

# THE ADOPTION CLAUSE

**JP Fox**



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## A WORD FROM JOHN

I was an early reader; from about the age of six, I was reading comic books and recall reading to the kids on my street. From as far back as I can remember, certain words puzzled me; I would put them in sentences I imagined made sense. Problem was, they made sense only to me!

I went through a period in my early- to mid-teens when I read every Agatha Christie novel I could lay my hands on. In my twenties I found true-life stories more gripping: marine disasters and sea-faring tragedies particularly stirred my emotions. I'm not surprised that much of my own writing deals with the emotional cascades stirred up by personal tragedies of fellow humans.

In my early fifties, my daughter wrote a story for children, and, being clever at sketching and painting, she planned to illustrate it also. It got me thinking, Could I write a story? That evening I sat down and began. Three months later I had put together 100,000 words followed by The End. I have been writing ever since; more of hobby than wishing to have my stories on someone else's bookshelf.

Poetry followed. In a short time, beginning in 2008, I wrote the lines and rhythm to a hundred poems, on themes dealing with happiness, sadness, misery, discovery, tragedy, relief, heartache, memories good and bad, mistakes made and lessons learned.



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Irish lass Catriona Bridger takes a holiday in Cairns, Australia. While at the movies with her friend, she sees the face of her brother-in-law... legally dead these past seven years.

Told she is mistaken, the intrepid Catriona refuses to let go, and pursues what appears to be weak evidence.

## CHAPTER 1

Catriona Bridger woke to the sound of soft guitars playing the nineteen sixties classic pop melody, *Guantanamera*. She didn't usually read the time on the alarm clock because it was always set for a few minutes to seven. This morning was different and she savoured the moment in her warm bed a little longer. The digital readout changed from 6.59 to 7.00 to 7.01, 7.02, and to fight counting the seconds ticking in her head, she let her mind drift to looking out the window of an Aer Lingus jet, its nose raised skyward. With her eyes closed tightly she pretended to follow the pilot's orders to secure the seatbelt. Through the window she watched shapes representing people supposedly waving bon voyage from behind the plate glass wall of the departure lounge.

'Australia, here I come' she heard herself whisper, her excitement soaring in tandem with the rising aircraft. Catriona wondered about her long journey. Never before had she taken on a trip of this scale or distance and certainly not alone! On her previous trips to Europe, she invariably travelled with a companion and received impetus to reach out to new and strange destinations. Going half way around the world was a huge jump for her travel-wise, especially doing it unaccompanied.

The excitement filled her stomach with swarming butterflies, making it impossible to keep her eyes shut and snooze on for the extra few minutes. The thrill of the holiday 'down under' was too much for her to be able to lie still; the anticipation of what lay ahead had reached a peak, pouring adrenaline through her body, urging her into activity. Far better, she reckoned, to get up and put the time into getting sorted at the radio station before she left for a full six weeks of freedom from her job, and all the responsibility that went with it. With fresh purpose she popped her eyes open, threw the duvet off, swung out of bed and pushed a button on the radio alarm, effectively stopping a newsreader in mid-sentence.

'Enough of you,' she said, addressing the radio, 'there are things more important than a hike in the price of petrol and rain in Galway', and made straight for the *en suite* where she soaked under warm water for five long minutes and sang what she remembered of *Fields of Gold*. The parts she didn't know she hummed at the top of her voice. She gathered a large towel around her, switched on the hair dryer and made quick work of her short hair, brushing it back into shape as it dried. Dressing next to the mirror she put on her blue jeans with the floral design on one leg, just below the calf, and her favourite top, a white blouse she bought in France. Her reflection showed a good-looking woman of thirty-two, with strong features displaying high cheekbones, a slightly twisted smile, a long straight nose and sharp, inquisitive tawny eyes.

The shoes she selected increased her height to five feet seven inches instantly and carried her into the small kitchen that formed a part of the three rooms she rented above the souvenir shop in Enniskerry. Plugging in a juicing machine to prepare her first drink of the day, she turned two apples, a carrot and a stick of celery into a refreshing beverage. No one could accuse her of being a health freak but she knew what was good for her, and anyway, she listened to her mother, sometimes.

Into a shoulder bag she packed a few essential items: mobile phone, letters for posting, and a new lipstick from the bathroom. Having decided on the Aran sweater her mother knit last year she swept the keys off the hook and exited the door in high spirits.

An icy wind unrepentantly cut into her face with a chill greeting as she stepped into a new day, Friday 19th December 2001. Dark clouds rolled in from the Irish Sea, building up to shed its watery tears on the land. The sun argued to get past the thunderhead mantle but had well and truly lost the battle. Catriona put her personal things on the passenger seat of her silver-grey Clio and thought about putting on the sheepskin coat she kept on the back seat. 'How warm it will be in Helensvale', she let her imagination run, 'in sunny Queensland' where her friend Julie lived, and who at this very moment is basking, no doubt, in brilliant sunshine. 'Queensland', she reminded herself, 'is known as the "sunshine state".' Even the thought of it made her feel warm! Julie had warned her that the heat might be more than she bargained for and advised precautions. 'But don't worry Catriona' she remembered Julie saying on the phone, in her best Aussie accent, 'we'll look after you, mate!'

Eight-thirty was her usual start but today she wasn't pushed to be on time. Martha Blake was prepped to take over her position while she was on holidays, so Catriona would spend a few hours, perhaps the whole morning, tidying up a few odds and ends, giving some final instructions to her staff of two and helping them coordinate the tasks for the following Monday. 'After that, they were on their own', she secretly said, abdicating her responsibility in favour of a well-earned break. After lunch she had a million things to do, including visiting her sister, Samantha, collecting dry cleaning from Stillorgan, posting letters, visiting her bank and et al and sundry. In her shoebox office, she checked her list of to do's and prioritised them. The bank: a must. Dry cleaning: definitely. And, see Sam. 'If I do nothing else' she told herself, 'I must do these three things! That leaves the rest of the evening to finish packing' she sighed.

The schedule was discussed with Mark and Brenda, her sales team and fellow 'time-slotters', as they nicknamed themselves. Selling airtime to the many advertisers who wanted their messages to navigate the airwaves to reach the thousands

of listeners and tempt them to buy their goods was the team's primary purpose. Catriona was well liked and respected in the workplace and got on well with her colleagues; her sense of humour never went astray as it betrayed itself by the twinkle in her eye, a valuable quality in a job that called for pressure decisions at critical moments.

The radio station was a popular one and it called for a bit of juggling to fit everything in. She was well practised at her job and with good teamwork and cooperation from the DJ's and radio announcers it ran smooth like Dutch ice cream. All the ads were produced by Catriona and her staff; pre-taped by experienced 'voice over' personalities. Sometimes there weren't enough hours in the day so finishing often cut into her own time. A smiling complaint to the station manager, which seemed a regular occurrence of late, convinced her he was either deaf or had the worst memory ever, or that it was an expedient way of letting her know things would not change. 'I must be tougher in future', she'd say, but then shelve the notion. It was easier to put up with it than to argue with a man who persistently fobbed her off. The number of times he said he'd review the situation, but never did, persuaded her to consider moving on. More than once Catriona promised it was time for a change, but she was still there.

The six-week break was very welcome after a solid year of hard slog. The manager had the gall to ask her to postpone her holiday until January or February! She didn't hang around to give an answer. Imagine! Two days before an epic journey, with tickets paid for, friends waiting in Queensland, and this moron asks you to cancel your life because he *needs* you!

'He was lucky I didn't resign on the spot', her complaint occupied the ears of Marge the tea lady for less time than it took to add the milk to her coffee. Anyway, by the time she went through the programme for the next few days and incorporated the ads into the various DJ's schedules, it was past midday and the man didn't enter her thoughts again. She swept through the other staff members and said her good-byes, and '*maybe*' she half threatened, 'I'll be back next year'. Her geniality brought a breath of fresh air to the station; her wit and good humour were infectious, a feature of her personality amply testified to by her colleagues. But it wasn't always so.

Five years ago she thought she met her "Mr Right" in the form of Steve Brenner, the 'boy wonder' of advertising. At a young and ambitious twenty-eight-year-old, he was destined for 'great things' in the entrepreneurial world, where deals mean everything and money the offshoot. Engaged for one year, the wedding day planned for the spring, the guest list complete, the hotel retained for the reception and the honeymoon in Honolulu booked two months in advance.

There was one booking that was not considered, however.

That of Steve himself.

The police charged him with relieving his boss of a sizable sum of currency. This money was meant to pay a gambling debt *after* the horse he bet the loot on had won his race. With the winnings, he would replace the boss's cash and none would be the wiser. That was the plan, anyway. The filly came last and Steve was apprehended at Rosslare Harbour, just as he was about to drive his car onto the ferry.

That was not all. An extra scoop of insult to Catriona's dignity was added when picked up with him was a girl he had courted before he met Catriona. In consoling her, her mother thanked heaven her daughter found out now before she married a liar, a thief, and a womaniser! She was twenty-seven then and it took her another couple of years to get over him. Glad she was saved from him but deeply hurt by the trust that was marooned, by her naivety and lack of good judgement. She said she was a testimony to the words of the song 'Love hurts'. She knew, though, that it's not love that hurts but selfish people that hurt others. Her father gave her a hug and told her "*real love* has never hurt a soul". Wanting to see her betrayer, Steve, in Mountjoy Prison where he was given a three-year jail sentence, she asked her sister to go along with her for moral support. As she explained to Samantha, the visit was not to make up with him or forgive him. She went to see for herself that *he really was in prison!* The guy looked a sorry sight, disgusted for letting himself be caught, but not a sign of regret for the crime, and more especially did he show no symptoms of apology for wounding the girl he claimed he loved more than life itself!

Catriona walked boldly away from the gates of Mountjoy Prison linking her sister for support, realising she hadn't *really* known the man at all, and wondered why *anyone* would call a prison by *that* name.



With a bit of life's experience under her belt and a few years to recuperate from a major let-down, Catriona was back to her old cheerful self again but with a diminished trust in men, from whom she kept a safe distance. Life was a happy affair at present; she enjoyed herself by travelling and keeping fit and healthy. Maintaining a strong desire for family, the idea of mammy, daddy and babies was still an option she hadn't relinquished, despite her attending feelings. There was, she believed, the right man out there, somewhere, and while still carrying treacherous scars she was not in a hurry to test the waters at this point in her life. As a sign of her bravery, she was modest enough to recognise her vulnerability. Since purging her flat of every gift that Steve had given her, everything that was a reminder of him, including jewellery, she uncluttered her heart by

packing them into boxes with the label addressed to a local charity. She refused to benefit from anything that came from his wallet, especially knowing they may have been bought with money not his. Finally, she put the engagement ring in its original box and sent it to his prison address. The lid on that relationship was closed forever.

At the financial institution that looked after her money, she arranged to have a large sum accessible in her Visa for use on her trip, and some traveller's cheques. She waited in the queue until an acquaintance of hers, Jean, was available so that she could say goodbye. Jean had been in Samantha's bridal party and she and her husband, Jeff, and their two children had become close friends of Samantha and her new husband, Gareth. Jean had been a pillar of support to her friend when after three years of married bliss Gareth had gone missing in a boating accident. Samantha's family and friends surrounded her on the following day, filling in the time by drinking comfort tea while anxiously waiting for word from the rescue vessel.

Gareth had no parents or siblings to cry for him. At twenty-two, it was necessary for Gareth to identify his parents' bodies, the victims of a fire in their new home in Greystones. Having being overcome by smoke inhalation, the fire resulting from an electrical fault, they were unable to be revived. It took Gareth years to come to terms with his parent's sudden departure from his life and it was meeting Samantha that gave him comfort from the pain of losing them.

The Coast Guard picked up a mayday over the radio that gave out a fractured message from *Southern Horizon* that the engine had stalled, that the boat was letting in water very quickly and then the radio went dead. They were able to trace the boat's owner to one Albert Jones of Duncormick and from his father they found out he was out fishing and, yes, they had left Kilmore Quay earlier that afternoon. It was Jonesy's father, Daniel, who rang Samantha's home with the news of the missing men. The Coast Guard could only make out 'quay' and 'Saltee', so they dashed to the area between Kilmore Quay and the Saltee islands off the Wexford coast. But there was no sign of a small boat and no more sounds from the radio. It was a moonless night, with fog patches pushed by strong winds. For all its candlepower, the searchlights were ineffectual on a cold, dark night in tempestuous seas. The rescue vessel returned to shore with no extra passengers.

The police informed the families that so far there was no sign of the boat or its crew, and that the search would continue if and when the seas abated. Samantha didn't sleep a wink all that night. Jean sent her husband home with the children and stayed up all night to be with her friend, to comfort her where possible, but mainly to be there for her if the worst kind of news paid its grim visit. The rest of the family nodded off one by one, finding a cushion or another shoulder

to rest on. On the little balcony outside Sam and Gareth's apartment, she and Jean looked south towards Rosslare. Samantha broke down for the second time, unable to bear the strain of what could be an awful outcome.

She had such good news for Gareth.

On the Friday morning he drove down to Duncormick to meet up with his pal Jonesy, she visited the doctor in Novara Avenue to have a pregnancy test. Certain that she was pregnant and wanting to see Gareth's face when she told him, she put off ringing him on the mobile, although she was hardly able to contain her joy.

For some reason Samantha could not fathom, she noticed Gareth wasn't his natural self that morning. He had a planned trip with his best pal and days before he had shown a lot of excitement for the weekend out at sea, saying he would definitely catch a big fish and wouldn't come home until he caught one. He looked preoccupied on that fateful morning, but he seemed to perk up for Samantha's sake. On thinking back, Samantha recalled Gareth being somewhat out of sorts over the past few weeks, but he would put it down to some other pretext and bounce back to his old self, or so it seemed. He kissed her goodbye and held her for an extended hug, rocking her in his arms for longer than usual. She didn't mention she was seeing the doctor, so she planned to tell him the results when he got home from his fishing trip on Sunday evening. She'd wished she had told him.

Samantha wept on Jean's shoulder and poured out her news to her friend, that she was going to have a baby and Gareth might never know. The pair of them cried together, in bitter disappointment, and sympathy. Jean tried to reassure Samantha that Gareth *could* still walk in the door, but it had little effect on Samantha's heavy heart.

Catriona was away for the weekend in Tullamore seeing a pal she went to school with, who was having her first child any day soon. On hearing the news about Gareth, she apologised to her friend, Brid, for having to cut her visit short. So on Saturday morning she left early for Bray and walked in on her family and friends in discussion with two Garda. Catriona broke into the crowd and took hold of her older sister, and hugged her tightly. Samantha responded to Catriona warmly but she shook with fearful expectation.

The policeman in charge, who looked very uncomfortable, asked Samantha to sit down, but she refused.

'Mrs Dean', Sgt Ciaran Murphy cleared his throat before going on, 'at this moment in time we don't exactly know what happened but bits of wreckage came in on the morning tide—he paused before going on—and the body of a man—Samantha swooned and was about to fall when several hands reached out

to catch and ease her into the armchair behind her. The family all looked at the Garda as if he was responsible for the wreckage but he dutifully carried on—it was not your husband, Mrs Dean. It was that of Mr Jones, Albert Jones. Your husband has not been found yet. It is possible he made it back to shore, but we can't be sure. I'm...we're sorry.' He spoke for every policeman in Ireland.

Samantha turned white with terror at the thought of her precious Gareth out there in the icy water, or worse, beneath it. He may even be caught in among rocks, his lifeless body being buffeted from one hard cold stone to another. He was a strong swimmer, she thought instantly. Maybe, just maybe, and hopefully, he is lying on a beach, still alive. Samantha let out an unrestrained roar of anguish mingled with anger, an agonising scream at life's outlandish deliveries, with no apparent care for its victims, offering no explanations. Samantha looked up in her awful pain and took in the gaze of her parents, her sister, her friend, and appealed to them with a long, heart-rending, distressing stare. She lovingly closed her hands and arms around her stomach, sobbing bitterly.

*'Gareth will never know our baby!'*