

Monkey Business

AUTHOR: KATHRYN LEDSON

Extract

Prologue

A tap on the window snapped me awake and I sat up, listening. Had I dreamed it? My bedside clock said three a.m.

'Hello?' I said, croaky voiced.

'It's me.'

'Oh!'

I jumped up, flicked on the lamp, called out, 'What are you doing here?' as I rushed to the mirror. This wasn't what I expected, this man at my bedroom window. One who was supposed to be on a plane or going somewhere, not standing in my front garden.

'I, ah, forgot something,' he said.

'What did you forget?' I shoved the framed photo of the two of us into the bedside drawer.

'Can I come in or will we just chat through the window?'

I pushed my fingers through tangled hair and blew into my cupped hand, checking my breath. When I opened the front door, Jack Jones was standing there with a sheepish yet still-perfect face. He was wearing camouflage army pants and a snug black T-shirt. His hair was scruffy. He'd been sleeping.

I looked past him to the four-wheel drive parked at the kerb, Joe's silhouette behind the wheel.

'What's Joe doing?'

'Waiting for me. Can I come in?'

I swung the door wider and he stepped inside my house.

I said, 'I thought you were going away.'

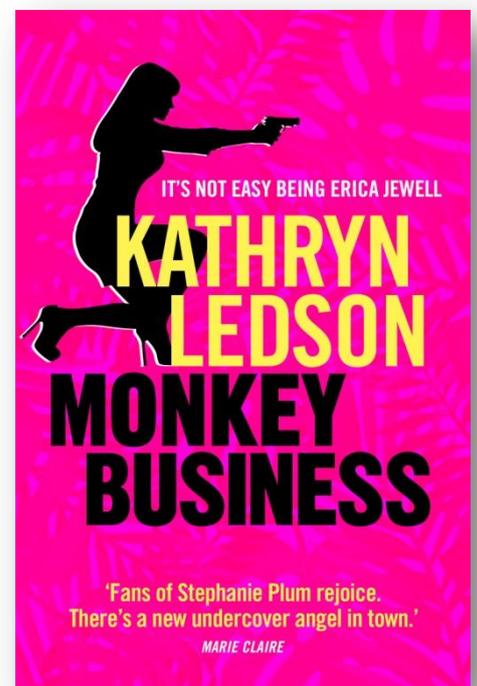
'I am. Tonight.'

'It's now morning.' In the dim light we looked at each other. He towered over me in his army boots, even more than usual. 'So,' I said, 'what did you forget?'

'You left this at my house.'

He held out a cheap, plastic hair comb. Yes, I may well have left it at Jack's house last time I was there, or when I was living there a few months ago, hiding from bad guys with guns. Back in the good old days when life was, well, life-threatening.

'I can probably afford a new one,' I said, taking it. 'They're about fifty cents.'



'I thought it might be a special one.'

I turned it over, inspected it. 'No. It's not special, but thanks anyway.'

'Okay,' he said. 'Well, I'll go.'

'All right. Um. Thank you?'

We stared at each other a few moments more. What else did he want? Maybe to ask me to wait for him, like men used to do before they went off to war. That'd be nice. And I'd wait, of course. But more likely, he wanted to ask me to put his bins out.

He sighed. 'And something else.'

'What?'

'I didn't kiss you enough.' He put his arms around me and I leaned into him.

'Oh, yes please.' I could take as much kissing from Jack Jones as he cared to dish out. It was a soft, tender kiss. Last night he'd come to find me at the pub and told me he was going away. He'd kissed me very nicely, but wouldn't say where he was going.

I tugged at his hand, stepping back into my bedroom, away from the open front door.

He said, 'I can't stay.'

'A few minutes?'

'All right.'

I lay on the bed, pulling him down next to me. He resisted but only slightly. Willing and reserved at the same time. Probably trying to work out how he could love me without my catching on that he might actually love me. But anyway, he couldn't stay. That was okay. This was better than nothing. Maybe. He kissed me again. Still soft but lingering. Nope. I wanted him to leave. It was going to be painful. I put a hand on his chest.

'Talk to me,' I said.

'What about?'

'Well, where are you going in the middle of the night dressed like G.I. Jack? Am I allowed to know?'

He lay on his side, head propped on his hand, and brushed my cheek with his thumb. 'No.'

'Is it a secret?'

'Yes.'

'Is it dangerous?'

He gazed at me. Jack's eyes have a way of revealing his emotions and they were currently showing concern. For me or him, I wasn't sure.

I pressed, 'What do you have to do?'

He hesitated. 'There's a guy . . . causing trouble. Big trouble.'

'What sort of trouble?'

He shook his head.

'But why you? Why do *you* have to go?'

'Because, baby, I'm the best. Didn't you know?' He gave me a wink.

Yes, I knew that. He's the best in the business. The best person for anyone needing a big, tough soldier to sort out troublemakers in dangerous places. Or a hired gun to secretly deal with local bad guys, terrorists even. Or someone to rescue an office worker who might get herself kidnapped in a nice safe place like Melbourne or Sydney. And then to make love to her in a flash hotel and break her heart by going off on a dangerous mission, which was probably just a cover for the mercenary's commitment issues.

Jack kissed me again, much deeper. He ran his hand over my back and pulled me closer. I could feel the warm length of him. His hard body. Goodness. Joe honked the horn. One short toot the neighbours probably didn't even hear. Joe's so polite.

Chapter One

Ah, autumn in Melbourne. When we farewell the sleepless, sweaty nights of summer and welcome the frost, snuggle up on a soft sofa with a hot chocolate, or, even better, a nip of ancient cognac served in crystal, all before a roaring fire in the posh Brighton home of a wet-your-pants spunk of a mercenary.

That would have been nice, but unfortunately not where I was right now, and even though said handsome tough guy was sitting next to me, I didn't feel I could do with him what I wanted at the footy.

Jack smiled. Actually, it was more of a smirk. 'Hot pie?' he said.

'Very funny.'

'I'm just asking if you want a pie.'

'No, you're not. You're being a smart-arse because the Magpies are winning.'

'Pies are on fire.'

'They're not on fire. They're only thirty-eight points ahead.'

The crowd roared and I looked to see what was happening. A Richmond player handpassed the ball . . . straight to a Collingwood player.

'Come on, Tigers!' shouted Steve. 'Jesus Christ, what are they *doing*?'

I'd lost interest. Richmond had been brilliant last year, such a welcome change; everyone predicted another mighty season for them. But so far, nothing but disappointment, despite Steve and me willing them on, forever hopeful. In fact, we'd stuck with them since we were kids, but they hadn't won a grand final since 1980. Not that either of us remembered it, being one-year-olds at the time.

Steve shook his head, disgusted.

I shivered, blowing onto my cold hand, the one that wasn't holding a plastic cup of beer. Jack took that cold hand and rubbed it between his palms. Heat radiated from my stomach and I was instantly warm. Hot, actually.

'Tell me again,' I yelled over the roar of the crowd, 'why we're not sitting up there in the nice, warm members' area? Or in the Dega Oil box drinking free wine. From real glass.'

Jack said, 'It's better here. In with the action.'

'But you're an MCC member. You love swanning around in posh places.'

'I don't *swan*, Erica. And I only like the Melbourne Cricket Club during cricket season.' He said to Steve, 'Another beer?'

'Yeah. Make it a double,' Steve mumbled into his hands.

'Same again, girls?'

'I think I'll have champagne,' said Lucy. 'Celebrate another Collingwood win.' She and Jack high-fived.

'They haven't won yet,' I countered, not very convincingly. 'I'll have champagne too.'

'Sparkling wine,' Jack corrected, 'but I'm sure even that's an insult to sparkling wine.'

He stood and made his way along the aisle past other Collingwood supporters. As usual, women gazed up at him, open-mouthed with shock at his gorgeousness.

Lucy scooted across to Jack's seat and nudged me with her shoulder. 'Having fun?'

'Why do I have to sit with all the Collingwood supporters? How come I'm not up there?' I looked at the Dega Oil box, where I could see my Richmond-supporting workmates *swanning* around in warmth and happiness. With nice wine. In proper glasses.

Lucy said, 'How did Jack's mission go? I wasn't sure if I should ask.'

I shrugged. 'He just said it isn't finished yet. I don't think he's allowed to say.'

'What does that mean? Not finished?'

Another shrug. 'I guess it means he'll be going away again.'

Jack had been away for two weeks on some secret thing, and then called me out of the blue saying he was back and suggesting we go to the footy. I immediately accepted – even though I hate night football – because it meant I'd get to see him. I'd asked at work about tickets to the corporate box, which were available, but Jack said he liked mucking in with the plebs. He didn't actually say plebs. Or mucking in.

I peered around Lucy at Steve. He was sitting there with his head in his hands. Luce reached across and gave his leg a pat. 'Cheer up, my darling. There's always next year.'

He shook his head and groaned.

As Jack made his way back to us, women stood, pretending to make space for him to pass, but really just wanting his attention. He smiled into their faces, oblivious to their underlying desire. Or maybe he *was* aware of it and just thought that's how all women felt about all men. Lustful. I took the two champagnes and handed one to Lucy.

'Thanks,' I said.

Jack screwed up his nose. 'Don't know how you can drink that rubbish.'

'See? You're a snob.'

Lucy stayed in Jack's seat and Jack sat in hers. Luce shouldered me again and gave me a wink.

I said quietly, 'Thanks for coming tonight.'

'I love watching my boys kick butt.'

For some reason I'd been overwhelmed with shyness at the thought of seeing Jack, and had asked Steve and Lucy to come along. They both knew about Jack's secret life, and mine, and this made it easier when socialising and answering the inevitable, 'How was your week? Work? What did you get up to?' especially when Jack's response could be, 'Oh, killed a couple of bad guys . . .'

The match and pain finally over – the Melbourne Cricket Ground more like the killing fields than a football oval – we all headed for my house where the boys had left their cars. Steve and Lucy held hands, I walked next to Luce, and Jack walked with Steve as they talked about the game. Steve was frustrated as usual and wondering where it all went wrong. Jack was kind about it, saying that Collingwood seemed to be especially brilliant tonight, that they would've beaten any team.

I wondered if I should walk next to Jack and hold his hand. It's pretty intimate, hand holding. In a way, it's more intimate than sex, which is something I had actually done with Jack, a few weeks ago, in Sydney. But only once. Well, more than once but it was all on the one night. Couples hold hands, and we weren't a couple. I stuffed my hands into my coat pockets.