



IF NOT US

*'If Not Us has it all:
gutsy characters,
a good fight, bone-
shaking loss, love
and hope.'*

SCOT GARDNER

*'Moving and
powerful...The right
book for right now.'*

KATE O'DONNELL



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The Winter Trilogy

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Hesse slipped his board into the rack on the side of his bike and swept down the Russell Street hill. If he was lucky he'd get an hour in the water before dark. May was the best month for waves, with gentle offshore breezes and in-between-sized swells, like the whole coast was drawing breath before the arrival of winter. He loved this feeling of flying down the hill, with the promise of waves ahead of him and his weekend homework buried in his backpack in his bedroom.

School was done for the week and the next two days he'd be tied up working in the surf shop. That didn't worry him, though—the water was crowded on weekends with surfers from the city. But Friday arvos were golden: just the local crew, the tradies finishing early and the schoolkids racing each other

from the bus stop to the beach.

He reached the corner and swung left onto Ocean Road, past the general store with its two petrol bowsers standing out front like sentries, and on to the surf shop. It was a converted mechanic's workshop, a big barn of a place that Theo Turnbull had been running forever.

Hesse mounted the kerb and skidded to a halt in the gravel car park. Theo was in the shaping bay, one hand holding a worn piece of sandpaper, the other caressing the rail of a foam blank he was working on. Most boards were factory-made these days, but Theo still shaped his own for special customers.

'Hesse, my main man,' he said, looking up. 'You're in a hurry.'

He always spoke like that—like the seventies had never ended and *Morning of the Earth* was still showing at the Shelbourne hall.

'Need some wax,' Hesse replied. 'You should finish early and come for a surf. It's small but Haystacks should be okay.'

'And every tradie on the coast will be crowded onto the one bank, yahoing and carrying on like it's New Year's Eve.'

Hesse looked at Theo. His hair was still thick and his pony-tail long even though he was pushing sixty. When he was shaping like this, he tied his beard into a strange sort of bun and tucked it inside his T-shirt. The fine dust from the foam blank sat in the creases of his face making him look like some sort of nightmarish snowman.

'You need to be careful. You'll frighten the customers away,' Hesse said.

Theo smiled, showing the gap between his front teeth. ‘Wax, you say? You know where it is. That’ll be on the account, will it?’

Theo had taken Hesse under his wing when Hesse’s father had died seven years ago. Trevor Templeton paddled out at Razors one bleak winter’s afternoon and never came back. No body. No board. Nothing. It was like he’d been swallowed by the ocean. Theo was meant to surf with him that day, but he’d been held up at the shop. By the time he’d driven out to the point, it was almost dark and low cloud had rolled in. Razors broke half a kilometre out to sea. Theo had waited for his friend to return to shore but Trevor never arrived. The weather had turned that night; the offshore shifted to a vicious southerly gale. By the time they’d got a boat out, Trevor would have been in the water for five hours. They’d searched through the night, risking their own lives in the conditions, but found nothing.

It takes longer than seven years to get over something like that, but Theo had helped Hesse through the worst of the pain.

‘See ya tomorrow,’ Hesse said, grabbing a block of Mrs Palmers off the shelf behind the counter.

‘Don’t be late. It’s going to be a sunny weekend. We’ll be flat out.’

Hesse gave him the upward nod that ended most of their conversations. He tucked the wax into the crate attached to the carrier, sliding it under his wetsuit and towel.

He rode around the side of the surf shop, cut through the Rotary playground and rejoined Ocean Road in front of the surf lifesaving club. From there he braced for the climb up the hill

towards the lookout. As he emerged from the protection of the trees, the offshore hit him and he instinctively turned seaward. Haystacks was a kilometre further along the coast but he could tell by the way the sets were hitting the end of Wangim Point that he'd be in for a good surf.

Reaching the top, he swung off the road, riding the dirt track like he was surfing a wave, banking on the corners and shifting his weight in the seat.

The car park at Haystacks was only half full—a good sign. Hesse stashed his bike in the tea trees, changed quickly into his wetsuit and ran down the track onto the open beach. There were a dozen surfers in the water. He hoped Jago Crothers wasn't one of them. Jago was a couple of years older than Hesse. He was apprenticed to his dad, Bob, Shelbourne's only motor mechanic. For reasons Hesse could only guess at, Jago seemed to enjoy nothing more than hassling him whenever they found themselves surfing the same break. It wasn't as though Hesse had ever done anything to aggravate him, not that he could remember, anyway. And everyone else seemed to like Jago, with his Ryan Gosling smile and smooth manner.

Hesse hadn't seen his pimped-up ute in the car park, but Jago had plenty of mates who could have given him a lift.

The paddle out was easy. Once he got past the shore break, Hesse stroked towards the other surfers who were congregated on a clean right-hander. The waves always appeared a little steeper and hollower from water level, but the size was manageable. Hesse sat up on his board just wide of the pack and watched. Even with the sun in his eyes, he recognised

Steve Daly's familiar style. Quick to his feet, he was perfectly balanced as he leaned into a bottom turn, one palm almost touching the face of the wave. Hesse was on nodding terms with Steve, though they'd never spoken. It was the way with most of the older locals—a nod, maybe a brief 'g'day', then back to business.

Hesse moved into the line-up, watching the horizon for the next set. Finding your spot was tricky when you first got out. He kept an eye on the surfers around him, noting the way they paddled continuously to counter the cross-current.

He was starting to feel comfortable when he heard a familiar voice.

'What are you doin' out here dipshit?'

Hesse hadn't spotted Jago in the glare.

'Worried he'll out-surf ya, Jago?' It was Steve Daly.

This was something new: one of the older guys speaking up for Hesse.

Jago smiled. 'In what universe would that ever happen,' he replied.

A set was approaching and the pack was on the move. Hesse felt a tug on his legrope and turned to see Jago pushing past him. He dug in deeper and the two of them went stroke for stroke. Jago was strongly built, his tanned arms rippling below his short-armed wetsuit. His long, sun-bleached hair swept back off his face as he turned and glared at Hesse.

Hesse paddled over the top of the first couple of waves but spotted his chance with the third. He was the furthest inside, giving him right of way. He pivoted his board and stroked

easily into the wave, feeling the familiar surge under him as he sprang to his feet. He'd gone a little deep on the peak so he was behind the spilling lip when he came out of his bottom turn. Unfazed, he found a little extra drive and flew out onto the face. Everything was in the moment then, all muscle memory and instinct. He was lining up a slap off the lip when Jago dropped in barely a metre in front of him. Hesse maintained his speed determined not to give up the wave he'd earned. Ahead of him, Jago carved at the face like it was his enemy, slashing fast turns and leaving Hesse in his wake.

Finally, just before the wave exhausted itself on the shore break, Jago cut back sharply and slammed his board into Hesse's ankles. They fell together in a tangle of arms and legs.

The punch came fast and unexpected, hitting Hesse hard on the cheekbone. He surfaced, stunned and gasping for air. Jago stood next to him in the foaming white water.

'Sorry, dipshit,' he said, all innocence. 'I didn't realise you were behind me on that one.' But the smirk on his face was a challenge.

Hesse felt his cheek. A lump was forming.

'You knew I was there,' Hesse said, trying to stand up for himself but there was a tremor in his voice.

Jago glanced back towards the other surfers then brought his face up close to Hesse's. 'What if I did? What are you gonna do about it?'

He laughed when Hesse didn't respond. 'Yeah, I thought so,' he said, giving Hesse a shove. 'Now why don't you crawl back to main beach and surf with the other grommets.'

Jago slid onto his board and paddled out again.

Hesse staggered up the beach and sat down. He should go straight back out and let Jago know he wouldn't be intimidated, but he didn't want a fight. He looked along the beach to see if there was another peak he could surf. There was nothing as good, but he decided on a left-hander a hundred metres back towards town.

Hesse surfed on his own for another hour. By the time he made his way off the beach it was almost dark. The cool evening air bit at his skin as he peeled the wetsuit off and struggled back into his clothes. His head throbbed. He could feel the swelling below his left eye and it was starting to make things blurry. With his gear packed into the crate and his board in the rack, he wheeled his bike out of the tea trees. The car park was deserted now but he saw a girl sitting on the rail of the platform, directly beneath the only light. She was hunched against the breeze, a mass of black curls spilling from the hoodie she'd pulled over her head. The glow of the light framed her against the gathering darkness.

Hesse couldn't see a car or another bike. She must have been on her own. It'd take her half an hour to walk back to town. He knew all of the kids in Shelbourne and she wasn't familiar.

'Hey,' he said, approaching her. 'Are you okay?'

The girl ignored him. She stared out to sea.

Hesse was in two minds. If he was any later getting home his mum would worry, but he didn't feel good leaving the girl there. He put his bike down.

'Hey,' he said again.

When she looked up the hoodie fell back a little revealing a girl about his age.

'*Hai*,' she said. She had an accent. Hesse thought maybe German.

'Are you okay?' Hesse asked again.

'You said that already.'

'Sorry. It's, um, getting late. Are you heading back to town?'

'No. I'm okay. Thank you.' She seemed to clip the end of each word.

Hesse studied her for a moment longer. 'See ya, then,' he said.

'Yes,' she said. 'I see you, too.'

'No, I mean, I'll see you later.'

'Why?'

Hesse stepped closer. 'Where are you from?' he asked.

She pointed towards town.

'Shelbourne?'

'*Ja*, of course.'

'I haven't seen you around,' he said.

'No,' she said. 'You haven't.'

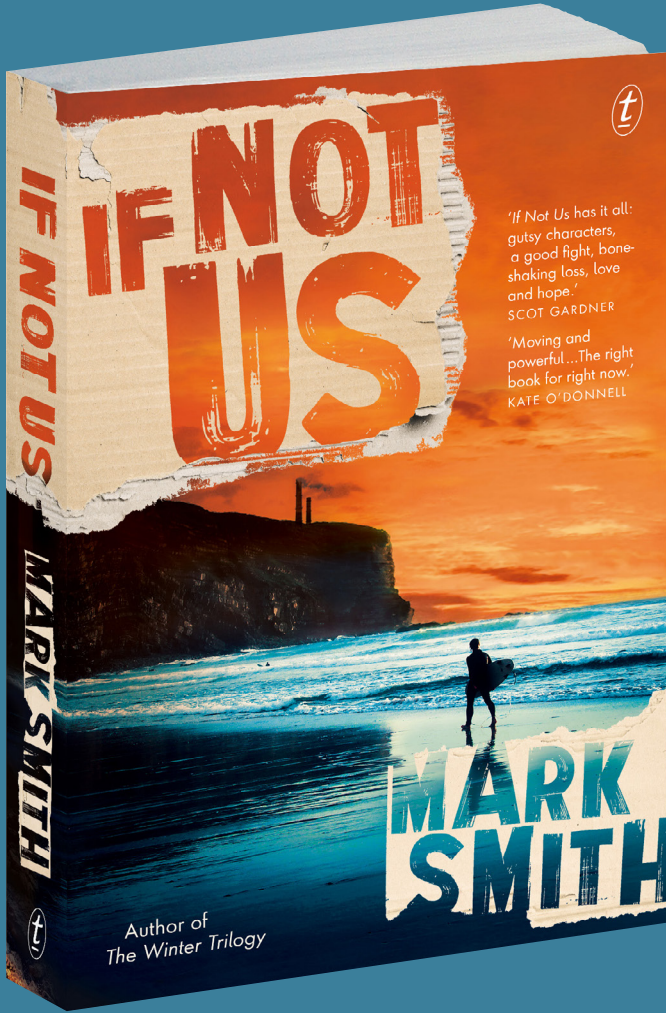
'Are you waiting for someone?'

She shook her head.

Hesse felt awkward talking to girls at the best of times, and he didn't want her to feel he was hassling her. 'Well,' he said. 'I'm off then.'

'Okay,' she said.

Hesse shrugged. He picked up his bike and wheeled it to the beginning of the track. He looked at the girl one last time. She was hunched forward again and looking out to sea.



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