stoked to see you again, babe! Fuck it’s so good to have you home again, Jess.’

Jess once again smiled that beautiful smile that only she could smile, ‘It’s great to be home, Jordie. And let’s do all of that and more. I’m all yours ‘till Monday – well except for catching up with Mum and Dad and Mary – and Bec. I have to fly to Japan on Monday night; we’ve got a week of shows there before we fly out to London. You could come with me; I would love you to come with me, Jordie.’

‘You don’t know how much I wanna say yes to that Jess, but I can’t. We’ve got gigs booked too. And Dave and I are almost ready to go with the studio. That old warehouse up in North Hobart is now starting to look like a studio, you’ll have to drop in and check it out. We’re hoping it will be finished in the next few weeks, just waiting on all the gear to arrive. But there is definitely one thing I am gonna do, Jess. I’m gonna find a way of spending a whole lot more time with you from now on.’

Jess once again smiled that beautiful smile, ‘I’d like that.’

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ I said as I fronted the microphone and Vince took his seat at the drums Kate tuned her bass and Jess settled in behind the keyboards. ‘Tonight you’re not gonna see The Hang Up. Why! Well because Jess is back in town. So tonight you’re gonna see Constellation J. We’re gonna give you Universe – from start to finish. Hope that’s okay with you guys?’

The Bagdad Blues Club was packed to the rafters and the roar that went up after my question was deafening. As The Hang Up we’d always been able to draw a crowd but I think word of Jess’s return must have filtered out because tonight they had to lock the doors. Dave had told me there were hundreds more punters outside so I’d asked the management if they could open the dungeon type windows that opened onto the street above so those outside could at least hear us play.

We hadn't played any of these songs in over a year now but from the first chord to the last we were chord perfect. Each time it was Jess's turn to sing my guitar playing went onto auto pilot as I watched and listened to her absorbing every word she sang, every gesture or facial expression she made. Unlike Kate and Vince I hadn't consumed any of the Columbian on offer backstage but I was high on Jess. Nothing could have made me feel any better than having Jess just twenty feet away from me on stage singing and playing just like we used to.

Monday came way to fast. The short time I'd had with Jess just made me want more. As we sat in the airport café waiting for but wishing the boarding announcement never came Jess reached across the table and took my hands in hers.

'As soon as we finish this tour I'm not gonna be doing anymore touring, Jordie. Not for a long while at least and definitely not as full on as it's been. I've had three number one's, if there's to be a fourth it'll have to happen without me spending all my days on the road plugging it. I think I'm ready to go with your approach to the music business, Jordie. In fact I'd like to become a regular in 'The Hang Up'. If that's okay with you!'

I didn't say anything at first but the smile that lit up my face was a dead giveaway of my thoughts.

'Nothing in this world would make me happier, Jess.'

Then, as a smile lit up her face, Jess looked deep into my eyes, 'Just one other thing, Jordie,' she said before pausing for a few seconds. 'Will you marry me?'

If you'd have asked me to guess what Jess was gonna say as she looked deep into my eyes, 'Will you marry me' wouldn't have been in the top one thousand.

'I thought the guy was supposed to ask that question,' I smiled.

'Yeah – I guess that's how it's supposed to work - but as I said to you that day in the hospital, when you and I first hooked up, remember I said, 'You boys are a bit slow on the

uptake sometimes.’ Well I don’t wanna miss out on you beautiful boy - so I’m not waiting until you get around to asking.’

What was it Marty had said when Jess and I had first started to put Constellation J together, something along the lines of ‘with Jess running things there’s no way we could fail’. I guess those profound words from Marty were not restricted to just Constellation J but to life in general.

I watched as Jess’s flight disappeared into the blue all the while thinking, ‘God I love that girl’.

And my answer to Jess’s proposal.....YES YES YES!