



*Secret of
Berry's Vineyard*
darry fraser



an Australis Island novel

Secret of Berry's Vineyard

by Darry Fraser

SECRET OF BERRY'S VINEYARD

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Table Of Contents

Chapter One	7
Chapter Two	15
Chapter Three	24
Chapter Four	29
Chapter Five	36
Chapter Six	43
Chapter Seven	49
Chapter Eight	56
Chapter Nine	59
Chapter Ten	70
Chapter Eleven	77
Chapter Twelve	81
Chapter Thirteen	87
Chapter Fourteen	91
Chapter Fifteen	100
Chapter Sixteen	106
Also By Darry Fraser	110

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This work is one of my older stories and it may differ in style to my more recent work.

Secret of Berry's Vineyard

An Australis Island novel

Australis Island - otherwise known as (the real) Kangaroo Island, South Australia.

CHAPTER ONE

Last night was the last night, she vowed silently.

Well, for a while, Clancy, old girl. Don't go making promises you can't keep. After all, 'tis the season to be jolly.

Yeah right.

Some jolly. Another brawl with Dad and this time I'm homeless and jobless.

Almost.

The bus took off after dropping her outside the hotel. She stared at her dumped luggage and let out a ragged, pathetic sigh. It wouldn't move itself.

For two hours the coach chugged and chortled out of Adelaide on its way to Reception Bay and the Australis Island ferry terminal.

She was just lucky she hadn't chucked and chundered all the way.

Her eyeballs hurt, her tongue felt like a leather strap and her throat craved a thirst-quencher she knew she couldn't get, no matter how much H2O she guzzled. A thirty minute ferry ride over a thankfully flat and glassy Explorer Strait to Portstown on Australis Island. Finally another ninety minute bus ride to wherever-the-hell-she-was.

How big is this island?

Four hours so far into the hangover, maybe another four hours of gut-rolling nausea to go with a skewer still piercing each temple for good measure.

Gee. A chef's job on Australis Island had seemed like a good idea last week.

That, and the fact the new boss had signed her up so fast the ink hadn't dried on her application – so to speak – and had seemed a tad too eager.

Maybe I'm the only person who applied.

Oh God.

Now look. What I need is something to cheer me up, and a drink right now just might be the right idea. Forget the ridiculous vow to never drink again. Hair of the

dog is what I need. Hair of the largest dog ever. With lots of ice and lemonade. Then a diet coke...no, maybe the real thing.

And look. Here's a hotel.

She gave the old building the once over. If she had to wait here for her lift to the MacGregor Thomas Vineyard Estate, no better place to wait than inside.

She hauled her bags behind her and headed towards the main door. As she juggled to reverse inside, the door pulled open behind her.

"There you go." The warm baritone hummed at her back.

Clancy scuttled her wheelie bag inside. "Thank you." She glanced his way. The green-eyed gaze connected with hers and a rush of heartbeat pitter-patter charged through her.

And that didn't happen a lot these days. Those green eyes were really something under fine dark brows, above an open, friendly face with beard-stubbed cheeks. That gaze had her pitter-patter ratcheted up a notch.

He held the door wider as she dragged her other bags past, and a solid bump of her hip on his side brought a rush of blood to her cheeks. "Sorry." She shuffled through and hoped her every pore didn't reek of last night's vodka shooters.

"Pleasure." His voice still hummed, soft-timbred and low in his throat.

She glanced again to smile her thanks. His gaze locked hers for an instant, intense and interested. She dragged everything past him through the door and clomped inside, hellbent on the closest bar stool.

Only ten feet away...

Rattled, unorganised and clumsy, she grabbed a seat and climbed onto it, puffed out a long breath.

Great. I just sounded like a balloon deflating. My attractive self.

Her green-eyed man stopped to chat with a couple seated at a dining table. She ogled the broad back and the tight bum and, when he turned to look at her, tried not to ogle the bulge where a bulge in a man's pants should be.

She swiveled in her seat to check the place over, Distracting Herself.

Someone had clearly attempted to refurbish the place and give it the look of authenticity again. Or maybe, nobody had done a bloody thing and it was the genuine

article. Shabby *shabby* as opposed to shabby *chic*. Perhaps someone else had put up the tackiest, daggiest Christmas decorations she'd ever seen.

"G'day. What can I get you?" The lanky barman lifted his chin at her. His ears dangled bobbing Santas. Jammed over his head was a baseball cap on backwards with tinsel pinned to it. A damp-looking, grubby Christmas motif towel draped like a fox stole over his shoulders.

"Whatever you've got in sauvignon blanc. Something local." She stopped herself. "And, a long lemonade with lots of ice, please."

"No worries."

Her head throbbed. She shouldn't have ordered wine, but what the hell.

The awful, bloody annoying Christmas decorations swinging around her refused to be anything but cheery and jolly. Not helping.

Definite hangover.

She glanced around. Anything to take her mind – and gaze – off the man with the green-eyed stare still laughing with the couple at the table.

Oh, look - the bar itself.

Two massive four-metre planks of highly polished, rough-cut river red gum. The rich, deep auburn hue reminded her of luxury, masculine, refined, assertive.

She flattened both palms and slid her hands along its silky surface. Someone had known what they were doing when they installed the bar.

The thought made her sad for a moment. *This was like at home. Too bad now. Getting maudlin. Drinker's remorse or something.*

And her head still hurt. Maybe she needed a glass of water, too. Jeez, more water. The hangover was worse than she thought.

A few moments later the bartender plonked two ten-ounce handle glasses in front of her, one filled with ice and soft drink, the other with white wine.

Clancy took up the lemonade and chugged down a great gulp, sighed, suppressed a burp, relaxed and turned her attention to the wine.

She was about to protest its unstylish glass when her green-eyed doorman took up the seat beside her.

"I see you like the counter-top, but you don't like the wine." He scraped the stool closer to the bar and nodded at the bartender.

Her heartbeat thumped in her ears. "I haven't tasted it yet." She met that intense green-eyed stare. Maybe it was the slight pucker of his brows which made it so intense. He was about forty, a little weathered, but in that tingly cosy-up-by-the-fire way. She glanced at her wine. "I don't like the glass it's in."

"The wine's good. Just the staff training's a bit lacking. And they haven't got around to buying wine glasses yet." He nodded at the bartender again as a ten-ounce of beer arrived in front of him. "I'm guessing you're the person Mac Thomas has employed." He took a long drink then set his beer down, fished in his pocket and slapped a fold of notes on the bar.

Santa-dude swiped a tenner and returned with change.

"Good guess," she said. "I'm Clancy Jones."

"Berry Lockett." He held out a hand.

"Berry?" She took the proffered hand, its palm rough. It was a strong hand, a hand used to helping with heavy loads. Her heartbeat thudded merrily pushing the skewers deeper into her forehead. It had to let up soon.

"Beresford. Fancy name, I know. Great-grandma's maiden name." That low baritone rumbled again.

"Ah."

"Going to drink your drink?" He nodded at her glass. "You look a bit gloomy staring at it." He slid a small wallet and a bunch of keys on to the bar alongside his change.

She pulled a face at her untouched glass. "I asked for a local sav blanc. I hope it is."

"It is. Taste it," Berry said. "It's good. Happen to know the vineyard pretty well. It's just over the hill about four kilometres."

She ventured a sip. "It is good." She sipped again. Checked out the black chest hair above his T-shirt collar. "You drink wine sometimes?" She lifted her chin at the beer.

"Sometimes. Probably too much. Beer's a good change, but I can vouch for the local wines." He grabbed his wallet and peered inside. "There are others but none better than this one."

She looked around the bar. "I expected good food and wine but the place looks a bit rough, though."

"And you'd expect some atmosphere in here for a country pub, too, wouldn't you?" He waved his hand around. "The place lacks a certain *je ne sais quoi*," he said.

She ventured a glance at his face. "You know exactly what it lacks. How'd you fix it?"

"I'd employ some happy staff, for a start." He inclined his head towards the dangly-Santa-dude. "Nice guy, but Alan over there doesn't exactly warm the cockles of your heart." Berry studied his hands. "Is this where Mac Thomas has you working?"

"I'm supposed to be in the Vineyard Restaurant. I didn't know he owned this place, too."

"The Vineyard Restaurant." Berry frowned. "It's not exactly up and... ah, I wonder he didn't say something about..." His voice trailed off. Then, "Well, they need a bloody good cook in here, too."

Clancy shrugged. "He said the Vineyard Restaurant. All I know." She took another big swallow of lemonade again. She was enjoying the conversation, hoping he was as good as he looked and not some crazy noo-noo out here in the boondocks. That'd just be her luck.

"Fact, there's another place around here could use a chef now I think of it." Berry shrugged. "As I was saying, staff would be one change then I'd get myself some goddamn good wine glasses for the place."

She looked at the handle glass. "Good move."

His gaze roamed over her face again. "You from Adelaide?"

"Yes." She didn't elaborate, took a tentative sip of wine.

"Apart from the obvious attractions," he said and waved a hand around at the bar again, "why here?"

She shrugged. "Chance to work on the MacGregor Thomas estate. When I saw the ad for the job, it said something like, 'Chef required to make us great again. We're a bit rundown and looking for energy'. Hope that's not a bad sign," she said into her drink. "And I hope I have the energy."

“A bit rundown,” he repeated. “Yes. Well, sometimes, you just have to take the plunge, right?”

Clancy hesitated. “Needed to make a fresh start.” She looked into his eyes and away again, the forthright stare unnerving. Maybe her decision to take the job wasn’t such a good one. “It’s pretty much in the sticks here, isn’t it? It just seemed like a good place to come.”

The kitchen doors bounced open and Alan appeared with two plates of something she didn’t recognise. He headed for a couple sitting over by a window.

“What was that?” Clancy asked. “Couldn’t pick it.”

“That’s the Poacher’s Stew.”

“Poacher’s Stew.”

“That’s right. It’s game pie.”

She checked the grin on his face. “You’d have to be game to eat it, right? You led me into that one.”

“I know for a fact it is day’s old cooked mutton, which ordinarily would be all right, except it’s been heated and reheated since it was first chucked in the pot.”

“Oh no.” It was easy, pleasant conversation. Friendly even. No sleaze about him, maybe not a noo-noo after all. “You seem to know all about it.”

He lifted a shoulder. “I’m local, immediately local.”

“Oh. You’re not—? Are you here to take me to the property?”

He glanced at her hair held in a clip at the back of her head. His gaze roved over her face to her mouth.

Her lips tingled. Her toes tingled. And something in between tingled, warmed.

A second or two later he said, “I have gravely considered my answer, and it is that I wouldn’t deliver someone like you to Mac Thomas even if he begged me.”

Clancy at first thought she’d misheard. A whip of heat slipped over her neck at the way he looked at her. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“Long story.” He raised his glass. “So, to the new chef at the Vineyard Restaurant.”

She tucked a loose tendril of hair behind her ear and raised her glass. “Thanks. I think.”

The bar door slammed open and a big, solid man pushed inside. "Lockett, keep away from my staff. Don't want them damn contaminated," he called from the doorway.

Clancy sneaked a glance at Berry, who slid a small card across to her, slipping it under her fingers. "That is Mac Thomas, and this is where I take my leave." He swallowed the rest of his beer. "Good talking to you, I enjoyed it." His gaze clamped hers a moment and he leaned towards her. "In case you need a friend." He tapped the card then turned to the big man. "I've only told her when she's seen the light and finishes working for you, she can come and work for me."

Clancy palmed the card and pocketed it. She lost sight of Berry as Mac Thomas wedged his bulk between them.

"In that tin-pot little affair you've got going on over yonder? I don't think so." Thomas turned to her. "You must be Clancy," he said and thrust out a massive paw.

Clancy's hand disappeared in the bear paw. "I am."

She looked up at the big man and guessed he was mid-to late fifties. He had a thatch of what might have once been carrot-red hair, now streaked with grey, thick and unruly. He didn't bother to flick it away when it flopped over his forehead.

His face, his redhead skin blotchy and dry had been out in the weather for years too long. His eyebrows were long, wiry and silver, and stuck out at odd angles. His nose was straight, and his eyes were blue, but pale. His stare gave Clancy the feeling he wasn't really looking at her, it was the direction his eyeballs took.

His gut stretched the customary blue shirt and challenged the button on his RM Williams moleskins. On his feet were the biggest pair of Rossi boots she'd ever seen.

She shifted her seat to the left to accommodate his bulk at the bar.

"Mac Thomas," he said. "But you know that. Hope you didn't take any notice of that piece-of-work." He jerked a thumb in Berry's direction.

When Clancy glanced over Mac's shoulder, she could see Berry disappearing out of the bar. In that instant, he turned and tipped an imaginary hat at her, grinning broadly.

She liked that he knew she'd be watching him. She made a note to find out what sort of 'tin-pot little affair' Berry might have 'over yonder', and to find out more about Berry Lockett. The card felt warm in her pocket.

“He seemed to be right about a few things,” she said thinking about the wine in front of her, and about the comfortable chitchat she’d had with him.

“Yes, well, he’s not always right.” Mac Thomas rolled his shoulders. “Ready to get started?” He lifted his chin in the direction of the door and walked off. “Let’s go.”

Clancy downed a little more of her wine, slid off the bar stool and picked up her bags. She shrugged on her heavy backpack, gripped the handle of her wheelie-bag and picked up her laptop.

She was ready to get started.

All over again.

CHAPTER TWO

Mac Thomas boomed a one-sided conversation the whole time since she'd pushed her bags into the back of the vehicle.

He'd sat in the driver's seat and waited until she clambered into the Land Cruiser's passenger side, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. He turned the key in the ignition before she'd buckled herself in and closed the door.

"I see by your resumé you've done a fair bit of fancy restaurant work," he bellowed at her as they roared out of the pub car park.

"My family owns a restaurant. Not really fancy, but innov—"

"Doesn't cut the mustard for me." He glanced sideways at her. "May as well straighten it out from the get-go, I want plain, good and lots of it. There's plenty of cow cockies around here and people from the city come to experience what we've got and what we've got is a lot of cow cockies. And cow cockies eat plain."

Clancy attempted to reply. "Well—"

"Just want to get it straight before we start," he thundered again. "'Course, my boy likes to think he's better than the rest of us and fancies himself a bit of a connoisseur in the food department, but I'm the one calling the shots."

Clancy decided she didn't need to reply. Sounded like he was winding up to a soliloquy. In any case, if plain was what he wanted, she could do plain; might even find it challenging. How many ways to do plain? There must be thousands. All she'd need would be a few basic garden herbs, a few homegrown veggies and—

"He's working the place for me, while I go out and do the marketing. Look, the old estate has been a bit neglected the last year or so, but now we're on top of things we need to get it back to its finer glory. And good food's the way to go. Isn't it?" He thumped his enormous stomach and glanced at her again.

She nodded. "Sure is."

"We'll certainly see what you can do by tomorrow. I've got a big opening do planned for the weekend, and it'll be the whole Christmas bit. Reckon you'll be in the swing by then? You can practice on me and my boy."

She figured that would be all right. It was only Tuesday and wouldn't take long to check the pantry and storeroom for provisions make the appropriate orders and get the menu underway.

"This big do." She raised her voice to catch his attention before he opened his mouth again. "How many are you catering for?"

"Hundred."

"And style of service?"

"We'll get to that."

Interesting. Something to get her teeth into right from the start. Good. No time to dwell on cutting apron strings and all that.

They'd driven only a few kilometres before Clancy saw a sign approaching:

MacGregor Thomas Vineyard Estate 4 kms

Thomas turned the car left at the arrow, and the bitumen abruptly finished a few metres in. It was an easy drive; undulating country on both sides of the dirt road, dotted with dairy cattle and the odd paddock of sheep.

They rounded a bend and Thomas's boom began again, a finger jabbing here and there as the buildings came into view.

"That there is the house where we live and down there opposite is the restaurant. Down that way is the..."

Clancy tuned out. She gazed across at the old homestead with its huge verandah and its straggling grapevine draped over the front of it. Nothing extraordinary there. It was the restaurant that caught her attention, and the dilapidated sign spanning across the front of it.

It was enormous. It stood off the ground like a shearing shed. A ramp angled up to a double doorway. Ancient corrugated iron, thick timber struts and beams and generous windows. She couldn't wait to see the fit-out inside.

"...was the original shearing shed so I gutted it and..."

There'd been an attempt at a garden to pretty the place up, the corral-like fence in the front now protecting only the weeds from kangaroos and wallabies. Plastic tables and chairs were stacked on a lean by the back of it.

As they drove past, she turned to see more. There'd been sandstone pavers laid, and an outdoor fireplace, and something which resembled a wood-fired oven.

"...then the kitchen itself was a bit of a shonk, but I eventually got him to pass it, you know, to keep in theme with what..."

Under the shed itself she could see a jumble of equipment, more chairs, and generally a heap of junk stuck out like the proverbial sore toe. She imagined it would all be loaded into a truck in the next day or so and removed. Likewise, someone would tidy up the garden and maybe deliver some new outdoor furniture. That plastic stuff was really tacky.

A creep of unease spread though her still queasy stomach. Something on the edge of her subconscious nudged a question forward, but she couldn't quite grasp it.

"...and the heating proved to be a no-show, but we're used to that out here. Bit breezy in the real winter, but it's hardly that now. I've got plans for the..."

The vehicle skewed toward the homestead. He boomed on, but she wasn't listening. What the homestead had hidden from view, until they pulled up, was the spread of leafy vines, which stretched for what seemed like miles in front of her. The hills behind the house were covered in vines as far as the eye could see.

"Oh, it's beautiful," she breathed.

"What? Yes. But a lot of back-breaking work has gone into that beautiful, and a lot more back-breaking work is still to be done. And now the bloody bottom's dropped out of the market, we've got to take steps to ensure we can get over the line and stay there."

The glut of grapes in the industry this year was no secret. Yet panning ahead of her were hectares of fruit not far from the picking. She felt another tingle of apprehension. "You won't be pulling up the vines?"

"Jee-sus, no. People still want their wine but I reckon we've neglected another area of revenue." He thrust his chin towards the barn-like building. "The restaurant."

The vehicle came to a sudden full stop and he launched himself out before she could even unbuckle her seat belt.

"Get yourself over to the restaurant. I'll meet you there in a minute."

"Right," she muttered, and stepped out of the car.

She stretched, winced at the throb in her temples. Should have had a big glass of water at the pub. She pulled the clip from her hair, shook her head and earned another throb, then gathered the unruly lot into a twist and re-clipped it.

She headed for the building, over a stretch of cleared land, her feet sinking into soft sand and dirt mixed with gravel. It made the going hard. She wondered how patrons dealt with it – if it was in fact the car park for the restaurant.

On closer inspection, the ‘restaurant’ did really resemble more a shed than anything else. And it looked as if it had been neglected for a lot longer than a year. As she stepped on to the ramp, a plank of wood gave way under her weight. She yelped, her foot crunching through soft rotting timber, which scraped the inside of her leg above her boot.

Clancy reefed her foot out of the hole, balanced on the other foot and clutched a wobbly handrail. “This is not a good start.” She steadied herself, bent down to examine her leg.

“Doesn’t look like it,” a male voice piped up beside her. She jumped afresh.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you. I’m Greg Thomas.” He bent and checked the few timbers ahead of them, shook the rail. “Didn’t think they’d be this brittle. Reckon these few’ll hold. Are you okay?”

Clancy gripped the outstretched hand which guided her up a metre or two. “Yes, I am, thanks. I’m Clancy Jones. The new cook.”

“Good to have you on board. I take it the old man is meeting us over here?”

When Clancy finally met his eyes, she’d already gazed over big feet encased in solid working boots, lean legs in blue jeans, a broad chest and a stomach draped with an old flannelette shirt over a pale grey T-shirt. Wisps of ginger chest hair curled at the base of his neck. His hair was deepest auburn, his face a younger, sharper version of Mac Thomas. But those eyes. Blue of blue of blue. Piercing, and strange, as if they looked at you from a different perspective. And not a good one.

“Who?”

“Dad. He said he was meeting us here?”

“Yes. Yes, he did.”

“All right, so you and I may as well go on inside and I’ll show you around.” He smiled at her.

Warning bells were clanging. It was a brilliant smile, dazzling in its effect, fake, and almost leery.

Her head pounded. Oh God, this was the son and heir. This was also looking like she'd jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

She followed him up the ramp aware at any moment she could plunge through and break her neck, so she stepped carefully and at a much less enthusiastic pace than he set.

At the door inside, she was a little dismayed to note the whole internal floor was timber. "Oh no," inadvertently escaped her.

"Don't worry about this floor. We've checked it over. It's fine."

"The ramp...?"

"Was also due for replacement but the tradesman never returned."

"Your father said there was a function at the end of the week."

He nodded. "Over this way."

Clancy followed him to the back of the huge room. She took in the exposed timbers of the ceiling, cobwebs draping many metres below where they originated and wasp and swallow nests filling every mitre she could see. At times a pungent aroma wafted up from the floor.

There was a short wall of timbers in front of her, a gate of sorts and then some pens beyond, all smeared and splashed with stains of light and dark.

"This is a shearing shed." She looked around her, dismayed. Bewildered.

"Yep. Not used as that now of course. This," he turned and spread his arms wide, "is the restaurant."

"I missing something here." Perhaps dehydration had killed off more than a few brain cells; like maybe her eyesight. There was nothing in here. "So, where do you intend to have the function?" Where was the pristine, stainless steel kitchen with a huge gas cooktop, and state-of-the-art chargrill, and freezers and a coolroom and a stylish but snappy bar and—

His grin dropped away. "Here, of course."

"How?"

“That’s your job.”

Clancy began to see where this was going. “I don’t think so. I’m a chef, not an interior designer of shearing sheds.”

Greg Thomas stepped into her space. The sudden glare backed her up a pace. At the same time Mac Thomas lurched into the shed and marched over to them.

“Don’t get your knees in a knot. The whole new fit-out is due tomorrow.” He kept booming. “We’ve had it decked out as a restaurant before, I told you that. But it just got a bit untidy, ‘specially when we put the sheep back in. You’re gaping.”

Clancy closed her mouth, turned away. “The whole fit-out... you mean that junk under the floor is the old—”

“S’right. It’s gonna be a busy place tomorrow with the tradies in. I’ve made bloody sure every tradie known to man will be on deck to get cracking.”

Clancy turned to stare out the huge window space along the walls. “Glaziers...?”

“Yep. And plumbers and sparkies and cabinet makers and the furniture truck.”

“Four working days left up to Christmas Day and you don’t have a restaurant.”

“S’right. You’ll see, we’ll get you there.”

Clancy rounded on him. “It’ll take a week to prepare a Christmas function and I haven’t even got a kitchen. I took the job expecting to walk in and begin work. I can’t order anything without a storeroom, or a coolroom or kitchen benches or—”

“Hey! We’ll get it done.” Mac Thomas shoved a gnarly finger at her. “Your job is to go over my menu and get prepared.”

“Dad.”

Clancy frowned and waved her hand around. “Where am I going to work while you outfit this shed?”

Mac Thomas swung his arm towards the back corner. “Over there. We’ll get a desk in. You’ll be right.”

“A desk.”

“Dad.”

“Mr Thomas, if you haven’t got a restaurant ready to go, functioning and clean, fully stocked—”

"Your job is to get it ready once the tradies are done. They'll be finished by sundown tomorrow." Mac Thomas turned and clomped away.

"What about staff?" She followed him. "What about the—"

He didn't bother to turn around but boomed over his shoulder. "I'll bring my menu. Be at the house at two pm. I'm looking forward to dinner tonight."

Clancy stopped following as Mac Thomas hurled himself out of the shed. She stood a moment or two watching as his uneasy gait crabbed its way across the paddock, small puffs of dust billowing at his feet. She turned to look at Greg. "What the hell—?"

Greg shrugged his shoulders. "Once you answered the ad, he just went ahead and started to order everything."

Clancy was shaking her head. "Uh, I didn't sign on for this. I need to speak to your father. I can't do this without a kitchen even on the ground yet. Four days – barely that, and the worst week of the year for getting what you need in time."

"It's all under control." Red blotches glowered on his cheeks.

Clancy thought at first that he might have been embarrassed. Well, so he should be, they both should be. "I need to get your father to take me back to the hotel. I'll get the bus back to the ferry. This just isn't going to work. Not only for me, but for you as well." Though how she thought she'd find a place to live, get work and start all over back in town was just a bit beyond her at the present moment. Her insides were parched, including her brain.

The suffocating air, thick with the smell old lanoline and sheep piss had her head spinning.

Greg ducked his head and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Just wait until tomorrow. It'll all happen then." He looked at her, anger evident in his eyes. "You can prepare at the house kitchen. It's not brand new, but everything works. There's a big coolroom there. Think about it." The red blotches paled. "We need to do this."

She took another sweep of the huge area, pressed a forearm to her forehead to mop the perspiration. She frowned. "Why not do it at the pub? You own that, don't you?"

"Already suggested that." He kicked at something under his boot. "Dad does things on impulse. Drives the bank manager crazy, shuffling money here and there, but he was so excited you were on board—"

“He didn’t tell me everything I needed to know.”

Greg stared at her. “Thing is, this is our last shot.”

Clancy’s heartbeat escalated. “What?”

“This has to work or nothing. He’s right down to the wire, mortgaged to the hilt and has a legal battle on his hands over the land.”

“Stop.” Clancy held up her hands.

“We can pay you – that’s no problem. We just need the place rolling by New Year, to show it’s viable. We already have forty-five firm bookings for Christmas lunch, all paid in advance.”

He tried a smile but Clancy was on to him. There were agendas here and she didn’t like it. She didn’t like the way he was looking at her either.

As if she was prey or something.

Noo-noo radar was in overdrive and it was never wrong. And she was tired, wrung out after last night’s useless fun and boring games after the blow-up with her father. Maybe her perspective was skewed.

She was also broke and homeless and this was not going to be a good way out of that predicament.

She weighed up her options as best she could. Had she said she wanted a challenge?

Don’t wish too hard for what you want...

She rubbed her face, wiped her hands down her sides and felt Berry’s card in her pocket. Berry. Green eyes. She shook her head to dispel the distraction and tried to recall their conversation earlier in the bar. Hadn’t he said something about working for him if it didn’t pan out here?

She looked at Greg Thomas. “It’s the twenty-first today. If the place is not fully operational on the morning of the twenty-third I’m gone. That’s electricity connected, gas connected, clean running water, ovens, cook tops, deep fryers...” She counted off her fingers.

“I get it.” He nodded at her. “It will be, don’t worry. Thanks.”

“Hasn’t happened yet.” She was busy trying to figure out what should happen first, the menu and orders for food to save time, or should she wait to see if the fit-out made it across the line then go mad on the day. If it worked out.

"If you need a hand..." His voice trailed off, but his leery gaze didn't.

She stopped short of telling him to get the hell away from her. His strange blue gaze was on her face. "Where are my quarters, please? I need to get changed before I meet your father again."

He ducked his head once more. "Uh, a room in the main house. I'll show you." He turned on his heels.

"Wait a minute." She was talking to his back. "I was told I had a self-contained cabin here."

"I told Dad he shouldn't have offered that. It's in bad condition." He waved a hand behind him. "A room in the main house. Come on."

Clancy stared after him, the creep of uncertainty spreading inside.

CHAPTER THREE

Berry Lockett sat on his verandah watching the sun sink over the vines. A glass of his own fine shiraz was in his grip, the bottle open on the table beside him.

So, Mac Thomas was going for it. He was going to try and put together that restaurant of his in the old shearing shed and tackle his problem by throwing more money at it.

He glanced across at the sheaf of papers alongside the bottle. His solicitors had done as much as they could before they closed a week or two back for the Christmas break.

Some Christmas.

He had an early January court battle on his hands and he wasn't looking forward to it.

He bent over the arm of his chair and ruffled his dog's head. Rommy looked up at him. "Stupid bugger, that Mac Thomas." Rommy knew what he meant. Kelpies were smart that way. He dropped his black head back between his equally black paws.

Berry thought of the woman he'd met at the hotel, Clancy. He wondered if she'd given his card any more than a cursory glance before chucking it in the nearest bin.

By now, if she had any sense, she'd be able to see Mac Thomas didn't have a hope in hell of pulling off what he needed to. She should be running for the hills.

Mac's pub was up for sale. Everyone in the district knew Mac was up against a wall and his last chance was to make a go of the Vineyard Restaurant again.

Clancy Jones hadn't struck him as someone who could pull it off, either. She'd looked a bit jaded, weary.

He liked what he saw, but he figured she had battles of her own.

Don't we all?

He thought again about her. The easy conversation, the laughter, the way her gaze rested on him when she spoke.

He thought again of her hair in that clip-thing, all loose and bouncy, as if at any minute it might fall down around her shoulders. He'd like to see that.

The thought startled him.

It wasn't all he'd noticed. The rest of her had fired his interest, the first woman in a long time to grab his attention and hold it for more than a moment or two.

He swallowed some wine, allowing the pepper and spice flavours to fire his taste buds. He refilled his glass, held the bottle up in the fading light. "*Berry's Vineyard*," he said, admiring the label. "Our good name, hey Rommy?"

Rommy agreed, although he wasn't a connoisseur of wine himself.

A vintage from 2007 – one of Berry's best ones. It had come out of a good summer with decent rains in the winter before. He rolled another mouthful around and let it sit on his tongue a moment before letting it slide down his throat.

Full bodied, fruity and intense, with mulberry and blackberry flavours deep on the palate, pepper for pizzazz, spice for comfort. He loved this wine.

He loved his home.

He didn't love his neighbours.

And he certainly didn't like this time of year. Sure, he was busy enough and his own restaurant was doing well using his farm produce, the freshwater crayfish, and his own wines from the vineyard.

But it wasn't a happy time for him. He was a man on his own, long past hoping for the right woman to join him. He had his work, his dog, his friends. But it was times like Christmas when he felt bleak, when he knew his mates invited him over because their wives couldn't stand to see him on his own on that particular day.

Even they'd given up trying to match him with single friends. Seemed nobody before had caught his eye.

But Clancy Jones had. And there she was, a bit jaded, a bit weary, and working for the enemy.

"No and no and no." Mac hit the table three times with the flat of his palm.

Clancy winced inwardly at the booming voice. "You can't have a Christmas feast with Poacher's Pie as the main course."

“You haven’t been here five minutes so don’t go telling me what I can and can’t do. I want down home food and lots of it.”

“Mutton stew is not going to cut it.”

“Who told you it was mutton stew?”

Greg scratched his ear. “It basically is just that, Dad.”

Mac Thomas glared from his son to Clancy and back again. “I want this place to be known for where you get big hearty meals.”

Clancy tried again. “What about a spit, lamb or beef – perhaps both. Maybe some salmon mousse or veal terrines... and some decent salads.” She was trying to think of anything tried and true she could prepare without having to experiment to get things perfect. There wasn’t a lot of time—

“No one ever got filled up on salads. Lots of roast veggies, good and plain, that’s what I want. And pavlova. Huge ones. Nothing fancy, hear me? Nothing I can’t spell or pronounce.”

She leaned back in her chair and glanced around the big old kitchen, which would have been a beauty in its day. A real cook’s dream back then. Those long, deep, solid timber benches, the butcher’s block, and an island bench with cupboards which was half the size of the room and would have been before its time, she reckoned. Cupboards lined the walls top to bottom and wonder of wonders, there was a pantry you could dance in.

But she had no clue how to cook on the AGA, a massive wood-burning stove that squatted in the alcove. A wood-fired pizza oven was about as far as she’d got in that direction. Besides, it looked out of place, unused and unloved. The new kitchen had better be operational soon. She wondered what the two men did for cooking their own meals.

She sighed aloud. “I don’t know I’m going to stay—”

A mobile phone trilled loudly and Mac Thomas thumped his chest and pockets to locate it. When he found it, he yelled, “Yes? What papers? Yes, of course I did. Well, it will have to do. Take the bastard down once and for all. That’s my land.”

Greg had come to attention. Clancy looked between the pair and couldn’t decide whether or not to take her leave. She stood but Mac Thomas waved her back into her seat.

"Yes, yes. All right. We'll be there. January tenth." He hung up without another word.

"As I was saying," Clancy started again, "I don't know that—"

"Three or four choices of entrees, same with mains and lots of side dishes. No freshwater cray, got it?" He glared at her. "I've got a list here of all ingredients I want you to use. Nothing fancy, so don't go ordering anything fancy."

"But—"

Greg leaned towards her and spoke very softly. "How do you think you'd even get off this place?"

Prickly heat rushed across her shoulders. Clancy let the silence hang and Greg didn't attempt to fill the void; just sat back staring at her.

He'd spoken so softly Mac Thomas hadn't heard. "Good. I reckon that's easy enough to handle. I'm looking forward to it. Now, you can practice on me and Greg for tea tonight. We'll have lamb." He shoved his chair away as he stood up and stomped out of the room.

She dropped her pen to the table and took a deep breath. "Freshwater cray would at least liven things up. The weather's forecast to be stinking hot by next week and he wants roasted veggies."

"No cray."

"Why not?"

"His mortal enemy and biggest competitor lives on the farm next door. He farms the crays, and he's got his own vineyard and wines, too."

Clancy's hand slid into her pocket and clamped on Berry's card, still there, nice and warm. "I see."

"And he has one of the best boutique restaurants on the island." Greg looked at her and shifted in his seat. "So I'm told."

Clancy raised her eyebrows. Berry Lockett had a bit more going for him than he let on. A thrill ran through her. "So he's the competition. Is he doing Christmas as well?"

"He's shut for the actual day."

"What's the story between him and your father, then?"

“Goes way back to my great-grandfather’s day. A fight over who owns the land we’re on.” His blue eyes pinned hers. “It’s comes right down to the fence wire, literally. Lockett’s boundary is supposed to be this side of our shearing shed.”

“Go on.”

“Beresford Lockett – that’s the next door neighbor, his great-grandmother was married to my great-grandfather, an earlier marriage. She’s buried on the land, and where she’s buried he reckons is his land because the boundaries had been shifted illegally.”

“And?”

“If the courts uphold it, we will have to relinquish about ten metres this side of the shed and for about three kilometres.”

“A lot of land.”

“And our shearing shed.”

“So why bung the restaurant back in there? Why doesn’t your father rebuild it somewhere else?”

Greg shrugged. “I dunno. Pride, maybe.”

“So where is great-grandma buried?”

Greg curled his lip. “That’s the kicker, the big secret. It’s the reason Lockett is going for our throats. He reckons she’s under the shearing shed.”

CHAPTER FOUR

In her room Clancy tried to concentrate on a shopping list for Mac. If she didn't do it, God only knows what he'd come up with to get this function happening.

But why was she even bothering?

Well, for a start, she had no car and it was a four-kilometre walk to the gate. Greg Thomas had figured that much out, the weasel. She had no way of carrying all her worldly possessions with her.

That's why she was bothering, biding time until she could work out how to get out of here. They were mad, both father and son. Mad. They had no money, a failing business and they were about to throw good after bad and set up a restaurant.

She left her gear packed, and had pushed the bags against the far wall of the bedroom. She wouldn't be unpacking in a hurry because she intended to find some way to get the hell out.

At least the room was comfortable enough, but it certainly wasn't what she'd been promised.

Neither Mac Thomas nor his son were to be trusted on a number of fronts.

She had to use the bathroom which was down the hall and was a shared bathroom. Another annoying second-rate factor. She hadn't felt at ease being in the house either, but there wasn't a lot she could do about it.

And what a typical male bathroom it was.

On her way out she'd almost bumped into Greg as he was going in.

He just stood in her way as she tried to get past.

Awkward. Unpleasant.

Foreboding.

She'd had to flatten herself against the wall to avoid touching him.

The whole set-up was nonsense. No way should Mac be building up infrastructure when losing a court case could see it all ordered to be removed. Such a waste of money – and money it sounded like he didn't have.

She had to get out. She'd jumped from the frying pan into the fire for sure, but the frying pan was looking better than it had two days before. Then again, remembering the angry vow to her father she would never return probably meant that particular frying pan was now not an option.

Clancy checked her watch. She had some time before she was due to start the evening meal, a test run for the dinner Mac had said. She figured they expected her to become their kitchen maid, but they had another thing coming. She'd cook what she wanted.

Maybe that way she'd get sacked tonight and be told to move on the following day. And that way they'd have to deliver her off the property.

Yes!

There might be another way. She eyed her laptop. Perhaps there was satellite broadband at the house. She'd email Berry Lockett, ask him politely if he'd come and get her, maybe meet her on the driveway track (dragging her luggage) and drop her off at the pub to get the bus and ferry back to Adelaide.

She thought a moment or two about just plain ringing him, but then she got the jitters. A woman ringing a man after a chance meeting in a pub and asking for major assistance was not a good look. What if he rejected the idea outright? Embarrassing.

At least if she emailed and he chose not to answer, there wouldn't be any stomach-turning mortification.

Email is best.

She opened the laptop and fired it up. Deliriously happy when she saw the Internet was available, she checked Berry's card, keyed in his email address and tapped out a quick note.

Berry, I know your place is next door to where I am now. Is there a chance you could meet me somewhere between the two properties and kindly give me a lift back to the pub for the bus? Hope you can help. Thanks in advance, Clancy Jones.

That already made her feel better. In fact, she felt a warm tingle make it all the way down to her toes.

She waited until she was sure the email had sent then closed the laptop. She'd check for his answer in an hour. In a half hour. In fifteen minutes...

The warm tingle was still with her. But right now, she was stuck. The only option was to do what she'd always done in tight spots, or times of sadness...or happiness for that matter.

She went in search of the kitchen to cook.

Mac Thomas leaned over his plate. "What do you call this?" He had his nose over his plate and sniffed.

Clancy could have whacked him on his big head with a frying pan. "It's lamb kebabs, with middle eastern spices on a bed of boiled rice because there was nothing else in the pantry."

"I don't eat rice. God only knows how long it's been in the pantry, probably since the last cook was here." He pointed at his son. "Don't eat the rice."

Clancy forked a mouthful and chewed slowly.

Greg looked at her. "It smells great. I didn't even know we had those spices in the cupboard." He dragged a meatball off the skewer and shoved it whole into his mouth. "The best."

Mac Thomas glared at her. "I said plain."

"Fine." She stood up and went to the microwave, pulled open the door and delivered a warm plate with a perfectly cooked lamb fillet resting on it. Diced potatoes dripped butter and herbs, and a couple of baby carrots accompanied it.

"You didn't microwave that." Mac pointed his knife at the plate.

"No, I didn't."

"I don't eat carrots."

She took a pair of tongs, removed the carrots from his plate and dropped them on to her own. She placed his plate in front of him.

He sliced the fillet. "Not cooked," he said as the meat revealed it was just a little pink. He pushed the plate away.

She smiled at him. Reached across and tonged the lamb from his plate and placed it on a plate beside hers. Then she resumed her seat, and her meal.

Greg sputtered his wine.

"It's not cooked." Mac Thomas thrust his seat back. A few lonely pieces of diced, buttery potatoes sat on his plate in front of him.

"It is cooked the way I cook it. It is plain. It is with potatoes. You can't get any plainer than meat and potatoes." Clancy continued eating without looking at either man. Just the way she liked it.

"You can't cook like that for this function."

"I will be cooking the way I know how. If you don't approve, I will happily leave tomorrow." She continued eating.

Greg took a long swallow of wine and another whole meatball before he said, "Dad, this is really good. You need to try it." He smiled at Clancy.

She felt sick.

Mac Thomas was beet red. "I don't like spices. I don't like under-done meat. I don't like salads. I want plain meat and veggies."

"You ate it all when Marlie was cooking for you."

Clancy's eyes widened. "Who's Marlie?"

"Marlie McEwen, his girlfriend."

"Marlie McEwen is not my girlfriend."

"Not now, no. You pissed her off too much." Greg looked at Clancy. "But she did cook great meals for Dad. He lost a lot of weight."

Clancy continued chewing, then swallowed and took a sip of wine. "What other veggies do you like?"

"Parsnip. Onions."

"You don't have any."

"Well, when we do the shopping we will have."

"What else?"

Greg piped up again. "That's about it."

"Greens?"

"Only if they're about mush by the time they get to the table." Greg pointed at her spare plate with his fork. "You going to eat that fillet?"

"No. And you're not either. Your father is going to eat it."

"I won't eat it uncooked."

"Slice it again," she instructed and landed the fillet back on his plate. This time the meat juices ran clear. She could hear his stomach rumbling. Mac harrumphed and took a bite. Then another. It wasn't long before he'd wolfed the lot.

"Well, Dad?"

"Not enough on the plate."

Clancy nodded. "Fair enough." She pushed her plate away, just about empty. "I'll be off to bed. Long day."

"You have to clean up."

"No, I don't. I'm the chef, not the kitchen hand. Goodnight."

In her room, she could hear the arguing voices but not the content. She was exhausted, but not too exhausted to open her laptop. She waited patiently for the email program to open, to download, and was disappointed to find nothing in her inbox.

She felt sure Berry would have answered her. Maybe he would later. She'd have a nice surprise when she awoke to his email in the morning. That idea carried her to the bed where she undressed, fell under the covers and slept.

The next morning there was still nothing from Berry.

Clancy got to the bathroom ahead of the two men. She hurried, didn't want to be bumping into anybody as she went in or came out.

She checked her emails. Nothing.

Pulled on clean jeans – checked her emails – and a light-weight long sleeved t shirt wrinkled from her bag – checked her emails – and went straight to the kitchen. Surprise, surprise, the dirty dishes from the night before were still on the sink and the table. She left them.

Finding the kettle and boiling water, she looked for coffee and found only instant. It would have to do. She marched back to her room and checked the laptop for the eleventieth time, still without success.

No answer from Berry.

Her heart sank. He wasn't going to reply. He was just going to let it go and ignore her. But she'd had such a good feeling about him – how could that be wrong? He had a certain way of looking at her made her feel there was... something.

The way he'd looked at her. The way his eyes had never left her face when she was talking. He watched her, listening as if she was saying the most important thing in the world to him. To him. That's what it was... that she was the only thing in his world.

Dammit.

She sat on the edge of the bed, thinking fast.

There was only one solution right now. She'd have to sweet talk Greg into giving her a lift back to the pub. That was that.

She didn't like it too much. He was definitely creepy.

She opened the outside door in her room, stepped out to stand on the verandah with her coffee and gazed at the extraordinary sight before her. The vines reached from almost her doorstep to at least five hundred metres all around her, sloping down to a tree-lined gully.

It was one thing to be without a home and a job, but man, it was pretty here.

Why the hell would they be building up that old smelly shearing shed? Sure, it had character, but the view from this verandah was nothing short of spectacular.

Clancy took a step back, checked it with a different perspective... it was wide enough for banquet-style tables and chairs.

She walked the length then back again. You could get service staff in and around it easily and with doors from the verandah to almost every room in the house, access from the kitchen wouldn't be a problem.

She ran down the few steps to gaze back at the verandah from the lawn below. It would be perfect. Why hadn't they thought of this?

Mac would only have to re-fit the existing kitchen – and wasn't all that stuff coming today? She should hijack the shearing shed idea and redirect all the energy to the verandah. It would still be called the Vineyard Restaurant, and what an outlook over the vineyard...

Nah. Not convinced. Even the little she knew of the Thomas's, she couldn't expect any worthy idea to fly.

She swallowed the last of her coffee and was about to get another when she heard Mac clomping about inside. She waited a moment or two, wanting to be out of sight for a while.

The phone rang and Mac answered. A beat or two and his rasping shouts, angry questions and replies reached her ears. Then silence.

So, the day hadn't started well. She bet one of the tradies couldn't make it today, of all days... It wasn't her worry.

Maybe it was the electrician, only the most vital of them all. And if that were the case, then maybe her idea about the verandah would make it—

She heard Mac bellow with rage for Greg, and from a distance, Greg bellowed back. Another argument ensued.

Forget it. There was no way she was going to stay here. Bugger the verandah idea. She ducked back inside to her bedroom to check the laptop again. Still nothing. She looked about her room as if an idea would leap out of the woodwork. "Come on, Clancy. Pull something out of your hat."

Then a knock sounded on her door. She pulled it open.

It was Greg, his face ashen. "The truck. The whole bloody truck carrying everything down from Adelaide has tipped over outside Yankalilla. It didn't even make the ferry last night. We've lost everything. All the kitchen stuff. Everything."

CHAPTER FIVE

Clancy was stunned for a moment. Greg looked on the verge of bawling. Then all manner of thoughts jumbled at once. “Order more stuff... insurance would cover—”

“This close to Christmas? Our supplier is already closed, and we’ve got no credit—”

“That’s bad. I’m sorry.” Her thoughts were doing somersaults processing the news and at the same time trying to find a way to walk-drive-fly out of her now precarious position. And Greg sounded too desperate for her to feel comfortable. When he moved towards her, aiming, she thought, for a consolation hug...

No way!

Her hurried side step didn’t go unnoticed. The desolation on his face changed in an instant, the glitter in his eyes spooky with madness. He reached for her arm.

She lifted it out of his way. “I’ll leave right away,” she said. “I won’t hold you to my contract.” She backed up a pace, giving herself as much distance as she could from the intense glare. “You won’t want me hanging around without anything to do. I understand. It’s okay. No hard feelings.”

Greg stared her down for a moment. “You’ll be leaving us right in the shit. I’m not having that.” He spun on his heels and left.

Clancy puffed out a breath. Things had just gone very bad. And not just for her, that was obvious. She had to get out of the place before bad went to omigod-so-much worse.

She checked her phone for signal, waving it around the room. Nothing. She jumped up on the bed to hold it closer to the ceiling, but then of course she couldn’t see it. Frustrated, panicky, she stepped outside and on the edge of the verandah it tipped three bars – she’d have enough to call Berry Lockett, now her only ally – even if he didn’t know it – and beg for help. If she could raise him.

And she hoped like hell she could. To drag her luggage four kilometres to the gate was not a great thought. And then what – hitch a ride from passing traffic?

Maybe she should try and get Mac to drive her back to the pub. But approaching him right now would not be a good idea. So far he hadn’t stopped bellowing about the place, venting his anguish.

She pushed her hands into her pockets searching for Berry's card. Nothing. Where the hell had she put it?

In her jeans from yesterday, balled up in the backpack.

She could hear more bellowing from down the hall, rage and hysteria. Clearly both men were not just a little unhinged. The only thing to do was to get out now. On foot. Somehow.

She'd have to wait to call Berry somewhere on the track.

After figuring a way to move all her stuff – backpack on back, wheelie bag dragging behind, laptop secured to wheelie bag, handbag strap over her head and slung across her body, arm socket ready for severe damage – she was just about ready to don her walkers and outfit herself with the bags when her email alert pinged.

She rushed at the machine and there it was. Berry had answered.

No problem. Let me know when & I'm there.

She tapped out a harried reply, hoping against hope that he hadn't sent an email and shut his machine off.

Now. Please. I'm starting to walk towards the gate.

An anxious minute or so and a reply came.

Yr mobile no...?

She keyed in her number, and typed –

I will start walking now. Text me & thank you.

She gathered her gear and set it at the top of the verandah steps. Taking a deep breath, she went in search of Mac Thomas and found him at the kitchen table.

"I'm very sorry, Mac. It's a terrible blow."

He barely raised his head from the table. "What would you know?" His eyes looked like a bloodhound's, his face had turned a shade of pale and sweat had popped on his forehead.

"Are you feeling all right?"

"Just bugger off out of it."

“Right.” There wasn’t anything much to say after that.

He barely nodded.

She let her breath out and winged it down the hallway. When she got to her room, Greg was sitting on the bed, staring out the open verandah door.

Her blood froze.

“Leaving right now?” He swung to look at her.

“I just told your dad. And he doesn’t look very—”

“Walking with all that stuff?” He pointed to her luggage outside.

“I didn’t want to bother anyone.”

“I’ll bring the car around. Drive you back.”

She hesitated. Her phone pinged in her pocket. She checked. Berry.

Meet u on their track.

“Look, thanks, but I should be fine. I lug this stuff everywhere, all the time.” She moved past him and out onto the verandah. The heat coming off him was palpable. She couldn’t run without her stuff – though she felt like it. She couldn’t leave all her worldly possessions behind, not this time. She’d actually have nothing if she did that.

“I said I’ll bring the car around.” He followed, stepped off the verandah and shouldered past her, striding around the corner of the house.

Clancy tried to calm herself, strapped the laptop securely to the wheelie bag. Her hands shook but grabbing the backpack and shrugging into it gave her flight some strength. The handbag strap looped over her head and shoulder and the bag fitted snugly against her body. She clutched the wheelie bag handle and set off down the steps, wanting to get a little distance between her and the house.

She had no clue how far away Berry would be. She just began marching resolutely down the track hoping he’d appear like she hadn’t hoped for anything in a very long time.

She’d hardly gone a hundred metres. How the bloody hell she thought she was going to be able to drag all this stuff – her back already ached under the weight of the pack, the wheelie bag finding every bump and rock in the road. But the very thought of being stranded here with two extremely angry and disconsolate men drove her on.

Where was Berry? How far did he have to come?

She heard both vehicles at once. She saw a huge four-wheel drive sweep the bend ahead of her at the same time she knew Greg must be coming up behind her. She glanced around. Sure enough, the vehicle that Mac Thomas had driven to bring her to the estate was speeding up the drive.

She struggled off the track as Greg pulled up first. He snarled through the window. "Get in."

She swiveled to see Berry – she hoped it was Berry – about two hundred metres away.

"Thanks. I'll wait for Berry," she said.

Greg glanced up the track at the approaching vehicle then leaned towards her across the passenger seat. "Don't do this. We need you back at the homestead. Get in."

Clancy, her heart pounding, watched Berry roaring up fast. "No. It's okay, I'll go with Berry." She stepped back on the verge, still loaded with everything, afraid to let go of any of her stuff.

Berry skewed his car to a halt just shy of touching the bullbar on Greg's vehicle. He got out, stood for a moment and stretched.

Greg shoved open his door and shot out to face his neighbour. "You're on my property." He hadn't moved beyond the hood of his car.

Berry nodded at Clancy. "You all right?" When she nodded in return, he opened the back door, took the wheelie bag from her and loaded it in. The rest she did herself. He turned back to Greg. "Not for long."

"Clancy."

"It wasn't working for me, Greg." She got in to the passenger side of Berry's vehicle, crossed her arms because her heart was beating so hard she feared it would leap out of her chest. She stared resolutely ahead. Unfortunately, she was facing back the way she'd come.

"Lockett—"

"Don't know what's going on, Greg. I'm just taking her back to the bus." Berry wasted no time getting back behind the wheel, reversing, taking a wide turn and driving out the way he'd come.

Clancy watched Greg in the side mirror. He remained in the middle of the road for some moments then he got into his car and tore back to the homestead. She took a deep breath. "Thank you. I'm sorry I called on you. An imposition, I know but I—"

"No imposition." Berry looked across at her. "Nothing broken?"

"Only their restaurant." She stared at the dashboard. In her head, she was still stuck on the side of the road with nowhere to go. Her heartbeat hadn't slowed and the unnamed threat of Greg Thomas was still with her. "The truck carrying all their new gear rolled over last night, wrecking the total fit-out, apparently."

"Shit."

Clancy gazed out the window, not really seeing the miles of vines happily uniform and leafy across the stretch of land to her left. "It was getting a wee bit weird there. Understatement."

"Right." Berry kept his eyes on the road. "So, you know there's no bus until tomorrow. I can take you back to the pub and you can get a room there tonight—"

She shot him a look. "You said they own that place, too."

"Or maybe you'd like to look over my place, stay there, and I'll drop you at the pub tomorrow in time for the bus."

Clancy hoped she hadn't gone frying-pan hopping again. "Do you have somewhere for me to stay overnight?"

"There's a small bedsit just off my restaurant. Used to be where I'd camp when I was building my house."

"Sounds perfect. I can pay." Clancy loosened the grip her arms had across her chest. She leaned back in her seat glad for the headrest. "I won't get in your way. I'm just sorry I had to call on you for some help."

"Glad of it, might even put you to work to cover my good deed."

Clancy turned to look at him. "If I can be useful."

"There's always something." He gave her a quick glance. "I suppose I should fill you in on what I do."

She liked his voice; it was calming. He was calm; his whole demeanor was at ease, comfortable. She checked his hands on the steering wheel. Big knuckled, tanned and supple, stained with red dirt. Or maybe grape juice.

"You do vines and wines, a restaurant, freshwater cray. And moving land boundaries."

"Ah, seems you've already had the low-down." He smiled across at her. "Yes, I have vines. Red grape varieties. I have the wines made to suit me. Luckily others enjoy them as well."

She let out another breath when they turned right out of the driveway and on to the dirt road. "Even after only one night at the Thomas's, that is a very good feeling. Too uncomfortable back there."

He nodded, glanced across at her. "Now, my restaurant. That's really something. I only open three nights a week in the slow season, and four in the busy season. Closed always Sundays, Mondays and Tuesdays."

"Nice." She sat straighter in her seat, jiggled around to loosen herself up. "So today is a day off."

"A day off from people coming to have dinner. But there's always plenty of work. And today we get ready for the rest of the week's food service. I'll show you around when we get there."

"How far?"

"Three kays." He tossed another glance her way. "And there'll be staff around later. You won't be on your own."

Clancy nodded. "Thank you." She rubbed her face hard for a moment, lightheaded with relief.

"You don't need the cops or anything?"

"Oh no." She faced him. "It's just... Greg came to my room—"

Berry turned to her sharply.

"—to tell me about the truck. And from there it all went downhill. Mac was... Well, distraught is not a strong enough word. And I wasn't sure if Greg hadn't flipped out a little bit. Somehow."

Berry maintained his silence for a moment. Then, "He can be a hot-head of sorts."

"I have a very different word to describe him."

Berry's chin tucked into his chest. "And you're sure you don't need the cops?"

This time Clancy took note. "I'm sure. Why? Has there been a problem before now?"

"Nothing I have any proof of."

"Would have been nice to know." She dropped her face into her hands for a second or two again.

"Just rumours. Might also be clouded by the fact we are battling in court just after Christmas and I don't trust them as far as I can throw them."

It was Clancy's turn to nod and remain silent. She focused on the difference in the landscape a few kilometres made. The expanse of vines had grown and on the other side of the road she could see netted ponds dotting the paddocks for miles. "What are they for? Some sort of water catchment?"

"That's where we farm the crays. 'Marron' they're called in this part of the world. Brought here by farmers years ago from West Australia to be fattened in their dams. They escaped to the waterways and today we have a new industry."

"Sort of a feral native food."

Berry nodded. "A different way of putting it."

"Is that all you serve at the restaurant?"

"No. But it's our mainstay. I'll introduce you to the chef; have her show you around. She'll be in sometime later."

Clancy smiled at him. She couldn't help it. His face lit up as he glanced at her and he grinned back. She even believed the quickening of her heartbeat was with delight.

What a ridiculous notion.

CHAPTER SIX

Berry had driven right up to the restaurant itself, parked at the side. He got out, opened the back door and hauled out her wheelie bag.

She stepped out of the vehicle. "Wow. An oasis amidst the vines."

The place was built to look like a huge tin hut. Roughly hewn beams were exposed over windows and doorways, and an open verandah area with a galvanised iron roof spanned the length of the building as cover for al fresco dining.

"It looks great. Can't wait to see inside."

Berry grunted pulling out the backpack. "Jeez, how'd you lift this thing?"

She grabbed her laptop and handbag. "Clutching my worldly possessions, I ran for my life."

"Wouldn't have got far. Weighs a ton." He headed to a doorway at the back of the building, hefting the pack with him. Not needing a key, he turned the handle and pushed the door open. "Not a palace, but it has a bed and a bathroom, hot and cold water." He dumped her bag inside and turned for the wheelie bag. "I didn't need cooking facilities so there isn't a kitchen in here. You might have to come up home when you need food. Restaurant won't be open till late tomorrow." He stopped and looked at her. "But I suppose you'll be gone by then."

It felt odd to hear that said. Clancy nodded, looked around her, hoping she was conveying her gratitude. "This is great of you."

"I'll bring some sheets and stuff for the bed," he said. "There are heaps in the house."

"I'll come up and get it. Don't bother yourself." She thrust her hands into her pockets and stood in the doorway.

"When you're ready. I'll drive the car back to the shed and head over there now." Berry pointed to the house some distance away, but he didn't move off.

She stepped into the little flat, brushing past him. It was just a bedsit, as he'd said, and she could see the shower and the toilet through an open door off to the left. "It looks fine."

He, too, dug his hands into his pockets. "Come and have lunch with me. I'll fiddle about in the kitchen at the house and see what I come up with. Half an hour."

"Sounds good." She swung back to him and smiled.

"Right." And he was gone.

Clancy sat down on the bare bed. Shook her head just so. Was it barely thirty minutes ago she was wondering how she was ever going to feel safe again?

Berry leaned on the bench in his house kitchen, his heart thumping audibly. What the hell was he going to do now? She'd called on him, he'd charged in on his white steed and now she was on his property.

He'd known her a day or so. Less if you counted last night's sleeping time. But she'd been on his mind the whole time, even while he was sleeping.

Rommy nudged his leg.

"I'm standing in the kitchen. It doesn't automatically follow you'll get something to eat."

Rommy knew differently so he just sat. Waited.

Berry went to the fridge. Come for lunch, he said. Half an hour, he said. Why look in the bloody fridge when you know it's empty, he said.

The empty fridge didn't look any different no matter how hard he looked at it. Rommy took a cursory glance at it then back at Berry.

"Failed miserably there, boy," Berry said. "Come on, we'll have to go raid the shop." Rommy knew 'shop'. That was the restaurant kitchen. He trotted along beside Berry as they headed out the door and down the dirt track back to the shop.

Berry left Rommy at the kitchen door.

Inside, the chef was poking about in the coolroom. Berry called through the sliding door. "Heidi, I need something quick and easy for two – how about three or four decent sized tails, the lemon and grape sauce and a salad?"

Heidi looked out. "Hey, Berry. Sure. You want me to plate it up?"

"Uh, no—"

"Or I can just give it to Clancy here to take up with her?" Heidi opened the coolroom door to reveal Clancy with her hands full.

Clancy stared at him. "I saw there was someone in the kitchen and I just thought I'd—"

"She came in to say hello. Good thing too. I've been at you long enough to find another chef and I don't know how much longer I'll be able to reach the stove." Heidi patted her large pregnant belly with one hand and with the other she took a platter from Clancy and handed it to Berry. "There's the tails. I'll get a salad."

Clancy came out of the coolroom carrying pots of Berry's signature salad sauce. She closed the door with her foot. "Whole place looks good. Smaller than I thought." She followed Heidi into the kitchen.

Berry nodded. "Thirty seats max," he called after her. Her hair was scrunched atop her head; she wore a very nicely fitted T-shirt under one of Heidi's aprons, new looking jeans and sneakers.

The girls must have worked quickly. He reckoned he'd only been gone twenty minutes.

Clancy as his new chef. He felt good about the idea.

He stood at the coolroom looking after them, the platter still in his hand. He hadn't even interviewed her... well, that's what lunch could be about. He had to find out if she could cook.

And just who was he kidding? If she wanted the job it was hers. *If* she could cook. He could look at her all day long. Trouble was it was going to get pretty tricky around here in the next couple of weeks.

Heidi was due in the middle of January, the court case just before that and the bookings were full houses for the next few weeks. There'd be hardly any time to train someone. He knew Heidi desperately needed to leave soon and be sure the place was in capable hands.

He took the platter to the kitchen.

"I can help out, you know." Clancy stood at the servery. "Until you find someone, of course."

He just stood looking at her, his insides warming up until Heidi spoke.

“You wanna eat at the corner table, or you wanna take this back to the house?” She was bent over a large leafy salad.

Berry looked at his chef. “Here is good.” Lunch in the restaurant was by far a better idea than lunch in his house. He thought briefly about his bathroom. Not good. About his unmade bed and the clothes strewn from wall to wall. Not good.

And I’m thinking about my bedroom and bathroom because...?

They took one of the platters, the salad and the sauce and settled at the table Heidi had indicated.

“I didn’t offer to work here,” Clancy was saying. “I don’t expect anything, but she was telling me when the baby is due then she asked me what I was doing and—”

“It’s fine. As long as you’re comfortable.”

“I am, thanks, but um, you didn’t offer a job and—”

“I forgot the wine. Red or white?”

“Either.”

“Think we’ll go red.” Berry left her to go to the bar. He poured a generous couple of reds, caught Heidi’s raised eyebrows and then her wink, frowned and headed back to the table.

“I like the nod to Christmas,” Clancy began as he sat down. “I don’t do Christmas, but this looks good. Looks... Aussie. Real.” She waved her hand in the direction of the large dead gum tree bereft of any leaves whatsoever but laden with all manner of modern, simple decorations. It sat snugly in a huge earthenware pot filled with sand and it dominated the eastern corner of the room. “Sorry. I’m waffling. I think I’m still downloading, or off-loading, or whatever.”

“No problem, that’s fair enough. And Christmas, well, the staff look after Christmas for me. I don’t get into the swing, either. Here, help yourself.” He pushed the platter towards her.

She lifted her glass of red. “Thank you again for the rescue. I feel like a bit of an idiot, but it was really suffocating. And scary. I don’t scare easily.”

“I should have warned you on Tuesday but it didn’t seem right to do that.” He lifted his glass in return and they both sipped.

"You did enough by giving me your business card. I'm grateful."

"I'm surprised Mac didn't take a swipe at me in the pub. Wouldn't be the first time." Berry watched as her brows rose. "Lucky for me he didn't. I'm fine boned."

Clancy burst out laughing and her face transformed. She sparkled. Her eyes lit up. Her smile was ear to ear. "You are not."

Berry returned her grin. "And he even tried to sit on me once, after he caught me."

"He did not." She couldn't stop the laughter then. "But isn't there a serious matter between you?"

Berry looked at her. Where had she been all this time? And just like that, here she was on his property, eating lunch, with him. His heart was pounding away merrily and when he saw she was returning his frank stare, he felt the heat flood in his cheeks. "Very serious. A boundary issue we have to clear in court."

"Greg Thomas said something like that." She glanced down at her plate then at her glass of wine. She took a couple of sips.

"Goes way back and should never have come to this. At least I'll get through New Year before the ugly happens."

He noticed a moment or two of silence as she looked over his restaurant and out to the vines beyond.

"This is a great set up." She looked back at him. "I wonder why the Thomas's would want to try something so similar close by."

"Think they're in the Barossa or somewhere where there are loads of tourists wandering around." He looked at his own plate and decided to tuck in. He never got sick of the cray. Between mouthfuls he said, "It took a long time to build this up from twelve seats and a few small private functions for the district. We only run to capacity at this time of year. I keep it small. In the winter, we really scratch out a living."

Her gaze flicked from one of his eyes to the other. He felt the heat blooming again and this time it seemed to go way down to the crutch of his jeans.

She tucked a loose few strands of blonde hair behind her ear, went back to her food. "This is good. She's a good chef, that Heidi."

“She is, but she’s also good and pregnant and due to drop any tick, which brings me back to what we touched on in the pub.”

When she looked at him this time, there was a smile on her lips, inviting and interested. “You’re buying the pub and replacing Alan and the glasses.”

He sat back in his seat. “Not quite. I’ll need a chef here very soon, and I should have done something about it long before now.” He picked up his glass of red. “There’s a job going if you want it, here at Berry’s. A formal offer.”

“You haven’t asked for any references. Maybe I can’t boil water.”

“Then show me. Don’t get on the bus. Start with Heidi tomorrow night. She can show you the ropes and away you go.”

“All right. Sounds good.” She hesitated, then, “Was that an interview?”

“Yup. And you’re hired.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Things might be all right after all. She had a job again, she had somewhere to stay and, according to Heidi, she would be working for the greatest man on earth. Except for, of course, Heidi's husband, the father of her baby.

Berry had excused himself after lunch. He said he had to go and check the ponds, something about paddlewheels which left Clancy wondering. He headed in the direction of the house first.

Heidi stood at the sink, her head of reds curls bouncing up and down as she spoke. "Your job for tomorrow night is to make a killer dessert. Anyone can dress a cray, but you have to do a great dessert." She stacked the dishwasher and pushed the start button. "And a clue, it's Berry's favourite course. Another clue – he has a very good palate, loves subtle flavours and we try to use only seasonal fruits and so on." She dried her hands on a paper towel pulled from a dispenser. "Ideas?" She straightened up, a hand on her back at her hip and stretched. With the back of her other hand, she patted perspiration from her forehead.

"Maybe. I'll work on it."

"Good. Check the coolroom for whatever you need, and the dry store's in there." Heidi pointed to a pair of swing doors next to the coolroom. "So. You tried working for the Thomas's."

Clancy headed for the pantry. "Nearly. I arrived, found there wasn't a restaurant, or a place for me to stay other than their house, got creeped out by Greg Thomas and decided to leave." Inside she eyed the shelves with a sort of sinful glee. "Then when they got bad news this morning, it went pear-shaped very quickly." She moved further into the space, marveling at its orderliness.

"Greg can be a bit strange."

"Not to mention Mac."

"True, but he's all bluster. Greg can be downright weird. It's a crime he's so good-looking, can throw you a curly one for a while. Trust me, I know."

Clancy came out of the room feeling eager to start work. She glanced at Heidi whose intent gaze on her was curious. "It felt very strange right from the start."

"Good thing you met Berry at the pub."

Clancy had related their meeting to Heidi when she first poked her head into the restaurant kitchen earlier that day.

"What were you doing before?" Then Heidi let out a whoosh. "Little bugger just kicked me." She placed a hand on her big belly.

"You okay?" Clancy decided she didn't look okay. Oh no...

"Yes. Just sometimes gets me right there, you know? I'll sit for a bit." Clancy fussed for a moment then when it was clear Heidi was taking a breather and not about to deliver a ten pounder on the spot, she left her and wandered into the main room.

What was I doing before? Running my dad's restaurant until he and the new stepmother thought they could do better.

Fine.

Breaking it off with Pete before she broke something over his head.

Fine.

All behind her now. New life starting today.

Very fine.

She stood at the western edge of the restaurant and through large expanses of window stared out over the rows of vines before her. Across to the left, hedges of rosemary and lavender bordered a small veggie garden encased in chicken wire to prevent wildlife getting in and munching on the delicacies.

Heaven would be like this.

Masses of brilliantly coloured geraniums guided a walkway up the slope. Her sweep of the place stopped at Berry's house, a long low mud-brick bungalow sat amidst scrubby gums. She watched as he came outside and strode back towards the restaurant, carrying what appeared to be a heap of linen. His dog trotted alongside.

The little flip-flop of something inside quickened as he got closer.

Clancy didn't stop staring until he was out of sight. When she turned back, Heidi was watching her.

"He's candy all right, even if he is an old guy." Heidi was grinning widely. "Oh hey, and you're blushing."

Clancy tucked her chin to her chest and began to make her way out of the restaurant. "He's the boss. And he's got an armful of gear for my sleep-out. I was just checking to see where—"

"Well, don't be too long." Heidi wagged her finger as Clancy walked past.

Berry was backing into the bedsit with linen loaded high in his arms. "I couldn't remember what was what so I brought the lot. Or nearly." He turned inside and dumped it on the bed. His nose crinkled. "But I think it might need to go through the wash first. It's clean, but been locked in a cupboard for a while. There's a washing machine around the side."

"Fine. I'll do that."

"Clothes line there, too."

"Okay. Thanks."

"Should dry all right today."

"Yes."

"Pillows." He looked at her. "One or two?"

"Two's good."

"I'll be right back."

Clancy poked her head out the door and watched as he paced up to the house again, the dog still trailing. Berry's back was straight, broad where it was meant to be and narrowed to hips and backside, which filled his jeans exactly right. The dark salt-n-pepper hair was short and tousled, as if hands had gone through it to make it look artfully just-been-ravished. Oh.

It was a very funny feeling she was feeling, but good... new and fresh and good, something she hadn't felt in a long time. Something she thought she would never feel again. So, she would be careful with it. Not fan the tiny flame into a wildfire and forget all about her sanity in the self-inflicted frenzy.

Thoughts create feelings, Clancy.

She turned back inside the bedsit and decided to check it out properly. She started with its little cupboard on the back wall. Nothing there except a couple of bent up

coat-hangers. As she peered over the top shelf, she could see a dog-eared manila folder way back. She stood on her tiptoes about to grasp it when she heard a vehicle pull up. Instead of grabbing the file, she went to the open doorway to check who'd arrived.

Not that she'd know anyone except the neighbours and she certainly hoped it wasn't either of them.

A woman jumped out of the driver's seat, slammed the door and headed straight for the restaurant.

Clancy caught movement from Berry's house and looked up the slope. He was returning with pillows. When he saw the visitor, he stepped up the pace and headed into the restaurant, too.

Well, follow that man with the pillows.

As she entered the restaurant, Berry stood, still with an armful of pillows, listening intently to the woman.

"Apparently, a massive heart attack after that woman just left them in the lurch." The woman speaking was an older version of Heidi sans the pregnant belly and the short curly hair. Hers was a mass of long, tight strawberry blonde coils like a subject in a Botticelli painting.

Heidi had seen Clancy. "Mum."

"First told them she wouldn't cook the way they'd asked her then fed them lamb with rice – you know Mac hates rice. She barely put enough on Greg's plate but Mac couldn't even eat his, it was so rare. Then she upped and left the kitchen in a god-awful mess, goes and sleeps in a bedroom in the house because the cabin wasn't good enough for her and then had the audacity to accuse Greg of stalking her when she bumped into him coming out of the bathroom."

Clancy hadn't heard right.

Berry swiveled a one-eighty with the pillows and his stare locked on Clancy's.

Heidi tried again. "Mum."

"Honest to God, I know there's no love lost here, but you'd think the man's health would be—"

“Mum!”

Berry handed the pillows over to Clancy and said to her, “Would you excuse us for a sec – I’ll come see you shortly.”

Clancy took the pillows dumbly. She stepped back a pace when Marlie swung around to face her. She turned and left the restaurant on wobbly legs but stood just beyond the door, out of their sight, to hear what else was coming.

“Was that her?” Marlie asked of someone. “Greg told me she’d come here. He was going to warn you, but I suppose with the trouble, he didn’t know his advice would be welcome.”

Clancy heard Berry’s, “You’re joking.”

“Mum, you know perfectly well, Mac could have had a heart attack at any time, and as for Greg—”

“Not ten minutes after she skipped out, Greg was calling the ambulance. It was all her fault. He was so angry. Mac nearly died on the way in to Regency—”

Clancy had heard all she wanted to. She stalked back to the bedsit and threw the pillows on to the bare bed, paced a while wondering what her next move would be.

Of all the bastard tricks to pull. How neatly Greg Thomas had landed her in it. How easily damning words had shot out of that woman’s mouth.

How could something like this be happening again? Bad enough her stepmother concocting stories, but a dead stranger? This was unbelievable.

She was staring at her bags – the dumb things – still propped against the wall, still unpacked and where she’d left them earlier that day.

Looks like she wouldn’t be unpacking here after all. Now what?

Now what? No one else to email for help.

A shadow in the doorway startled her.

Berry.

“That was Marlie McEwen, Heidi’s mum. I think you worked that out.” He spread his hands. “She thinks Mac is still hers to look out for. The old bastard treats her like dirt.”

Clancy didn't bother with the niceties. "None of it happened like that."

"Mac has gone off to Regency Hospital and sounds like they'll be airlifting him to Adelaide."

Clancy tried to follow his lead. Calmly. "He'd had a pretty big shock. He didn't look well just before I left."

Berry looked at his hands and dropped them to his sides. "Marlie doesn't know anything about a truck loaded with a restaurant fit-out."

The air stilled between them.

Chilled was more like it. "The Thomas's both told me about the truck yesterday. And this morning Greg came to tell me it had tipped over at Yankalilla, never made it to the ferry."

"Greg's told her you decided that here would be a better place to work."

She shook her head, lifted her hands palm up. "What do I say? It didn't happen like that. None of it."

Berry leaned against the doorjamb. "Look, just relax, camp the night here, and we'll talk things through tomorrow."

"What do you mean?"

"We'll get it squared away and move on."

"It is squared away. Nothing like what she said happened."

"I've got some stuff I need to do at the ponds, won't be back for a while." He straightened, rolled his shoulders. "I'll see you tomorrow." And he walked away.

Clancy sank on to the bare bed. God, the more she protested her innocence, the more it sounded like she was covering up. What a slimeball Greg was.

Surely no one could believe the crap he told Marlie McEwen.

She lay down and was counting the ceiling tiles when she heard voices at the car outside her room. Heidi was saying goodbye to her mother, yes, she was fine.

Marlie spoke too quietly for Clancy to hear her reply, but the car door opened, closed and moments later the engine fired and the vehicle backed out of the driveway.

She heard the crunch of footsteps on gravel, then a knock on her door. Heidi poked her head in. "Sorry about that."

Clancy sat up. "What can I say?"

"No need to say anything to me. I have arguments with Mum over the Thomas's all the time. Greg and I have history. Short thankfully, and not pleasant. Mum never got it then, either."

"I don't think I have a job."

Heidi snorted and eased herself down on the bed beside Clancy. "Don't think like that." She nudged Clancy's shoulder with her own. "I really have to show you the ropes, so unless you've pinched Berry's dog, don't worry about not having your job."

Clancy's gaze drifted across to her bags. "No chance you could run me to the bus?"

"No chance. That sounded pretty half-hearted to me and besides, I think Berry would draw and quarter me. I don't know you from a bar of soap, but I can tell you like it here."

"Mud sticks."

"Not Greg's sort of mud. And certainly not with Berry." Heidi gave a little wince. "Help me get up, would you? Got to keep moving."

Clancy stood, Heidi hauled herself up. "How far—?"

"About five weeks to go. Should have stopped work a couple of weeks back." She stretched. "Don't worry about what Mum said. She'll cool off when the old bastard survives to give her shit again. Now, let's go over a few things more then I'm going to go home before I can't get behind the wheel. I feel like I'm growing by the minute."

Clancy stopped. "You don't think it could come early? Like tonight?"

Heidi pulled a face. "Don't reckon. But if it does, you just do what you can. You're a chef. You'll be fine. Come on." Her hand under her belly, she headed off talking to her unborn baby.

Clancy stood by the door a little while weighing her choices. There wasn't a choice, really. Short of stealing Berry's car she couldn't get off the property.

Well, only one thing to do. Get into that kitchen and cook. After all, there was a killer dessert to create.

Operation Dessert Storm.

And she had just the one for the job.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Berry was at the ponds checking the pumps, the fuel levels and the nets covering each marron pond. Now nearing sundown, he and Rommy decided it was time to head back home.

Fucking Greg Thomas. How many times had that screwed up little bastard conned someone into his sick little web?

And Marlie should know better by now.

He jumped back in the ute. Rommy sat up in the passenger seat and they headed back.

Clancy had looked funny, as though stricken when he'd come to tell her what Marlie had reported. What was that about? He'd never believed a word about anything Greg Thomas was up to, didn't expect anyone else to be bothered by him either.

He'd thought better of going to her when she was protesting the accusation. No point muddying the waters. Better to let everything calm down.

Tomorrow would look better for everyone and things would settle down. The Greg Thomas factor would have lost its heat. There'd be nothing to worry about.

He parked at the house and went inside, Rommy following. He could see a light on in the restaurant but no light on at the bedsit.

Heidi must be going over a few things with Clancy. That was a good sign. Seems those two got along okay. Maybe not a crisis after all; no thanks to his prick of a neighbour.

He opened a beer, and walked out on to the verandah. Rommy nudged his food bowl so Berry lifted the lid on the barrel of dog nuts, grabbed a couple of handfuls and dropped them into the dog's bowl.

Berry settled on the settee, his booted feet landed on the upturned half wine barrel. He listened as Rommy crunched his dinner down. A man could do with some food too, he thought and idled around the idea of heading towards the restaurant.

Too obvious, peanut.

He'd go down later, after Heidi left. That shouldn't be too long; she could hardly stand up much after eight in the evening these days and it would mean Clancy had left the kitchen as well. He'd grab one of the staff meals Heidi always had packed and ready, a chicken thing or a beef thing and head back up to the house.

He leaned back in his seat. The beer was heading south really well.

He'd let it do its trick then he'd haul himself into the shower.

Fifteen minutes later, Rommy followed him back inside, sat at the bathroom door while Berry got himself wet and soapy. Rommy didn't like that room particularly much; he'd also get wet and soapy in there from time to time and it was never much fun. No need to go right inside in case he was told to step in with the boss.

Dressed, except for boots, and back in the kitchen, Berry could see the light still on in the restaurant.

"Heidi must be really getting stuck into the handover, Roms." He hoped they wouldn't be too much longer and his stomach growled on cue.

He went to the dining table, flicked on the laptop and opened his emails. He checked a few orders, answered a few queries and entered a couple of restaurant bookings. These few days before Christmas were filling up nicely, and now even after Christmas and into January. At last the stress of previous years might be lifting; the place was well deserving of its good name and the bookings were proof.

And further up the email list, there was Clancy's email. He hadn't deleted it. He clearly remembered the thud in his chest when he'd opened his emails the day before and saw she'd contacted him. He almost leapt on the spot to help her out.

Something about her grabbed him, and he could feel it growing by the minute. But if she was working here with him and staying on the property, he would have to step carefully. Things could get messy.

Things could get bloody fantastic.

Better not to rush it. He didn't need hassles in that direction at all. He wondered what she'd look like working in this kitchen here. Her fair head of hair would be bobbing up and down as she sautéed, stirring with a big wooden spoon, or whisking eggs for an omelette for breakfast.

Other things would be shaking and bobbing along with the rhythm. He thought a bit more about that. Thought about what might have occurred before that omelette breakfast.

Or maybe, better still, she'd watch him work in the kitchen, her chin cupped in her hand as she sat at the table waiting to be served dinner the night before...

Or she would have her elegant hands around a wine bowl and a deep, rich berry-flavoured shiraz would be warming in her palms. Her brown-eyed gaze would be on him the whole time and then when he served dinner—

Dinner. Food.

What were those two doing down there? Once he realised the light was still on he glanced at the clock. Eight pm. Heidi was usually well gone by now on no-trade days.

“Rommy, stop being a chicken. A man's got to eat.” He pulled on his boots. “Let's go.”

CHAPTER NINE

Clancy stood in the coolroom. They'd easily need another couple of hours before they'd be ready to turn out. But she didn't have to do that tonight.

And they did look gorgeous. Three loaf trays of her special lemon yoghurt panna cotta. Not to be taken lightly.

Three trays ought to be enough for service tomorrow night, and perhaps the following night as well if it wasn't as popular as she expected it would be.

And they looked about the best she'd ever done.

She checked the berry compote, careful not to disturb it too much. It needed to draw a bit more in its own juices before she could add fresh fruit and slide it spoonfuls over the thick slices of the dessert.

A little garnish of lemon myrtle liqueur (apparently from the distillery down the road, according to Heidi) to add zing, a dollop of cream and—

“Whatever's in there, it must be pretty good.”

Clancy jumped and the coolroom door slammed shut as she spun around.

“You're looking at it as if you could love it.” Berry stood with his hands thrust in his pockets.

Her hand went to her throat as she took a breath. “Berry. Crept up on me.”

“You were engrossed.”

“It's my dessert for tomorrow night. Heidi wanted me to come up with something special.”

“What is it?” He opened the coolroom door and peered in. “Wow. Panna cotta?”

“Yes. My own recipe.”

“Can't wait.” He looked around inside the coolroom. “And what else have you been doing?” There were shelves of Heidi's handy work, her house-made sauces and savoury marmalades, which he skimmed over.

But a section of shelf caught his eye. He didn't recognise the work.

Clancy stepped in behind him. "I looked at Heidi's menus and thought a marron mousse might be something different as a starter, or maybe as a teaser." She moved past him and lifted a linen cloth. "And I found some chicken livers and the wattle-seed and I thought a pâté might work as well. You know, coming up Christmas." She looked back at him. "Not that there's anything missing from Heidi's menus. She asked me to add a few bits..."

"Where is Heidi?"

"She left hours ago." Clancy was getting cold in the room so she brushed past him on her way out. He followed and closed the door.

She went back to the prep bench and lifted a cloth there as well. "I've got savoury breads rising and as soon as they're ready I can bake them and freeze—" She looked up. "Is something wrong?" Clancy had hardly noticed the time disappearing. She just wanted to keep cooking until her nerves settled and her thoughts were ordered.

"Not a thing. I just came down looking for a feed for dinner. I thought Heidi must still have been here showing you around."

Clancy checked over the dough rising obediently under the linen. "You want me to cook something?"

"No, I didn't mean that. Heidi usually has staff meals frozen. I was going to grab one of those." He stared at her.

"You want me to—?"

"I'll get them." He still had his hands in his pockets as he turned away, then back again. "Have you eaten? I'll grab two packs and we can sit here if you like."

"Great." She'd just about finished clearing everything away so she shook a few stainless bowls free of rinse water and stacked them on shelves above the sink.

Berry had his head in the freezer. "A chicken thingy or a beef thingy?"

"Beef, thanks."

He came back with two deep square boxes each labelled 'Beef Thingy' and headed for the microwave. "Your shout for the red."

Clancy poured two glasses from the bar and brought them back to the kitchen bench. Found the kitchen cutlery and two simple plates. She dragged two bar stools over and sat waiting for the microwave to ding.

This felt extremely weird, as if something great was happening but all in slow motion, something she couldn't grasp and hold on to. Not even three days in the Row Hill area, hardly a full day in Berry's company and the very thing she was wary of was happening.

As soon as the aroma from the microwave hit her, her stomach rumbled. For a moment, she couldn't remember if she'd had lunch then recalled very clearly she'd eaten with Berry. And now dinner as well. Hopefully this meal wouldn't end the way lunch had.

He lifted the lids and Clancy almost saw the curl of flavour waft across to her. Chilli and spice and something sweet tucked in behind it. He turned the first bowl out and Clancy could see fluffy white rice as well.

He turned out the second bowl, and carried them both to the bench.

"Bon appétit."

Rommy made a noise in the doorway and Berry dug in his pocket for a biscuit and slid it across the floor to him.

They all dug in. "Heard from home?"

Clancy looked up, startled.

"I reckon you came from somewhere only a few days ago. Haven't heard you mention a thing, but there must be a story." The intense green-eyed stare was back.

She forked a little rice through the meat and spices. "Not a good one. I'd been running my family's restaurant in Magill, *Jones and Jones Restaurant*. Dad decided the new wife could do it better." She ate a mouthful, nodded her appreciation. Then, "As I didn't agree, I marched. Though Dad would say I got my marching orders."

"So, I might not have got a reference after all."

Clancy sipped the wine. "I must sound as if I'm trouble wherever I go."

"I don't take any notice of Greg Thomas. Or Marlie, poor woman. Her perspective is distorted. And I don't have to know what happened at your place, unless you want to say."

“Thanks.” Clancy gave a quick smile. “And no, haven’t heard from home. I might next week when Dad wants to forget what happened. I don’t think the new bride is quite up to a full-on restaurant just yet.”

“Dads, huh? Mine was a doozy, but he did it tough all his life. Never knew anything but hard work and hard living. All this was his place before I got it, back in the days when the succession laws were simple.” Berry ate steadily, rested his fork to take a swallow of wine. “This is a good Beef Thingy. She never does it the same way twice.”

“You’re going to miss her when she goes.”

“I will. She’ll be back, but out of the scene a while.”

When Clancy saw him look at her from under his brows, it wasn’t only the chilli creating some heat. “She’s very good at her job.” Clancy knew he couldn’t see her face redden.

“I reckon you are, too.” He sat back a minute. “I happen to like my lamb fillet medium rare, unlike MacThomas. Best way to have it.”

Her gaze met his, the green eyes lively. Her heart did a little skip and a jump. She concentrated on the Beef Thingy and a moment or two passed in silence. Then, “It’s hard to beat a slow roasted lamb shoulder with rosemary and wild garlic, and a herby parmesan crust.”

A beat. “That is very true.” He leaned on his elbows. “So what has our Heidi got you doing tomorrow?”

“I’ll work with her all day. She wanted me to prepare a few bits.” She waved her hand back at the coolroom. “And so we’ll get something together for tomorrow night’s service.”

“Will that dessert be ready?” He thumbed over his shoulder to the coolroom.

She nodded, finishing up her meal. Her glass was nearly empty but she pushed it away. Too dangerous to be sitting here with the boss drinking the smoothest, palate-pleasing sensuous red she’d had in years. All she needed was a dark chocolate torte, a dollop of thick Australis Island cream, and heaven would be at her feet.

Or more trouble.

“Think you should save me some. Am a bit partial to desserts.” Berry ate his last mouthful, swiped the serviette over his mouth and took another swallow of the big

red. "You know what? I might walk you back to your place and head off home with Rommy. Will be a big day tomorrow."

Clancy reached across and took his plate. "Right. I'll just get all this cleared away..."

They both tidied up. Berry ran through the lock-up procedure, the lights, and the key lock combination. Rommy watched beside him.

Outside, she couldn't see a thing. "Lucky there's a moon rising." Clancy looked into the night sky. "It's pitch black out here." She stood by the back door as he shut the place.

"Come on, I know my way around backwards."

He took her hand as naturally as if he'd been doing it for years.

Of course she knew it was because she'd break her nose on something if he didn't. It was a hand-hold, and it was guiding her, not grasping her, nor tugging, nor being cute or overly friendly.

It was just a hand-hold.

"Here you go," he said and opened a door with his other hand, flipped on the light switch in the bedsit.

They both stared at the pile of smelly linen on the unmade bed. Faint wafts of it had settled throughout the room.

Neither made any attempt to drop the others' hand. "Not looking good," he said still staring at the bed. "I forgot about it."

Hands dropped.

"Me, too." Clancy walked into the room. "Doesn't matter. You said it was clean, it's just cupboard-musty."

Berry walked in behind her. "I'll look again. There must be something at the house. I didn't think it was this bad."

"Don't bother. I can crawl on top of it and—" She waved her hands around.

"Won't hear of it. I'll only be a few minutes." He turned to face her, hesitating. Rommy came and sat beside her, looking up. "Truth is, I don't want to..."

“What?”

“...leave.” Berry looked down at his hands. “I mean, I’ll leave, I mean I’d rather not leave you here. There’s no key in your door. I’m sure it’s at the house.”

Rommy kept looking up at her.

“Oh.” Clancy shrugged a little at that. Did anyone have keys in their doors out here? “I’ll come up to the house with you. Find some linen. And you know, when we come back if you want we could sample that panna cotta tonight.” Clancy darted across to one of her bags and pulled out a lightweight jacket.

“Great idea.” He got to the doorway just ahead of her. “Leave the light on, the screen keeps the mozzies out.”

Rommy took off ahead of them.

When Clancy left the bedsit and Berry’s hand found hers again, she pretended she hadn’t noticed. Berry seemed to be acting the same.

His hand was warm, and big, and dry and strong and... He leaned across, gently holding her arm close and let his lips brush her cheek.

She smiled, but didn’t turn to face him. She looked out into the dark night, holding her breath.

They sauntered on up the slope to Berry’s house. The moon was climbing in the sky and its light was just enough to show her the pathway. Berry’s unerring stride indicated how well he knew the way.

His hand had tightened on hers.

Conversation was light, about nothing much. It seemed to Clancy to be flowing easily enough but about what, she couldn’t remember. A couple of times their shoulders bumped.

A couple of times her head cleared. This was dangerous territory.

Delicious territory.

By the time they got to the house, Rommy was spinning round and round inside. He seemed pretty happy about something.

The lights flicked on and Clancy found herself in an immense kitchen with gardenia-white cupboards, a huge island bench with a sink in it and a polished deep

mahogany timber top. She looked across at a solid timber table made with great beams which would have taken several very fit men to move.

She wanted to run her hands over every surface. She spun around to eye the oven, and the expanse of cooktop which mimicked the one in the restaurant, though not as big. "You use this kitchen much?"

"Me? No." Berry was alongside her, leaning back on the island bench and staring at the oven, too. "I built it so I could have friends stay with me when I take a break from the restaurant. Doesn't happen often."

"It's beautiful." She turned back again to survey the rest of the place. Her gaze swept over a large antique sideboard, and the many family photos in frames which sat upon it. She walked over. "There are a lot of people here."

He came to stand behind her. "There were four brothers who settled here back in 1920, and they're the patriarchs. The families still mostly have connections on Australis. I've got a brother, Flynn, he's a stonemason here. Riley is my sister and she comes back and forth, and I have a cousin, Joseph, who lives here on the north coast. He's a grandkid of those two." His finger moved to the right. "And this one's my great grandfather, Phillipe." He pointed to a formidable looking man.

"And which lady is great-grandma?"

"She's the regal one third from the left. Esther Beresford."

"She is that." Clancy peered in and focused on a slim dark-haired woman whose striking features would have attracted many a suitor of the day. Or, any day. Classical beauty. She knew Berry was close, caught his scent as if his personal warmth had a signature.

Berry's hand came over her shoulder and he pointed at another photo, and a stern looking character seated beside a woman. "That's Phillipe there with his second wife. We don't have any pictures of him with Esther. The second wife is Greg's great-grandmother."

"Did Esther die young?" Clancy felt a thrumming on her back. Berry's heart must be pumping as loudly as hers and it vibrated between them. She breathed in and out deliberately slowly, otherwise she was sure she'd lean back on him and the moment would be spoiled.

“In her thirties. My grandmother was only a young child, six or seven. She found the photo not long after Esther died and she hid it away. It’s the only reason we have it. After Phillipe remarried there were other kids, other priorities for him and the new wife.”

He stood closer, but his hand retreated. Clancy turned around and stood just under his chin. She could see the beard stubble, imagine its coarseness under her fingers. Over her body and down...

His hand slid down her arm.

Moments stilled and the heat hummed between them, tangible and connected. She didn’t want to move, either to break the spell or to act upon it. But as she looked up the green eyes roved over her face and she had to ask, “Is this a good idea?”

Berry shook his head once as his hand found hers. “No.” He stared down at her. “Best I get the stuff for your bed.”

Clancy dropped her gaze to where his T-shirt showed under his shirt. A pulse at his throat was pumping strongly. “Right.”

Don’t make a mistake here, Clancy. Step away from the man. Get the bedding and run. Run.

She smiled at him. “Right,” she repeated and let her hand gently disengage his. “Point me in the right direction of some fresh linen and I’ll follow the path back to my room.”

Berry turned and disappeared for some moments. Clancy took a deep breath and tried to figure the next best step she could take. Be calm and rational and together; or be herself and leap on him with a frightening fervour.

Be calm and rational.

He returned with two folds of linen, and his nose screwed up.

“There’s only one thing to do.” He unfolded them in front of her. “I’m going to load them in the machine and toss them in the dryer here and in about an hour they’ll be fresh. Okay?”

Reprieve.

“Okay. Sounds good.”

"So, stay here, pour some drinks. I'll put the load on and be back."

They were grown-ups, right? They should be able to sit on the settee and bump shoulders, nudge knees and press hands. Or they should be able to stand by the fridge together and laugh at dumb jokes and brush locks of hair from the other's eyes without feeling there was anything untoward going on.

They should be able to open another bottle of wine because the first one was consumed without either of them noticing.

They should be able to go together to the laundry and gaze at the whitegoods doing what they're supposed to do and return to the settee content the linen would be dry in a very short space of time.

Each time she chanced a look at Berry he was doing the same at her.

Then they'd grin, hold hands again, chat about nothing and stare out of the windows into the darkened night.

She felt like it was a tempest being held in a teapot, and she didn't want to be the one who lifted the lid and let it out. It might be something she couldn't control.

At the same time they heard the alarm go off on the dryer, they both saw the bob and dim of car lights coming onto Berry's property.

He glanced at his watch. Nine-twenty. "Who—?"

"Won't be for me, that's for sure," Clancy said and hoped she hadn't sounded fuzzy. His wine was delicious, so easy to drink but she was sure it had a big impact on her sobriety. Still, she felt nice. Nice, nice, nice. Not drunk as a monkey. "I'll get the linen."

By the time she returned with the warm sheets folded in her arms, Berry was nowhere to be seen. Neither was Rommy, nor the lights of the car. The other thing she couldn't see was the light in her bedsit that they had clearly been able to see from Berry's lounge.

Odd.

Now clouds covered the moon and the light completely gone, she was not going to attempt to find the path and head down to her bed. She'd wait for Berry.

She'd find coffee and brew a pot. Maybe he had some cheeses stashed in the fridge and she'd find some crackers in the panty, some olives, some figs somewhere perhaps...

She had her head in the near empty fridge when Berry and Rommy walked back into the house.

Berry dropped her handbag just inside the door. "It was Greg Thomas."

Clancy straightened. "What?"

"Greg. Seems he came to find you, to talk some sense into you and get you to return to their place." Berry stood by the long timber bench. "Looked like he'd been drinking pretty hard, on or off his medication – I don't know which – then he took an almighty swing at me and passed out," he said and spread his hands, "on top of the musty sheets in your bedsit."

Clancy stared at him.

"I'm going to get the car, go down and pick up the rest of your stuff while he's out like a light. I'll be back in ten." And he left again.

Clancy stared after him, aware she could possibly resemble a gaping fish. She turned around in the kitchen, not able to concentrate on the coffee, or getting together a plate of something for a supper. She was aghast Greg Thomas had driven on to Berry's property in search of her.

This was becoming more than weird.

Berry returned with the wheelie bag and with complaints about its weight, her backpack and the laptop. "I took his car keys and hopefully he'll sleep till morning. If he's not good by then, I'll call an ambulance."

"I'm... I'm dumbfounded."

Berry nodded. "I'm guessing without Mac at home he got a little spooked. He's not great on his own at the best of times." He glanced at the attempts at coffee and supper. "Sorry there's not much in the house. I could go back down to the restaurant and grab a few things."

Clancy shook her head, dazed. "But Greg?"

“He’s got a few problems. He can sleep this lot off.” Berry looked at her. “No question now of you going back there. I’ll do up the spare bed and camp in the office.” He held up a hand. “No arguments. Now,” he said, smiling his Berry smile. “Orders from the restaurant? There’s certainly nothing in my fridge here.”

“Can I come, too?”

Berry, Clancy and Rommy trooped back into the restaurant’s coolroom and raided Heidi’s stash of cheeses, olives and some of Clancy’s pâté, then from the pantry a mix of crackers. As they loaded a small box, Berry stepped back into the coolroom and returned with a tray of her dessert.

“Quality assurance,” he said and placed the tray gently on top of the rest of the goodies. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER TEN

“Moonlight’s back.”

“Must be getting late.”

Berry leaned across her to shed some light on his watch from outside. “Nearly one in the morning. Way past my bedtime.”

“Mine too.” Clancy was preparing to leap into the spare room ahead of him and not make a fuss of who went where.

“You wait here, I’ll strip my bed stuff and throw it over the stretcher in the office and you can make up my bed with the clean stuff.”

“No, it’s okay, I’ll take the stretcher in the office—”

“It’s easier with the en suite for you. You won’t know you’re way around—”

“I’ll sleep like a log, I’m sure—”

Berry held up his hands. “What am I saying? We haven’t checked your dessert yet.” He headed to the kitchen neatly avoiding the pile of very clean linen at the foot of the settee.

Clancy burst out laughing. “You want to eat it now?”

“Why not now? If it’s what I think it is, it’ll slide down the hatch beautifully.” He brought back the whole tray, a cake slide, a couple of flat plates and two forks. “You serve. I don’t think I can contain the excitement.”

Still laughing, Clancy sliced thick, wobbly lemon yoghurt terrine on to the plates and together, staring one at the other, they tasted their first mouthfuls.

Berry closed his eyes. “I’m savouring those tingles on my tongue.”

“It is a good one, even if I do say so myself.”

“And it’s naked—”

“We forgot the fruit sauce—”

“But it’s not needed.”

“No.”

Berry set his plate down. "I'm going to have more in a moment." He gently took her plate. "But now, I'm going to have some of you, right here. I don't care how stupid it might seem tomorrow morning." He took the fork from her hand and set it on her plate. He cupped a hand behind her head and kissed her mouth.

She tasted her dessert and his wine on his lips, felt the rasp of his chin on hers. Resisted only a little as he drew her closer. Against all her—

Rommy jumped on the settee with them.

"Get off!"

Rommy jumped off the settee.

Berry took her face in his hands and kissed her eyes, her nose, her mouth again. "I'm feeling pretty happy with myself." He let her go, sat back to look at her.

"Me too, but that could be the bottle of wine I've consumed."

"Could be. More dessert?"

"Not yet." Clancy leaned forward, took his face in her hands and landed especially soft kisses on his mouth, then sat back to look at him.

He placed her glass of wine in her hand and picked up his own, sipped and looked at her over the rim. "Broke the ice, I think."

Clancy loved the hum in his voice, the vibration it set off between them. She smiled, unnerved for a moment, unsure where to go from here. "Without mistletoe," was all she could think of to say.

"Not a Christmas man." He hadn't taken his eyes off her.

She floundered a beat. "Heidi told me you have a frantic few days before you close and—"

"And I'm glad you'll be on board to help. She goes on leave around the same time we go to court, so..." He twirled the stem of the glass in his fingers. "I hope—" He waved his other hand back and forth between them.

"Oh no. I'm good. It's been great. Everything's fine. And thanks again for the rescue." *Let's shut it down before things get out of control. I get it. Well, good. I can be the grown-up too.*

Damn it.

She stood up. So did he. And Rommy.

“I meant I hope you’ll stay on here and that we can do this some more.” He waved his hand again, this time in no particular direction. “If you would like to.”

“I wouldn’t like to mess things up.”

He ran his hand down her arm again as if he loved the feel of her skin under his fingertips. “If we’re sensible—”

“Then there’d be no reason—”

“—not to go there.” He stood closer.

“True. If we’re sensible—”

“And stop mucking around like two kids—”

“I don’t want to scare you off.”

“Likewise.” And he kissed her again, hard, his hands on her shoulders. “Are we going to make that bed?”

“You think we can make the bed?” She stepped into his arms and pushed her fingers through his hair, her gaze roving over his face.

“Nah.”

Their bodies close, the rush and tingle of heat coursed through her. He lifted her on to the settee so she stood over him, and pulled her shirt out from her jeans, pushed his hands up over bare skin. The rough palms sent feathery waves of pleasure over her ribs and deep whirls of warmth into her belly.

Her hands slid from his shoulders and unbuttoned his shirt. She flattened her hand on the old T-shirt stretched over his broad, lean chest, the hard contours fitting her palm. His heat buzzed through her.

Berry bunched her shirt under her breasts and kissed her stomach, dragging his bristly chin from side to side. Ripples and tingles and shivers sped all over her and when he gripped her jeans’ zipper, her legs wobbled.

“Not a good idea up here,” she breathed.

“You’re right,” he said into her chest. “I need you down here tucked in beside me.” He slid her on to the seat and climbed up beside her. “I got the zip down but you’ll

have to get out of them yourself.” His hand was low on her hips, nudging the jeans south. “Or lift your bum so I can pull them off.”

She lifted her hips and he knelt up, gripped the hem of her jeans and with a couple of tugs had them off and on the floor.

Rommy was very interested in all of this.

Clancy's knickers were askew, and as Berry's gaze rose from them to her face, she unclipped his belt, popped the top button and unzipped his fly. Her hand rested lightly over a growing bulge straining against the denim and when a low noise emitted from the back of his throat it pinged directly to the very base of her belly.

Her breath caught in her throat. Her mouth open a little, her gaze on his and it was all he needed. He stood, one foot on the settee, one foot off and with a little hop shucked his pants, threw them on the floor.

Rommy looked at the pants, and at Berry.

Berry knelt over her, slid her bra straps down until both breasts popped out under his face. He reached under her and opened the bra, pulling it out of his way.

She'd gripped his shirts and pulled both over his head before his mouth could descend. Then the delicious warmth of his chest on hers... his hips on hers... and his weight on top of her...

And then his mouth claimed one taut nipple—

The phone rang.

Berry hesitated. Groaned into her breast.

Clancy froze. “Oh no.”

He lifted his head and exhaled. “Yep.” He reached over and grabbed the handset on the coffee table. “And at one-thirty in the morning it isn't going to be good.”

She snuggled down as a chill descended, and waited, closing her eyes, reveling under the weight of him.

“Lockett.” He tucked the receiver under his ear, pulled the throw off the back of the settee and draped it over him. One handed, he gathered Clancy a bit closer. Then he stopped. “Marlie, it's one-thirty in the morning.” He listened a moment more.

Clancy could hear Marlie's voice but not what she was saying. “Don't panic, Marlie, he's here, so turn around and go back. He's sleeping off the cocktail he'd

given himself.” He shifted a little further over Clancy. “He drove over here, off his tree drunk and stoned and so I sent him to bed.” He tugged the blanket over a little more. “Well, why wouldn’t I? Can’t have him driving around out here in the state he was in.”

Clancy opened her eyes and looked at Berry as he moved off her to sit up. He tucked the blanket around her.

“No, turn around and go back to their place. No need to come over here... He’s perfectly safe sleeping it off in the... No, I have his keys. No need—Shit.” He looked down at Clancy, touched a finger to her lips. “Sorry. She’s hung up, is already in her car and heading over here. I’ll meet her down there.” He thumbed in the direction of the bedsit.

“Oh.” Clancy clasped the blanket to chest as she sat up. “Okay. I’ll um, just um...”

“Make up my room.”

“Okay.” Clancy felt the disappointment down to her toes. The moment was lost, or the many moments she thought there might have been, were lost. A creeping embarrassment brought a bloom to her cheeks and she was thankful the lamplight was soft. She shrugged back into her bra and top, pulled on her knickers and jeans.

Berry was pulling on his pants in silence.

Oh, this is no good, Clancy. It feels like we were caught out doing the naughty.

She bent and picked up the neat stack of clean linen. “Which way to your room?”

“First left. If you wouldn’t mind dumping my bed linen in the study – it’s further down, end of the hall.”

She nodded. She’d simply take the linen to the study, sleep on whatever was available in there and not disturb his room. There was no point taking up where they left off, the moment had well and truly fled. She’d make up her mind about the rest of the situation in the clear light of day, tomorrow.

“Clancy.”

She’d already turned for the hallway, but she looked back.

“It’ll be fine.” He smiled at her, a genuine, broad grin.

Rommy let out a series of barks just as she nodded again. Clancy felt anything but fine, especially as a car pulled up outside the house.

"Shit. Didn't think she was already on my place." Berry dragged his T-shirt over his head.

Marlie just marched right on in. She took one look at Berry settling into his clothes, then a look at Clancy with the sheets in her arms, and back again to Berry. Then spied all of Clancy's bags stacked by the kitchen bench.

She narrowed her eyes at Berry. "Where have you put Greg?"

"Nice to see you, too, Marlie. I told you it wasn't necessary to come."

"His father's sick with worry." She was glaring.

"Is Mac back home?"

"No. He's still in Regency Hospital. He couldn't get Greg on the phone, that's all, and he asked me—"

"At one thirty in the morning?"

Marlie set her jaw. "You know what they're like." She swung her glare at Clancy and back to Berry again. "So sorry to have interrupted. I'll take Greg back home. Which room is he in?"

"He isn't in the house. He's in the bedsit. And no, you won't go there and disturb him. You'll let him sleep it off."

Clancy glanced at Berry, who nodded, indicating she should go down the hall. She turned again and left the room.

She heard Marlie ask, "Why should you care?"

Berry's reply was muffled, spoken gently but firmly. Again Marlie spoke loudly. "And just why is he at the bedsit? That's where she was."

Clancy froze in the darkened hallway, sure Marlie had intended her to hear that.

Berry's voice was low again, and insistent.

"You can't call the police," Marlie wailed.

Again, Berry's voice was controlled but barely audible. Clancy made out "...drink driving, drugs..." and "danger to..." and "threatening..." before she found the door at the end of the hallway.

She searched for a light and flicked it on. Berry's office had the usual desk, chair and bookshelves, and a great chesterfield lounge which suddenly looked inviting and

cosy and just waiting for her. There was another throw rug folded on the seat and she thought she had all she needed. She didn't need a pillow, could manage without, she would sleep with her head on the arm.

With raised voices still coming from the kitchen, then a door slamming and the car starting up, she thought maybe Marlie had gone. But when she realised Berry was no longer in the house and she heard another vehicle start up and drive away she made her makeshift bed, shucked her jeans and wrapped herself in the light throw rug.

She sat up for a while, expecting to hear Berry back any minute, but sleep was beckoning. She'd had a big day.

As she slid horizontal on the settee she hoped she wouldn't snore after all the red wine she'd drunk.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was clearly early daylight, which by Clancy's calculations had to be about six o'clock, if not a bit later.

She added up on her fingers. Today would be the twenty-third of December. It flickered through her head her restaurant, Jones and Jones would be jumping by lunchtime today, catering to the groups for Christmas.

She hoped the pang she felt was hunger. She did not want to be missing Dad and the new bride on her home turf.

She sat up on the chesterfield, fully aware of where she was and easily remembering the events of the night before. But as she hadn't heard a thing after Marlie and Berry had left the house she had no idea what to expect next.

She groped around for her jeans and it was then she saw all her bags had been taken to the office, including her handbag. Berry must have brought them sometime in the night.

A quick dash to the loo, and checking the main bathroom was clear, she took a shower, using the fresh towels there. She dressed, spun her hair into a loose twist, pinned it and ventured into the kitchen.

The supper dishes from the night before had been cleared away, the dishwasher was humming and a new caterer's pack of rich espresso coffee sat on the sink alongside one of the restaurant's coffee plungers.

She checked the cupboards for the kettle and set about making coffee.

Berry came in through the side door carrying a bag which he set on the bench. "Morning." He took another two steps, gathered her into a quick hug and kissed her cheek.

Warmth trilled up and down her spine. "Morning." Clancy took in the crumpled clothes from last night and, his red-rimmed eyes. "So it was a late, late night?"

"It was three-thirty before I got back here. Marlie made a song and dance about taking Greg home, and when she couldn't wake him up she started to panic." He

brought his hands to his face and rubbed vigorously. "In the end I hoisted him into her car, told her to drive and I followed them back to the estate, hauled him into his own bed, the stupid bastard, and left Marlie there looking after him."

"You look done in."

"I am. And I'm looking forward to this breakfast." He reached into the bag and brought out eggs, bread and bacon. "Simple but effective." Clancy stood for a minute, uncertain. Then he said, "And you're going to cook it while I have a shower." And he was gone down the hallway.

Surreal. Some sort of dream weaving. She was in a man's kitchen, cooking his breakfast while he went off and had a shower. Maybe she'd slept through a couple of years last night.

But tired as he was, he looked good from the back, striding down the hall and disappearing into his bedroom.

Maybe he'd need his back scrubbed.

But he hadn't invited her so... She waited till he was back at the breakfast bench before cooking the eggs.

He cupped his hands around the freshly brewed mug of coffee and breathed in the aroma. "Not scared off?"

"I'm a bit bewildered by everything. It's been a strange few days." She cracked eggs into a pan, the instant sizzle a comfort. Eggs and bacon, simple but effective.

"Hope I can unbewilder you. They're just a strange, needy family."

Clancy served up, eggs from the pan, bacon from the oven and toast from under the grill. Butter, salt and pepper, Spring Gully Worcestershire sauce to finish, and breakfast was heaven on a plate. "Seems Marlie likes to get herself into the mix quite a bit."

"Not long back there was talk of Mac and Marlie getting married. I don't know what happened. Clearly Marlie hadn't called anything off. She's watched Greg grow up, feels maternal about him, I suppose." Berry tucked into breakfast. He chewed a few mouthfuls then said, "Heidi doesn't think a lot of Greg, but that hasn't stopped Marlie." Another few mouthfuls. "But wait, there's more."

Clancy had the feeling today would be a long day.

"While I was there last night, Marlie told me Mac had a firm group booking for his Christmas lunch, paid for in advance. So now there are at least forty-five people out there who don't know they haven't got a lunch to go to."

Clancy added a few things together. "And the advance payment has been spent."

"Correct." Berry kept eating.

"Tricky." Clancy waited. She couldn't work out where this was going, but she knew it would involve her somehow. "So, Marlie will have to contact everyone from the bookings and re-schedule..."

"She has other ideas." He scraped his plate, loaded the last of his bacon and eggs on to his fork and savoured the last mouthful. "She wants me... us, to do Christmas lunch for the forty-five."

At first Clancy thought it should have been easy. Berry's own restaurant wasn't scheduled to open on Christmas Day.

But why would he entertain ideas of rescuing his mortal enemy? The green eyes gazed at her. "I can see things ticking over in there."

"Not what you think." She vaguely remembered her idea for the verandah restaurant on Mac's estate, but dismissed it when she thought of the logistics. She finished her breakfast, poured another coffee for each of them. "The pub?"

"That would take more time than we have, even if everything worked down there, like the staff, for instance."

She smiled with him. "Can't see another way around it. Unless you're thinking of here on Christmas Day. Do you have staff?"

He shook his head. "No. There'd be a mutiny if I tried that one."

She sipped coffee. He wasn't coming forward with anything to work with. Clancy frowned. "I need more information."

Berry leaned back in his seat. "What could we do here to cater on the day, you and me, with no fuss?"

She put her cup down. "Seriously? By the twenty-fifth? There wouldn't be enough provisions here, and Mac hadn't even ordered anything..."

"Someone had. All the food's there in the house coolroom." He tucked his chin back and screwed up his features "All plain and nuthin' fancy'. I can't do the boss-

eye, though.” He sat forward. “We can be preparing in the kitchen here the next two nights. Heidi can take care of our customers with the staff, and you and I can be working alongside her. Marlie said Mac wanted pavs, roasted meats, veggies. Easy.”

Clancy stared. “Yes, easy. But you’re going to take him to court next month, why help him out now?”

“Oh, I’m no angel. If *Berry’s Vineyard Café* can supply a lunch for forty-five people who would otherwise be lunch-less, well, feather in my cap.”

“Not out of the kindness of your heart then.”

“Look, Mac’s not all bad. He’s just arrogant, loud. Has a sad son. And he’s in trouble.” Berry lifted his shoulders. “And next month is next month.”

“And the bill?”

“Marlie will have a refrigerated van to bring all Mac’s food here today. We’ll use Mac’s wines and beers, so there’ll only be your wages.” He gave a wry grin. “I’ll tack it on to my court claim.”

There wasn’t much she could say. Easy roast dinners for a small group wasn’t a problem. “And how do we get to these forty-five to notify them?”

He reached over and squeezed her hand. “That’s Marlie’s job.” He stood and cleared the table. “Let’s get to the restaurant.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Berry rang Heidi before her shift to say they'd be working in the kitchen but they'd try to stay out of the way as much as possible once she arrived.

Marlie had driven her vehicle into Regency, swapped it for a refrigerated van and was going backwards and forwards from Mac's loading and unloading food and drinks. Mac was not home yet and Greg was staying well out of the way – useless sod.

Clancy retrieved her bags, used Berry's vehicle to move everything back to the bedsit, and had unpacked a few things.

Neither had said anything to the other about her move back. And she hadn't thought twice about it.

She looked forward to unpacking everything. She took an hour off to hang a few clothes, find an iron to de-crinkle her chef's jacket and trousers, wash the resident doona and its cover, the bed linen and a few other bits and pieces using the restaurant's laundry around the corner from her room. It would all dry easily on a day like today, hot and dry with a balmy breeze.

And she made her bed as soon as the sheets were dry.

Clancy smiled to herself. She really had all she needed here. Somehow she felt she belonged. It was comfortable.

She set up her tiny reading lamp on the small bedside table, plugged in her phone to re-charge it and re-arranged the sparse furniture so it appeared cosy. She set her laptop on the small dining table, laid out her diary. She'd need to get a TV or something, but that would come. She had an iPod for music, and an e-book reader so she was fairly self-contained.

She'd just stacked the top shelf of the little cupboard with her recipe books and the tiny box of jewelry she had when Berry knocked on the door.

"Ready? I think Marlie's brought everything. If not, we'll wing it."

"Okay. I'm ready." Clancy walked with him into the restaurant. They only bumped shoulders a couple of times, and neither figured the other had noticed.

Marlie had yet to say a word to her.

Heidi was huffing and puffing when she came on duty that afternoon. She headed straight for the coolroom and picked up a tray of Clancy's panna cotta.

"I'm just tired, that's all and that mother of mine creates more work, or more trouble, I dunno which." She took a large spoon and scooped some yoghurt terrine into a small bowl. "I'm all ready for tonight, and the team is ready to go, so go for your lives back there." She waved at the kitchen benches and the coolroom. "All yours," she said to Clancy. "Make sure you run your kitchen-hand hard, he can be a slacker." She took her apron off the hook and wrapped it around her big belly, then spooned a mouthful of dessert. "And leave me some of this dessert. It's a winner."

Clancy baked more bread, prepared more pâté, chopped vegetables until her hands were aching. She prepared meats and marinades.

Once or twice she was caught sneaking a glance at Berry, who in turn was caught out himself. At one point Heidi stood upright and glanced deliberately between the two. Clancy burned bright red. Heidi tsk-tsked.

Tomorrow Clancy would make the pavlovas, more yoghurt terrine and a quick Christmas pudding for the die-hards. For forty-five it wasn't hard work.

That evening, Heidi's kitchen was jumping with the full house. Thirty people in for full service dinner made Berry's a very busy little place.

Heidi took a break early to catch her breath and rest her back but by ten-thirty, she declared for the day and decided to head home. Berry waved her off and together with the staff, he helped clean up and finish the night.

By eleven-thirty, the last of the diners were on their way.

Half an hour later, Clancy still had things to do and reached for another set of knives. Berry placed his hand over hers. "Time to call it a day. It's past midnight again."

She gave in quickly. "I'm a bit out of touch. Not even a week gone and I haven't any stamina... I must have relaxed or something."

"Come on," he said. "Let's lock up and I'll walk you home."

Rommy picked them up at the back door, tail wagging and banging on their legs as he did his round and rounds.

"So this is where you live," Berry said at her door. "Nice place."

"You don't think I'll have any strange visitors tonight?"

"If you mean Greg, I don't think so. Marlie is at the estate house with him so I don't think he'd dare. And if you do have trouble, ring me."

She nodded, rested on the doorjamb. "You know, if I had coffee I'd offer you one."

He smiled, leaned forward until his forehead touched hers. "I don't need coffee."

His lips came down on hers and Clancy was quite sure it wasn't a sweet goodnight kiss. It was more like 'helloooo-and-what's-next?' sort of kiss.

Tentatively, she framed her hands on his face and his arms went around her.

It felt good in every way. Warm, tingly, inviting, wanting... all the good things. He pressed against her; kissed her again, let her kiss him back.

He pulled at the pins and her fair hair slid down on to her shoulders. "I have wanted to do that since the other day when I first saw you." He picked up a handful and pulled it gently to his face. "Mmh. I love the smell of goose fat in the evening."

"Chicken livers," she corrected. "Plain old pâté."

"But what's it doing in your hair? I thought it was supposed to smell of vanilla or baked bread or something?" He nuzzled her neck. "Going to invite me in? Been a while since I used the shower in this place."

She hesitated.

He lifted his head and his gaze pinned her. "I've said the wrong thing?"

"I don't have towels. I forgot to mention earlier."

He laughed. "I'm not walking home to get towels to troop back here to shower. Come on, another night up at the homestead."

Rommy leapt ahead of them as they idled their way back up the path to his house. His hand held hers tightly, and instead of settling in the lounge area, he walked her straight into the bathroom.

"Get the water hot and I'll be right back."

Her belly felt all floaty.

Steam was just rising when he walked back in. He held up a masculine looking nightshirt – “You’ll look great in this,” – and flipped it on to the vanity. Then he stepped to her and kissed her soundly. “I’m bloody desperate to get you out of these clothes.”

“Such romance. I should help in that case.” She unbuttoned the neck of her jacket, pulled it over the top of her head.

He caught her there. “I’ll get the rest.”

He bent and slipped off her socks and shoes, hooked his hands into the waist of her chef’s trousers and slid them down to the floor. She stepped out of them pulling her cami off at the same time.

He was kneeling at her feet looking up at her when she reached round and unclipped her bra, let it fall to the floor, her breasts bobbing just above his head. “I’m not wasting that water one second more.” She chucked him under the chin and ducked into the shower before he could protest.

He tore off his T-shirt, kicked off his shoes, unzipped his jeans and hopped and stepped until he was out of them. He kicked them away—

His phone rang.

It rattled in his jeans and the vibrations started to crib the pants over the bathroom floor. He looked at his jeans and back to the shower where Clancy was soaping up behind the steamy screen, and back to his jeans again.

“God. Damn. It.” He snatched up his jeans and reefed the phone out of the pocket. The screen told him it was ten minutes to one in the morning, and secondly, who was calling. “It better be good this time, Marlie.” He marched over to the shower and opened the door.

Clancy smiled at him as she shampooed her hair, arms over her head, breasts now bobbing in front of his nose.

He stared at her then pointed at his phone. He still stared.

She shrugged, smiled, turned her back and rinsed the suds. But rounded back again when she heard his astounded, “What?”

He shut the screen door and moved to the vanity, leaned over it. “When? How did—? What’s the matter with Greg’s—? All right, all right... Well, if they’re on their

way that's good. I can probably get to her first anyway... Yes, yes I know it. Get off the phone and when you get his car started, meet me there... No, I'm not coming to get you, I'm going straight to her."

Berry stepped back into his jeans and thrust himself into his T-shirt. He pulled open the shower door again.

Clancy felt like she was under a waterfall. He kissed her, hard. The water pounded over them both, saturating him as he held her, his hands low on her waist.

He pulled away a bit. "It's Heidi. Sounds like she's had contractions on the way home and the car's veered off the track."

"Omigod, where?" It was delicious to stand under hot water held by a man who was fully clothed and fully wet and fully something else, but this was awful news.

"On the main track. She's called her mother, who's called the ambos, but I'm closer. Dunno anything about delivering babies, though. See you later."

He kissed her again with an audible groan, shut the door, grabbed a heap of towels and was gone.

Clancy finished up in a hurry, flipped off the taps and stepped out to dry off.

For God's sake, it all happens around here.

She donned the nightshirt, slipped her bare feet back into her chef's crocs and wandered to the lounge room, her dirty clothes tucked under her arm.

Rommy was barking like a mad thing inside the house. She settled him down, paced with him for a while until they looked at each other and flopped on the settee together. There was nothing for it, without a car all she could do was to wait.

She worried for a few minutes longer and finally gave up. It could be hours before she'd hear anything, or see anyone... and she needed sleep.

Best thing to do would be head back to the bedsit.

Poor Heidi. Clancy hoped the ambulance would get to her before the baby decided it was coming out... and before Berry had to deliver it.

Heidi! Having the baby!

No chef in Berry's restaurant.

Me! Oh my God! There are things I need to be doing—

Wait. It's all been re-set for tomorrow, there's staff to do service, I can easily get the orders out using her menu. No problem. There are only thirty customers. It's Christmas Eve. They'll practically look after themselves.

Don't panic. It'll be a piece of cake.

She stood in the lounge of Berry's house and stared out into the darkening night. She'd never make it to the bedsit in this light. If she kipped down now, here, and got a reasonable few hours sleep, she'd get through tomorrow. That's the least she could do, for everybody.

She tracked back to Berry's office, dumped her soiled clothes on the floor, crawled into the sleeping possie she had the night before and drifted off, happily aware Rommy had settled himself on the floor alongside her.

This time her last thought before sleep was how Berry had looked at her when she was in the shower.

She vaguely heard Rommy stir, a few snuffles, shuffles and a swish of his tail on her leg and then silence.

Someone kissed her forehead, whispered in her ear, "We have a baby boy."

She prised one eye open and saw Berry kneeling beside her. "Did you do it?"

"Mainly Heidi. I just caught him." He brushed her hair out of her eyes. "I'm going to bed for a few hours. Wake me when you get up."

"Okay." She could hardly fend off the sleep. "Goodnight, Berry."

"Goodnight, Clancy."

Another wave of his big hand over her head and he was gone.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

She didn't wake him when she rose.

She fed Rommy, showered quickly, and headed straight for the restaurant.

Heidi, bless her socks, was a good one for lists and check sheets and procedures. The only thing Clancy would have to hone was her plating up. An unfamiliar menu and style, she'd have to deliver cleverly.

Then she'd have to fit in all the prep for tomorrow's Christmas lunch that wasn't their Christmas lunch.

But that shouldn't be too difficult either. Berry had asked a couple of kitchen staff to come in two hours earlier than normal today so she'd have plenty of help. No one grumbled, it was all money in their pockets.

A couple of times amidst the new yoghurt terrine, the pavlovas, the extra bucket of spuds to peel she heard her phone chirrup as text messages came in. She'd get them in her break – oh, a break – and get back to whoever it was. Old mates on Christmas Eve would have to wait.

With her hands in the sink, and loading and unloading the small commercial dishwasher, she wondered how her dad was faring. He would already be sweating in the kitchen doing lunch and then preparing for dinner tonight plus the big lunch tomorrow.

Suddenly, it was important to speak to him; to talk to her dad. She couldn't just yet. Still, it nagged at her late into the morning.

Berry walked into the restaurant at around two o'clock.

Pauline and Tim, the two staff members who'd been called in, congratulated him as if he were the baby's father. Everyone laughed and joked at once and Clancy straightened up to watch him approach.

Her belly did that funny little flip again and she could feel her smile all the way down to her toes.

Yes, he looked tired, but it was an exhilarated exhaustion. His green eyes were bright, his smile to her in return was broad and he held her in an enveloping hug, generous and uninhibited in front of the others.

It set the mood for the afternoon, and a bright happy atmosphere descended. Berry just kept laughing, and shaking his head.

Tim stuck the obligatory *'It's a Boy!'* sign on the main door and Pauline prepared Berry a huge mug of strong coffee, begging him to give up the details of last night.

He'd found Heidi's car nose first nudging a tree, down a very slight dip off the main track. She'd got herself into the back seat and the baby was well and truly on the way by the time he got to her.

Neither of them knew what to do, (except what they'd seen on the telly) so they let nature dictate and it wasn't long after, maybe minutes later (but it felt like hours) the baby popped out head first (luckily, they both thought) and slithered into Berry's waiting hands. He had nothing to cut the cord, so he wrapped him in one of the towels he'd taken, helped Heidi hold him and they waited for the ambos.

Easy.

"Bet you were scared."

"Yep. But 'scared' is a real understatement."

"What's his name?"

"Don't know."

"Was it messy?"

"Yep."

"Wow."

"Hero."

"Nup. I nearly fainted. There was a lot of yelling, and that was just from me."

Clancy ploughed on in the kitchen. Pauline helped settle her nerves, explained style, loaded the prep benches and made coffees.

Berry stacked the fridges, Tim checked the seating and two other staff arrived to take up the last minute jobs. A very late afternoon break, one last check of the tables and the first members of the Christmas Eve party arrived.

Berry's heroism had gotten around the district pretty quickly so apart from the festive season's jocularly, dinner was a great affair celebrating Heidi's baby and his safe arrival.

Clancy got past her nerves and with Pauline steering the ship, she delivered dinner to her thirty customers. The raucous applause for her lemon yoghurt terrine made her previous panic all worthwhile.

Berry ushered the last of the stragglers out at eleven p.m. and just after the staff left with hugs all around for Christmas, Clancy hit a wall.

Her eyes watered with fatigue, her bones ached, her feet needed a spa and her shoulders felt like bricks.

She slumped on a stool at the bar, rested her head in her arms.

"Don't go to sleep there, I'll never get you home." Berry pulled up alongside her. "You did a fantastic job tonight, Clancy."

She looked up bleary eyed. "Thanks. I'm so tired I could sleep for a week."

He looked at her a moment, touched her arm. "One for the road, then?"

She opted for a glass of shiraz, but not a big one, she qualified, and took it gratefully. "About tomorrow."

Berry glanced at her over the rim of his glass.

"I'll be in here as early as I possibly can. Is there anything other than the obvious you need me to do?" She lifted her head and took a sip. Loved it all over again.

"I should be asking you that. Look, Mac's people aren't expecting table service, just a table with plenty of food on it and plenty of drinks. Hopefully Marlie already explained the situation and we'll just reinforce that. I'm not going to be worried about it. We shouldn't have many issues."

"Famous last words."

"I'm not going to worry about it and neither will you. Mac won't have any objections, that's for sure." He touched her arm again. "Maybe tomorrow night we could have a Christmas drink ourselves."

"The drinks you have when you don't do Christmas drinks."

"They're the ones. So, come on, drink your drink and I will walk you home, tuck you in and leave you alone. Fair?"

“Berry, tonight I’m just so tired—”

“I know. Me too. I’m still on a baby-high. Reckon I’ll come crashing down any moment.” He rested an elbow on the bar and looked at her. “One thing I don’t want to do, like you said, is mess things up.” He held up a hand when she began to reply. “And rushing into random sleeping arrangements when neither of us is in any shape is not what I want. I’d like this to start the way we’d like it to continue.”

Her cheeks warmed. “Let’s get through tomorrow.” She left her glass half full and stood up. Her phone beeped again and she took it out of her pocket.

Berry tidied up after them and hovered in the doorway waiting to lock up.

“My dad,” she told him as they closed the restaurant. “I might have the chat-I-have-to-have before I hit the sack.”

They wandered in silence to the bedsit. Berry pushed open the door, switched on the light and faced her. “Goodnight, Clancy. See you tomorrow.”

She stepped into his space and pressed her lips to his. Their hug was warm and long and she felt his body stir against hers as she tucked her head under his chin.

“Something doesn’t know it’s tired,” Berry said, kissed her again and was gone before she could change her mind.

She showered under water as hot as she could stand. Slipped between the sheets in Berry’s old nightshirt and rang her father.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Clancy was as ready as she could be with no staff and forty-five Christmas lunch customers coming in to a restaurant they hadn't booked.

She'd been in the kitchen since five, readying the trays of vegetables, meat, trays with small jugs of sauces and savoury marmalades, and dishes of pâté and homemade crackers, baskets of breads and pots of softened butter.

She'd moved tables and chairs so the restaurant and its fare would resemble a medieval feast, making the delivery of lunch service extremely easy on her and Berry.

Every timber chopping board in the place was situated on the long tables waiting to accommodate sizzling pans of rare, roasted, basted, and herb encrusted joints straight from the oven.

Her pavlovas were waiting patiently at the back of the kitchen, and the accompanying thick local cream and fresh berry fruit topping sat in the coolroom ready for their appearance.

Her poor man's Christmas pud was simmering in an enormous pot she'd found at the back of the pantry and her cheat's custard (a packet job) and the brandy sauce (her own), were on standby.

Berry had kept the coffee up to her. They exchanged a few comments here and there, bantered when time allowed, accidentally bumped hips whenever they possibly could. Neither wanted to distract the other. Much.

Berry said "Merry Christmas," and Clancy said, "Likewise," both grinned like kids, but that was all they had time for.

Berry stacked the fridges, did the dishes, filled water pitchers for the tables. By midday they were ready. In another thirty minutes, guests would be arriving.

The slow roasted meats were baking as they should, the vegetables coming along nicely. Clancy had prepared huge salads but there was hardly enough time to do anything more on the spot.

"I'm already looking for a sleep."

“We’ll be fine, now. You’ve done a huge amount of work and it looks great. We’ll just let the day carry itself.”

They heard a vehicle pull up.

“Looks like we have early ones,” Berry said and hesitated before he went to check. “Uh, I meant to ask, how did it go with your dad last night on the phone?”

“It was fine.” She looked away for a moment. “He misses me.”

When she looked back, Berry nodded at her, and left with a small frown on his face.

Clancy inhaled, looked over the fully set-up restaurant once again. There wouldn’t be time for any more adjustments to be made and they’d just have to do the best with what they’d done. She straightened up, buttoned her collar and made for the ovens.

It was time to get the meat rested and to let the fun begin.

“You haven’t even raised a sweat.” Berry juggled another three baskets of bread before heading out to the tables.

He’d opened plenty of wines and had beers in an ice-filled elevated crate at the end of each table for people to help themselves.

Clancy was feeling good about it all. The meat had gone out and the guests had nominated ‘fathers’ to carve. The women served vegetables and the salads were passed around. It looked a bit like a Country Women’s Association meeting.

They told Clancy they were a farmer’s group from the other end of the island and they were over the moon to have somewhere to go. No one cared it wasn’t silver service, as long as the food kept coming.

She glanced at the clock – only one-thirty – and the hard work was just about done. She checked Berry and he was almost running. But he was grinning at the same time, so clearly enjoying himself.

Clancy was hefting the last hot vegetable tray out of the oven when a huge bulk of a man blocked her from leaving the kitchen.

Somehow, Mac Thomas had both his eyes on her. She wondered how he did that.

“Mac.” She didn’t quite know what to do about him but she needed to get the hot tray out to the tables.

And from behind Mac, Greg appeared and simply held out his hands to take the tray from her. She let him, oven mitts and all. She watched him deliver it to where Berry had directed.

Clancy looked back at Mac, dusted down her jacket. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right," he boomed. "Think I was dead, didja?"

She rolled her eyes, side stepped him and glanced around the tables. Where was Berry?

"What's this idea?" He waved a great hand over the restaurant area.

"What?" *Where was Berry?*

"These are all my customers." He hadn't advanced any further into the kitchen, but he still managed to take up all the space and most of the oxygen.

"Yes. They are."

He squinted at her and his boss-eye shot off to the left. "Whaddya think you're doing?"

This was no good. She straightened up. "I'm feeding your customers your meat and veggies. Meat and veggies – plain cooked, and cooked properly and given to your customers... the ones you couldn't feed and water. Then," she said warming to her subject, "I'm going to serve them pavlova for dessert – the simple kind you can spell – as well as a Christmas pud in the traditional style and then a very sophisticated, gourmet lemon yoghurt terrine in the panna cotta style – which you may not be able to spell." She stood with her hands on her hips. "And we could possibly get you seated if you thought you might like to stay and behave."

He, too, stood upright. Astounded.

That was when Marlie skidded into the restaurant kitchen. "Mac, I told you to wait for me."

Clancy, whose eyes narrowed, pinned her. "Why aren't you with Heidi?" She glanced at Mac and back to Marlie again. "And why do I get the feeling that he," she thumbed in Mac's direction, "doesn't know about any of this?"

"Know about what?" Mac bellowed.

Only a slight drop in the conversations in the restaurant was noticed.

“Now, Mac—” Marlie ignored Clancy’s glare.

“Mac.” Berry had come back to the kitchen and was handing more baskets of bread to Greg. “Welcome to this little tin-pot affair.”

Mac rounded, which meant in the kitchen everyone had to move quickly. “Lockett, I swear to God—”

“Marlie, either find yourselves a table or get the hell out of here.”

“What’s going on?” Mac thundered. “These are all my customers!” he roared.

Marlie took his arm, but that didn’t do too much.

Greg had returned after bread deliveries. “Dad, everyone is having a great time. Don’t do your chewy now. It’s embarrassing.”

“What the fuck—”

Berry moved fast and stood nose to nose with Mac, his voice low. “You get your dirt mouth out of my kitchen, Thomas. This has just saved your arse, mate, so don’t go blowing shit up my nose now. Get to a table or get out. Marlie can let you know what all this means before you make a fool of yourself in front of all your mates.”

Greg had his father’s arm and he and Marlie steered a belligerent, sweaty Mac Thomas out of Berry’s kitchen. They got him to a table away from the main party.

Clancy saw Mac fling off his son’s arm and squirm out of Marlie’s grip. But the three of them sat.

“Goddamn him if he has another heart attack in here.” Berry leaned on the bench alongside Clancy. “You okay?”

She burst out laughing. “Yes, but a bit shocked. He was the last person I expected.” She swiped a cloth over the stainless steel bench and grabbed new plates and cutlery. “I’ll get them sorted, you don’t have to.”

“Might be a good thing for the moment.” Then he answered the loud calls for more wine and amidst the merriment of the raucous, happy group, he kept his eye on Clancy as she headed for the Thomas’s. She stacked Mac’s table with an assortment of everything the major party had on their tables. She opened a red and poured three generous glasses (after all, it was Mac’s wine), and she delivered hot bread with lashings of butter. Bugger the heart condition.

She never said a word and neither did they.

Good thing she wasn't a Christmas person. No cheer at this table.

Clancy retreated to the kitchen after stopping a couple of times as the guests congratulated her. It was time to plate up the pav, the pud and the terrine and to load the cold bain-marie for self-serve. She'd get filter coffee on – she'd never get lattés, espressos and long blacks done all by herself. It just couldn't be helped.

She glanced at Mac's table. Greg was gesturing wildly at his father and Marlie was putting her two cents worth in as well. It looked as if Mac was staring at her in the kitchen, but she couldn't be sure. That funny eye was a real trap and both eyes were back to each going their own way.

Clancy could see Berry doing his level best to steer clear of Mac Thomas altogether.

She filled the bain-marie with plates apportioned with desserts earlier. Once done, she skittered around the tables gathering the used crockery and cutlery and headed for the sinks.

Only a couple of hours to go. Then a couple of days to regroup before Berry's restaurant opened again. She could manage; she knew it.

The coffee was on. She stacked cups and saucers, filled milk jugs and sugar bowls then she headed for the tables.

Only a couple of hours to go...

She glanced at Mac's table. All three were eating solemnly, and only Marlie glanced up once or twice to survey the restaurant. Some of the guests wandered across to their table to give season's greetings, and all credit to Mac and Greg, they returned the same with some semblance of joviality.

Food was disappearing fast. Mac's wines and beers were disappearing fast. Clancy wondered if Berry would open his bar, but she doubted it. Mac should put money on the bar if he wanted people to stay. It was the least he could do.

She tried to catch Berry's eye, but he was busy sharing a joke with some customers.

Some of the group headed for the dessert stand so she hovered nearby. Greg approached for his serve of dessert, the intense stare of his blue eyes fixed on Clancy.

Only a couple of hours to go.

By five in the afternoon, only Mac, Marlie and Greg remained.

Neither Clancy nor Berry made any attempt to talk to them until the chores were at least under control. But they needn't have worried about making the first move.

Mac lumbered up to the counter. "Lockett."

Berry didn't look up from dunking the glasses over the brush. "Mac."

"I have to pay you."

Berry continued to work, head down. "Your food and booze, so it's just Clancy's wages; maybe four, five hundred. Five, I reckon."

"Right." Mac withdrew a wad of cash from his pocket. "I got four hundred here. That's all I got. On me." He left it on the counter.

Berry looked at him and nodded, left the money where it lay.

Mac glanced back at the table and Marlie nodded encouragement. He looked at Berry again. "Thanks. You did save my arse doing lunch."

"Best thing for the district," Berry said.

"Makes no difference to next month."

"None at all."

Mac waited a beat or two. "Do I owe ya more than that?" He lifted his chin at the four hundred.

Berry waited a beat or two. "No."

"Keep the leftover booze."

Berry lifted an eyebrow. There wasn't any left over.

"We'll be going then." Mac turned to Marlie and Greg. "Hurry up and get me out of here. If I can't drive meself, I don't wanna be stuck here beholden to this bloke."

Greg shot out of his chair and headed out the door, following his father.

Marlie approached Berry. "You saved him today, Berry. I'm grateful."

"I saved those people their Christmas lunch, that's all. You should have told him, though."

"He would have shot himself in the foot if I had."

"Marlie, some people just have to keep doing that until they get it all by themselves. This was not a favour for Mac, it was to keep the faith with local people."

She shifted her weight. "I hoped there would've been some...worthwhile discussion."

Berry stared at her. "Between Mac and me? About?"

"The court case. To settle out of court."

"Hope you're telling him that."

"He'll lose everything otherwise."

"He just has to agree to the proper boundary and then I'll settle out of court. It's that simple."

"It's not that simple for him and you know it."

"It is that simple, Marlie, for all of us." Berry noted the stubborn set to her mouth and changed the subject. "And Heidi, how's she going? How's the baby? Still in hospital?" Marlie, the doting grandmother, he thought.

"They'll let her come home tomorrow." She turned to go.

Clancy came up to them with a smile. "What did she name her baby, Marlie?"

Marlie looked right through her and left without a word.

"Merry Christmas," Clancy said to her back. She swung back to Berry. "Is it just me?"

"No. She sides with Mac over everything, including the boundary business. And she's a strange one, anyway." Berry grabbed a couple more empties off the table. "He just has to agree to the legal boundary, move his fence-line a few metres back – over about three kilometres, I'll grant you – and move the shearing shed back about twenty metres. That's all. I'm not asking for his right arm. I've paid rates on that land for years." He took what he could carry in his arms over to the bar and dumped the bottles into the recycling.

Clancy followed him as far as the kitchen then ducked into the dish-wash area. "And that way great-grandma's grave will be back on your side of the fence and not under the shed. I get it," she said over the noise of the machine.

Berry had come into the kitchen. He stood looking at her. "Pardon?"

She looked up from the sink. "Isn't Esther buried under the shed?" Strangely, Clancy felt that the noise around them had stilled. "What did I say?"

The only focus at that moment was Berry's intense green-eyed stare. "Who told you that?"

"Greg said it's what you think, and so you want great-grandma back on your side of the boundary. Something about it being a secret."

"Greg said Esther is buried under their shed?"

Clancy frowned a moment trying to recall exactly what Greg had said. "No, he said... um, '...it's the kicker, the big secret, he's going for our throats because he reckons she's under the shearing shed'. Meaning you reckon Esther's under the shearing shed."

He threw his hands in the air. "I never knew where the hell she was buried. And what bunch of maniacs would build a shearing shed over their grandmother's grave?" He shook his head. "That is the craziest thing I've ever heard him come up with." He looked around the restaurant for a diversion. "Place looks like a bomb's hit it."

"Won't take us long."

Berry scratched his head. "Thing is, the titles office can't find the original documents which show the land I'm trying to retrieve is really mine, or was my Dad's. And Mac doesn't know that." He disappeared into the restaurant and returned with stack of dishes. "Dad must have had the title papers at some point and never returned them. I don't know. I can't bloody imagine how documents like that can disappear from the titles office."

Clancy followed him back into the restaurant, clearing dishes, returning to the kitchen and loading up the benches, scraping plates and loading and unloading the dishwashers. "Then how will court in January—"

"Exactly. I've been hoping Mac would pull back and settle out of court, but it doesn't seem like he will unless I can prove it without a doubt." Berry dumped another stack in the kitchen, leaned on the bench. "Neither of us can afford to do this, and Mac even less than me. But he's one stubborn bastard."

"Can't give it one more go with Mac?"

“You’ve seen the man. Proverbial brick wall.”

“He might be a bit mellow after today.”

Berry shrugged. “Marlie sort of suggested he might be ready to settle.”

Clancy didn’t want to venture any further into territory she knew nothing about. But if Esther wasn’t buried under the shed – or rather, that the shed hadn’t been deliberately built on top of her – it was simply an issue of boundary. Still, big enough issue, she conceded and remained quiet.

Berry looked at her. “You know what? It doesn’t have to be broached today. It’ll still be an issue tomorrow, so I’ll sleep on it and think again with a clearer head. Let’s at least get all this tidied up and then we can relax.”

Even sweating in the kitchen over a steaming dishwasher, with plates stacked to her eyeballs, Clancy felt the little thrill leap in her belly.

Then she wondered whether or not to tell Berry of the conversation she’d had with her father.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“I want to have a shower first, a long hot soak to shift the lamb and beef fat out of my pores.”

Early evening had come and gone and night was descending. They were both perched on bar stools, the last of the dirty dishes done, food scraps and empty bottles removed, glasses and cutlery done and polished. The rest of it could be handled another day.

Rommy was eating a Christmas dog dinner, a big one, at the back door.

Berry agreed. “Okay. And then after that I want to have a plate of that terrine. You did save some, didn’t you?”

“Can’t remember if we used it or not. It certainly was a hit.” Clancy was swinging her legs trying to relax them.

Berry slid off his seat and headed for the coolroom. “All good,” he said emerging with a small tray and bringing it back. “I’ll take this up to the house.” He looked at her. “Will you come up for a drink?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Let’s get out of here.” He took her hand in his other and led her out of the restaurant into the dark night. “When you’re ready, text me and I’ll come get you.” He and Rommy left her at the bedsit.

She kicked off her shoes, fell flat on her back on the bed and stayed there for fifteen minutes. The aches wouldn’t subside until she’d had a hot shower, but she needed a little wind-down before then.

And to think what to wear – out of the little choice she had – to have drinks with Berry later.

Christmas night was not as warm this year as she had known other Christmas nights, so she’d get away with clean jeans, a top and a jacket.

Her phone chirped. A text from her dad. *Thought about it?*

She hadn't really. She didn't want to think about it. He had asked her last night to return to Jones and Jones. The new bride had discovered the restaurant game was not for her and she'd be happier waiting for her husband at home and not waiting on tables or being dish-bitch out the back.

Clancy didn't reply. She would, but not yet.

She ran a long shower, scrubbed the cooking smells away, shampooed something fragrant into her hair – had Berry said vanilla? It wasn't vanilla, maybe green tea.

Dried off, she found clean undies, a lacy bra she'd forgotten she'd packed for that special occasion, a not-too-crumpled long sleeved tee, and clean jeans.

Her heart did a little thud every so often as she thought of the night ahead. She would love to be with Berry, would love to see how far they could take it and make it work. She was even hoping against all the things she knew about relationships – how grown-ups often weren't very grown-up, or how some were too set in their ways to make for a happy co-existence.

In any case, she was hoping it would work with Berry, and the thought of being with him tonight warmed her from head to toe.

She checked herself in the mirror. She needed earrings. Dangly ones. Where had she tucked her little jewelry box? The cupboard, top shelf.

Standing on tiptoe trying to locate it with her hand was a waste of time. She dragged over a chair, stepped up, moved the recipe books aside and found the box.

She also spied that old manila folder again. Her heart thudded only a beat before her head registered what she might have been looking at.

Her phone chirped. Prob'ly Dad again. She stepped off the chair with her jewelry box and the folder and checked her phone.

It was Berry.

Yr taking too long. On my way don't want to surprise you.

She swiped the dust from the cover of the folder. Focused on the masculine cursive handwriting on it and flipped it open to reveal a couple of very old and large folded pages.

Oh, but would she have a surprise for Berry.

Rommy barked all the way down from the house.

They sat hunched over the low coffee table in Berry's lounge, gazing at the original titles of the five blocks of land Berry's father Tony had inherited from his father Dan.

Dan Lockett, Berry's grandfather, had expanded on the holdings Berry's grandmother Joyce had brought to the marriage back in the thirties. Joyce was Esther's daughter and Phillippe had split his land to allow his eldest daughter a dowry of sorts of five blocks. That was the block on which Berry's house and restaurant now stood, and the other four made up his vineyards and marron ponds.

Mac was Phillippe's grandson from his second wife but he hadn't done as well as Joyce and Dan. And that was where the boundaries had become a little fuzzy over time. Without the original titles, or Berry's antecedents to correct things, hearsay couldn't be proven true.

Not that anyone was blaming Mac totally, but it was his assertion he'd laid fences on the correct boundaries. And now Berry could prove him wrong, without a doubt.

"I have moved that cupboard a dozen times. I never thought to check the top of it."

Clancy refilled their glasses. "So this means?"

"I take it to Mac, tomorrow." He sipped his red wine. "On second thoughts, I'll copy these as best I can here and take the copies to Mac tomorrow. It means he will know I have proof of the boundaries. He'll have to come to the party or risk the lot." Berry sat back on the lounge. "What a great day. It could give Christmas a whole new meaning." His phone buzzed and vibed on the table. "Oh no."

Clancy laughed.

He opened it. "A pic coming through." Then he hooted and handed it to Clancy.

There was Heidi smiling broadly, holding a dark-haired baby with a scrunched up face.

Merry Christmas Uncle Berry from Harry Beresford McAdam.

"Bit of a mouthful," Berry mused when she handed his phone back.

Clancy could see he was touched silly. She pressed his arm then sidled in alongside him. "I'm glad I could be here to see it. The baby pic and the old titles."

He lifted his arm around her. "Can't say I've had this much luck all decade and now I've got all this in one night." He took a last look at the picture then put the phone down. Berry sat forward to look at her. "What will we do now?"

She snuggled a bit closer. "We could eat some terrine."

He hesitated only a moment. "We could." Then got up and went to the kitchen.

Rommy bobbed up from his dead-to-the-world sleep.

Berry came back with the tray and two spoons. "After you," he said handing her a spoon, but he didn't wait. As he sat down, he tucked in. "This has got to be the best I've tasted. Ever." He had his eyes closed savouring the mouthful of subtle citrus and creamy full-flavoured yoghurt.

Clancy thought the time was right. She held his hand from delivering its next mouthful, knelt up beside him and kissed his nose, his eyes, his cheeks, then she let his hand go.

Spoons clattered to the table.

Berry swooped his arms under her and laid her on the settee, pushing her legs around his hips. He kissed her hard, flattened himself full bodied over her and let her feel what he wanted.

He shimmied the T-shirt up, cupped a breast in each hand. "Nice bra," he breathed and lowered his head to nuzzle each with a raspy chin. He reached under her and unclasped the hooks. "Nice boobs," he said to her bare chest and his mouth descended.

Her legs tightened around him. Her breath stopped for moments and at the exquisite pull on her nipple her back arched, her belly fluttered. She pulled at his shirt, dragging it over his head until the warmth of his broad chest touched her skin.

His face didn't leave her breasts but his hands removed her tee, pulled off the bra, pushed her legs back under him, went straight to her zip and slid it down. He moved lower and pushed her pants to her feet, kicked them off and... let his face rest over her bellybutton.

After a moment, she asked, "What's the matter?"

"It's about now the phone rings," he said into her hip.

"No," she cried, then laughed, her hands in his hair.

He nipped her hip and came up alongside her. He sat and stripped off his jeans, leaving a tight pair of black jocks over a ready bulge. He sat her up and over him, hooked his fingers in her knickers as her hands rested on his shoulders. “Reckon I could stand up under you?”

“No.”

“You’re right.”

“Besides, I like it here on the settee.” Her hands were still in his hair but her mouth had found his and the long slow kiss she delivered didn’t give either of them much more time. They slid to the floor. “Or on the floor.”

The coffee table shifted and the dog gave a tiny yelp.

Berry pushed her knickers down and out of his way. His warm hand travelled up her leg and his fingers toyed with the silky softness he found. She gasped, gripped his shoulders, moved her bare hips under his and her hand eased him out of his undies.

She shifted her hips again, her legs around him and then the powerful slide entered her body, took her breath away.

“You okay?” he rasped.

“Wonderful,” she breathed and urged him harder, tightening her legs, drawing him deeper inside.

He wasn’t going to last, and that was okay with her... she wasn’t going to be far behind— A grip of hands, a groan, a shudder—

One last uncontrollable beat and her body gripped his, sure to take every last drop of him... he buried his face in her breasts and as his mouth tugged one nipple she cried out and gave herself up.

Berry waited as she quietened beneath him then sank on her. “And so this is Christmas...”

Clancy reveled in the warmth over her body, the scratchy hair of his chest on her breasts, the corded muscles in his arms. He tucked his legs under hers.

She closed her eyes... only for a few moments, the delicious temptation to drift off completely was hard to resist.

"I'll manage to last a whole lot longer next time." Berry shifted alongside, and wrapped his arms around her.

"Me, too. Couldn't be helped." Then a moment or two later, Clancy mumbled, "What is that awful slurping noise?"

Berry lifted his head, listening. "Oh, shit. Rommy. And our dessert."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Clancy stared at the email, read it again. She hadn't answered her father's text yesterday – she'd had a few other things on her mind.

Christmas had turned out to be something spectacular for her this year. It had been a long time since she'd pulled an all-nighter with a gorgeous male in her bed.

Well, on the floor of his gorgeous house rather than the bed, though they did eventually get to his bed, via the kitchen and the bathroom.

Anyhow, today, with Berry over on Mac's farm negotiating, she'd had time to open the email discussion with the senior Jones.

Dad was really pulling out all the stops, now. Amazing. A big blow up a week or so ago and now everything she'd ever asked for, he's offering, and more.

Where have you been stashing that sort of money, Dad?

"Got a minute?" Berry poked his head in the door of the bedsit.

"Of course. Come sit with me in my drawing room."

He sat close to her on the bed, only giving her laptop a swift glance. "News from home?"

"I'll tell you mine after you tell me yours."

"Hoping you'd say that." He hugged her, kissed her cheek, her mouth. He held her off by the shoulders. "Mac's agreed. In principle."

Clancy let out a whoop. "Great news. But what does 'in principle' mean, exactly?"

"We'll run the surveyors over it, locate the pegs. If it all pans out, I give him reasonable time to move his fences."

"Reasonable?"

"Six months."

"And the shearing shed?"

"We're still talking about that. Neither of us have sheep any more, so I thought about making a gentleman's agreement with him." Berry frowned. "Then I thought

again about that. With Mac it has to be very cut and dried, so 'gentleman's agreement' won't work." Berry inhaled. "That's still a bit up in the air. I'm hoping with Marlie hovering close by, it'll happen sooner than later. It has to, really."

"And great-grandma?"

"He swears she's not under the shed, and that he doesn't know where she is. He reckons she's on one of my blocks, and should be in the family plot over beyond that huge red gum here. He thinks there must be more papers to find." Berry shook his head.

"So, Esther gets to hold on to her secret after all."

"Seems. Don't reckon she minds overly much."

An incoming email pinged on Clancy's laptop. Her father, no doubt looking for an answer from her. "Sounds like Mac caved too easily after all the feuding." She opened the message.

"Mac wasn't a push-over. Still, my little folder had all the ammo and he had nothing. I'll pin him down about the shed in a couple of days. Then I'll call my lawyer to make it formal and have the court date called off."

"Exhausting. It almost went right down to the wire." Clancy had one eye on the email. She saw the words, 'annual' and 'holiday' and thought there was possibly even more up her dad's sleeve than she suspected.

"Still two weeks to go before the tenth." Berry indicated the laptop. "And your news?"

Clancy shifted, uncrossed her legs, stretched and let them dangle over the edge of the bed. "Well, *Jones and Jones Restaurant* can't seem to do without this particular Jones."

"Really?"

"Evie Bridezilla has pulled the princess vote and doesn't like the work."

"The new bride."

"The very same."

"Must be tempting."

Clancy considered that. "Yes. It is."

She heard Berry's breath rush out but he remained silent.

“Dad says here—” she ran her finger down the body of the first email. “Any shifts I want, an upgraded company car just for me and a down payment on a unit in Stonyfell. Then he mentions here in this last email, an annual holiday. In writing. A contract to sign, as well.” She looked at Berry. “I’ve never had an annual holiday.”

Berry nodded. “Impressive offer.” He toyed with her hand. “Considering it?”

“I’d be a liar if I said no.”

Berry lifted her hand to his mouth turned it over and kissed her wrist. “I have an offer, too.”

“You do?”

“Yes. A job. I’d like you to make that terrine for my restaurant, amongst other things – here on the premises – every week for the next few years. As well as that, I’ll throw in a mangy terrine-eating kelpie to keep you company, a small bedsit with no kitchen but a wonderful outlook, a fantastic neighbour on the same property, and a job in a fine boutique café with its own winery and vineyard, not to mention a vineyard mystery. And the whole place only a few kays out of thriving metropolis Dagsville.”

Clancy rolled all that around in her head. “He’s not mangy.”

“And if that’s not enticing enough, after a little while, all being well, I’ll throw in a shared space in the big house and some permanent company with a bloke who runs a little tin-pot affair this side of yonder.”

“Will I have to cook there?”

“Maybe a bit.”

“And I’d have to sleep with the boss.”

“Desirable. Essential, in fact.” He kissed her other wrist.

“Are there any other clauses in the contract?”

He thought about that. “Maybe a few extra small ones I’ll get to later.”

Without looking, Clancy closed the laptop. She took his hands in hers and pulled him closer, wrapping his arms around her.

“Where do I sign?”

THE END

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