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**Opening Extract from...**

# **To the Moon and Back**

Written by Jill Mansell

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Jill  
Mansell

to the moon and back

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# Chapter 1

‘What would you do without me?’

Fresh from the shower, Ellie took in the alluring view from the bedroom doorway. Seriously, could anything beat the sight of a drop-dead gorgeous 28-year-old male wearing nothing but white boxers whilst clutching a steam iron in one hand and a black skirt in the other?

*And to think he’s mine, all mine.* She had the marriage certificate to prove it.

‘OK, don’t answer that, I know what you’d do.’ Jamie bent down and unplugged the iron at the wall. ‘Go out wearing a crumpled skirt.’

‘Possibly.’ She fastened the lime-green bath towel securely around her chest. ‘But I don’t have to, do I? Because I have you.’ Reaching across the ironing board, she planted a kiss on the mouth she never tired of kissing.

‘So you’re grateful, then?’ He gave the edge of the towel a playful tug.

‘I am. Very grateful. Thank you, thank you to the moon and back.’

‘Because if you feel like repaying the favour, I can probably think of a way you could do that.’

Regretfully Ellie tapped her watch. ‘But we don’t have time. Look at my hair. I need to get dressed and do my face . . . *wah,*

no, stop it, get away from me!’ She snatched the skirt and danced out of reach before Jamie could ravish her. Tonight they were going out separately. Along with a crowd of friends from work, she was heading off to a performance of *The Rocky Horror Show* where dressing up was mandatory. Hence the black skirt, bought in a charity shop last year and cannibalised with garden shears to give it a zig-zaggy hemline for a Halloween party. It had been lying at the back of the wardrobe ever since but would be just the thing for a Rocky Horror outing, teamed with mad hair, over-the-top eyeliner and fishnets.

‘Right then, which shirt should I wear?’ Jamie indicated the ones he’d ironed while she’d been in the shower. ‘Blue? Or white?’ He was off to a school reunion in Guildford.

Ellie said, ‘How about the pink one?’ and saw his mouth do that turning-down-at-the-corners thing it did when he felt awkward.

‘I don’t know. Not tonight.’

‘Why not?’

‘Just . . . because. I’d rather wear the blue tonight.’

She took the fuchsia-pink shirt out of the wardrobe and gave it an enticing waggle. ‘But this is beautiful! Look at that *colour*. Why wouldn’t you want to wear it?’

‘Because I don’t want to turn up and have everyone saying they didn’t know I was gay.’

‘Oh, come on! Just because it’s pink?’

Jamie pulled a don’t-make-me-say-it face. ‘It’s a very gay pink.’

OK, maybe it was, but he could carry it off. ‘I bought it for you for Christmas! You could have taken it back to the shop and exchanged it.’ Ellie shook her head in disbelief. ‘But you said you loved it!’

‘I didn’t want to hurt your feelings. Besides,’ Jamie ventured, ‘I kind of like it to *look* at. Just not to, you know, *wear*.’

‘The colour would really suit you.’

‘I’ll wear it soon, I promise.’ He slid the blue shirt off the hanger and shrugged it on.

Men, honestly, what were they like? ‘Right, that’s it, wait until next Christmas. No presents, that’ll teach you to turn your nose up at my choice of shirt. Next year you’ll get nothing at all.’

Jamie broke into a grin. ‘Does that mean I don’t have to buy you anything either?’

‘You just wait. You’ll be sorry. No, get off me!’ Shrieking with laughter, Ellie found herself backed into a corner of the living room. ‘I told you, we don’t have *time!*’

Jamie snaked his arms around her waist and pulled her against him. ‘Sometimes,’ he murmured persuasively in her ear, ‘you just have to get your priorities right and *make time.*’

DDDDDRRRINNNGGGGGGGG went the doorbell and Jamie clutched his heart, staggering backwards as if he’d been shot. ‘No, no, not fair . . .’

‘Oh, what a shame. Just as I was about to change my mind, too.’ Skipping past him, Ellie went to the window and peered down to the pavement below.

Todd waved up at her. She waved back.

‘And to think he used to be my friend.’ Jamie flung open the window and yelled, ‘You’re early.’

‘I know.’ Todd spread his arms wide, evidently pleased with himself. ‘That’s because you told me not to be late.’

Jamie rolled his eyes. ‘The first time in twenty years he’s been early for *anything.*’ Raising his voice he called down, ‘Look, we’re kind of busy just now. How about doing us a big favour and just going for a ten-minute jog around the block?’

‘Get lost!’

‘Or that’s something else you could do.’

‘Not a chance. Stop bugging about and open the door.’ Energetically stamping his feet and rubbing his hands together, Todd called up, ‘It’s arctic out here. I’m freezing my nuts off.’

★ ★ ★

‘Look at you,’ Todd marvelled, greeting Ellie with a kiss when she finally teetered out of the bedroom, dressed and ready to go. ‘Understated. I like it. Off to church?’

‘Ha ha.’ She loved Todd, which was just as well, seeing as he was Jamie’s best friend. For almost twenty years the two boys had been inseparable. Their personalities complemented each other and their shared sense of humour enabled them to bounce jokes off each other so effortlessly that they never tired of it. Jamie and Todd were known as the double act and Ellie lived in fear of Todd meeting and settling down with a girl she didn’t like, because what could be worse than that? How would they cope? It had the potential to spoil everything and she couldn’t bear the thought of that happening. All they could do was cross their fingers and pray he’d choose someone great.

‘Right, are we ready?’ Jamie was driving tonight; rattling his keys, he ushered them towards the door. ‘Let’s go. Where are we dropping you?’

Ellie gave her backcombed hair one last wild blast of glitter spray for luck. ‘Just at the tube station. Everyone’s meeting at the Frog and Bucket.’

‘You’re not going on the tube on your own dressed like that.’ He pinched her bottom as she headed past him down the stairs. ‘We’ll give you a lift to the pub.’

‘*Pleurgh.*’ Todd smacked his lips together in dismay. ‘I’ve got hairspray in my mouth.’

‘Open wide.’ Peering in, Ellie said, ‘Whoops, there’s glitter in there too.’

Jamie grinned. ‘That’s so when he meets up with the girls he used to fancy at school, he’ll be able to make sparkling conversation.’

Ellie brushed a speck of glitter from Todd’s cheek. ‘God help those poor girls.’

★ ★ ★

By the time Ellie arrived back at their Hammersmith flat it was almost one o'clock. You knew you'd had a good old Rocky Horror night when your throat was sore from singing and the soles of your feet were on fire. Throughout the show they'd jumped up and joined in with the dancing, bellowing out the words to the songs everyone knew off by heart. Then afterwards, on their way back to the Frog and Bucket for last orders, they'd carried on doing 'The Time Warp' all the way down the road.

'That's ten pounds fifty, love.'

She paid the taxi driver, clambered out of the cab and looked around to see if Jamie was home yet. No sign of the car, but he might have had to park around the corner. And the windows were in darkness, but that could mean he was crashed out in bed.

Letting herself into the flat, Ellie felt the stillness and knew she was the first one home. OK, that was fine, she was still buzzing with adrenalin. If Jamie came back soon she might seduce him, make up for what they'd missed out on earlier thanks to Todd's untimely arrival. Toddus Interruptus, ha. Their very own living, breathing contraceptive. She smiled to herself and switched on the light in the living room. She'd make a toasted sandwich and put on a DVD. Oh, the light was flashing on the phone. Reaching over, she pressed the button and listened to the message from someone whose voice she didn't recognise but whose name she'd heard before.

'Hey, Jamie, what's going *onnnn*? It's Rodders here, man. What happened to you and Todd, eh? You said you'd be here. Give us a bell, mate. You missed a cracking night.'

The call ended. That was it. Rodders was Rod Johnson, who had taken it upon himself to organise tonight's school reunion in Guildford. And he had made the call an hour ago, which made no sense at all unless Jamie and Todd had arrived at the event early, peered through a window, decided it looked like rubbish and beaten a stealthy retreat before they were spotted.



Because what other explanation could there possibly be for their not turning up?

The only sound in the room, the ticking of the clock Jamie's grandmother had given them on their wedding day, seemed louder now. Ellie fumbled in her bag for her phone, switched off since they'd entered the theatre five hours ago.

Seven missed calls. One message. Her heart juddering against her ribs, Ellie experienced split-screen consciousness. One half of her brain was telling her that this couldn't be happening, there'd been some mistake, everything was going to be fine and any minute now Jamie would be home.

Yet somehow, simultaneously, the other half of her brain was listening to a calm female voice relaying the message that Jamie Kendall had been involved in a road traffic accident and could she please call this number as soon as possible . . .

And now the ground was tipping and another voice, a male one this time, was advising her to make her way to the Royal Surrey County Hospital in Guildford. Jamie was currently in a critical condition, the voice on the phone explained – *No, no, no, he can't be*, screamed the other voice in her head – and he was in the process of being transferred from casualty to the intensive care unit.

## Chapter 2

Bip. Bip. Bip. Bip. Bip.

The sound of the heart monitor filled Ellie's ears. As long as it kept on doing it, everything would be all right. With every fibre of her being, she willed the bipping not to stop.

It was four o'clock in the morning but the intensive care unit was flooded with blue-white light. Most of the nursing staff were busy working on an elderly patient at the other end of the ward, calling out instructions and rattling machines across the floor. Ellie shut out the noise they were making. She had to concentrate all her attention on the bips. And on Jamie, who was lying on the bed looking like a life-sized waxwork model of himself.

*How can this be happening? How can it?*

The left side of Jamie's head was swollen and purplish-blue. He was unresponsive, in a deep coma. His skin was warm but when she held his hand he didn't curl his fingers around hers. Saying his name provoked no reaction. Even when the doctor had rubbed his knuckles hard against Jamie's sternum, he hadn't reacted to the painful stimulus.

For God's sake, he wasn't even able to breathe on his own. A ventilator was doing the job for him. Plastic tubes were running into his body. Every function was electronically monitored. It looked

like something out of a film but with ultra-realistic special effects. Except it was real. Already gripped with terror, Ellie jumped a mile when a hand came to rest on her shoulder.

‘Sorry,’ said the nurse. ‘But could we ask you to leave for a short time?’

‘Can’t I stay? I want to stay.’

‘I know, dear.’ The no-nonsense nurse shook her head, indicating the increased activity around the bed at the other end of the ward. ‘Just for a while, though. Go and have a cup of tea, and we’ll call you back as soon as we can.’

She wasn’t asking, she was telling her to leave. On wobbly legs, Ellie made her way out just as the doors crashed open and three white-coated doctors burst into the unit.

Time to phone Jamie’s dad. Oh God, how was she going to tell him about this? But she had to.

*Please, just make it stop.*

Outside, the sub-zero temperatures gripped her and her teeth began to rattle. The ground was slick with frost, the puddles were frozen. How had Jamie felt as the car had begun to skid on the ice? What thoughts had flashed through his mind when he knew he’d lost control? She couldn’t bear to think about it but she couldn’t *stop* thinking about it. Horrific images replayed themselves over and over in her mind. If only there was a button she could press to switch them off. Had he cried out as the car had hit the crash barrier? When he woke up would he remember every detail or would his memory of the accident be blanked out?

OK, just do it, call Tony in LA and tell him what had happened. Would he be able to come over or would he have filming commitments he couldn’t get out of?

Ellie’s hands shook as she found the number on her phone. The time difference between LA and London was eight hours, so it was eight thirty in the evening there. How should she say it when he answered the phone? Which were the best words to

choose? Right, just press Call. Do it. The sooner it was done, the sooner she could get back to Jamie.

Moments later she heard his familiar voice at the other end of the line. *Do it now.*

'Tony?' Aware that she was about to break his heart, her voice cracked with grief. 'Oh Tony, I'm so sorry. There's been an accident . . .'

The nurse came out to find her in the relatives' room fifteen minutes later. Making her way back into the intensive care unit where calm had been restored, Ellie saw the curtains drawn around the bed of the elderly man at the far end of the ward who'd been the centre of attention earlier.

'All sorted now, is he?'

The nurse said gently, 'We lost him, I'm afraid.'

*Lost him?*

Did she mean the man was actually behind the curtains, *dead*?

Oh no, that only happened on TV, at a safe distance. Not here, right in front of her, in real life.

'Sit down, dear.' The nurse deftly steered her on to the chair beside Jamie's bed. 'Take deep breaths and I'll get you a glass of water. You have to be strong now.'

Strong? Ellie swallowed, she felt about as strong as a newborn kitten. Jamie was here on a ward where people died and every minute was more terrifying than the last. And she was wearing a Rocky Horror outfit that couldn't be more inappropriate if it tried, but going home and changing into normal clothes was out of the question because she couldn't leave Jamie . . .

*Oh Jamie, wake up, please just open your eyes and tell me everything's going to be all right.*

The dead man was placed in a covered metal trolley on wheels and removed from the unit by two porters. Two new patients arrived, a skeletal yellow-tinged woman and a teenage boy. Relatives sobbed around their beds and looked strangely at Ellie in her

jagged short skirt and fishnets. When none of the nurses had been looking she had kissed Jamie's face but it hadn't felt remotely like his face and now he had bits of giveaway glitter on his forehead and cheek.

'Sorry about the glitter,' Ellie told the nurse when she came back to do his obs.

'It doesn't matter a bit. We'll just wipe it off with some damp cotton wool, shall we, so it doesn't get into his eyes. Now, do you want me to see if we've got some spare clothes you can change into, or can you call a friend to bring something in?'

It still felt like the middle of the night, but the clock on the wall showed it was nine thirty. And it was light outside. With a jolt, Ellie realised she was supposed to be at work. Out in the real world, life was carrying on as if nothing had happened.

'Um, I'll call a friend.'

Outside again, she rang work. Paula answered the phone and let out a squeal of mock indignation. 'You lazy bum, I had way more to drink than you last night and *I* managed to get in here on time!'

'Oh Paula, I'm at the hospital and I need you to h-help me . . .'

Hollow-eyed with lack of sleep and gripped with grief, Ellie stayed at Jamie's bedside. The chemical antiseptic smell of the ward seeped into her skin. Doctors came and went. Various medical tests were carried out. Paula arrived in a taxi and floods of horrified tears, with a change of clothes and toiletries, and a hastily purchased Get Well card for Jamie signed by everyone at work. Not allowed into the unit, she clutched Ellie's hands and kept sobbing, 'You poor thing, I can't *believe* it,' and, 'He's going to be all right though, isn't he? I mean, he's not going to die?'

Numbly, Ellie submitted to the hugs. It was a relief when Paula finally unpeeled herself and left. All she wanted was to get back to Jamie and listen to the bips.

More hours passed, then the nurse came and told her that Todd was outside. This time, in lieu of family and because he was Jamie's oldest and closest friend, the nurses agreed to let him on to the ward.

Ellie's stomach clenched at the sight of Todd as he made his way over to the bed. There were cuts and bruises on his head and hands; kept in overnight for observation, he was limping but otherwise OK. He put his arms around her but she felt herself shrink away. She didn't want to be touched and hugged; her skin was too sensitive. It was like having flu, when it hurt to even brush your hair. How could two people be in the same car, in the same car crash, and one of them escape with scarcely any injuries at all?

It was unfair. So unfair. Fond though she was of Todd, what had he ever done to get off practically scot-free? Why did it have to be Jamie lying unconscious in the bed? Not that she could say this out loud, it wouldn't be polite and it might hurt Todd's feelings. Anyway, that was the thing about life and fate; it never *was* fair. Horrific things happened to good people and brilliant things happened to bad ones.

And it wasn't as if Todd was even bad. It was just that out of the two of them, he wasn't the one she loved with all her heart.

But he did love Jamie. Sitting back down, Ellie watched him move across to the bed and rest a hand on Jamie's bare shoulder. A muscle jumped in his jaw as he gazed, ashen-faced, at his best friend.

Bip. Bip. Bip.

Bip. Bip.

Bippppppppppppppppppppp . . .

*'Oh God, what's happening? No no no—'*

'Don't panic.' The nurse bustled over, reattached the electrode lead that had popped off when Todd's sleeve had brushed Jamie's clavicle. 'There you go,' she said as the regular bips resumed. 'All fixed.'

‘Sorry.’ Visibly shaken, Todd backed away from the bed and wiped a slick of perspiration from his upper lip.

When the nurse had left them alone again, Ellie said, ‘How did it happen?’

‘I don’t know.’ A helpless shrug. ‘We weren’t going too fast. The car just took a bend and went into a skid. It was like slow motion, but kind of speeded up at the same time. I said, “Oh shit,” and Jamie said, “Oh fuck.”’ His knuckles turning white with the effort of holding back the tears, Todd said, ‘We didn’t even know there was ice on the road until it was too late.’ His voice broke. ‘And then we just . . . *went*.’

Todd had left. More tests were carried out. Jamie’s bruises grew bluer. Night came and so did Jamie’s father; calling the unit, Tony informed them that he had just landed at Heathrow and was on his way to the hospital. The nurse who spoke to him recognised his voice and put two and two together. Within minutes, word had spread that Jamie was the son of Tony Weston . . . you know, *the actor*. Behind the professional exteriors, excitement grew. Watching them, clutching at straws, Ellie wondered if this meant they would somehow make more of an effort to help Jamie recover. Because if all they needed was an incentive to try harder, maybe she should offer them cash.

Then a vivid mental image sprang into her mind and she smiled, just fractionally, at the thought of explaining *that* to Jamie when he arrived home, gazed in disbelief at the bank statement and demanded to know why she’d emptied their joint account.

Forty minutes later, Tony appeared. In his mid-fifties, tanned and handsome, he was immediately recognisable to the staff as the respected actor who had moved to America and made his name as the quintessential upper-class Englishman, despite having been born and raised in a two-up two-down on a council estate in Basingstoke. If everyone else on the unit was discreetly thrilled to

be seeing him in the flesh, Ellie felt only relief. She no longer had to be the one in charge. Jamie's dad was here and he was a proper grown-up. Tears of exhaustion leaked out of her eyes as he hugged her.

'Oh, sweetheart.' It was all Tony said, all he needed to say. He smelled of aeroplanes and coffee and expensively laundered shirts; he was also unshaven. Turning his attention to Jamie, he gazed at him in silence and seemed to vibrate with pain. Finally he murmured, 'Oh, my baby boy,' and his voice cracked with grief.

The consultant materialised within minutes and introduced himself. Ellie watched him carry out the various neurological tests the doctors had been performing at regular intervals since Jamie's arrival in the unit. She studied the expression on the man's face, searching for clues, waiting for him to stop looking so grim and break into a smile of relief before turning to them and saying, 'He's really on the mend now, give him another couple of hours and then he'll start waking up.'

*Go on, say it.*

*Please, just say it.*

The smile didn't happen. She and Tony sat together in silence at Jamie's bedside and watched the still-serious consultant write something in the hospital notes. Finally he turned to face them and Ellie felt as if her chair had been abruptly pulled away. A great rushing sound filled her ears; was this nature's way of drowning out the words she already knew she didn't want to hear?

The rushing sound was loud, but sadly not loud enough to do that. Fear coagulated like cement in her chest. Next to her, Tony was shaking his head slightly but the rest of his body had turned to stone. One of the senior nurses came to stand close to them, a sympathetic look on her face.

*Don't do this, please don't say it, Jamie might hear you . . .*

'I'm so very sorry,' the consultant said, 'but the tests that have



been performed are conclusive. There is no remaining cerebral function.' He paused. 'Do you understand what that means?'

*No, no, nooooooooo . . .*

'You're telling us his brain is dead.' There was a world of agony in Tony's words. 'He's gone. My boy's gone.'

The consultant inclined his head in sombre agreement. 'I'm afraid he has.'