



# *This Time Forever* darry fraser



an *Australis Island* novel

# *This Time Forever*

by Darry Fraser

THIS TIME FOREVER

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This Time Forever

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#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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

# *This Time Forever*

An Australis Island novel

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



## PROLOGUE

As he turned up the gravel road towards *The Hill*, Jarrad glanced across at his young son, Harry. The boy smiled at him, his clear blue eyes full of childlike wonder at this most interesting game they were playing.

“Daddy, are we nearly there?”

Jarrad nodded and smiled back. “We should see her house just about now,” he answered, though his voice sounded alien and constricted in his throat.

He gripped the steering wheel. God, how would she react to him? How would she take seeing him after six years and bringing his son along as well?

His gaze swept to the right and he saw the sprawling homestead only one hundred metres from the road. Her tour vehicles were backing out of their respective carports but Jarrad couldn’t see her.

He rounded a curve which, if memory served him correctly, would swing further to the right, and the magnificent coastline of eastern Australis Island would appear at the bottom of the road. He glanced at his odometer. Another half a kilometre and the causeway would appear on his right, past a thin, long stretch of broombush.

“Can we swim at the beach, Daddy?” Harry pressed his nose to the window, eyeing the expanse of ocean at the bottom of the hill.

“Sometime,” Jarrad said. He slowed the vehicle, negotiating the laterite pebbles and the soft sand at the start of her long driveway.

His arms shook and his grip on the steering wheel strengthened. He was a fool to attempt this. She could’ve married again, by now. At the very least, after their last meeting, he wouldn’t have blamed her for shooting him on sight.

His mind wandered a moment as he glanced again at his son.

Harry was the one he left her for. But was that it, really? No. Admit it. She made him choose Cindy. She gave him the option to have the child he badly wanted, that she couldn’t—no, wouldn’t have. She made him leave her and he hated himself for it.

He laughed to himself. He loved her because of it.



The vehicle swung over the causeway and on to the property. It hadn't changed much since the last time he'd seen it, although the homestead was new. It hadn't been built when he was seeing her, it was only a dream they'd shared. She'd done it without him as she said she would.

He'd helped pore over the plans, revising and restructuring the floor space. He wondered if she'd changed the layout. Probably.

Great pieces of red sandstone scudded what was once farmland pasture. He vividly remembered the line of broombush and the shock of her completely unexpected announcement while they strolled over the property.

He took the right-hand sweep back towards the ocean. Following a now well-worn track, there was her homestead, sprawling and magnificent just as they planned it would be, atop *The Hill* and overlooking one of the greatest coastal views on the island.

He gave a cursory glance at a small cabin which lay on the western fence line but he didn't remember planning that. Nor did he care.

His heart hammered as he drove closer.

"Is this it, Dad?" Harry leaned forward, straining against the seat belt.

Jarrad nodded, unable to find his voice. So far, it looked exactly as they'd planned.

There was no sign of her, so far. He pulled in beside a row of young pink gum that shielded him from the main house. They'd talked about tree planting and pink gums. He smiled to himself. They'd been heady, exciting days.

A four-wheel drive crept alongside. The driver gave him a quick wave and a grin. "G'day, mate."

Jarrad nodded again.

Harry struggled out of the restraining belt. "Come on, Dad, let's get out and go see her."

Jarrad stepped out of the vehicle. He caught up with Harry before he took off, and held his hand. They peered through the window of the tour vehicle across to the back landing of the house.

A second vehicle slid across his line of sight and then he saw her, through the series of car windows. There was another couple there, handshakes and hugs exchanged,

laughing. The woman in the couple clutched her flaming auburn hair, gathering it in check against the stiff breeze. They stepped into a vehicle and headed off.

He looked back at the woman he'd come to see. She looked as lovely as he remembered. Willowy, graceful and yet with an energy that shone from her body. Her hair was still in its familiar bob, shoulder length and still dark; he reckoned she'd be nearly forty six now. She bent to check one of the boxes her driver was carrying.

He swallowed, hoping to moisten his dry mouth. Her effect on him was as strong as ever and he stood, mesmerised, even as Harry tugged on his hand.

The driver who'd spoken to him moved his vehicle off.

Jarrad clutched his impatient son's hand tightly. As five year old Harry began to squirm, he saw the woman he loved straighten, flick her hair back across her shoulders, the way still so familiar to him, and stand with hands on still-slim hips as she spoke to the other tour guide.

He watched the second driver slide behind the wheel, give him a curious glance and then gun the big motor into action. The vehicle moved off.

Jarrad stood stock still. Harry stopped fidgeting.

She'd not seen either of them. Until she turned to gaze, as he knew she did daily, at the magnificent view.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Eight years earlier*

Meg Donovan turned on her side and could have wept. She would've done six months ago, but now she'd almost become impervious to it.

Martin threw back the covers on their bed and stretched. As usual, he was not in the least perturbed their lovemaking had failed yet again. She closed her eyes. He'd be standing now, surveying his body in the mirror before striding to the bathroom to relieve himself.

He whistled. Not a care in the world. She was lucky this time he hadn't said his standard, 'Thanks for the root.'

She rolled on to her back. How is it that a man in his prime was not able to make love to his wife? Not now, nor hardly successfully even in the seven years of their living together. She squeezed her eyes shut again. If she broached the subject one more time about his needing professional help, he would not speak to her for a week, which made life in their tourist business very difficult. To put it mildly.

She sighed aloud and pulled the covers over her naked body. Six months ago she would have been in an agony of insecurity, wondering as she had for the previous six years why he wouldn't make love to her, why he wouldn't ejaculate or even have an erection. Her only answers up till then had been because she was, as he'd said many times, not sexually attractive to him. That's how he explained it all, yet still insisted he loved her and didn't want to find another woman.

She'd begun to realise he simply didn't want to make love to her. More to the point, to any woman, or any man. It was asexual.

It was a torment.

All her efforts to initiate lovemaking had been rejected and it was only when she insisted that they try, did he even bother to turn to her.

Even bother to turn off the television.

Meg was sure he loved her. She was also sure now that the problem was his. Hers by marriage, but his by condition. These days, however, she knew the eight month

old marriage was not going to survive his problem. That was her fault. When they married she thought she'd accepted his problem as hers. He needed help but she found she couldn't give it to him.

Now it had gone beyond her wanting to.

He farted loudly and spun the taps in the shower recess, the water crashing out of the rose. Within a minute he was out and toweling himself off.

"Short shower," she ventured, then instantly regretted it. She knew his answer already.

Martin poked his head around the bathroom door. "I had a shower last night...only had to wash off the bit that got dirty," he said, and grinned.

She rolled away again, her eyes smarting. Still the same old joke. Still that her body was unclean, that it was her fault his erection subsided on entry into her, that she was sexually unattractive. That she smelled.

She slipped out of bed and padded into the bathroom, used the toilet and then stepped under the steaming water of the shower. It was the last time she'd subject herself to his humiliation. The last time.

It made matters worse knowing he thought nothing of it.

She wondered again why she put up with it. Why, after all the knock backs, the soft insults, the boyish attempts at intimacy which dismally failed both of them, had she stayed?

Because she believed he would come good after the pressure of his failed business had dissipated.

Because she thought his tiredness would be relieved if she helped him as a partner and a wife should.

Because initially, she believed it was her fault, not his.

Because she'd lost all her money, that's why.

Had she been physically battered and beaten she would've had the excuse to leave. But just as battered wives tend to stay with their husbands, so too did she. Maybe it was the same type of syndrome. Of course, she knew now that it was emotional abuse and the only scars were on the inside.

She let the powerful stream of water cascade over her head, reached for the shampoo and lathered with a vengeance.

Meg warned him after their last chat about this problem. She warned that she would start to live her own life, get her life back, regain her self esteem again and leave him behind.

He scoffed. What would she do? Have an affair? Who would want her?

The discussion descended into a yelling match.

“If bloody Elle MacPherson was lying in that bed instead of me you wouldn’t be able to keep it up for her either!” she screamed in frustration.

He’d scoffed again. “Oh, I would for her,” he said, confidently, smirking at her. “Most certainly.”

Meg winced at the memory. She lathered soap all over her body and vowed Martin would never fumble over it again. Not that he’d ever really wanted to in the first place. She rinsed off, stepped out and toweled off, hardly noticing that the television was on in the bedroom and he was watching the 6.30 morning news.

She heard him explode about something, the football results then the weather. She padded past him, pulled on her underwear and padded back to the bathroom.

Her reflection stared back in the long mirror. She’d lost her ‘unhappy’ fat as she called it and had back her girlish figure.

Meg was thirty-eight. And still a size twelve, still able to gain the winks of her colleagues and male friends. Still able to turn heads when she went out, dressed to kill. Still able to reel ‘em in. Why had it taken her so long to see it?

Her boobs were good, not so pert, but they never had been. She’d have loved to have a strong collar bone, but her own was good, feminine.

Her waist wasn’t hourglass, but in proportion to her slim hips, thighs small and taut, the result of years of walking every day. She turned to her side. Big enough bottom. Thankfully.

She straightened and her eyes drifted to the reflection of her face. She was tired, she knew, and was looking forward to her holiday. Away from him and the business. The dark smudges under her eyes told of sleepless nights tossing and turning.

Her brows were strong and dark, legacy of her Italian heritage. Brown eyes, a good shape, stared back at her. She chewed her lips to bring some colour into them. Her cheeks had a hint of colour, not much, but her cheekbones were high and strong.

There was nothing wrong with the way she looked. Only the way she was told to look at herself by her husband. By what he didn't say, didn't do.

None of the reasons he'd given her were true. The sad thing was he believed them himself until she had spoken up and told him to have a good look. Told him she wasn't about to take it from him any longer.

She'd made him see a specialist. Made him take his problem to someone she believed would help him. Help them.

She laughed to herself. He'd been referred to a urologist, not a sex counsellor.

It was the visit to her own GP which forced her to see the truth. She sat in his clinic feeling like an idiot.

"Now Meg, we can't all be like Rambo and do it every night of the week like in those girl's books out on the shelves now."

How curious to put Rambo and girl's books into the one sentence. She didn't recall Rambo having sex in the movie. Maybe he did, but she didn't recall it.

The GP himself not a great specimen of adult male. Skinny, with freakishly slim, pale white hands and balding with a comb over. If you have to be bald, don't do the comb over.

"Once a month would be barely all right, Doctor, but once a fucking year isn't my idea of good conjugal health."

Doctor Cremont started. "Once a year?"

"If that."

Doc looked at his writing pad. "Get him to come and see me."

"I'll try," she said. "But more than anything, I want to know how to handle it. I want someone to tell me what to do, how to save my sanity."

He rubbed his chin. "There's nothing." He tapped his pen on to the pad. "Accept it or get out. Most women get out. Most would not have stayed as long as you. He's lucky you have." He tapped again. "Get him to come and see me and I'll refer him to a fellow in town."

Meg left the clinic wrung out, betrayed and further humiliated. Not much help, a male doctor. He'd treated her as if she were an oversexed schoolgirl, that she couldn't discern normal behaviour from abnormal. Oh, but she could. She *could*.

Martin insisted there was nothing he needed to have checked out. It was simply that she wasn't attractive to him and that's where it ended. Now if she could do this... or that... well, he was sure a sex life would magically appear and he'd perform splendidly. But until then... He spread his hands. Tough.

She tried what she could without making a clinical farce of any approach. When it failed after the third attempt, he relented and agreed that this time—and only this time—he hadn't been feeling well and maybe needed a check-up.

The specialist told Martin to stop wasting his time. There was nothing physically wrong with him, so go home, make a commitment to the woman and stop messing about. She'd take off unless he did.

And still nothing worked. And nothing changed.

Still nobody asked Martin about the state of his emotional health, or his mental faculties or even his understanding of the sexual act.

Still no one could help. Meg had to find her own solution. And she'd turned to alcohol first, then to other men like a predator, which was embarrassing.

She pulled on her jeans as Martin headed out of their bedroom, loudly greeting the guests ready for an early morning walk before breakfast.

She laughed that the dreaded words alcohol and men entered her head at the same time. There had been plenty of alcohol—that was part of their business. For her it helped her sleep, or have fun. But when she'd had too much, her problems bubbled to the surface and an angry argument would ensue, Martin making her out to be the world's greatest bitch, screaming shrew and alcoholic.

Finally realising her problem would not go away, she decided to make a solution come to her. She shed seven kilos, slipped back into her 'Meg' clothes, as opposed to her stodgy work clothes, grew her hair longer, began to wear make-up and perfume again. She determined to smile a lot more and gradually became aware of the looks of admiration when she walked into a room. She liked how it felt. It's how it felt before she met Martin, oh so many years ago.

She buttoned a Calvin Klein white shirt and tucked it into her jeans. The shirt had been a gift, and she tenderly fingered the collar as she remembered Paul.

He was lovely, such a gentleman. Such an understanding soul. He hadn't so much as touched her, but he knew of her sadness and just let her chatter away into the night. He was a computer analyst, away on a holiday in Australia from the States. They'd sat up late after all the guests had gone to bed, after Martin had taken off early—no doubt to catch the big game on telly.

Paul had chosen her establishment, a bed and breakfast, because of a solid recommendation from friends who visited the year before. He also took one of Meg and Martin's tours into the wilderness and was having the time of his life.

He'd sent the shirt as a token of his appreciation of her hospitality. For Martin he'd sent a souvenir hat. Poor Martin had noted the difference in gifts—even he knew who CK was.

Tim, another short stay visitor, still called her from time to time, but his calls were now few and far between. He was a friend, long distance, and likely to remain so. She'd toyed with the idea of visiting him once, but it had come to nothing. She hadn't been able to bring herself to that. Yet.

There were others, but still nobody who had taken her fancy, nobody who might have remotely sparked her interest and who would leave her giddy with excitement.

She hauled on her socks and riding boots. Besides, she was now nearly forty. Well, eighteen months off. Married, though thankfully—because of the state of the marriage—with no children and not likely to have them.

This in itself didn't bother her, she had never been interested but the sight of a young and healthy pregnant woman never ceased to upset her. She knew that unless each pregnant girl had used IVF, at some time that girl had, at least once, had sex, had made love.

She sighed. The intimacy was all important, not just the sex. But how would she manage that now? How predatory had she become? Men could see it a mile away and yet could she stop? And could she allow the best years of her life to wither away in a sexual desert until the next forty years stretched behind her like some barren landscape?



She shuddered involuntarily. The predatory thing would vanish, she was sure. And out there were men, the older ones who had suffered divorce or widowhood. They were men who were as fragile as she was, and just as frightened. They were no good to her either.

Some greater promise propelled her. She would keep smiling, keep her heart open. There would be somebody.

Something primal tugged her towards her destiny. She would not be without this precious gift which was her right. She would not go without. Not any more.

Meg Donovan was back.

## CHAPTER TWO

“You know, when I think back to what you started with, this place is a phenomenal achievement.” Anne McGregor watched a tired Meg as she sipped coffee, freshly made and steaming in her cold hands.

Meg smiled. Anne was her neighbor and her friend. “We couldn’t have done it without your help. It pays to have great landlords.”

Anne returned her smile. “Don’t let that take away from all your own hard work. When you arrived you had no bookings, no money and very little else. What kept you going was the vision you had.”

The rich aroma of espresso reminded Meg of how enhanced her sense of smell had become. She must make sure to notice everything around her, not let anything escape. She breathed it in. Roasted beans. Delicious.

“And Martin’s hard work. He’s the one with the stamina for it. I get so beat up tired these days.”

“Men do things differently,” Anne commented, lightly. “And I’m not surprised you get tired. All the bookwork, the people work, the training, not to mention the cooking and the all night entertainment. I’m not sure I could do what you do.”

“It’s simply a matter of wanting to do it. It’s fun, the people are great and we enjoy what we do. But boy,” Meg dragged a hand across her brow. “I am really tired now.”

“When does it slow up?”

“End of next week.”

“Not before time.”

“And it won’t come soon enough, I can tell you. I’ll need more than a few days to re-invigorate my tired bones.”

Anne looked at her friend across the table. “Not sleeping?”

“No. Tried everything.” Meg avoided Anne’s intense gaze.

“What will you do, Meg?” Anne asked softly.

Meg inhaled and fell back on her chair. “Just carry on, I suppose. He refuses to believe there’s anything wrong.”

“Anything wrong with him.”

“Yes.”

“And what about you?”

Tears pricked Meg’s eyes and she blinked rapidly, her focus on the ceiling. “It’s gone too far now for me to retrieve any feelings for him. What was there before isn’t there now.” Her tears vanished. It was the truth, it was sad but she could face it. “I’m going to take a holiday, totally relax, do nothing but walk, read, eat and sleep. Perhaps my perspective will be different after I’ve had a break.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I don’t know what I’ll do. All my capital is in here now, everything that was left after Martin’s business crashed. I just can’t walk away and leave it, have him sell up. I’d have to start over.”

“You might have to.”

Meg frowned. “Not this time. This time if I walk I take what’s mine, what I’m owed. I’ve worked too hard on this relationship and this business to walk with nothing.”

Anne settled into her chair. “Does he know of your intentions?”

“I haven’t got any intentions,” Meg replied. “There’s all too much to think about. I’ve been out of the formal workforce now for five years. Employers wouldn’t look twice at me. I’ve no trade, no specific skills—”

“You don’t think people would jump at the chance to take you on?”

“This is my livelihood, now. This is all I want to do. And I want to do it with a man, a partner in all aspects of my life.”

“And what about the land?”

Their block on the east coast of Australis Island had one of the best panoramic coastal views there was. Meg and Martin had plans to build a new establishment and operate both the wilderness tours and the bed and breakfast from there. And it was going to be impressive. It just needed more time, a lot more money and very careful planning.

But Meg's life with Martin was unravelling fast. "I don't know, I just don't know."

"Does Martin know how you're feeling now?"

Meg set her cup on the table, a beautiful red gum timber table Martin had built when they first arrived. It always raised comments from their guests. She inhaled again deeply, trying to bolster some clear thoughts.

"I told him last night that things hadn't improved. Once again. I told him there was nothing left for me to do but live my own life, now. To live separately from him under this roof and—"

"Impossible."

"I know. I really do. But I can't walk away."

"And his reaction?"

Meg sipped her coffee, set the cup down and rubbed her eyes tiredly. "Total disbelief. Tried to tell me that he'd been getting better... All the same old stuff I've heard before."

Anne shook her head. "It's such a shame, Meg. I really think he's a nice guy."

"While he's a nice guy out there, I have an emotional cripple here. I need a big-strong-robust-healthy-male man." Meg sighed. "Martin could've had it all. He could've had everything. But he refuses to budge on it, won't address it and now, it's too late."

The love was gone and with it any chance of reconciliation. Meg dreaded to think of the months ahead and the trauma that would follow.

"Take one day at a time," Anne said. "Don't make any decisions – let the opportunities come to you. Don't beat yourself up."

Meg refocused on Anne. "I don't love him anymore and I'm married – again. How could I have made another mistake? Why didn't I listen to all the things I knew were wrong for me? I'm well and truly trapped. That's my problem."

"Only trapped by the material things, otherwise you'd walk out, wouldn't you?"

"Am I so bad to want the things I've worked hard for?" Anne shrugged. "Perhaps he'll leave, or move out."

“He might.”

“Could you cope?”

“Yes.”

Anne leaned back in her chair. “Would he do that?”

Meg laughed shortly. “I doubt it.”

“Perhaps you’d better suggest he does.”

“We’ll see.”

Anne nodded. “Something will come of all of it, Meg. Just a matter of time. The right time,” she added. “Do you have guests tonight?”

“A single, Somebody Scott,” Meg answered. “Don’t know if it’s male or female. Just one person. They’re often the hardest to keep entertained.”

“And probably just as much work.”

Meg nodded. But her mind wasn’t on the guest arriving later that day. It was on Evan, her one night stand, and the implications of her actions.

She did not feel good.

The guest was male.

Meg looked into the deep, dark brown eyes. Her stomach fluttered, and a lick of heat instantly burned her head, her chest and her belly.

“Hi. Jarrad Scott.”

The shock of his touch in their handshake unsettled her. “Meg Donovan,” she said and couldn’t take her eyes off his face.

He was taller than her, but not by a lot. His short, dark hair was cropped, tidy, shiny. His stubbly beard was dark, red tinged and she wondered what it would feel like against her cheek. Tufts of wiry black hair curled out through the open neck of his denim shirt. *What would that feel like brushing against...*

Crimson bloomed on her cheeks as she realised he was aware of her staring at him. “I’ll show you your room.”

“Thanks.” His smile was wide, gleaming, and his breath was cool as it fanned her face.

He didn’t seem to mind that he was in her space and she was damned sure he knew he was.

Animal magnetism, she thought. *I am an animal...*

Her bloom deepened. Her heart thumped merrily, harder than it had just a moment before.

*Oh no. He’s under my own roof for nearly ten days. My heart will give out by then.*

Inside the room, he dropped his luggage on the bed. “Nice. A private bathroom. I didn’t expect that.” He turned and fixed his gaze on her face.

Not more than twenty-eight, twenty-nine. Maybe thirty. Maybe not. She didn’t care. Even if he was only twenty-one, it wouldn’t have bothered her. He was gorgeous.

“Pretty civilised here,” she managed. *Except I’m feeling a bit cavewoman right now.*

She explained the rest of the house to him. He nodded and smiled at her the whole time. Her heart was racing. She couldn’t look him in the eye for fear he’d see lust and want, a heaving bosom and a bodice which needed ripping.

She glanced down at herself. No heaving bosom. Yet.

“Martin said I could also take meals here.”

“That’s right.”

“Many other guests?”

“You’re the only one booked in for tonight.”

“I’ll just go to the pub for tea, then.” He hesitated. Then, “You should join me.”

She laughed. “Maybe.” He was cheeky, that’s for sure. A funny little ripple rolled through her again, this time with a glow.

“Well, it’s no good just cooking for one, is it?” He slipped past her too closely. “I’ll bring in the rest of my gear.”

She exhaled, watched him at his car, a ute loaded high with machinery. He leaned over into the tray. Breath caught in her throat.

He squatted by the bags he'd dumped outside the car. He'd already thrown down the gauntlet. Those eyes had twinkled and the charm had flashed in her direction. Its little arrow had struck her heart. Something else had done a little dance lower down.

She darted for the kitchen as he came through the front door, laden with luggage, books and maps. She bent to retrieve something that had dropped from the load and when she placed it on the top of the pile in his arms, her fingers brushed his shoulder. A little spark of electricity crackled under her fingertips and she laughed nervously.

"Could be a good night," he said and threw his gear into his room.

She felt silly, stupid, wondered if she looked obvious, or like mutton done up as lamb. She wanted to rush to a mirror and check there wasn't something written on her forehead, 'pick me, pick me'.

"What is it you do for a job?" She stood in the doorway of his room as he sorted piles of paperwork.

"I'm a soils tester. You know, check the different areas for crop suitability, fertiliser if needed, balances, all that sort of stuff. I don't mind throwing a hand in on the farm when I get there." He looked at her. "Sometimes I arrive in the middle of chores and it's just as easy to pitch in."

She would be at least ten years older than him. At least. "I see."

"I'm never not working somewhere." He shoved some paperwork into the desk drawer.

"Is it your own business?"

"Been going maybe six years now. Wanted to be a vet but couldn't wait until I got a degree before I started earning." He smiled broadly at her as if it was some joke she would enjoy. He pulled off his boots.

"Oh." Dear God, don't let him take off his shirt. Her heart hammered again as that visual hit her imagination.

She was easily ten years older, maybe twenty. She was a hundred years older. Get to that mirror. Suddenly the grey hairs in her fringe were staggeringly long and wiry, and the laugh lines at her eyes like road markers. Did she have a huge witch's mole on her chin? What about the long spikes of chin hair sprouting from here to breakfast time... When was her last bikini wax job?

Would the age difference be a problem if—

She contained most of her panic. “Don’t you have another job anywhere today?”

He glanced at his watch. “Nope. It’s already gone five, so that’ll do me for now.” He stood up.

Meg felt heat wrap around her. His chest was broad, stomach flat and the fly on his jeans covered a distinct male-only bulge. Thank God for peripheral vision ... Her eyes were fixed to his face, but every part of her was tingling in response to the man in her bedroom. Uh, the guest in his bedroom.

“Would you like coffee?” she asked, already turning from the room.

“Tea, thanks.” He followed her into the lounge area. “Nice place. It was recommended to me. I feel right at home.”

Meg nodded without speaking. Either he was doing a really good number on her—foolish old lady—or he just plain oozed appeal, basic masculinity. She preferred to think it was the latter.

“No kids around. You don’t have kids?”

Meg’s glance was unguarded.

“Sorry.” He held up a hand. “You know us country types... nosey. I like kids. I’ll have a family one day.”

“Not married now?”

“Nope. Girlfriend.”

“Oh. Nice.”

What did it matter? She was kidding herself over Jarrad Scott. And she wouldn’t make a fool of herself here. She would not. He was too young, too much of a surprise on her, too gorgeous to be legal and had arrived right when she was feeling the lowest in her marriage she could possibly have felt.

Was there a better time to make a fool of oneself?

In the kitchen and waiting for the kettle to boil, she fidgeted. His direct gaze on her face was irresistible and when she could no longer resist a glance, she asked if he needed sugar.



His gaze flickered from one of her eyes to the other. "No thanks and just black."

Meg's hands shook as hot water leapt from kettle to cup. She wondered if he noticed. Don't be a fool, woman. Play him at his own game. Don't let this kid get to you. "I see by the booking you have ten days here. All work and no play?"

He leaned on the kitchen counter, barely an arm's length away. "A couple of days off towards the end of the week. Maybe you could show me around."

"To the high spots of our little outback retreat."

"I'm sure you'd know where to take me."

Confident, cocky youngster. He was cheeky, cool and very self-assured. But she liked him. "Oh, yes," she answered. "I surely do."

He laughed good-naturedly as she handed him his tea.

"Hey, Meg. I'm home." Martin loped into the house. "G'day, mate. You must be our only guest in for tonight."

Jarrad stood and shook Martin's outstretched hand. "Jarrad Scott."

"All settled? Got the run down on the place?" Martin glanced at his wife.

"He's just walked in, Martin."

Martin laughed. "Fair enough. So, covered the lot in thirty seconds flat then, hey?"

Jarrad agreed pleasantly.

Meg busied herself in the kitchen.

"I'm not in for dinner, Meg," Martin told her over his shoulder. "Meeting on at the yacht club I forgot to mention. Hope you haven't cooked for me, too."

"No." She stared out the window. Not that there was anything to see except her own reflection. She almost didn't recognise herself. Her face stared back as if haunted, or that she was the ghost of the woman she used to know as Meg Donovan. She shook briefly. How silly.

Jarrad spoke up. "I'll be going to the pub, no big deal. Don't want anyone put out just for me."

Martin didn't bother to look at her as he headed for their bedroom, in a hurry to change his clothes and be gone again. Instead, he said from behind the door, "You should go to the pub, Meg. Have a night off. I'll come down too, if I get back early enough."

Meg deliberately looked after him, not wanting to glance at Jarrad Scott. "Good idea. I think maybe I will." She looked back at her reflection in the kitchen window. *What a good idea.*

"Must be something pretty good at the yacht club," Jarrad said.

"That would be yachts," she answered.

She could see the grin on Jarrad Scott's face without even looking at him.

They found a table in the dining room. Wasn't hard; meals at the Murphy pub here were hit and miss at the best of times. Locals kept hoping for some consistency so some nights were packed, some nights not so.

"Everyone will be talking about you."

She shrugged. "Nothing new. They probably don't have anyone else to talk about."

"Talk of the town."

"They should learn to mind their own business." Meg toyed with her glass of wine. "Anyhow, you could be my brother."

"Hardly." He swallowed a long swig of rum and coke. "How do you manage to get along around here?"

"Let's order a meal." She rose and stood in front of the menu board. He stood behind her, almost touching her. His body hummed, and the urge to lean back into him was powerful.

She placed her order. "Rare fillet steak, please. No sauce."

The waiter nodded. "And for you, mate?"

"Same, thanks."

They each paid for their own meal. Jarrad went to the bar and ordered another round of drinks.

*Meg—note to self: no swilling or there's danger of losing one's knickers tonight...*

"So, how do you get on here?" he repeated.

"I have a very interesting job and meet a lot of very interesting people. It's not just life in sleepy old Murphy. That just happens to be where the house is situated. We could be anywhere."

He looked around the dining room. A few people nodded at him, smiled at Meg, clearly a question in their minds. "Would you like to ask someone else to join us?"

Meg looked him squarely in the eye. "No, I wouldn't, thanks all the same. I don't care if they gossip their heads off. It really doesn't matter."

He settled back in his chair. "Donovan's not your married name."

"It's my name, full stop," she said.

"A raging feminist."

"Perhaps not raging."

He grinned. "How is it you've found yourself in a place like this?"

"You mean a little town with one hundred people in it and not much else, surrounded by a half a million sheep?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"We wanted a place where we could set up a new business and this was the only place on the island without competition at the time."

"Bit isolated for you."

"I like it like that."

"Do you? I'd have thought you'd find it lonely."

The challenge in his voice was unmistakable. How could he pinpoint her so easily?

"You can be lonely in a city," she fenced. "It's all right here."

He half smiled at her, paused as the waiter thumped their meals on the table in front of them and marched away. "Looks good," he said, studying his plate.

“Fingers crossed. Go ahead, tuck in.”

His conversation was natural, open. She liked listening to him and his easy laugh. Liked watching the way his eyes danced over her face, twinkling with mischief and cheek.

She'd have to be very careful. This was not just a pretty face to take her eye. A picture of Evan hazily wafted past her vision. Evan had been nice, still was, but the one night stand had killed any sweet affection she may have previously felt for him, and she presumed it was the same for him. Evan had been shocked to learn she was married, so her venturing into that foray had been doomed from the start.

But Jarrad Scott was different. And suddenly she didn't want to be anywhere but close to him. Suddenly it meant a great deal to be beside him, to be seen with him, to listen to every word he said and to revel in their conversation.

By ten-thirty, there was no sign of Martin Wellard. Dennis, the publican, hinting that he was closing the bar, bellowed, “Last drinks!”

“Shall we head back?” Jarrad asked. “There's nowhere else to go, is there?”

“No clubs, if that's what you mean,” she said and laughed, knowing full well that's not what he meant.

He chuckled. “Perhaps a couple of ports at home, then.”

*Home.* “All right.”

They laughed and joked, fenced and jousted until the wee small hours. Martin had come in somewhat under the weather and had gone straight to bed.

By three in the morning, Meg had mellowed out considerably. There were no warning bells going off, just a hazy contentment talking to a lovely man in the middle of the night.

“I think I'd better head off to bed,” he said softly and leaned towards her over the coffee table.

“Mmh,” she agreed and put her glass down carefully. What a disappointment. She hadn't wanted their talking to end. She stood up.

So did he, hands dug deep into his pockets. "Goodnight," he said and smiled into her eyes.

"Goodnight." She took a swift couple of steps to his side. "Thank you for being so sociable, for being so kind to me." She kissed his cheek briefly.

"My pleasure, Meg, not kindness," he said and caught her face in his hands, firmly pressing his lips to hers. "I'll see you tomorrow for that early breakfast." Without a backward glance he entered his room and shut the door gently behind him.

Meg stood in the middle of the room, her mind blank for stunned moments.

A thought crept in about following him, but it wafted past her. That would be just plain foolish.

But still, to sleep curled up beside him, his arm holding her body to his, her head on his chest... The sound of his strong, good heart beating...

She shook her head, switched off the lamp and headed for her own room, her own bed and her husband. She decided that it wasn't as good as the other prospect, but it was probably the smarter option at present.

"You're up late enough with that bloke."

Meg undressed in the dark and climbed into bed. "Yes. Very pleasant conversation." She felt peculiar, as if she were cheating.

Not on Martin. On Jarrad.

Martin grumbled something unintelligible and rolled over.

Meg settled under the thick doona. Sleep eluded her.

Jarrad Scott. His kiss on her mouth was not tentative. It was firm and confident and bold. Her heart was hammering away under the doona and she hoped Martin wouldn't be able to feel the reverberations.

What would it be like to slink into Jarrad's bed and roll back the covers, to feast on the sight underneath? Did he wear boxer shorts to bed or did he sleep in the nude? Nude, she decided. Naked. Bare. Smooth. Strong. Lusty.

She loved that word all of a sudden ... *Lusty*. Hot.

Wanting. Ready.

Her breath caught.

*In a few short hours I'll see him again ... Sleep...*

But her thoughts were anything but sleepy. She tried not to think about the outline of his thighs encased in faded jeans, or the big booted feet which touched hers oh-so-casually under the coffee table. She tried not to make anything of the way he stared at her when she was talking, how his hazel gaze never left her face, his eyes flickering from eye to eye as he concentrated.

And then it was morning. Six thirty. She felt vibrant and alive ... wondered why she wasn't groaning with so little sleep.

Meg slipped out of bed and dived under the shower. Oh, what a lovely few days it would be.

Jarrad appeared just as the coffee finished brewing. He breathed in deeply. "Wow, does that smell good. And am I ever glad I have an easy day today. Good morning, Meg Donovan," he said.

"Good morning." She watched that twinkle in his eye. "Sleep well?"

"Never better," he returned. "Once I got to sleep."

"Must have been the ports keeping you awake," she commented. "Would you like a cup?"

"Thanks. And I don't think it was the port, I think it was the stimulating conversation." He pulled out a chair at the table.

She poured a steaming mug of coffee for him. "The conversation, then," she agreed.

"You're as bad as I am," he said and settled in front of a large bowl of cereal and some toast. "What are your plans for today?"

"Lots of paperwork. Have to get the lunches ready for the tours. We also have a few other guests in for dinner tonight. They're coming in off today's tour."

"So I get to sample your cooking after all?"

"If you like."

He looked up from the diminishing bowl of cereal. "I'd be delighted to eat here with you."

"Good. I'm sure you'll meet some great people. That's the only kind we have."

“Dinner it is. I look forward to it.”

He was gone by seven.

Martin appeared at eight, showered and dressed. He ate breakfast with yesterday’s paper in front of him. “I have to get those drawings to the builder today,” he commented idly over page four.

Meg looked up from the kitchen. “Oh, yes.”

“I’ll be gone all day. Will most probably have dinner in town with the client.”

Martin did this often, leaving her to entertain guests by herself. Would she mind so much this time? Did she ever?

“Whatever,” she said and went back to chopping vegetables.

He left without kissing her, which was also usual. It used to make her feel less worthy not to be kissed goodbye, but when she realised today she hardly noticed, just let it go. She was recently aware that by letting it slide, so had her affection for Martin. Each little piece he took from her, or didn’t let her have, edged her further away from him. He had no idea. How was that so?

His ‘forgetting’ to introduce her to new people they met. His ignoring her when they were out together. His total lack of affection, sometimes failing to acknowledge that he even had a wife, and that she was his wife.

She’d thought earlier in their relationship that he did it because he didn’t know any better, and then later that he was embarrassed by her. It caused some fights. He refused to take responsibility for the grievances she had, claiming she was over-sensitive. Some people did call her sensitive. Perhaps she was.

Now she was barely sensitive to it at all. And he blamed her for that, too.

Meg shook herself out of her reverie. She had loads of work to do today and it wasn’t Martin who was on her mind.

Jarrad Scott and his lazy smile dominated her thoughts for hours, almost preventing a good solid day’s work. Meg pushed on through her growing infatuation, watching the clock as it neared five in the afternoon. He’d be home soon.

How she'd love to feel that way about a man again. To look forward to his coming *home* to her.

She momentarily hung her head. So many wasted years. Why had she let it all go on?

"Deep in thought, Meg?" Anne poked her nose in the door.

"Just flat out busy, that's all. Up to my ears in potato peels as usual."

She gave her friend a rueful grin.

"Speaking of which, how busy are you for the coming season?"

Meg threw her hands in the air in mock exasperation. "I'll be so busy I won't have time to scratch myself."

Anne stepped inside and closed the door. "Well, I have a proposition."

"Yes?"

"Jeff and I were discussing things. I need a part-time job, Meg. Things are not so good out on the farm, and even though we're doing okay, I need a little bit extra. You know, food on the table and all that sort of thing."

"Sit down. Let's talk about it."

Anne and Jeff had always seemed financially comfortable. Two farms, a holiday house they let to visitors, their own home, and the house Meg and Martin occupied to operate their business. "Are you sure you want to work here?"

"Rather here than anywhere else. Besides, it's close. No travelling."

Meg laughed. That was true, Anne was right next door. "But it'd be cleaning, and scrubbing dunnies, cooking ..."

"Sounds lovely."

"Glad to have you on board," Meg said. "And if it were after four, I'd have a drink on it."

"It's getting close," Anne said.

"Can't afford the time right now."

The front door opened.



“Hi, honey, I’m ho-ome,” a deep male voiced sing-songed from the foyer.

Meg looked at Anne who looked back. “He’s gorgeous,” she mimed to Anne as Jarrad Scott came into view.

“Oh, hello. Didn’t realise we had company.” He laughed at Meg’s expression. “Hi. Jarrad Scott,” he said and shook Anne’s hand.

Meg’s knees felt funny, like they wouldn’t hold her up.

Jarrad was filthy. He smelled of something not even the cat would drag in. His feet were bare but for socks, he’d left his boots outside.

Anne stood up, her nose crinkling. “Nice to meet you. I think. *Where* have you been working?”

“I stink, do I? I was testing at Jim Bonnings place and he asked me to give him a hand in the sheep yards. Sorry.”

“Testing what?”

“Soil. But I volunteered for the sheep yards, too.”

“Ah.” Anne glanced at Meg. “Well, I’m off to put tea on for the old boy. Perhaps I’ll catch up with you later,” she said to Jarrad.

“Absolutely.”

Meg turned to Jarrad who stood in the middle of the lounge. “It’s not exactly the done thing to tell a paying guest that he really is on the nose, but—”

“Okay, I get the message. I’ll peel off this lot, have a hot shower and be out to entertain quick as look at you.” He smiled and the dirt on his face crinkled into his laughter lines. “By the way, it’s good to see you.” He turned before she could react and closed the bedroom door behind him. “Care to scrub my back?” he yelled from within.

“In your dreams,” she called back. Oh, what a thought.

She could hear his shower running as she prepared homemade vegetable soup, first course of the evening meal.

She could see the shampoo lathering in his hair, hot sudsy water teeming over that compact body, his strong soaped-up hands massaging toned limbs and stretching down to scrub at legs and feet...

The chopped onions were watering her eyes. She brushed away the tears and scraped the onions into the pot.

*... Back up again to work at the suds clinging to sleek dark hair under his arms, water and bubbles cascading down over the wiry soft spring at...*

She closed her eyes, inhaling an elusive scent, enjoying an illicit moment right there in her kitchen, paring knife clutched in her right hand.

Soup. Soup. Get on with the soup.

A car door slammed and she jolted back. Her tour had arrived back twenty minutes early, the big four-wheel drive releasing six weary, happy travelers all staying at her establishment. Introductions were loud as the driver-guide, Garry, joked and played around as usual at the end of the day.

As Garry went to unload the vehicle of its lunch and picnic gear, Jarrad emerged from his room, hair damp, clean clothes wrinkled but fresh. Meg caught a tantalising whiff of some man cologne and smiled to herself as warmth unfurled inside her.

Georges, a middle-aged, balding man from France, became very excited. “Ah,” he began, thrusting his outstretched hand to Jarrad. “You must be ze ‘usband of zis woman—she who is ze very good cooker,” he said, pumping Jarrad’s hand vigorously.

Meg stifled a smile. One, because Georges had said ‘cooker’ like ‘kook-er,’ and the other, because Jarrad hadn’t batted an eyelid.

“Well, hello Georges. Nice to meet you. I’m not Martin, I’m Jarrad, but I’d sure like to be this woman’s husband.”

Meg burned crimson to the roots of her hair.

Georges’s confusion was apparent. “Oh, sorry, sorry. A mistake.”

“No, don’t be. Delightful compliment.” Jarrad threw a glance at Meg, then introduced himself to everyone. He even helped with bags to rooms and directions to tea and coffee.

“Hey, I could do a job like this. There’s nothing to it, is there?” he asked as Meg concentrated in the kitchen, fearing her thoughts were plastered all over her face. He came up beside her. “It’s great. You just have to be friendly and be able to kook.”

Meg cracked. “Don’t,” she whispered between laughs as he stood close. “I won’t be able to keep a straight face.”

“Good. You should laugh more often.” He sniffed appreciatively. “What’s *kooking*?”

Meg laughed again. “Stop,” she commanded. “Why don’t you open some wine?”

“Oh, is that the husband’s job?”

“Dream on, Mr Scott.”

“I do. I do, I do, Meg Donovan, and I did all day today.” He opened first one fridge and then the next and found a crisp sauvignon blanc. “Where’s the red?”

She directed him around the house and he fell into his new role as if born to it. One by one, as the couples came out of their rooms for dinner, he applied himself to his task beautifully. He may as well be the host, she mused. He certainly overshadowed Martin.

At one stage during the meal she felt Georges’ eye on her. He said something to his wife in French and they both nodded. Meg had a little French and Georges had said something like ‘perhaps they have a special friendship’. Jarrad’s flirting with her had not gone unnoticed.

Guests made their way to bed early. It was ten o’clock, and though all her work was done and she felt weary, Meg didn’t want to go to bed. She carried the last of the coffee cups to the kitchen, rinsed them and switched off the light, knowing Jarrad’s eyes followed her.

Jarrad stood in the doorway. “One thing about me,” he began, “is that I’m not an idiot. And I like honesty.”

Meg looked into those deep hazel eyes. They were serious eyes and she tried to meet his stare openly. “No one said you were an idiot. And honesty works best, always. Do you have a problem?” She reddened at her familiarity. It felt like they were having some kind of lover’s tiff.

He stood with his arms folded, blocking her exit from the kitchen. “A woman who goes to the pub with a guy and then sits up with the same guy until all hours of the morning while her husband sleeps in bed is not the sort of woman I’d call happy.”

“How observant,” she bridled. “I didn’t see you backing off with the flirting all night tonight. Hardly discouraging.”

“I said I was honest. Are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Can you put into words what you want or are you just going to beat around the bush the whole time I’m here?”

He was so close; a powerful aphrodisiac. So close but still just out of reach. She wasn’t ready to take it right at this moment. Her throat felt dry. “Presumptuous.”

“I’d rather be a realist,” he said and bent to her face. His lips on hers were firm. “And I seriously risk my good reputation by doing that too often.”

“You either want to, or you don’t.”

“I want a whole lot more, Meg Donovan, but I’m not prepared to be used up and spat out. I’m going to bed, now. Late night last night. Think about what you want. Good night.” He turned his back and was gone.

Once again, she stood alone in the room, thinking about her next move. How could he do that? How could he just walk away after making his intentions known? Maybe he was just winding her up, a soft touch ready for the taking.

*Think about what you want...* Oh God, what she wanted and what she would allow herself to have...

And the age difference, Meg Donovan. He’d not mentioned it so far but he might also be playing up to an obviously frustrated, much older woman just for fun. She shook her head. Would he? Was ‘needy’ written all over her?

The delightful tingles in her stomach had long since subsided. Left were the rumblings of uncertainty and fear.

Meg went to her room and gazed at the mirror. Same old Meg. Still okay. Still looking good. She studied her face. Not too many feather-like wrinkles. A little downy soft hair but no great tree trunks sticking out of her chin or her throat. Or her nose for that matter.

Up close she still looked all right.

She sat on the edge of the bed. So what was he asking? Only to tell him what she wanted.

She flopped backwards. What she wanted was a man to love her the way she needed to be loved... and to be able to return that love, to have the protection of strong arms

and a strong heart. Was that so much to ask? And was it to be Jarrad Scott? She was already falling for him, she was certain. He was ten years her junior, at least. She didn't even really know.

If it didn't worry him, why should it worry her? But it was a worry. Meg stripped for bed and climbed in.

Sleep was elusive again and as she imagined curling into the crook of his body, thoughts drifted to the way his glances caught her tonight at dinner. How the innocent brush of his arm against hers sent tingles right through her, how her heart pounded as she watched him load the fire with logs, watched the muscles in his back moving under his shirt. And then he'd turned and smiled at her, clearly certain she had been watching.

Her belly tightened low and deep. How would he feel inside her, moving to a rhythm that matched hers? How she longed to dance that old familiar waltz when someone she wanted was inside her, thrusting his way in to stroke and play. She wanted this intimacy to be all hers, to hold it close to her, but not forbidden and hidden and—

Her hand shifted between her legs and after a short time the exquisite spasm came quick and powerfully; the rolling waves all the more ecstatic in her stealth.

When she awoke Martin was beside her. She hadn't even heard him come in but there he was, snoring softly on his back. She slipped out of bed and showered, thoughts of Jarrad Scott crowding her brain once more.

In the kitchen Jarrad was his breezy self. He chatted quietly as he ate, mindful of other guests still sleeping. He talked about his home in Tasmania, his house set on an old farming estate and the renovations he planned for it. He spoke of the cold but beautiful areas he visited when he was there, about an island he and his girlfriend would visit when he returned.

Meg had forgotten the girlfriend. Momentarily, hidden by the kitchen wall, she ducked her head as the embarrassment hit her. He had been fooling her. Why would he want her when there was probably a sweet young thing—and blonde, more than likely—at home for him, warming his bed and his heart?

She recovered. Cheerily. She asked him about home and his plans. He completely obliged, girlfriend included.

“What’s her name?” Meg asked, interested, and trying not to show it.

“Cindy.”

*Of course, Cindy.* “And what does she do?”

“Receptionist for a dentist.”

Meg thought that was a riveting profession.

“Well, thanks for breakfast. Who are we entertaining tonight, the same people?”

“No. All new ones tonight. But only four.”

“Good. Bit exhausting, all that work last night.” He grinned his grin at her, tipped his forehead as if dipping his hat, and started out the door. “See you tonight,” he called over his shoulder.

She nodded. Oh yeah.

## CHAPTER THREE

“How long’s that kid staying for?”

Meg looked at Martin over his newspaper. “You mean Jarrad Scott?”

Martin nodded.

“You took his booking. I presume it’s another eight days.”

“Bit of a smart arse, if you ask me.”

“You haven’t been around to find out, Martin.”

“Well, I will be tonight,” he said and thumped the paper down on the table.

That night at dinner, Jarrad left Martin for dead in the entertaining stakes. Suddenly she found herself with two competitive males, each trying to score points off the other.

She glanced at their guests. No one was the least perturbed by the rivalry; they were thoroughly enjoying the display by the two Aussie guys, even though most of it was not understood. Meg retreated to the kitchen whilst the men battled it out, albeit in a restrained, but reasonably friendly manner.

Martin folded first. He was tired, had been working hard all week on his projects and as usual, was not up to late nights unless he could watch television. He didn’t consider entertaining his guests part of the job, and he easily tired of them. He checked with Meg to see that she had the last of the work under control, excused himself, and went to bed.

It signalled the end of the evening. Her guests retired.

Again, it was only ten o’clock.

Jarrad Scott leaned on the kitchen door way. “Can I get you a drink, Meg? A port?”

“Thanks,” she said, swiping a damp cloth over the benches. “I could do with a good relaxing drink right now.” She came out of the kitchen as he poured two very generous ports.

She sat in the lounge and he sat beside her, nonchalantly, as if he belonged there.

“More tours tomorrow?” he asked as he clinked his glass with hers.

“Two cars, twelve people. A few tomorrow night.”

“Soon a break?”

“Yes, soon.” She leaned back on the lounge and closed her eyes momentarily.

“Feel good?”

“Does now. The days can be really long sometimes.”

“You don’t have to get up to do breakfast for me, I could manage, you know.”

“Okay,” she said. “All on your own tomorrow.” “Aw, Meg.”

She laughed and so did he. The little silence was friendly. She sipped and he sipped.

“Dinner was good.”

“Thanks.”

“I really like you, Meg.”

Meg decided he could do a lot more talking tonight.

He stared at his port. “I was a little bit hard last night, or something. Sorry.”

“That’s okay. Doesn’t do to take things for granted.”

“Got any ideas?”

“On what?” she asked.

“Here we are again, sitting up after everyone has gone to bed, including the husband, and you don’t have any ideas?”

“Jarrad, do you know how old I am?”

He cast a sideways glance. “What’s that got to do with it?”

She sat forward, put her glass on the table. “I had a think, as you suggested. This is what I came up with. I must be ten years older than you.”

“I’m thirty. So what?”

“...Eight years older. I have a husband, therefore I’m married. You are a visitor here and have a girlfriend. That means you will go away, back to her. And you are not married. There’s nothing more to think about.”



He leaned forward, lifted her glass and handed it back to her. "What if I want to think about it some more?"

"Nothing I could do about it."

"I'm not going to let it go. I think there's more to it."

Meg looked at him. "All a bit fast, isn't it? You've only been here three days."

"Who's counting?" he said and his hazel eyes grew large. "Meg, I can't explain it yet. It's like a destiny thing. I knew I was going to meet someone here—"

"A psychic as well."

"You are beautiful, Meg. A cynic, but beautiful. Like someone I see only in my dreams."

"Don't say things like that."

"Why not?"

"Just don't." She took a long swallow of the port. It burned her throat and she tried not to drain her glass.

"It's going to be a long week, Meg. I need to know you're not fooling around with me."

And vice versa, she thought. The scent of his skin drifted over her and she could feel warmth surround her. Peeping out of the open neck of his shirt was the black wiry hair of his chest. She wanted to touch it, tweak it. She sucked on her bottom lip and looked away.

"Perhaps we should go for a drive tomorrow," he said.

"And land ourselves in real trouble? I'm not about to jeopardise any of this for a fling, Jarrad. No matter how much I might want it."

"You said it. You said you want it."

"But I'm also trying to remember what I have to lose here, and how differently you live your life. I don't want a fling. I'm over flings. I want the whole bit. The whole thing. Everything."

"Then why don't you have it out with him?" he asked. "Get it over and done with. You might take a few hits but you'd be out."

“It’s not that simple. It takes time and to be honest...”

“What? Waiting for him to make the move first? He won’t be doing that, I can tell you.” He shook his head. “The guy gets it on a plate. What’s the matter with him?”

Meg backed away first. “You would never understand it,” she said. “Not in a million years.”

“Try me.”

“No. Let it be enough that I am not going to—”

“I know, jeopardise anything precious here.”

“It’s everything I’ve worked for, Jarrad. I have to be careful if I’m going to initiate anything. I have nothing outside this place, the tours and the land—”

“What land?”

“We have eighty acres on the east coast.”

“Wow.”

Glad of the change of direction in the conversation, she relaxed. “It has spectacularly beautiful views. We have plans to build another bed and breakfast there.”

“You have the plans already?”

“Martin’s an architect.”

“You’ll have to show me this land.”

“When you have a day off.”

“Could make it any time,” he quipped. “That could be our drive tomorrow.” He waggled his eyebrows.

She laughed. “We’re talking like old lovers.”

He wound a lock of her hair around his finger. “We will be old lovers, Meg. We will live together.”

“My, what a healthy imagination.” Tears began to prick her eyes. Why her? Why did he have to come to her, and why now?

“Not imagination. I can see it.” He drew her face to his and kissed her.

She reached up to touch his face and his hands gripped her shoulders. He was over her body, still kissing her softly, insistently. She didn’t want to be on the lounge when...

He stopped as well. “Meg, I don’t want—”

“Shh.” She didn’t want to hear talk. “It’s not right, here, I know. And I should know better. It’s me who has to go to bed, now. You don’t know me enough to—”

“Wait, no. Okay,” he said and slipped off her. “I promise to be good. Please, just sit here with me. Let’s just talk.” He held her hand and helped her sit back up on the lounge. “I know you think it’s highly unlikely, but Meg, I—”

“No,” she said quickly and put her fingers to his lips. “Don’t say anything to me, please, that you don’t absolutely mean. Not now, not ever. Not one word that you can’t honestly say for sure is the absolute truth.”

Meg watched as those deep hazel eyes began to show he understood. His breath fanned her face and she thought she would die of wanting his arms about her, his lips on her face, her body. But she wanted a lot more. She dropped her hand.

Not a fling. But was Jarrad Scott her man?

“Goodnight, Jarrad.” She didn’t touch him. She stood and left the room, heart thumping audibly in her head.

By the time she rose the next morning, he was gone. She checked his room and was assured by the mess of clothes and other belongings still there that he hadn’t left.

Her day proceeded with a delicious anticipation she had forgotten she ever knew.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Jarrad breezed in as usual just after five in the afternoon. “Hi Meg. How you going?”

She looked at him, hands stuck in flour and eggs. “Fine. And you?”

“Just great.” He stood at the doorway to the kitchen. “But I think I stink again.”

“I think you’re right.” She crinkled her nose. “Don’t come in here, you’ll curdle the dinner.”

“Oh, yeah?” He stepped into the kitchen. “Reckon if I decided to grab you right now there wouldn’t be a lot you could do about it.”

“Just try it, buster,” she said and held up her eggy, floured hands.

“Okay. Fight. Go ahead, fight.” He lunged at her, butted her with his hip, then he ducked out of her way as she swiped at him.

“You pong,” she grated, “something awful.”

“Okay. I’m going for a shower. Could do with a back scrub but not with those hands. I’ll have to send out for the girl down the road.” He gave her a big grin, and shot into his room, slamming the door behind him.

Meg laughed. He was funny and bright. And he liked her.

The feeling was mutual.

But she was married. And he was a visitor with a girlfriend back home. It was just play and it was time to look at it as just that. But her resolve did not strengthen.

The tour came back and so did Martin. The night continued as normal until Jarrad emerged and began to shake hands with the new guests.

Martin glared a moment at Jarrad, who was his usual good-natured self. Martin launched into his role as host, but he couldn’t snatch it from Jarrad who was by far the more adaptable of the two men.

Meg had wanted to experiment wildly with new recipes and place an exotic meal on the table. She supposed it was her home-maker side reaching out to the hunter as

he returned from the day. She stifled a laugh. Neither Martin nor Jarrad reminded her of hunters.

Though one had definite possibilities.

Instead, she stuck to her tried and true dishes, in case the new recipes failed dismally. No use experimenting on unsuspecting guests.

Meg glanced at the two men in her life, so different. Jarrad would only be with her for just a little while. The thought hit her guts and she took a breath as the effect of the emotional punch subsided. This was no good at all. Jarrad Scott couldn't give her anything.

Correction. She couldn't give Jarrad Scott anything. She was as tied to this place as a convict to a ball and chain. All her own doing, she knew.

Between courses, Martin came into the kitchen carrying an empty bottle of wine. "I have to talk to you about something."

He stood, as usual, in her way. "Can it wait until after dinner? I can't concentrate on much else right now." Her heart was thumping. Not because Martin looked serious, but because she hadn't been able to take her eyes off Jarrad, who was being the total gentleman and not acknowledging her at all.

"Well, yes and no," Martin said. "I'll be gone after dinner, so it'll be too bit late, then."

*So like Martin.* "Oh. What is it?"

"Two things really," he began and got the dishes out for the main course and put them on the serving bench. "I've got the chance to take a yacht from Melbourne to Brisbane. The other guys are going by ferry to the mainland on the late boat so if I leave tonight I can be in Melbourne tomorrow." He looked at her.

Meg had never stopped him sailing, even if it meant overloading herself. "Not much notice, Martin, once again."

"Yeah, I'm sorry, but I checked the diary and things lighten up for you from tomorrow for a few days. You'll be right."

*Such a caring man.* "You said there were a couple of things."

He nodded. "In Melbourne I'd see my client over there, the guy who wants to build the eco-lodge. It'd be a great opportunity."

"I'm sure you can't just drop in on him. You'd need an appointment."

She began to pull baking dishes from the oven.

"I have one. For the day after tomorrow."

Meg didn't miss a beat. He'd arranged it all already. "Oh, I see. Well, it sounds like you're under control. Go for it. A two week sail, you say?"

"If we make it to Brisbane. Might be longer, depending on the weather."

Meg nodded. Concentrated on the meal. The oven. Her hands on the hot dishes.

"I'll have to leave at eight tonight."

Meg glanced at the oven clock. Seven fifteen. "Right."

Martin merely nodded. He waited a second or two. "You don't mind?"

She wanted to ask him if it would matter anyway. She wanted to throw the plates at him and shriek her despair and her frustration at being tied to this bloody empty relationship. She wanted to yell and demand he tell her why she wasn't good enough, why he always got what he wanted from her but it was never the other way around?

"Meg?"

"Would it matter if I minded?"

It wasn't the response he was waiting for, so he just waited, his face unreadable.

"You go," she said. She bent her head and stirred the chicken chasseur very gently. "Do you have your credit cards? There's no spare cash."

"Yes. All organised. And my bag's packed already."

Of course it is. That was good—she wouldn't be asked to pack it for him. "Well, we have guests here so please say goodnight before you leave and not just disappear."

He didn't argue which meant he was grateful she hadn't objected. He'd normally just fade away, hoping nobody would notice his absence.

Jarrad didn't look at Meg when Martin announced he was leaving and she was glad for that. Her pasted-on smile beamed at everyone except Jarrad, and she took the exclamations of dismay with a grace she did not feel, played the game to save Martin face.

She resented him even more, the bastard. Their relationship was all too far gone now to retrieve. It was just a case of her letting go, deciding not to be the work-horse. Or the victim.

She could barely name the rage she felt, much less contain it. But contain it she did, kept things moving smoothly and without disruption. Her voice was steady without accusing nuance or suggestion. It was like a cold hard lump in her chest that only time away from him would soften. Not soften for him, but for her. She couldn't function with the level of rage and futility she felt.

It was time to set things in motion and free herself.

Still saving face, she followed Martin outside to his vehicle. He'd already climbed in behind the wheel.

"I'll leave the car at Tommy's and one of the guys will bring it back tomorrow."

"Right." She stood by his vehicle. "Well, have fun."

"I will." He backed out of the drive.

Silently, she said her final goodbye. He would not come back under the same circumstances as every other time. This time, Martin Wellard was on his way out of her life.

Jarrad's eyes caught hers briefly as she returned inside.

He stepped into the role of host as if nothing were amiss. Between the two of them the night proceeded smoothly, and little jokes at Martin's expense drifted into the conversation. Meg responded genially, stating, as Martin often did to anyone in earshot, that nothing was as important to Martin as his sailing.

Everyone laughed with her. Except Jarrad.

The wine flowed, the stories flowed, the evening flowed. And with the dishes taken care of, the table cleared and coffees finished, her guests began to drift away for the night.

Meg was still in full chatter mode with her night-time farewells when Jarrad stopped her by the kitchen. "What's going on?"

"Simple," she said and twisted away gently. "He had a sailing trip."

"Just like that?"

"How else do they happen?"

"No notice, no forethought? What about you, and this place?"

Meg rubbed her eyes. "He always runs it by me first, usually I have a day or two longer so I get used to the idea. Why shouldn't he go?"

Jarrad stared at her. "You just let him go?"

Meg rounded on him. "He does this. He sails. He's never been any different. He tells people in front of me that he lives only for sailing. That nothing is as important to him as his sailing. He tells them that nothing comes between him and sailing. What am I supposed to do? Yell? Scream? He doesn't hear me. He doesn't even hear himself!"

"Shh." Jarrad held his finger to his lips. "Selfish prick," he muttered, but kept his eyes keenly on hers.

"How do you think it sounds to other people? How does it sound to you?" she went on. "Like I don't count? I know that." She flung her arms in the air. "How do you think I feel when people look at me when he says things like that? They look at me as if I should be hurt. Then, because I don't show the hurt, they look at me as if I must be stupid. Nobody gives me the benefit of the doubt. Nobody thinks that I may have got so used to it that I can't feel anything anymore," she finished, shouting in a hoarse whisper.

"Meg." He gathered her into his arms. "Meg," he murmured into her hair. "Sorry. I'm sorry."

"I don't just let him go." Her face pressed against his neck, her mouth tingled. "There's no reason to make him stay."

"It's okay."

Shaking, angry, hurt again and humiliated, she felt she had to try and make like it didn't matter.



“Why do you let him go?”

“Why should I make him stay? I don’t want him here. I wish—” She stopped.

“Go on.” Jarrad held her at arm’s length.

She looked away. “Long story, very boring. Something to do with bored housewives and my-wife-doesn’t-understand-me.”

Jarrad chuckled. “So, who’s who?”

“Jarrad. He’s not gay. He’s just a married bachelor.” She sank against him, sobbing out a laugh as she held on to her fragile emotions. “Oh, sorry. I wish you hadn’t been here to see it.”

He hugged her. “Why? Because you feel all choked up about it? I reckon you’re as mad as a cut snake. Go ahead, correct me.”

She loved the solid body close to hers. “I’m glad he’s gone. He leaves me without a backward glance, or acknowledgement, or even thanks...”

They stood for a while, and his warmth and strength bolstered her.

“So, are the dishes finished?” He peered over her shoulder. “I have to tell you for all my SNAG qualities, I just don’t like doing dishes.”

She laughed, still hiding her face in his big shoulders. “Sensitive New Age Guy and you don’t do dishes? I’m disappointed.”

“Yeah, sure.” He ducked down so he could see her eyes. “You know my story about not being an idiot?”

“Yes.”

“Well, tell me you won’t miss him, and I’ll believe you.”

Meg stared into his hazel eyes, serious once again. He had fine eyebrows and long lashes. His arms around her were strong against her waist. He held her like he cared, like he loved to hold her.

“Jarrad, I hope his boat sails on an eternal sunset and he never comes back.”

There was a moment of silence as her words sunk in.

Jarrad dropped a tiny kiss on her lips. “Is that kinda like you won’t miss him?”

She laughed. "Let's have a sit down before bed," she said. If she carried on as normal, maybe he wouldn't notice that she'd said 'bed'.

"I'll get a couple of ports."

"Great."

"So, tell me," he said, settling alongside her on the lounge. "How long before the ship comes in?"

"Yacht. He said maybe two weeks to go from Melbourne to Brisbane."

Jarrad snorted. "They'll be five days getting around the point."

Meg knew what he was talking about. At this time of year she knew going from Port Philip Bay to Gabo Island or thereabouts was as difficult as tying shoelaces with one hand. Or sailing the stretch single-handedly.

"I know. But he thinks it's fooling me to say he'll only take two weeks. If I minded, I'd object, trust me. He just doesn't want to be here. Or maybe he just thinks of this as a free ride and he can do whatever he wants and get away with it." She laughed shortly. "Seems he does."

Jarrad chewed it over. "There's something wrong with the guy, Meg."

"When I think that, it makes me wonder if it's just my own conceit."

"There's nothing wrong with you. I can't believe that he does it."

Meg sat upright. "I recall saying that you wouldn't understand it in a million years."

"Yeah. I remember that."

"Well, you wouldn't." How would a normal man believe that a healthy male would not want sex with his wife, the woman he sleeps with every night?

All normal men would find it hard to believe. That's why it was so goddamned hard to fathom it. It's not natural. It just reflected on her, showed her up to be less than desirable. After all, if a seemingly red-blooded male rejected her, there must be something wrong with *her*.

Only, she knew that Martin wasn't a normal red-blooded male. She was sure he wasn't gay, so it'd been doubly hard contending with the fact that he was straight and was simply not interested in her. It bit deep. There was certainly no way she could understand it other than she was simply not attractive to him.

Reason would always knock that idea down. Clearly, men were interested in her. Just not the one she'd married. No way could she explain it. Baffling.

"Meg?"

"It's complicated."

"Meaning, you're not going to explain."

"Exactly. I'm not going to explain."

He sighed. "I can't just sit here and watch it eat away at you."

"You hardly know me."

"I've known you all my life."

"You have a dental assistant."

He rubbed her wrist. "Yes, I do."

"Known her all your life?"

Jarrad inhaled patiently. "Not quite. Maybe four years."

"Ah. Surely close to marriage stage."

He closed his eyes. "Maybe."

"You don't want to make a mess of that," Meg said softly. She eased her hands from his. Picked up her port and sipped. But a recklessness goaded her and she shook to control it. Perhaps now that Martin was on his way she could throw caution to the wind and fling away to her hearts content.

Except it wouldn't be to her heart's content. A fling just would not cut it now, it would wreck more than it would assuage. It would cruelly destroy whatever was going on here.

"How long have you been married?" he asked.

"Not quite a year."

"Oh, I thought—"

"We've both been married before, and I tell you, it's not something I'll look for again. We lived together for six years before we married."

Meg imagined there was some swift calculating going on in his brain. "I sound naïve, but I think marriage means for keeps. Means forever."

"I did too," Meg said, "until forever finishes. I take it you've never been married?"

"No."

"Then think carefully about it. If you want it to be for keeps, that is."

"How would a person ever know?"

Meg thought fleetingly about her first marriage. Joshua. Cultures too diverse, though they could've made it work if he hadn't been so hell bent on pleasing his family instead of looking after his marriage. Meg didn't have much patience left after four years of arguing with the whole damn tribe.

With Martin she drifted into it, thought she wanted him for keeps when actually all she wanted was to be loved. So she bought her way in, saved his financial butt and worked hers off, for him. In the end, there was nothing between them. Martin had taken what he needed from her to claw his way back, and she was left in an emotional desert, expected to live out her life without the warmth and intimacy of a virile, vibrant partner.

"It's a day by day work in progress. But I'm the wrong person to ask, Jarrad."

"Maybe not."

"Look," she began. "I've made two big mistakes. I'm not good at this stuff. If you want to marry Candy—"

"Cindy."

"Sorry. Cindy. Then go ahead. And if you want it forever, great. But forever is sometimes not as long as you think it is." Forever, she thought, means sticking together through changes in a person's emotional and mental growth, or their changing needs, and realising they're a different person to you. But they have to agree to do it for you, too. "It's a game, this forever thing, it takes two people to want it, and I can't do this particular forever anymore."

"But you went for it twice."

"I definitely shouldn't have gone for it the second time. I knew what he was like. Thought I could handle it because I loved him."

"You regret it."

"You're not human if you don't regret mistakes."

“Everyone makes mistakes.” He hugged her shoulder. “It’s okay to admit mistakes. But...”

“What?”

“No kids at all?”

Meg stilled. No. No kids. No inclination. No urge. No interest. Maybe Martin had wanted children but he didn’t seem to care there wasn’t any. Besides, he probably thought they came from the cabbage patch. How else would they arrive?

“I never felt that way about kids. Maybe if someone had insisted I think about it ... but no one did.”

He was silent for a minute. “You’re not too old.”

She was silent a moment. Did he think she wanted children? Did he think he wanted children—by her? Uh uh. This was going nowhere. “Yeah. I’m too old.”

“No, no. They can—”

She cut him off. “I may not be physically too old, but my head is. Babies at my age. I’d be ninety-three when they got to kindy. No, not interested in that.”

“I don’t think your maths is too good.”

Meg sat up. “Look. Cindy’s your girl if you want babies. She’s the one.”

Jarrad looked at his glass of port. “Your shout,” he said and handed her his glass.

Meg refilled his glass, determined when she returned to change the subject.

He did it for her. “You’ve got this place looking great. It’s a real home. All the guests love it.”

She nodded. It was a good try, changing the subject. She sat down beside him again. “That’s what it is, a real home. Some of these people haven’t relaxed at home for over six weeks.”

“Nice lifestyle you have, Meg,” he commented. “Course, I know it’s a lot of work.”

She looked up at him. “Depends on the company. And speaking of which, I shouldn’t be keeping the company up until all ends of the day and night again.”

He stared at her. "You're scared."

"Of what?"

"Staying up with me now that Martin has gone."

Meg sat up. "I'm not scared of anything. And Martin being gone has nothing to do with it."

"Then stay."

"Not tonight." Too much at stake. Namely how she intended to start again.

He stood up, swallowing the port in one gulp. "I'll see you tomorrow, then."

Meg watched as he went to his room and closed the door quietly.

Gone again. Door shut behind him. This was starting to seem like a child's game of tease. Or was it that, like her, he could not be sure of control. Perhaps just like her, he could feel it might be bigger than both of them.

Her bed was cold. Empty. But it had been empty for years, even with Martin in it. Martin. What an intrusion on her thoughts.

She wanted to get up and go tap on Jarrad's door. And what? Just offer sex, no strings? It wouldn't be sex and no strings. It couldn't. She tried to ignore the rolling ache in her belly. She needed sleep, undisturbed sleep.

But with Jarrad Scott on her mind, she wasn't going to get it.

This wasn't helping the fresh start. But at least thinking about it wasn't really a crime of any sort. Just like thinking about murder wasn't really a crime until you did it. Like thinking about sleeping with someone other than your husband wasn't really infidelity unless you did it.

She laughed at herself. Well, maybe she wouldn't be guilty of that with Jarrad, especially if she wanted that new start.

Would it be infidelity if her husband didn't want her anyway? Hadn't touched her in years? Barely acknowledged her as his wife?

So what? It didn't matter. She would eventually make up her own mind and do things the way she wanted.

Hot and bothered, she flung her arm over her eyes and tried to sleep.

She tossed, still hot and now sweaty and when she finally dozed she dreamed of Jarrad Scott on his back, under her. Jarrad Scott on top of her. Jarrad Scott lying beside her. Jarrad Scott kneeling between her legs.

Jarrad.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“Hi, Anne.”

“Good morning, Jarrad. Still got plenty of work?”

“Surely do. Matter of fact, I’m off down the western end for most of the day. I’ll be there late so I reckon I might stay overnight, you know, not bother Meg with a late-arriving, smelly guest.”

Meg couldn’t see his face from the kitchen but she knew his words were for her. She could hear it in his voice.

Anne looked over at her. “Oh, hell, that wouldn’t bother Meg. Heavens, she’s had more smelly critters in here than you could poke a stick at. Besides, I’m here to learn the ropes, so a good down-to-earth, smelly guest to learn on mightn’t be such a bad thing.” She laughed.

Meg came out of the kitchen to take the empty coffee pot from breakfast. “Oh, don’t try and talk him out of it. You don’t want someone as smelly as this guest.” She smiled at Anne but turned to glare at Jarrad.

He met her stare coolly then bent to pull on his Rossi boots.

“While Jarrad’s getting himself ready for his smelly day, why don’t you and I start in these first two rooms, Anne? They have to be completely cleaned. The guests left this morning.”

“Right. Oh, by the way, I saw Tommy down the street earlier. He said he and the guys would drop your car back today.”

Jarrad glanced up. Meg glanced away. “Great, thanks.”

Anne looked at Jarrad, as if trying to decide something. “So, that means Martin has taken another sailing trip.”

“Yep. You know those sailing trips.”

“Yep.” Anne glanced again at Jarrad who was staring at Meg. “Well, I reckon I know where the cleaning equipment is.”



"I'll be there in a tick, Anne." Meg walked back to the kitchen, coffee pot in hand. Jarrad didn't follow. She rinsed the pot, rinsed the plunger, and dried each piece of equipment.

"Meg."

"Just go, Jarrad. You'll feel better being away from here. I understand, really. I'll refund you—"

"That's not it."

Meg inhaled. "If you're worried about being on your own with a lone, older female looking for a broad shoulder to cry on, think again. I'm not the clinging type."

"You're making me angry."

"Then get angry. If you want to stay away overnight, stay away. It's none of my business, and I don't need to hear lame duck excuses like, 'I'll be so-o smelly'."

Jarrad eyed her. "Many guests tonight?"

"Enough." There weren't any. But suddenly she wanted this mini break and she didn't want a frightened male within coo-ee.

"Okay, well, I think it's better if I stay out."

"Good for you," Meg said and smiled, hoping it wasn't too bright a smile. "You've got stuff to do. Good idea. The guys down the western end are great."

He didn't say anything to that. He pulled on his jacket. "I'll see you."

"Yeah."

Meg and Anne cleaned the place like it had never been cleaned before. Anne had a sheen of perspiration on her face when they finished and removed two layers of clothing.

"Wow. Some job."

"And that's with two of us. You move twice as fast when there's only one." Meg washed her hands. "Thanks, Anne. Think you want the job?"

Anne laughed. "Hey, it's not as if I don't know what I'm doing." Then she came up behind Meg. "So, how long's he gone this time?"

“Maybe two weeks, give or take whatever it takes.” Meg scrubbed like a surgeon. She knew Anne knew better than to say anything.

“If you need anything, we’re just next door.”

“Thanks,” Meg muttered, still scrubbing. She stopped and leaned over the sink. “What I need is a new life.”

Anne patted her shoulder. “Keep at it, kid. It’s coming. It’s coming.”

Meg worked like a Trojan all day. Nothing was left undusted, untidied, unwashed or unreplaced. The logs for the fire were stacked, front and back verandahs swept, cobwebs brushed away. The energy was frightening but it purged the soul. And she needed to burn off the antagonism.

By five that afternoon, she wasn’t exhausted, just totally out of things to do. So, it became Meg Time. And Meg needed to do some leg waxing. She would polish her toe-nails, and after a long shower would oil and massage her body. How she had the energy she’d never know, but she did.

She poured herself a glass of red, first. This was really the life. No guests, no men. Delightful.

But her heart-strings tugged when she thought of Jarrad. Ah well, a young fella like that needed to be out in the thick of it. No way was she ever going to try and change anyone to suit her.

Martin had taught her it couldn’t be done.

Before the shower, she waxed first, shins and bikini line. Beautiful. Then a mud mask for the face. Awk! Not so beautiful, but she would be. And afterwards, a long soaking hot shower, shampooing her hair, applying intense protein treatment, massaging her scalp. She soaped her body lavishly with fragrant gel, and rinsed off under the water until she felt guilty.

Meg emerged hot pink, glowing and very happy with herself. A new woman. She wrapped a towel around her wet hair, donned her great-white-robe, and walked into the dining area to refill her glass.

“Hi.”

She stopped short.

Jarrad stepped into the dining room from the kitchen, dirty and smelly, a glass of water in his hand. "I changed my mind. It was so cold out there it would freeze balls to brass. All I could think of was this place and the warm fire."

"Oh." Meg put a hand to her turban and then tightened the belt on her bathrobe. "That's okay. Don't blame you for wanting a warm fire. It does get pretty cold out there."

He nodded then waved a hand in the direction of his room. "I'll, um, be half an hour de-stinking then I'll grab dinner at the pub."

She nodded. Her skin was hot. She was emanating hellfire but hopefully not brimstone as well.

"Have you eaten?" he asked then glanced around. "I'm suddenly aware of no other guests."

"It was a night off, after all, and no. I was just going to have leftovers."

"Let me buy you dinner at the pub."

They stared at each other a moment. Meg wondered why he'd come back. Maybe she knew, but she wasn't silly enough to hope she was right.

"Why not?" she asked, and forced a smile. "I'll just refill my glass and get dressed."

"Yeah," he said, not taking his eyes off her as she approached the kitchen.

She couldn't get past him. "Jarrad. You-really-smell-awful."

"Sorry. I'm going." He turned. Then back again. "And you smell like heaven." He ducked into his room.

Meg hung on to the door jamb. Her heart thumped, her vision was skewed. If she broke out in a sweat she'd know she was having a coronary. Damn! He wasn't supposed to be back in for tonight.

She carefully made herself up. Not overdone. Just right. She stepped into jeans and a top, grabbed a jacket, keeping it casual. She wouldn't do much else for the local. If she walked in there looking like some middle-aged catwalk model she'd feel worse.

She heard him rummaging around in the main area and came out of her room, bag slung over her shoulder. "You want a drink first?"

"I was looking for the open bottle of wine."

"Bottom cupboard left," she directed, and looked at his ironed shirt, clean jeans, neat bum. She detected a subtle, gorgeous cologne. "You smell different, that's for sure."

He grinned, pulling out a half empty bottle of red. "I should hope so. I just about scrubbed with Ajax to get the stink off me. A man should get back to soils testing." He held the bottle aloft. "You don't mind?"

"Not at all."

"You look great. Hope you don't think it was just the fire I came back for."

"What else could it be?" Her heart gladdened.

"Yeah, right. I was a prick. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Understandable, really. Are you going to pour, or just wave the bottle about?"

"Can we sit at the table here a while?" He poured two really full glasses of red, emptying the last of it.

Meg sat and he sat beside her.

"If I stay here, Meg, while he's away, how is that going to affect things?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, me here all by myself for God only knows how long before other visitors arrive and your husband away?"

Meg looked at the wine glass in her hands. "Do you think he cares?"

"I don't want to talk about him. I want to know about you. What you want."

"What I want is something he either can't give me, or won't. Your being here doesn't affect me at all. Except in the most positive way."

"Glad you qualified. You're not going to tell me what it is with you two?"

"It's not what there is between us as much as what there isn't. And trust me when I tell you, chances are you won't believe me."

Jarrad took a long swig of wine. "Do you love the guy?"

Meg found the answer quickly and spoke curtly. "No. I haven't done for quite some time." She shuddered. Just kept up the pretense. And now there was no need.

"That was none of my business."

"No, but I wouldn't have answered if I didn't want to."

He nodded, mouth pressed in a tight lipped line.

"It's crazy out here, Jarrad."

"I'm not a kid."

"I know. But you get dealt some weird cards, at times. You just have to roll with the punches." Though for the life of her she wondered why roll? Why not get up and fight back. Maybe she was now.

He twirled the stem in his fingers. "I can't understand why I'm so attracted to you."

"Oh, thanks. Possibly because I'm just so gorgeous, so enigmatic."

"So deadpan." He laughed. "I meant—"

She placed her hand over his. "I know what you mean. Like, why you feel this attraction when there's ..."

"Cindy."

"...Cindy back home, waiting to be married and who's stuck with you for four years while you procrastinate."

He frowned. "I'm not—"

"Yes, you are."

"You don't know that. Jesus, I don't know that."

"Jarrad, you'll go home. You'll settle in. You'll cruise for a while." He was shaking his head but she went on. "Then, when it all gets comfy again, you'll think to yourself that maybe you should just cave in and marry. That's what'll happen. Have a big party. Be the centre of attention for a day. Make your Mum happy." His eyes were bleak and she laughed again. "Don't look so down. It's just a scenario."

"You don't know how close you are to the truth."

"It's whether or not you do."

“Cindy is ... She’s—”

“Can I say I don’t want to know?”

Jarrad shut his mouth. He nodded.

“Thank you.” She tossed back the last of her wine. “Now, either take me to the pub and feed me or risk having your left leg eaten off.”

“They’re staring again.”

“Some people just never learn.”

“Do you want to leave?” he asked.

Meg gave him a big beaming smile. “You know what? They’re staring,” she said, stabbing a juicy piece of prime rare steak, “because they want to talk to you and then talk about me. They want to show off that they know me, and they want to be friendly to you. Want to test the theory?”

He grinned. “I’m game.”

“Hey, Johnno,” Meg said waving at one of the string of locals. “Have you met Jarrad Scott? He’s doing the soils testing.”

Johnno bolted over to their table as if he had a rocket going off in a strategic position. He was Jarrad’s new best friend and encouraged others to become best friends as well. Business suddenly boomed for Jarrad Scott.

He watched his new friends wander off. “I see what you mean.”

“Thought you would.”

“At least two of them got a question in about Martin.”

“Of course,” Meg said. “I need to be reminded I have a husband, don’t you know.”

He inhaled. “If my being here is really—”

Meg held up her hand. “Your being here is just fine. Why don’t we finish eating and settle in for a few drinks?”

Once the locals realised they weren’t going to be fenced off, many of them who visited the bar also visited Meg and Jarrad’s table.

“It’s weird,” Jarrad commented quietly in between visits. “I come from a small community that gets all a-buzz with gossip and excitement, but I’ve never known this before.”

Meg laughed. “Next, we take bets on which one of them gets the news back to Martin first.”

“Like that, hey?”

“It’s only the gossip they’re after. The women here can be particularly excluding and vicious. But it’s the men who’ll be the worst ones.”

“Guess we sort of protect our own.”

Meg snorted. “I somehow don’t think that’s it.”

Jarrad toyed with his glass. “Eventually you’ll tell me, won’t you? Eventually you’ll let me know what not to do.”

She looked at him carefully. “Jarrad, with Mandy...”

“Cindy.”

“Oh, God. Sorry. It’s not deliberate.”

Jarrad was silent.

“With Cindy, if you love her, look after her.”

“I don’t want her in my pocket, if that’s what you mean. Or anyone for that matter.”

“No, I don’t mean that.” Meg took a long swallow of her wine. “My shout?”

“I’d prefer to go home,” he answered quietly, and threw down the last of his drink. “I suddenly need that roaring fire to warm my bones.”

They paid the bill, Dutch again, despite his protests, and then sauntered home in the crisp night air. Meg thrust her hands into her coat pockets and Jarrad did the same. She wondered if he were as frightened of touching her as she was of him. If she did touch him, it’d be to wrap her arms around him and hug him to her, to feel that solid wall of man against her chest, to know the weight of his security.

She shook her head. She was losing it, fast. Jarrad Scott could no more give her what she needed than fly to the moon.

And the sooner she realised that the better.

“You’ve gone far away,” he commented as they sat in the empty house, tucked up on the lounge and staring into their drinks.

“Just mellowing out. It’s lovely to have a night off. And after the day’s jobs list, I don’t think I can bear to lift my head any further. Can barely think straight to talk.”

They were sitting close, his knee would touch hers and move away, her shoulder would rest on his as she spoke then pull back.

Into the silence went Meg’s thoughts. No matter who she met or where she was, she had the responsibility of this business. By hell, it owed her, not Martin. It owed her. And it tied her up. Or down, whichever way you looked at it. It was almost a twenty hour a day job, exhausting both physically and mentally. She had to keep up with the day to day running of the place, the tours, the meals and the office work. The marketing itself was demanding and exhausting.

Thankfully Anne had decided she needed a job. What a bonus she would be. But with Martin gone, Meg would have to—

But Martin hadn’t gone. He was just away, and would be back when it suited him.

“Meg?”

“Mmh?”

“If Martin doesn’t come back...”

“He will. There’d be no-one else out there to pick him up and let him play his man games.”

“But if he didn’t, or at least if he did and you decided you’d leave him, would you...”

Meg sat up, her bones weary and her muscles sore. “I will never leave this to him. Never. So it would have to be Martin to leave. And you know something? He knows which side his bread’s buttered on, so there won’t be much chance of that.”

“You can’t live this sort of life without—”

“I’ve known you four days. Let’s drop it.”



“I can see what’s happening.”

“No, you can’t. You can see only what I’m telling you. Not the whole story.”

“What do you mean?” Jarrad sat closer.

“Martin has another side to the story. I just wished I knew what it was.”

“What? Treating you like a bloody door-mat—”

“I’d feel better if I knew why—”

“You’d feel better about how he’s treating you?”

“Don’t shout.”

Jarrad slumped in the seat, his shoulder nudging hers. “I just don’t get it.”

“Me either. But maybe it’s me. You walked in at the wrong time. I’m sorry.”

“Nice excuse for burying your head in the sand.”

“Yes. It is.” Meg stared into her glass.

“That’s what they say about married couples.”

She looked up at his frowning face. “What?”

“They say they begin to think alike.” Jarrad leaned over and put his glass on the table, stood, moved by her and went to his room, closing the door behind him. “Goodnight.”

The rush of heat to Meg’s face surprised her. How neatly had he turned the tables around. Her own head in the sand.

She sat there a while, glanced once at his closed door and saw the strip of light under it. If she was anything less of a coward she would march right over there and—

But that had always been her problem. In the old days she would’ve accepted the challenge, picked up the gauntlet and barged into his room, believing that’s what he’d expect her to do. But in every situation where she played out her fantasy, sometimes alcohol-induced, sometimes not, the man simply wanted his privacy. Was sick of the banter and her stubborn refusal to see things another way.

Not this time. If Jarrad had shut the door, he meant it should stay shut. Meg would not beat it down, crying and raging against the unfairness of life.

The light in his room flicked off and a sense of the full-stop descended on her. There was no open invitation. The man had gone to his bed, expecting to be alone, and he was. She need not entertain ideas that he felt otherwise.

She stood up and stretched, opened the slow combustion fire and refilled it with mallee stumps, then went to her own bed.

Her empty bed. Yet without Martin in it, it seemed filled with the hope that one day it wouldn't be so empty. She sneered at the anomaly. In her current situation, a bed with two bodies in it was emptier than a bed with one body in it.

Meg undressed and slipped between cool sheets, shivering a little as her body heat adjusted. She snuggled down on her side and let her thoughts drift again to Jarrad, his delightful sense of humour, his open and cheerful outlook, and wondered what else it was that attracted her to him. Beyond the so-called animal magnetism, what attracted him to her? What sort of person were you and therefore, what sort of person did you attract?

She rolled on to her back. Look at the facts. He's just plain gorgeous. You recognise that. He knows you recognise it. He responds to that. Simple.

*Groan.*

Was it pheromones, or a last ditch effort from her body to get the babies it needed to justify its existence? Well, what a specimen it chose for procreation. If that was ever going to happen, her hormones were leading her to him by the nose.

Thing was, the baby issue was never going to come to ...ahem ...fruition.

*All right, Meg. Look beyond the physical.*

*Nup.*

OK. Get a grip. You've known him four days or so. He ticks all the boxes you have on your list...

He is dark haired, has a good body, seems honourable, has a great sense of humour. He smells good—well, after a shower. He talks to me... even better, *converses* with me. He doesn't care that anyone can see he's interested in me—and, he compliments me.

The list was going to be a long one, it wouldn't end at one page. But how on earth was she going to make anything come of it? Even men wanted something more than just a good rumble in the jungle.

Or did they?

And what could she even offer? She was older, married, locked in to her mortgage and bank loan and her busy business.

Could it be more than just the base attraction? Could there be a real reason, apart from her need and his want? And at what price?

A part of her cringed and she tucked up a bit tighter in her bed. If only the fairy-tale ending could be hers.

*Don't be silly.*

She straightened out deliberately then stretched. No point following this track, she didn't have all the answers. All she knew was that when he looked at her, her heart raced, her voice caught in her throat, a peculiar smile tweaked her lips and a merry dance happened in her belly and tapped an insistent beat all the way to her cha-cha.

Just like now.

Everything drew her to him. Smell. Touch. Sight. Sound. Taste.

*Taste.*

Just a little tongue-touch behind his ear, or a light lingering kiss soft as a breath on his fine brow. Maybe a lick across one man-nipple and a nudge of her lips into the soft hair under his arm. A taste of salt and hard work on his chest, of soap and shampoo in the hair all over his body. The scent of skin hidden from the sun, particular skin, velvety smooth and warm, in wrinkled folds before it filled out before her hungry gaze.

Her breath caught.

He'd be asleep, she was sure of it. And he probably went to sleep sure that she would think of him and be mighty unsettled by those thoughts.

She started to drift off, exhausted by the day but elated by the idea of tomorrow. It had been a long time since she'd felt like this.

Then she snapped awake with the thought that perhaps something final had occurred between them tonight and she'd missed it.

She was right. The remaining few days of Jarrad's stay were strained.

Anne made a comment to Meg about him and took the angry silence to mean that she'd find out in due course.

The house was busy, the tours were busy, the office was busy. Meg was exhausted, though happily so, as it meant her life could run on as it had. She didn't have time to think.

Jarrad had taken to coming in late. He would sit up for a drink with guests after dinner, making sure to retire before the last of them had gone to bed.

Meg thought it best to leave the situation alone. For one thing, what sort of trouble would she find for herself if she did let him climb into her bed? However, Jarrad was keeping his distance, politely but coolly.

Ah yes, she could play the game, and at her age she had no desire to ambush some young guy if he were ... unwilling.

"I'm leaving tomorrow, Meg," he said one night, as the last of the guests lingered outside with cigarettes and coffees.

"Time's up, hey?" She glanced at his gorgeous face, so serious. Her chest was suddenly hollow. "Where's that twinkle in your eye?"

"You've got it somewhere," he said.

"I'll see you in the morning, we'll hug goodbye and all that stuff. You'll keep in touch, of course?" She was trying to look busy but all the work was done.

"I'd rather hug now and not see you tomorrow."

She was exhausted and didn't want to face this night. "Jarrad, I'm dirty and smelly now. I'm going to have a quick shower and go to bed. I'll be up early to see you off. Please don't tell me you don't want to see me tomorrow."

"Now you sound like someone's bloody mother."

"I do not." She smiled but it was a bit wobbly. Meg watched him as he disappeared into his room and swallowed hard.

Tomorrow would be hardest of all. As if to deny herself the anguish she knew she would face tomorrow, in bed she dropped instantly asleep for the first time in days.

Yet the next day it was clear Jarrad had left quite a lot earlier. Meg looked at his empty bedroom and then at the empty driveway and wept.

## CHAPTER SIX

“So, you want to tell me what was going on?” Anne hadn’t missed Meg’s red-rimmed eyes.

“He was a nice kid,” Meg said, sniffing. “And I don’t know why he had to enter my life right now when we weren’t able to make anything of it.”

Anne made some comforting noises. “Sometimes it happens like that to show that we have a purpose in life after all.” She patted Meg’s shoulder. “And he didn’t look much like a kid to me. Oh sure, he was probably younger than you, but so what?”

Meg poured coffees. “If ever there was a type of man to run away with, he was it.”

“And live your life soil testing and volunteering to work in sheep’s piss? No thanks.”

Meg laughed. “Nothing wrong with the romance, Anne.”

“I don’t think there’s anything romantic about sheep’s piss.”

Meg told Anne about how Jarrad bewitched her from the beginning.

“But you didn’t – you didn’t—?”

“No, we didn’t.”

“Well, damn me.”

“Damned if I did and damned that I didn’t.”

“You is a married gal, Meg.”

“Oh, I know. And the honour of *some* men.” Others she knew didn’t have quite the same tack on honour. She shrugged. Her episodes with other men had nothing to do with honour.

But Jarrad wasn’t other men. And he was gone.

Martin returned, tanned and full of the wonders of the world. He asked how the place had fared while he was away and Meg let him know she coped, as usual.

"I was worried," he said, eyes wide, the pseudo-hurt on his face evidence of his guilt at being away.

"Why didn't you stay away longer?" she asked by rote, certain he'd say the opportunity was there to keep sailing.

"I know you don't mean that," he said with a jocularly that made her feel ill. "I have a responsibility here, you know." He patted her on the head. "Can't leave my girl all alone while I go out and have fun."

He dumped his sailing bag by the washing machine.

Meg eyed the bulging bag, knew it to be full of washing that hadn't seen a machine for over two weeks. "You'll do that, of course, won't you?" she asked without looking at him.

It was his moment's hesitation that made her grit her teeth. "Oh, there's no washing to go on? Thought it might go in with yours."

"No, I've done mine," she said. And walked away from him. Gone was the pretence of a welcome home for him. She didn't want him at home.

As he cursed loud enough for her to hear about how the machine was obviously not working, she peeled the vegetables for dinner. Six guests. It took her mind off the awful farce of living with him.

Anger boiled close to the surface as he kept cursing. All he wanted was for her to go to the laundry and do it for him. Think again, Marty-baby. You best learn to do it by yourself. Learn to do a lot of things by yourself.

Though there was that one thing he did admirably by himself.

She slammed the potato peeler to the bench and his cursing stopped.

Which brought her up short. He thought he'd got her.

Meg exhaled, inhaled shakily at first, then more strongly. And carried on with the veggies. Her work came first, not his bloody dirty washing, or his useless house-keeping.

"So, what's up your nose?" he asked as he sauntered back into the kitchen.

Oh, a confrontation to ease his guilt, she thought. Ah yes, of course.

"You've been a snarly bitch since I've been back."

“Maybe that’s why.”

He’d never heard that from her before. He deliberately stood where she’d have to ask him to move. “On the rags, are we?”

Her gut squeezed. There was nothing she liked about Martin, and least of it all was his total ignorance about the female body and its normal functions. “Why, Martin, as a sailor you’d know there’s been no full moon, so for me to have my period is impossible, isn’t it? You’re always the one telling me all women menstruate at the same time on a full moon. My goodness, how did the world’s greatest sailor even find his way home if he didn’t notice there wasn’t a full moon?”

Martin had nothing to say. Somehow he’d heard that the full moon brought on the menstruation of a billion women all at once. For some reason he believed it, probably because he never thought to ask.

Meg often wondered about this full moon thing. About how Martin thought the world’s dispensaries, pharmacists and supermarkets could handle the onslaught of a billion women marching en masse to purchase tampons all at once. She wondered if Martin had ever seen the phenomenon himself.

Meg went back to chopping vegetables. A nice big ratatouille for tonight. Beautiful.

“So lover-boy left the nest, did he?”

Her heart lurched. “Which one are you talking about?”

She must remember to put that special sauce over the top, once the vegetables were cooked.

“That one with the goopy eyes for you. Get the boy in the sack, did you?”

Meg looked at him calmly. She noticed the red rims around his blue eyes. She hoped like hell he was stressing. “Why would that be of interest to you?”

He believed himself to be a master in the bedroom. He led people to believe he was a regular Jean-Claude Van Damme. Or was that Arnie Schwarzenegger? She could never remember and it didn’t matter.

He wandered off to the bedroom and Meg heard the telly click on.

He’d have forgotten all about the spat before he even left the kitchen.

At dinner the laughs and jokes came from guests from all over the world and Meg's life rolled on.

She worked, slept and got up again, worked. Went to bed alongside Martin.

But after Jarrad left there was one difference: she knew she no longer had to stay.

*Jarrad, Jarrad, Jarrad.*

There wasn't a moment in Meg's day which didn't belong to Jarrad. Meg thought of him, of what he might've said as he stared at her, of what he wore, the way he moved his hands. There was something about how he connected with her, though they'd barely touched, had barely bumped shoulders, or shared a companionable hand. The simple kisses were spontaneous. The one time it might have gone further it didn't and was not repeated. But she knew he was there on some sort of level, emotional, intellectual, something... Or maybe all of the above.

She wanted to know if he thought of her. Her hand lingered often over his phone number but it would've been a futile exercise. 'Hi, Meg. No, of course I want to hear from you...' No thank you. No matter what he might have said about keeping in contact. Besides, what if Mindy-Candy-Bambi answered the phone? You just couldn't trust 'em.

*Jarrad.*

In the dead of night her dreams were filled with his hands on her, all over her, sliding down her back to the cleft of her backside, lifting her on to him, holding her steady. Or cupping her breasts and sucking or squeezing a ready nipple. His fingers would stroke and strum her, sometimes his mouth instead in those same places and over and over again...

Sometimes the daily grind was harder than ever. And oh-so deliciously uncomfortable.

*Jarrad.*



## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Six months later*

“I can’t live here, Meg,” Martin said.

Meg gazed around her. The house was by the beach, isolated, beautiful and private. No one could access this place except by boat or over the land they now rented.

They’d sold their B&B in the little town and Meg was looking for a quieter life. They still had the tour business and a smaller, more exclusive B&B.

“You wanted this place,” she said to him.

“It’s too isolated. No one’s around.” Martin stuck his hands in his pockets.

“There’s all that lovely ocean out there. You could get a boat.”

“We can’t even get telly.”

“Aha. That’s the main problem. So put up a sat dish.”

Martin inhaled. “Look. I thought it’d be a good idea for you to be here. Our block is just behind, you can run the show from here easily, plenty of space, but...”

“But what?”

“I’m not really suited to it.”

Meg heard loud and clear what was happening. “Maybe if your lady friend was with you and not me, it’d work out.”

Martin reddened and looked away. “I told you that she’d said that. I didn’t say it... But if I did have the right person here maybe I’d be happier.”

“Nice.” You moron, she wanted to shout. You had the right woman, but you didn’t look after her.

Tears smarted so she deliberately looked towards the sun. All the years she strived to make it work with Martin and here she was having to listen to him agreeing with some bimbo about the right woman.

“Well, there’s only me. So you better think about what you’re doing and where you’re going,” she managed. “Because you will be going.”

Meg packed a little overnight bag and went to help the new girl in their old B&B for a night. When she returned the following day, her house looked like a tip. The kitchen in particular.

Martin was gasbagging on the phone, highly animated and laughing.

The girlfriend. Someone he’d met on one of the marketing trips for the business. It was all over the island and the industry and people assumed she didn’t know. She knew Martin so through and through it surprised him. Surprised others when she let them know that the girlfriend was old news. She also knew that Martin wouldn’t get it up, and would soon start blaming the girlfriend—if she didn’t ditch him before it got to that.

Some new relationship.

She unpacked the little bag, satisfied that Linda would cope admirably in Meg’s old B&B and that Anne still had her job there. She took a hot shower and prepared for bed.

Martin was still chatting on the phone.

Meg pulled back the covers of her bed ready to climb in, and stopped short. She stared at the bottom sheet and the large stain which pooled on his side and smeared on to hers.

The time has come, she said to herself, snorting at the pun. Some people just never learn. Martin, there was never such a fool as you.

“I’ve got a problem,” he said as he carried the portable phone into their room.

“I am well aware of that.”

He looked at her. “What are you doing?”

Meg looked from the stained sheets to his face. “You’re too old for wet dreams, Martin, so I guess you wanked again and left me to clear up the mess.”

He stared guiltily at the sheets. “I didn’t leave it for you—”

“For crissakes, I’m not your mother you have to hide this from. It’s just—just-on!” Her blood heated. “You know, when I used to talk to you about sharing and

intimacy, I'd even have settled for sharing *just this* if that's all I could get from you. But you wouldn't even do that." Her rage billowing, she threw the covers down and began to strip the bed. "Well, you can share with yourself somewhere else in this house. I don't care where. You can sleep in the shed for all I care and wank yourself stupid." She ripped the soiled sheet off the bed, then stared at the mattress protector which she also grabbed by the handful and pulled it off the bed. She tossed the lot at his feet. "First of all, at least I won't have to wash up after you, and secondly, I won't have to be faced with the fact that you *prefer* to masturbate *alone* than to be with a woman."

He stared at her, sat on the stripped bed. "You weren't here..."

"Don't give me that crap," she railed mercilessly. "I've been here for seven years while you did it by yourself and told everyone else what a man you were in bed. I put up with your bragging about something you insulted me about." She clamped hands on her hips. "And what does your new girl think of this amazing way to conduct a relationship, hey? Is she going to put up with the wanking on the sly instead of the love-making? Is she going to wonder why she's not good enough, or wonder that you're a closet homosexual while you tell her she stinks, or she's sexually unattractive, or that you've constantly got a fucking headache?"

"You're screaming."

"Damn-right-I'm-screaming!" She was boiling mad. "And this is not a new conversation. You have a big problem, Martin. A big problem and I can't stand it any longer. The moment you admit you have a problem—"

"I have a problem with you."

"Same old line. It's not only me, it's with every girl, isn't it? Probably started with your goddamned mother. Why don't you admit you're just not interested?"

"If you mean I'm gay—"

"The thought has occurred to you, then?" Meg was steaming. "If you were gay, do you think I'd care? We'd just go our separate ways, live our separate lives. But you don't even have the honesty to admit this mismatch is *worse* than that!"

"Don't yell so loud."

“You won’t even acknowledge that you just don’t like sex. You don’t have the urge, the natural *urge*... you haven’t got the guts to say that you’re *just – not – interested*.”

“I must get the urge,” he said, defensively.

“The urge to be with a WOMAN,” she said at the top of her voice. “But even the wanking you do, you keep all to yourself. You don’t share, you don’t give. All you do is take, Martin. You’re the most selfish bastard I’ve ever known.” She sat beside him. “This ‘us’ is going to stop. So take the bed linen and go sleep somewhere else. Take all your clothes out of here. Get out of my life. And when you find another place to go, go. I don’t want to live this farce any more.”

“I haven’t got anywhere else to go.”

“Oh, don’t be so pathetic. You’ve broken your neck all week to let me know you’re talking to your sweet thing twice a day. Wonder who’s paying for those phone bills? I’m sure whatshername will put you up.”

The air stilled. As usual there was no resolution. Martin simply picked up the bedclothes and found another room. Meg was sure he’d make up the bed using the soiled linen. She shrugged. Not her problem now.

Her chest hollowed. Emptied. Thank Christ he was gone. At least as far as another bedroom. She began to make the bed with fresh linen.

Martin came back to collect his clothes. “I said I had a problem.”

“Another one?” she said, not able to resist. After seven baffling years with him, her anger was spilling over into every conversation.

“I have a job offer.”

Her heart jumped. “Where?”

“That guy in Melbourne I visited before that last sailing trip.”

Meg vaguely remembered his mentioning an appointment.

“I can start at the end of the month if I want the partnership.” Martin hung shirts over his arm.

“There’s no money for you to buy into a partnership.” Meg was thinking fast.

“I know. That’s the problem. But this guy, Rod Brennan, wants a work commitment first, then he said we could talk financial input later. What do you think?”

Not that it mattered, but Meg asked, "Did you know this was in the offing when you left for the trip?"

He looked away before he answered. Suddenly Meg knew then that he must have been planning it for at least six months. She sighed heavily and closed her eyes. God, why did it make her feel doubly lousy, doubly the fool?

"We talked about it."

"Did he know you were married?"

Martin met her gaze. "I never told him."

Again, the lack of acknowledgement. Meg laughed at herself. The guy would think Martin was footloose and fancy free, no encumbrances to hold him back.

Goddamn, she'd been more than a fool for a long time. The utter bastard.

Why did it still matter now? The end of the month was only three weeks away. And then she'd be free.

"I know you'll be able to run the business." Martin left to dump more stuff in his new room. When he returned he said, "So I guess I'll just remain a silent partner, and take dividends or something until we sell it."

Meg was way ahead of him. Her brain had worked frantically over every scenario she'd ever hoped would be the end of their marriage. This was better than any of them. "We'll work something out," she said, trying not to sound too complacent.

"I trust you."

"Oh, I know." *Trust me to be thick as a brick.*

"And we both know I'm not cut out for this stuff and you are." He walked off.

Then why'd you even consider starting out? Why did you let me spend even more money going into something you never wanted?

Her silent questions to him answered themselves. Perhaps he'd never intended to stay, he just needed his meal ticket out of the situation he was in when he met her.

The work-horse. Meg Donovan, the work-horse who picks up lame-ducks and gives them all her money in exchange for love, only to find out love just wasn't there.

It stared her in the face.

Meg Donovan, the goddamn fool.

“Meg, how are you coping?” Anne asked.

“This should’ve happened years ago. I’m truly glad he’s gone.” Meg wiped a piece of grated carrot out of her eye. “I just have to settle in now, soak up all this delightful seclusion and keep the business going.” She tucked the phone under her chin and carried on grating. “But I’ll have to have help here now you’re busy on the farm again. It’s just too much.”

“I know a girl out your way. I’ll get her to give you a call.”

“Thanks.”

“So, how about you come in for a barbie tonight?”

Meg sighed. “I’d love to but the drivers won’t be back until seven, and I have to clean the cars.” With Martin gone, all the work fell on Meg’s shoulders. She’d needed a car detailer and a neighbour with a couple of young teenagers had offered to do the work for her, starting in a week’s time. Not too soon, Meg decided.

“Are you going to do something about that? I mean it’s only October and you’re already stretched to the limit.”

“It’s okay. If this girl of yours works out, I’ll be fine. Get her to call me soon?”

“Sure will. Catch you.”

Meg disconnected. Hit her contact list and scrolled down to see Jarrad’s name and number. Then she clicked out of it.

*Jarrad.*

Thoughts of him popped into her head more often than usual now. She wondered for the thousandth time what would’ve happened if they’d got together. Of course if they’d got together, she’d have blown it somehow. She always did.

She took to the carrot again. No use crying over what never was, and what never will be. She pushed the thought away.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Martin had been gone six months. Six months of hard yakka, keeping the tours moving, her drivers happy, the business pouring in. Meg employed a marketing consultant, a house-keeper and an office girl.

Things had become a little easier in the New Year.

Martin periodically rang to ask for money and Meg had become increasingly angry. In the end, she just said no, and consulted a solicitor.

An offer was made and negotiations got under way. Martin was paid out and by the end of the following six months, she applied for divorce. Irreconcilable differences.

She stared out to sea, so grateful they'd moved to the ocean before the separation occurred. Sometimes it felt as if Martin had deliberately engineered the whole thing. She hadn't had the reins at all.

Part of the divorce settlement was her buying Martin out of the business, and he signed over his share of the land to her, thereby repaying his debts.

As she posted off the completed divorce kit and signed the cheque to accompany it, she wondered if he felt anything at all. Opening a bottle of wine to celebrate The End, she started to cry. She didn't stop until she took herself off to bed, drunk as a monkey and slept the sleep of the dead.

A man, she cried to herself. My kingdom for a man.

Meg spied one, but naturally one too good to be true. Garth stood over her when he met her at a function, his broad chest enhanced by hours in the gym, no doubt. It didn't matter to her, as long as those muscly arms grabbed her and threw her over his shoulder.

They agreed to meet at her house, one night in between guest nights, and Meg began to live the best sex she'd ever known.

Trouble was, she got plastered and all she remembered of that first encounter was in the morning, hours before he left.

Good thing too. There was no way she would get attached, and no way now it mattered how much she drank.

She anticipated his arrival each time, openly eager. His greeting would be a hard kiss on her mouth, his hands would span her waist then slide up to cup her breasts. One hand would remain there and the other would search between her legs, then he'd sit her up on a bench, strip her bike shorts or cotton trousers, lift her knees and lick and lick her until she came.

Sometimes he couldn't wait for her. He'd apologise breathlessly, push into her and come explosively, without restraint. Then after his little rest, he'd lift her to the settee and strip her clothes, suckle and nudge her nipples, stroke her, then lift her on to his lap and press into her again for a long, slow fuck.

God, she thought she was in heaven.

Garth wasn't going to stop. Everything he needed as a man he took, and he gave everything back with immeasurable pleasure.

Meg decided it was meant to be. Martin was gone, Jarrad never was. Things had to change. She was human, and woman.

Garth and the universe showed her she was a desirable woman, yet she knew he was only part of her journey. She was appreciative, but the gift came with a price. It wasn't going to last.

Garth slipped away. His work dropped off in Adelaide and he left for interstate. Meg's heart hadn't broken, her head was too sensible to imagine the affair had been anything else but what it was. Her last phone call to him was to thank him, and to say that he'd never know just how much he'd done for her.

His stunned silence allowed her a small measure of satisfaction. He'd liked her, after all, and she knew now that he'd have pleasant memories too.

The next foray was not so satisfactory, but another lesson from the universe. Oh, the sex was powerful, and again she'd proven to attract a powerhouse of a guy, but he'd lied to her. Hadn't told her he was engaged to be married. She shouldn't have trusted so easily. At least she still cared about that sort of thing.

Meg had ended up making a right fool of herself. Not once but twice, trying to work out why Steven was so slack in appearing for dates. The first time he left her



high and dry was because he'd missed the flight connection, though that was just the excuse, as she found out later. The second time, she just got fobbed off. Frustrated with the innate incapacity men have for honesty, she kept away from him. Besides, sex with Steven was all for Steven. A hard bonk, but with no finesse.

At least Garth was a considerate lover, clever and sensual. Steven was a wham-bam-thank-me-ma'am guy. Meg genuinely pitied the woman he was going to marry for two reasons: one, he was a cheat, but two, she'd have that selfish style in bed with her for the rest of their relationship. Poor thing. Steven was a dud.

Meg felt she was moving away from the gift the universe had given her, and that she was abusing it.

She laughed a little to herself. If she hadn't been drinking, none of it would've happened. Would she never make love the first time without alcohol?

So that was the year that was.

Gazing out to sea once again, her thoughts were far away. A year. Eighteen months, even more time gone and no fulfilling experience to explain her existence.

*Jarrad.*

Jarrad who crowded her thoughts all through the flings and the one night stands. Jarrad, the Someone she hadn't slept with, dulled thoughts of all others into a dim mixed up past.

All she wanted was a partner to share her life. Yet the drought began again.

This seemed to be a pattern repeated. After Joshua, the drought had been hefty, and for a long time she believed she'd never undertake the type of relationship she dreamed of. Now, twenty years on, she was back to believing the same thing. Perhaps the universe was telling her that she'd always be solitary.

It stuck in her gut. And she hated it.

## CHAPTER NINE

The months slid away as the busy season engulfed her. The international tourists flocked to her company and the Island reveled in its best visitor year yet.

Meg Donovan stood over the desk that Helen, her office girl, controlled. "Stats look good for now," she commented and smiled.

Helen smiled back. "We're doing all right, boss."

The phone rang. Helen picked it up. "Island Complete Experiences, good afternoon. Certainly. Who shall I say is calling? Right, just one moment, I'll try and locate her for you. Please hold." She placed the call on hold and said to Meg, "Jarrad Scott."

Meg blanched.

"Do you want to take it?" Helen asked, concerned.

Meg nodded without a word and headed into her office. How to do this? What to say? Cheerful. Be cheerful. "Good God," she answered the phone. "This is a voice from the past."

"How are you, Meg?"

"I am just fine," she said, a smile on her lips. "And you?"

"I'm great," he said. "Look, I'm here on the island. Can I come out?"

To the point, our Jarrad. Meg's heartbeat thumped in her throat. "Of course, but I'm not where I was."

He demanded directions, said he'd be an hour. She wanted to ask everything of him but he cut her off. "I don't want coffee, I want to see you."

"Of course. Are you all right?" Meg was trying to track the time between their last meeting. Two and a half years? Three.

"I will be when I see you."

He rang off and for the next hour and a quarter she drove Helen mad with pacing until the office girl finally got it out of her.

When he burst into the office Helen suddenly found some mailing to do.

Meg stared at him, and he her. He hadn't changed except for a different cut to his hair. The broad chest strained the buttons on his chambray shirt, his jeans still filled with healthy Jarrad.

"God, but you look good," he breathed and took a step towards her.

Then stopped.

She stepped into his space and didn't hesitate. It was a fury of a kiss, full of pent up longing, warm and hungry, slippery lips and darting tongues as each remembered the other from memories long tested.

"He's gone, isn't he?" he breathed into her mouth.

"Long gone," she breathed back. "And Candy?"

"Cindy."

They stood apart as Helen came back inside. Jarrad shook her hand, asked her if she enjoyed her job.

Meg hardly heard Helen's answer.

"I never dreamed it was like this," he said, gazing out to sea, standing in almost the exact place she always did.

She wanted to touch his broad back. "Jarrad. What—?"

"I've got a week, Meg. I needed to see you."

"We never stayed in contact."

"You never called."

"You, either."

"But we never forgot." He turned back to her, took her hands. "I need to know how you are," he said and kissed her. "I want to stay the week here, with you."

"And Cindy?"

"She wants a baby."

Meg's heart stilled for a moment. "And you?"

“What about you, Meg?” he countered.

“I’m forty-one, Jarrad. I don’t think so.” She let go of him. “What is it you came back for?”

“You. What else?”

He was gruffer than before, angry even. She frowned and decided to change the subject. “I’ve had plans drawn up for the new B&B. Do you remember I told you?”

“Are they different to the ones you planned with him?”

“Of course.”

His hands slid down her arms. “Then I’d love to see them.”

The fear which consumed her fell away. She went to fetch the plans leaving him standing in her front room, gazing at the rolling ocean.

She suggested that they go up to the land so she could show him where everything would go. He drove them in his car, changed gears with his hand on hers, his grip fierce.

Meg’s head was empty of everything but him. He swung the vehicle on to the block, taking her directions through the scrub and up to the clearing. The view was breathtaking. Meg got out of the car, the rolled up plans clutched under her arms. She made a to-do of spreading them on the bonnet.

Jarrad grabbed a car-blanket and a couple of chairs and set up a picnic area. He pulled her down, the plans awry in her hands.

His kiss was fierce again.

“What is it?” she breathed, when she could.

“Meg, I’ve thought of nothing but you...”

“And Cindy.”

“Don’t do that. I can’t explain, except to say that she fits where you don’t want to. I want a child, Meg, and you say you don’t.”

“So I play second fiddle while you fiddle with someone else?”

He pulled her head close to his. “You remember those nights at your place? It was all I could do not to take you away with me. But you had your life—”

“And you had Cindy—”

“—and how was I to interfere with that?”

“You didn’t even try,” she cried and snatched herself away from him. “I’ve made my life, Jarrad. Don’t come rushing in here demanding what was never yours.”

“The hell it wasn’t mine.” He exhaled loudly, flattened his hand on the plans as they threatened to blow away. “I have a week,” he grated.

“What makes you think I’m here for you?”

The silence lengthened as he stared at her. “You’re here.”

“Jarrad.” She shook her head.

“Look, the years apart mean nothing,” he said. “You haven’t been out of my mind.”

“Have you been trying all along for a baby?”

The wind went out of his sails.

She looked at him steadily. “I didn’t ask, I should have... Are you already married?”

His body stilled. “If I were I wouldn’t be here.”

Meg took his hand. “Jarrad, I’m eight years older than you. And I don’t want a cheap relationship any more. I want the whole thing, all of a man, sharing all of our lives. I’ve built this business up to keep me going.”

“I can’t make a claim on you, Meg,”

“No, you can’t.”

He turned away. “All I’ve thought about is—”

“Cindy, a baby and me.”

“You don’t understand.”

Meg nodded once. “We parted less than good mates, Jarrad. This sort of reunion comes with a price, you know. Old hurts.”

“You were living a bloody lie with Martin and you turfed me out—”

“I didn’t turf you out.”

“There was no contact—”

“And you didn’t make any.”

“One last time, Meg, I want you. I want us.”

Meg stared down at the sheets of paper creating a ruckus under his hand as the breeze rustled through it. “You see that area there?” she said, pointing to the plans. “That’s going over there, optimising the view.” She moved his fist so he could see more clearly. “And this wall is here to create a wind break and also a private area for guests if they want to use the barbecue. It gives some shelter from the sou’easterlies. This, over here, is where I’ll garage the electric cars to take the guests to the beach. And this will be the gardener’s cottage, where the boss’s wife takes the hired hand.”

“The hired hand, huh?”

They spent the next hour wandering the block, hand in hand, sometimes stopping to gather the other close, sometimes just to gaze at the magnificent view overlooking land and sea.

At one point he went ahead of her and stood with his hands on his hips. “I don’t know if there’s anywhere I’d rather be right now,” he said over his shoulder. “I must be in the best place on earth.”

She’d thought of nothing but him for a long time, of what it would be like to sleep with this man who lingered in her thoughts day in and day out, to have him love her, want her day and night, make plans, laugh with her, cook in her kitchen, sing with her to her music.

Why shouldn’t she have it, even for just one week?

## CHAPTER TEN

There were no guests in tonight.

Which was such a good thing because who would have thought to move them along? Who could do any thinking? Both Meg and Jarrad barefoot, and in the kitchen, bumping shoulders.

The touching of hands made even preparing dinner a lengthy affair. Just a simple salad and steak took its time getting ready.

She'd begun to pour their next wine when he stopped her.

"I don't need any more wine right now." He stood behind her, his chin resting in the soft curve of her neck. "And I'm not even hungry."

In that moment she felt beautiful, adored. There was nothing in her life right now but Jarrad Scott. He was the air she breathed, the warmth by which she sunned herself.

He gripped her shirt and pulled it out of her jeans, one little tug at a time until it was free. From behind, he undid the buttons and pushed it open, out of his way. He placed a hand on each of her hips. "Put your hands on mine."

His voice was softly, softly in her ear and his hands were warm on her bare skin. As she laid her hands over his, they moved forward as one over her ribs and across her stomach.

She inhaled as they moved together up and over her breasts cupped in lace but her breath stopped in her throat as the palms of his hands settled over her nipples. Her hands tightened over his.

"My beautiful Meg." He pulled her back to him and her head rested on his shoulder. "Leave your hands there." He slipped his out from under hers, moved them lazily to her jeans. He unbuttoned them, downed the zip, slid warm hands under her knickers and pushed her clothes to the floor.

She bent to step out of them.

"No. Stay there." He moved and stripped her clothes off, knelt in front of her, stared up as she held her breasts. "I have dreamed of this for years and years." He

brushed fingertips over the hair at the base of her belly. "And nothing is going to make me hurry." He pressed his face into her warmth.

"I won't be able to stand up." She swayed at his touch.

"Just for a minute." He nuzzled, pressed his face into her, gripped her hips to bring her closer.

Meg put her hands on his shoulders. "Jarrad, I can't stay upright..."

He lifted her, stood right up, and carried her from the kitchen to the lounge room, the soft glow of a sinking sun lighting the room.

She laughed as he muffled something into her chest before carefully lowering her to the settee. He knelt beside her, kissed her mouth, her neck, reached behind and released the hooks on her bra and stripped it away, her breasts spilling out. He sucked and nuzzled her nipples and waves of intense pleasure shot straight through her. Then he tongued his way down over belly until she couldn't stand it anymore.

She gripped a handful of his hair. "Jarrad."

He rose and slid alongside her on the lounge and kissed her again and again... many kisses which lingered until there was almost no time to get out of his clothes. He rose up, shucked his jeans, tore his shirt over his head.

No time for long stares at each other's bodies, no time for soft spoken words and slow caresses.

She flattened her palms against the solid span of his chest as he sank over her, the dark hair curling under her fingers. Her arms moved around his neck to draw him closer, and she felt him snug and hard against her leg.

Urgent and demanding, yet longing to make the moment last, she shifted just so ... a leg moved ever-so-slightly...

And in he slipped. A soft sigh from her, a breath of surprise from him as she tightened around him.

"Meg... Meg." He moved slowly at first but it wasn't his to control and a primal, age-old rhythm took them over.



Every nerve in her body reveled. Every plunge he took she wrapped him harder to savour every minute, every second of him inside her.

She gripped his shoulders, rode with him, higher, faster until a sudden, blissful climax took her by surprise. Pleasure beyond all Meg's daydreams.

Someone cried out. Someone cried. Someone whispered that they couldn't stop, couldn't hold on... that they wouldn't let go...

He held her fiercely against him, and when he plunged deeper before giving in, before giving up to her, he held her tighter and tighter. And when he gave in, he called her name over and over until he could no longer speak and he sank on to her, his strength gone.

The air around waited for them to breathe again.

She was home. He was home. Her hand in his hair and on his much loved face was a caress she never believed could mean so much to her.

*Jarrad.*

Meg closed her eyes to shut out everything but the sound of the humming rhythm of his body now alongside hers. As his arm fell under her breasts he gathered her close to him, holding her tightly, murmuring sleepily.

For years the lonely nights had plagued her sleep, had drawn her days in exhaustion and depletion. And now here he was in her life again, with hardly any warning, large and warm and robust.

She wanted to settle the doubts; she wanted quiet now.

But her thoughts wouldn't be silenced. How could she let him go again? Why should she?

He stirred and she snuggled closer. She didn't want to disturb things just yet, needed to think clearly, if she could.

But clarity wouldn't be kind.

*How can I not let him go? He wants a baby. "Jarrad, I..."*

"No." He tucked his chin into her neck again. "Whatever it is, we won't talk about it tonight."

He remained motionless and she knew he was on alert. She took his hand and pressed it to her lips. "All right. Not tonight."

Not tonight.

Meg took time off to be with him at the B&B. While she rarely moved guests, and only when she absolutely had to, she diverted the few bookings she had for the week to Kate McAuley and the Daisy Hill B&B twenty kilometres back towards the main town of Regency.

For once she would totally indulge herself and greedily grasp every moment of Jarrad Scott.

They talked late into the nights, and by day roamed the beach or the land beyond, hand in hand, laughing, making grand sweeping plans they both knew might never eventuate.

The bitter-sweet enveloped them with each passing day, though their delight in each other grew in spite of it. They picnicked in the scrub behind where the house would eventually be built, they made love under moonlight on a mild night, high on the cliff overlooking the beach.

Her happiness was catchy. The drivers and her staff were worried at first, then relieved that she seemed joyful at last and ready to move on.

Meg and Jarrad laughed and giggled and loved in their freedom until the day before he was due to leave.

He spoke of it first. "I have to get back tomorrow, Meg."

Meg looked up from the bench where she was preparing their lunch, roasted chicken breast on a bed of fruits and greens with a basil mayonnaise. Lover's food she'd called it. "Hasn't escaped my notice."

"So what have you come up with?"

Her silence was longer than she'd intended.

His voice was soft and flat. "Same old answer then."

"Jarrad. I don't want you to go. You don't have to go. Stay."

"I want to stay, but—"

“I don’t want to have a baby. I don’t.”

“I don’t understand that.”

“I know.” Meg could feel her heart breaking. Even for this man, she did not want to have a baby. Fear, her age, fear. Fear. But regardless, she did not want a baby. She was sure of that.

He didn’t sigh, he didn’t speak, he just looked at his steepled fingers then his hands dropped on to his thighs. He rubbed them up and down.

She tried to engage again, but his conversation was monotone, his smiles quick and without depth. Her chest filled with a familiar weight and it was all she could do to act as normally as possible.

That afternoon they sat inside, staring at the ocean beyond. Dinner was subdued, hardly a bottle of wine consumed between them, and when the time came for bed, their first lovemaking brought both of them to tears. Their last was stormy, tempest-tossed and hard and Meg clutched him with all her might.

*Panic.*

She would not let him go.

First thing in the morning, she would relent, hold him to her, tell him she’d changed her mind – they’d try for a baby. A baby can’t be so bad. They’d make it work... she’d make it work... It *would* work.

It was her last thought as she drifted, wrapped in his arms.

In the early hours she heard him rouse and go for the toilet. She rolled on to his side of the bed and into the warmth his body had left. She dozed, then slept heavily till morning.

It was only when she woke hours later that she realised he’d gone.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The shock and the emptiness left her with no words to voice the anguish. At first she frantically searched for a note, a goodbye, an explanation. There was none.

He didn't answer her calls, even though she left message after message, begging him to call her.

Three days later, he texted: *I'll miss you forever; my love. Don't contact me again.*

At first the ache in Meg's chest was physical, a choking boulder cutting off her breath, the weight of it slowing her down, dulling her down. She wondered at times why she bothered to get out of bed each day.

*Was this grief? Of course it was.*

She buried herself in her work, added to her load by filling the B&B seven days a week for months on end until Helen shut that idea down and brought the occupancy back to four nights a week.

Meg didn't argue, hardly protested, but her restlessness still needed to be burned off.

She started to drive the tours as well, something she had not done before except for emergencies, preferring to take care of the office and then the evening's guests. The drivers shut that one down too, as much for her health as for their own earnings.

Months passed before Meg finally relented and let go, let things get back to how they were before. By now the physical ache was muted and bearable.

Her body lay dormant in its needs. Her mind could not tempt or tease out the feelings he had invoked in her and nothing would substitute for his touch on her body.

She stepped through life sure in the knowledge that, though she had let him go for all the right reasons, she never understood how she actually did it.

Finally the hours and days when she answered each phone call hoping it would be him subsided. She'd thought of calling or texting him but always pulled up short, never able to do it. What would she be interfering with if he did answer? His new

life? Would she risk hearing the resentment in his voice, the accusation he'd throw at her? Or his voice saying he'd moved on. She would feel well left behind.

She couldn't face that. Her cowardice was her shield.

Meg could now believe people who told her that they'd dreamed of this or that, how vivid the people in those dreams were. How real had Jarrad's touch been in her dreams night after night? So real that after she finally slept, she would wake in the dead of night convinced he'd crept back into her house, into her room and her bed and was lying naked and warm beside her.

How real did it seem when she'd feel him rise over her to kiss her and scrape his chin over her shoulder, her neck and carefully, oh-so-gently over a breast and down over her belly and down, down...

More often she awoke with a start, and with a sureness that he'd been there in her bed with her, loving her. She'd reach a hand over the place where he would have been only to feel the cool sheets, the space bereft of his body heat.

She knew she couldn't have his babies, nor would she have, and it didn't matter really. If she hadn't sent him away and he still wanted children and she still refused, sooner or later he would have left. If she'd had children she didn't want, she would have resented that and made their lives a misery. No. In this she was right to refuse him.

Leave him free to have his kids.

At times, she thought she was merely missing him, and that in itself was her grief. Other times she thought it was simply an overworked emotional state.

She risked her sanity, feared sinking further into the madness of it. His departure had weighed too heavily. She knew she had to go into combat to stay afloat and press on, to keep depression at bay.

Perhaps she would go mad. Then again, people who were mad rarely had an insight into their madness. It wasn't madness for her then, after all.

She would distance herself somehow from the emptiness. It took a long time working through it. It was grief, pure and simple. She was ill-equipped to deal with it. She struggled, drank, slept fitfully, hid herself away and still she pressed on.

The best she could do was distract herself and once again, she threw herself into the business.

By the end of the first year she'd resigned herself to just filling her day, to getting out of bed, putting one foot in front of the next, to breathe in and out, to work, to rest. And to remember what it had been like with him.

Still she wondered for the millionth time what she had done.

Anne would come to visit. "You need to get out more," she'd say.

They'd both chuckle. "Soon as I can take a break," Meg would answer, knowing the break would never be taken.

At one point, Anne—who was not a touchy-feely person—reached across the table and placed her hand on Meg's. "There is life after him."

Meg nodded. "I know." She inhaled deeply. "I'm living it."

"He's not dead, Meg. You could pick up the phone and talk to him."

Meg looked at her friend. "Yes, I could do that. But I'm not sure I want to know about the happy life he's leading, or about his wife, his kids."

"How will you know unless you contact him?"

"And what do I want to find out? That he's happy? I already know that."

"You don't know any such thing."

"Don't need to ring him to know I'm not happy."

"Meg." Anne's soft admonishing was not lost.

Meg shrugged it off. "I wouldn't want to sound like an ex-lover trying to come back on the scene. I've had that happen to me before and it's awkward and nasty. People move on. I'm sure he has."

Anne fell silent for a moment, withdrew her hand and topped up their glasses with Chablis. "You two would be able to pick up where you left off."

Meg shrugged again. The thought of calling was tempting, but the reality would be a cold shower. "I think Jarrad Scott was my last man. He should stay in my past now. Leave the hurt there."

"You'll get over that bit and remember only the good bits. Hurt passes, it always does."

Meg nodded in silence. She knew she'd get over it, and she meant he would be her last. Not because she didn't want to love, but because it was never successful for her. All this time since Jarrad, because their relationship—or the chance of one—had failed, it was more proof of her ineptitude. She wouldn't try again. She just didn't know how to go about it and succeed.

"I'm terrified I'll end up like others I know who've had multiple marriages and failed relationships. I'll end up bejeweled and made-up like some crazy old lady. I feel like I'm already on my way."

"It happens to men, too, you know. And I agree, you're sounding a bit crazy," Anne said. "You don't have the jewels and the overdone make-up, though."

Meg laughed a little. But that terrifying image of crazy old lady beset her.

The hurt of missing Jarrad was too high a price to pay. The loneliness, the bewilderment, the trying to make sense of what happened to her over the years, and why, was more than she could bear.

Sometimes she thought she could grasp the reason, but it always eluded her. She couldn't sustain relationships—she'd proved it over and over again.

"I can't ring him. It wouldn't be right. He probably has a new life, nothing that belongs to me. I'll be able to let it go soon, I promise."

Meg waved her friend goodbye and sat down at the dining table, gazing at the ocean once again. It was calm today, tiny waves lapping incessantly at the shore.

For the umpteenth time she wondered what was in her that sent men running for the hills, or what attracted men like Martin or Joshua or any of the others she managed to draw into her life? Why did she accept those losers? Did she think she deserved to chain herself to a less than fulfilling life?

She didn't know. And couldn't find the answers. It was better to withdraw and shore up some self-preservation and strength.

So she did.

And the years wandered on.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Six years on*

The young red-haired woman had one of those serious looks about her. She and her husband—Meg assumed it was a husband—had just signed the paperwork to purchase the touring company and the beach house from her.

Clodagh and Dex seemed an odd mix, but Meg's solicitor assured her they had the money. It should all proceed quite smoothly. Meg had negotiated to stay at the beach house until her own place was built on the hill beyond. She would continue to operate a B&B but on a much smaller scale, not in competition with Clodagh—Cloudy as she preferred to be called—and Dex, but as an adjunct.

As work was already underway, the extra three months she needed would fly. It would take all that time to do a proper hand-over of the business, outfit the new place with furniture and landscaping, begin to operate solely as a B&B, taking the overload from Cloudy and Dex.

The drivers had all been informed that their jobs were safe. Helen would continue to work for the touring company and would be in touch almost daily with Meg.

The transition went seamlessly. Meg lived in the new place and the drivers picked up their tour vehicles and passengers from Cloudy's below on the beach front and their extra passengers from Meg's on the way past. It was working extremely well.

Today the early sky was bright blue, the air crisp and the salt on the breeze was sharp. She'd had four guests the night before and they were touring today with her old company. Cloudy and Dex had come up to say hello and to see off their touring clients. They waved goodbye and headed off.

Meg was outside with them all as the drivers pulled in to pick up the guests and their luggage. She noticed a third vehicle coming in from the main road and presumed it to be her mail arriving in a neighbour's vehicle.

It wound its way up her driveway. Garry, one of the tour guides, greeted the driver of the vehicle when it stopped. Fleetinglly, she thought it must have been someone new on the job.



It wasn't until Garry moved his car off that Meg saw the man who stepped out of the car with a small child.

Meg focused on him. Strange. No one was booked in today.

Her heart did a leap. "Jarrad." Her hand flew to her mouth in shock. Quick, stinging tears of disbelief filled her eyes. "Is that you, Jarrad?"

The man smiled and her heart leapt again. There could be no other man on earth with that smile, that wonderful boyish grin. Her heart swelled to bursting.

Her hands shook as he took a tentative step towards her, the child left standing where he was.

*Jarrad Scott.* "How many years —?" She barely realised she'd spoken.

"Five years, ten months, twenty-two days and—" He looked at his watch. "Ten hours...fifty seven minutes." He stared at her. "Don't get excited, I had to double check most of that yesterday."

She stared back. How many times had she thought of him, wondered where he was and what he was doing? Wondered if this day would ever come?

*Jarrad Scott.*

He reached across and took her hand away from her mouth. His touch electrified her and she stared into those glorious, dark eyes she had loved so long ago, still loved, with a torment and pain that haunted her long nights alone.

"Jarrad."

"Tears?" He gently brushed them away.

"Must be the sun." Her throat was tight and painful.

He laughed. "Must be." He cupped her face in his hands, studied its contours, and stared into her dark eyes. "Let me kiss this beautiful face." He lowered his head, pressing his mouth over hers.

Meg Donovan's heart almost stopped. She wrapped her arms about his neck and returned his kiss firmly, hoping its meaning would not be lost on him. He was here, he'd come back to her, and she wanted no misinterpretations.

He broke away to look at her. "I've missed you." Then he drew her close again.

His hug was warm, his broad chest and big arms enveloped her, crushing her to him. How she missed this man, how she'd wanted him with all her life, only to thrust him away from her at her lowest point. How she'd needed him. And now he was here.

"Daddy, what about me?"

The little voice struck a tiny chord through the fog. Tucked under Jarrad's arm, Meg turned and looked at the child who watched his father nervously.

"Harry, this is the lady I was telling you about. This is Meg Donovan." Jarrad looked at Meg. "It is still Donovan, isn't it?"

Meg laughed through her tears. "Yes." She held her hand out to the little boy. "Hello."

"I'm Harry and I'm five."

This was his child. Meg took a deep breath. The little boy was so like his father, she wondered what his mother Cindy looked like. Harry had Jarrad's open face, his dark, tousled hair, his generous grin. Her heart lurched and she swayed in Jarrad's firm grip about her waist. His child. "Five. Well, that is a grand age. Would you like to come see my house?"

"Yes. Dad always talks about this house. He says—"

"Remember what else I said, Harry," his father warned. "Watch your manners."

"Come on," said Meg, tugging the little boy's hand. "Let me see if I can find some lemonade or an icy-pole."

They moved off to the house, a threesome, and she laughed. Jarrad wasn't relinquishing his hold on her.

"Hopefully I can find us something stronger than lemonade," she said.

Jarrad deposited Harry on the floor overlooking the magnificent view. The boy slurped from a large glass of lemonade and an ice cream cone alternately, under orders not to spill a drop.

Meg took Jarrad's hand. "What do you think?" Her free hand swept around the room.

"It's wonderful. You've done a great job. You must be very proud of yourself."

She smiled at him. "It had as much of your input as mine."

He took a seat at the large dining table. "Will you have a drink with me?"

"A rum and coke?"

He laughed. "Not this early. How about a white wine?"

She poured two large crystal goblets and she knew her hands were visibly shaking. She sat beside him.

"Have you been all right?" he asked as they chinked the glasses.

"Fine. You?"

"Fine."

Meg nodded knowing neither had been fine. "He's a gorgeous boy, Jarrad."

"Yes, he is." He bent his head and studied his wine.

"Do you have other kids?"

"No. Only Harry."

"Not trying for more?" Her breath had caught as she asked the question, but her voice was steady.

He looked at her thoughtfully before answering. "No. I'm divorced from Cindy. That's why I've come. I want to see you again."

*He'd married her. He'd divorced her.*

Meg's heart still raced. Elated to see him again, she studied him openly. His hair was flecked with grey at the temples, and a few grey strands streaked the thick, dark hair across his head. The wiry hair on his chest curled through the open shirt collar and, like long ago, she longed to reach across and touch it, lay her hand on his big chest.

He would be thirty-eight or nine now.

She felt fresh tears coming. It would be so cruel if he'd shown up just to boost his ego. Would he do that?

The tears cleared before they had a chance to spill. No, she reasoned. He was always honest with her, even though he'd broken her heart. They had always agreed to be honest.

He was here because he wanted to see her.

"It's been too long, Meg. I needed to see you." He laid his hand over hers.

Her skin tingled where he touched it. How often had she imagined that tingling? How often had she tortured herself thinking he might one day return? She turned her hand and intertwined her fingers with his.

"How long are you here for?" There was no sense being taken by surprise again if he was going to leave in an hour.

He shrugged. "I have to have Harry back on Monday."

"Well, I'm sure I can put the two of you up, if you'd like that." Three days. A lot can happen in three days. It always did when they got together. It always clicked smoothly into place every time they laid eyes on each other.

Meg didn't ask about Harry's mother. Nothing was going to mar this wonderful meeting.

"I would, very much. You look great, Meg. Just the same as you always did."

"So do you. I do detect a distinguished aging."

"You like it? It kinda grows on me."

She laughed again, put her hand to her hair and was about to say something.

He held up a hand. "Don't tell me about your age," he said, quietly interrupting her. "I don't want to hear that. You look like the woman I fell in love with eight years ago. You look even better now. I still love you, Meg."

She inhaled sharply. "You've already caught me by surprise. Let me get used to seeing you again."

He ran his hand up her arm and down again, played with her fingers, turned her palm upwards. He seemed to want to stare at every part of her. "Do you want to get used to it? Is there anyone else?"

She shook her head. There hadn't been another man to take his place. She had finished with men not long after she'd sent him away. Besides, she'd wanted no one else. "No one."

She looked into his hazel eyes. How long had she waited, hoping? How long had she wanted to throw all caution to the wind and rush into his arms the moment he held them wide for her?

Now it frightened her. She would be fifty in four years. It was more frightening to her now, seeing him beside her as a mature man, and somebody's father. Eight years her junior.

Her hesitation was not lost on him. "I don't care if you're a hundred and fifty. It makes no difference to me and it never did. It took me all my guts to come to the island knowing that there was an enormous chance some other bloke had married you off. You sent me packing back then."

She glanced at Harry who was making sure neither the drink nor the ice-cream spilled onto the cool terracotta tiles beneath his bottom.

"You could've found out somehow before you arrived."

Jarrad shook his head. "I didn't want to know."

Hurt dredged up from her boots. "I couldn't give you what you wanted back then."

He shook his head again. "You *wouldn't* give it."

"I was forty years of age."

"You were thirty-nine."

"And married to someone else."

"You'd separated by the time I came back. You sent *me* away, not the other way round, remember?"

Meg shifted uncomfortably. It was the same old argument. For so long she had cursed herself because of her cowardice. She hadn't been interested in having a child, and when she decided she could, just to hold on to him, she was too late. He'd gone, disappeared in the night.

She reddened. She had been the fool and had sent him away by not speaking up sooner. By not knowing sooner. Now he was back asking to take up where they left off. Had she changed at all? Could they pick up the pieces, scattered as they were across their intertwined lives?

Now he had his Harry. Now it wouldn't matter that they didn't have a child together. There was a little ping in her stomach when she thought about that.

She looked at Jarrad. "Well, he's a great looking little kid. I'm very glad for you."

He shifted in his seat, leaned across the table. "Don't turn me away, Meg. I don't want to be without you. Do you understand me? There's nothing to stop this now, unless you don't want it anymore. We already worked out the happy ending."

She nodded and looked down at his hand covering hers. She didn't want to allow her decision to come quickly. It would be too easy to give in, too painful to unlock all that emotion, too tormenting to know the hurt was seeping away, and with it, all her defenses.

If she gave in this time and he left, it would kill her.

"That was before the sad one. And the six year break. I have to think about it."

He took both her hands in his. "I know you're nervous about letting it all happen again. God knows I am, but not because I know it wouldn't work." He squeezed her hands. "But because I know it would. Let's not waste any more time." He stood up. "Can we leave Harry with someone for a little while? I'd like to take a walk around this place."

"Andrea will be along in a few minutes. She's my help in the guest rooms. She has kids of her own, he'll be fine."

"Take me on a tour of the house until she arrives."

Harry trotted behind them as far as the guest rooms. Beyond that, the beautiful carpets and furnishings within would not have stood up well under a five year old's ice-cream and lemonade slurping and dripping. They waited while Andrea parked her vehicle, was introduced, and took the happy Harry away.

Jarrad took her in his arms. "I'm not letting you go, Meg."

She kissed his cheek. "Mmm, but you do feel good, Jarrad Scott. It is just wonderful to see you again." She took his hand. "Come on, let's go on this little tour."

He followed her on to the verandah and took a deep breath. "You don't know how often I've wanted to stand here with you and take all this in." He stood behind her, wrapping his arms around her and hugging her close.

She leaned against his chest, rested her head on his shoulder and for the first time ever, she didn't see the view at all.

She couldn't speak. This was everything she'd dreamed of for six years. His arms around her, holding her securely, lovingly. She rubbed his arms with her hands,

feeling the coarse hair, the hard muscles. Oh, she wanted this man. Yet still something held her back. Perhaps the dream was never meant to be reality.

“Let’s go over the place. We’ll do inside later,” she said. She stepped on to the expanse of land at the foot of the verandah steps.

“What’s that building?” he asked, pointing off to the west where he had seen the cabin as he came in.

She laughed suddenly, then. “You don’t remember what we talked about?”

Perplexed, he shook his head. “We talked about everything and anything. I don’t recall talking about a cabin.”

“The hired hand?”

He shook his head again. “Don’t remember.”

“Come on,” she said, taking the verandah steps two at a time and marching over the bare ground. “It took me a month of Sunday’s to get it approved. I had to call it a site shed. It’s as bare as a baby’s bum, but I had to do it.”

He laughed as she half dragged him, half pushed him, then she went on ahead.

“Slow down,” he complained. “I’m not the fella I was.”

“Oh, you’d better be,” she laughed over her shoulder.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Wait until I remind you of this.”

She pushed open the little door of the cabin, brushing cobwebs down from the entrance. “This was where you were going to stay. Remember? We kidded around that I’d have to hire you to get you into—”

“The hired hand. I remember.” He kissed her roughly, pulled her to him. He slid his hands down her arms then they wrapped around her, holding her closer. “You won’t have to hire me.”

“You’re not going to leave again?”

“I’m not going to leave you.” He slid them both carefully to the dusty floor.

“What about your job? What about Harry?” She started to unbutton his shirt.

“The job will come with me. Harry goes back to Cindy to live, to go to school. That’s the deal.” His voice rasped in her ear, his breath warm. “But he’ll visit us here.” He lifted his head. “I’ll pay my way, Meg. I won’t interfere. Your finances are your own. I just want to be here, make my life here, with you.”

“You sure you want to live here?” Her hand had found the warm, firm chest over his heart.

“If you’ll have me.” He gave her a piercing stare after taking a look around. “Though not here in the site shed.”

She laughed. Her hopes rose higher than they’d ever dared before, but tentatively. She wanted to be careful, aware. Sure to make it work.

She took his beloved face in her hands and kissed him softly on the mouth. “I’ll have you. I don’t want to be without you ever again.”

“Never.” His booted foot swung the door of the cabin closed, shutting out the rest of the world. “I’ll be here, forever.”

Meg closed her eyes as his strong arms lifted her on to his lap. The warmth of his hands on her bare back sent waves of heat through her.

*Forever.* The thought breezed through her head, teasing her resolve, reminding her that forever was not what it promised.

Forever, for now, she decided. It was the best she could do.

No. *No.*

This time, forever.

*THE END*



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