

Letting Go



Ann O'Leary

LETTING GO

By Ann O'Leary



2010

Copyright © 1997 by Ann O’Leary

Bella Books, Inc.

P.O. Box 10543
Tallahassee, FL 32302

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

First Published by Naiad Press 1997

First Bella Books Edition 2010

Editor: Christine Cassidy

Cover Design: Judith Fellows

ISBN-10: 1-59493-194-1

ISBN-13: 978-1-59493-194-9

About the Author

Ann lives in inner-city Melbourne, Australia, with her partner, Helen, and their gorgeous Bichon, Daisy.

Ann intersperses writing with freelance advertising projects, focussed on audio production.

Letting Go is Ann's first novel, and she chose a familiar theme for the setting of the story: the advertising game.

The book's theme is "taking a chance", and accepting that life-changing attractions and even love often arise from unexpected quarters.

*For Helen
Whose love makes everything possible.*

Chapter One

It was a hot summer's night in Melbourne, silent and still except for the constant soothing chirps of the crickets. Laura's apartment was bathed in moon-light, which indiscriminately cast its ghostly wash over objects here and there. Part of a renovated Art Deco building on the Saint Kilda Beach foreshore, the apartment was not large, but exuded a feeling of spaciousness and light. It consisted of a bedroom with bathroom on a mezzanine level that created a lower ceiling downstairs over about one third of the area. Under this was a kitchen and laundry, and a small TV and office space. The rest of the space downstairs was open to the vaulted ceiling and one could enjoy a clear view of the sea from both levels, through soaring glass windows. The mezzanine floor was supported by simple round columns,

and its edge, like the kitchen bench directly beneath it, was rounded to mirror the curved deco balcony which extended the full width of the apartment. The furniture was modern, but classical in style. The color scheme was soft greens, teal and white that reflected the sea view.

The heat was oppressive, steamy. On the balcony, leaning back in a deck chair, Laura was sitting alone. She was wearing a light silk robe. One leg was drawn up, with her heel resting on the edge of the chair. Her exposed thigh was smooth and tanned a light golden brown, and the soft robe had slipped off one shoulder, partly revealing her breasts. She didn't care that it was two-thirty in the morning, and she had been sitting here alone for some time. Long enough to drink half a bottle of cognac and smoke most of a pack of cigarettes. The ashtray on the table beside her was overflowing, and she was feeling decidedly woozy. But she had waited this long, and she would continue to wait until Debbie finally came home.

She had lived with Debbie for nearly three years, and things had not been going well in recent months. Their relationship had never recovered from Debbie's affair a year ago. Laura felt like she had tried to forgive her, but things were never the same. Laura's closest friends had advised her then to walk away. Mostly they'd never liked Debbie much, with her spoiled-child attitude and affectations. Some considered her a bimbo. Despite this, Laura had hung on, reluctant to give up on this relationship she thought she badly needed. Debbie came into her life at a time when Laura had emotionally hit rock-bottom. She'd had two years of being alone after the death of Alexandra, the one true love of her life, two years of shutting everyone out. A few sordid one-night stands the only degree of intimacy she'd been able to

endure. She was deeply immersed in her work, getting her newly formed agency together, desperately trying to fill the huge empty hole inside her. Debbie, aged twenty-eight, full of fun and vitality, made Laura feel alive again. She set her sights on Laura and eventually succeeded in seducing her, easing a lot of Laura's heartache. Laura just let it all happen because she knew she couldn't go on the way she had been. She'd thought she was ready for a relationship again.

Before long Debbie moved in with her and they'd been quite happy for a couple of years. Laura never loved Debbie the way she had loved Alexandra. She didn't expect that. It wasn't possible to be that deeply in love with anyone else.

Once again, she was plagued by suspicions. Debbie was so distant lately. She was hardly ever home, always working late, and impatiently avoiding Laura's questions. Laura didn't want to believe it. Hadn't Debbie promised it wouldn't happen again? But all the signs were there. Laura had considered the situation for some time and decided at last to face the truth. Whatever love she once had for Debbie was gone. Debbie was making a fool of her, and as far as Laura was concerned, the relationship was over. But she wasn't going to let Debbie off lightly.

She was angry, determined to confront her tonight and demand the truth.

Suddenly out of the darkness, headlights flashed across Laura's face. One of the few cars purring along the beach road below turned into the driveway to the garages that ran alongside the block of six apartments, and it glided up the steep driveway to the garages at the back. It was two-forty. Debbie had at last arrived home.

Laura continued to sit quietly, staring out toward the sea. A ray of moonlight fell across her arm as she reached for yet

another cigarette. The cold knot in her stomach tightened its grip and her heart began to thud in trepidation. She waited until she heard the key turn in the lock, then slowly rose and went inside, standing in the shadows by the wide French doors.

Laura watched Debbie sneak in. She removed her black patent high-heeled shoes, obviously trying to avoid making any noise on the parquet floor. Laura admired, not for the first time, Debbie's legs. Her smart business suit revealed her shapely hips and the tight top under her open jacket showed off her full breasts. She placed her briefcase carefully on the floor while she turned to lock the door. The keys slipped out of her hand to the floor with a small clatter.

"Shit," she muttered as she bent quickly to retrieve them. Laura took a deep drag of her cigarette, and Debbie jumped. "Jesus Christ, Laura, what the hell are you doing there? You scared me half to death!" She took a few steps closer, moving cautiously, as if steeling herself for a confrontation. She fingered the pendant around her neck, sliding it back and forth along its chain.

Laura, her voice thick with anger, brandy and cigarettes, said, "I've been waiting for you for hours. Where've you been? It's a quarter to three."

"I told you I had to work late. There was an important litigation case to prepare for." Debbie's tone sounded defensive even to her own ears. She hoped her confident facade was masking her growing fear. Her hands felt sweaty.

She came inside and removed her jacket, tossing it casually over a chair. Moonlight splashed across her face. She tossed her shoulder-length blonde hair in that manner Laura had always found so sexy. If she could just put her

arms around Laura, hold her close and kiss her neck, the way Laura liked, she could probably save this situation. She could usually get around her that way. She noticed Laura fiddling with the ring on her left middle finger, twisting it around in an agitated fashion.

Debbie gave a seductive smile and said, “Won’t you hold me, honey? I’m really tired and I just want to go to bed.”

But Laura’s cold unwavering gaze remained a barrier between them. Laura took another long draw on her cigarette and turned away. She stood on the threshold of the open French doors and looked out into the darkness.

“Who is she, Debbie? I know you’re seeing someone and I just want to know who she is.”

Debbie panicked; the situation was slipping out of her control. “Don’t be ridiculous, honey! I’ve been working! You know I’ve got to be there when they need me. What am I supposed to say when my boss asks me to work late? ‘Oh I’m sorry, but I can’t cause my girlfriend develops jealous fantasies if I’m not home on time’? You know the legal business is very competitive and if I don’t give the firm one hundred and fifty percent, they’re not likely to find me a position when I finish my degree, are they?” Laura didn’t reply, and Debbie felt she’d gained some pound. She added sweetly, “You want me to do well, don’t you, honey?”

Debbie was ambitious and worked hard. She was studying part-time for her law degree and working as personal assistant to the senior partner of a large law firm. Laura said she didn’t have a problem with occasional long working hours; it happened quite a lot in her own business.

“There’s no law firm I ever heard of that works half the fucking night as often as yours does, just preparing ordinary cases. That’s bullshit, Debbie. So tell me, where were you?”

She spoke in a monotone. She clearly wasn't going to crack.

Debbie had already noticed the odor of alcohol, and she could see the bottle and glass on the outdoor table. She jumped to the offensive. She raised her voice and spoke to Laura's straight back—like a brick wall, she thought. "You're half drunk, Laura. There's no point in continuing this conversation tonight. I'm going to bed." With that, she turned and grabbed her jacket from the chair, picked up her briefcase and started up the black iron winding stair-case to their bedroom. She badly wanted a shower.

Laura raised her voice to Debbie's retreating shadow. "I rang you. I rang your direct line. I rang your boss's direct line and the main office number. I rang at nine o'clock, ten o'clock, midnight and again at one. You weren't there, Debbie." Her voice caught on those last words as she stifled a sob.

Debbie froze. A cold chill crept up her spine. Further lies would be a waste of time. Laura wasn't going to forgive her this time. It was over. Defeated and angry, she spat out her last confession. "All right, Laura. I've been having an affair. You really want to know who it is? Well, I hope you're ready for this." She paused, watching Laura's silhouette in the doorway; she hadn't moved. She felt dread as she imagined the impact of what she was about to say. She clenched her fists and drew in a deep breath. "It's Mark Downing."

Laura looked like she would faint. There was an awful silence filled only by the constant drone of the crickets in the background. She slowly stepped over to the sofa and sank down safely in the cushions before she found her voice. It was barely above a whisper. "You've been screwing a man? I don't believe it! You're a lesbian. Since when have you been interested in men? All this time...while you've

been living with me...” Her voice trailed off.

Debbie felt the need to try to justify herself, even if it was a waste of time. “For God’s sake, Laura, I’m not the first woman to fuck her boss for the sake of her career. Okay, it’s not a great thing to do, but in the legal business, women need as much help as they can get.” She stood there on the stairs waiting for Laura to respond. Laura drew her knees under her chin and hugged them tightly as if trying to disappear into a tiny ball.

A few moments passed before Laura spoke again, a measured tone. “I want you out of my house by tomorrow night. I want all of your things out of here, and then I never want to see you again. For as long as you live.” Dry-eyed, she was clearly shell-shocked.

Debbie stomped up the stairs, and Laura heard the bathroom door slam. She remained on the sofa with her head on her knees and allowed the tears to flow freely. She rocked herself gently, trying to soothe the horrible ache in her chest. It was worse than she had imagined. How could she have so blindly misjudged Debbie’s character, and why had she allowed this pretense of a relationship to drag on for so long? She stretched out on the sofa. Finally, around four o’clock, with the help of the brandy she’d consumed earlier, she drifted off to sleep.