



# Jasmine Sea



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# Jasmine Sea

River's End Romance, Volume 2

Phillipa Nefri Clark

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JASMINE SEA

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# Chapter One

“I can’t wait another minute!” Martha’s eyes sparkled as she reached for Thomas’ hand.

“Always impatient.” Thomas kissed her fingers. “What will you be like at the airport?”

“I quite like airports. Good place to read. Now where is my ticket?”

“Where it will be safe.” He tapped his jacket. “Can’t have it falling into the ocean.”

“Never let me forget it, will you?”

The words were meant to be under her breath, but Thomas heard. With a grin, he checked his watch. “Hope those two get back before the bus arrives.”

Martha bit her lip and he took her hand again. “She’ll be here when we return.”

“But, what if she isn’t? I’ve only just found her.”

“Now, come on. Why wouldn’t she stay? She has the cottage and Martin. And really, who would leave Randall?”

“You’re leaving him.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t go.”

“Thomas! I’m being serious. What if something happens?”

“It won’t. Listen to me. Better yet, turn around.”

Hand in hand, Christie and Martin hurried out of a Green Bay shop. Christie said something and Martin burst into laughter.

Thomas put his arm around Martha’s shoulders. “Never heard the boy laugh that way until she came along.” He glanced behind. “Our ride’s arriving.”

“Oh, I’m sorry we took so long!” Christie threw her arms around Martha as the bus pulled in. “I wanted you to take this.” She held out a box. “It’s a small camera. All you need to do is point and shoot.”



“I shall miss you, dear!” Martha kissed Christie’s cheek, then reached for Martin. “You too, young man.”

Martin offered his cheek. “We’ll miss you as well.”

“What about me?” Thomas demanded.

“What about you?”

“Hmm. Trying to get rid of me so you keep the dog.”

“Randall is already my dog, Granddad.”

Passengers alighted from the bus and the driver followed, opening the cavity underneath. Martin and Thomas carried the luggage over and helped stow it.

Martha whispered to Christie. “Stay safe, my darling girl.”

“Of course I will!” Christie hugged her great aunt. “Enjoy Ireland, take lots of photos, and when you get home we can work out where you two will be living.”

“Have a perfectly fine house in the mountains.” Thomas held his arms out for Christie. “That’s where my bride and I will be.”

“It isn’t settled yet!” Martha tapped him on the shoulder. “Come on, old man.”

The driver climbed back into the bus. Thomas guided Martha up the steps, his hand on her elbow. They found seats at the front and settled in as the front door closed with a whoosh.

Here they were, beginning their honeymoon. Martha reached for Thomas’ hand as the bus left town. The man who had haunted her dreams for a lifetime was finally her husband.

The last time she had been on this road, in this direction, she had been running away – in December, 1967.

\*\*\*

Martha had no idea why they had to leave almost before dawn, but Patrick, her father, was insistent. He liked to take his time, to be careful through the hairpins.

She couldn't remember the whole family going to Melbourne together; certainly not since her early childhood. Now, though, her mother Lilian sat beside Patrick, keeping half an eye on his speed. Dorothy dozed beside Martha.

This felt wrong. Every mile took her further away from Thomas. Further away from making up with him. Almost a week ago, in the midst of a violent storm, she had broken their engagement after seeing him with her near-naked best friend. Ex best friend.

His words went round and round her head. "I will wait for you, Martha! Every morning at the end of the jetty."

Their jetty. The one she had slipped off during the storm, into waves which sucked her under and would have claimed her life. But Thomas found her.

Why, oh why, did her pride do this? Make her say things she didn't mean and, even worse, take action like now. This was no simple visit to the city. Martha was staying with Dorothy for a while, until she worked out her future. Lilian was joining them.

"We will spend some lovely time together. Just the three girls seeing what Melbourne has to offer." Lilian had been so excited that Martha allowed herself to be talked into this. After all, it was only for a little while, until Thomas apologised and made everything better.

\*\*\*

Now, Martha blinked a few times to clear her vision and reminded herself she was in a much happier part of her life. The bus wound smoothly around those same curves, a vivid blue ocean on one side and saltbush on the other.

"What are you thinking?"

Martha smiled up at Thomas. "I can't wait to show you my little house in Ireland. Introduce you to my friends. It's so pretty you will want to paint all the time."

He squeezed her hand. "Anything else?"

The same engagement ring she'd thrown into the sand during the storm was again on her finger, exactly where it was meant to be. Even if now her hands were aged and her once strong body weakened with each passing year.

Tears brimmed. "So much lost time."

"Then we shall make sure that not another moment is wasted. My beautiful girl, time doesn't matter anyway. Now, tell me more about Ireland."

\*\*\*

Christie and Martin waved until the bus was out of sight. As one, they lowered their arms. Martin reached out and pulled Christie in for a cuddle. "They'll be fine."

"Of course they will."

"Thomas is very responsible and careful."

"And Martha is well travelled. She knows airports and passports and all the stuff Thomas doesn't."

"Yes. So you can stop worrying."

Christie leaned back a little to look at Martin. "Me?"

"Well, I'm not worried."

"Right."

"Though I am concerned that pile of junk Thomas drives won't make it back to River's End."

Christie giggled. "No wonder they insisted on catching the bus. I doubt it would have got to Melbourne."

"If you had a sensible car with room for the luggage, we could have driven them all the way."

"Me? What about if you just had a car, instead of a decrepit motorbike! And don't knock my beautiful Lotus!" She slid her arms around his neck. "You are impossible. But I do love you."

"Which is a good thing, or else you'd be walking home. Insulting my most prized possession."

Christie raised herself on her toes to touch her lips to his. “Anyway, they’ll be home in a few weeks. And I’ve got a cottage to renovate.”

Martin took her hand as they walked down the road to where Thomas’ old Land Rover was parked. “Thomas is determined they’ll live at his place.”

“But you’ve said it is old and run-down now. Surely moving into town will be better for them?”

“Do you think we’ll make it back without a stop to cool it down?” Martin opened the passenger door for Christie.

She hopped in. “Shall we make a bet?”

“Nope. Let’s just hope for the best.” Behind the wheel, Martin turned the key. After a splutter, the motor roared. With a bit of force, he got it into gear and onto the road.

“Did you know that my great-grandfather’s grandfather won Palmerston House in a game of poker?” Christie asked.

“A good reason not to gamble.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Imagine suddenly having a property through nothing more than luck and being in the right place at the right time.”

Martin glanced across in amusement. “Yes, imagine.”

“You mean the cottage? I guess so. Much as I love it, sometimes it feels like a great weight. You know, all the tragedy around it and now, all the work it needs.”

“Anything good about it?”

Christie’s face lit up. “Nothing at all. Except bringing me to River’s End to meet the love of my life.”

Martin squeezed her leg. Now out of Green Bay, the twisting road took his attention and Christie was content to gaze out at the ocean. Never did the powerful majesty of the sea fail to touch her. Some deep, primal part of her soul needed to be near it.

Born in the outback, her first sight of the ocean was at the age of seven from the aeroplane that had brought her to

Melbourne after her parents died. She went to the beach at St Kilda for the first time a few months later. Gran forbade her to swim in the sea, her fury terrifying Christie the one and only time she disobeyed.

“You okay?”

“Hmm? Oh, just thinking.”

“About me, I hope.”

“Kind of. More about the ocean. But if you were in the ocean, I’d be thinking about you.”

“Right.”

Christie sneaked a glance at him. Dressed in a checked shirt with rolled-up sleeves and his favourite jeans, he was so good-looking that keeping her hands to herself was a struggle. “I didn’t know you could drive.”

“Why wouldn’t I drive?”

“You don’t have a car.”

“Not a fan of cars.”

“Well, you drive really well.”

“I probably observe the speed limit and conditions a bit more than you do, young lady.”

“To celebrate Martha and Thomas heading to Ireland, shall we go out for dinner?”

“Changing the subject.” Martin observed. “Okay. Let’s go and toast their honeymoon. Their incredibly overdue honeymoon.”

The River’s End sign came into view. Martin slowed, indicated, and turned into Christie’s street. The old Land Rover complained in the lower gear, but was great for navigating the potholes on the other side of the disused railway line.

In the driveway, Martin let the motor idle. “At the pub tonight?”

“Sounds good. I’ll walk down.”

Martin leaned over and touched Christie's face. "I love you, sweetheart. Thomas and Martha will have the time of their lives. So, we need to be living ours." He kissed Christie with a sweet tenderness. Heart racing, she closed her eyes and surrendered to the knowledge that she was loved. Absolutely loved.



## Chapter Two

Ribbons of gold and pink decorated the early morning sky. Christie climbed the narrow path from the beach winding up the cliff to Martin's house.

At the top, she stopped to watch the sunrise. A sleek, modern yacht glided through calm water, sails full as it passed the cliff. *How wonderful.*

A cold, wet nose prodded her bare leg and she laughed. "Morning, Randall." Christie patted the golden retriever. Hand on his head, scratching the soft fur, her eyes returned to the sea.

"Daydreaming?"

Christie leaned back until she stopped against Martin's rock-hard chest. He wrapped his arms around her waist and rested his chin on her shoulder to see what had her interest.

"Nice. But how can a girl who is afraid of the water love boats so much?"

"Excellent question and one I have no answer for. Did you know I learned to sail in California?"

Martin chuckled. "Do you mean, learned to drink champagne without falling overboard?"

"Funny. But I did. I can actually manage a fifty-footer with a bit of help."

There was a long silence, then Martin kissed her neck. She turned to face him, sliding her arms around his neck, her smile like the dawn. When Martin's lips met hers, Christie forgot where she was as her body moulded to his and the world stopped turning. Like it did every time he kissed her.

Randall whined and reluctantly Martin lifted his head. "Your bowl is full, dog." He pointed at the deck and Randall took off at a run. "Where was I?"

"Offering me breakfast."



He traced her lips with his finger. Eyes wide, she waited for another kiss. Instead, taking her hand, Martin turned to the house.

As they went up the steps, Randall came down, licking his lips and wagging his tail. He trotted off around the corner, happy with himself.

“Food, sleep and play. Really all he needs.” Christie said.

“And you. He loves you.”

“Well, he loves just about everyone.”

“So, have you eaten?” Martin ushered Christie through the perpetually open sliding door.

“I’m hungry.”

“Just as well I have food, then.”

“Shall I help?” Christie dropped onto a stool beside the kitchen counter.

Martin shook his head as he started the coffee machine. Christie leaned her arms on the counter to watch him. Only a few months ago, he’d made her breakfast when she’d arrived in his kitchen starving and with no food at home. Frustrated at her apparent inability to eat properly, he had cooked the best eggs ever.

Their brief harmony disappeared moments later when Martin had noticed Christie was wearing her great aunt Martha’s engagement ring. Back then, he believed their families would always be at odds. He told her to leave River’s End. To return to her fiancé. Heartbroken, she had.

“Why so serious?” Martin placed a cup of steaming coffee in front of Christie and sat beside her.

“Oh, thanks.” For a moment she stared at him, then picked up the cup and inhaled. “Yum.”

“Christie?”

“Nothing. Just remembering those eggs you made that time.”

He took her left hand. There was no ring now. Not Martha's – nor Derek's. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"How is it you can always read my thoughts?" She shook her head. "But no, the past should stay in the past."

"Is this some new mantra? I shall not delve into the past, no matter how intriguing the outcome."

Christie still had mixed feelings about the chain of events started by her grandmother's death last year. The cottage full of secrets with Christie right in the middle of it. "Anyway, I did drop by for a reason."

"I'll close the door."

Tiny tingles of anticipation rushed through Christie and it was all she could do to stay on topic. "Not that reason. Sorry." The colour rose in her face.

Martin half-smiled. "Drink your coffee. I'll start breakfast in a moment."

She obeyed with a long sip, glancing at him over the rim. His eyes radiated amusement and something else. The love that she still couldn't believe he felt for her. She put the cup down. "Um, so I had a call today from Ashley."

"Your old neighbour?"

"Yes, I can't wait until you meet him, and Ray. So, Ashley has a job for me; someone pulled out at the last moment."

"In Melbourne?"

"Yes, at Docklands Studios. Just a TV commercial so a few days, I expect. He said I can stay with them if I want." She unconsciously laced her fingers together.

Martin cupped her hands in his. "A hotel would be better."

"I don't even know if he still lives there." Christie stared down at Martin's strong hands.

"Book into a hotel, Christie."

"I don't want to live my life worrying about where Derek is and if I might run into him."

“Please, look at me.” Martin’s tone was mild but she raised her eyes to meet his. “Unless you want me to come with you, book a hotel.”

Relief swept through Christie. She nodded.

“When are you leaving?” Martin picked up both cups and returned to the kitchen.

“This afternoon. Depends on how quickly I can get hold of Barry Parks.”

“Barry?”

“Well, with renovations starting, I need to arrange a key for him and run through the details again. He won’t be able to ring me during the day, which is a problem.”

“No problem really. I know what you want so he can phone me. Leave me a key and I’ll get him and his crew in and out each day. Okay?”

“But you hate the cottage!”

“I don’t. With you living there, how could I hate it?”

\*\*\*

Randall raced along the beach after a sky-borne frisbee, toward the stone steps leading up to the graveyard. In shorts and sunglasses, Martin wandered behind him.

As he closed in on the frisbee, Randall abruptly stopped, his attention on the road above. The frisbee thudded onto the sand. Tail raised, Randall listened to something only he could hear. He wagged his tail then dropped it, disappointed.

“She’ll be back soon, mate.” Martin stopped beside his dog, guessing he’d heard the Lotus leaving River’s End. He gazed to the top of the cliff.

As long as Christie did as he’d asked and stayed clear of Derek, then no harm would befall her. And she was every bit as determined to avoid the man as ever so why, why was his heart racing and why were his hands clenched?

Randall nudged Martin’s leg. With a deep sigh, Martin released the tension in his shoulders and patted the dog. *Trust*

*her judgement.* He turned back toward his own home, high on the opposite cliff. When she returned, they could begin to plan their future.



## Chapter Three

Christie stood at the window in her hotel room, one hand on the glass, as she peered down to dark water lapping against timber walkways. Leisure craft dotted the artificial bay. City lights flickered on beyond Etihad Stadium and, from here, Christie saw the apartment she'd lived in until late last year.

No lights shone there. Derek would not be home for hours, if his usual routine still stood. She'd spent three years of her life there – two of them with him. Her furniture, homewares, all her special touches were still there, abandoned when she'd left.

The palm of her hand was cold on the glass. She stepped back, rubbing it. Why did this matter? These past months were without doubt the best of her life, and in a few days she'd be home again.

\*\*\*

Familiar city sounds woke Christie before dawn. Trains in the distance. Traffic. The boats. A siren. She watched the sky lighten from her bed. Her view at home was to the same sky but through old trees.

Less than an hour later, pulling her make-up case along behind, she hurried through the almost deserted shopping precinct of Harbour Town. Resisting the aroma of freshly ground coffee wafting from the cafes, she turned a corner and there it was: Docklands Studios. She might have worked on sets in Hollywood and around the world, but here, on the doorstep of Melbourne city, was her favourite.

\*\*\*

Three days in, Ashley dropped by as the crew packed up for the night. Christie gave him a weary smile and he wrapped his arms around her in a bear hug. "Time for you to get out of here."

"I wish."

"Delays?"

Christie closed her make-up case with a nod. Ashley took it from her. "I'll lock this up. You go change into something and we'll pick you up in an hour."

"Oh, I can't." She giggled as Ashley shook his head. "I mean—"

"One hour. Stop arguing. You don't want to upset Ray, now do you?"

"He'd understand."

"He would blame me."

She gave in. Dinner with old friends would lift her spirits. Just as long as they stayed away from Derek's favourite haunts. No point complicating matters.

\*\*\*

Ray and Ashley wasted no time in escorting Christie right where she didn't want to go. Beneath an almost full moon, the three of them followed the walkway along the marina. Water splashed against concrete pylons to their right, whilst traffic zoomed past on their left.

Ashley chatted about a film he was overseeing, oblivious to Christie's eyes darting at everyone they approached. Ray noticed, tucking her arm through his. "I saw him get into a taxi." He patted her hand and she shot a look at him. "Think he was off to some event or other. He has no idea you're in town."

Her mouth flickered into a small smile. "You always understand."

"Understand what?" Ashley realised he was being ignored.

"That an overworked, hungry woman needs food, not a recital of your film credits. As if she doesn't have enough of her own!"

Ashley took her other arm, not the least offended by Ray. "One can never have enough. However, I agree we should feed her before she wastes away."

“Um, thanks. I’m unlikely to waste away, but I am thirsty.”  
She prodded them both.

\*\*\*

After a glass of white wine and shared entrée of olives, dips and bread twists, Christie breathed a happy sigh. The boys were embroiled in a debate over some place they’d visited years ago.

“What’s so funny?” Ray held his hand up to pause Ashley mid-sentence.

“Don’t let me stop you. I’m happy to be entertained.”  
Christie said.

“It isn’t important.” Ray replied.

“Oh, really?” Ashley refilled Christie’s wine glass.

“I won the argument, and want to hear about Christie now, not you.” The main course arrived. “So, last I heard, you were at a wedding.” Ray prompted.

“Surely we’ve spoken since?”

“Seems the phone lines between here and your little town only work on occasion.”

“I’m sorry. You need to visit. Just not until the cottage is finished.”

“Finished?”

“I’m trying to return it to its original condition, but with some improvements. You know, a real washing machine and perhaps even a phone line.”

“So, you’re really going to live there.” The men exchanged a glance.

“I do live there.” Christie toasted the air with her wine glass. “To my funny little cottage on a lonely little road in a tiny little town.”

“And how is life with your new man?”

A stunned silence followed Ashley’s question. Ray kicked him under the table.



“Okay. How do you know about Martin?”

“We’re your friends, sweetie. You can share anything with us.”

“Ashley?”

“Derek told him. And it is none of our business. Right, Ash?” Ray said.

“I don’t mind you knowing. In fact, I can’t wait till you meet him, but when did Derek tell you?”

Ray shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “A day or two after you moved out, he knocked on the door. Upset. Said you’d left him for an artist you met at your nanna’s funeral. Wanted some support but after what he did—ouch!”

This time Ashley kicked Ray.

Christie looked from one to the other. “You heard? The night I left him? I am so, so sorry.”

“He was yelling at you. We were coming over when he slammed the front door on the way out. I hoped he would never return!” Ray’s face was bright red and his hands clenched into a fist. Ashley dropped an arm around him.

Christie curled her fingers around Ray’s hand. “I should have told you both. He and his business partner sabotaged my job in London, which was just the final straw really and I don’t want to rehash it. But I never left him for another man.”

“It didn’t make sense. After that dinner at your place, with Ingrid flirting with Derek right in front of us. Aargh.” Ray leaned his head against Ashley’s shoulder for a moment, eyes closed. Christie squeezed his hand as tightly as she could.

“It’s okay. I’m over him. Over them. They want the land the cottage is on because another developer is buying up anything available. It really is just some game to them.”

Ray’s eyes opened. “I wish it was him gone. Not you.”

\*\*\*

What should have been a pleasant stroll to the hotel turned into a sprint with a sudden downpour catching them halfway back.

Christie abandoned her dignity and slipped her heels off. Arms linked and laughing, the three found cover.

Ray fiddled with Christie's wet hair as they waited, smoothing it back into place. "Beautiful! Now, Ash, how about we sneak into the studios and do some glamour shots?"

"Funny man! There will be no images taken of me looking like this, thanks all the same."

"Surely your Martin would love to see you at your best?" Ray stood back with his hands in a square, peering through them like a camera.

"He's seen me at my worst so anything is an improvement. But no."

"And what was your worst?"

Ray slipped his phone out as Christie checked herself in the window, wrinkling her nose at her reflection. She spun around as Ray took her picture.

"Ashley, please tell Ray, no!"

"Ray, no." Ashley picked up Christie's shoes as the rain slowed. "I imagine you'd like these, bella."

"Thanks."

She mock-glared at Ray, who grinned and took another shot. "Not nice!"

"Not like you have Facebook for me to plaster it all over. Goodness knows why not though."

"You sound like Belinda." Heels back on, Christie stepped out onto the walkway.

"And who is Belinda?" Ray offered his arm to Christie, who pretended not to see it.

"Belinda Crossman, from River's End Bakery. She is the sweetest kid ever. Actually, in a couple of weeks she'll be starting beauty school here, so I'll have a reason to visit."

"A reason to visit? Oh, and we're chopped liver?" Ray feigned offence.

Christie held her hand out to Ashley, who smirked at Ray as he slipped it through his arm. “No, dear. You’re the chopped liver.”

Ray darted to Christie’s other side. “Ah, I see what you’re doing. Excellent distraction. Now, you never did tell us about being at your worst.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“So?”

“So, there’s my hotel.”

“Shall we come up for a drink and you can fill us in?” Ray persisted. Christie stopped and threw her arms around him.

“I love you.”

He squeezed her back. “Not even one drink?”

“Not even one!”

With a laugh, she shooed them back to their own building. Her smile faded. *I’ll miss you so much.* Her life was split in two

\*\*\*

Outside her hotel, Christie stopped for a moment to squeeze rain from her hair.

A taxi drove past, abruptly stopping at the curb a few metres further along. Christie glanced across at the movement, but nobody got out.

She’d had enough of the rain and wanted a quick hot shower, another glass of wine, and a long conversation with Martin.

\*\*\*

The moment Christie entered the hotel, the passenger door opened. A deluge began, soaking the man who stood on the pavement even after the taxi drove away. Derek stared at the hotel. Through the window, he saw Christie head for the elevators.

She was out of sight. Derek hurried to the windows, darting from one to another until he saw her again. She stepped into the elevator and glanced his way after pressing the button. He froze. The doors closed and Christie was gone. Again.



## Chapter Four

Top down, the Lotus rounded the last curve before home. Christie pulled over to a shoulder, as she had done on the first time she'd come here. Then it had been for Gran's funeral, knowing nobody and expecting to leave within a day.

One day turned into a week. Going back to Melbourne – to her life with Derek – was not her first choice by then. The town and her inherited cottage grew on her so fast it was as if she was meant to be here.

Back to her life she had gone though, until Derek showed his narcissistic personality one time too many and brought another woman into their relationship. Not that she knew if he had feelings for Ingrid Kauffman, other than their kindred love of property development, but Christie deserved better.

It was early evening and at the bottom of the hill the town was a picture, with the slow river winding through a break in the cliffs, meeting the sea as a shallow lagoon. The air was oh-so-salty and pure, as a breeze filled Christie's senses.

She loved the city. Loved the movement and life, the restaurants and people. Martin used to call her 'city girl' and in those respects he was right. But River's End held her heart now.

All of a sudden, she had to see Martin. Instead of going home first, she nosed the Lotus back onto the road and past the turn-off to the cottage.

\*\*\*

Nobody was there. The sliding door was uncharacteristically closed – locked, in fact. Christie peered through the glass to an uninhabited house. She checked the shed. The old motorbike and the surfboards were present. The studio was as deserted.

The sun almost touched the horizon and hunger gnawed at her stomach. She checked her phone, just in case. No missed calls. No messages. Unlike Martin.

Derek had never bothered letting her know where he was. Annoyed that he'd crossed her mind, Christie pushed the

thought away.

\*\*\*

By the time she turned the Lotus into the driveway, Christie was so tired that she just wanted to eat and then climb into bed. Even her suitcase could stay in the car overnight. Only her handbag and make-up case made it onto the porch with her.

About to slip the key into the lock, Christie heard a noise from inside and stopped. Heart racing, she stepped back.

The noise again – a small thud against the door. Another step back. Derek had got into the cottage before. But it couldn't be him!

The door handle turned, just a little. Christie eyes widened. The key clanged on the porch as she dropped it, hand flying to her mouth.

“Randall, you need to move out the way if I'm to let Christie in.”

The door opened enough for Randall, tail wagging furiously, to rush to Christie. Martin pushed the door completely open with a wide, welcoming smile.

“Wondered where you got to when we heard you drive past.”

In spite of the dog circling her in excitement, Christie's hand still covered her mouth. It was Martin and Randall. Not some intruder. *Not Derek.*

“Christie?”

“I... I thought...”

Martin reached out for Christie. She rushed into his arms and burst into sobs.

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“I thought we'd got past this crying stuff.” Martin held a box of tissues for Christie, who sat at the table with Randall beside her.

“Me too. Sorry.” She dabbed at her eyes.

Squatting down in front of Christie, Martin cupped her cheek. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

She leaned into his hand, fear evaporating with his touch. Her heartbeat was normal again and she was cross about overreacting. Who else would be here? He had a key.

“You okay?”

“I went to your house.”

“Ah. We heard you drive past. Thought you must have needed something at the shop.”

“No. Just you.” Her voice was tiny.

He dropped his hand onto hers and squeezed it. “Come and see your room.”

Martin led her down the hallway. The dining room door was closed and Martin tugged at her hand when she hesitated.

At the bedroom door, Martin guided Christie in first. She stopped in awe. The plastering and painting was complete, with the lovely old ceiling rose returned to its position around the new light fitting.

Heavy, sea-blue curtains framed a sparkling new window, with lace curtains draped to one side. Perfect against the pale cream walls.

“I thought you said the painting wouldn’t be done yet?”

“It needed doing.”

Christie put her arms around Martin’s neck and kissed him. “Thank you. No abstract mural?”

He grinned. “Hungry?” Without waiting for an answer, he left. Curious, Christie followed him to the dining room. The minute the door opened, mouth-watering smells of roast chicken wafted out.

On the floor, a colourful blanket was spread out. A picnic basket overflowed with bread sticks, salads, cheeses and chicken pieces. Candles flickered on the windowsill. The two



straight-backed chairs – the only furniture in the room – served to hold plates and napkins. An ice bucket, complete with a bottle of chardonnay, rested on the floor beside two glasses.

Martin held his hand out. “Are you coming in?”

“Wow!” She managed, before a tear slipped down her cheek.

Martin sighed and took her back in his arms. “You, my sweetheart, are overtired. When did you last eat?”

Christie mumbled something against his chest. His scent filled her with longing to stay exactly where she was, but her growling stomach was just as insistent she move.

“I hope you just said you had lunch today. And breakfast?”

“I just wanted to finish and get home.”

“Hmm. We’ll discuss this another time. Wine?”

Randall flopped down in the doorway. His tail thumped on the ground when Christie patted his soft head. “Missed you.”

She was home. Everything was right here.

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“Who needs a dining room table?” Christie sat cross-legged on the floor, wine glass in one hand and a piece of bread in the other.

“Might get uncomfortable after a while.”

“I might buy big cushions. Or bean bags.”

“I hope not.”

With a grin, Christie toasted him. “To you, with thanks.”

“You’re welcome. For what?”

“This. Painting my bedroom and making my bed. Being here when I got home.”

Martin leaned over to kiss her forehead. “I should have told you we were here.”

“You were right. I was overtired and hungry. Silly of me to react like that!” Her face tensed up.

“Here. Come here.” He held his arm out and Christie shuffled over a bit to move into his embrace. With his free hand, he refilled their glasses.

“How was Melbourne?”

“Exhausting. Don’t get me wrong, I love the job still and I adore Docklands Studios. It was just... weird. Being back there.”

“Did you see him?”

Christie’s eyes flew to Martin’s. Worry creased his brow.

“No! Of course not. I promised I’d stay clear and I did.”

“But Docklands is small. That was my concern, that he’d run into you somehow.”

“Ash and Ray took me out for dinner at Central Pier which is straight past my old apartment. But they had already seen him go out in a taxi and were with me every moment. So protective and sweet. And they walked me almost back to the hotel. Well, we ran a bit, ‘cos it was raining.”

Martin chuckled.

Eyes closed in contentment, Christie relaxed against Martin. How silly she was, imagining Derek would even bother with her anymore. That part of her life was over and now she had the most wonderful future to look forward to.



## Chapter Five

“But what if I fail? What if all the other girls are smarter and I don’t fit in?” Belinda paced around the kitchen.

“Ah, but what if you succeed? And what if the other girls adore you as much as I do?” Christie poured water into coffee cups.

The pacing stopped. “You do?”

“Most certainly I do! Listen, for me, the first day of the beauty course was terrifying. I wanted it so, so much, but I just knew everyone would look at me and see a little country girl.”

“But you’re a city girl.”

“You know, one of these days I shall hold a meeting in town and discuss that phrase with everyone. Including your cousin Martin.” She struggled to keep a straight face. “I spent my first seven years in the outback.”

“You did?”

“And I was terrified putting myself in the company of young women who I imagined were already beauty experts. And guess what?”

“They were?”

“Some thought so. But all of us were just as nervous and excited and ambitious as each other. Within a few days, we had sorted ourselves into groups and – just like at school – either became friends or simply tolerated one another.”

Belinda pulled a face. “School wasn’t much fun. I mean, I did okay, but I was always a bit different.”

“You’ll see plenty of different in Melbourne! But isn’t that what you want? The chance to become what you want to be?”

“But who is going to talk to the pastries?”

Christie burst into laughter. “Sorry.” She tried to stop. “I’ll drop in and speak with them.”

Belinda stared in disbelief. “You mock my pastries?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean—”

Belinda’s mouth quivered and then broadened to a cheeky smile.

“Funny. Maybe I should warn your teachers about you.”

“No need. I shall let them find out for themselves. Oh, I almost forgot!” She dug around in her oversized handbag and pushed a brightly wrapped box in front of Christie.

“Oh. What’s this?”

“It’s a box.”

“Ha ha. For me?”

“Are you okay? I mean, I can give it to someone else.”

Christie put her hand on the box with a stern “Mine!” and Belinda giggled.

Christie carefully pulled the ribbon to undo the elaborate purple bow. She unwrapped the vivid yellow paper one end at a time. Before taking the paper off, she peeked at Belinda, who was intent on the process.

“Hurry up!”

“I might wait until you go. No? Okay, okay.” With a flourish, she revealed the present. “Oh, sweetie.”

Framed in ornate silver was a photograph. From Thomas and Martha’s wedding, it was taken on the beach, following their vows.

It was a moment caught in time. Christie gazed up at Martin as he wound a strand of jasmine around her braided hair. His concentration was on the jasmine and hers was on his face. He’d smiled. “There, that’s better. Jasmine Sea.”

Until then, Christie had believed he didn’t love her, but when he’d used those words, her heart had almost stopped. He’d remembered their first evening together, when she’d joked about being a candle maker who created a scent made from a flower and the ocean.

“Do you like it? I was going through all the photos and saw you two in the background. It looked like a special moment. You really love him.”

“I really do.”

“Well then. We’re all happy.”

“You are a wonderful friend. I love it!” Christie leapt up and hugged Belinda. “And you will be fine in Melbourne. You call me anytime you are lonely or not sure about something, okay?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. And what’s more, I’ll be back for work so we’ll hang out and maybe go take a look at Docklands Studio together.”

Christie wasn’t entirely certain, but there may have been a tear in Belinda’s eyes when she left a few moments later. It was hard to tell past the mist in her own.

\*\*\*

The office on the twelfth floor overlooked Port Phillip Bay. It was a large, immaculate workspace with modern furnishing and no clutter. A map of Victoria took up a whole wall, sporadically studded with the company logo.

Behind the desk, Derek Hobbs stared at a laptop. Cold coffee was untouched from two hours ago.

Intent on his monitor, he ignored a tap on his glass door. The handle turned. It was locked. The tapping began in earnest until, annoyed, he glanced up.

“Dammit.” He hurried to unlock the door. Ingrid pushed her way past, carrying a takeaway tray with two coffees.

“Are you quite alright?” She demanded as Derek locked the door again.

“Busy.”

“Your phone is busy!”

“Nope. Unplugged. And before you tell me, the mobile is off.”

As soon as he sat again, Ingrid passed him a coffee.  
“Why?”

“Thanks. Told you. I’m busy.”

“Too busy for me?” She tottered around the desk, stilettos digging into the deep pile of the carpet. She peered at the screen.

“Oh. Really?” She smiled faintly. “Aren’t you past all of that?”

“She was here.”

“Christie?”

“Yes.”

“In this office?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. In Melbourne. I saw her go into the Four Seasons the other night.”

“Did she see you?”

“No. She was working at the studios. She went there the next morning.”

“Stalking her?”

“I was curious. But then she disappeared in that stupid car of hers so no doubt is back with the artist.”

Ingrid perched on the corner of the desk, crossing one black-stockinged leg over the other. “If it bothers you so much, why don’t you visit?”

“Ingrid, why are you here?”

“You arranged a meeting. With Rupert, if you recall?”

“Sorry.” He took her hand. “Don’t mean to be abrupt but I just can’t help thinking that if things don’t work out with the artist, she’d be willing to sell. And we might as well be the ones to buy.”

“Does your ex know Rupert?”

“No. She would never have come across him. Oh, clever girl!”

Ingrid tilted her head. “I do love sea air. And I’ve been wanting my portrait painted for ever such a long time. In your internet stalking there, does it say if Martin Blake does anything other than abstracts?”

Derek got to his feet. “Did I tell you how clever you are?”

“You are most welcome to repeat it.”

“Then I must do so. Dinner tonight and we will discuss this further.”

“Send me a text with the details. I’ll leave the door unlocked. Rupert is waiting, you know.”

After she left, Derek stood in front of the map of Victoria. He ran his hand along the Great Ocean Road until he reached River’s End, a small dot on the map. He wanted that town.





## Chapter Six

At the very edge of the cliff, Christie gulped in air, sweat drenching her singlet top. From here the view was endless across the Great Southern Ocean. To her right, the stone steps descended to the beach. The same steps she had just sprinted up after a decent run along the river and through the gap in the cliffs onto the sand.

She checked her watch and got moving. There was time for a quick shower before Barry and his team arrived to continue their work. She cut through the graveyard, stopping at Gran's resting place. Her eyes flicked over the inscription:

Dorothy Lilian Ryan

Daughter of Lilian and Patrick

1938–2017

Not a word about her only child, Rebecca. The daughter she pushed away and then lost in a car accident – Christie's mother. No mention of Martha, her own sister once so beloved that Dorothy believed she alone knew what was best for her.

Martha may have forgiven her sister, but Christie could not. There had been no warmth about Gran. Bringing her orphaned grandchild into her sterile home was a huge imposition and Dorothy had made sure Christie knew it.

Christie touched Gran's headstone. At least now, she was at rest. Such a pity she would never know Martha was reunited with Thomas. If nothing else, Gran's insistence on Christie delving into the past had brought her to Martin.

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By late afternoon the cottage was quiet again. Christie swept debris into a pile. The other bedroom and the dining room had new ceilings, primed walls and bare floorboards. Old carpet slumped in a pile near the front gate, waiting for the over-full bin on the verge to be emptied.

The familiar sound of a motorcycle interrupted the silence. Christie smoothed her hair and hurried out.

Helmet dangling from one hand, Martin stood beside the motorcycle, surveying the garden. His customary t-shirt clung to a muscular chest and flat stomach, and he wore jeans. Denim that hugged the contours of his legs right up to his narrow waist, curving over his... *Stop it!* Christie's heart skipped a beat as he turned a leisurely smile on her.

"You've been busy."

"It's a bit of a mess. But at least the roses are back under control."

"So I see." He dropped the helmet on the seat and closed the gap between them. He checked her hands, criss-crossed with small cuts and grazes. "You've put something on these?"

"They're just from the thorns."

"And?"

"I washed my arms. I need to get a first aid kit, or something."

"How long since a tetanus shot?"

"Last year." *Stop fussing.* Christie gently extricated her arm. "What's the helmet for?"

"Safety. Yours."

Her eyes lit up. "Oh, where are we going?"

"Somewhere I don't think you've been yet. So, get yourself ready and lock up."

"Do you want to come in?" She grinned.

"No. I want you to hurry up!"

Still smiling, she rushed inside. Martin watched her leave with a small smile of his own.

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The last time Christie was on this motorcycle, the Lotus had run out of fuel and Martin reluctantly helped her get some. Then he had whisked her up the nearby mountain to a lookout, where he had accused her of planning to bring development into the town.

Now, they rode past Palmerston House, the stately homestead once owned by Christie's family for generations and now run as a bed and breakfast. Martin slowed as a new housing estate came into view along the right at the top of the hill. The few finished homes were large, on bigger than normal blocks, but still like suburbia. One road led into the estate, through stone walls proclaiming "River's End Heights".

The road curved inland. It was bushy, the sea disappearing from sight. With hardly a touch of the brakes, Martin swung left onto a narrow track, Christie gripping his waist. She gazed ahead as the trees parted. Here was a secluded bay, much smaller than the beach at River's End. Protected by cliffs almost wrapping around the narrow strip of sand, the calm water looked deep. And it was dotted with yachts.

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Fingers entwined, Martin and Christie followed a path to the shore. The motorcycle was in a parking bay, one of ten or so marked out at the end of the track.

"How long has this been here?" Eyes wide with excitement, Christie almost skipped along.

"It's a natural harbour, so probably centuries, but the new estate we passed increased the population of boats."

"I thought there were more around. Oh, look at that one!" She pointed to a schooner.

"Yes. Pick the most expensive one."

"You used to accuse me of collecting expensive toys. Never considered a boat though."

"But you'd like one?" Martin glanced sideways.

"My own yacht? That's beyond my pay cheque."

"If it wasn't?"

Christie stopped as they neared the edge of the sand, surveying the bay. Ten or twelve craft of different sizes and types bobbed at their moorings. Her eyes were drawn to a smaller yacht, sleek and pretty. How wonderful to sail it out between the cliffs to the open sea.

“I would love it.”

Martin pulled her close, tilting her chin up and touching his lips to hers. “And I love you.” He turned her to face the boats. One arm around her waist, he pointed with the other. To the smaller yacht.

“Made from Huon pine in Tasmania. A sloop so responsive to sail that she can almost do it on her own.”

“She is beautiful.”

“She’s old. But yes, she is beautiful.”

The peace of early evening enveloped them. Surreal late sunlight flooded through the gap between the cliffs.

“Read the name.”

The yacht was a fair way out, but Christie had good eyesight. As though highlighted by the sun, the name on the side of the boat was clear.

She shot a shocked glance at Martin.

“Read it, sweetheart.”

“Her... her name is *Jasmine Sea*.”



## Chapter Seven

“But... how? Why?” Christie gripped Martin’s hand to stop hers shaking.

“Take a deep breath.”

“I don’t need a breath! Why is the yacht called *Jasmine Sea*? Please?”

“Come and see.” Martin released her hand and strode down the beach a short way. Christie caught up with him as he dragged a dinghy from a pile. The dinghy was small and timber and, to Christie’s eye, unsafe. That didn’t stop Martin pulling it all the way to the tideline. He fiddled with the oars.

“Are we getting in that?”

“Depends if you want to see the yacht. Or you could swim.”

“It might be safer.”

“Have I ever put you in danger?”

She grabbed one side of the dinghy. “What are we waiting for?”

Martin’s eyes missed nothing. “Toss your shoes in. Once we’re knee deep, hop in and I’ll get us a bit further out.”

Shoes and socks went in and she took a moment to roll her jeans up to her knees. His idea of knee deep water was different than hers, and it wasn’t long before her legs were wet.

“Okay, sit in first and then take your legs over. That’s the way.” Martin steered the small boat a bit further out, then copied Christie’s actions to join her. He rowed effortlessly through the small waves. “I thought you knew how to sail?”

“A fifty-footer. A big boat and it was tied up in a marina, so no need to row to it.”

As he navigated round a larger yacht, Martin gestured at the water. “It isn’t very deep here. No more than we swim in. Check out how clear it is.”

He was right. The sandy bottom seemed close enough to touch. The sea was calm and she turned her attention to the yacht now only a moment away.

*Jasmine Sea* was a picture as she gently rocked. Her long bow was graceful, with shining ankle-high railings, and tall timber masts towering above the cabin and wheel.

At the stern, a ladder invited Christie to climb on board and, with an encouraging nod from Martin, she did so. Padded seats and a fold out table made a perfect place to enjoy a meal. Near the cabin was a timber wheel. Steps led below deck.

Christie turned questioning eyes to Martin. Unfazed, he leaned against the railing, arms crossed.

“This is yours?”

“No. Actually, yes. For now.”

“I don’t follow.”

“I’ve owned this craft for years. One of the first things I ever bought. Over time, I’ve used her less and less. Although Randall still loves it.”

“You have a boat called *Jasmine Sea*?”

A tiny flicker of impatience crossed his face. “I had a boat called – well, called something else. Whilst you were in Melbourne, I changed her name. And now she is *Jasmine Sea*. And if you want her, she is yours.”

“Oh.”

“Oh?”

*Why?* Who gives away their boat? They weren’t married or engaged or... Was he about to propose?

“Whoa, steady. Here, sit for a while.” Martin led her to the seats and took her onto his lap. He brushed stray hair from her eyes. “Slow breaths. Don’t faint on me.”

“Sorry. I just felt a bit odd for a moment. I’m okay now.”

“Hmm. Missing meals again.”



“Did you really say this is mine? Are you giving me a whole yacht?”

“Bit pointless giving you part of one. Maybe I should have waited.”

She shook her head, struggling to understand. He sighed, wrapping both arms around her so that she leaned against his chest, her head on his shoulder.

“I’ve never had anyone to give things to. Christie, you’ve changed everything by being here. Being with me. But I see in your eyes sometimes that you’re not sure.”

She tried to sit up but he tightened his hold a little, adjusting his position so that she could see his face.

“I love you, Martin!”

“Sometimes love isn’t enough. You have another world out there and I know you’re torn.”

“What are you saying?”

Martin kissed the tip of her nose. “I’m saying this boat is your freedom. Use it anytime you want to escape. For an hour or a week. This is its harbour, just as I am yours.”

“I love my job. And I miss my apartment sometimes. And my friends. But this is my world now, at least for the most part. With you.” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“And Randall.”

“Yes, actually, where is Randall?”

“Having a sleepover at Palmerston.”

Christie giggled. “May I explore my boat?”

“Soon.” His lips touched hers. “Once I’ve done this for a while.”

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The bedroom at the bow was simple and comfortable with a freshly made bed. There was a tiny bathroom and a functional galley with a table and seats. Between the steps and the galley,

a walk-through area housed cupboards, a shelf with a radio, maps, and a hatch leading down to the engine room.

Christie ran up the steps to find Martin. Night softly fell. The gentle lapping of water against the hull was soothing. The other yachts were ghost ships under the moonlight. They were alone out here in this harbour.

“Umm... it’s night time. Does the motorcycle have working headlights yet?”

Martin glanced over to her from the bow. “If I say no?”

“Then we’re trapped here tonight.”

“Do you have somewhere else to be?”

“I don’t have a change of clothes.”

He made his way back to her and took her face in his hands, eyes serious. “If you want to go home, I’ll make it happen.”

“I think I’d like to stay here.”

Martin smiled and released her. “Go up to the bow. I laid out a picnic whilst you were looking around.”

“Two picnics in a week!”

“Easiest way to make sure you eat. Go on.”

“Where are you going?”

“Always a question!”

True to his word, Martin had a picnic laid out. A seafood salad and platter of cheese and fruit made Christie’s mouth water. She had only stopped for coffee during the day so no wonder she’d felt faint earlier.

A moment later, Martin joined her with an ice bucket, a bottle of wine, and glasses.

“Champagne is a big part of changing the name of a boat. Didn’t have any on hand, so hopefully your favourite white will do to toast the change of ownership.” He poured two glasses and held one out to Christie.

“I thought it was bad luck to change a boat’s name. Thanks.”

“You have no idea.” He tapped his glass on Christie’s. “To *Jasmine Sea*.”

“To you.” Christie leaned over and kissed him. He smelt male and salty and utterly desirable. Her stomach growled and she giggled.

“Eat.” He instructed. “In fact, you hold my glass and I’ll get your food.”

She watched in contentment as he picked the best morsels of seafood and added buttered sourdough to her plate. “How did you change her name?”

“With champagne and ritual.” He swapped his glass for her plate. “There is a formula. One has to appease Poseidon and it must be done with correct words in a specific order and plenty of quality champagne tipped into his domain to make him happy. Only then can one offer a new name.”

“You are joking.”

“I am not. In fact, you can ask Belinda because she helped me do it.”

Martin lifted a forkful of salad, winking at Christie’s incredulous expression. What had gone on in those few days she was away? All this conspiracy.

“Have you ever had a surprise party?” he asked.

“Yes. I hated it.”

“Thought as much.”

“It’s just...”

“It’s just what? Here, have some tartare.”

“Oh, yum. I don’t know. I guess I’m good with some predictability.”

For a while they ate in silence. The air was warm with just the hint of a breeze. Although the tide was on the rise, the movement of the boat stayed gentle.

Martin refilled their glasses. "I'll show you the basics in the morning,"

"We're going sailing?"

He laughed. "Just around the harbour to start with. Alright? And you have to sit your Marine Licence before I hand over the keys."

"I'm sorry. About before."

"Which bit, sweetheart? Not eating properly again? Or looking for an ulterior motive in my gift?" He spoke mildly but underneath, Christie sensed disappointment. In her.

"I don't deserve it."

"That is my decision."

"And it means more than you know."

"Then don't second guess it. Other people may have gifted you expensive toys for the wrong reasons. Not me. I am not Derek." With a shake of his head he stood, not seeing the hand Christie held out as he went to the stern.

She followed with their glasses. She leaned against him. "I belong here. With you and Randall."

He put an arm around her, pulling her tightly against him.



## Chapter Eight

It might have been the smell of bacon and eggs cooking, or the subtle movement of the boat, or even sunlight on her pillow that woke Christie. She stretched like a cat.

Through the half door, she watched Martin take plates from a cupboard. As if sensing she was awake, he glanced over. “Two minutes then this will be served up on the deck.”

“No breakfast in bed?”

“Beds aren’t for eating in.”

*I may have to work on that belief.* Few things in life were as indulgent as curling up with a book and a meal in a comfortable bed.

“One minute and counting.”

“Hey! That went fast.” She complained but with a grin, sliding her feet out of bed.

\*\*\*

Morning had barely begun but it was already warm enough to eat at the stern. It was serene here, so private. The other boats bobbed in a strangely erratic rhythm.

“Thanks. I mean, for breakfast and coffee.”

“Not for letting you sleep in, or...” He deliberately left it unfinished and she blushed.

“What is it called?”

“Coffee. And this is bacon, which comes from...”

“Very funny. This place?”

“Willow Bay. Named for the native willows along the ridge. This has been her home for longer than I’ve lived.”

“I never knew it was here. So hidden and perfect.”

“Not completely perfect – there are a few spots to be careful of. The channel is pretty safe, but there are a couple of tricks to avoid trouble.”

“But you’ll teach me?”

“Every step of the way.”

\*\*\*

In the dinghy, heading back to shore, Christie was silent. She watched Martin row, powerful sweeps of the oars cutting through the water with next to no effort. How could he be so good at everything?

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Okay. Actually, turns out I can’t sail after all.”

Martin put the oars down and let the dinghy drift. He took both of Christie’s hands in his, rubbing their palms. “Actually, you can. It takes time to understand each boat, and this one is old. She has some idiosyncrasies.”

“But how could I ever handle *Jasmine Sea* on my own? She’s so responsive in your hands but I made her stop.”

“Practice. Anyway, hopefully you won’t feel the need to go off alone. Doing the marine course will help, and so will I.” He kissed each hand then picked up the oars.

“Can we sail somewhere? For a few days?”

“When you get that cottage of yours finished, then yes. We’ll take Randall and go down the coast a bit.”

“So he really likes the boat?”

“Loves it.”

The dinghy bumped through the waves near the beach and Martin clambered out. Christie joined him, helping pull the little boat to shore. She lost her grip and sat down in the shallow water.

Martin held out a hand, laughing. He pulled her to her feet, keeping her hand in his and dragging the dinghy along. “I think you need a life jacket.”

“That’s not funny.” She spluttered, trying to wipe wet hair from her eyes. “I look a mess now!”

“Yes. But in a beautiful mermaid kind of way.”

She stopped, slipping her hand from his. He kept going, getting the dinghy high up the beach and turning it upside-down. Then, he wandered back to the shore, grinning.

“Are you going to stand in the waves all day, or would you like to go home?”

“I’m a mermaid. I can’t leave the sea.”

In response, Martin strode into the water and swept Christie into his arms, lifting her as though she weighed nothing. “Always wanted a mermaid and now I have one.” He stood, legs apart to brace himself. “So, which is it? Go home and have a shower, or...”

“Or what?”

“Or I throw you back in.” He turned as if to follow through.

Christie wrapped her arms tightly around his neck. “Home! I mean, I’d like to go home.”

“But mermaids live in the sea. And besides, you forgot something.”

Giggling, Christie nestled into his arms. “Please. Take me home, please?”

“Much better. Manners are important for mermaids.” A car door slammed at the parking area. “And that is our cue to leave.” Martin murmured, stepping onto the beach and gently placing Christie back on her feet.

\*\*\*

A hot shower had rarely felt so good. The ride home on the motorcycle resulted in semi-dry, cold clothes that she was relieved to peel off. Martin had dropped her at the end of the driveway and Christie had watched him go, part of her longing to leave with him. It had always been this way, even early on when they were at odds with each other. The minute they were apart, she missed him.

With a sigh, Christie turned off the shower and reached for a towel. Her relationship with Derek had never felt like this. When they dated, she loved being with him, but was just as



happy to go back to her apartment and plan her next job, or go out with friends. Even once he moved in with her, there had not been this longing to be together all the time.

Christie stopped drying her hair and stared in the mirror. *Jasmine Sea*. Words that had mattered to her, significantly mattered, at pivotal moments in her relationship with Martin. Now, he had changed the name of his own yacht.

*You don't deserve it.* The words whirled around in her mind. More than once, Martin had mentioned what he called her expensive toys. Her car, Derek's very expensive ring. Even a new phone when she threw hers against a wall to stop it ringing.

Now he had given her the most expensive toy of all, for she had no doubt the yacht was worth more than the cottage Gran left behind. It felt wrong.

Perhaps it was not the gift itself she didn't deserve. Perhaps it was his love.



## Chapter Nine

Palmerston House was as impressive in its modern role as a bed and breakfast, as when the stately home of the Ryan family. Immaculate gardens enticed weary travellers to wander and enjoy the European-inspired beauty. Wide verandahs offered views of the gardens from seating nooks. The pond out the back was busy with birdlife.

“Oh, I thought I heard your car!” Elizabeth White hurried down the curved stairway from the mezzanine level.

“Yes, I have no hope of sneaking anywhere quietly!” Christie crossed the floor to greet the older woman with a kiss on the cheek. “You look well.”

“Not having to worry about those newlyweds helps!”

“Have you heard from Martha?”

“Only a one-minute phone call when they arrived in Dublin. Shall we have tea?” Elizabeth didn’t wait for a response.

Christie followed her down the picture-studded hallway. Framed photographs of old timber yards, the industry that elevated the Ryan family’s fortunes. The railway station in its heyday, bustling with people and activity. Different houses. At the very end, an empty hook. Faint differences in the colour of the wallpaper gave away the size of whatever had once hung there.

“Elizabeth?” Christie joined her in the kitchen. “What photograph is missing in the hallway?”

“Would you get the milk out, dear? Do you know, I haven’t thought about that for a long time. It must have been missing when I purchased Palmerston.”

Christie collected the milk and took it to Elizabeth, who was busy serving slices of meringue.

“Did you make this?”

“Of course. Old recipe, handed down from my great, great, great... oh, who am I kidding? Belinda showed me how to

make it.”

“It looks amazing.”

“The trick is to make lemon curd and use that in place of fruit. Then lots of double cream. You aren’t dieting, are you?”

“Not today!” Christie took a bite and closed her eyes with a moan. “I don’t know how you get so much lemony-ness into the curd!”

“Ah. Past the pond and through the archway, there’s a whole orchard of fruit and nut trees, and lemons just taste better straight off a tree. Oh! I just remembered!”

Christie stared blankly at Elizabeth.

“That photograph. I found it in the back of a closet when I first moved in. The frame was damaged. I packed it away planning to get it fixed and forgot.”

“The one from the hallway? So, was it another photo of the region?”

Elizabeth put her cup down. “No, dear! If this sudden memory serves me well, it is a photo of your cottage.”

\*\*\*

A narrow hallway led to steps going down to a cellar, where dusty wine racks filled two walls. Elizabeth pushed open a door on the far side and turned on a dim light.

“I don’t know why I forgot this! Probably because Keith was busy fixing up the place, seeing as it had been boarded up for so long.”

“Keith?”

“He was such a good man. My husband for twenty amazing years.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. We were happy for a long time. Now, let me look in here.” Elizabeth opened a long cardboard box. “Here it is! Oh my, it is exactly as I recall!”

Christie took the offered photo, holding it up under the light. Layered with dust, its frame was broken in several places, but the photograph was intact.

Taken from the front of the driveway, it captured a manicured garden, much smaller trees, and something that almost made Christie drop the photo. There was a path leading from the gate to the centre of the front wall. Not the overgrown, solid weatherboard wall Christie had yet to clean up. This was a wall with a front door.

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Barry tapped the glass in front of the photograph. “Not surprising really. Although some of these old houses weren’t built to any plan, I did think it curious that there wasn’t some kind of main entry.”

“So, there are no house plans?”

“None. Nothing lodged anyway. Have you had a look for it?”

“The front door? Shall we?”

Instead of following Christie to the front of the cottage, Barry went to the back of his work truck and collected a shovel. He tapped away through the long grass. Clang.

“Got it.”

Christie rushed to see what he meant as he squatted down and brushed the grass to one side.

“Old path. You’d never know without the photo.”

Barry tapped his way to the front wall. In a deep garden bed, woody old bushes – well past their prime – blocked his progress.

“They can go.” Christie said.

With a couple of grunts, Barry pulled two bushes out. He dragged them to one side, leaving a narrow passage through the dirt.

“Oh, there’s a step!”

“Newish weatherboard. See how it’s just a bit different? Where your door is hidden, I’ll bet.”

“Wow. This is between the bedrooms. So the cupboard—”

“Yup. Behind it we’ll find the other side.”

“Okay. Let’s do it!” Christie almost danced in excitement.

Barry grinned. “Not that straightforward, but I’ll get the boys to have a look and let you know.”

“Oh. You can’t just knock the wall down?”

“Not until I know it won’t bring the roof with it. While we’re looking at it, you need to think about whether you really want a front door.”

Barry headed back to his truck. Why wouldn’t she want a front door? And more importantly, why had the front door been boarded up, and when?

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“Do you think Thomas would know?” Holding her glass out hopefully, Christie puzzled over the mystery of the front door.

Martin refilled both their glasses. “Perhaps. It depends how long ago it was boarded up.”

“Barry thinks at least fifty years ago, probably a bit more. Didn’t Thomas live there as a child? Would there be photos of the place back then that he might still have?”

“So many questions. Okay, don’t look at me that way. You might have to wait to ask him.”

Christie wandered out to the deck. The smell of sea spray and jasmine reminded her of the yacht and she smiled.

“What’s that for?” Martin leaned his arms on the railing, watching her face in the glow of the sunset.

“I’m lucky. That’s all.”

“You’re beautiful.”

Christie blushed. Until Martin, no compliment ever raised the colour in her face, yet all he had to do was say something

nice, or look at her with those dark, moody eyes, and she was lost.

“It’s sweet.”

“What is?” She swallowed some wine to cover her reaction.

“Here you are, this worldly, travelled woman who has brushed shoulders with the rich and famous for years. Yet,” he moved closer, turning her face to his with a gentle finger under her chin, “you blush like a teenager.”

“Umm... it’s the sun. The sunset. Just a reflection of the sun.”

He chuckled, the sound low and very appealing. Her body responded by leaning toward him, completely without her permission.

“Then I shall wait until the sun goes down and tell you again. And again. You are beautiful, Christie Ryan. And sweet.”

“I don’t want to be sweet.” The words were a mere whisper.

“Then just be my sweetheart.” Martin sat his wineglass on the railing and took Christie’s to put with it. He took her hands and held them against his chest.

“Do you feel my heartbeat? It’s racing. And that’s for you, Christie. Only for you.”

Shivers of delight coursed through her, nerves awash with sensitivity. The way he was looking at her, there must be something special coming.

“I waited my whole life for you.” His words were like a dream.

*I love you, I love you!* He was going to propose. It didn’t matter that they’d been together for such a short time. What they shared was real. True. Honest.

Martin kissed her forehead. Then reached for the wine glasses and offered Christie hers. Confused, she took it.

Maybe for a toast? But he was an old-fashioned man.  
Wouldn't he want to do the whole formal proposal thing?

"Christie?"

"Yes?" Her voice was barely above a whisper and now, he glanced at her with a smile.

"I'd offer you dinner, but there's a potential client who's arranged to call me soon. I'll be a while."

"Oh. I'll go? That's what you mean. Oh, I thought..."

"What did you think?"

"No, nothing."

"I'm sorry, I'd have liked to spend the evening together. Tomorrow?" He kissed her. She barely returned the pressure of his lips and he pulled away to look at her. "I've upset you."

Christie pushed down the feelings of bitter disappointment and embarrassment. She smiled and handed him her empty glass. "Actually, I'm rather tired so yes, let's catch up tomorrow."

Martin searched her face, his forehead creased. "We'll talk about this then."

"Sure." *Not a chance.* "I hope the phone call goes well." She ran down the steps.

"Christie?"

"Give Randall a cuddle!" Without a backward glance, she hurried into the evening, hoping he wouldn't follow.





# Chapter Ten

In near-darkness, Christie stood at Dorothy's grave, wondering what on earth was wrong with herself. Gran had thrown away marriage after marriage. Pushed away everyone who loved her. Lived a lonely life for decades. *I don't want that!*

Hands clenched, Christie stalked away. What if she was making the same mistake with Martin that she'd made with Derek? So desperate to be loved, she'd allowed Derek to move in with her only weeks after meeting him. And her life was good. Fulfilled, busy, successful. But not happy.

At the side of the road she waited for a car to pass. The driver tooted and Daphne waved madly as she and John passed. The tension drained away the moment Christie waved back at the couple who'd been the first to welcome her to town all those months ago. This wasn't her old life. This was her hang-up, not Martin's. He had no idea of her state of mind. Imagining a proposal not once but twice in a couple of days was silly.

The old railway station loomed on the right through the trees lining her street. Once the hub for transport and freight for the region, the old buildings were long deserted and falling apart. Nobody ever stepped onto the platform to wait for a loved one to return.

Clank.

Like a dropped piece of metal, the sound reverberated from somewhere along the line, startling Christie. She opened the torch app on her phone.

There was the crack of a branch, or maybe just the wind in the trees, closer now.

"Hello? Who's there?" Christie's eyes shot from one side of the road to the other, following the light from her phone. There was no answer. She hurried to the driveway.

At the gate she paused, glancing back. It must have been an animal, perhaps a possum or kangaroo. Her imagination

was on overdrive. Unfamiliar fear crept into her mind and she rushed past the Lotus to the back door.

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The cottage was a mess. Scattered throughout the hallway, kitchen, and lounge room were leftover pieces of plaster and debris. The dining room and lounge room – now the main focus of the renovation – housed piles of paint-splattered drop sheets, ladders, and an assortment of plasterboards.

Christie leaned against the doorway to the lounge room. She'd got the workmen to throw the old sofa into the rubbish bin out the front. After stepping over the drop sheets, she ran a hand over the marble mantelpiece. It needed to come off so Barry's men could repair large cracks in the wall behind it. Not long ago, a seascape had hung above the fireplace, repaired and framed by Martin. Now it belonged to Thomas and Martha, back with its artist and the woman he painted it for.

Hungry, she navigated around the mess to the kitchen. Behind a bottle of wine she found some leftover chili con carne. As it heated, she made good use of the short wait to open the wine. The moment she sat at the table, Martin's ringtone filled the room.

“Do you mind doing the talking?”

“Why?”

“Eating.” Without waiting for an answer, she took a mouthful. “Mmm.”

He chuckled. “Very good. Sorry about earlier, just never know how long these things take.”

“S'okay.”

“S'okay? No, don't answer. You're not making any sense.” He paused, sipping on something. Probably whiskey. “When I finished the call about the new commission, I got one from Thomas.”

Almost choking in an attempt to swallow, Christie grabbed her wine and forced the food down. “Are they o-okay?” She coughed a bit at the end.

“I thought you wanted me to do the talking? They are fine. Loving it in fact. Thomas wants you to know that Martha’s little house is a lot like your cottage, except it has a front door.”

“You didn’t ask him about my front door? Oh my goodness! If he wants a front door, then there will be one when they get back and that way they can have the cottage. Oh, I’m so happy!”

“Are you quite finished?” He was amused. “No, I didn’t. We got onto other things.”

“What other things? When are they coming home?”

“Eat and I’ll tell you. Are you eating?”

Christie filled her mouth again.

“Martha has put her place up for sale. There’s already been a few interested people and she’s finding it a bit... confronting. Thomas is whisking Martha off to Paris. Apparently, they had some plan to go there once. He is so excited, sounds like a young man.”

*I will meet you anytime, anywhere you want me to. We can move to Paris if you wish. Get far away from River’s End and start a new life for ourselves. Just do not give up on us.*

That was what Thomas once wrote to Martha, in a letter that she never saw. There’d been other mentions of Paris, but that one came back to Christie with alarming clarity.

“You don’t think they are staying there?”

“What do you mean?”

“Permanently. Like, moving to Paris.”

“No. Relax, sweetheart, it is just a long overdue visit.”

“You know he once told her they could move there. Leave here forever. What if that’s what they’re doing?” Near tears, Christie pushed her plate away.

Martin took a moment to reply. “It isn’t. They’re not going to leave you. Nor am I.”

“Then why don’t you...” She stopped herself. *Not now!*

“Why don’t I what? Christie, what am I not doing?”

“Let’s talk about something else. Okay?” *Please, let it go.*

A long silence drew out between them. Appetite gone, Christie played with her wine glass.

Eventually, with a sigh, Martin spoke. “How was the walk home? Did you go via the beach?”

“Yes. It got dark quickly and I put the torch on when I thought...”

“Thought what?”

Christie stared at the ceiling. “There was a possum or something up along the railway track.” She forced a laugh. “It made me jump, that’s all.”

“Maybe I should come over.”

“No. I mean, it isn’t necessary. I’m safely here and the door is locked. And look, I’m even eating. I just want to clean up the mess the tradies left today and have an early night. But, thanks.”

“I could tuck you into bed.”

“Stop tempting me. I love you.”

“I love you as well. A lot.”

After he hung up, Christie held the phone for a while. More than anything she wanted him here but how could she be honest without the emotion? Swirling around in her head were too many what ifs and doubts. Not just about their future, but Thomas and Martha’s.

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Martin whistled for Randall as he strode across the soft grass to the gate. Running to catch up with him, the dog – tail wagging furiously – was ready for the night-time adventure. Hand on the gate, Martin stopped.

Would turning up uninvited on Christie’s doorstep make things worse? He’d seen her hide some sudden emotion before

she'd left. Just now, her tone of voice and odd comments reinforced his gut feeling that something was upsetting her.

Earlier, on the deck, their connection had been strong. Her hands on his chest, her eyes gazing at him with such incredible love. With the late rays of the sun on her face, no woman in the world was more beautiful. So fragile and precious, she created a desire in him almost impossible to keep in check.

If it was up to him, they would be married tomorrow. They would have a family, the dream he'd kept buried his whole life. Only now, with the light she brought, could he begin to imagine this was real.

Martin wandered back to the house, trailed by a confused Randall. He had to step back a little and give her some space. If he rushed her into a commitment, then he was no better than Derek.

At the deck, Martin dropped onto the top step. Randall whined and offered him a paw. "Sorry, mate. False alarm." He scratched the dog's head, staring into the night.

Once he had been in a happy family. His mother singing him to sleep. Dad carrying him on his shoulders. Vague memories that disappeared a little more every year.

After a lifetime of loneliness, Christie burst into his world. He needed to protect and love her, breath in her incredible scent, and walk in the light she radiated. Every time she was out of his sight, he ached to hear her laugh. See her smile.

The only way to do this was slowly. One step at a time, letting her lead, so she would know he was serious and not be afraid of embracing this precious love they shared.



# Chapter Eleven

Rain on the window woke Christie before dawn. There was no need to be up yet and she snuggled under the covers. Sleep was elusive, pushed aside by annoying memories of Derek. He'd been so attentive at the beginning and she'd missed all the warning signs of his narcissism. Over time, as her friends drifted away and few took their place, he became her world, outside of work.

No doubt she'd compensated by concentrating on her career. Perseverance paid off, fulfilling her until the day he and Ingrid ripped it away. How naive she'd been. Well, those two suited each other and, hopefully, would never appear in her life again.

On the other hand, Martin was a real alpha male, naturally protective and, at times, bossy. Yet this felt right. More than right. Christie was an intelligent, educated and sensible woman, able to stand up for herself and others. Yet all Martin needed to do was raise an eyebrow or lower his voice to that mild yet no-nonsense tone and she was not only listening, she was melting.

She gave up on sleep and turned on the bedside lamp. Christie picked up the photo Belinda had given her. A moment in time she would always treasure. This was the man she loved and if he needed time to decide she was his future wife, then so be it. After all, she had a cottage to finish before Martha and Thomas returned.

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Breakfast was coffee and a reminder in her phone to go shopping. By the time Barry and his men arrived, the rain was gone, leaving a grey but warm enough morning. Two of the men started pulling the mantelpiece apart, whilst Barry and another man turned their attention to the closet at the end of the hallway.

Christie stayed in the kitchen, making a shopping list as she listened to them work. In a few days the bathroom, laundry, and kitchen would be gutted and, at that point, she



would move out. Elizabeth insisted she go to Palmerston House and, unless Martin suggested otherwise, Christie would do that.

“Christie?” Barry called from the hallway.

Almost at a sprint, Christie joined him.

He grinned at her. “So, would you like a front door?”

“It’s doable?”

“Sure is. From the look of things, this here,” he tapped on the closet “was the doorway. Where the weatherboard is outside would have been a little entry alcove. We’ll start from this side, restructure as needed, put a door in. The outside can wait until the cottage is secure.”

“I want the cottage to be like it once was.”

“Okay then. I’ll give you links to a couple of door places and if you can take a peek and give me some options, we’ll order one.” Barry tapped on his iPad and a moment later Christie’s phone beeped.

Back at the table, she compared the old door in the photograph to those on the sites Barry had sent. The original door was solid timber, nothing inviting or interesting. *Forget tradition*. Christie sent a message back to Barry with a link to a timber door with glass inserts featuring kookaburras,

A moment later he stuck his head around the door. “Good choice. It’ll come up a treat with some stain. I’ll also order a lightweight security screen door.”

“Oh, okay. I guess it would be nice to have the front door open in summer.”

“Best to have it anyway, what with the glass panels and all.” He disappeared again.

Frowning, Christie wondered if she’d made the right choice. If someone wanted to break in, there were plenty of windows. Not that anyone would. It wasn’t as if she had anything worth stealing.

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The jewellery store door jangled as Christie pushed it open with her hip, hands full with two cups of takeaway coffee from the corner cafe.

George Campbell looked up from polishing a watch, a broad smile lighting his face. “What brings you by, my dear lady?”

“Hello, George. Thought you might enjoy a coffee.” Christie offered him one. “Just the way you like it.”

“How thoughtful, thank you.”

“Not entirely. It is kind of a swap for information, if you have a few moments?”

“For you, always.” George reached for his coffee.

“You know I am renovating the cottage? Well, it has come to light that once upon a time, it had a front door. In fact, there is a photo belonging to Palmerston House showing one right in the middle of the front wall.”

“Indeed. You certainly like to look into the past.”

“Actually, I thought that was over, but I am curious about why anyone would change such a lovely building that way. Barry Parks says it may have been done anywhere from fifty to seventy years ago, going by the timber.”

“Let me see. I am seventy-four, so it must have been about nineteen-sixty. Yes, it was, for I had turned seventeen and Tom was just sixteen. You need to understand his parents were very traditional. No encouragement for him to pursue art for goodness sake. His father, James, wanted him to be the next stationmaster and they argued about it just before the two of us went on a weekend hike into the mountains. It is a sad story though.”

George paused, brow furrowed.

“What happened?” Christie prompted.

“When we returned, I went up to the cottage with Tom to put the camping gear in the garage. It was late, and dark. Tom stopped in the middle of the driveway, not sure what was

wrong, but then we realised the front door was gone. We joked about it. His parents were not very social people.”

*It must run in the family.* Cliff top houses and mountain retreats.

“After stowing the gear away, I headed home so I only have his version of events.” George was troubled by the old memories. “You really should speak to him about it, but he probably won’t tell you anyway. All I know is that his father closed in the entry way. Tom had hung some of his paintings there, against his father’s wishes. At the same time, his father threw away all of the paintings – his sketches, paints, brushes, everything.”

“No! Oh, how horrible. How could a father do that to his own son?”

“Tom left home the same night and came to my house for a while. He was still at school and worked weekends at the timber yards. After a bit, his father apologised and Thomas went back. But it was never the same.”

“There’s a paint-splattered work bench in the attic.”

“They reached a compromise. Thomas agreed to follow his father’s footsteps in return for a workspace that was his alone.”

“But he was never a stationmaster.”

“The line closed. Happiest I’d seen Tom in years when it happened. By then, he had Martha and was working on selling some paintings before they married. So, there it is.”

Christie squeezed George’s arm. “I’m so sorry to remind you.”

“The past is never far away these days. At least now, Thomas is happy, truly happy, and that, my dear, is your doing.” He patted her hand.

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Ingrid stalked into Derek’s office with a scowl. He glanced up from his laptop, raised an eyebrow and looked back at the screen.

“Where is it?” She put both hands on the other side of the desk, leaning toward him. “And why?”

“Why what? I’m busy.”

“The monstrosity of a painting. I might not like it, but I should be consulted before you just sell something off like that!”

The phone rang. Derek hit the intercom. “Hold my calls, Lorraine.” He closed the laptop, pushed his chair back and crossed one ankle over his knee. “Careful. This is still my firm.”

Ingrid inhaled slowly and straightened. “Sorry. Don’t mean to be bossy but you know I’m used to running things.” She swayed her hips as she stepped around the desk and deliberately sat on its edge as close to Derek as possible. “Don’t be cross.”

“Seeing as you’re here, update me with your progress.”

“Not much to tell. Had a lovely long conversation with lover-boy and he agreed to meet. Kept telling me he doesn’t do portraits but I persuaded him I really need one. For my elderly mother, you know.”

Amusement flicked into Derek’s eyes. “What else?”

“While I am in town, there’s a real estate agent, John Jones, who handles things for Bryce Montgomery’s developments locally. Perhaps he needs a chance to consider... alternative options.”

“Tread very softly and make sure you meet him away from his office. Not when that meddling wife of his is around.” He had no doubt Daphne Jones had been responsible for alerting Martin Blake when he visited Chris last year. The memory of being thrown out of her cottage by Martin still angered him. “My name cannot come into it, if you insist on speaking to him.”

Ingrid moved her legs so that they touched Derek’s. “Did you upset things so badly?”

He returned the pressure. “Let’s just say that they are fans of Chris. And that artist. Tread gently.”

“I heard you the first time. Where is the painting?”

“You do your job and I,” he suddenly got to his feet and walked to a small bar. “I will take care of mine.”

After pouring two glasses of brandy, Derek wandered back to the desk and handed one to Ingrid. “To taking what’s ours.” Their glasses clinked.

“To loads of money.” Ingrid replied.

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Once Christie unpacked the shopping, she followed the echo of hammering down the hallway. As usual, debris and dust covered the floor and it got worse by the minute. Barry stood aside as one of his men pounded on newly exposed brickwork between the bedrooms.

“Sorry.” Barry raised his voice over the noise. “Whoever did this went to a lot of effort to make it solid. Two rows of bricks.”

“It was the stationmaster.”

“Huh? Hey, Dave, take a break.”

Happy to put his tools down, the other man nodded to Christie and headed toward the kitchen.

“I said it was the stationmaster himself that did this. The last one.”

Barry rubbed his forehead. “Was he hiding a body?”

“Where’s the cupboard?”

“Garage. Boys got it out in one piece so it’ll make good storage out there if you want. Which reminds me, you had a delivery.”

“Me? But I haven’t ordered anything.”

“Are you sure? It’s pretty big. We signed for it, hope that’s okay, and put it in the garage as well. Here, I’ll show you.”

Christie followed Barry, glancing into the lounge room as they passed. The walls were ready for painting and the mantelpiece back in place. She couldn't wait to decorate the room.

Inside the garage, a large, thin box – much like one housing a giant flat screen television – leaned against a wall. Something about its size and shape was familiar. Christie glanced at Barry. “Do you know who sent it?”

“Just a regular delivery van. Barely fitted in.”

Christie looked for a return address.

“Want me to open it?” Barry pulled out a box knife and when Christie nodded, sliced carefully along one seal. He peered inside. “Think its art.”

Sudden dread filled Christie. With uncanny insight, she knew what it was. As Barry sliced through the other sides, she opened her mouth to stop him, but nothing came out. He pulled the front away, then thinner packing board behind it.

“Wow! This is one fine painting.” Barry stood back to admire it, missing the fear that swept into Christie's face.

It was a fine painting. One that she loved as much as she loved its artist. The problem was that *Sole Survivor* belonged to Derek.



## Chapter Twelve

“Why? Just why?”

Christie paced around the garage. Martin stood like a rock some way back from the painting in silent thought.

“What on earth is Derek up to? This has to be some sort of screwed up message from him but why?” As Christie stomped past Martin for the third time, he reached out and gathered her into his arms. In the safety of his embrace, her heartbeat gradually slowed. Fear and frustration seeped away until Martin’s steady breathing surrounded her.

“I don’t know. But you being distressed doesn’t help us work it out.” Martin kissed Christie’s hair before releasing her.

“Sorry. It just shocked me.”

“I can see that. You’re sure there was no note?”

“Barry helped me search. Unless something fell off inside the delivery van, then no. And I’ve checked all the packing and box.”

“An anonymous gift.”

“Are you sure he bought it? I know he said he did, but that might have been to rattle me because I’d defended you when we first saw it.” Christie gazed at the painting, absorbing the stunning colours.

“I am sure. The receipt was from his business. What do you mean you defended me?”

“He and Ingrid made some stupid comments about abstract art and I disagreed.”

“And?”

“And... I may have been rather forceful and offended them. But it was their own fault! Ingrid declared abstract art is the work of a disorganised mind and I pointed out that you have one of the most logical, intelligent minds I know. Or something along those lines. Why are you smiling?”

“Because I adore you, my little ball of fire.”



“Well, I wasn’t about to stand there and let that woman judge you with no basis for her ridiculous comments.”

“It really doesn’t matter what other people think. You know that. Only the people you love matter.”

Christie touched the man in the painting. Misshapen, he dragged an anchor twice his size from a broken shipwreck. All the colours were back to front and incredibly beautiful. *Sole Survivor*. The person left behind when all around him was lost. She turned to Martin, her green eyes dark with emotion. “This is you.”

About to deny it, Martin bit his lip. Christie had a way of seeing through him, bypassing his defences with her perceptive kindness. Whatever that painting was, he had not meant for it to be identifiable, yet it was. To this woman who gazed at him with the glimmer of tears, held back no doubt to stop him commenting on them.

Drawing her into his arms again, Martin chose to kiss Christie instead. To let her feel his answer rather than hear it. Her arms slid up around his neck. He tasted her sweet lips with longing, wishing that they were somewhere, anywhere, other than here in the old garage dealing with her ex-fiancé again.

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Martin locked the garage and handed Christie the key. “We need to decide what to do with it. I’m not comfortable with it staying here.”

“In the garage? I guess it isn’t the best place.”

“No, here at the cottage. You have enough to worry about without this as well.”

“Oh, that reminds me. Come and see what’s going on!” Smiling at last, Christie took Martin’s hand and they wandered to the cottage. “You won’t believe what we’re doing!”

“Installing a proper kitchen with appliances that order and prepare your meals?” Martin teased. “Gutting the cottage to open a cinema showing all the films you’ve worked on? Ouch, don’t dig your nails into my hand. Let’s see, turning a room into a beauty salon?”

Christie stopped at the back door to pat Randall, who lay fast asleep in the late afternoon sun. He groaned and rolled over to have his chest scratched and Christie obliged. “That’s not a bad idea.”

“Which one?” Martin leaned against a post to watch them interact.

“I could open a salon. Probably not here though, just a bit too far from town.” She tilted her head. “You know, I wondered when I arrived here whether anyone provided beauty services.” She gazed at Martin.

“Don’t ask me. I was joking.”

“Of course.”

“It would interfere with your career.”

“Yes. It would.”

“Not give you the income you’re used to.”

“Are you trying to talk me out of it?” Christie took his hand again, playing with his fingers, keeping her eyes on his. “I’d be in River’s End all the time. No more travelling. No more absences.” Which was what Derek used to complain about. “I love living here.” She opened the door.

Martin caught up with her in the lounge room. He inspected the wall above the mantelpiece. “Nice job. Once the room’s painted, I’ll find you a painting.”

“It suits the seascape. Thomas’ painting. So I do hope they’ll accept the cottage as a gift.” She missed the flash of misgiving that crossed Martin’s face. “By the time they get back, I hope to have everything ready.”

“There’s a lot of history here. It is incredibly sweet that you want this so much, but what if they can’t get past that history?”

“I don’t know. I shall probably sell. But, hopefully it won’t come to that. Particularly once Thomas sees what we’re doing with the front door.”

“You found out about it.”

“I went to see George and he told me when and why it was closed off. Poor Thomas, he was only sixteen... oh, you don’t know.” Christie turned away and went to the window. The trees cast long shadows with the approach of evening. After a moment, Martin came to stand behind her, his hands resting on the windowsill, one on either side of Christie.

“What I do or don’t know is beside the point. George should know better than to discuss Thomas behind his back.”

“He was trying to help. Not being a gossip and after all he was there when it happened.”

“It isn’t your business though. Nor mine. Stop trying to fix everything, sweetheart.”

Staring at their reflections in the window, Martin’s face so hard, like it had been time and again when they first met, Christie’s heart sank. *Why don’t you trust me?* “I’m sorry. I won’t speak of it again, but I will put the front door back where it belongs. As you said, Martha and Thomas may not wish to live here, so I need to think about myself, or the value of the place should I sell.”

“Who would you sell it to? It seems to be developers who want it.”

“And you know I will never sell to them! I don’t know who and anyway, it isn’t my priority.” She fell silent, aware that her voice had sharpened.

Martin moved his hands from the windowsill to Christie’s waist, gently turning her to face him. She kept her eyes down.

“Christie? I’m not cross with you.”

Still, she stared at their shoes. He chuckled and in surprise, her eyes flew to his.

“You want to say something. And you’re holding it in.”

She tightened her lips into a straight line and stepped out of his loose embrace. “Would you like to stay for dinner?”

“Yes, but don’t get defensive and change the subject. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

*I'm scared of loving you too much. I want a family with you but what if I lose everything? What if you don't feel the same?* "I'd rather not, just now. I might go and see what looks good to cook though." She softened her tone and managed a small smile.

Martin nodded. "I need to feed Randall. We'll be back in a little while."

"I love you."

"I know you do." Martin squeezed her hand on his way past and left Christie alone in the lounge room.

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Just after dark, Christie heard a familiar woof from the street. Such a little thing to make her happy, yet it did, so much. Randall was the dog she'd never had as a child. Gran would not tolerate any pets, not even a goldfish, leaving Christie to daydream about owning a cat, or a dog. Sometimes even a donkey, with long velvety ears.

She turned on the back light and unlocked the door, then returned to stirring a bolognaise sauce. He knocked.

"It's unlocked," she called.

"It shouldn't be." Carrying a bottle of wine and a small chiller bag, Martin came in with Randall. "Do we need to discuss this, Christie?"

His tone reminded her of the day he'd found the door unlocked after twice reminding her to lock it. A shiver went up her spine. Part apprehension and part attraction. She waved her spoon at him. "I only unlocked it when I heard Randall bark. I promise it was locked before then."

After leaving the wine and chiller bag on the kitchen table, Martin wandered to the stove. He kissed Christie's cheek. "Smells fantastic. Keep the door locked please. Particularly at night." He took wine glasses from a cupboard. "Perhaps you should get some lights around the cottage as well?"

"Why? This is a safe town, how often have I heard you say that? Everyone says it, in fact." As a pot of water came to the

boil, Christie turned down the sauce and collected fresh pasta from the fridge. She added salt and oil to the water, then the pasta.

“Shall I stir?” Martin took a spoon to the pasta anyway and Christie stopped what she was doing to watch him with a grin. “What?”

“I just like looking at you.”

Martin turned off the sauce and opened the wine, but with just a hint of a smile that filled Christie’s heart.

“Randall’s gone to your bedroom. Is that okay?” He handed Christie a glass of wine. “Cheers.”

“Cheers. He can sleep wherever he wants.”

“Yes, he has that effect on people all the time.”

“Mmm.”

“What does ‘mmm’ mean?”

Christie took a sip of wine before answering. “He is so special. I’d like to have a dog one day but how on earth would I get one like him?”

“He’s one of a kind, like they all are. You know he has chosen you as one of his people? It isn’t a case of who owns Randall, but who Randall wants to be with. You’re definitely high on that list.”

“But—”

“No buts.” Martin busied himself finding cutlery. “Who am I to tell him who to love? It’s not as though I don’t feel the same.”

*Then why are you holding back so much?* Christie turned away so he wouldn’t see the conflict in her eyes. Somehow, she had to learn patience.



## Chapter Thirteen

Dinner was long finished and the washing up underway. In between kisses, Martin washed and Christie dried. Randall sat hopefully in the middle of the kitchen. With no scraps coming his way, he wandered off again.

“The kitchen will be so wonderful once it’s done.” Christie folded the tea towel. “Coffee?”

“Thank you. You’re putting a lot into it. If it really is all for Thomas and Martha, then they need to buy it.”

Christie stopped filling the kettle to look at Martin in surprise. “I couldn’t do that!”

“And why not? Martha is selling her home in Ireland and Thomas – assuming he agrees – will sell his little place up the mountain. On top of that, he’s made a decent living as an artist for a long time, so money is not an object.”

The kettle plugged in, Christie collected mugs and teaspoons, giggling as Martin barricaded the drawer by leaning against it and refusing to move until she kissed him. “You can make the coffee if you don’t stop!”

“Perhaps I should. Do I need to buy you a coffee machine?”

“There’s nothing wrong with yours.”

“Except it’s at my house.”

“Exactly. So why we would need two?” Christie sneaked a glance at Martin. He was opening the chiller bag he’d brought with him. He mustn’t have heard.

“What’s in there?”

“Aunt Sylvia sent them.”

“Sylvia? How sweet... and surprising,” Christie joined Martin. “Did she know you were coming here?”

“Behave. She likes you a lot. Just give her time to get over Belinda moving to Melbourne.”

“I like her too. It must be hard for her without Belinda, particularly in the bakery. Does she have anyone else to help? Ooh!” Her eyes got rounder as Martin lifted two perfect mini cheesecakes out of the bag and then she rushed to the cupboard to find plates.

“To answer your question, yes, she has taken on a lad to train up. She had been considering an apprentice for a while, so in some ways this forced her to do it. He’s a good kid, committed and keen.”

Cheesecake on plates and coffee in hand, they settled back at the kitchen table. Christie smiled. “Between Belinda and now Sylvia, I have no chance of wasting away. I am pleased about her new assistant. She’s done it tough, hasn’t she?”

“Aunt Sylvia is a tough lady. And kind.”

“Very. Was there ever a Mister Sylvia? Don’t look at me that way, I’m not gossiping, just trying to fill in back story.”

“It’s her story to tell, but to stop you putting your foot in it, no there never was. Belinda and Jess’ father would never commit to marriage and eventually, he moved on. No.” He put his hand up as Christie went to ask more. “That’s it. You want to know more, you ask Sylvia.”

Christie gave him a little smile as collected the plates and went to the sink. Martin’s eyes followed her, admiring the slender lines of her body under jeans and t-shirt. She looked amazing in anything. Or, out of anything. His mind wandered.

“Another coffee?”

“Hmm?”

“You were miles away.”

“No. Not miles.” He checked his watch and stood up. “Time to let you get some sleep.”

“I’m not tired.”

“You should be, with all the work you’re doing here.” Martin held his arms out and Christie snuggled into his warmth. “I have an early meeting that I must prepare for.”



“Banker? Insurance broker?” she teased.

“Are you free in the afternoon? Might go for a sail if you’d like to keep practising.”

“That would be wonderful!”

Martin whistled softly and a moment later, Randall padded down the hallway, yawning. Christie followed them out onto the back porch.

“Sweet dreams. Lock the door.”

“I will. Have a nice walk home.”

Now wide awake, Randall took off after a rabbit. “My cue.” Martin squeezed Christie’s hand before following Randall into the darkness.

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At almost midnight, Christie pushed her laptop away and made another coffee. In the last couple of hours she’d filled her head with nautical terms and rules of sailing, preparing for the Marine Licence exam. There were quite a few differences from what she’d learnt in California, sailing around Santa Monica with some of the cast of a film.

Those were heady days. In spite of her fear of the sea, and that she would embarrass herself being seasick, Christie had ended up on board the producer’s yacht one evening and loved it.

There was a freedom in the wind-filled sails unlike any other. How cleanly and quietly the boat cut through the waves. More modern than *Jasmine Sea*, it comfortably carried the group out and around the gorgeous bay. One evening turned into many. Christie got on well with the producer, Carlo Palmero, and he gave everyone the chance to learn to sail.

It was extraordinary that she now had her own yacht. It didn’t feel real and part of her still couldn’t understand why. Did Martin believe that Christie needed the boat in order to feel at home?

Her phone announced a message with a soft beep and she almost squealed in delight. From Thomas, it was a photo taken

in front of the Eiffel Tower. His arm was around Martha's shoulder and her eyes were on him. A message followed.  
*Highly recommend Paris for honeymoons.*

Christie responded with a smile. *Will keep that in mind. Lovely photo. Love you both!* How wonderful to see them in the place they'd once dreamed of going to. Their happiness was an inspiration. But were two happy endings in one family even possible?

\*\*\*

"What is that sound?" Thomas stopped in the middle of the park for the third time.

"I imagine it is your phone, dear." Martha took the opportunity to sink onto a bench. Thoughts of a foot rub had occupied her mind for the past hour, as Thomas directed them from one part of the beautiful city to another. His enthusiasm was admirable but her legs were suffering.

Phone in hand, Thomas joined Martha. "I think it's this thing here, then that... ah!" He held the phone back a bit to see. "From Christie. She wrote 'Will keep that in mind. Lovely photo. Love you both!'"

"That was quick! Isn't it midnight at home?"

"Maybe we woke her. Might need to work this out a bit better. What does she mean, 'will keep it in mind'? What could be better?"

"They're not even engaged, Thomas. Perhaps a little early to plan a honeymoon."

"Only took us a few weeks."

Martha leaned against Thomas and his arm went around her. "We had a lifetime to make up for."

"Not an hour passes that I forget that. Which is why we need to keep walking. There's so much to see."

"No, let's sit for a while. We can see perfectly well from here. I promised Christie I'd bring some photographs back."

As Martha opened her handbag, Thomas put his phone away. “This is the most incredible place. As you once promised it would be.”

“What you could have accomplished had you come here as a young man! Paris would have been at your feet, my darling.” Martha smiled at Thomas. “Tonight, I have something special arranged.”

“Just how have you arranged anything? I thought I’d kept you close to me all the time.”

“I have my ways. Did you know there is a restaurant below the glass pyramid in the Louvre?”

He shook his head.

“Well, there is. And, if you would care to escort me back to the hotel to have a short rest and get changed, then I will take you there.”

“At night?”

“That’s usually the best time for dinner, I find.” She snapped a few photos of the park. “Unless you prefer not to visit the Louvre?”

“At night?”

“I’m certain you are repeating yourself. Yes, twice a week it is open late, so we can wander and gasp at the Mona Lisa and imagine ourselves part of a thriller book if we wish. But dinner is reserved for six-thirty, which is in about two hours —”

“Why are we sitting here?” Thomas was on his feet in an instant, hand held out for Martha. She took a moment to put the camera away, smiling to herself.

As soon as Martha stood up, Thomas wrapped his other arm around her body, pulling her close to him. “Do you have any idea how much I love you, Martha Blake?”

“Oh, yes I do. And I shall spend every day of my life the happiest woman in the world.”

\*\*\*

Moments before her appointment with Martin, Ingrid sat outside his wooden gate in a blue Porsche, contemplating her reflection in the mirror. This was a bold move, even for her. First she'd develop River's End, then further west. Bit by bit, she and Derek would stamp their authority on this backward region.

All it would take was the cottage and its land. The precious long, narrow parcel had two things going for it. The obvious one was its location. Secluded enough to attract privacy-seeking weekenders, yet close enough to the town centre for amenities. Then, there was the abandoned railway station alongside.

Attached to the railway line was hundreds of acres of land, and whilst local council would probably be happy to sell, there was a problem. Long ago, when all the land belonged to the Ryan family, a covenant was created to protect it being subdivided. Only the owner of the cottage could give permission for council to approve such an action.

Pity that Derek had stuffed things up with his ex. Instead of getting all primal with her, he should have used that considerable charm of his to change her mind. Marry her, by preference. Tie things up and manage the situation.

Nine o'clock. No point sitting here and wishing this was over. Ingrid smoothed her short hair, now flame red rather than its normal platinum. She swung her legs out of the car, stood up, and threw her bag over her shoulder. Elegant but understated black pants and jacket over a soft green blouse were eye-catching. But, no jumping in and doing a seduction just yet. Slowly. One thing that Ingrid had plenty of was patience. Lots and lots of patience.



## Chapter Fourteen

Christie was up at dawn, intending to make the most of the weekend, free of Barry's crew. By about nine, she had cleared a wide section of the garden bed in front of the cottage. It did look a bit odd though, the blank wall with an old step and cleared frontage. She hurried to the back of the cottage.

In a box left by the workmen was a can of spray paint. Giving it a shake, Christie returned to the front of the property, giggling now at what she planned to do. She stood on the best of the old bricks and sprayed the outline of a door onto the wall. Not a very good one, as it leaned to one side and was too wide.

She added a door handle for good measure, then attempted a kookaburra. "Oh dear," she murmured. "I'm not really artistic after all."

A black Range Rover crossed the railway tracks. Christie couldn't believe her eyes when it turned into the driveway with Angus McGregor behind the wheel. She jumped up and down until he climbed out, then threw her arms around him.

"My goodness, Miss Christie! Let me stretch! You always were the most impatient child!"

"Yes, and I still am. Impatient that is." Christie squeezed him and reluctantly stepped back. "I can't believe you're here! How long are you staying? Oh, you can meet Martin!"

"I should like that. As for your question, I don't have any plans. I just wished to see you."

"Are you alright? You're not ill, Angus?"

He laughed and shook his head. "Nothing of the sort. I missed you."

"Well, come inside and have some tea. There is so much to talk about. You can stay for a while? Days? A lifetime?"

Angus reached into the car, drawing out a small satchel. "Perhaps a few days."

"Oh, goodie!"

After Angus locked the car, Christie put her arm through his and they wandered along the driveway. Angus stopped. "And what, may I ask, is that?" He pointed to the door and Christie laughed. "That, dear Angus, is the front door. Or at least, a not very good artist's impression of where it will be. We have much to discuss and I need to warn you, it is a mess inside."

\*\*\*

Angus McGregor lived his life in the service of others. Marrying young and losing his beloved wife only a few years later, he had turned his energies to the hospitality industry. After working his way up to concierge of a prestigious London hotel, he eventually yearned for his homeland of Australia and returned with no job, friends, or ideas. Quite by accident he had come across Dorothy Ryan, a wealthy businesswoman with a long history of being difficult and failing to retain staff to run her home.

Within a few days, he'd understood why so many previous staff had left. Hired to run her Toorak mansion, including arranging and running regular dinner parties and overseeing all aspects of the day-to-day management of everything except her business, he'd come close to resigning more than once. Dorothy was a cold, sometimes unpleasant woman who expected perfection yet refused to deal with details.

Determined to make Melbourne his home, Angus had learnt to ignore his employer's sharpness and somehow won her over with his steady, calm, and perpetually polite nature. She retired around the time that Christie, her only grandchild, was orphaned and came to live with them. He flew to outback Queensland to attend the funeral and bring the child back. Dorothy would not forgive her own daughter for marrying the doctor who took her so far away, not even long enough to see her only offspring laid to rest.

Now, he had finished his final duty of emptying and selling the Toorak mansion. The Range Rover was his to keep, a car he rather liked. With nothing to hold him to Melbourne, he relished his recent travels around Victoria, following whatever road took his fancy. But it was Christie who always stayed in

the back of his mind. The child, now woman, was as close to a daughter as he would ever have.

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Almost dancing from room to room, Christie showed Angus the changes already made, and filled him in on the plans for the rest of the cottage. They stopped between the bedrooms.

“So here was once the front door.” Christie waved at the brick wall. “Can you believe it was filled in last century and in all these years, nobody reversed that? Thomas lived here with his first wife, Frannie. Surely, they would have put the door back? Although...”

“Although?”

“Perhaps it hurt too much. His parents did this after there was an argument about Thomas’ future. He wanted to paint and they wanted him to be the next stationmaster. According to his best friend, Thomas came home after a weekend hiking and not only was the door gone, but all of his paintings and art supplies. Thrown out.”

“How awful! That would be life changing for a young man.”

“It was. He eventually agreed to do as they wished in return for his own space to paint.” She gestured above to the attic. “That is where he painted the seascape, Angus. And where Frannie hid the letters he once wrote to Martha so something must have stopped him using it, or she would never have kept them there.”

“A sad story indeed. But your last email told me how happy Thomas and Martha are now.”

“Come and have some tea. They are in Paris! I’ll show you the photo they sent last night.”

“I might just wash up first, if you don’t mind?”

“Of course, ignore my chatter. I shall put the kettle on.”

When Angus joined her a few moments later, he dropped the satchel onto the kitchen table. “I found some photos and bits and pieces from your Gran’s you may wish to keep.”



“No love letters from unknown people?” Christie handed him a cup of tea.

“Thank you. Not that I am aware of.”

“Please, sit. Have you had breakfast?” She joined him with her coffee, pushing the satchel to one side. She’d open it later, when she was alone.

“Indeed. Quite a pleasant breakfast at the motel in Warrnambool.”

“Speaking of motels, we need to find you somewhere to stay. I would have you here in a heartbeat but as you’ve seen, the place is only just habitable for me. As it is, I’ll be moving out in a couple of days to let the guys do all the wet areas.”

“Then it’s a good thing I planned ahead and booked a room.”

“You did? Not in that motel I hope!”

“No. At Palmerston House.”

“Wonderful! Elizabeth will look after you and that’s probably where I’ll be soon as well. Oh, this is going to be so great. I don’t know where to begin!”

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Martin straddled his surfboard, aimlessly paddling in a circle of sorts. His mind drifted over the morning with his new client, Bethany Fox. He couldn’t pick her accent, a curious mix of private school Australian, English and something else. German or Dutch. Or South African. She said she worked in finance and, from the look of her clothes and car, it was lucrative.

Under normal circumstances he would have politely declined. He usually only painted those who mattered to him, but two things swayed him. There was her own soft plea. This painting was for her parents in England. Her mother was frail and unable to travel. A lover of art, she asked Bethany for a portrait with Australian scenery around her beloved daughter. Whilst Martin wondered why a quality photograph would not

have sufficed, he nevertheless understood Bethany's desire to make her mother happy.

More importantly, there was the commission. Money usually mattered little to Martin. As long as he had enough to pay his debts and feed his dog, not much else counted. Thomas had taught him to save, to invest wisely. There was sufficient tucked away to keep him going for a long time should his income dry up. But that was before Christie came along.

He had to stop thinking like a single man. Sooner or later, she'd give him an indication that she was ready to be with him forever. If he was to be the man who would be the father of her children and the husband she deserved, then he needed to start planning for their future.

A small wave carried the surfboard in. Randall bounced around, barking happily. Martin put the surfboard under an arm and trudged through the sand toward his house. Much as it pained him to take time away from Christie, and go against his odd gut feeling, he'd made a decision. He'd ask for a ridiculous sum for the portrait and, if she agreed, he would paint Bethany Fox.



## Chapter Fifteen

Ingrid drove past Palmerston House heading to River's End Heights. This was the first of Bryce Montgomery's development estates in the area. She snorted as she turned in through the stone entry walls. It was typical of so many developers to alienate the locals by creating a new suburb. The small town needed a massive upgrade and development so clever it would feel organic, which was the best way to get the nod from councils.

It took only a few moments to finish her inspection. About a hundred houses. No shops. No amenities apart from a tiny park in the middle. With only a handful of the houses occupied, it would be a while until the impact of a sudden population increase would filter to the village. One hundred families needing school placements, medical facilities and more shopping. How did Bryce think this would work?

She scanned the street, noting the boat trailers outside several homes. No boats on them, so there must be marina or harbour nearby. Interesting. Boats meant money and she was all about that.

Derek's ring-tone interrupted her thoughts. "Phase one underway," she answered.

"So, he's agreed?"

"Do you doubt me?"

"When do you start?"

"Still to be decided. Anyway, I'm seeing this estate agent shortly, so have had a drive around Bryce Montgomery's pathetic attempt at developing."

"You're keeping a low profile? Avoiding Chris? That would ruin—"

"For goodness' sake, Derek. I wasn't born yesterday." She softened her tone. "I won't let you down, but you need to trust me. Everything is meticulously planned." She followed the street back to the main road.

“Fine. Just be careful, the town is very insular.”

“Insular or not, it is large enough for me to avoid exposure, as long as this John Jones character keeps his mouth shut.”

“Presumably money will take care of it.”

“I’ll call you after my meeting.”

“Good luck.”

*Luck is for gamblers.* Ingrid drove down the long hill that forked to either Martin’s house or the town. She glanced at Palmerston House. The Lotus was there. No sign of Christie Ryan, but she would need to be careful if the other woman was in town today.

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After an impromptu morning tea at Palmerston House, Christie reluctantly drove home. Angus insisted she keep her plans, promising to have dinner with her that evening. Elizabeth made him welcome and he was most comfortable in his new surroundings.

An empty car was parked opposite the cottage and Christie hoped it wasn’t more property developers. The last time it was Bryce Montgomery and he was brazen enough to try to buy the place from under her. The older model sedan was not his style though, and she gave it no more attention.

Half an hour later, concentrating on shaping the roses along the front fence, Christie jumped and dropped her shears when a man walked into the driveway.

“Hey, I’m sorry!” Short and rather overweight, the man leaned down to retrieve the shears and handed them back. “I should have sung out.”

Christie took the shears. “I was miles away.”

“Beautiful garden.”

“Thanks. It will be, once I finish it.”

“I’m Rupert. How are you?” He offered his hand to shake. “I took a wrong turn and ran out of gas! At my age, one would think I’d know better.”

“Hmm. I’ve done that myself. Do you need me to call someone?”

“Oh, not at all. I walked down to the petrol station and just put some fuel in it.”

Christie realised he was sweating, and wore a suit. “Would you like a glass of water?”

Rupert shook his head, then smiled. “Actually, yes. As long as I’m not imposing. My wife will be upset I forgot to carry water on the trip.”

“Come around and I’ll get you one. Where are you heading?”

“On my way home now. Bit disappointing really. I went to Warrnambool for a job interview. I’m in sales. We want a sea change, Lucy and I, now that we’ve got a bubba on the way.”

They stepped onto the deck and Christie hesitated.

“Miss, I’m happy to wait here. Don’t want to traipse dirt over your floor.”

Christie broke into laughter. “Sorry to laugh. I’m renovating and the mess those tradies leave is more than you would imagine. Come in, please.”

Rupert followed her, leaving the door open behind himself. He gazed around. “Miss, if you don’t mind me saying, this is true old world charm.”

She offered a glass of water to Rupert. “Please, I’m Christie. The cottage is rather special, isn’t it? I’m looking forward to getting it back to its original beauty.” The smell of cigarette smoke clung to his clothes, so she took a discreet step back.

“Was it a stationmaster’s residence?” Rupert gulped his water. Christie took his glass and refilled it. “Thanks. Had no idea how thirsty I was. Long day.”

“You said it was disappointing?”

“They offered me a job. That’s the good bit, but I looked at the houses on the market and they just won’t do. Want a bit of

room for a pony and we really like our privacy. Lucy longs to grow vegetables and stuff.”

“You should speak to the real estate agents in town here. They might know of something.”

Rupert finished the second glass, took it to the sink and rinsed it out. Turning it upside-down on the side, he smiled. “Thanks for that, Christie. Have to say I envy you. This is exactly the kind of place we’d love. Anyway, should let you get back to those roses.”

“No trouble at all. Go see John Jones. He has the place with the flower pots outside. Tell him I sent you.” Christie walked out of the cottage with Rupert and down the driveway.

“I think I will. Great little town. No sign of high rise buildings and shopping malls.”

“No. Those are things we’d like to keep out. Have a safe trip home.”

Christie watched him get into his car, do a U-turn and drive off down the road. His family sounded exactly the sort of people she would sell to. If she ever sold. Not that she planned to.

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Christie missed the first call from Ashley. Her phone, along with a fresh glass of water, was perched on a post near the driveway. When it finally got her attention, she sprinted across the garden, almost knocking the glass off in her rush.

“Oh, you do answer phones!” Ashley laughed.

“Well, hello to you too!”

“Thought I’d have to drive there to get a reply.”

“And you would be most welcome! What’s up?” Christie reached for the glass. The day was warm, with the sun almost directly overhead.

“I had dinner with Carlo Palmero last night, and we got onto the subject of you.”

“I’ve not seen Carlo in ages. What was he doing in Melbourne?”

“Scouting locations. Some thriller he’s making next year. Most likely here at Docklands, but he asked about windswept beaches. Thought of your place.”

“It would be ideal actually, as long as he picks his timing with the weather. How exciting!” Christie plonked herself onto the grass in the shade.

“Fill him in personally. He has a job, if you’re interested.”

Christie closed her eyes for a second. *Not Europe. Not the US.* “Do tell.”

“Well, your name came up about the location and he asked where you are now. Told him you’ve turned into a country girl in a little seaside town and he just gave me that long, serious stare he does. Eventually he said, and I quote, ‘the countryside is already beautiful, it is the city that needs Christie to work her magic’. Unquote.”

Christie giggled. “You’re making that up. When and where?”

“Soonish. He starts shooting in a couple of days but won’t need you for a week, two at most from now. Auckland.”

“He leaves things late.”

“No, bella. He just wants...”

“What?”

“Let’s just say there is room for you in the crew, and he wants you there.”

“Is my reputation so bad, Ash? He’s just finding a spot for old time’s sake?”

“You’ve been in this industry long enough to know how fickle people are. Those who know you, love you. And Carlo does, so be good and say yes. It’s only a few weeks and then everyone will forget London and start throwing work at you again.”

“I’ll think about it.”



“No, give him a call and say yes. You can decide if you want to give up on your career afterwards.”

“How do you—”

“Christie. I’ve known you forever. Your heart is somewhere else and that’s wonderful. Just don’t give up because someone else messed things up. Yes?”

“Okay. Maybe. Thank you.”

“My pleasure. Ray sends his love.”

“Tell him I miss him. I miss you both.”

After hanging up, Christie lay back on the grass to stare at the sky. Soft clouds moved ever so slowly. The enormity of the universe washed over her, tension seeping into the ground below. *It isn’t fair*. Once, Christie struggled with too many contracts. Major film companies listed her, directors personally called. All it took was one manipulative man and a devious woman to damage her reputation.

Ashley was right. If she just gave up now, then Derek and Ingrid won. She would call Carlo and accept his gracious offer. Go to New Zealand and do the best work of her life. Then she would talk to Martin. Let him into her soul, past her defences. Perhaps he would see her commitment was to him and decide he needed to take things to another level. A level where their lives would be made one.



## Chapter Sixteen

Martin was already at the bay when Christie arrived. He sat on the sand, sketching the boats. She watched him from the trees, drawn to his talent; his very being. These feelings he created in her were beyond her ability to put into words. Deep, profound, eternal.

“Are you planning on sailing today?”

*How does he know?* Christie dropped onto the sand. She leaned against him as he finished the sketch, following every quick stroke of the pencil as it formed seagulls and yachts and clouds on the paper. The heat from his body radiated into hers. She closed her eyes.

“Going to sleep there?” Martin kissed her forehead. “Shall we venture out of the bay?”

“We could stay here. I could sleep, here on the sand. With you.” Reluctant for the moment to pass, Christie snuggled into Martin. He closed the sketch book.

“Or, we could go sailing. Come on, sleepyhead.”

With a groan, Christie moved to allow him to get to his feet, then accepted his hand to pull her onto hers. “The sun is so nice.”

“Which is why we’re sailing today. Within a month there’ll be more rainy days than sunny. Autumn’s almost on us.”

Martin tossed his sketch book and pencil into a backpack.

“Did you bring water?”

Christie shook her head.

“If you’re sailing, plan ahead. Whilst I try to keep the galley stocked, it’s best to bring what you need for a trip every time. You never know if something might go wrong. Conditions can change fast. The motor might seize when there’s no wind.” He headed off to collect the dinghy.

“I need to learn so much.” She was right on his heels.

“Yup. That’s why you’ll be doing the sailing. I’m coming along for heavy labour and advice if you really get stuck.”

Together they dragged the dinghy into the shallows. “So I’m the boss,” Christie announced with a cheeky grin.

“Hop in. You can call yourself whatever you wish.”

The dinghy slid through the water easily under Martin’s guidance. This time, Christie had no flutters of fear as the water deepened. A few moments later, she was on *Jasmine Sea*, grinning like a small child with a new toy. Her yacht! Martin tied the dinghy to a buoy.

“Life jackets are under the seat there.”

Christie pulled two out. Martin checked she was secure, tightening one strap and kissing the tip of her nose. “You are as excited as a little kid in Disneyland. Take a deep breath and start thinking about procedures. You’ve been studying?”

“I have and I’m doing the test this week. Shall I raise the anchor? And what do I do if it won’t raise?”

“Under normal circumstances it will. We can practice.”

“But what if it really gets stuck?” Christie peered down along the narrow chain into the water.

“Bolt cutters.”

“Through that?”

“Through that. Now, you’re in charge. I’ll jump in if you miss a step.” Martin leaned against the railing, half smiling. Dark sunglasses added an air of mystery to his face.

“I love you.” Christie couldn’t help herself, slipping her arms around his neck and lifting herself onto her toes. For a long moment they kissed.

Then, Martin raised his head. “If you do that again, we won’t be going far.”

“Aye aye, Captain. Oh wait, I’m Captain. Swab the decks!”

“You’re having too much fun with this.” There was a suggestion of warning in his tone. Christie grinned as she went to the winch. She thought Martin chuckled at her, but then again, perhaps it was the seagulls overhead.

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Daphne stood outside her husband's office, listening to his side of a phone call. The cup of tea she carried – complete with one of her homemade double chocolate cookies on the saucer – could wait a moment or two, as she didn't wish to disturb what was clearly an important conversation. John was her high school sweetheart who had whisked her off her feet at the age of eighteen to be his wife. Some forty years later her heart still sped up when he smiled at her. Together they'd built up the finest real estate agency in the region and, now retirement loomed, John recently turned to something he'd always avoided: dealing with large scale developers.

“But of course it will be confidential. You can trust me completely.”

*Whoever are you speaking with?*

“If that is your preference. But, I can't promise anything until we discuss this further.”

Interesting. Secrecy and intrigue, two of Daphne's favourite things.

“Yes, I can be there at three. See you then.”

It was almost two-thirty according to the clock at the end of the hall. Still, he had time for his tea. Daphne popped her head around the corner.

“Tea time!”

“Oh, Daphne. Didn't hear you coming.” John closed a notebook, but not before Daphne saw the words Green Bay Lookout.

Daphne frowned as she put the cup and saucer down. “Are you off somewhere?”

“Meeting a potential client. In half an hour actually.”

Daphne pulled out a chair and dropped into it with sigh. “That's better. Feel like I've been on my feet all day. So, what sort of client is this?”

After a sip of tea, John picked up the biscuit. “Not sure, actually. All very hush-hush. Don’t want anyone to know they are looking in the area.”

“How peculiar.”

“I’m meeting them soon, so need to make a quick call and finish this tea.” He looked at Daphne. She smiled back. “So, I just need to make a call?” He prompted.

“Oh, of course. I have to go and box up the rest of those cookies for Christie. Thought I’d pop up after work and catch up.”

“Lovely idea. I’ll bring my cup out in a minute.”

“Well, I’ll let you make your call.” *Whatever was going on?*

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Almost the moment *Jasmine Sea* nosed through the narrow gap between the cliffs, wind filled her sails. Christie kept her head, systematically shutting down the engine, raising the spinnaker with a bit of help from Martin, and steering with the breeze at their backs. The yacht responded effortlessly as they left the bay far behind. Soon the land to their left was hazy and distant.

“We’ll go up as far as Green Bay.” From the bow, Martin raised his voice to compete with the flapping of the mainsail. “We’ll be back before dark. Gives you a decent run.” He clambered back to join Christie, admiring her new confidence. She handled the wheel with a light touch, as if she and *Jasmine Sea* shared some connection. “Good work. You’re doing well.”

“I love it. Oh, Martin, this is amazing!”

Her eyes alight with joy, hair whipped back with the wind, she was a picture of happiness. *God, I love you.* Martin busied himself fetching bottles of water, just to control his urge to kiss her over and over.

He offered her a bottle, putting a hand on the wheel to let her drink. “On the way back, we’ll be closer to the coast.”

Look!” He pointed starboard.

“Oh. Are those dolphins?” Christie stepped over ropes and under the sail to see better, leaving Martin holding the wheel. “Come and see! They are incredible.”

“I would, but someone has to steer and I thought you were the captain?”

“Sorry!”

“I’m teasing you, sweetheart. Sit and watch for a while.”

Without hesitation, Christie dropped onto the deck, leaning over the side to watch the pod of dolphins. So clear was the water that their sleek bodies revealed every twist and turn.

After a while, the yacht slowed and Christie glanced at Martin. “Come on. Back to work.” He held a hand out. “Time to practice changing direction and see how close we can get to Green Bay.”

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Green Bay Lookout was partway down a cliff, accessed by a narrow, winding dirt path. Surrounded by heavy bush, it was a protected, hidden spot attracting young lovers and tourists alike. Today there were no lovers or tourists, just Ingrid and John, sitting on the only bench in the small, railed space.

“So, you see why I insist on keeping this... between us.” Ingrid almost purred. An open laptop displayed an aerial shot of River’s End. “People get nervous about development. Suspicious. But I understand how to calm those concerns. Help show the key people the benefits.”

“Benefits? What exactly do you mean?” John was at the far end of the bench. He’d never met a woman like Ingrid. Flame red hair cropped short like a pop star. Eyelashes so long they could not be real. Even her... well, body, looked a bit unreal. Tight green dress with a tiny waist and so short, exposing perfect legs.

“My face is here, darling.”

“Um, yes.” His eyes shot back to hers. “The problem is I already have a client for much of this land.”

“Bryce Montgomery? You know, he’s such a sweetie but I went for a drive and there’s not one bit of forward planning in River’s End Heights. No shops or footpaths. Just great big houses with little backyards. Yet all this space.” She touched the screen. “Then, there’s the demographic to consider.”

“What demographic?”

“Think ahead, John. What kind of people do you want as neighbours? Who will bring community spirit? Money for the benefit of all home and business owners in your lovely town?” She closed the laptop and crossed her legs, leaning closer. “You need a mixture of wealthy retirees and weekenders.”

“But we don’t have any retirement villages and no plans for them here.”

“No need. I’m talking about early, self-funded retirees, cashed up and wanting a quality home in a peaceful town. They’ll bring their wisdom and friendship. As for the weekenders, well, that’s where the town really benefits. Schools won’t be impacted because most of the time they’ll only visit on weekends and school holidays. They’ll bring the real money. Spend up big and give your community a chance to grow enough to keep its current residents from leaving. Now, doesn’t that sound better than a mostly empty estate that nobody really wants to live in?”

John nodded. “I’ll need to have a look at what’s already signed and sealed. Then we can talk further.”

“Perfect. Not a word to Bryce. And not even a whisper to another soul.”

“Not even my wife? Daphne is my right hand in the business.”

Ingrid put a hand on John’s leg and squeezed it. “In my experience, wives don’t understand that sometimes their husbands have to do... things, without them.” She smiled and stood up in one elegant move. “I’m going to watch the sea for a while. Give me a call. Soon?”

John pushed himself to his feet. He extended his hand to shake but Ingrid had already turned away and stood, staring



out at the calm sea. He dragged his eyes away from her and trudged back up the track.

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Ingrid watched a yacht only a hundred metres or so out. Her eyesight was excellent and she immediately recognised Martin Blake doing something with a sail.

Such a good-looking man. Interesting. Intelligent. Christie once told her he had a logical mind. He did. Except, she decided, when it came to Christie, who now appeared from the lower deck carrying drinks of some sort. How much fun it was going to be taking his attention away from little Miss Christie. *Nothing personal, dear.* She blew Christie a kiss.

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“I think that was the best afternoon of my life.” Christie leaned back against Martin, his arms around her. They sat on the beach, much as they had earlier in the day. Tiredness weighed her down but her mind strayed to the dolphins and waves.

“You did well. A few more runs and I’ll feel confident handing over the keys.”

“Thank you. You were a great bosun. Don’t tickle me!”

“I was a great...?”

“Teacher!”

“Better. You need to practice rowing though.”

“That’s your job.” Christie only half joked. Her attempt at rowing back ended after Martin pointed out she was heading back to sea and took the oars again. “Captains don’t row.”

“I need to go collect Randall from Elizabeth.”

“I bet Angus made a fuss of him. Oh, I can’t wait for you to meet him. You’ll come to dinner tonight? Please?”

“I don’t wish to intrude.”

“Now, that is something you could never do.” Christie touched his face. “You are the two most important men in my life. I thought we’d just go to the pub. Let someone else cook.”

“I’ve exhausted you.”

“Not quite. So it’s yes?”

Martin answered with a long kiss.

“I could stay like this.” He finally admitted. “Here, with you in my arms.”

“I love my life. I’m so lucky.” Christie sighed in pleasure. “There’s little more I could want.”

“There must be more though. Work? More travel? Family, perhaps.”

Christie gazed into Martin’s eyes, searching for meaning behind the question. “There is a bit more I need to finish. Some work, and I’ll tell you about it once I have some details. But, I don’t want to be travelling all the time. Not now. This is my home. My family is here.”

What was he asking? About children, or whether she had other dreams to fulfil? She’d never seen him around children. Perhaps he didn’t want them, like Derek hadn’t.

That was a deal breaker with Derek, along with other things. But Martin was different. She loved him with all her heart and should he not want a family, then love might still be enough. *But I want children.* She wanted to ask him what he meant, but the moment had passed.

Martin was on his feet, backpack over his shoulder, hand outstretched. “Coming?” His expression was thoughtful. Or, maybe it was just the late afternoon light.



# Chapter Seventeen

Evening closed in as Martin cut across country to reach Palmerston House. The Lotus had zoomed past earlier, top down, with Christie calling out some cheeky comment with a wave. She had done so well today and he knew the decision to gift her the yacht was the right one.

He whistled as he neared the front steps.

“He’s over here.” From the far end of the verandah, Angus called out.

Martin grinned as he drew closer to the bench. Randall wagged his tail at Martin, but made no attempt to move from the side of the older man he sat beside. Had a friendlier dog ever existed?

“Good evening, I take it you are the owner of this rather wonderful dog?” Angus stood and offered his hand.

Martin shook hands. “Don’t know about owner. He is quite happy to share himself around. Martin Blake.”

“Angus McGregor. I believe we have more in common than a golden retriever.”

“Christie can barely contain her excitement at us meeting. She has it all planned for dinner tonight.”

“Oh dear. Shall we pretend this didn’t happen?” Angus leaned toward Martin, his voice hushed. “I’m game if you are.”

“I wonder how long it will take for her to work it out.”

Randall whined at Martin and both men reached a hand to his head. Then laughed.

“Would you care to join me?” Angus sat down.

Randall lay down immediately, so Martin relaxed on the bench. It was pleasant to sit here in the near darkness as the trees became silhouettes. Solar lights along the driveway flickered on. The fountain randomly changed colour, a tribute to Martha and Thomas’ wedding. Elizabeth had refused to let

Christie take the lighting system back out after the reception, not only for the pretty effect, but as a reminder that anything is possible.

“I believe the pub is only a short walk from here.” Angus said.

“Five minutes. I’d offer to drive you, but only have my grandfather’s dreadful pile of junk, or an old motorbike.”

“I’m partial to motorcycles. My father had a beauty that he rode everywhere. Still remember the growl it made when he powered it down.”

“Mine gives more of a whimper than a growl. Perhaps walking is a better idea. Christie would be horrified if we front up on it at the pub.”

“Indeed.”

Martin glanced at his watch. “I’m going to take the boy home and feed him. Have you spoken to Christie about what time to be there?”

“Briefly. A moment or two before you arrived. She said she needed to get the sea spray out of her hair.”

“We were sailing.”

“I beg your pardon. I thought you said sailing!”

Martin chuckled. “Seems impossible. Christie had almost full control of *Jasmine Sea*, out in the open sea and back. And she swims. Not quite as confident about deeper water yet, but it’s a process.”

“That fear was her biggest. And sadly I let it happen.” Angus dropped his head. “Instead of standing up to Dorothy Ryan, I watched a happy, self-assured little girl retreat into quietness. Becoming invisible at times.”

“I’ve never known where that fear came from. Christie once mentioned Dorothy forbidding her from swimming in the sea, but that’s all.”

“After losing her parents, all Christie wanted was someone to love. In spite of her sorrow, she was such a loving, sweet

child. Bit by bit, her grandmother's coldness and occasional fury taught her to rely on herself. She's good at that."

"You're not at fault. And Christie would be heartbroken if she thought you blamed yourself." Martin stood and Randall jumped to his feet. "Christie was lucky to have you."

"As she is to have you, Martin."

With a nod, Martin took his leave. After one more pat from Angus, Randall tore after Martin.

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Christie tapped her feet on the floor. First to arrive at the pub, she'd chosen a booth at the furthest end where it was a bit quieter and had a window view of the street.

"Would you like to order a drink?" Lance, the long-time owner of the pub, laid out cutlery for three.

"I'll wait for Martin and Angus, if that's okay? Although, would you arrange a bottle of local chardonnay please? And three glasses."

"Your wish is mine to fulfil. Do you know that they also grow olives at the winery? No? I shall also bring a complimentary plate of olives, from their own harvest." With a flourish, Lance disappeared into the kitchen.

Martin slid into the seat beside Christie.

"I didn't see you come in!"

"You were busy flirting with Lance."

"Well, my flirting got us a plate of olives. Not a bad result. How's Randall?"

"Exhausted. Pretty much ate his dinner, went for a wander, and tucked himself into bed. How do you feel after our sail?"

"Happy. I'm getting the hang of it, not that I can envisage sailing alone. I mean, why would I ever need to?"

Martin kissed Christie's cheek. "Good."

"Oh look! Here comes Angus, quick, let me out. Please." She added with a grin. Martin made space and she rushed to

hug Angus.

“Angus, meet Martin. Martin Blake, Angus McGregor.”

Martin and Angus met in a hug. Like long lost friends. Martin stepped back, gesturing for Angus to take a seat. “You’re looking very dapper tonight, Angus.”

“You too, Martin. What is that term? Ah, yes, you scrub up well.”

Martin waited for Christie to sit again before joining them. “Considering how little time I’ve had to get ready, that means a lot.”

“And how is Randall?” Angus enquired.

“Okay. What’s going on?” Christie demanded. “You’ve already met!” Her downfallen expression made both men laugh. “Stop. You’re not funny. Either of you.”

“Wine for three?” Lance arrived with a tray.

“I need my own table, Lance.” Christie said. “But I’ll take the whole bottle with me.”

“So, wine for three.” He placed a platter of olives, bread and cheese in the middle of the table. “This should help.”

Under the table, Martin captured Christie’s hand and squeezed it. She wouldn’t look at him, so he gently pulled her toward him and whispered, “I love you.”

Her eyes flickered in his direction and the corners of her mouth curved ever so slightly.

The wine poured, Angus raised his glass. “To friends and family.”

Martin passed a glass to Christie and they both tapped Angus’ glass. “To friends and family.”

“Where’s that fancy car of yours?” Martin asked Christie.

“At home. I’ll walk back.”

“I’ll walk you home.”

Christie nodded. Once she would have argued that it was a safe town and she was a capable adult. The arrival of *Sole*

*Survivor* and the odd feeling she had of not being alone last time she walked home changed that. Only a little bit. After all, it *was* a safe town and her cottage was secure. Nothing to worry about at all.

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By the light of a small torch, Ingrid wandered around the cottage. Why would anyone want to live here? Old, run-down place with small rooms and no walk-in robes. She opened the wardrobe in Christie's room, inspecting her clothes. *She has good taste*. She picked up the photograph from the bedside table. Ingrid cared little for romance, it was a ridiculous waste of energy better spent pursuing wealth. A quaint shot of Martin and Christie made her stomach turn.

The bathroom interested Ingrid, with a cabinet next to the sink and one behind the mirror. The quality and selection of make-up and perfume was impressive. Unable to resist, she dabbed a different scent on each wrist, sniffing one and then the other. She sprayed another on the side of her neck, wrinkling her nose.

In the kitchen, she opened the fridge. Not much other than cheese, wine, and fruit, but it reminded Ingrid she was hungry. On the kitchen table was a satchel. She undid the clip and peeked inside.

Her phone rang and she jumped, dropping the satchel.

“What is it, Rupert?”

“They've just left the pub. The old guy went one way. Christie and her boyfriend are walking in your direction. Looks like lover boy is going home with her.”

“Then come and pick me up. I'll wait on the corner.” She hung up, annoyed. Clearly this backwater town had no night life.

As she hurried down the road, she dialled Derek. Potholes and a lack of a footpath made for an uncomfortable walk in heels.

He answered almost straight away. “Anything?”



“Nice make-up and clothes. She certainly has some class.”

“Ingrid!”

“I couldn’t find the painting. Not in the cottage anyway, so maybe the artist repossessed it.”

“Were you in the cottage?”

“Well, if she’s going to leave windows unlocked...”

“You’re insane.”

“Thanks. I’ll call when I’m back at the hotel. Rupert’s on his way to get me.”

“Stay out of sight.”

“I wish you were here. Not Rupert.”

“Put up with him a bit longer.”

“I can see his car. *Ciao.*”

She made it to the corner as the sedan pulled over. Cigarette smoke wafted out when she opened the door. “Put that out, now.” She wound the window down, slamming the door behind her. “Kill yourself with them, but not me.”

Rupert wound his own window down enough to toss it out. “How can you complain, smelling the way you do? What the heck type of perfume is that?”

Not expecting an answer, he touched the accelerator and drove away from River’s End.



## Chapter Eighteen

Arms around each other, Christie and Martin stopped at the end of her street to gaze out over the moonlit sea.

“So peaceful. So perfect.” Christie said.

“Yes.”

“Except for that.” Slipping out of Martin’s embrace, Christie crossed to the other corner to a smoking cigarette butt. She extinguished it with her shoe, then found a tissue in her bag and picked it up. “Seriously, does nobody care about bush fire risk?”

Martin followed her and now, took the tissue and buried it in a pocket. “You do. Beautiful girl, you never fail to surprise me.”

“I do? Surprise you?”

He kissed her, taking her hand. “Did you enjoy this evening?” They wandered down the street.

“Apart from you and Angus ganging up on me so much, I did.”

“We did not. It was just interesting to hear from someone else about your ongoing disregard for security. It was probably just as well your grandmother was away when you left the house unlocked, and the gate, and—”

“Okay, okay. That is enough, thank you. I was sixteen.”

“Don’t use your age as an excuse. I shall have to spend more time with Angus.”

“He’s leaving in the morning.” Christie said.

Martin halted in the middle of the road and pulled her into his arms. His hands slid right down her back, pressing her against him so that she had to tilt her head back to look at him. His fingers tapped her bottom like he was playing a piano. “Is that a lie?”

“Yes.” Christie’s breath left her. He was not serious, she could see amusement in his eyes, but the tone he used, the way

he held her brought those part attraction, slightly scary anticipation feelings rushing back.

For an endless moment he watched her as mild alarm softened into desire. “Just so you know, I need honesty. Lies don’t work for me.”

“I know. I do know, and I was joking.”

“Don’t ever lie to me, Christie. Please.” His face hardened.

Christie reached up to touch his cheek. “Hey,” she said softly, “I’ll never knowingly hurt you. Don’t you know that by now?”

“Yes. But sometimes people don’t mean to lie. They promise they’ll be there, then...” Martin abruptly released Christie and turned away. His head dropped and his hands clenched.

Christie stepped in front of him and took one of his hands, unclenching his fingers and kissing his palm. “Martin, it’s okay. My parents did that too.”

He raised his eyes to meet hers.

“I’ll always come home, I promise. I won’t leave for long. Ever. Listen, I’ve been asked to go to Auckland next week for a film shoot. Just for a couple of weeks. Tell me to stay and I will.”

“You want to go.”

“Not desperately. But I want my reputation back and this will help. Whether I ever go overseas for work in the future is a whole different matter, but this job, well, I would like to do it.”

As if forcing his body to relax, Martin drew a deep breath. “Go. Do this, because you’ll always wonder otherwise.”

“You’re sure?”

“It’s part of the package. Besides, I have a portrait to paint and you don’t know what I’m like when working. I can be unforgiving of interruptions and protective of my privacy.”

“Which is different from normal, how?”

Martin raised his eyebrows and reached for her but she danced away, laughing.

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Christie took her shoes off in the kitchen and draped her jacket over a chair. She and Martin had stood on the porch for at least five minutes, kissing and whispering. Then, just as she went to invite him in, she yawned. Another yawn quickly followed that refused to be concealed.

“Go to bed.” Martin instructed.

“Alone?” She yawned yet again and he laughed.

“I think so. Sleep well and dream about the dolphins.” He had given her one last long, lingering kiss.

Now, she touched a finger to her lips, smiling. *How much I love you.* Martin’s new vulnerability touched her so deeply and she ached for his pain. For the little boy in him that still couldn’t comprehend the accident that he alone survived.

At the bathroom mirror, ready to remove her make-up, she sniffed the air. Surely one of her perfumes hadn’t leaked? She opened the mirrored cabinet and checked each one. No leaks, and now that she thought about it, the scent in the room was not specific to one of hers. More of an odd mixture.

She knew she’d unlocked the back door when she’d got home, but rushed to check it again. It was locked. The satchel left behind this morning by Angus was open, the clip undone. *You’re imaging things.* She glanced inside, not that she’d know if anything was missing. Angus put it there and then she’d moved it to one side. Clipped shut. Now it wasn’t.

“Oh, God.”

Christie grabbed her phone and started dialling Martin. Then stopped. What would she tell him? Someone had been in the cottage? What if they were still here? Eyes wide, she grabbed a frying pan from the cupboard.

Room by room, she flicked each light on, checking behind doors and what little furniture there was. Frying pan still in hand, she tested each window. Bedrooms locked. Bathroom

too small. Laundry locked. Lounge room locked. Dining room... the window yielded.

Heart in her throat, she forced the window down as far as it would go and locked it. She'd had this window open the other day, airing the room after the workmen filled it with plaster dust. How could she have forgotten to lock it?

Someone had climbed in. Played with her perfume and opened the satchel. She ran to her bedroom. Everything valuable was present, including jewellery and a small amount of cash in a box. Her passport and book of contacts were untouched.

Tonight the lights could stay on. She picked up the phone, turning it in her fingers. *Don't spoil things*. The phone went into a pocket and she checked again that the back door was locked. Disappointed in herself, Christie climbed into bed, the frying pan on the floor. Her light was off but the rest of the cottage was ablaze.

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In the middle of the studio, Martin studied a part finished painting, a glass of whiskey in his fingers. The subjects were Thomas and Martha, sitting on the end of the jetty, their legs dangling and toes dipping in the sea. Perhaps they were in their early twenties. Deep in conversation, the love in their eyes reminded him of them today.

Behind them, partway along the jetty, another Thomas stared at the young couple. This Thomas was older, gripping the hand of a small, dark-haired boy. A woman walked away, toward the beach. From her long chestnut hair it could be Martha. And on the beach itself, seventy-two-year-old Thomas, on his knees, offered an engagement ring to seventy-year-old Martha.

Martin touched the face of the child. "You landed on your feet." He drank the whiskey, its warmth radiating through his body. The little boy lived deep inside him, always expecting the worst. Now, it was time to stop. Christie wasn't leaving him. Nor was Thomas.

From his bed near the window, Randall whined in a dream. *And you. Thank God for you as well.* Fatigue set in and Martin covered the painting with a sheet. Ever so gently, he woke Randall. “Bedtime.” With a wag and a yawn, the dog followed Martin to the door.

\*\*\*

In the apartment that Christie once called home, Derek prowled from room to room, listening to Ingrid on the phone. Still in the suit he’d worn all day, he wanted a shower and a shot of brandy. Tonight would offer little sleep. He had too much to do.

“Once I have John Jones in my pocket, then he’ll introduce me to the right local councillors. Ones who are open to this.”

“You sound confident.”

Ingrid laughed shortly. “How often do I fail?”

Derek stopped at the doorway of the bedroom. His big, lonely bedroom with its king size, empty bed. Perfectly made, ready for love, the bed mocked him. “When are you coming back?”

“Do you miss me?”

“With you and Rupert away, I’m doing everything.”

“Poor baby. Never mind, it will be worth it when you cut the ribbon to open the new estate.”

Time for that brandy. Derek headed for the bar in the living room.

“Are you still there?”

“Have you seen Chris?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“God. She didn’t see you?”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. She was too busy cuddling up to her artist on a boat to notice anyone.”

“Boat?”

“Some yacht. I was at a lookout and they happened to sail past.”

“Find out about that yacht. Who owns it.”

“Why bother?”

“Please.” Derek poured brandy into a glass and downed it. What the hell was Chris doing on a yacht? She hated the water. Whatever hold that artist had over her, she was acting out of character. What did she see in him anyway? No money, talent, or status. To think of him touching her... he refilled his glass.

“Alright. Would you like me to take photos as well?”

“Sarcastic bitch,” he said it softly. “You’re doing well, Ingrid. Another few days and this will be over. Tell Rupert to up the ante.”

“You mean—”

“He knows what the next step is. Now, get some sleep. I’ve got work to do.”

Derek disconnected the call. On the counter was a folder from his solicitor. If there was a legal way to buy the land from the railway, then it would be in this report. Buying it would pressure Chris into selling her parcel of land. She would hate living beside a building site. One that he would ensure was as intrusive as possible.

He headed for the shower. One way or another he was getting her land. And although Ingrid didn’t care who got hurt, he knew the moment Chris found out he was behind it, he had no chance of getting her back.





## Chapter Nineteen

Rain fell again overnight, finally soothing Christie into a deep sleep in the early hours. Until the rain, every sound disturbed her. The normal night-time creaks of the house and tapping of the trees on the roof became shadowy figures breaking in.

When her eyes fluttered open, it was a moment before she remembered. A moment when she smiled at the thought of seeing Martin today and catching up with Angus. Having lunch with him, invited by Elizabeth to Palmerston House. Then, realising the phone was in bed with her, it all came back.

She'd been told this town had little crime. Occasionally a break-in would occur and the locals always blamed outsiders. People passing through. Most likely and logically, that's who it was. Probably she and Martin had disturbed them when they'd arrived back. So lucky he'd been with her.

In the light of day, Christie shook off the fear. This was her home and nobody would get in again without an invitation. Her new routine would ensure she checked every lock every time she left. Martin didn't need to know her suspicions. She had it under control.

After a shower and coffee, Christie opened the satchel, inhaling the old-leather smell with a frown. Just above the clip, carved into the leather, were the initials J.O., and as Christie traced each letter, her forehead creased.

Inside, a folder and a jewellery box. *Not this again!* Her fingers trembled as she fumbled with the folder. Three photographs. The first was of herself, aged about eight, in the front garden of Gran's home. Tight plaits, a school blazer, knee-length skirt. Serious, sad eyes. A shiver ran up Christie's spine. This was the first day in her new school. A proper, private, ladies' college.

The second photo was a man and a woman, each holding one hand of a little dark-haired girl whose smile was contagious. Christie smiled at herself as a toddler, she couldn't help it. But her smile faded as she searched the faces of the

man and the woman. “Mum. Daddy?” A cold stone dropped into the pit of her stomach. She turned the photo over. “With darling Christabel, aged three!”

Almost afraid, she looked at the final photograph. Her mother, so beautiful in a wedding dress, gazed at her father in utter adoration. A tear slipped down Christie’s cheek, dropping onto her arm unnoticed. On the back, in different writing, “Rebecca Ryan marrying Julian Oliver. 1981.”

“Julian Oliver.” She touched the initials on the satchel. “Christie Oliver.” She’d forgotten her real name. Gran changed it to Ryan when she adopted her. And whilst her intention was good, ensuring Christie’s future was secure, it robbed Christie of her heritage. How could she have forgotten?

Nestled within the jewellery box was a heavy gold locket. She didn’t need to look inside. Without even touching the locket, she remembered. As though it were yesterday.

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Seven-year-old Christie sat on her mother’s lap, playing with the locket around her neck. “It’s so pretty, Mummy.”

“And one day, it shall be yours.” Rebecca opened it. “See? It reminds me every day how much your Daddy and I love each other. This photo of him is from our engagement party.”

“What’s that?”

“That, my sweetie, is a special celebration when two people decide to get married.”

“Like you and Daddy are?”

“Yes. This photo, the one of me, is a bit newer. It was taken just a few weeks before you were born. See how happy I look?”

“Is that because of me?”

“Besides Daddy, there is nobody in this world I love more. So, when you have this locket, you can see the love we have for each other, and our beautiful girl.”

“When will I have the locket?”

“Not for a long, long time, sweetie.” Rebecca kissed the top of Christie’s head.

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“You were right, Mum.” Christie whispered, staring at the photographs through tears. “It was a long time.”

This satchel and contents meant more than anything. In spite of the tears that kept falling, a part of Christie was back. She was Christie Oliver, daughter of Rebecca and Dr Julian Oliver. The memories rushed back, tumbling over each other. Daddy teaching her to ride a bike. Mum showing her a gorgeous sunrise. The three of them playing a board game on the wide verandah, avoiding the heat of the day.

The stone in her stomach disappeared, replaced by warmth. Love. The love of a mother and father. Happy, adoring parents. A family. It was possible to have that. It could be real.

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“I’ve driven around a bit, looked at those places you suggested, but none of them really appeal to me.” Ingrid was a little too close to Martin for his liking. Her perfume was too strong and, up close, her make-up too thick. It was well applied but used to cover her age, rather than enhance her natural beauty the way Christie’s did.

“Do you have a backdrop in mind?” He asked with a patience he didn’t feel. He’d seen her keep a wide berth of Randall, who, oddly enough, had no interest in making friends.

“Somewhere typically Australian. Water, boats. You know the kind of thing.”

“Koalas? Kangaroos?”

“Now you’re being silly.” Ingrid wandered around the studio, stopping in front of one painting, then another. “You do such interesting abstracts. May I have a glass of water?”

*And a twist of lemon?* Martin opened the fridge, wondering if she expected the lid to be removed from the bottle. He left it

on. Now she was flicking through his sketchbook.

“That is private.” The words came out in a harsher tone than he intended and she glanced up. He held a hand out for the sketchbook.

“I’d like that place as a backdrop.”

She’d left it open at Willow Bay. *Jasmine Sea* was in the background. “Not a great spot. Too much going on.” Martin closed the sketchbook and dropped it on the sofa.

“Where is it? I’ll go and see for myself.” Ingrid opened the bottle and took a tiny sip. “This was such a good idea. I love working with real men and you, Mr Blake, have that dominant streak I admire.”

Oh God, she was flirting. This wasn’t going to work. His expression hardened.

“I’ve deposited ten thousand dollars into your account,” she said. “My mother is so excited about this, so please, tell me where it is?”

Randall sat up, his attention on something only he could hear. Martin recognised that look. Christie was close by.

“If you go west past the estate, you’ll find a narrow track on the left, just a few hundred metres further along.”

Ingrid’s face lit up. The sound of the Lotus wiped the smile away. “Oh, is that a visitor?”

“She’ll wait at the house. Why?”

“I... I’m terribly private. I don’t want anyone knowing I’m here.” She picked up her handbag. “Is there another way out?”

“No. But if really don’t want to run into Christie, I’d suggest going around the house to its left.”

“Yes. I’ll give you a call when I’ve looked at that place.” Without another word, she swept out of the studio. Randall tore out of the door, heading toward the house. Martin picked up the sketchbook.

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Curled up on Martin's lap, Christie's composure slowly returned. He'd put her there when the tears flowed too fast for his handkerchief to manage, cradling her in his arms as she sobbed and told him about her parents.

Now, the tears spent, Christie sat up, wiping them away with her hand. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. You can buy me a new t-shirt." Martin lifted the wet material away from his shoulder. "Would you like to wash your face?"

"Probably."

"I'll organise some water."

Christie sprinted out of the door. It only took her a minute to rinse her face, trying not to look in the mirror at whatever damage she'd done to her make-up. Before going back to the studio she made a quick detour to Martin's room.

Back in the studio, Martin had two tall glasses of sparkling water ready. When Christie held out a clean t-shirt, he laughed and immediately stripped off the wet one. As he raised his arms to remove it, muscles rippled across his chest. Emotional as Christie was, the sight of his naked torso was distracting.

He extended his hand. "Hello. May I have that?"

"I'm thinking about it."

"Aren't you having lunch with Angus in half an hour?"

Christie reluctantly handed over the t-shirt. "What would you say if I just took off my top like that?"

"Sweetheart, there'd be no talking. Maybe just a text message to Angus to cancel lunch." He tucked the t-shirt into his jeans, grinning at her expression.

She took a long drink of water, playing with the locket now around her neck.

"May I see?"

Martin closed the distance between them and opened the locket. "I can see you in them both. What a thoughtful legacy."

“I don’t understand why Gran kept it from me. But mostly...” She sighed.

“Mostly, what?” Martin closed the locket and placed it against her skin, taking her hands in his. “Your name? Christabel Oliver. So beautiful.”

“Yes. It bothers me that Gran changed my name. As if erasing Dad. And Mum.” Her eyes filled with tears again.

“Hey, don’t cry. Whatever her motives, you have your name again and can use it how you wish. But, Christie, no more tears. I’m out of handkerchiefs and fresh t-shirts.”

That made her laugh. “I might run home and freshen up. I don’t want Angus feeling bad for bringing me the satchel.”

“Do you want to come back up later? Dinner on the deck if it’s still warm enough?”

“I’d love it. I might drive up rather than walk back at night.”

“I’m happy to walk you home.” He took her into his arms. “But just as happy for you to stay.” His lips touched hers. “In fact, I’d rather you stay.”

*I’ll never want to leave.* “Me too. I’d better get going.”

“I’ll see you tonight.”

She picked up her handbag. “I meant to ask. Who owns the Porsche that was here when I arrived?”

“You didn’t cross paths? She’s the person I’m painting.”

“Nice car. She doesn’t have short platinum hair, does she?”

“Bright red hair. Now stop asking questions and go see Angus.”

“Okay okay. I’m going. Bye Randall!” Christie waved to the dog, who wagged his tail and followed her to the door.





## Chapter Twenty

Christie let herself into Palmerston House, expecting Angus or Elizabeth to greet her. Instead, the foyer was deserted.

“Hello?”

Laughter drifted from the back of the house. Christie followed the sound down the long hallway and to the kitchen. She stopped in the doorway, unnoticed by Angus and Elizabeth. Both wore aprons and he had flour all over his front. His sleeves rolled up, Angus kneaded a ball of dough.

“Now, if you will, add a little more flour and we’ll roll the first sheet out.” Angus put the rolling pin to one side.

“You want more flour?” Elizabeth pointed at Angus’ front and they both laughed.

“One can never have enough to make quality pastry.”

“Then more flour is coming right up.” As she reached for the glass jar, Elizabeth saw Christie in the doorway. “Oh, hello!”

“What are you making?” Christie wandered in, sniffing rich, meaty aromas with approval. “I haven’t seen you in an apron in years, Angus!”

“Beef Wellington. This dear lady has not had a traditional version since leaving England so I am making one.”

“Did you know, Christie, Angus has worked in some of London’s most exclusive hotels?” Flour added to the bench, Elizabeth put the jar away. “Oh, you’re here for lunch with Angus!”

“We can do it another day.” Christie pulled out a stool and sat down. “Besides, I’ll be taking you up on your kind offer of a room this week, once Barry tells me the schedule. Angus, you are still here for a few days?”

“I might stay a little while. That is, if Elizabeth has my room free.” He glanced at Elizabeth, who smiled back.

“Christie, there’s a jug of my lemonade in the fridge if you’d like a glass? Angus, shall I get a tray for the pastry?”

“Please do.” Angus rested his hands on the bench, his attention on Christie. “You have the locket on.”

“Thank you for bringing Mum and Daddy back for me.” Determined not to cry, Christie spoke slowly. “I’d forgotten my own last name. Now, I feel as though I’m more... whole, I guess.”

“I am glad. That satchel was one of the last things I found as I packed up Miss Dorothy’s house.”

“I’d like to ask some questions. If that’s okay? I just need to think a bit first.”

“Whenever you wish.”

He returned to the pastry as Elizabeth brought a baking tray over. They exchanged a smile. Christie got to her feet. “I might go home and leave you to your cooking.”

“Do you have something at home for lunch?” Angus glanced up.

“Now you sound like Martin. Yes, I do.”

“He’s a wise man.”

“Okay, I’ll be going now!” She grinned and waved as she left. They called out “goodbye” at the same time, resulting in another laugh between them. *How wonderful!* Whether this was the beginning of a great friendship, or something more serious, they certainly both deserved happiness.

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Under starlight, Martin set a small table with silver cutlery and white plates on a dark red tablecloth. He lit a short red candle and draped a few tendrils of jasmine around its base. Beside the table, a silver ice bucket held a bottle of their favourite wine. He stood back, pleased with the effect. A perfect setting for a perfect night.

“Oh, it’s beautiful!” Christie stood at the bottom of the steps, her eyes wide. Martin swung around in surprise.

Dressed in a blue lace dress softly following her shape, hair sleekly pinned in a low chignon, Christie was a picture of elegance. Her only jewellery was the locket, and her very high heels accentuated stunning legs.

“You are beautiful.” Martin crossed to the top of the steps and offered his hand. Christie accepted, her radiant smile almost taking his breath.

At the top of the steps, she reached up and kissed his lips. “And you are so handsome. And, you smell of strawberries and the sea.”

“A new candle combination? Would you care to sit at our table, or join me inside whilst I finish the entree?”

“You sound so formal! I should love to come inside.”

Randall rushed through the doorway. She leaned down to kiss the top of his head and stroke his velvet ears.

“Shall I leave you two alone?” Martin offered his arm. “I might reconsider kissing you tonight.”

“Why? Randall is clean,” Christie curled her arm through his. “I mean, I don’t know what’s been in your mouth!”

“I might also reconsider sharing the wine with you, if such disrespect continues.”

Christie leaned her head against his shoulder as they walked. “I’ll behave. Oh, what smells so good?”

Martin pulled out a stool at the long timber kitchen bench. “You do.” He dropped a casual kiss on her neck as she sat down. “As far as food goes, I’ve made a seafood bisque to start, followed by ricotta ravioli in sage butter sauce. Stop drooling. And something nice for dessert.”

“I’m going to have to improve my skills if this is the standard you bring. May I help?”

Now in the kitchen, Martin turned the heat on underneath a large pot. “No, you may sit there and tell me about your day. And would you like a martini?”

“Full of surprises and so good-looking. Yes, I’d love one.”

As Martin prepared martinis, Christie told him about Angus and Elizabeth, making him laugh at the description of Angus covered in flour.

“I’ve never seen Angus so happy. Oh, thank you.” She took the glass. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if they got together?”

“Cheers.” Martin tapped his glass to hers and they sipped. “In a previous life, were you a matchmaker?”

“I might have been. A matchmaking candle maker. Good that I only make things, not destroy them! By the way this martini is delicious.” She took another mouthful, closing her eyes in bliss. There was no answer, so she opened her eyes to watch Martin cook. At first she couldn’t put a name to the warm calmness inside. Then she realised it was contentment.

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“Do you think there’s rain coming?” Christie shivered slightly as a heavy breeze lifted the sides of the tablecloth and flickered the candle.

“Yes. Is the roof up on your car?”

“I locked it before I left. Oh, you thought I drove. No, it’s at the cottage.”

“That explains Randall not hearing the car. Or me. But... those shoes?”

Christie laughed. “I only put them on when I got near the house. My runners are in the bag. It was too nice not to walk and I detoured to thank Sylvia for the lovely dessert the other night. She told me Belinda is settling in well. She’s in a shared apartment with three other girls and is trying to teach them how to cook.”

“Best thing for her. She’s sensible and keen to make you proud. Like I am.” He reached across the table for Christie’s hand. “You’ve given Belinda direction and shown Sylvia that change is okay.” The breeze returned, strong enough to extinguish the candle. “If you’d like to take my glass, I’ll bring this inside.”

Christie followed Martin after he carefully pick up the table and carried it into the house, setting it down near a window in the living room. He went back out to retrieve the ice bucket and Christie took their empty plates into the kitchen.

“Shall I relight the candle?” she asked.

“Soon. Before it rains, would you look at something? A painting I’m doing? I’d like your opinion.”

“Mine? Of course, not that I know much.”

“Are you okay to get to the studio with those shoes on? Or, I could carry you.” Martin offered with a grin.

Christie slipped them off. “Bare feet will do. You can carry me back if I get tired.”

All the way to the studio, Christie wanted to dance, rather than walk. The wind carried the scent of the sea as Martin led her across the dark, silky grass. It was a bit surreal, barefoot before the rain.

The studio was warm. The floor-to-ceiling windows and multiple skylights allowed sunlight through from most directions and, once it was closed up, it stayed pleasant. Martin took Christie to a covered painting.

“It isn’t finished and I don’t know whether to keep going or discard it.”

“Is it that badly painted?” Christie teased.

“It is exceptionally painted. Christie, it’s the subjects that concern me. I don’t wish to offend them.” Half raising the sheet, he paused. “Be honest. I would prefer to destroy it now than cause them one moment of distress.”

Puzzled, Christie watched him remove the sheet. He walked away, as if unable to witness her reaction. Goosebumps rushed over her skin and the fine hair on her arms stood up. “What have you done?” She whispered, eyes riveted to the most incredible work of art she’d ever seen.



## Chapter Twenty-one

“You hate it.”

Dismayed at the dejection in Martin’s voice, Christie held her hand out. “The opposite! I am in awe, absolutely astounded by the beauty and emotion of it!”

He didn’t move, his eyes on the floor. “You asked what I’d done.”

Now, Christie went to him, taking his hands in hers and squeezing them. “Yes, I did. Because you’ve taken life experiences and somehow... imprinted them. Turned them into something so haunting that I will not allow you to destroy it!” As her voice became more forceful, Martin looked at her. “You wanted my opinion? Okay, then come with me.”

She dropped his hands, her eyes demanding he follow her, then she stalked back to the painting and waited. After a moment, he wandered across, stopping behind her to wrap his arms around her body.

“That was very bossy,” he said.

“Then no more talk of destroying this. It is alive and deserves to be finished.” Christie felt him relax against her and leaned back into him. “I understand your concern though, in case this might remind Thomas and Martha of times they’d rather forget. But Thomas painted the seascape of the night Martha left him, then tried to give it to her.”

“True. But that was between them. This is... different.”

“Yes. You are freeing them. The young lovers, the separated and heartbroken individuals, the reconciling pair. And you.” Christie turned around in his arms, pulling him close. “You’re freeing the little boy. He’s earned freedom. Hmm?”

How far they had come. Once, any talk of his childhood or the dark years he and Thomas shared would result in a wall coming down between them. Now though, Martin’s eyes gave away the hurt still within. But there was hope as well. “Thank you.”

Rain pattered on the roof. Martin released Christie and reached for the sheet. “We’d better get back to the house.”

Cold without his embrace, she rubbed her arms. “Speaking of paintings, I was in the garage today.”

“We need to do something with it.”

“I have no idea why I have it and I’m worried about who owns it now. Is it mine? Yours?”

“Or Derek’s. Sweetheart, I don’t know. We might need to get legal advice.”

“Or I could ask him.”

“Absolutely not!” Martin shook his head as he checked the skylights. “That’s probably what he wants.”

“Perhaps. Or it could be an apology. Or maybe he just doesn’t want it.”

“Then he’d sell it, make something back.”

“Martin, one phone call will clear this up and then we’ll know.”

“And I said no.” Martin went to the door and flicked the light off. “Come on, it’s going to bucket down any minute.”

“You can’t just tell me what to do!” Christie didn’t move, crossing her arms and raising her voice a little.

“I’m going to get dessert and another glass of wine. Join me or stay here, but if it’s the latter, lock the door.” The corner of his lips curled up. “Coming?”

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The light rain abruptly became a downpour. Christie stomped across the grass, refusing to sprint but determined to stay ahead of Martin. What made him think he could just tell her what to do? If she wanted to call Derek, she could have done so without talking to Martin first. *So, why didn't you?* Ignoring her inner voice, she rushed up the steps, slipping on the top one.



“I’ve got you.” Martin caught her before she fell. “Slow down.”

Christie tried to shake his hands off and found herself swept up and carried like a baby. “Put me down!”

“Told you. I’ve got you. Behave please, otherwise we’ll both end up on the ground.”

She stopped wriggling and bit her lip.

Going straight through the open sliding door, Martin continued to his bedroom. At the end of the bed, still on his feet, Martin shifted Christie’s body so that she had to look at him. He stared at her, one eyebrow raised, expression thoughtful. She squirmed.

“This could go a few ways. The one that appeals to me the most will not please you one bit.”

“Why? Do you want me to stand in the naughty corner?” Christie could not help herself.

“That’s where you’d end up. Afterwards.”

Christie’s breath caught in her throat as colour flooded her face.

“Sooner or later, it will happen, Christie, because one day your temper will see me put you—”

“I... um, I only ever get cross with you. Nobody else really.” She didn’t want to hear where she would be put.

“Is that meant to make it okay?”

“No. It’s just sometimes you make me so angry. I’m sorry.” Her voice was a whisper.

Martin sighed and sank onto the edge of the bed, Christie on his lap. Water dripped from her now bedraggled and wet hair to his arms “Let’s sort a couple of things out. First of all, Derek is up to something. Whether it is just rattling you for old time’s sake, or still attempting a land grab, there’s an intent behind sending the canvas. You phoning him is playing into his hands.”

“Fine. But you don’t need to tell me what to do. I can make decisions quite well.”

“Which brings us to the second thing. I have the utmost respect for you, my darling, and you do make good decisions. Look at everything you’ve accomplished so far, based on hard work and intelligent choices.” He lifted her hand to his lips. “But when it comes to your safety, I won’t hesitate to tell you what to do.”

“But I don’t need to be told!”

“Let me count. Leaving the cottage door unlocked on numerous occasions. Not bothering to eat for days on end. Recent information coming to light about a history of security failures. Do I need to go on?”

“I don’t need a boss.”

“Then we’re going to have problems.” He spoke softly and Christie gave him a puzzled look. “How many captains does a boat have?”

“One. But—”

“And every bit as important to the boat is the first officer. But in stormy weather, it is the captain that takes on the responsibility of getting his boat to safe harbour. Putting himself on the line and facing danger in order to protect his crew.”

“You want to protect me.”

“I can’t help it. With my life I will protect you.”

Christie slipped her arms around his neck. “I love you for that.”

“But will you fight me when I take a stand? Every time I see danger where you don’t?” He searched her eyes. “Better to walk away now than endlessly battle for your trust.”

“No!” Tears filled Christie’s eyes. “You have my trust, Martin. You have since the very beginning, but I’ve had to make so many decisions in my life and rely on myself for so long that I don’t know how to be a first officer.”

“I’m not trying to run your life, I promise you, but I have an old-fashioned streak when it comes to the safety and wellbeing of those I love.”

Martin rotated his torso to gently deposit her on the bed. “Let’s get you out of that damp dress.”

Desire blazed in her eyes as he undid the buttons on his shirt before discarding it.

He closed the door.

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John sat in his darkened lounge room in a dressing gown, staring at his mobile phone. The call from Ingrid had surprised him this late at night, and he was annoyed he’d forgotten to turn the phone off before retiring. At least the ringing hadn’t disturbed Daphne.

There was nothing to tell Ingrid. As much as she insisted on quick answers about his availability to work for her rather than Bryce, it wasn’t that simple. John did nothing in a hurry, without proper investigation, and the status quo would remain until his solicitor finished checking his agreement with Bryce.

After a lifetime in local real estate, John had enough for their retirement. However, this recent interest by developers in the region was proving lucrative and he wanted to surprise Daphne with the long holiday in Europe that she always dreamed about. She’d worked every bit as hard as he had to build and run their business and soon they would enjoy their rewards.

This Ingrid was trouble. Somehow he knew it, but what she offered – the incredible fee she dangled in front of him to help her – might be worth it. After all, someone would eventually continue the progress Bryce started and at least she had a vision that the locals would understand. Sighing, he switched off the phone and got to his feet.

Careful not to wake Daphne, John took his time getting back into bed. He was uncomfortable keeping his meeting with Ingrid secret, but sometimes client confidentiality came first. It wasn’t as though he’d met her for any wrong purpose.

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Daphne opened her eyes as his breathing settled into sleep. For the first time in her life, she was afraid. Whoever phoned John just now was the same person he'd gone off to meet in another town. John usually kept nothing from her so something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

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Wrapped up in Martin's soft, warm dressing gown that almost reached her ankles, Christie sighed with deep contentment. Feet tucked under herself on the sofa in the living room, her eyes followed Martin's every move as he prepared their long overdue dessert. After handing her a glass of wine, he'd kissed her forehead and told her to stay put.

At this moment, Christie would agree to anything Martin asked. Follow him to the ends of the earth. Spend every waking – and not waking – moment with him. Even be the person at his side when, as captain of the boat, he weathered the storm. Her life was complete right here and now. His touch, his kiss, his... every move, took her to places beyond imagination.

“You okay?” he asked, not looking up from the perfect little bowls of decadence he prepared.

“Hmm? Oh, just thinking.”

He shot her a look.

“I love being with you, Martin. Being here.”

Martin wandered out of the kitchen, a bowl in each hand. “I love it too. Here.” He sat beside her. “Try this.”

Thinly sliced strawberries were layered with chocolate mousse and thick cream. One bite and Christie was in heaven. “I'm sure I've asked you this before, but wherever did you learn to cook like this?”

“Thomas is a great cook. And YouTube. Don't laugh, that and Pinterest are invaluable when you have a fridge full of fresh fish and no ideas how to use it all.”

“You don’t happen to be on Facebook or Instagram?  
Belinda scolds me for not using social media.”

“She is nineteen. It’s her job to be up with everything. I have quite enough to keep busy without losing myself on the internet.”

“Unless it’s for recipes.” Christie grinned, scraping every last delicious morsel from the bowl. “Worth every calorie.”

He took her bowl and put it onto the coffee table with his, then gathered her into his arms. “When are you going to Auckland?”

She snuggled into his chest. “Later this week. Waiting to hear when exactly.”

“So someone else makes your arrangements? Hotel, transport and the like?”

“I just get on the plane and go where I’m told.”

“Ah. You do know how to follow directions then.”

“That’s my job though.”

“And you still love it.”

Christie sat up so that she could look at Martin. “Is that a question? Because I do, at least I love everything except the distance I need to go. And how long I’m away.”

“But it didn’t used to bother you. Months in London, or Los Angeles. Don’t you miss being part of that lifestyle?”

*Where are you going with this?* She frowned. “If you mean working eighteen-hour days, living out of a hotel, being at the whim of directors who sometimes change their minds mid-shoot, missing home... sure.” Taking Martin’s hand, she finally smiled. “It isn’t what I want anymore.”

“What do you want?”

She kissed his hand. “I’ve got everything I want.”

“Everything?” He pulled her against his hard body, mouth tantalisingly close to hers.

“Almost.” She breathed. “Unless I’m missing something?”

“Let’s find out.” Effortlessly, Martin got to his feet with Christie again in his arms. This time, needing his kiss, she reached for his neck, his hair. When their lips met and fire devoured her, Christie knew exactly what she was missing.



## Chapter Twenty-two

Derek hurried for the elevator, late after a last minute phone call from his solicitor. His mind worked overtime on the bad news. Initial optimism that the covenant on Chris' land would not hold up in a legal challenge to buy the adjoining allotment turned out to be poor information. If he wanted the land, he needed either Chris' permission, or to buy her property.

"Well, she's not going to just sign it over, is she?" He'd hissed at his solicitor before disconnecting the call and throwing the phone onto the sofa.

Rounding the corner too quickly, Derek almost ran straight into Ashley. "Sorry, mate." He extended his right hand. "Been a while."

"Guess we're all busy," Ashley shook his hand. "Keeping well?"

"Well enough. But it's not the same since Chris left."

"Anyway, good to see you—"

"Please, just tell me she's okay? I mean, I miss her so much and it was all one big horrible misunderstanding..."

"I'm sure she's just fine."

"Does she come to the studio still? I'd love to buy her coffee one day."

"No. Not lately."

"So, she's given up film?"

"Oh, that would make you happy, wouldn't it?" Ray appeared from behind Ash.

"What do you mean? I still love her."

"Well, she doesn't love you and she most certainly has not given up her career." Ray took a step toward Derek, ignoring Ashley's pleading expression. "No, you made it almost impossible for her, but she's got friends like Ash and Carlo—"



“Ray! Drop it and let’s go.” Red-faced, Ashley grabbed Ray’s arm. “Don’t make a scene!”

Derek and Ray glared at each other, inches apart. Then Derek’s lips curled up in a smirk. “Yes, don’t make a scene. I didn’t mean to upset you, just wanted to know she’s okay. But no doubt the new boyfriend hates her going away every bit as much as I did.”

“At least she has someone decent to come home to now.”

“That’s enough.” Ashley got between them. “This conversation’s over, both of you.” He stared down Derek, who eventually stepped back. “Goodbye, Derek.”

Derek spun around and then stalked off. At the elevator he hit the button several times, fuming. How dare they! It was time to move. The doors whooshed open and he stepped in, jabbing the ground floor button.

Doors closed, surrounded by silence, his thoughts settled. Carlo. Ray said Chris had friends like Ash and Carlo... presumably the people keeping her employed. He remembered something about Carlo. The American. Yes, he remembered who he was.

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Leaving Martin in the morning was hard to do. Dawn found them awake, wrapped in each other’s arms, discussing *Jasmine Sea*. Christie’s Marine Licence exam was on Tuesday. “You know what’s required, and if you forget, just think about the feel of the boat.” Martin advised.

He’d made them coffee and tried to keep a stern tone with Christie about getting breakfast at home, but it was difficult when she kept agreeing with such compliance he almost laughed instead.

“I’m practising being a first officer,” she’d stated ever so solemnly.

“At this rate I shall demote you to deckhand,” he’d replied with a grin.

After coffee, she'd reluctantly packed her dress and heels into the bag. Not once had he suggested she stay here instead of Palmerston House, not even after the incredible night they'd shared. As she walked home along the beach, she wondered if her behaviour earlier in the evening had been a factor. She needed to watch her temper.

By the time Barry and his crew arrived at the cottage, Christie had moved the Lotus onto the grass verge. Today was a big one, with deliveries expected for the bathroom and laundry.

Christie unlocked the garage and went inside to stare at the box containing *Sole Survivor*.

"Morning, Christie." Barry tapped on the garage door, leaning against it to adjust a boot. "What if the boys put that into your bedroom? We'll keep the door closed anyway and lock it up at night. Probably less risk of damage than the comings and goings in here."

"Good idea. I'm all packed so it can go against the wall."

"There's something I need to ask about." Barry straightened up with a lopsided grin. "Er, it appears you already have a front door."

"Got a bit carried away with some spray paint. How long until the real one arrives?"

"Few days. But we'll open the entry way up internally first. I'll probably do that today, maybe tomorrow. Are you going to be up here at all this week?"

"I'm part way through clearing the veggie gardens, so yes, you'll see a bit of me."

"Good. Just in case I need to check anything. Looks like you've got a visitor." Barry gestured to the front of the house.

Rupert stood outside the fence in the driveway, waving.

"Interesting," Christie said. "I'll leave it to you, Barry."

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Rupert watched Christie walk toward him, wishing his purpose here was to invite her to dinner, to New York, to anywhere really. She was one classy woman and he silently cursed Derek. He didn't care for his employer and even less for Ingrid, but the pay made up for it. This job was unsavoury, but he'd do it, and do it well.

"Hello, Rupert. What brings you by?" Christie wandered onto the grass verge.

"How goes the renovation?"

"Doing bathroom and laundry as we speak. Then the kitchen."

Rupert whistled. "Big job!"

"Can't wait to see the end result. So, passing through town?" Christie regarded him with those emerald eyes and he almost forgot himself.

He did his best to look embarrassed. "I wanted to thank you again for your hospitality the other day. Lucy told me I should extend her thanks as well, you know, she worries about me."

"Not necessary. It was only a glass of water."

"I went to see the estate agent. Spoke to his lovely wife, um, Daphne? Anyway, she took my details and is apparently sending some stuff through the post for us to look at together. You know, about the town and some new estate?"

"River's End Heights." The expression on Christie's face told Rupert how little she thought of it.

"Sounds right. But, here's the thing. I kind of fell in love with this place."

"The cottage?"

"I told Lucy all about it and she almost jumped up and down in excitement. Not that she did, what with bubba on the way, but you know what I mean. So, um, is there any chance you'd consider it?"

"Consider..?"

“Selling me the cottage. It’d be perfect for Lucy and the little one when she comes along. Room for a pony. Grow our own stuff and such a nice town.”

Christie was quiet. She hadn’t said no. But she was quiet.

“I can pay whatever you ask. We’ll be selling our place in Melbourne and it’s a seller’s market there.”

“It isn’t a matter of money, Rupert. I just don’t know if I want to part with the cottage. My Gran left it to me and it has a lot of meaning attached. Lots of history. Besides, there’s someone in the family I’ve been thinking of gifting it to.”

That stunned Rupert and he covered his surprise with a broad smile. “How generous! Young family?”

A beautiful smile crossed Christie’s face and Rupert gulped.

“Not young. In fact, they are quite... senior. But this would be perfect for them.”

“It is a bit out of town though. A bit isolated. No neighbours by the look of it, which appeals to me. But older folk, well, perhaps they like being close to amenities.”

“You don’t know them like I do.”

Rupert patted his forehead with a handkerchief. “Well, if you decide to sell, please think of me first. Lucy and I would treat it like the family home neither of us ever had as kids.”

“Yes.” Christie had the oddest expression on her face, almost sad.

“The lovely Daphne has all my details. You know, in case you want to have a chat.”

Christie extended her hand. “I appreciate the offer.”

A truck rumbled down the road. “Better let the crew know the new bathroom is here!” Christie smiled at Rupert and hurried back to the cottage.

Rupert scowled. She wasn’t going to cooperate. Not yet. Plan B time.

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As the elevator doors opened, Derek hit the button to take him upstairs again. Hopefully, Ashley and Ray were back in their apartment and not skulking around the hallways. To think he'd once called them friends. In hindsight, it was Chris they liked. Their loss.

Derek went straight to the room they'd used as an office. What exactly was still here? The night Chris left him, she packed only a few suitcases.

He rummaged through the drawers of the filing cabinet. Some old receipts, an expired passport, airline tickets kept as mementos. She'd left a shoe box on the desk and he tipped it upside down. More receipts, birthday cards, a signed menu. Rubbish.

The bookcase had big gaps where Christie had taken her favourite novels, leaving others lying at angles. Messy and annoying. Derek propped the remaining books together neatly. He'd need to buy bookends now. And why she'd thought a photo album belonged in the bookcase was beyond him. He grabbed it, slamming the door in his wake.

He knew what was in this album. Her life before him and without him. People he didn't know, places on sets, and randomly selected moments in time that meant nothing to him. In the kitchen, he stepped on the pedal of the bin, ready to toss it in. Be done with her. *Unless*. He let the lid close as he opened the photo album.

Derek flicked through the pages. "No. Good God, what was she doing? No," then, "ah." It was a photograph of Chris with a bald, rotund man on a yacht. Ripping the photograph out, he turned it over. *Got you. Carlo Palmero*. Yes, that was the man he'd thought it was. Now, all he had to do was find out where he was filming. Or planning to film.

The phone rang, Rupert's name appearing on the screen.

"Tell me she's selling." Derek tapped the pedal of the bin again and the lid swung up.

“Sorry, boss. Not yet anyway but she’s agreed to think about it.”

Derek dropped the photo album into the bin. “Not what I want to hear.” He strode to the entry way to get his briefcase, turning straight around to return to the kitchen. “Did she actually say she’d consider it?”

“She said she’s thinking about giving it to some old couple.”

“What? Damn it.” Derek took a laptop out and opened it. “Then there’s no alternative but to implement the next part of the plan.”

“I think she’s moving out today. Suitcase in the car and lots of bathroom work going on. But it’s risky—”

“Then don’t get caught. Or leave evidence. If that’s not too hard for you?”

“Whatever you say.” Rupert hung up.

The laptop booted, Derek typed Carlo Palmero into the search bar. That led to his website and a list of credits. At the very bottom was a one-line reference. “Shooting will commence on *The Devil’s Dream* in and around Auckland, New Zealand, in February.” Derek read it aloud. Chris was in River’s End, but she had a packed suitcase in her car. Was she on her way to Auckland?

Derek closed his laptop. Just maybe there was another way.



## Chapter Twenty-three

Martin changed into board shorts, longing to surf. He did his best thinking out on the waves with nothing to distract him save Randall's occasional complaint from the beach. Christie overwhelmed his senses and made him want to ask her to marry him. Last night proved she wasn't ready, not when she was still willing to put herself at risk again with her ex.

He lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Christie was moving into Palmerston House today. Instead, she should come here. Give her an idea of what life would be like when the time came. Waking up to his kisses and coffee, long days in the late summer sun, evenings filled with conversation and romance. Randall would love having her here. *I'd love it.*

Surfing forgotten, Martin searched for his phone, Randall on his heels. He found it in the studio, switched off. He turned it on, then uncovered the painting in progress. Seeing it through Christie's eyes and heart, his confidence had returned.

A soft beep from his phone. Martin grimaced as he read the message from Bethany Fox. *That bay is perfect. Please meet me there at eleven. Once preliminary sketches are complete, I will transfer the next instalment into your account. Bethany.*

He'd meet her there, do some sketches and then she could go back to Melbourne and he would talk to Christie. If she agreed to stay here instead of Palmerston House, then he'd delay Bethany's painting until Christie was away.

\*\*\*

Martin heard Ingrid before he saw her. On the phone, her voice carried along the small beach at Willow Bay in a tone of scorn. Snippets of the conversation made no sense and he wasn't interested in hearing it.

"Ridiculous and self-indulgent!" She realised Martin was only metres away and she forced her expression to change from anger to welcome. "I'll call you back." She hung up and pocketed the phone. "Well, hello. Thought you'd forgotten



me.” She tilted her head, eyes hidden behind oversize sunglasses.

“It isn’t quite eleven. Shall we begin?”

“Now? Oh, no darling. I’m not dressed properly and have to be somewhere else soon.”

“Then why am I here, Bethany?” He crossed his arms.

“To show me the boat.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Ingrid smiled sweetly and pointed into the bay. “What better place to sketch me than on a yacht, with the backdrop of the Australian bush and such a secluded little beach? Mother adores the sea and it will be perfect and so special. Just what I want.”

He kept his voice neutral. “We can’t just board anyone’s boat.”

“Of course not, how silly you must think me!” Her laugh was hollow. “As if I wouldn’t do my homework. No, it is a particular boat. That one.” She pointed to *Jasmine Sea*. “Your yacht, Martin.”

“She is old. Not sophisticated like some of the others here. And she isn’t mine anymore.”

“Oh. That’s disappointing.” Ingrid removed her sunglasses and stared at Martin, her eyes hard. “Very disappointing. I have my heart set on this and it would be a shame to have to cancel the arrangement.”

“Your choice. If, and I do mean if we go out to the yacht, it will be once only. We’ll be there long enough to get the sketches I need and photographs. The rest will be done in the studio.”

Ingrid put her sunglasses back on with a smile. “Sounds perfect. Let’s make it tomorrow then.”

“This afternoon. I’ll have the dinghy ready at two.”

“Anything you say.” She turned to go, then glanced back over her shoulder. “It will be just us? I’ve told you, I’m very

private.”

“I can’t sketch with distractions. It will be just us, Bethany.”

With a nod, she wandered toward the path to the car park. Martin stared at her back, wishing he’d told her it was off. *You’re being selfish. Think of Christie.*

\*\*\*

Ingrid waited until she was out of Martin’s earshot and dialled Derek.

“Why did you hang up on me?” Derek demanded.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I should have continued our discussion in front of Martin Blake.”

“So what happened?”

“I’m going out to the yacht this afternoon to be sketched. But apparently he no longer owns it. Was cagey about the whole thing.”

“Well it’s important you keep him busy. Where are you with John Jones? Shouldn’t he be on our side by now?”

“We’re meeting shortly and I fully expect he’ll be on board. Stop doubting everything I’m doing, Derek! And maybe instead of coming up with ridiculous notions to win your ex back, you should concentrate on being ready to buy the minute we can.”

“Those ridiculous notions are the last resort, if you and Rupert fail. I’d be careful, Ingrid, and do your part without telling me what to do.”

“Let’s not argue, particularly about a woman who left you for some deadbeat artist. By tomorrow morning, she’ll be chasing Rupert, so just relax, darling.”

Ingrid reached her car. She shook sand off her shoes.

“It’s hard to relax with so much at stake. But you’re right, arguing is pointless when we’re on the same side and you’re sounding jealous, which you don’t need to be.”

Ingrid almost dropped a shoe. “I can’t wait to return to civilisation. In fact, once this is bedded down and we turn it over to the legal team, I might just treat myself to a trip to somewhere snowy, with a hot tub and brandy. Do you ski?”

Derek chuckled. “Of course.”

“Well then, let’s make it a date.”

“When you’re back, we’ll talk about it. Now, be a good girl and sort John Jones out.” Derek terminated the call.

She threw herself into the car and slammed the door. “Be a good girl!” she muttered. “No wonder Christie left you.”

\*\*\*

Daphne shuffled paperwork. John hadn’t told her about last night’s phone call and she wasn’t about to ask. Trust was an unspoken part of their relationship. Whatever was going on, she had to believe it wasn’t about them.

“Love, I’m popping out for half an hour.” John dropped a folder in front of Daphne, frowning at her uncharacteristically half-drunk coffee and untouched cake from morning tea. “Are you okay?”

“Um, oh, I’m fine, doll. Seeing a client?” She glanced up at him. His remaining hair was freshly combed and she smelt reapplied cologne. Her heart sank.

“Just that same one from the other day. Has a few more questions.”

“I remember you said they are interested in property? Maybe one of those nice homes up in the Heights would appeal?” She fished.

“Not after housing. Something a bit bigger.” John kissed her cheek. “Gotta go.”

“They aren’t developers, are they? Because if they are, we shouldn’t be speaking to them. Not unless they are with Bryce Montgomery.”

Halfway around the counter, John stopped. “We’re not locked in with him, apart from what we’ve already done

together.”

Pursing her lips, Daphne stared levelly at her husband. “I’m sure you don’t need my opinion, but whether or not we have a legal arrangement with Bryce, there most certainly is a moral one! That young man has been good for us, very good, and he believes we are on his side. Which we are, doll, aren’t we?”

“I’m only in discussions. Trust me.”

“I do. I always trust you to do what’s right and I still love you today as much as the day we married. Now, go and have your meeting.” She picked up the folder, her mouth softened in a smile.

John hesitated.

“Go on, you don’t want to be late.” Daphne got to her feet. “I’ll see you soon.” Holding the folder to her chest, she forced herself to walk to the filing room without looking back. A moment later, she heard the door close. “I do trust you,” she whispered.



## Chapter Twenty-four

Rupert pushed open the door of the real estate agency with a big smile.

Daphne looked up. “Well, hello again. Back in our little town?”

“And I hope it won’t be too long before I’m a local.” He leaned on the counter. “Of course, I do need your expert help.”

“That’s what I’m here for. It’s Rupert, if my memory serves me.”

“Your memory is perfect, Mrs Jones.”

Daphne laughed. “No Mrs Jones around here, just Daphne. So, what brings you back so soon?”

“After our last chat, I drove back to Melbourne and told Lucy all about River’s End and the beach. I’ve accepted the job in Warrnambool, and we’ve put our place on the market. Better to do it now, before our bubba arrives.”

“Very wise. It is a perfect time to move here, what with the wonderful new estate and all.” Daphne came around the counter. “Over here in the window, there are photographs of some of the best homes in River’s End Heights. Every mod-con, big blocks, and on the right side of town for your drive to work each day.”

Rupert stayed where he was. “Lucy just won’t have a bar of them, I’m afraid. She has a thing about old places and besides, we really want at least an acre. That little cottage up the hill is perfection itself.”

“Christie’s cottage? Well, yes, it would seem perfect, but Christie is happy there. Renovating to make it more of a home for herself.”

Scratching his head, Rupert looked confused. “Odd. She just told me she’s thinking of giving it to some old couple.”

“How sweet of her! She’d be talking about her great aunt Martha and Thomas. They’re away right now so she must be doing all that work with them in mind. Of course, now I think

of it, most likely she and Martin will make things official one of these days, so there'd be no need for her to keep the cottage."

"Do you think they'll take it? It's a bit isolated for older folk."

Daphne returned to her chair with a laugh. "You don't know those two! But Thomas has a house already, so who knows what will happen."

"Would you do me a favour? If you hear anything leading you to believe it might come up for sale, would you let me know first? I'll pay above market rates."

"Of course. I wouldn't hold your breath, and it would be wise to consider other properties, just in case."

"Our hearts are set on that one."

"I've got your contact details, so leave it with me."

"Thanks, Daphne. You are a gem." Rupert headed for the door. "It'll be great living here." With a wave, he left, taking care not to let the door slam.

"Now what was I doing?" Daphne asked herself, her mind straying to what John might be doing right now.

\*\*\*

John unlocked the front door of one of the new homes in the estate, the one furthest from the main road. This street was uninhabited and the chance of anyone driving past was next to zero. Ingrid wanted privacy, well, he'd provide that. This last time.

The growl of the Porsche cut through the otherwise silent house. A moment later, the front door opened and shut with some force. "Where are you?"

"In the kitchen, just straight ahead of you." John placed his briefcase on the white counter of the spacious room and walked to the opposite side.

"Why are we meeting here?" Ingrid stopped in the doorway, eyes darting around, then back to John. "I'm not

buying houses.”

“But you want to avoid being seen. The worst anyone would think if they see your car here is that you’re inspecting it. Besides, it’s quiet and we won’t be disturbed.”

“Alright. What news do you have?” Ingrid lifted herself onto the edge of the counter and sat there, legs crossed. “My connections are keen to work on a contract with you.”

“Bryce Montgomery approached me almost three years ago looking for land to develop into estates. Like this one. He might not go about it the way you propose, but it’s been a mutually agreeable arrangement.”

“I don’t need a history lesson, Johnny. Get to the point.”

“My point is I’m not prepared to go behind his back.”

“That isn’t what you’d be doing. There is plenty here for all of us, and in fact, my interests are going to be different from his. Keep working on whatever you’re contracted to if you must, but I will need priority.”

“May I suggest talking to our competition in town—”

“No you may not suggest it!” Ingrid pushed herself off the counter and leaned across it, her face red. “I chose you for a reason, darling. You have knowledge of whatever Bryce is doing. You also have the ear of certain landowners I require access to. No, John, you will reconsider.”

He levelled his gaze on her. “The answer is no and it is not negotiable. I wish you well. Now, if you’d like to leave first, I will lock up.”

Ingrid smirked. “Don’t be too hasty, darling. I wonder how that lovely wife of yours will feel once she finds out we’ve been having an affair.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“Sure I would. I can be very convincing and it’s easy to prove we were alone twice recently. And the phone calls. You know, this arrangement will bring you lots of money. I mean, real wealth to retire on. Just a year of your help and then we’ll go our separate ways. No need for unpleasantness.”



“Get out.” John picked up his briefcase. “Now.”

“Oh, you will regret this,” Ingrid hissed. She spun around and stomped out. When the door slammed, John put his briefcase down again and looked at his hands. They shook almost uncontrollably.

\*\*\*

Daphne hurried to the front door when she heard the Lotus pull up. She'd been clock-watching since Rupert left. Something wasn't right, she felt it in her bones.

“Hello, lovely!” She called as Christie stepped out of the car.

“Oh, hi Daphne! Just the person I want.”

They hugged.

“So good to see you, Christie.” Daphne beamed when she finally released her.

“You too. Are you on your own?”

The smile dropped. “Just for now. John's out with a new client. Why do you ask?”

“I'd like to take you out to lunch. If you haven't eaten, that is.”

“How sweet and no, I haven't. But I probably should wait until he's back, if that's okay?” Daphne looked out of the door but there was no sign of John's car. “I was going to give you a call anyway.”

“I can wait with you.”

Daphne flopped into her seat behind the counter and Christie leaned her arms on the counter top, much as Rupert had done earlier. “Why were you going to call?”

“A young man called Rupert dropped by.”

Christie raised both eyebrows. “He is certainly persistent. Did he want to look at local properties?”

“Just one. He loves your cottage.”

“So he tells me.”

“Are you planning on giving it to Martha and Thomas?”

“If they’ll take it.”

“What a wonderful gesture! You are a most generous girl and Martin is very lucky to have you in his life.”

A door closed at the back of the building and Daphne’s eyes widened. “That’s John.” She stood up.

“Daphne?”

“Out here, doll.”

From around the corner, John hurried straight to Daphne and embraced her. He was sweating profusely and had pulled his tie away from his neck. He stepped back, but held onto Daphne’s hand. “We need to talk.”

“Whatever is wrong? You look pale. You didn’t have an accident, did you?”

“No, no. I’m okay. Christie, sorry to be rude...”

“No, that’s okay. Daphne, lunch tomorrow?” Christie went to the door with John now right behind her.

“I’ll give you a call and arrange a time.”

Christie slipped through the door which John closed, and then locked. He turned the “open” sign around.

“John?”

“Let’s have a cuppa, love. There’s something I need to tell you.”

\*\*\*

By the light of a small lamp, Martha sat on a rocking chair in the lounge room of her Irish cottage. Outside, dawn was a long way off in spite of spring being imminent. She loved this time of year, as the first signs of the coming season filled the air with a freshness and vibrancy unique to Ireland. With a cup of coffee in her hands and a blanket around her legs, she was warm enough. Once Thomas woke, she’d get the ancient stove going and make them both a hearty breakfast. Thomas did love to eat and yet never gained an ounce.

From here, in the quiet, the ever-present sounds from the ocean soothed her spirit. The waves rushing in and out were a lullaby that had sung her to sleep many times in her life. This little home had been hers for more than forty years, bought after she'd finally decided to live out her life in the country of her ancestors. She knew everyone in the village, had taught most of them at some time or another. It was like an extended family. One she would miss so very much. The cottage had sold and, today, she and Thomas would begin packing.

“Whatever are you doing up so early?” Wrapped in a dressing gown, Thomas rubbed his eyes as he wandered in. He stopped beside Martha and she leaned her head against his side, reaching for his hand.

“I didn't mean to disturb you, dear. Go back to bed.”

“Not without you.” He lowered himself into a chair.

“Shall I make you coffee then?”

“Soon. Why are you sitting here all alone?”

“Just thinking and remembering some of the special times I've had here. Birthdays with friends who are long gone. Dressing the place up for Christmas and hearing the children sing carols outside, until the wind off the Atlantic Ocean sent them home in a hurry.”

“There's always memories with houses. Some good and some... well, at least you'll be taking a lot of your keepsakes home.”

“Yes. It's strange to think of someone else moving in. I shall probably be a little emotional at times, and I apologise in advance for any moments I may have.”

Thomas leaned across to pat her leg. “Darling girl, I'll be with you every moment. Think how much fun you'll have unpacking everything and finding special spots for your most precious things. No doubt Christie will help.”

A smile brightened Martha's face. “I can't wait to see her! And Martin too.”

“I just miss Randall.”

Martha laughed and he joined in.

“We do need to discuss where we will live though. It’s a subject you tend to avoid – see, there’s the expression on your face again!”

“There’s nothing to discuss. I own a perfectly good house with stunning mountain views. What more could a woman want?”

“Well, there’s small luxuries, like an inside toilet.”

“There’s a covered walkway.”

“And heating.”

“I’ve got blankets.”

“Which is all very nice, but there’s one thing you don’t have up there.”

Thomas sighed. “The sea.”

She nodded, her eyes misty.

“We’ll find somewhere in town, okay? Don’t cry, I don’t know what to do when you cry.” Thomas took her hand, squeezing it tightly. “I was never going to make you live up there. We need to be close to the children.”

“And Randall?” She managed with a weak smile.

“Especially Randall. Now, why don’t you go and get dressed and I’ll organise some coffee and kick this stove of yours into action. And you complain about my house!” He got to his feet, then pulled Martha to hers. With the lightest touch, he held her face between his hands. “I love you, Mrs Blake. If you wanted to live on that damned boat of Martin’s, I’d even consider it, so never think for one minute I’ll let you down.”

“Oh, Thomas, I love you too and you’ve never let me down. Not once.”

Thomas kissed her. “Get dressed. We’ve got a lot to do today and I want my woman properly nourished.”

“You mean you’re hungry.” Martha laughed as she left the room.

Thomas stared after her. *For you, always.* He couldn't wait to get her home and start building new memories for her.



## Chapter Twenty-five

As he checked his watch for the third time in as many minutes, Martin decided Bethany was almost out of time. The dinghy was near the water line, his sketch book and camera in his backpack on its floor. She'd been on thin ice for a while and he only needed one more reason to ditch her as a client and find another way to build his nest egg.

"Hi Martin." Ingrid hurried toward him, dressed in jeans and a checked shirt. "Thanks so much for this, I phoned my mother and she is over the moon with the idea." She stopped in front of Martin, smiling. As if she was a different person.

"Let's go."

"In that?"

"In that." *Go on, refuse.* But she said nothing else, simply went to the dinghy and waited. With a sigh, he joined her.

\*\*\*

Once on the yacht she wandered around, openly admiring the timber panels. "I like this so much more than those artificial looking boats. This has real character and you must love it! Although, didn't you say you sold it?"

"No. I gave it away."

"My goodness! What a generous man you are. Must be someone special."

"Are you ready to start? The light is good right now."

"Where shall I pose?" Ingrid was so helpful and friendly Martin wondered if she was the twin of Bethany. He directed her to the stern, where she quietly sat, eyes on the horizon. For an hour he sketched and she barely moved, despite the warmth in the air and the natural distractions of the bay.

After several sketches, Martin stood and stretched. "You've done well, Bethany. Take a break whilst I sort my camera out."

"May I use the amenities?"

“Down the steps and to the right. There’s water in the fridge if you need some.”

Martin put the sketch book to one side and prepared his camera, taking shots of the bay and adjusting the aperture.

“Why do you need photos?” Ingrid re-joined Martin, offering him a bottle of water.

“Thanks.” He took a quick drink. “Sketching lets me get to know you. The way your face changes as you think, observe, daydream. How your hair moves. What’s natural for your body. Photographs give me colour. Skin tone, eyes, your clothes. The background as well, in fact is very important, because the sketches are all about you.”

“May I see?”

“No. Not until I’ve formulated the finished painting. Then I’ll show you the process. I’m happy you’ve chosen to dress this way. Informal, at one with the region.”

“You know, I only wear those heels and dresses because it’s what I have to do in order to get ahead in a man’s world.”

“Let’s do this before we lose this great light. There’s a storm coming.”

Ingrid positioned herself where she’d sat for the sketches. “I love storms. So powerful. They excite me, like a lover.”

Martin ignored her, taking hundreds of images in just a few moments. Satisfied, he turned the camera off and gathered his things. “Time to go.”

“Oh, good! How long before it’s finished, Martin?”

“A couple of weeks. I’ll start it late this week and should have something for you to look at the middle of next week. Now, do you need help getting into the dinghy?”

\*\*\*

Christie stared out of the window of the bedroom in which her great aunt Martha had grown up. The outlook was over the front garden. Martha must have spent many hours watching



the comings and goings outside, the abundant bird life, and even occasional kangaroos.

It was a privilege to stay in Palmerston House whilst the cottage renovations continued. With each visit, Christie discovered some new snippet of information about its history or her family. Elizabeth showered love and respect on the property and it showed in every little touch.

Through the gates and up the hill was Martin's house and studio. He was sketching his client, the mystery woman with the Porsche. Over dinner one evening, Martin had explained his commission work was almost all abstract or, occasionally, a more traditional seascape. All done via a brief from big businesses or a gallery.

"I make enough for my lifestyle, Christie, but I'm not wealthy." Martin had stared intently at her.

She'd kissed him with a smile. "You may not believe it, but money doesn't matter to me."

Now, Christie puzzled over his decision to accept this commission. On welcoming the subject into his very private sanctuary, their identity kept secret. Even from her. Was this woman some kind of celebrity? Of all people, Christie understood the famous.

\*\*\*

Back on shore, Ingrid turned on her mobile phone and immediately received a message to contact her father in England. Martin saw the panic in her eyes and agreed to wait a few moments to let her call. As she walked a little way off, talking to her father, he put the dinghy away. This afternoon her manner was so different, making it not quite a pleasure, but at least tolerable to work with her.

He flicked through the sketches, stopping on the one he favoured as the base for the portrait. She wasn't hard to draw and would be even easier to paint. Once Christie left for her job, he would download the photographs and use the best of those to select the palette.

Ingrid hurried back to Martin, dabbing her eyes with a tissue. “I am so sorry, Martin. Mother is quite unwell and my father believes she’ll be moved into palliative care in a few days.”

“That must be shock.”

“I didn’t know it was so bad or I would be back already. My next call will be the office so I can get a flight. Oh, you’ll need me though, won’t you?”

“Not now. Today went well and I can work from everything I’ve done so far. Getting to England is more important.”

“Yes. Please excuse me and sorry. I’ll be in touch.” She almost ran back to the car park, dialling as she went.

Martin followed. He’d ridden the motorcycle up, planning to see Christie afterwards.

In the car park, Bethany leaned against her car, tears running down her face. Seeing Martin, she wiped them away as she waited on her phone. Not prepared to leave her alone and upset, he tinkered with the motorcycle. Eventually, she finished her call and found another tissue. With a soft cough, she regained her composure.

“Well, it seems I can’t get a flight until Wednesday night. My secretary is trying to find something sooner, but it’s how things are right now.”

“You must be very worried.”

“I had hoped to give her the painting when I went home. We may need to talk about shipping it instead... if there’s any point by then.” Her eyes welled with tears again. “Martin, what’s the fastest you’ve done a portrait?”

“Fast enough but it won’t be dry.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Even if I could manage the layers without fully drying them, it will be weeks before it can be safely shipped. Oils are tricky.”

Ingrid's shoulders slumped and her head dropped. For the first time, there was a vulnerability about her. She sighed deeply and looked up at him. "Well, I appreciate your honesty. It's my fault for leaving this so long." She opened the car's door.

"Bethany, wait a minute. I could do a watercolour. It won't be as vibrant or intense, but your mother will still see you as you envisaged."

Her hand went to her mouth and she nodded. "Yes, please do that. I want to hug you, but I'm sure you won't want a teary face all over your chest."

Thankful she didn't hug him, Martin nodded. "I'll start work now. You make your arrangements and we'll talk soon. I'll refund your second payment."

"You won't. I still want the oil done please, but in your own time. By the end of the week I'll deposit the balance, plus another ten thousand." Ingrid's phone rang and she got into her car to answer.

Martin started the motorcycle, wondering exactly what sort of finance industry she was in to spend such large sums of money on portraits of herself. It didn't matter. He would take care of her request and then he would have what he wanted.



## Chapter Twenty-six

“So peaceful.” Christie sat on a bench beneath a very old oak tree, close to the pond. “I’d spend all day in this spot if I lived here.”

Ducks squabbled on the water and ibis stalked delicately around the reedy edges on the far side. Angus settled himself at her side and took the lemonade she offered.

“Did you meet my mother and father?” Christie touched the locket.

“Just once.”

Eyes wide, Christie grabbed his hand. “When? What were they like? Was I born?”

“One question at a time.” Angus chuckled. “It was your mother and she came to visit with you. I’d only been working for Miss Dorothy for a very short time and picked you both up from the airport. You were about four, if memory serves me, and such a chatty little thing.”

“I can’t imagine that. Where was my dad?”

“Working, I believe. Your mother came for Miss Dorothy’s birthday. The visit was cut short, unfortunately, after your mother and Miss Dorothy disagreed about something.”

“They argued? What about?”

“I’m sure I couldn’t say,” Angus knew exactly what it was about, but telling Christie would serve no purpose. No, he remembered the day with alarming clarity.

\*\*\*

It was the second day of Rebecca and Christie’s visit, in the middle of the morning. Angus carried a tray holding tea, a glass of milk, and some small cakes into the informal living room. The formal areas of the house were off limits to children and kept in pristine condition, should visitors drop by. Not that they often did, for Dorothy had few friends.

Little Christie flicked back and forth through a colourful picture book, engrossed and chatting quietly to herself. But Dorothy stared at Rebecca with a cold expression, whilst her daughter's face was creased in distress.

“But why won't you visit us? Never is a long time, Mother.”

“You made the choice to live where you do. Instead of enjoying a good life with friends and family, and a purpose, you blindly followed him to such a remote and barren place. Working amongst people who can't even pay you.”

“I have a very good life, and lots of friends, thanks for caring. Julian and I love the community. It is a work of love and I most certainly do have a purpose!”

As Rebecca raised her voice, Christie looked up with wide eyes. Angus offered her his hand as he went past, hoping to remove her from the escalating argument, but she didn't see it.

“I did not raise you to live in such squalor, Rebecca! You are a Ryan, and one day you will inherit everything I've worked my life for.”

Rebecca stood up as Angus reached the door. “No. I am an Oliver. And I most certainly do not want or need your money. You were happy enough for me to marry Julian, so what changed?”

Dorothy also got to her feet and Christie slipped out of her chair. “As a doctor he should have put his own family first. Not the needs of... what do you call them? A community? This is your last chance to change your mind. Come home and live the life you deserve.”

“What I deserve? Do you think this is it? Oh my God, Mother, you have no idea!”

As Dorothy took a step toward Rebecca, Christie backed away. Straight into a stand holding a ceramic vase which teetered, then crashed onto the floor and shattered. Angus hurried to begin picking up the pieces as Dorothy turned her attention on the child, stalking toward her, palm open.

“No!” Rebecca flew to Christie and lifted her up, away from her mother. “You will never raise a hand to my child!”

“Then get out of my house.”

Angus took Christie from Rebecca and carried her out of the room. “Hush little one, Mummy is okay. Grown-ups say silly things sometimes.” She clung to him, her head on his shoulder. He walked as far away from that room as he could, taking the child out of earshot.

An hour later, he drove Rebecca and Christie to the airport and waited with them as Rebecca booked a flight home. He never saw Rebecca again.

\*\*\*

“Angus, are you okay? You’re very quiet and you look sad.”

“I was just remembering how beautiful your mother was, and how very much she loved you.” It took all of Angus’ resolve to keep those memories to himself. “There was nothing she would not do for you.”

Christie’s smile was enough to tell Angus he’d made the right decision.

\*\*\*

Watercolour was the least favourite medium Martin used. It was, however, a relatively fast drying way to paint and the best option in these circumstances. If he finished it today, with drying time and proper packing it should be safe to travel by Wednesday. This wasn’t ideal and, for Martin, the pressure was not welcome.

Laying out his paints and setting up an easel directed his brain to that place of unwavering focus for his subject, his job. This time though, Christie’s face kept intruding. Her lips, so soft and sweet. Those emerald eyes capable of inspiration or devastation. God, he wanted her here, more than ever. All of his plans were on hold now, because he wasn’t prepared to subject Christie to his moods when he painted.

He needed to talk to her, to warn her again about the tight little cocoon he wrapped himself in. To ask her to give him

just a little bit of time so he could do this, and then be free to be with her. No doubt she was at Palmerston House. He'd missed any opportunity to have her here and, in reality, this was bad timing. *Get it done and move on.* Just one quick call, then he would paint.

\*\*\*

Dusk fell as Christie drove into the cottage driveway. Barry and his team were long gone. She sighed at the inevitable mess left behind. After sweeping, she peeked into the laundry. Completely gutted, the walls had new holes cut in to provide access for the washing machine and new sink. Stepping carefully past a pile of tiles, she checked the laundry door was secure.

One by one, Christie ensured the windows were all tightly locked. Before leaving, Christie stood in the kitchen, gazing around. The place felt a bit alien now with the work in progress. Once the door was locked, Christie headed for the garage. That was secure. Everything was the way it should be.

Christie wished she was going to Martin's now. She felt alone and a bit sad. But he was painting and the slight tension in his voice when he had rung gave away his need to be alone.

Rain pattered on her windscreen as she turned onto the main road. Storm clouds loomed from the south-west. A lone yacht scurried beyond the cliffs, hurrying to its mooring. Not the night to be out on the water.

\*\*\*

John stood at the kitchen doorway, watching Daphne stir something in a pot. She hummed, her face relaxed, as she put a lid on the pot.

"Smells good, love." He decided it was time she had a kiss.

"Oh, I didn't hear you come in!" With a big smile, Daphne opened her arms. He wrapped her up in his, squeezing her until she protested with a giggle. Then, he kissed her. A romantic, lingering kiss that left both of them a bit surprised and breathless.



Red-faced, Daphne wiggled away. “My, oh my, John Jones! It’s got terribly hot in here all of a sudden.”

“Well, I should cool you down with a nice bottle of red.”

“But it’s only Monday.”

“You get the plates and I’ll get a bottle.”

Daphne dabbed her forehead with a tissue, then gave the pot one more stir, replaced the lid, and turned off the flame.

John wandered back, reading the label of the bottle he’d selected. “Think this will do. Been keeping it for a special occasion, and today fits the description, don’t you think?”

“I think you are the most wonderful man in the world.”

“Then let’s open this baby and drink to us.”

While he found a bottle opener, Daphne filled two plates with stew and added a bread roll on each. Instead of their customary dinner in front of the television, she rushed into the dining room and set the table. John appeared behind her with the plates. “You sit down, I’ll get everything.”

“First...” Daphne opened the glass cabinet and found a pair of crystal glasses, the good ones they kept for entertaining.

After John filled their glasses, they clinked them in a toast from him, “To the best darned real estate agency in the world!” which resulted in more giggles from Daphne.

For a few moments they ate in silence, then Daphne sighed and took another sip of wine. “I truly cannot understand what that woman was thinking. As if I would believe for one minute that you would stray.”

“She’s used to getting what she wants and I just hope she’s gone for good. The trouble is she’s nosing around all over the region and, before long, just might find someone who doesn’t see through her.”

“Should we warn the others?”

“Don’t see how we can, love. Not without the risk of a law suit, should she get wind of it. She’s good though. Very clever

at getting a person to see her vision, and it's not a bad vision."

"Just a bad woman. Well, doll, you saw through her and sent her packing back to Melbourne." Daphne stabbed a piece of potato as if it were Ingrid.

John put his hand on hers. "If you hadn't reminded me how much we owe Bryce for his loyalty, then I might have signed something and got us into a lot of trouble. I just want to be sure we'll be comfortable when we retire."

"You did nothing wrong and you never would have. Now, tonight is special and we're going to stop talking about horrible women and start talking about helping Bryce with his next endeavour!"

John smiled and nodded. Talking shop was never old with Daphne. Telling her about Ingrid's attempt to intimidate him today reminded him why he loved her so much. Ingrid was gone, and, like Daphne, he hoped it was for good.



## Chapter Twenty-seven

“Good God, I am happy to be back.” Ingrid sank onto the sofa in Derek’s office. She considered taking off her shoes, but Derek was touchy about things being out of place, so casually draped one leg over another instead.

Through the floor to ceiling windows, Melbourne city stretched out, lights defining the buildings. A sprinkle of rain dotted the glass, not heavy enough to spoil the view. Derek brought over two glasses of brandy. “Here, you deserve this.”

“Yes, I most certainly do, being sent to purgatory for all this time.”

“I would have thought Martin Blake would appeal to you.”

“He does in that primitive, alpha sort of way. But he’d get tiring quickly, so no need to worry.” She smiled very sweetly, then tasted her drink. “This is nice. Civilised. But I thought you wanted me to stay there longer?”

“Not tonight. The best thing is you being very visible here, just on the off-chance anyone suspects your involvement.”

Ingrid covered a yawn. “Sorry, darling. I’m tired. I’ll just come home with you and that way I’ll have a perfect alibi.” She glanced at Derek through partly closed eyelids, a tiny curve on her lips.

“Nope. We’re off to the casino. Between dinner with friends and then a move into the gaming rooms, you’ll be safe from any accusations. Don’t pout. Go home and have a shower and I’ll meet you there in an hour.”

“Fine, but expect me to drink a lot of very expensive champagne.” She leaned over and touched her lips to his. “It’s been hard work dealing with those idiots and if I must go out, then I shall do so in style.”

She started to get up, but Derek’s hand whipped to the back of her neck. “I expect nothing less.” He pressed his mouth against hers, forcing her lips open in a fast, hard kiss. “This will be over soon. Then we’ll book that trip to the Alps.”

\*\*\*

Elizabeth suggested a game of Scrabble after a delicious dinner served in the kitchen. Angus and Christie looked at each other and groaned aloud.

“Well, what about cards then?” Elizabeth frowned.

“No, it’s a great idea! We love Scrabble but we are so competitive and nobody else ever wants to play.” Christie explained. “Angus is the king of unusual words and I like to make things up to delay everything whilst somebody researches to prove me wrong.”

“Well then, I’m sure you won’t mind me joining in and seeing what I can learn.” There was a suspicious glint in her eye.

Half an hour later and trailing behind them both, Christie shook her head. “Always the quiet ones.”

“Sorry, dear?” Elizabeth laid out a particularly difficult word and Angus sighed.

“Nice to see we’re teaching you something.” Christie grumbled.

“Care for a glass of sherry? Or wine perhaps, I seem to remember you enjoy the local chardonnay. It might help.” Elizabeth actually giggled and Christie caught Angus gazing at her with the softest of expressions.

“I’ll go and find alcohol for us all so that Angus and I can drown our sorrows.” Christie headed for the kitchen. Laughter drifted behind her, and she smiled. She found a bottle of wine, a beer she thought Angus would like, and glasses.

Back in the living room, she put them on the table. “Is it my turn yet?”

Angus stood with a bit of effort. “Go, see if you can complicate the situation! I believe I am now coming last.”

“Shall I take it easy on you?” Elizabeth asked with a deadpan expression.

“Yes. Yes, I believe that is an excellent idea.” Angus spoke with such resignation that Christie and Elizabeth burst into laughter. He handed them each a glass of wine, opened the beer and offered a toast. “To f-r-i-e-n-d-s.”

“Ooh, yes!” Elizabeth added, “to g-o-o-d-t-i-m-e-s!”

“Which leaves me to toast to m-e-w-i-n-n-i-n-g.” Christie grinned.

“That’s not how you spell Elizabeth.” Elizabeth stated.

“But it’s how you spell success!”

Angus took his chair again. “In that case, I shall try this word and you may both try to spell it!”

Christie overflowed with happiness. All that was missing was Randall and Martin to have made the evening perfect.

\*\*\*

Martin put down his brush. His watch was in the house and he refused to keep a clock in here so had no idea what time it was. He tried to focus on the watercolour but exhaustion tricked his vision. Too many versions already ripped in two, until he’d spent a few minutes scratching Randall’s tummy, letting the gentle wag of his dog’s tail soothe him. In a better frame of mind, he’d finished the portrait in a few hours.

He knew what the problem was. Bethany Fox being on *Jasmine Sea*. Self-reproach bubbled just below the surface. Instead of controlling the situation, he’d been too concerned about money to keep his integrity, which annoyed the hell out of him. Never again. Instead of worrying about having enough in the bank to cover every future contingency, it was time to trust himself. Trust these hands that didn’t fail him. Trust Christie to love him no matter what.

This could stay here and dry overnight. In the morning, unless there were serious flaws, he would call Bethany about collecting it. Whether it would be fully dry was another matter, but he’d worked with a light touch. Cleaning up the brushes, all he wanted was sleep in soft sheets and drift into a dream as the rain tapped a lullaby. If Christie was here, it would be perfect.

Before turning off the lights, he took a moment to look at the oil he'd shown Christie last night. As if she understood exactly what his vision was, she'd got to the heart of it. Nobody in this world instinctively knew him, yet she had from the very first moment.

"Bedtime, Randall," he said. A very sleepy dog reluctantly got up, stretched, then padded out. The rain was heavier now and Randall dashed for some bushes before catching up with Martin at the house. Something made Martin close and lock the sliding door behind them. He was accustomed to leaving it open, but it was beginning to feel hypocritical to be on Christie's case all the time about locking doors, yet not bothering himself. Once she lived here, he'd insist on more security, so he might as well start now.

\*\*\*

By two a.m. the short-lived storm had moved on and the rain slowed to a drizzle. Cold and stiff from sitting for several hours, Rupert dragged himself out of the car. He'd parked it close to the railway station, backed up into bushes right off the road where he could keep an eye on the cottage.

He grabbed a short crowbar and a pair of gloves from the car boot, then trudged through the muddy ground, past the desolate station and down the cottage driveway. During his visit this morning, he'd scoped his target areas. This wasn't about damaging the cottage, more about scaring Christie. He felt sick about it. She was nice.

He circled the cottage, flashing a narrow light through windows, stopping at the sight of the box in Christie's bedroom. The painting. It was Rupert who'd packed it up and got it shipped here, following Derek's instructions.

Inspection done, Rupert rattled the garage doors. Locked. He slipped one end of the crowbar between the doors and twisted it from side to side until the old lock gave. He pulled the doors closed behind himself.

A few boxes were open. A beautiful clawfoot bath became the first casualty with a few hard swings of the crowbar. Shards flew in every direction, one hitting Rupert's cheek.

“Goddammit!” He dropped the crowbar, grabbed a handkerchief from a pocket, and cautiously wiped blood away. Once the bleeding stopped, he retrieved the tool, angry. More careful now, he wrenched the door off the dryer and the lid from the washing machine, knocking some huge dents into each appliance for good measure.

He ignored the enclosed boxes. Instead, he uncovered a container full of accessories. Fittings, wall mounts, screws. Lifting it high up, he turned it over, spilling the contents right across the floor. That would do. Enough damage to put fear into someone living alone.

Outside, he leaned against the doors and lit a cigarette with shaking hands. His face hurt. She didn't deserve this, the woman with emerald eyes. No matter what she'd done to Derek, it was becoming a joke. No more. From now on, he'd find a way to avoid this sort of job. That resolved, he tossed the butt away and left.

\*\*\*

From across the gaming room, Derek contemplated Ingrid. She might have been tired in his office, but a decent meal and copious champagne had revitalised her. She was stunning in her tight short dress and stilettos. Red hair suited her. Men wanted her and women wanted to be her. Pity she wasn't a little more... amiable. Still, she had her purpose and was an asset.

The small group she was in split up but one man stayed, leaning very close to her, his body language clear. Ingrid smiled and whispered something in his ear, her hand on his arm. He pulled back abruptly with a scowl. Without looking back, Ingrid tottered across to Derek.

He met her halfway. “Having fun? Making friends?”

“Stupid, bad smelling—”

“I get the picture. You can't expect men to leave you alone. And anyway, you enjoy leading them on, only to kick them in the guts on whim.”



“Right. I think there’s a compliment in there. So, can we go yet? I’m finally done with champagne and have a lot to do in the morning.”

“It is the morning. Almost three actually and yes, we can leave.” He lowered his voice. “Rupert just called and it’s done.”

“Then we’ve got to be ready to move. Is he back at his motel? I might call him.”

Derek took her arm. “Let’s go. Let him be.” They sauntered out, making sure they spoke to acquaintances on the way. “We’ll have breakfast at seven, okay? Go home and sleep and then we’ll work on the next move.”

She curved her lips. “Who needs sleep, darling?”

“I do. Actually, so do you. Thank me in the morning.”

He could never tell if she was amused or irritated when he rejected her, not even after all this time. But he knew she loved being kept at arm’s length until it suited him. She loved it.



## Chapter Twenty-eight

The Marine Licence test was booked for eight-thirty, just as VicRoads opened for the day in Green Bay. Although she'd studied and practised, Christie couldn't sit still as she waited, jiggling her feet until the woman behind the counter glared at her. Martin had sent her a text message just after dawn. *You'll ace this, sweetheart. Call me when you're back.*

She'd switched the phone off after sitting down. This meant so much to her, not just for the yacht but as a measure of how far her relationship with the ocean had improved. Deep water still scared her so very much, but now she had techniques to distract her from thinking about it too much. Of course, when Martin was around, he was all the distraction she required.

“Miss Ryan?”

Christie jumped up. A man beckoned from a door to one side of the counter. This was it!

\*\*\*

The insistent ringing of his phone stirred Rupert from a deep sleep. He pushed it away and the noise stopped. He turned over, dragging blankets with him. It rang again. A bleary glance at the bedside clock reminded him Derek wanted to do a conference call with Ingrid at seven. Two hours ago.

“Okay, okay.”

“I've rung you half a dozen times, Rupert!”

“Man, I've had hardly any sleep. I'm awake now.”

“You've had more sleep than me, so pull yourself together and listen. You get yourself ready from a call from Christie, or the agent. If you don't hear anything by this afternoon, go and find out why.”

“Huh? Like just rock up at the cottage? Hey there, Christie. So, feel like selling now I've smashed your stuff up?”

“Just remember who pays your wage.” The steel edge in Derek's voice cut through the last bit of sleep haze.

“Yeah, dude, I know.” Rupert swung his feet out of the bed. “Sorry, boss. Just damned tired.”

“Have a shower, have some coffee. But make sure your phone is charged and with you every minute. Hang around town. Get the gossip. You’ll find an opening if it comes to that but this is the best chance we have to strike.”

“Will do. I’ll come up with something. Maybe I can go help clean up.”

“Yes, take her some chocolates. Be careful, Rupert.”

“I’m not stupid. Is there anything else?”

“I’ll be waiting for your call.” Derek hung up.

“*I’ll be waiting for your call,*” Rupert mimicked. “Don’t hold your breath, boss.”

\*\*\*

Christie drove into her street, still buzzing at passing the test. Her heart jumped seeing a police car on the verge outside the cottage. She pulled over, grabbed her bag, and almost flew down the driveway. *Is someone hurt?* The garage doors were propped open and Barry’s team stood around, looking in. Was Barry okay? Her legs wouldn’t carry her fast enough.

“Christie. Good, you got my message.” Barry came around the corner of the cottage and Christie slid to a stop. “Message? No, I haven’t checked. Why are the police here?”

Barry put his hand on Christie’s arm. “Afraid there was a break-in overnight.”

“Break-in! Who? I mean, what happened?”

“Somebody forced the doors open then decided to would be fun to smash some appliances. It’s a big mess in there, but once Trev is done fingerprinting, we’ll clean up and see what is salvageable.”

Christie stared at Barry. It didn’t make sense. Vandalism? Who would do such a thing? “I need to see.”

“Let Trev finish up, then I’ll show you. There’s stuff all over the floor. Sounds like Martin’s arrived.”

“Martin?” The rumble of the motorcycle reached Christie.

“I rang him after leaving you a message. Thought you’d be there.” Barry returned to the garage and Christie ran down the driveway.

Martin was barely off the motorcycle when she threw herself at him. His arms closed around her, strong and comforting.

“I’ve got you.” He squeezed her tightly. “At least everyone is okay.”

Head against his chest, she nodded. “But why?”

“We’ll try to find out. Come on, Trev’s winding up.”

Senior Constable Trevor Sibbritt nodded to Martin and extended his hand to Christie. “Nice to see you again. Shame to have this happen, particularly when you’re working so hard to bring the old girl back to life.”

“Um, thanks.” Christie tried to smile. She’d only met Trev a few times. First at Martha and Thomas’ wedding, and then just passing hellos in town. He spent a lot of time on the road, covering several inland towns as well as River’s End.

“Any ideas?” Martin asked.

“Bored kids. An attempted theft gone wrong. I got fingerprints but bet they belong to Barry and his men. Nothing on the lock or the doors.”

“They were locked?”

Christie shot a glance at Martin. Did he think she’d let this happen? She’d checked every lock last night. Hadn’t she? Doubt crept in. *Of course I did.*

“Sure was. Crowbar job, I reckon. Odd thing is, they didn’t have a crack at the cottage.”

“So maybe they wanted the appliances, but for whatever reason, couldn’t get them out and went on a vandalism spree.” Martin suggested.

Trev picked up his case. “Dunno. Something doesn’t sit right. And it’s not as if you’ve had trouble up here.” He looked

at Christie. “Nothing out of the ordinary? Strangers or cars hanging around?”

*Oh, no.*

“Christie?” Martin squeezed her hand and she turned worried eyes to him.

“I’m going to apologise in advance. There’s something I need to tell you both.”

\*\*\*

In the kitchen, Christie, Martin and Trev sat around the table. Trev wrote lots of notes and Martin stared at Christie. She felt his eyes boring into her. His response to her confession about believing someone was here the other night was silence. He’d drawn his breath in when she admitted there was a window left unlocked. *I’m in so much trouble.*

“Christie, what makes you think this Rupert is above board? Do you know anything else about him?”

“Not really. He just didn’t strike me as suspicious. A bit absent-minded and not very prepared for his trip, I guess. Daphne Jones might have some insight. I believe she’s met him more than once.”

“Okay. I’ll go see her next. If you think of anything else, call.” On his feet now, Trev offered his hand to Christie. “We don’t get much crime around here. Be assured I’ll find the perpetrators and bring them to justice.”

It was a big statement, but Christie shook his hand and smiled, her heart pounding as he left, leaving her alone with... well, the man she loved.

The silence dragged on whilst Christie watched her fingers trace an old line in the table.

Barry stuck his head in. “Boys will have it safe to come in shortly.”

“Thanks, Barry. We’ll be out there in a few moments.” Martin’s voice was mild. Christie knew that tone.

“We need to talk,” Martin got to his feet and held a hand out. She finally peeked at him, and wished she hadn’t when she saw his disappointment. She took his hand.

“Dining room.” He headed that way with her hand held firmly in his.

He shut the door behind them. The room was empty, except for the two straight-backed timber chairs that had been here when she moved in. They caught her attention. Why had just two chairs been left by the previous tenant? Her mind wanted to go somewhere else.

Martin released her hand and leaned against the door, arms folded.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you but I—”

“But you didn’t want me to know you’d left a window unlocked. And you’d never have told me had this not happened. Correct?”

“I thought I’d imagined the whole thing, the smell of perfume and the moved satchel. Why would I bother you with something that probably wasn’t real?”

He stared at her.

“Okay, yes. Once I found the window unlocked, I didn’t want to say anything. I’ve been trying to be more aware of security and it shocked me to find the clip undone. I didn’t want to disappoint you,” the words tumbled over each other, “or make you think I wasn’t listening. Because I was and I agree that the cottage needs to be locked and I even came back last night and know I locked the garage—”

Martin took one of Christie’s hands. “Shh. I know you did. But, sweetheart, when will you ever trust me?” Frustration underpinned his words. “It doesn’t matter if you need to admit a mistake, God, we all make them! We will deal with it.”

“You’re disappointed in me.”

“You keep pushing me away.”

“I’m not!”

“You are.” He released her hand. “We need to look at the damage and give the boys a hand cleaning up.” Still, he didn’t move.

All Christie wanted was for him to hold her, kiss her. Even tell her off. Anything other than this exasperation filling his voice and his face. “I am sorry.”

“Forget it.” He stepped aside, opening the door. “As you said the other night, you don’t need to be told what to do.”

A cold chill swept through Christie. “Martin?”

“Let’s go.” He gestured for her to leave first and his now stony expression gave away nothing. Nothing except his refusal to discuss this further.





## Chapter Twenty-nine

By the time Christie and Martin reached the garage, most of the mess was cleaned up. One of Barry's men sifted through a pile of screws, parts, and small fittings. Another inspected each appliance for damage. Barry frowned as he tapped on his iPad.

Christie hesitated at the door. The clawfoot bath was beyond repair, its porcelain and acrylic interior shattered and the feet broken. With massive dents in the washing machine and dryer, and parts ripped off, they too looked destined for the scrap heap. She watched Martin speak to Barry as if from a great distance. Her stomach churned and, in spite of the warm sun, she shivered.

*I can't lose you.* Christie covered her mouth to suppress a sob. Tears threatened and she slipped away. Through the open gate in the back garden, past the vegetable beds, running until she dropped onto the grass beneath a fruit tree.

She closed her eyes and let the silence wash over her. Christie concentrated on each breath, following its path through her body until gently exhaling. She curled her fingers into the long grass, connecting to the earth through their soft strands. Bit by bit, the panic retreated. Her eyes opened. From here, the back of the garage was just visible behind trees. If she listened carefully, voices drifted across.

She'd have to go back. Talk to Barry and find out what to do next. Move back in for a start, to prevent this happening again. Except, it hadn't stopped someone entering the cottage, touching things, spraying her perfume. Was someone watching her? Was this Derek's doing?

Arms tightly wrapped around herself, Christie thought it through. One quick phone call. Why did you send the painting? Five minutes conversation for peace of mind about the break-in. Martin said he'd handle it, but sending a solicitor's letter might not get the answers they needed, if any at all. With Martin already upset with her, what difference would it make?

The shivering returned and she held herself more tightly. *He'll understand.* She knew it wasn't true. Tears trickled down her cheeks and she buried her head in her arms.

\*\*\*

Martin went into the cottage to find Christie. Her handbag sat on the kitchen table, but no Christie. When she'd told Trev someone might have been in the cottage, anger and fear flooded him. What if she'd walked in on them? No more coming home at night alone. Hell, no more living here. *Let me protect you.*

He followed the path to the orchard. His gut felt like he'd been kicked ever since realising she was still holding herself back from him. Trust and respect. With them, they could face anything together. Without them... well, the thought scared him.

*There you are.* Under the tree, arms wrapped around her drawn up legs, her head rested on her knees. Martin caught his breath. He wanted to kiss and comfort her, and paddle her behind all at the same time. Get through to her that she never had to fear losing him. She was not his follower or submissive but his equal, except if there was danger. At this moment though, his self-control remained tenuous.

"Are you okay?" He spoke softly. Her head shot up, eyes red and cheeks streaked with drying tears. He squatted down and brushed back a strand of her hair.

"Sorry, I just needed a moment."

"Take all the time you want. Do you want me to leave?"

"No! I mean, please don't leave me."

Martin's resolve almost melted away. He joined her on the grass. "Barry is ordering replacements as we speak. The insurance should cover a lot of the damage."

Christie nodded.

"Did you pass?"

"Oh. Yes."

“I’m proud of you.” He smiled and she managed a flick of her lips in response. “We’ll talk about *Jasmine Sea* another time. Okay?”

Her lips turned down. Did she think he meant forever?  
“Christie—”

“It’s okay. I understand and really, I shouldn’t have a boat anyway. I’d sink it or something.”

“You wouldn’t sink it, silly.” Martin stood up. “Let’s go.”

“You’re angry with me.”

“No. But I need to think.” He held out a hand and after a second, she took it. He hauled her onto her feet. “Give it time.”

Her eyes were wide and her lips invited his but he meant what he said. Until he knew what was going on in her head, and his, he would wait. No more mistakes.

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Word of the break-in spread quickly. By the time Christie returned to Palmerston House, Elizabeth and Angus were locking the front door, ready to go to the cottage.

“Christie! Are you okay, dear?” Elizabeth held her arms open as Christie stepped onto the verandah. “We were so worried!”

“I’m fine. Just a bit shaken.” She returned Elizabeth’s hug. “There’s a fair bit of damage inside the garage.”

“Thank goodness you were staying here last night.” Angus put an arm around Christie’s shoulders.

“I don’t know.”

As she unlocked the front door, Elizabeth glanced at Christie in surprise. “Do you think you would have stopped them? But that would have been so dangerous.”

“Or maybe they wouldn’t have tried. The cottage being deserted might have encouraged them.”

“But we don’t have any crime here!” Elizabeth went inside. “Not for years, and even then it was from outsiders.”

Christie hid a grin. Everyone not living here for at least twenty years was considered an outsider. She got away with it because her family once owned half the town, but people like Rupert and his family would be regarded with suspicion until they proved otherwise.

“I shall put the kettle on, dear, and you can fill us in on the details.”

“First I just need to dash upstairs. Trev’s dropping by soon to dust some of my stuff.”

“I thought you said only the garage was damaged?” Angus closed the door behind them.

“There’s a slight chance someone may have been in the cottage the other night. No wait.” She took both their hands as they gasped. “I wasn’t there, but a couple of things were moved and Trev wants to see if there are fingerprints.”

“But how did they get in?” Angus asked.

Christie released their hands. “Please don’t overreact. There was an unlocked window and—”

“Christie!”

“I know, I’ve been told already.”

“Well, as long as Martin has things under control, I’m sure you won’t do it again,” Elizabeth slipped her arm through Angus’. “Let her go upstairs and we’ll make some tea.” She tugged at his arm gently, and although he had plenty more to say, he sighed and went with her.

Christie didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Angus wanted to tell her off and Elizabeth assumed Martin already had. Why wouldn’t she? Everyone seemed to believe she and Martin were going to make things official. Problem was, Martin didn’t share this view. And after this morning, probably never would.

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Randall trailed Martin around the house, then across the grass to the studio. Only ever a few steps behind, he wagged his tail hopefully when they headed outside, glancing at the path to the beach. When Martin went the other way, he picked up his frisbee and trotted after him.

Inside the studio, Martin stood before the watercolour of Bethany. It was dry enough to hand over and he wanted that more than anything.

Despite his mood, the artist in him was satisfied with the portrait. Watercolour suited the subject of a woman on a boat, the sun highlighting her red hair, and the green backdrop of the rugged bush in soft hues. Her eyes were cold. But he painted the truth, not some diluted version. Bethany was a cold woman who manufactured warmth. Whether she'd recognise it in the portrait made no difference to him.

Thirst drove him to the fridge and he chuckled seeing Randall sitting on his bed, frisbee dangling from his mouth. "Soon, mate." He stopped to scratch the dog's head. "We'll go for a swim a bit later."

Water in hand, Martin stood for a while, staring at nothing. Only a few months ago, his days were filled with his beloved work, punctuated with time on the beach and evenings back in the studio. Painting from his heart and subconscious, building exquisite timber pieces, and occasional stints mentoring youngsters who'd lost their way, were all he needed. That and Randall, and Thomas of course. Straightforward, predictable, unemotional.

Until Christie burst into his life and shone a light on the deep, abiding loneliness he'd buried since the day his parents died. She'd rattled his world and shown him exactly what was missing, filling that emptiness with love.

She would be safe here. With him and Randall, Christie would never have fear in her eyes again, as he'd seen at the cottage. Whatever resolve he'd had to keep his distance was rapidly disappearing.

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The last thing Christie felt like doing was venturing out of her room, but Daphne's cheery text message reminding her of their lunch date gave her little option. Once Trev left, hopeful he had some good prints to check, she'd headed to the café on foot.

The day now lay in ruins. The ruins of her relationship with the cottage, and with Martin. Her fault entirely. She tried to ignore the stone in her stomach as she neared the café

A sign in the window of the hairdressing salon caught her eye and she wandered closer to read it. *Business for sale. Enquire within.* What was the point? If she couldn't work things out with Martin, then River's End would no longer hold any attraction.

This upcoming trip to Auckland would open new doors in her own industry again. Christie's heart raced so fast she had to put a hand onto the window to steady herself. The idea of going back to what once was a challenging and fulfilling career suddenly sounded like a prison from which she would never escape.





## Chapter Thirty

Unlike Christie, who loved to drive with the car's top down, Ingrid detested the inevitable mess the wind made of her hair and make-up. It was bad enough returning to the backward little town without having to make herself presentable the moment she arrived. Instead, she played classical music and had the air conditioning turned up high.

Just after Green Bay, the Porsche caught up with a familiar, much slower sedan, cigarette smoke wafting from the partly open driver's window. Ingrid dialled Rupert. Twice, because he clearly didn't want to talk to her.

"What is it?" He finally answered.

"For a start, get that pile of junk out of my way."

"Go past."

"If you hadn't noticed, there are hairpin corners all the way along here."

"And?"

"And you are forgetting your place. People like you are dispensable." She almost spat the words.

"Oops. Sorry, ma'am. Was there any other reason for the call?"

*I'd like to run you off the edge of the cliff.* "Why are you going to River's End? Has she called you?"

"No, Christie hasn't, but I expect she will. Might as well be close by to seal the deal. And why are you here?"

If anything, the sedan slowed even more and Ingrid continually had her foot on the brake. "God, can you go any faster? And what I'm doing is none of your business."

"Well, it sure was nice catching up then."

"Wait." Ingrid scowled. "If you're going to be in town, I might have something for you to do. Later."

“I’m shocked. Remember I’m happily married with a bubba on the way.”

“Remember I’m behind you and just might give in to my desire... to see the back of your car sinking under the waves. No woman in their right mind would marry you, Rupert, let alone have your devil-child.”

He snickered. “You know you want me. Hey, you’re a bit too close. Back off, okay?”

The road forked and both cars took the left turn, off the Great Ocean Road. “You go do what it is you do. I’m going to see Martin Blake and stir things up. In the unlikely event I fail, you might need to repeat last night’s events, but in his studio.”

Ahead, the River’s End sign signalled a reduced speed limit. If Rupert drove any slower, his car would stall. They passed the road to the cottage, then went down the hill to town. “Are you there?”

“Damaging whitegoods is one thing. Valuable art quite another. If I got caught—”

“Well, don’t. His ridiculous scribbles cannot be worth much except to hurt him. If I have to, I’ll chase both of them out of this town.”

“I’m stopping just up here. Do you want to continue this face-to-face?”

“Are you insane? Just keep your phone on and let me know if you hear from her.”

“From Christie? I dare you to say her name.”

Ingrid jabbed the disconnect button. The sedan indicated and pulled into a parking spot near a bakery. She drove past, ignoring Rupert’s wave and turning onto the road to Martin’s house.

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“But, lovely, you’ve got to put yourself first. Such a dangerous world it’s becoming.” Daphne dabbed tears from her eyes with a handkerchief. She hadn’t touched her lunch since finding out about the break-in.

“Please, please don’t be so upset,” Christie reached across the table to pat Daphne’s hand. “I was never at risk. I’m sure it’s just one of those random things and there’ll be no repeat.”

“Isn’t it time you sell? No, don’t frown, give it some thought. Surely Martin would rather you move in with him and after all,” she lowered her voice, “I’m convinced he has a proposal on his mind.”

Christie had no answer. He’d told her to give it time. Again. It reminded her of when she’d admitted to reading Thomas’ love letters. Furious, Martin had walked away from Christie and she’d thought she’d lost him forever.

“Besides,” Daphne continued with a smile. “That young man Rupert is all ready to buy, so it’s not like having to list it.”

“Oh, you need to know Trev will drop by to ask about Rupert. He is following up all possibilities.”

“My goodness, the young man is all about his family, not damaging whitegoods!”

“Daphne, I don’t know what to do. Thomas and Martha will be home soon and I wanted to give them the cottage, all perfect and ready for their life together.” Her voice caught and she looked at her own plate, just as untouched as Daphne’s. “This sets things back.”

“But do you really want them living there now?”

Christie’s eyes flew up. “Why not?”

“What if this break-in is the first of many? There could be someone coming into the area looking for trouble. Even one of our own. Your little cottage is isolated and it’s not like those two are getting any younger. They might be better going into the new estate.”

“No offence, but it’s like a city suburb up there.”

“Fair enough. Actually, I don’t know if I’ll ever step foot up there again after what that dreadful woman tried to do in one of the empty houses!” Daphne stabbed little holes into the top of her pie with a fork.

“What woman? Oh, was this something to do with John rushing in yesterday? He looked upset.”

“He was! She tried to blackmail him into something but he stood up to her and sent her packing. Nobody messes with my John.” Smiling proudly, Daphne finally took a mouthful of lunch, not seeing Christie’s mouth drop open.

“Who? And why, I mean, what on earth happened, Daphne? Blackmail?”

“This woman tricked John into meeting her twice in secluded spots, to try and get him to turn his back on the arrangement we have with Bryce Montgomery. When he refused, she threatened to tell me they were having an affair!”

An icy chill gripped Christie. “What’s her name?”

“Hmm? I don’t actually know. John refuses to say another word about it.”

“Then, what does she look like? Short, platinum hair? Anything.”

Mouth full again, Daphne shook her head and shrugged.

Christie’s hands shook. It had to be Ingrid. What was she playing at now? And was she behind the break-in?

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Martin’s plans for a swim went on hold with a text message from Bethany Fox. *There in ten minutes.* After sending a confused Randall into the house, he closed the sliding door. He’d make it up to him soon.

Back in the studio, Martin again checked the watercolour for dryness. He’d built a narrow, lightweight box to protect it. As long as Bethany liked it, all would be good. If she didn’t, she could have her money back. No more working for her or anyone else.

“Hello, darling!” Ingrid wandered in without knocking and went straight to the portrait. With barely a glance at it, she nodded. “Wonderful job. Clearly you are not the typical abstract artist.”

“I don’t understand.”

She fluttered her eyelashes at him, moving closer. “Most of them work from chaos. The scribblings of a disorganised mind. But not you.”

*Why does that sound familiar?* “I’ll box it up. Just make sure it is properly handled, particularly if being flown.”

“Sure.” Her voice was bored. “When will you start on the oil painting?”

Martin took the watercolour to the box. He lowered the lid and jumped as Ingrid’s hand ran up his back.

“You didn’t answer.”

“Very well.” He stepped away, deliberate about widening the gap between them. “This watercolour is it, no more portraits.”

“Why? We have an arrangement.” Her face reddened and her tone sharpened.

“And I’ll return your deposit, less the cost of this. Your mother is going to love it.”

Ingrid wandered to one of the windows. “I don’t want my money back, Martin. I’d like to increase my payment and take you with me.”

Martin picked up the box. “Bethany, I’ll carry this out for you.”

“You see, my mother isn’t long for this world. I need you to paint her. Paint us both, together with my father. In England.” She turned around, her face grave. “I’m quite serious and frankly, I have the money to pay whatever you ask.”

“There are hundreds, thousands of artists in England. Good ones, better than me.”

“But they are not you. Please, Martin, please do this.” Ingrid swayed back to him, stopping within arm’s length. “Name your price and I’ll make it happen.”

Martin stared at Ingrid, at the near-grief and desperation in her face. Then at her eyes. Cold, hard eyes. “I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?” She almost snarled. “You’ll be a fool to refuse.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Then he remembered. The garage, with Christie.

She’d admitted defending Martin to Derek and Ingrid, even though she barely knew him then. Eyes full of fire, Christie had spoken with quiet anger. “Ingrid said abstract art is the work of a disorganised mind and I pointed out you have the one of the most logical, intelligent minds I know.”

Martin put the box down. “What the hell do you want, *Ingrid?*”

She gasped.

“I knew there was something wrong from the beginning. You tell me now what this whole thing is about.”

Ingrid glared at him. “Think what you will. I’ve done nothing wrong, just commissioned a painting.”

“Why? What is your motive? If you’re after—”

“What do you think your little princess will do when she finds out we’re involved?”

“She won’t believe you. Remember, Ingrid, she’s seen you in action before.”

“And look what happened. No more engagement, or apartment, or career. I have a way of getting what I want.”

“Get out.” Martin grabbed the box and forced it into her arms. “Leave.”

With a shrug, she walked away. At the door she paused and looked back with a smirk. “She was never yours and before this week is through you’ll have lost her. Her place is still with Derek, as pathetic as it is.”

Martin strode across the floor but she slipped through the door and disappeared. He slammed it behind her and dropped into a squat, hands pressed against his eyes.

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Almost turning an ankle on the grass in her hurry, Ingrid swore and took off her shoes. How had he worked out her identity? Thank God Derek had insisted she spend last night in the city. No way to pin the break-in on her. No, she was safe – at least, once she got to her car she would be. For all she knew, he might set the dog on her.

At the gate, she glanced back. Damn him. Damn Christie and, mostly, damn Derek. She didn't want him, but she hated losing. Anything.

With all her strength, she threw the box toward the cliff. It hit the ground with a satisfying smash and bounced almost to the edge. She wanted to kick it over, send it into the ocean to rot. Except now she could hear the Lotus.

Flying into her car, Ingrid prayed she could get to the fork before Christie did. No point making things worse for herself at this point. Throwing it into gear, she forced the accelerator down.





# Chapter Thirty-one

The Porsche drove down the hill toward Christie. She slowed a fraction to give herself the best chance of a good look at the driver. Before she was close enough to see, the other car took a sharp turn and accelerated past Palmerston House.

Now what? She could hardly follow. For a second, she imagined the two sports cars in a thriller, a movie where she was hunting down the criminal. *Another time*. She continued toward the cliff top instead. There were things Martin needed to know.

She parked, got out, and locked the car. Never again would she fail to lock anything. That was one of her resolutions. Inside the gate, her eyes, as always, wandered to the vast ocean. It felt like ages since she'd been down on the beach for more than a shortcut. Randall barked, taking her attention. He galloped across the grass, tail high with excitement and she met him halfway.

"Hello, gorgeous boy." She stroked his velvet ears when he finally stopped circling her. "Where's Dad?"

"Don't know about 'Dad', but I'm here." Martin called.

Christie and Randall almost ran into him as they went around the corner. He steadied Christie then, holding her arms, studied her face.

"You look so worried. Is everything okay?" Christie's heart sank.

"Had the other car gone when you arrived?"

"Yes, it turned off in a huge rush heading toward the estate. Why?"

"There's something I have to tell you. Let's sit." Martin led her to the deck. "You sit." He leaned against the house.

Christie dropped onto the top step. "I know you want to tell me something, but I need to ask about your client and I'm sorry if it's out of line. Daphne had some problems with a woman, well, John did. She's a property developer and

threatened to tell Daphne they were having an affair if he didn't agree to help her. What?"

Martin's hands were clenched. His eyes were impossible to read. "Go on."

"Daphne doesn't know anything about this woman apart from her deceitfulness, oh and that she dresses provocatively. It just made me wonder..."

"You think Bethany Fox is Ingrid."

Christie nodded. "I'm sorry, it's so stupid of me. Forget I said anything." Martin's expression was so stern. She'd made a dreadful mistake. Again.

Martin crouched down in front of her and put a hand on either side of her face. "You are right, sweetheart."

"What!"

"She came to get her watercolour and something she said stuck with me. I finally remembered a conversation you'd recited and I called her out on it. It was Ingrid, and God, I'm so sorry."

Christie's face paled. Martin stood up and drew her into his arms, holding her as if he'd never let go. "I'm so sorry I let her back into your life."

"How is it your fault?" Her voice was muffled and he loosened his arms. "She's an insidious person and must hate me with a vengeance."

"She has some problems. We're going to give Trev a call, okay?"

"And I need to fill in Daphne and John. Make sure they warn the other real estate agents in the area. What made you suspicious?"

"Doesn't matter," Martin released Christie. "Come on, we'll ring Trev now."

His face was stern, a vein pulsing in his neck. *What did Ingrid do?* Would she never be free of this woman?

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Parked in the back street of the estate, Ingrid tried to tune out Derek's voice as he yelled at her. How Martin had worked out her identity was a mystery, but now he had, it was time to mop up.

Eventually, he stopped yelling. She waited a moment to be sure.

“Are you still there, Ingrid?”

“Yes.”

“Well? What have you got to say?”

“Do you want her back?”

“What does Chris have to do with this?”

“I've never heard you so angry and I'm sure it isn't out of concern that I might end up in jail. So, is it because she won't believe anything about me and Martin?”

“No. Yes, but only because you were convinced you could break them up. One more way to secure the cottage, or so you insisted. Yet here we are with no phone call from Rupert and you blowing any chance of working with John Jones. What's worse, Ingrid,” he raised his voice again, “my name will get dragged through the mud with yours.”

“Oh, calm down! It isn't nearly that bad and there is a lot still to play out. First of all, what have I done wrong? The fact Martin Blake is virtually engaged to your ex is enough reason for me – a person she hates, wanting a portrait by that artist – to avoid unpleasantness by using another name. Secondly—”

“What do you mean, virtually engaged?”

“They are an item, darling. He's like some Neanderthal when it comes to protecting her and she, well, she just swoons when he looks her way.”

“Shut up.”

Ingrid smiled. “I'm sorry, that was out of line.” Her tone was soft and apologetic. “I'm just upset and a little bit scared at the moment.”

“You? Scared? Let's just focus on what we do next.”

“I need some guidance from you, Derek.”

He sighed. “Come home. There’s little point staying anyway, so get yourself back here and we’ll sit down with the legal team. Just in case.”

“I’ll be there in a couple of hours, thank you.”

“Whatever.”

“Derek, wait. I’m going to get you that cottage and land. Don’t give up on me yet.”

“You do and this mess will all go away. I’ll make it go away, no matter what I have to do.” He hung up.

Ingrid didn’t move. She could be on a plane to London within hours. Reunite with Leon, the husband she’d barely spoken to in months. He’d whisk her away somewhere where this little problem didn’t exist. *Not yet*. She had unfinished business here.

\*\*\*

Martin paced around the kitchen as he spoke to Trev by phone. On a stool at the counter, Christie longed to lean against him and close her eyes. She wished this day was behind her, along with its revelations and problems.

“You look ready to fall asleep.” Martin finished the call and now half-smiled at Christie. “Do you want coffee?”

“Do you think I should sell the cottage?”

“Where did that come from?” He wandered around to sit on a stool beside her. “Is this because of the break-in?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. What if Thomas and Martha don’t want it, or should they even live there? It is so isolated.”

Martin burst into laughter.

“But it is!”

“Sorry, sweetheart. Not laughing at you, but please remember Thomas has a house halfway up a mountain, with no shops or neighbours for miles. And Martha’s place in

Ireland doesn't sound particularly populated. Why not see what they think?"

"But what if they don't? I've got someone who wants to buy it now and that way I can just finish fixing it up and move on."

"Where?"

"Where what? Oh, move where?" Christie bit her lip.

"Are you planning on moving back to Melbourne?"

Her eyes shot up to his. "No, I want to live in River's End. Just forget I said anything... I'm tired and rambling at the moment." Her expression pleaded for him to let it go.

"Would you like to rest for a bit? I can take Randall out."

She smiled. "I'm okay, thank you. What did Trev say?"

Martin returned to the kitchen and got coffee cups out. "He is very interested in chatting to Ingrid. Still too soon for any fingerprint results, which might take a few days. He'd also like to see us both for a formal statement and he'll catch up with John."

Christie checked her watch. "I have to see Barry before he leaves."

"Let's go to the beach later. I'll bring some food and we can sit on the sand and watch the sunset. Have a swim if you like."

"Yes. Yes, please." Then, she frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know that I really want to go back to work."

"It will only be for a short time." Martin brought their coffee around. "Let's have this, then I'm going shopping."

\*\*\*

"It's too risky. Aren't you in enough trouble?" Rupert tossed a cigarette butt out of the window and watched a breeze roll it from the car park into the graveyard.

“Not your concern.” Ingrid’s voice through the hands-free phone lost none of its coldness. “But the best way to put them off the scent is with another few break-ins and there’s no reason to wait until the middle of the night.”

“Jeez, are you determined for me to get caught? And before you give me some sarcasm, don’t think for one minute I’ll be quiet about it. I go down, so will you. And Derek Hobbs.” He grabbed another cigarette.

“Calm down, Rupert. Nobody is getting caught and you won’t be stealing anything. Think of it as a bit of a shake-up. After all, people need a reminder at times that they have it good. Anyway, you’re already getting a ridiculously high bonus so stop complaining and do your job.”

“Fine. Where exactly do you want me to start then? I can’t very well spend days casing the town.”

“There are three houses I have in mind. One isn’t even occupied, up at the estate. Half the furniture is there but no people. It’s on the back road. Number thirty-eight.”

“Then?”

“Then phone me and I’ll send you to the next one. As long as it’s before five, you’ll get in and out without being interrupted. So be quick with the first one.” She hung up.

Rupert swore and tossed his half-finished smoke out. “Bitch.”



## Chapter Thirty-two

Hands full with a tower of cake boxes, Sylvia pushed the door open with her hip. The top box slid and she almost lost the lot trying to save it. Daphne caught it and giggled.

“Good thing I looked up when I did! Whatever have you got here?” She put the box onto the counter and helped Sylvia.

“I’ve been thinking about what happened up at the cottage. Thought those boys helping out up there deserved a little something for having to clean up that vandal’s work. And Christie might need a cheer up.”

Daphne threw her arms around Sylvia. “You generous woman! What a lovely idea.”

“Thanks.” Sylvia mumbled, extricating herself from Daphne’s embrace. “Thought I might drive up there in a bit. If you’d like to come, of course.”

“Do I have time to run home and pick up some of John’s home brew? I’m sure he won’t mind sharing his beer given the circumstances.”

“Can I leave these here, then? I wouldn’t mind freshening up before going.”

Daphne regarded Sylvia with interest. With her hair in its customary messy bun and a flour covered apron, Sylvia was just... Sylvia. Unless it was because Barry Parks was overseeing the renovation?

“Daphne?” Sylvia interrupted her thoughts. “I said I’ll be back in an hour if that’s enough time?”

“Yes. Yes, of course. I’ll just let John know and then I’ll pop to the house. Shouldn’t take long at all.” Daphne moved the boxes to her desk behind the taller counter. Wouldn’t want someone coming along and taking them. There’d been quite enough crime for one day in the town.

\*\*\*

Christie was surprised to see Trev’s police car parked near the Lotus outside Martin’s gate. Trev was near the cliff’s edge,



taking photographs of something on the ground, so she changed direction to join him. It was a thin box with one side ripped off. Within the box was a watercolour painting.

“Trev?”

“Oh, Christie. I thought I’d drop by and catch you both here. This caught my eye.”

“Where was it?”

“Here. Looks like someone threw it with some force. Bounced a bit, I’d say.”

“That’s her. Ingrid Kauffman.” Christie stared at the face in the painting. Although her hair was now red, those unmistakable eyes stared back. Martin had such talent. He’d captured her coldness perfectly. No wonder he’d felt something was wrong.

“This is the painting Martin did?” Trev straightened up.

“She must have hated it.”

“Sounds as though she didn’t actually want it. All a ruse. Looks like she’s on a boat.”

“That’s Willow Bay.” Why there? Which boat would Martin use because there was no way he’d take some strange woman onto... *but it is*. The beautiful timber surrounds and silver railing gave it away. Ice cold tentacles crept through Christie’s veins until they reached her heart, wrapping themselves around it and extinguishing the warmth. Martin took Ingrid to *Jasmine Sea. My boat*.

“Ah, yes I can see that now. Must have taken hours.”

“I’ve got to go.”

“You can’t stay and let me interview you now?” Trev picked up the box at an angle, to keep the painting from falling out. “Are you feeling okay? You look pale.”

“I’ve got to go.” She backed away, then spun toward the gate.

“Hey, wait up. Christie, let’s go to the house.”

She shook her head without looking back. “I’m okay. Just a long day. I’ll drop in to see you soon.” *Please let me go.* Her feet quickened until she reached the gate. From here she saw Trev stride toward the house. In a minute, Martin would come looking for her.

At the car she grabbed the door handle. Locked. She almost turned her bag upside down before remembering her keys were in her pocket. The door opened this time and she threw herself in. With a roar, the motor started.

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Head in the fridge, Martin heard the Lotus power down the road. He glanced at Randall, who stood staring at the sliding door. “Sounds like she’s in a rush. Lie down, mate.”

Instead, Randall trotted to the door as Trev tapped on it. “Martin?”

“In the kitchen.”

Trev dropped the box on the counter. “Found this just along the cliff top. That’s her – Ingrid or Bethany?”

“Please tell me Christie didn’t see it.”

“Umm...”

Martin swore.

“Sorry, mate. Didn’t see her coming and didn’t know—”

“Not your fault. Mine, mine entirely. What happened?”

“Dunno. One minute she was fine, then she said something about Willow Bay and took off.”

“Without a word?”

“Said she had to go. Looked as though she’d seen a ghost but if there’s been a problem in the past with this Ingrid, then that’s understandable.”

“I might go and find her.”

“Sure. I’m going to take this for a bit, if you don’t mind. If Ingrid’s handled it, there’ll be fingerprints. And if they match those from the cottage...”

“Be my guest. Feel free to destroy it afterwards.”

“Right.” Trev raised his eyebrows and picked up the box.  
“Give me a call. You know, if you need me.”

*I need more than a friendly police officer.* Martin wanted to kick himself. Now he had two problems to deal with and all he could hope was that Christie’s forgiving heart would listen.

\*\*\*

Daphne hummed as she hurried to her front door, keys in hand. How thoughtful Sylvia was, and even John surprised her by offering the beer before she got the chance to ask. Such a lovely community and, in reality, so safe. Whatever happened last night at the cottage was some anomaly. Thrill seekers passing through.

As she inserted the key, she was sure she heard a thud. Surely, it wasn’t from inside her house? She giggled at her silliness and turned the key. The door opened with the slight squeak John hadn’t got around to fixing.

Thud.

She jumped. Heart racing, she peered down the hallway.  
“Hello?”

Silence. Then the back door clicked shut.

Daphne let out a small squeal.

Hand on the door knob, she listened. No more sounds. She grabbed her phone with shaking hands and dialled John’s mobile. “Come on, come on.”

“What did you forget—”

“John,” she whispered. “There’s someone in the house.”

“Daphne? What did you say?”

“Well, I think they’ve gone, but someone was here.” She tiptoed down the hallway.

“Did you say someone is in our home? Where are you?”

“In the hallway. I’m going to see.”

“Get out of the house! I’m on my way.”

Daphne stopped at the dining room doorway and turned on the light. Every cupboard door was open. All of her precious crystal glasses and the china dinner set from their wedding were shattered on the dining room table.

“Oh my.”

“Daphne, are you out of the house yet?”

With a bloodcurdling scream, Daphne dropped the phone and ran down the hallway toward the kitchen.

“Love? Daphne?”

\*\*\*

Christie couldn't remember how she got back to the cottage. The drive was a blur as, bit by bit, she'd created a wall around herself. Numbness replaced the panic but somewhere deep down, dark feelings swirled.

“Ah, there you are, good.” Barry came out of the garage. “It's all sorted in here and we've got all the undamaged stuff in the cottage.”

“Oh. That's great.”

Barry narrowed his eyes. “Feeling okay? Still a bit upset about it?”

“Um, yes. So, you wanted me to see something.”

“This might cheer you up a bit.” He led the way to the cottage, talking over his shoulder. “Made some progress on that front entry way. Quite interesting what's in there.”

“In there?”

“Yup. Expected an empty space behind the bricks. Even some debris, but not what we found.”

Noise filled the cottage. Drills, hammering, music. Barry called out. “Take a break.” He put his fingers in his mouth and whistled. “Take ten minutes.” Quiet descended and the workmen trailed out, each with a smile for Christie. Barry picked up a torch from a workstation.

Part of the brick wall was demolished, leaving a roughly oval hole in the middle. Not big enough to fit through, it nevertheless allowed Christie and Barry to peer in. Barry directed the beam of light through the gap.

The old entry smelt musty. The flooring was different to the rest of the house, with lovely old tiles. Both original walls were clad with timber to half way. "Looks like mountain ash." Barry commented as he highlighted them.

"Nice."

"Yes, but look above the cladding."

Framed oil paintings hung on two walls, their vivid colours glowing through dust and dirt.

Christie gasped. "These must be the paintings Thomas did!"

"And look at the front, where the new door will go."

Leaning against the weatherboards were more paintings and a box. The box was closed, but somehow Christie knew that it contained all of Thomas' precious brushes and paints. His father hadn't thrown them away.

"See, I need to open the rest of this up real slow and make sure no damage is done."

Christie turned incredulous eyes to Barry. "This will change his life."

"Don't know why they're here, but I guess there's a story behind it. We'll take care, I promise you. Oh, meant to say that Martin rang just before you got here. Asked you to hang around, couldn't reach your phone."

"Um, I'll wait out the front. Thanks."

"No worries."

Christie sprinted down the hallway, through the kitchen and out the back door. No sound of the motorcycle so he'd be on foot. She had time. *Time for what?*

"I'm sorry I let her back into your life." Martin had said that only an hour or so ago. Now the words mocked her. He'd

not only let her back in, he'd taken her to one of their special places. No wonder he'd said they'd talk about *Jasmine Sea* another time. He had no intention of giving her the yacht.

Before the feelings could completely overpower her, Christie ran to the Lotus. She had to find somewhere to think. To breath. To make decisions.



## Chapter Thirty-three

In the fourteen years Senior Constable Trevor Sibbritt had protected River's End, he could only recall a handful of crimes. A couple of shoplifting attempts from misguided kids, arrests for drunk and disorderly, and some angry neighbours. Nothing serious. He liked it that way. An orderly town meant a happy town, and River's End was the happiest place he'd ever lived.

At first, the events of the night added some zing to his otherwise ordinary routine. An average day saw him direct traffic around errant sheep, check in on several more isolated residents, and give safety talks at the schools in the region.

A real case reminded him why he'd become a police officer and put an extra spring in his step. With the new information about an outsider going under two names with intent to deceive and probably more, he was ready for the challenge of finding out exactly what her involvement was – if any – with what he'd nicknamed the 'Cottage Job'.

The discarded painting put a whole new spin on things and he'd called in forensics from Warrnambool to take a look. Well, they were going to be busy because now he was standing in the middle of another crime scene, this time in River's End Heights.

Alerted by a silent alarm installed in the new house, he'd arrived with sirens blaring, ready for action, his patrol car abandoned across the driveway. The front door was wide open, but there was nobody home. No perps. Nothing but what looked like a small explosion inside.

Somebody had had a lot of fun. The new owners had begun moving in and their wide screen TVs, whitegoods, and glass coffee table were smashed. "What is it about frigging whitegoods?" he'd muttered as he stepped over broken glass.

He took lots of photos, expecting backup from Green Bay any minute. Then the phone rang. At first, he couldn't make out any words because the man on the line was screaming.



“You’ve got to slow down. Who is it?” He tried twice before he got a coherent reply.

“It’s John Jones. You’ve got to get to my house! Daphne is there with an intruder and I think he’s killing her!”

The line died and Trev almost dropped the phone. *Not Daphne!* There couldn’t be a murder in River’s End. Not on his watch.

\*\*\*

Daphne ran like she had never run before. Bursting through the back door, she’d caught a glimpse of a man two gardens over. Jumping awkwardly into the third garden, he’d disappeared, but she knew where he was going. The road up to the mountains passed by the end of hers. She doubled back through her house and took off to the end of the street.

She felt for her phone. Darn. It was on the floor in the dining room. *With my precious things.* Forcing the image of the destruction away, Daphne put all her energy into getting to that corner. Each step was torture in her unsuitable shoes. Nothing had ever encouraged her to go much faster than a brisk walk on a cold day, but now she wanted to catch that man. How dare he step foot in her home!

Sweat poured down her face and her breath heaved in and out as she counted. Four houses to go. Three more. Two. There was the corner. And... wheels squealing, a dark blue sedan sped away. Daphne stopped, gasping for air, desperately disappointed.

“Daphne! Oh my God, doll!” John yelled from the other corner. He ran across without looking, straight to Daphne, and flung his arms around her. They grasped onto each other. “I thought... I thought he killed you.” John stammered.

Pulling herself away to look at him, Daphne’s mouth fell open at the tears on his face. “No, love. I’m okay.” She kissed him. “Don’t cry, love. Please don’t.” She reached into his pocket and found a handkerchief, using it to dry his eyes. He took it from her and blew his nose.

Sirens approached.

“Is that Trev?”

“I thought you were being murdered.”

“Oh. I dropped the phone when I chased him.”

“You did what?” John stared at Daphne with open admiration. “Did you see who it was?”

“No. But there would have been a murder if I’d caught him!”

John took her hand and they hurried back to the house, arriving at the same time Trev screamed to a halt outside the house. He leapt out of his car with an expression of utter relief when he saw Daphne. “Daphne! You’re okay!”

“I couldn’t catch him, Trev. He took off toward the mountains in a dark blue big car. You might catch up—”

“Don’t touch anything!” Trev dived back into the patrol car, and with sirens blaring, did a U-turn.

John turned to Daphne, still holding her hand. “We might go and see what he took.”

“I don’t think he stole anything.”

“What makes you say that?”

“He’s a vandal. Just... breaks things.” Her voice faltered.

“What things? Doll? Do you want to stay outside?”

Yes, she did, but no way was she letting her husband see that room alone. Chin up, she led him back into the house.

\*\*\*

Deep in bushes behind an empty house, Rupert watched the patrol car speed past. Thank goodness he’d spotted this driveway before running out of options. He was done. No more risking himself for his selfish employers. Things were getting hot in town and he was sure that woman saw his car.

He nosed back onto the road to River’s End, worried he’d see the police car in his rear vision mirror. Ingrid had promised him empty houses. The front door opening and Daphne calling

out had almost given him heart failure. Another few seconds and he'd have been heading for jail now.

He retraced his route as far as town, then took a right past the jewellery store. The old man who owned it sat on a bench outside. George. According to Ingrid, George virtually ran local council, so why she hadn't targeted him was a mystery. Martin Blake came out of the store and sat beside him.

He followed the track to the car park at Willow Bay, cursing when he saw the Lotus. What the hell was she doing here? And he couldn't just turn around because the top was down and Christie was in the car. As he parked, he pushed the small crowbar and balaclava under his seat.

Christie stared at him from the Lotus. No smile, a worried crease marring her pretty face. Her hands were on the steering wheel but the motor was off.

"Christie, I'm so glad I found you!" Rupert's tone of sympathy helped him fake a smile. "Someone said they saw you go this way and I just hoped you might be here."

"Who did?"

"Dunno, someone in town. I heard about that awful break-in at the cottage this morning. Wanted to see if there's anything I can do to help? I've got a mate who sells whitegoods and stuff. Get you some replacements."

"That's kind, Rupert, but no need. How do you know what happened? I thought you were back in Melbourne."

Rupert shuffled his feet. "Starting the new job next week and I'm still looking for a home for us. Too far to commute and don't want to be away from Lucy for days at a time. So, I thought I'd take another look in that new estate and see if I can talk her into something."

"Did you find anything?"

"Still have our hearts set on that cottage of yours."

"In spite of someone breaking into it? Aren't you worried about leaving your family up there alone?"

“My dad will move in as well. We’ll get him a granny flat once bubba comes. So, what do you say?”

“What happened to your face?”

His hand flew to the cut on his cheek. It was bleeding again. “Shaving accident. Embarrassing really. So, will you sell to me?”

Christie started the motor. “I’ll think about it.”

“That’s wonderful! So, you’ll let Daphne know?” He stepped back as Christie put the Lotus in reverse.

“Sure.”

He watched her until the Lotus rumbled out of sight. At least he had something for his masters. Damn them though if they were going to get him to do their work anymore. And nobody was going to pin those break-ins on him. He pulled the crowbar out and spent a few moments wiping it clean with the balaclava, then tossed both into the bushes.

\*\*\*

Trev drove back to town, disappointed he’d lost the car. Ahead of him, a mid-sized sedan turned from a side road and drifted across its lane. The car was green, but the driving was erratic enough for Trev to put his lights on. Maybe in her panic, Daphne had got it wrong.

The car pulled over, almost straight into a ditch. Parked behind it, lights on, Trev climbed out and, hand on holster, approached the driver’s side. The door flew open and a woman stepped out.

“Hold it there, ma’am.”

She froze, hands in the air and horror on her face. Trailing from one hand was a road map, which she dropped. Trev watched it float to the ground, then he glanced back to her face. Tears streaked down her face, making gorgeous blue eyes puffy. Blond, shoulder-length hair was unbrushed, and her dress might have been slept in.

“Hey, lower your hands,” Trev relaxed. “Are you okay?”

“I’m lost, officer.”

“Then let’s get you going in the right direction. Where are you headed?” He scooped up the map and offered it to her. Up close, she was pretty, really pretty, but so upset. “What’s your name?”

“Charlotte Dean. I’m so sorry, I wasn’t driving very well, was I?” She took the map.

“Just don’t try reading maps and driving at the same time. Okay?”

She nodded. “I’m looking for Palmerston House.”

Trev smiled. “I’m heading that way, so you follow behind and we’ll get you there. Are you fine to drive?” Charlotte clearly was no threat to River’s End, apart from her driving.

“Thank you...?”

“Senior Constable Trevor Sibbritt. Just Trev will do. Right then, I’ll go in front and we’ll have you there in no time.”

He waited for her to get back into her car, then returned to his. At least he’d be able to help one person today. As for the rest of the problems, well, only time would tell.



## Chapter Thirty-four

Angus met Christie on the front steps of Palmerston House. “This town is as bad as Melbourne! The kettle is on and Elizabeth is settling a guest in, so come and let me update you.”

“Update me on what?”

“There have been two more break-ins. One being Daphne and John Jones’ place.”

Christie stopped dead, hand over her mouth.

“She’s fine, but she apparently disturbed the intruder. He got away though.”

“I should go and see her.”

“No. You should have a cup of coffee and sit for a while. That nice policeman said you’d want to help but he has to do his job first.” Angus kept walking toward the kitchen, and Christie trotted after him.

“Can I talk to you?”

“Would you like some cake? Elizabeth made a delicious gingerbread this morning.” He collected cups from a cupboard.

“No, but thanks. I’m sure it is lovely.” She perched on the edge of the table. “Can I help?”

“I saw that look. I’ll have you know that Elizabeth works too hard and it is a pleasure to give her a small break. Now, where would you like to have this? Elizabeth will be back soon, if you want to wait.”

“Actually, I need some advice, Angus. From you.”

He shot her a glance. “What’s wrong? Is it about the cottage?”

“Today has just been awful.” Her phone rang. It was the third time Martin had called and once again, she rejected it.

“That was Martin, I saw his name come up. Why on earth not answer?” Angus stared at her in confusion, a cup in each hand. “Don’t tell me he is what you want advice about?”

Not trusting herself to speak, she nodded, eyes wide.

“Let’s go sit under the old tree then.” Angus led the way.

\*\*\*

Derek stood on the balcony of the apartment, staring at the marina below. Yachts. Lots of them. Why the hell hadn’t Christie told him she wanted one? He would have bought a decent boat with a captain and catering and all the comforts she deserved. He should have paid a bit more attention to her. But he’d always been generous. So many gifts and dinners. Trips away. Until it all fell apart with the death of her grandmother.

A key turned in the front door, which then swung open. Ingrid hurried in, closing and relocking the door behind herself.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Derek stalked inside.

Ingrid spun around in surprise, hand on heart. “God, you scared me! What are you doing here at this time of day?”

“None of your business. I’ll have my key back.” He held his hand out and Ingrid dropped it on his palm.

“Fine. But don’t expect me to knock. Or even come over anymore.” Ingrid went to the bar. “I just wanted somewhere to freshen up before coming to the office.”

“And what’s wrong with your place?”

“Have you heard from Rupert?” She poured herself a glass of brandy, then as an afterthought, one for Derek.

“Why are you changing the subject? Ingrid, what’s happened?” He picked his brandy up. “What have you done?”

“Nothing to concern yourself about, darling. Just arranged a little diversion to confuse the local police. But Rupert is getting difficult, as if he suddenly has a conscience. I’ve rung



him at least five times since leaving that town and he doesn't pick up."

"Maybe he just doesn't like you," Derek sneered, taking out his phone. He dialed and Rupert answered.

"Update please." He threw a look of contempt at Ingrid and she shrugged.

"Is she with you?"

"Why?"

"There's a problem."

Derek returned to the balcony, sliding the door closed behind himself. "Alright, she can't hear. What problem?"

"I don't know if it is her idea or yours, but breaking into other people's houses nearly got me caught."

Derek dropped onto a chair. "Go on."

"The town is swimming in cop cars. I'm sure nobody saw me and everyone thinks I am who I said. But that Daphne Jones might have seen the car. And now Ingrid wants me to smash up the artist's studio. You know, spread around the pain a bit."

Sounded good to Derek. Pictures with gaping holes. Walls and floor splattered with oil paints. "When did she tell you to do that?"

"She's left message after message. Threatening ones. Last time I checked, I work for you. Not her."

"Erase those messages. Can you safely get out of town?"

"Not yet. And there's something you should know. I ran into Christie and she was all upset. She said she'll think about selling to me."

Derek exhaled. *Yes.* He glanced around. He couldn't see Ingrid. "That's good, Rupert. Really good work. That bonus will be doubled the minute she cracks."

"What if she doesn't, boss?"

“If there’s nothing there for her anymore, then she will. Understand?”

“I don’t hurt people.”

“You’ll do what you’re told. Get that artist out of her life, one way or another.” Derek hung up and got to his feet. He flung the door open. “Ingrid! Where are you?”

\*\*\*

“Tell me what to do.” Close to tears, Christie pleaded. “I don’t trust my judgement anymore.”

Angus sipped the last of his tea. He’d listened to every word she’d said and wanted to pick up a phone and tell Martin to get himself down here right away. Overwhelming sympathy filled him, but she was wrong.

“It isn’t my place to tell you what to do. And I believe you know the answers if you’d stop for a minute and think.”

“I’ve been thinking. My head is ready to explode from it!”

“Well it won’t explode so stop the melodrama and focus on what you really want. Instead of running away, why didn’t you simply go and ask Martin why he took that woman to the yacht?”

“Because...” She looked down at her hands, playing with the empty coffee cup. “I mean, what if I do and he says I can’t have *Jasmine Sea* anymore?”

“Why are you even thinking that way?” Angus put his hand over one of hers. “He loves you. Not in a destructive, controlling way like you might have experienced in the past, no, not at all like that. He loves you for who you are, even when you make mistakes.”

Christie looked up. “Like leaving the window unlocked?”

“And not telling him.”

“I didn’t want to upset him.”

Angus smiled as Christie’s expression softened. “Okay, so we’re as bad as each other.” Her mobile beeped with a

message. She read it aloud. *Randall and I will be at the lagoon at six. With dinner.*

“And where will you be at six, Christie Oliver?” Angus stood up and stretched.

Christie got to her feet and threw her arms around him. “Thank you.”

“We all make mistakes. Wrong decisions that are sometimes based on a right motive. Talking, communication, that’s the way to sort things out. Well, one of the ways,” he grinned.

“Angus!”

“Come on. You might not have wanted gingerbread cake, but I do.”

\*\*\*

One by one, the police left. First were the forensic officers, who now had to go to the house in the estate. Then the very sweet youngsters from Green Bay who’d offered to make tea for Daphne and sit with her whilst John went to close the office. He returned with Sylvia and her cake boxes, just as Trev said his goodbyes on the front steps.

“Oh, Sylvia, I completely forgot about those!” Daphne grabbed John’s hand as if they’d been apart for months.

“I’ll make more tomorrow and we can take fresh ones up to the cottage then.” Sylvia put them on the top step to give Daphne an uncharacteristic hug. “These are for you and John now.”

“Don’t know what to say.”

“Let’s go inside, doll,” John opened the door. “You look a bit pale.”

Daphne didn’t move. “You know, maybe we should sit out here for a bit. Have one of Sylvia’s pastries.”

“Or I could help clean up where the police have been – that fingerprint dust is messy. My shop’s closed for the day, so

I'm here for you." Sylvia stepped inside before Daphne could stop her. "Come on, we'll get it done in no time."

John kissed Daphne's cheek. "Do you want to go for a walk? We can do this."

"Of course not." Daphne followed Sylvia, who went to the kitchen. John picked up the cake boxes and closed the door behind himself. Going past the dining room, he glanced inside, still shocked at the pointless destruction. All of Daphne's special knick-knacks. The wedding china. Crystal she'd chosen when they bought the house. All in pieces.

"I'll sweep it all up." Daphne was beside John, carrying a dustpan and brush and a garbage bag. "If you can help Sylvia with some warm soapy water and a cloth?"

"Let me do this."

"Don't be silly." With a big, forced smile, Daphne went in. "Just things, after all. But maybe we can get takeaway tonight? Once we're done."

"Sure. Good idea." John watched Daphne open the garbage bag and hook it onto the back of a chair. "I'll be back in a minute."

In the kitchen, Sylvia had already found cleaning items. John picked up the rubbish bin. "She'll need this."

"You help her, John. I'll get the doors cleaned up then start on a sweep of the house. Just in case there's glass. Go on."

Nodding his thanks, he carried the bin to the dining room. Daphne worked methodically from one side of the table to the other, gently pushing the shards together.

"Here, doll, this will be easier and safer than the bag."

"I did love that holiday in Tasmania. The plate with the Tasmanian Devil always made me smile." She spoke with a sing-song voice. "And your mum had the best taste in china. And daughters-in-law of course."

"Daph?"

“I recall how we had that little argument over whether to buy crystal or glass champagne flutes. I let you win, of course, because after all, they are just glasses.” She stopped and looked straight at John. Tears streamed down her cheeks. “Just glasses.”

\*\*\*

From part way up a tree on the far side of Martin’s property, Rupert watched the house and studio through binoculars. With a dog on the premises, he had to be extra careful to avoid being caught.

Martin had arrived home earlier with shopping bags. The dog ran around for a bit, but didn’t pick up Rupert’s scent. One thing he couldn’t do was outrun a dog. Nor most people, although he’d managed to stay ahead of Daphne.

At almost six, Martin left the house carrying a large backpack as well as what looked like folding plastic chairs and table. With the dog in tow, he disappeared down a track toward the beach.

Rupert scrambled down the tree and scurried across to the top of the track. By now, Martin was on the beach, well away from the house. He moved with purpose toward the jetty.

No matter what Derek said, no living thing would be harmed by his hands. Stuff, sure. But that was it. No real harm done that way. He checked the sliding door of the house. Locked. Well, that wasn’t his target anyway.

Having thrown the crowbar into the bushes at Willow Bay, he’d had to get creative and dug out the tyre jack from the car. He circled the studio, stopping periodically to stare in. Just paintings on easels and walls. What looked like part finished furniture, a coffee table perhaps. Sofa and bar. God, he could use a drink.

He rattled the door, noticing a slight gap near the lock. After inserting the flat end of the tyre jack, he put his weight against it until, with a satisfying ‘pop’, the lock gave. With a glance over his shoulder, he nudged the door open and went inside.



## Chapter Thirty-five

Warm early-evening air enveloped Christie as she left Palmerston House on foot. Her white cotton dress felt nice against bare legs as she walked toward the river.

Despite her talk with Angus, or maybe because of it, worry creased her forehead. He was right about everything, including her overreaction upon seeing the watercolour. The mature and sensible course of action would have been returning to the house with Trev and simply asking Martin why he'd painted Ingrid on *Jasmine Sea*.

She didn't feel very mature or sensible when it came to Ingrid, because every fibre of her being knew Derek was behind it all. Two attempts at blackmailing decent men into doing Ingrid's will. Three horrible break-ins leaving thousands of dollars of damaged were hardly a coincidence, but what was the connection? Poor Daphne. Of all people, she hadn't deserved that.

As she followed the path by the river, Christie's heart raced. She'd rejected several phone calls from Martin. Run away from his place. Perhaps he'd actually had enough of her emotional behaviour and was going to tell her, over dinner, this was over.

The narrow path through the cliff opened to the beach, where the ocean stretched out forever, bathed in golden sunset. The river broadened into a shallow lagoon. At its edge, staring at the sea, Martin stood with one hand on Randall's head. Dressed in a white shirt and black pants, feet bare, he radiated masculinity. Desire coursed through Christie. She stopped, her breath hurting. It was more than desire. It was love and, no matter what happened next, she belonged to Martin now and forever.

\*\*\*

It was past six o'clock and she wasn't here yet. Not one returned phone call, nor reply to his message. He hadn't even got to the cottage earlier, hearing the Lotus go down the hill as

he was running up the stone steps from the beach. She'd got his message to wait, and hadn't.

Instead of chasing her anymore, he'd continued his plans for dinner on the beach. He'd sat with George for a while. Shopped. Anything to avoid thinking about what the evening might bring, if Christie couldn't see past his poor judgement.

In the distance, a family wandered along the tideline, two children running ahead. Randall wagged his tail and then sniffed the air. Martin closed his eyes. *Please be here*. His toes curled into the sand.

“Martin?”

He slowly exhaled, giving thanks to whatever had brought her here. Then, and now. He felt Randall leap up and heard Christie laugh as he ran to her. Then he opened his eyes and turned around.

Like an angel, she was dressed in white, her feet and legs and shoulders bare, sandals dangling from her fingers. Her hair, loose around her face, reflected the sunset behind him, turning it into burnished copper. She straightened from patting Randall and their eyes locked. A surge of electricity jolted him. Had a woman ever been more beautiful than Christie was at this moment?

She wasn't smiling. Her expression gave away her apprehension. Fear that he created by his carelessness. Time for that to end. He held his arm out, a single red rose in his fingers. “Sweetheart.”

She ran to Martin, straight into his arms.

\*\*\*

He was a decent artist, this Martin Blake. Rupert knew nothing about fine art, but he admired the bold colours and interesting subjects. The half-done painting of a couple at three ages was kind of sweet and sad all at once. This studio reminded Rupert of his mother. He imagined her sitting on the sofa, enjoying the sunlight through the skylights as she had a smoke. Except she couldn't be now, because of those smokes. Life sucks sometimes.



At the bar, Rupert found an old, unopened bottle of scotch. He opened it. Inhaled the warm scent then took a long swig. *That's what's good in this world.* He carried it around the room looking at the other paintings. Abstracts that made no sense. Some reminded him a bit of the one Derek used to have in the foyer. Why he'd sent it to Christie was a mystery. Idiot still had feelings for her.

Another long, appreciated slug from the bottle in front of the portrait of Christie. Dammit, she was a fine looking woman. And so real and nice. Too nice for Derek. No, she suited the artist and he loved her, no doubt about it. Look at how perfect he'd made her skin, how alive her eyes were. On her hand was an engagement ring. Lucky man.

Rupert dug around in a pocket for his phone. He dialled Ingrid. It rang, then went to voicemail and he hung up. A second later, she rang back.

“So you do know how to answer calls?”

“Ingrid, Ingrid, Ingrid. Time to have a chat.”

“Are you drunk?”

“Planning on it. I'm in Martin Blake's studio.”

“Thank goodness. I hope it is in pieces. About time you got something right.”

He wandered back to the sofa and perched on the arm. “It isn't. And it won't be.”

“What the hell—”

“So this is what's going to happen. I have five voice messages from you. Two are just you ranting and raving. Another two mention the cottage. But the last one... all about you telling me to destroy the very studio I'm sitting in.”

“What do you want?”

“That's better. I want money. A lot of money, in my account. In the morning.”

“Those messages incriminate you too. Why should I?”

“Ingrid, you and Derek can go run off into the sunset for all I care, but I’m not doing your dirty work anymore. Now, if it means I go visit the local coppers and cut a deal, then so be it.”

“You’re not serious!” Ingrid hissed. “You’ll go to jail!”

“I’d be more worried about you going to jail. So, you’ve got until my bank opens in the morning to deposit double my annual salary plus ten times the bonus I was getting.”

“Why? Why are you doing this?” She sounded close to tears, which kind-of made Rupert happy.

“Sometimes life sucks. But not tonight. Not for the good people of River’s End anymore.” He hung up. He had his whiskey and tomorrow he would have enough money to disappear for a while. He raised the bottle to his mother. “Cheers, Mum. Love you always.”

\*\*\*

Hand in hand, Christie and Martin stood at the edge of the ocean. No words had passed between them, but Christie held the rose close, glancing at it from time to time. Out to the horizon, gold and red streaks turned the sky into a postcard. It was still quite light and perfectly warm.

Not far away, the children made sandcastles as their parents sat on the beach talking. Randall watched them, tail wagging. A little boy jumped up with a huge smile. He spoke to his parents who nodded, and then he walked closer. Stopping near Randall, who kept looking at Martin for permission to go to the child, he called to Martin, “May I pat your dog?”

“You may. Go on, Randall, but gently.”

Randall flew over and let the little boy pat him, sitting very still before suddenly bounding around him in joy. Christie laughed and Martin shot her a glance. There was a different light in her eyes.

“You like kids?”

She turned her smile on him. “I love them.”

He pulled her closer and leaned down to whisper, “So do I.”

Happiness coursed through Christie.

“Are you hungry?” Martin asked.

“I am now.”

Martin pointed to the jetty. “Then please join me.” At the far end of the jetty, a table and two chairs were set up. Christie giggled as he did a small bow while he handed her up onto the timber boards. The tide was rising but very calm, creating a soft backdrop of lapping against the pylons. The table was set with plates, glasses and a candle.

“Now, whether this will stay alight...” Martin lit the candle, which flickered frantically before settling. “We’ll see.”

He stood behind a chair. “Please.”

Christie sat, rather stunned by the effort he’d gone to. She’d never have thought of having a proper dinner out here, yet it was the most romantic setting imaginable. Away from the beach, over the darkening water, under the coloured sky. Randall joined them, plonking himself to one side. Martin opened his backpack.

“Oh, that smells divine. Shall I help?”

“You can sit there and look at the sea.”

*I’d rather look at you.* Everything was okay. Mostly okay. Right now, in this place, life was perfect. There was nothing Christie needed or wanted except for each precious moment to last. She followed every move Martin made with adoring eyes as he filled the table with a foil-covered seafood lasagne, salad, freshly baked bread, and olive oil.

He pulled a bottle of wine out last, and hesitated. “I should have got champagne.”

“What are we celebrating?”

“I didn’t think it through. Maybe I should go and see if the pub has any.”

“Okay, because we’re going to be super honest with each other from now on, I will tell you something nobody else knows. I don’t really like champagne. Too many reminders of the past.”

Martin opened the bottle. “Are you just saying that?”

“Nope. What I enjoy is a lovely, crisp dry white. Which you’ve instinctively offered me since the first glass.”

He poured the wine. “Then you’ll love this. Made by our friends over the hill, it is their recently awarded gold medal winner.”

He handed Christie a glass and sat opposite. “To things working out the way they’re meant to.”

Christie caught her breath. That was exactly his toast the very first time they’d shared a bottle of wine. He remembered. She tapped her glass against his. “And to dreams coming true.”

\*\*\*

They lingered over dinner, nibbling the last of the bread with olive oil poured over it. The sun was almost below the horizon when Martin reached into his backpack for a lantern. When lit, it cast a glow across the old boards.

Martin packed up the plates and leftovers, until all that was left was the wine, the candle, and the rose on the table between them. He sat again and stared solemnly at Christie. “There are some things we need to talk about.”

Heart sinking, Christie glanced away. For the past hour she’d pretended the rest of the day hadn’t happened.

“Why do you assume the worst?”

Christie forced herself to meet Martin’s eyes. He was unreadable. Not a wall, but a considered expression that gave nothing away. He took something out of the backpack and put it in the centre of the table. It was an origami boat.

“Unfold it.” Martin suggested.

“Why did you... I mean, Ingrid?”

Martin sighed and sat back in his chair. “Okay, let’s get this sorted. You do know I had no idea who she was?”

“Yes, but—”

“No, listen. Please. I had a client who, although annoying, was paying me a lot of money for a portrait. She got a phone call saying her mother, in England, was on her deathbed and begged me to set the portrait on the yacht.”

Ingrid would have pleaded, probably with her hand on Martin’s arm and her body leaning toward him. “Couldn’t you have just superimposed her onto a sketch without her actually being there?”

“How do you know I didn’t?”

“Oh. Did you?”

“No. I only had the money on my mind, Christie. I didn’t think it through.”

*Money? All those times...* Christie jumped to her feet.

“Sit down, sweetheart.”

“All you’ve ever done is criticise me for having nice things. My car, jewellery. You’ve always thought those things matter to me and they don’t, but now you’re telling me they matter more to you than—”

“Than what? Than you?” His tone was mild. “Do you want to know why I wanted the money? Sit down.”

Christie spun around and stormed away.



## Chapter Thirty-six

She didn't make it off the jetty. Martin's arms swooped around her, stopping her in her tracks.

"Let me go!"

"Not going to happen. Now, you can come back to the table on your feet, or I can carry you."

The heat of his body radiated through Christie as he held her firmly against him, his mouth near her ear so she could hear him all too well. She held her body stiffly, resisting its annoyingly natural urge to sink into him.

"I recommend the first suggestion," he continued. "If I have to pick you up, I may just forget that we are out in public. We've had this discussion about your temper, and not very long ago."

"I'm really upset."

"Come on," he released her. "There's something you need to see." He walked away. Back to the table, where he stood waiting. Without his arms around her, a sudden chill made her shiver. The weather wasn't cold, but she was, inside. It took all of her self-control to go to him, but she did.

He motioned for her to sit, and pulled his own chair out. The origami boat was on the timber boards of the jetty and he scooped it up. When she sat, he offered it to her and this time, she took it.

"I don't know what screwed up ideas have gone through your head lately, but if they are about *Jasmine Sea* and Bethany or Ingrid, whatever her name is, then forget them. The facts are I wanted the money for a good reason, except things got to a point I wasn't prepared to deal with the devil any more. Unfold the boat, Christie."

Her fingers struggled, still trembling with emotion. Then, as it opened, she realised what it was and her eyes flew to Martin's. "This is the boat registration."

"I know. Who is the registered owner?"

“Me.” Her voice was tiny.

“And what is the date the ownership changed?”

She scanned the document. “This can’t be right.”

“Do you remember when we talked about your attraction to yachts in spite of your fear of water?”

“Before I went to Docklands Studios last time. You gave me *Jasmine Sea* all that time ago?” Her eyes were huge.

“I finally found something worth giving you.”

“But you don’t need to give me anything, Martin,” she grabbed his hand, leaning forward. “Your love is everything. Not gifts or money or anything except you. And Randall.”

He watched her for a while, then sighed deeply. “All I knew was that the most perfect girl in the world loved me. How could I compete with what you had? What you were used to? Why would you stay when your world was so far removed?”

Christie slipped out of her seat and dropped to her knees beside Martin. “This is my world.” Her eyes glistened with tears. “My world, which I will fight for with every breath in my body.”

Martin lifted her effortlessly to her feet as he rose to his. Christie noticed his hands were shaking a little. *What’s wrong?* He looked so serious.

“I know you’re not ready. This is too soon, but I can’t leave you wondering any longer. I can’t wonder any longer.” He released her hands.

Puzzled, Christie watched him fumble around in his pocket and pull out a small box. He suddenly grinned. “This had better not end up falling in the ocean. George will never forgive me.”

Under the starlight, Martin sank onto one knee. Christie gasped as he took hold of her left hand and gazed into her eyes. “I fell in love with you the moment I first saw you. You frustrated me and challenged me and utterly delighted me until



I gave in and admitted to myself that you, Christabel Ryan Oliver, are the centre of my being. Will you marry me?"

Christie barely nodded.

"I think that was yes?" Martin opened the box. "Is it yes, Christie? Will you be my wife?"

Inside the box, on a bed of black velvet, was a diamond solitaire with four emeralds. They sparkled by the light of the lantern, perfect in a gold setting.

Randall padded over and sat beside Martin, leaning against him and looking at Christie with big, soulful eyes. "See," said Martin, "both of us are asking. We both need you."

Christie realised that she still hadn't spoken, and now tears were making everything misty. "Yes, Martin," she whispered. "Oh, yes, I will be your wife." For the second time in minutes, she dropped to her knees, this time to put her arms around Martin's neck. "I love you."

Randall buried himself between them.

\*\*\*

For a long time Christie and Martin sat on the edge of the jetty, their feet dangling. They held hands, talking quietly about nothing at all. Anecdotes about other times and places. Little insights into each other's pasts. Every so often, they'd kiss. And laugh. As if barely believing it was on her finger, Christie kept sneaking looks at the ring.

"Do you like it?" Martin asked, his voice a bit worried. "If there's something else—"

"I love it! Did you say something about George? Did he make this?"

"He did."

"So beautiful." Christie watched the diamond and emeralds sparkle. "Four emeralds?"

"Your eyes are the same colour," he captured her hand. "One emerald represents the first time I saw you. The second

reminds me of the first time I kissed you. The third is for tonight.” He raised her fingers to his lips.

“And the fourth?”

“For the day we marry. And the diamond will be our children. You do want a family?”

She nodded, too overcome with emotion to speak.

Then yawned. Martin burst out laughing, stirring Randall, who looked up with an indignant groan.

“Sorry,” she smiled, then yawned again. “I’m suddenly exhausted.”

“I’ll walk you home. It’s been too long a day.” Martin stood and offered Christie his hand. “Tonight you sleep and tomorrow we’ll concern ourselves with any unresolved issues. We’ll check up on Daphne in the morning, and see Trev. Okay?”

“Okay. I’m not going to argue.”

Slinging the backpack onto his shoulders, Martin chuckled. “Let’s get that in writing. In fact, I might prepare our wedding vows.”

“What a terrible idea.” She went to pick up the chairs but he got them first. “I can carry things.”

“Grab the lantern. Light our way. Randall? You coming?”

Lantern aloft, Christie reached the beach and waited for Martin. Randall galloped past and threw himself onto the sand to roll. “You are very strange at times.” Christie told him.

“Got your sandals?”

“In my bag. Which means I have a spare hand if you want me to take the chairs.”

With a smile, he took her spare hand in his. “This is a better use for it.” He leaned down and kissed her ever so gently. “I was afraid you wouldn’t meet me tonight.”

“What if I hadn’t?”

“I’d have had to find someone else to give that ring to.”

At Christie's outraged expression, Martin grinned and walked toward the river. She had no choice but to keep up with him because he had her hand tightly in his and wasn't letting go.

\*\*\*

The fountain in front of Palmerston House drew Christie with its ever-changing colours. She'd said a long, passionate goodbye to Martin halfway down the driveway, insisting she was fine to get to the front door on her own. The day was catching up with him also, lining his face with exhaustion.

She trailed her fingers in the fountain, water trickling over her right hand. Her left she kept dry, watching the ring sparkle in the reflection of the lights. How perfect. One diamond, four emeralds, and each with a significance to Martin. *He wants children!* Together they would raise a beautiful family and have a home built on love.

"Are you planning on joining us for a nightcap, or are you going to stay out there?" Angus stood on the steps, the front door open behind him.

"Hello."

"Hello yourself. Everything okay?"

"Oh, Angus!" Almost bursting with joy, she ran up the steps and threw her arms around him.

"My goodness! Whatever is going on?"

She stepped back and held her hand out. "I kinda said yes."

Angus pulled her into his arms and squeezed her so much that she squealed. "Young Martin has excellent taste. And so do you."

"I'm the luckiest girl in the world. And guess what?"

"Are you going to jump up and down? You look as if you will."

"He wants to have children. Angus, I'm going to have a family one day!" A tear ran down her cheek and she wiped it away with a laugh. "Look at me, all emotional and silly."

“My dear child, you deserve to be happy. You deserve love and laughter and every good thing in life. I am so, so happy for you,” Angus took her hand and linked it through his arm. “And now, we shall find Elizabeth, open a bottle of something special, and toast you both.”

\*\*\*

Martin and Randall were both ready for bed as they climbed onto the deck. As Martin unlocked the door, Randall growled. The dog was rigid, staring in the direction of the studio with a low rumble resonating through him. Martin had never heard him growl. Ever.

“Stay put.” Martin grabbed a torch from inside the door. Randall ran to the bottom of the steps, sniffing the air. “Go in the house.”

Randall wagged the end of his tail, acknowledging the command but intent on whatever he sensed. Martin slid his hand under the dog’s collar. “I need you safe.” He had to tug at Randall to get him into the house, finally shutting him in.

Once he cleared the house, Martin turned the torch on, flicking it around. The studio was in darkness and there was nobody about. Perhaps Randall had picked up the scent of a stray dog or possum.

He stood at the door, feeling for his keys then realised the lock was broken. Martin pushed it open and turned on the lights. There was nowhere to hide in here and it was obvious that he was alone. He went from easel to easel. There was no damage.

In the middle of the studio, he stopped. Why? Someone had been here, broken in. But nothing was touched that he could see. Who was doing this? *Derek*. His gut told him that somehow that man was behind everything that had recently happened in River’s End. Ingrid’s deceptive behaviour reinforced it. Now, he had to prove it.



## Chapter Thirty-seven

Christie wandered through the cottage not long after dawn, refreshed from a deep and happy sleep. Apart from the wet areas, now delayed thanks to the break-in, each room was almost complete. By the time Martha and Thomas returned, it would be ready for them to decide if they wanted it. If not, well, perhaps Rupert would be lucky and get it.

After locking the cottage, she checked the garage. Barry had wound a chain around the handles with a large padlock. All secure. Her foot crunched onto something. A shard of porcelain from the bath. Bits must have flown everywhere and it was surprising the person responsible hadn't been hurt. She wrinkled her brow, trying to remember something but was distracted by a cigarette butt a metre from the shard. None of the workmen smoked on site – Barry insisted on it – so whose was it? She squatted down. It reminded her of the butt she'd found smouldering at the end of the street.

She carefully picked it up in a tissue and buried it in a pocket. Most likely this was nothing, but finding two butts like this was odd. Very few locals smoked and she'd never once seen anyone toss a butt. It was worth showing to Trev.

\*\*\*

Nauseous from downing almost the whole bottle of very fine whiskey last night, Rupert lay in the back seat of his car. He'd been there all night after stumbling around for hours in the dark. He thought he was parked somewhere between Martin's property and Willow Bay, up some hidden track, but his memory was fuzzy.

He had to get up; he needed to find a place for breakfast to settle his gut. With a bit of luck he'd find his way out of wherever he was and get to somewhere like Green Bay. If he could drive in a straight line.

Forcing himself out of the car, he then leaned against it for a few moments, drawing the brisk early morning air into his lungs. Birds sang in the trees above, worsening his pounding

headache. He got into the driver's seat and closed his eyes, which didn't really help. An annoying alarm kept going off.

With a groan, he picked up his phone, which was somehow in the footwell of the passenger's side and ringing. "It's barely morning."

"We've got a problem."

"We always have problems," Rupert complained, closing his eyes again.

"Ingrid's vanished. I've been to her apartment, to the office, phoned her. Nothing."

"Well, she's not here—"

"Rupert. Shut up and listen. What did she do? Are the cops really involved?"

"Yes."

Derek swore. Rupert smiled to himself. Seemed that particular alliance was done.

"Where are you now?"

Rupert squinted at the trees. "Somewhere near River's End. But I'm not a suspect. Christie and Daphne still think I'm just this bumbling city guy looking for a sea change. I'm coming back to Melbourne later today."

"Not yet."

His mind was clearing now and he remembered Derek insisting any force was acceptable. "Boss, maybe you should come and do it. I'm not pushing the artist off a cliff."

"I don't want details. Just results."

Rupert stared out of the window, wondering when the money would get into his account.

"Are you still there?" Derek demanded.

"Boss. You know those voicemails from Ingrid, about doing over the studio?"

"Deleted of course."

“Nope. One of them is pretty incriminating about your part in this.”

“What?”

“I’m not going to be working for you anymore. But I’d like a decent severance pay... if you get my drift, boss.”

Derek screamed down the phone. “You get nothing! Nothing, you hear? There’s no proof I’ve done anything other than send you to buy a property on my behalf. How you’ve conducted yourself is on you.”

“So,” Rupert continued as if Derek hadn’t spoken. “I want double my salary and ten times my bonus in my account today.”

“You’ll get paid when you’ve split those two apart and I’ve got my cottage.”

“Oh, and about splitting them. She’s wearing his ring. He painted her with a lovely diamond and emerald engagement ring on... are you there?” Derek had hung up. *Never mind.* There was nothing keeping him here now. He lit a cigarette.

\*\*\*

If he hadn’t been in his office, Derek would have thrown his laptop against a wall. Rupert had to be lying. Christie would not marry Martin Blake. She was a sophisticated, educated woman with a successful career and a life in Melbourne. With him.

He dropped into his chair and put his head in his hands. This couldn’t be happening.

“Sir?” There was a tap on the door.

“Get out, Lorraine. Hold my calls.” He didn’t lift his head.

“Sorry, sir, but the police are here.”

Now, he looked up. Behind his secretary were two uniformed police officers. Were they here for Ingrid? Or him? *Damn her.*

“See them in.” Derek took a deep breath and got up. He waited to one side of his desk as they came in. One male, one



female.

“Good morning, sir, I’m Senior Constable Mayer and this is Constable Todd.” The female officer spoke and the male officer nodded.

“How can I help? Do you wish to sit?”

“Thank you, no. We are looking for your colleague, Ingrid Kauf—”

“So am I!” he interrupted, returning to his seat. “She owes me money and has disappeared in the middle of a straightforward job.”

“What exactly was this job?”

“She wanted to look at some land on the coast with a view to us bidding on it. Last I know, she was there. I’ve tried to contact her for a couple of days, but no answer on her phone. I even went to her apartment this morning but no reply.”

“When did you last speak with her?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe the day before yesterday? Look,” he leaned forward in his seat, “she was missing her husband. He’s in Germany or somewhere. She’s probably just gone for a visit.”

Senior Constable Mayer stared gravely at Derek. “Without informing you? Does she have friends, or other relatives we could speak to?”

“What’s this about? She’s not in trouble, is she?”

“Why would you suggest it?”

“You’re worrying me. Ingrid was acting strange last time we spoke. Said she really wanted a piece of land or something and the people didn’t want to sell it. She said she’d have to make them see things her way, but I thought she was joking.”

Senior Constable Mayer put her notebook away and handed Derek a business card. “If you hear from her, or think of anything to help us locate her, please call.”

The officers left, leaving the door open. Derek jumped up and closed, then locked it. He dialled Ingrid’s number and

again it went to her voicemail. He had no intention of leaving more messages. Between Ingrid and Rupert, they'd managed to stuff things up big time.

It didn't matter where she was. He'd done nothing wrong. And now he had only one priority. He tapped his intercom.

"Lorraine, arrange a hire car. I need it in one hour."

\*\*\*

"Sorry, mate, gonna have to get forensics in but they'll take care with your paintings." Trev shook his head at the forced lock on the studio door. "Do you think he was disturbed before... well, any damage was done?"

"No. For some reason, whoever broke in either had no intention of vandalism, or changed their mind. God knows." Martin leaned against a wall. "There is one thing missing. A bottle of Chivas Regal Diamond Salute."

"Expensive?"

"Not cheap. But it was for Thomas, well, both of us. Nice on the deck after a long day."

"Most likely saw it there and swiped it. Guess in the scheme of things, losing a bottle of scotch is better than your paintings. What he did to Daphne is disgusting, all her nice things shattered. Keepsakes, things they'd collected on their honeymoon and for what?"

"And Christie's goods. Is this some kind of thrillseeker, Trev, or something more sinister?" He went to the painting of Christie and traced her face, smiling slightly as he remembered the feel of her warm skin against his.

Trev joined him. "What are you thinking?"

"Christie's ex is trouble. Last year he let himself into her place and gave her a scare. He's a narcissist through and through, charming one minute and close to violent the next."

"I had no idea. But what would he have to do with this?"

"Ingrid, or Bethany Fox, whatever her real name is, has a business partnership with him. They both want Christie's

cottage. Scare campaign perhaps? Sending some message. Derek sent Christie a painting he'd bought after they broke up. It's one of my paintings. No note, no follow up contact so she doesn't even know if it now belongs to her, or is just part of some ploy to get her attention."

"I believe he'll get a visit this morning. Ingrid is proving elusive."

"Martin? Oh, no..." Christie ran in, hand to her mouth. "Your paintings?"

"It's okay, sweetheart. Nothing's damaged." Martin met her halfway and took her into his arms. "Just a bottle of scotch stolen and the lock broken." He felt her relax against him and loosened his hold.

She gazed up, worry in her eyes. "When?"

"Last night. Randall got all toey when we got back. Whoever did this was long gone, but I stayed down here just in case."

"You should have called me."

"No." His tone was firm and she nodded imperceptibly.

"Morning, Christie."

"Oh, sorry. Morning, Trev. Any idea who is doing all these dreadful things?"

Trev and Martin exchanged a glance. "Too soon. But the more fingerprints and other traces we get, the more chance of catching them. Anyway, hang around a bit if you can, Martin. I've got a couple of things to follow up." He nodded to them both, then hurried out.

Christie went to her portrait. She laughed softly. "When did you paint the engagement ring?"

"Around the time George and I designed it."

"Confident?"

"I asked the universe. Putting the ring where it belongs was simply the law of attraction."

Christie wound her arms up around his neck. “Oh, there’s definitely a law of attraction here.”

He chuckled. “Not quite what I meant.”

“So what are you saying?” On her toes, she kissed him. “The universe has a lot of explaining to do.”



## Chapter Thirty-eight

Pen and notepad in hand, Elizabeth bustled around the kitchen. Angus sat at the table, watching her with a smile. “Have you actually written anything down yet?”

Elizabeth stopped and looked at the notepad. “Make list to invite.”

Joining Angus, she handed him the pen and pushed the notepad in front of him. “What if we do that first? Then I can decide what to prepare and make a shopping list.”

“Have you checked our young couple are available on such short notice?”

“I’d better call, I suppose. Isn’t Christie going to New Zealand soon? Oh dear, I haven’t thought this through, so what if they don’t want everyone knowing yet and—”

“Hush,” Angus put his hand over hers. “You are getting all worked up for nothing. I’m sure this wonderful engagement is not a secret and just as sure that they will love a get-together. But what about something a bit smaller, considering how little time you have?”

Elizabeth looked at his hand on hers. He started to move it but she turned hers over and slid her fingers through his. As if nothing had happened, she continued. “I agree. Daphne and John – which will give poor Daphne something happy to focus on. And Sylvia, and Trev, if he’s not too busy.”

“And you can’t forget George.”

“He made that beautiful ring!”

“Yes, he did. So, finish writing your list to invite, and I’ll put the kettle on. Then we can see what Martin and Christie think.”

“Angus. I do enjoy having you here.” Elizabeth squeezed his hand before releasing it.

Barely able to hide a broad smile, Angus got to his feet. “Well, that goes both ways.”

There was a small tap on the kitchen door and they both looked up. Charlotte Dean stood there, holding a tray. "I'm so sorry to interrupt," she began. "I brought my breakfast tray down."

"Oh, there was no need, my dear," Elizabeth got up and hurried to her. "It's fine to just put it outside your door."

Charlotte let her take the tray. "As my mother always said, I have two healthy legs," she gave a small smile. "It was delicious, thanks."

"My pleasure. Now, are you going to do some sightseeing on this lovely day?"

"Perhaps a walk along the beach. It isn't far?"

"Not far at all. There's a little map in your room of the town, and some of the spots people like to visit. Actually, before you go, we will be having some guests over this evening. Well, I think we will. Some rather special people just got engaged and we'd like to celebrate with them."

"I can go out." Charlotte offered.

"Oh no, you are most welcome to stay but I wanted to let you know we won't be noisy or late."

"How kind. Well, have a nice day."

With that, she wandered back out of the kitchen.

Angus took the tray from Elizabeth. "She seems pleasant."

"When Trev arrived with her I didn't know what was going on. But he said the poor lass had been lost for hours, and I'm sure she'd been having a bit of a cry. Now, how is that tea coming along?"

\*\*\*

Trev was on the phone when Christie pushed open the door to the small police station. He acknowledged her with a wave. As she waited at the counter, Christie took the tissue out of her pocket.

"What's that?" Trev asked as he hung up.

“Probably nothing at all. I found it near the garage at home but nobody smokes.”

“Barry’s boys?”

“No, he won’t have smoking on site. And the night when I thought someone had been in the cottage? Well, there was another butt, on the corner of my road and the main road. It was alight and I had to stand on it. Martin picked it up.”

Trev collected a plastic bag and carefully eased the tissue and its contents inside. “Worth a look. Nothing’s come back on those fingerprints from the cottage but unless the intruder had a record, there’s not many reasons we’d have them on file. Martin mentioned a painting from your ex.”

“It arrived with no note. No phone call. Just the painting. Legally, does that make it mine?”

“Hmm. Until we find out who actually sent it, then I couldn’t say. If this Derek Hobbs did, then as its original owner, it would appear to be a gift. But perhaps it was stolen.”

“I should phone him.”

“Not a good idea. Not until we sort out who is behind the crime spree.”

“You think Derek is?” The phone rang. “I’ll wait.”

“It’s for you,” Trev handed the phone over.

“Oh. Hello?”

“Just me,” Martin said. “Your phone rings through to your voicemail.”

“Probably flat.”

“Charge it. Elizabeth called to ask if we would attend a small gathering tonight at Palmerston House. In our honour.”

“How sweet of her. But will it be small?”

“Apparently Angus talked her out of a general broadcast for the whole town. About ten people, for a couple of hours. So?”



“Seeing that I live there at the moment, I guess I’ll be available. Will you join me?”

“We might need to revisit those living arrangements. But yes, I will.”

Blushing all of a sudden, Christie turned away from Trev, who busied himself at his desk. “What time?”

“Seven or so. Anyway, we’ll catch up before then, but you must charge your phone or I won’t be able to call. Yes?”

“Yes, Martin.”

He chuckled and hung up.

“Thanks, Trev. Do you need me for anything else?”

“No, I’ll update you or Martin as things progress, but if you have any other thoughts, call me.”

Back in her car a few moments later, Christie plugged the phone in to charge. Tonight sounded wonderful. But something still nagged at her from the cottage. Something about that shard she’d stood on.

\*\*\*

On her way to visit Daphne, Christie’s phone beeped and dinged as messages and missed calls came in. Once she’d parked a few doors down from the real estate agency, she checked them. One from Martin, plus two missed calls and a text message, all from Ashley. The text message was a brief *Call me!* Was something wrong with Ray? She dialled.

“Two secs, bella,” Ashley spoke to someone on his end. “Sorry. I’m all yours now.”

“Are you okay? Is Ray?”

“We’re fine. But I had a call from Carlo and you need to hear this. Can you talk?”

“Of course. Is something wrong with the shoot? I haven’t heard anything.” Christie unplugged the phone.

“I don’t want to upset you, but apparently he got a call from someone asking about you. About when you are

travelling.”

Christie’s stomach churned. *Not again.* “A woman?”

“A man. Look, it may be nothing, but who would need to know your plans? Carlo thought he was talking to someone on your behalf, you know, to see when you landed in order to pick you up. Does that sound like anyone you know?”

“I was getting a taxi from the airport. I’ve allowed a day to get settled before starting and apart from Carlo’s assistant and Martin, nobody knows about the timing.” She closed her eyes. “This can’t be happening.”

“Carlo is just worried about you. After he got off the call, he felt as though he’d been interrogated. That’s why he called me, in case I knew who it was. Bella, he doesn’t want you thinking he’s checking up on you, because I told him a bit about why you missed that London job. I mean, before he offered you this.”

“I love you. Thanks for looking out for me, but now I don’t know what to do. It must have been Derek.”

“Then I’ll go and see him.”

“Please, no!” Christie opened her eyes and sat bolt upright. “You’re neighbours and I don’t want things being difficult between you.”

Ashley laughed without humour. “Derek and Ray got into it earlier, so there really is no love lost there.”

“What happened?”

“Derek wanted to know how you are and Ray got all defensive and said... oh. Dammit.”

“What?”

“Silly boy. He said that people like me and Carlo still believe in you. I didn’t think Derek would know Carlo.”

“He’d remember the name. Look, there’s been some strange events lately here. Ingrid came to town and pretended to be someone else.”

“She did what?”

“Tried to break us up.”

“Well, I hope she didn’t succeed.” His voice was outraged and now, Christie smiled.

“Not even close. Ash, Martin asked me to marry him and I said yes.”

“Oh, wait until I tell Ray! Congratulations, darling. Are you going to be alright? Can someone go to Auckland with you?”

“You know, if it was Derek, then he won’t follow through. He’s a coward and I will never let him near me again. Please, please don’t worry. I’ll talk to Martin and our local policeman and let them help.”

With a sigh, Ash agreed. “Okay. But we’re here if you need us. And we’ll be there with an amazing wedding gift when you tell us!”

Christie was laughing as they said goodbye and disconnected the call. Her smile turned to a frown. What the hell was going on now?

\*\*\*

Everything was against him, Rupert decided. He’d barely made it back to River’s End before running out of fuel. Not far from the petrol station, he’d dug up a container and walked the short distance but couldn’t pay. No cash on him, no money in his access account, and now his phone had died, meaning no way to transfer funds. He was directed to the only ATM in town and trudged his way there.

There was plenty of money in the linked account – thousands if Ingrid and Derek did as he told them – yet only an old-fashioned way of getting his hands on it. Hunger gnawed at his stomach and he was sure he was withdrawing from caffeine.

At the bank, he waited behind an old man who took forever to find his glasses, then his card. Eventually, he shuffled away from the ATM. Rupert glanced around. The street was quiet. He inserted his card, tapped in his number, and waited for a balance. Only the same amount as yesterday.

Annoying as it was, this probably wasn't Ingrid or Derek's fault. Just banking delays. He transferred funds to his access account, withdrew some cash, and headed back to the petrol station.

Fuelled up, he left the car up the road from the corner cafe and pushed open the door, almost running straight into Daphne. "Sorry." He couldn't bring himself to look her in the eye.

"Oh, no, my fault. Not looking where I'm going." Daphne peered at him. "You look a little unwell, love. And you should get that cut looked at."

"Um, just a shaving nick. Here, I'll get the door." He opened it quickly, hoping she'd leave, but she didn't move. Her long stare unsettled him and he shifted his weight between feet. "I'll bring Julie by next week and we'll have a look at those houses in the estate. She's getting a bit desperate before bubba arrives."

Daphne smiled and stepped through the doorway. "You do that, Rupert. John is always happy to show you around. Bye for now."

"Goodbye." Relieved, Rupert let the door close behind her. He needed to leave town.



## Chapter Thirty-nine

Outside the real estate agency, Christie spotted Daphne leaving the cafe on the opposite corner. Daphne glanced over her shoulder as she let a car go past, then hurried over, worry lining her normally happy face. Her eyes lit up when she saw Christie, and they managed a kiss to the cheek over the coffees.

“Something isn’t right.” Daphne announced, as Christie opened the door. She put the coffees on the counter. “I just ran into Rupert. I can’t put my finger on it, but there’s something about him that bothers me.”

“It is odd that he’s still here, instead of home with his wife. All he ever did was talk about Lucy and bubba.”

Her mouth dropped open and Daphne struggled for words. “Did you... Christie, what did you call his wife?”

“Lucy.”

“He just called her Julie.”

“Are you sure? It wasn’t just noisy over there?”

“No, it was Julie. And that made me worry all the way back because I thought there was something wrong about it. What kind of man forgets the name of his own wife?”

Christie’s phone beeped a message and she glanced at it. Ashley.

“And what’s more, he has a cut on his cheek that doesn’t look like any shaving nick I’ve seen!”

*The shard.* A crunch underfoot near the garage. The cigarette butt near the bushes and the one at the end of the road. Rupert smoked.

“Where is he now?”

“At the cafe.”

Both women rushed to the door. With coffee in one hand and a sandwich bag in the other, Rupert lumbered toward his car. A dark blue sedan.

“Oh, my,” Daphne bristled. “Him!” She reached for the door handle but Christie stopped her.

“Phone Trev and tell him. I’ll get the registration number and text it to him but you need to stay here! We can’t alert him.”

Without giving Daphne time to argue, Christie slipped through the door as he got into the driver’s seat. She darted across the road between cars. As soon as she was close enough, she took a photo of his car’s plate and then pressed herself against a shop window.

She messaged the photo to Trev. Her own car was around the corner and following Rupert would end up in a chase, for he knew the Lotus. If he drove off before Trev got here, all she could do was point in the right direction.

Her phone beeped again. Ashley. This time she read the message. *Ray saw Ingrid leave your apartment in a hurry yesterday. Derek was home. Thought you should know. Love from us both.*

A siren wailed in the distance. The sedan’s engine roared and Rupert pulled straight out in front of another car. The driver slammed their brakes on, screeching to a halt just in time. Without pausing, the sedan flew along the road toward the mountains. Christie ran to check the driver of the other car, who although pale, waved that they were okay.

Trev’s police car came into view. As he navigated around the stopped car, he wound his window down. “Everyone okay here?”

“Yes, but you need to get Rupert. He went straight ahead.”

The police car accelerated. Daphne and John rushed out and, drawn by the siren, townsfolk appeared on the street. Christie stepped back onto the pavement and the other car continued on its way. *Please catch him.* This had to stop now.

\*\*\*

The minute he cleared the town, Trev let the patrol car loose. This was his community and nothing would stop him catching the sedan this time. He’d radioed dispatch, who were alerting

the forensic team not to leave River's End just yet. All he had to do was find Rupert.

Five minutes on and Trev pulled over at the highest point of the road. He could see for kilometres ahead and there was not a car in view. Between town and here, Rupert had gone to ground, most likely down the side road Charlotte Dean had emerged from yesterday.

He doubled back, eyes flicking at each property he passed. There was an empty place with a fading For Sale sign on the front. On a few acres, the house was set back from the road and surrounded by dense bush. A glint at the far end of the driveway got his attention. He backed up and eased the car in.

Ever so slowly he followed the driveway, right past the house, to where a dark blue sedan was backed into bushes. Rupert sat in the front, eating. He dropped his food and pushed the door open. Trev leapt out. "Hold it."

"Officer. Just having breakfast." Rupert held his hands up, palms forward. "See, nothing in my hands."

"Step out slowly."

"Okay, okay. Man, can't get a few minutes peace for a quick bite." Rupert pulled himself out of the car with a grunt.

"Come to the front of the car."

"What'd I do? You can't arrest me for having breakfast."

"Bit late for breakfast. What are you doing parked here? This is private property."

"It's for sale. I've been looking for a house to buy for my wife—"

"Cut the bull. You've been identified as a person of interest in a break and enter."

"Me? No. I—"

"You've been drinking. I can smell it from here. Don't move." Trev looked in the car. "Interesting. That looks like a bottle of Chivas Regal. In fact, exactly like one stolen last night."



“I bought that.”

“Where?”

“Local bottle shop.”

Trev snorted. “Telling the truth will be better in the long run. Stay put, I’m going to do a breath test.”

“Then what?”

“Then we’ll be having a chat about what you are really doing in River’s End.”

\*\*\*

Too excited to go back inside, Christie and Daphne waited on the pavement outside the real estate agency. John brought Daphne her coffee and squeezed her arm. “You’ve done well.” With a kiss, he returned to work.

“I’m so sorry about what happened to you.” Christie put an arm around Daphne’s shoulders. “Trev will get him.”

“Oh, lovely, it wasn’t just me! All of your brand new appliances! And the poor family going into the estate. We’ve arranged for the mess to be cleared up but they are rather shocked. This doesn’t happen in River’s End!”

“No. And I’m so sorry.” Christie dropped her arm. “I’m sure Derek is behind it.”

“Well, shame on him! And thank goodness you escaped his clutches in time.”

Christie grinned at Daphne’s outrage. She played with her ring and, noticing the movement, Daphne looked at her hand. She squealed and Christie jumped. “What?”

Daphne grabbed Christie’s hand. “Oh! He did it and you said yes! This is the best day! Oh, congratulations, I always knew you were right for each other.” She inspected the ring. “So beautiful!”

“Thank you. George made it.”

“Well, of course he did. And it is just as special as Martha’s ring. Now, tell me all about the proposal. Was it

romantic?”

“Of course. But, oh look! There’s Trev.” As he slowly drove past, Trev nodded, then grinned. In the back seat, Rupert turned his head away.

“He got him!” Christie smiled at Daphne, who stared after the police car. “Hopefully, he’ll find out who is really behind it.”

Daphne burst into tears.

John pushed the door open. “Was that Trev? Oh, Daph...” He patted her on the back. “Didn’t he get him?”

“He did, John. I think Daphne’s a bit overwhelmed.” Christie took her hand. “Let’s go inside.”

“Okay. I’m sorry.” She sniffed. “I am a bit shaky, that’s all.”

“Let’s go, doll.” John accepted her hand from Christie with a small smile of thanks. “I’ll make you a fresh cuppa.” Daphne let him lead her inside. Christie took a moment to gather her own jumbled emotions. She had to let Trev know about the text from Ashley.

\*\*\*

The forensics team left in a hurry when the call came through about Trev’s pursuit. As much as he knew they were just doing their job, Martin was glad to see them go. He’d flatly refused to let them touch anything but the door, the fridge, and the windows. An hour of cleaning almost had the studio back to normal and he opened the windows to clear the smell of ammonia.

Randall wandered in, sniffed the air and left again. Martin saw him settle under a tree near the path to the beach. The day was warm and the humidity was rising, indicating a coming change in the weather. Going out to the shed, he found a replacement door lock.

Halfway through installing it, Christie rang.

“What’s going on in town? The boys here took off in a hurry.”

“Trev caught him!”

“Caught who?”

“Rupert. Daphne and I figured out that he wasn’t who he said he was and then he took off and Trev chased him down.” Christie filled Martin in on the events of the past hour.

“So, is there a trail to Derek?” Martin went to check Randall. “Has Rupert said anything?”

“I only saw Trev for a moment, just to tell him about the shard theory and about Ingrid being at Derek’s place. That last bit got him animated and he was going to call someone in Melbourne straight away. He’s like a man possessed.”

“You still sound stressed.”

Christie sighed. “What if Derek is behind this? I’d feel responsible for what’s happened to Daphne—”

“Stop. Blaming yourself is pointless and unnecessary.” Martin squatted next to Randall, who rolled over to expose his chest for a scratch. “There isn’t a person in town who would hold you accountable for someone else’s actions, so stop doing it. Got me?”

“Hmm. Yes.”

“That isn’t very convincing.”

“How about a sail?”

Martin chuckled. “Are you changing the subject? Do you mean today?”

“I could be ready in half an hour.”

“Sorry, sweetheart. I’ve got to change the lock and some other stuff, and besides, the weather will turn later.”

“Okay, well what about just going to *Jasmine Sea*? Row out and sit there for a bit.”

“Tempting.”

“That means no. Fine, maybe I’ll just row myself out there and sunbathe on the bow.” Christie teased.

“You’re going to row?”

“Not nice. If I don’t practice I’ll never get better. But that’s fine, I might just indulge myself with a visit to the beauty salon instead.”

“What beauty salon?”

“I meant the hairdressers.”

*What are you up to?* There was something in the way she spoke that made Martin wonder. He’d seen the For Sale notice in the window.

“Shall we meet at Palmerston House?” Christie asked.  
“Seeing as I live there?”

“I’ll be there before seven.”

“I can’t wait. I really can’t wait to see you.”

After hanging up, Martin straightened. He missed her just as much. Once she came back from New Zealand, he would ask her to move in with him. They belonged together and it was time they began making some serious plans for their future.



## Chapter Forty

Outside the interrogation room, Trev slammed his open palm into the wall. Rupert refused to say anything, other than to recite that he wanted a lawyer and a smoke.

Pity that Daphne hadn't seen his face, only the back of his head which had been concealed beneath a balaclava. A search of the car, now in the hands of forensics, only turned up a car jack that oddly enough was in the back seat.

Normally on his own at the small station, Trev had help today from the Green Bay uniforms. Gareth manned the phone whilst Jacqui handled the stream of locals who wanted to know what was going on. As he reached the counter, Jacqui was writing a note and glanced up.

"If one more person asks why you were breaking the speed limit in town, I'll arrest them for... something."

"Oops. Don't think I was though."

"Well, this will serve as a press release." She taped the note onto the counter. "Hopefully they will let you get on with your work once we leave."

"Sir, I just got a call from Senior Constable Mayer," Gareth said. "Derek Hobbs was out of his office when they went to interview him. He isn't at his apartment and his secretary either doesn't know his whereabouts, or is concealing them."

"What the hell?" Trev ran a hand through his hair. "You're telling me that Ingrid Kauffman and Derek Hobbs are both off the radar? What about their vehicles?"

Gareth checked his notes. "He doesn't appear to have anything personally registered to him. The Porsche she drives is leased by Hobbs Development International. And it is parked in her garage."

"Maybe they ran away together." Trev leaned against the counter. "You two get some late lunch. Are you right to stay a few more hours?"

“Sarge told us to stick around as long as you need.” Jacqui said. “Do you want anything?”

“Not in the mood to eat, but thanks.”

Alone again a few minutes later, Trev dropped onto his chair. He needed a clear connection between the break-ins and Rupert. And one between Rupert, Ingrid and maybe even Derek. He’d heard bits and pieces about this Hobbs character, none of it good. He’d better keep himself out of River’s End, or it would be a race between himself and Martin as to who got there first.

\*\*\*

With just one more stop before going to Palmerston House to help Elizabeth, Christie drove along the road to the cottage. She was relaxed after an hour at the hairdressers, her hair now straightened and soft against her neck.

She left the Lotus on the grass verge. Barry’s truck was in the driveway and there was a flurry of work around the front of the cottage.

“Hi Christie.” Barry called from near the outline she’d drawn on the front of the cottage. He spoke to one of his men, then joined her on the driveway. “You look nice. All ready for tonight? I believe congratulations are in order.”

“Oh, thank you. Are you coming along?”

“Elizabeth asked. Is it okay with you?”

“Of course! I’d love it.” Christie gave him a hug. “Thank you for everything you’ve done!”

Barry smiled and nodded. “You’re a great client. Anyway, tomorrow we’re going to put the door in. The inside isn’t ready, but there’s no reason not to be prepared. Maybe you and Martin want to take a look together at the artwork and stuff? Don’t really want to touch it.”

“Yes. Great idea. You expecting another delivery?” Christie turned as a white van pulled up outside.

“Nope.”

The van driver opened the side door and pulled out a bunch of roses.

“Looks like it’s for you. I’ll get back to work and see you later.” Barry wandered off.

“Miss Ryan?”

“That’s me.”

“These are for you.” The driver handed over twelve red roses. “There’s a note.”

“Oh. Wow, well, thanks.” Christie read the note aloud. ““Meet you on the boat at five p.m.” Martin had changed his mind. Beautiful roses, twelve more to add to the one he’d given her last night. She had just enough time to get to Willow Bay.

“See you tonight!” She called to Barry, who raised an arm in response. Elizabeth might have to wait. She wasn’t about to stand up her new fiancé.

\*\*\*

The drive to Willow Bay only took a few minutes, but it was after five when Christie drew into the empty car park. Afraid the roses would wilt in the heat, she’d dropped into Palmerston House on the way, found a vase and left them in the foyer. From the laughter out near the pond, Elizabeth and Angus were enjoying their afternoon and she didn’t interrupt them.

She tossed her phone and sunglasses into her handbag and locked the car. If anything, the humidity was worse here. Glad she’d stayed in shorts and t-shirt, she elected to keep her sandals on, figuring the sand would be burning.

From the edge of the water she peered at *Jasmine Sea*. The glare hurt her eyes, so she put her sunglasses back on. There was a dinghy tied to the stern. He was waiting for her.

She found the smallest, lightest dinghy and dragged it to the tideline, then put her sandals in her bag. Once in the waves, she jumped as the water lapped her ankles. So warm. But somewhere deep inside, fear still lurked.

\*\*\*



Rupert banged on the door of the interrogation room. This was bull and he wasn't about to sit around all night waiting for the charges to come to him.

“Step back.” With a rattle of keys, the lock turned. Trev closed the door, crossed his arms, and stared at Rupert.

“I need my phone.”

“No.”

“And a cigarette and first, a visit to the toilet.”

“You can have the last one. Not the others. Come on.” Trev opened the door and gestured for Rupert to go through. “To your left. Then first on the left.” He followed closely behind but stopped short of accompanying Rupert in.

Rupert did what he had to and washed his hands. At that point, Trev opened the door again. “Right?”

“Look, I might be willing to tell you some stuff.”

“Good. Back in the room then.”

“Mate, I need my phone for a reason. It has information on it that might help you.”

“Mate, back in the room.” Trev stepped closer and Rupert moved. His stomach still churned and he wanted to sleep. Locked in again, Rupert threw himself onto the chair. Trev returned almost immediately, followed by a female uniformed officer. She stopped just inside the door, expressionless. Trev sat opposite Rupert, holding his phone.

“What's on it?”

“I'm not admitting to nothing. But if I had a voice message from someone that said, plain as day, that they wanted a certain crime committed, what would that do?”

“You want a deal?”

Rupert leaned forward. “See, I think you can't pin anything on me. You didn't even see me driving under the influence, just sitting in my car. I cut myself shaving and you want to make out that some piece of porcelain did it. I

legitimately buy a nice bottle of scotch that just happens to be the same brand stolen from someone and blame me for it.”

“You done?” Trev looked relaxed. “Nobody mentioned porcelain, so that’s interesting. That bottle of scotch has the fingerprints on it of the owner. As well as you. Interesting. The tyre jack from your car perfectly matches the damage done to the door at Martin’s studio. Interesting. The way I see things, you’ll be spending some quality time in one of our lovely prisons, and I haven’t even got started yet.”

Hands shaking, Rupert dropped his eyes. He couldn’t go to prison, not with all that money waiting for him. Ingrid and Derek would have deposited it now, so it was too late for them. Too late. He raised his eyes. “Would you like to hear the messages?”



## Chapter Forty-one

Elizabeth carried a box of candles into the foyer, past the roses on the table. She looked over her shoulder, and turned around. “Angus?”

“On my way.” He appeared a few seconds later. “Where would you like this box?”

“Oh. Just in the dining room, but look.” She nodded to the vase. “They weren’t here earlier.”

“Odd. Although you were sure you heard the Lotus before, so perhaps they are Christie’s?” He smelt them with a smile. “Not nearly as sweet as yours are.”

Elizabeth continued into the dining room, colour creeping into her face. Angus joined her and put his box down. “Shall I start decorating the table?”

She smiled

“What is that for?” he asked.

“It just feels as though you’ve been here a long time. That you belong here.” She glanced down as he walked around the table to her side.

“Palmerston House is superb. You make everyone so welcome, dear lady. Even that new guest managed to give me a smile earlier on, so she is falling under your spell.”

Her attention suddenly on the candles, Elizabeth unpacked them. “Where do you think Christie disappeared to? Perhaps to see Martin?”

“Perhaps. Knowing her, she’ll be back soon to help.”

“Oh, she doesn’t need to do that, not for her own party.”

“But she will. Few people have such kindness and care for others as our Miss Christie.” Angus took a candle from Elizabeth’s hand. “That is why you both get on so well. Kindred spirits.”

“Thank you, Angus.” She reached for another candle at the same time as Angus and he took her hand in his, bringing it to

his lips

They gazed at each other. Out in the foyer, the phone began ringing.

“I’d better... answer that.”

“Of course.” Angus released her hand and watched her hurry out. In all the years he’d been alone, he’d not once been lonely. Something told him that if he left here, he would become very familiar with the feeling.

\*\*\*

Halfway to *Jasmine Sea*, Christie decided that she wasn’t going to tease Martin anymore. She’d fallen straight into his trap because now he wanted to see if she could row in the straight line. Well, she wouldn’t give up.

She let the dinghy drift whilst she rested, and gazed back to shore. Behind the beach, rising up in a protective semi-circle, was a densely bushed slope. Something glinted in there to the left of the car park. Christie took the oars again and focused on getting to the yacht. To Martin.

By now he should be standing at the stern, offering some sort of encouragement or enticement. Her throat was parched and she’d forgotten to bring bottled water.

The breeze dropped and the harbour was quiet. *Almost there*. She was quite proud of herself, pushing past her silly fears, but Martin could row back, even if they had to pull one dinghy.

\*\*\*

Trev burst out of the interrogation room, leaving Jacqui to close and lock the door behind them both. He ignored Rupert’s cry of “Hey, what about me?” He wanted a phone. And a detective, because this interview was over until someone with a higher pay grade took control. He couldn’t make deals or start to know what to charge Rupert with.

“Jacqui, get onto Sarge and ask him to chase up some suits.”

Jacqui sprinted to catch up with him. “Yes, sir.”

“I’ll need this joker taken to Warrnambool. Can’t keep him here and it’s almost time you head off.”

“We can stay.”

“No. Once you’ve done that, take Gareth and go. You’ve both been great.” Trev stopped at his desk. “I mean it.”

Jacqui nodded and got straight onto the phone.

Trev dialled his own phone. Melbourne was completely outside his area and his experience, but Senior Constable Katrina Mayer lived and breathed the city. They’d gone through academy at the same time but happily embraced their respective postings.

“Senior Constable Mayer,” she answered.

“Katrina, it’s Trev Sibbritt.”

“Thought the number was familiar. Do you have some news?”

“I have a confession. I can’t do much until he’s properly processed, but he’s dropped himself right in it. And he’s dropped your person of interest right in it with him.”

“Ingrid Kauffman?”

“Got some voicemails from her I just listened to. In a nutshell, she directed him to break in to more properties, one being Martin Blake’s studio. Said some pretty damning stuff about Christie Ryan and her cottage. Mentioned Derek Hobbs as being very unhappy if Rupert failed him.”

“Well, that will help. Not that either of them are around. Send me a transcript and I’ll have a talk to the boss now and see what we can do to escalate the search for Ingrid. Is everything else okay?”

“Sure. You?”

“You know. Work. Kids. Never stops, but wouldn’t swap it.”

“Yeah. A good life.”

After hanging up, Trev sat on the edge of his desk. He didn't even know she had kids now. He checked his watch. He wanted to get to Martin and Christie's party, have a drink with them to celebrate. With a bit of luck, he'd get Rupert out of here in time to shower and head over to Palmerston House.

\*\*\*

"Do you think I should wear the new shoes, love?" Daphne had three dresses laid on the bed and dangled a pair of shoes from each hand.

In the ensuite, face streaked with shaving cream, John paused and looked at her in the mirror. "Which are the new ones?"

"Left hand."

"Which dress?"

"I really want to wear my new shoes and then I can pick the right dress."

With a soft sigh, John turned around. "The new shoes will be perfect."

"But what if people think that I'm too old for them? They are so high heeled and I would hate to look foolish." Daphne frowned.

"Nobody would ever think that, doll. You go ahead and wear them and I guarantee you'll get some admiring glances." He wiped his face and wandered out, a towel wrapped around his waist.

"But it is Christie's night, not mine! Oh dear, maybe I shouldn't wear them."

John took the new shoes from Daphne and put them on the bed, then the other pair, which he returned to the closet. "It would seem that you only have one pair, so pick a dress."

Daphne giggled. "I was being silly, wasn't I?"

"A little. And a bit excited." John kissed her cheek. "We're going to have a lovely evening and you've done well to find such a nice gift on short notice."

“Thank you. I just wanted something those two can take on board *Jasmine Sea*. Martin is so big on his picnics but I know how tiny the galley is. What could be nicer than catching your own fish and cooking them on your own barbecue?” She picked up one dress and held it against herself. “I can’t believe how small they make those covered grills these days. Perfect for when we go camping.”

“Huh?”

“When we retire. I was thinking about a little caravan.”

“That dress is lovely.” He changed the subject as he returned to the ensuite. “I’m going to have a quick shower, then the bathroom is all yours.”

“Maybe the other dress. Sure, love. We’ve got plenty of time but if we get there early, I can help Elizabeth.”

The shower turned on and Daphne smiled. She was only half joking about the caravan.

\*\*\*

Christie perched on the side of the yacht, rubbing tired arms. There was no sign of Martin on deck. Purple storm clouds approached. The air almost crackled with humidity and a hot breeze ruffled her hair. So much for having it straightened. The natural wave was already returning.

“Martin, I’m here.” She called from the top of the steps. If it was any other time, there might have been a delightful picnic laid out downstairs. Not on the bed, of course, because Martin didn’t believe in eating in bed. “Shall I come to you?”

Only the seagulls answered, circling around the boat in interest. *Are you okay?* What if he’d fallen? What if he was laying in the galley unconscious? Christie rushed down the steps.

The galley was empty but a filled ice bucket was on the table. In it, a bottle of champagne. *Expensive champagne.* Christie turned it in the bucket to be certain. Only last night, she’d told Martin she didn’t like champagne. “Martin! Where are you?”



Christie forced herself to the bedroom and pushed the half door open. It was dark. Trembling so much that she had to try twice, she found the light switch and turned it on.

“Hello, baby. You finally made it.” Back against a pile of pillows, legs sprawled on the bed, feet bare, Derek held out his hand. “Grab the glasses, Chris. We’ve got a lot to celebrate.”



## Chapter Forty-two

Martin leaned on the deck railing with a glass of iced tea. Another hour, or two at the most, before River's End would be engulfed by the storm. By the colour of the clouds and overwhelming humidity, it would drop a bucket load of rain, preceded by hot winds. He intended to be at Palmerston House well before then.

Trev had just called with the welcome news that Rupert would be charged with a range of offences including drink driving, break and enter, and wilful damage. Even better was the arrest warrant for Ingrid. Although her whereabouts still eluded Melbourne police, Trev said it was just a matter of time.

“What about Derek?” Martin had asked.

“He is a person of interest. At this stage, we want a nice chat.”

“And when will that happen, Trev?”

“When he's located.”

“Located?”

“Don't worry. His secretary finally told us he'd driven out to a new development west of the city. Sooner or later he'll front up at his office or apartment and will be making himself available to answer some interesting questions.”

“You're sure he's not coming here?”

“I'm fairly sure Melbourne have it under control, Martin. All you need to worry about is dressing up nice for tonight so that your fiancée is proud of you.”

Now, Martin smiled at the word fiancée. He glanced at his watch. Close to five-thirty. With another hour and a half to the party, she'd be making herself beautiful about now.

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This wasn't possible. Yet, there he was, with a look of pure evil on the face she'd hoped never to see again. Her feet

gripped the floor as though anchored. *Run*. Her heart wasn't beating, she was sure it wasn't, and there was no air in her lungs.

"The champagne won't bring itself in, Chris. Do you want me to get it?" Derek swung his feet over the side of the bed. He smiled. "My God, I've missed you so much."

A surge of outrage dominated the fear. "How dare you."

"What did you say?" Derek stood up.

"How dare you send me an anonymous note, knowing I would think it was from Martin! How dare you come on board my yacht and make yourself comfortable on my bed."

Derek burst into laughter. Hands clenched into tight balls, Christie glared at him. This wasn't the man she'd once loved.

He stopped laughing, but the sneer remained. "Your boat. Seriously, you don't even like the water so why would you buy a boat?"

"I didn't buy it."

"Ah. That's what he did to win your... affection. Outdo me. After all, I only gave you expensive jewellery and clothes, and exotic holidays. Oh wait. You didn't really come along on all of those, did you?"

"Get off my yacht."

"We've got a lot of making up to do, baby, so let's open the champagne." He took a step toward Christie and she backed through the half doors. "Good. I'm glad you're seeing sense."

In the galley, Christie took the bottle out of the bucket and put it aside, then tipped the ice over the floor as quietly as she could. *Run*. He meant her harm. She had to get to the dinghy.

"What's taking so long?"

She flew up the steps into a wall of humidity and a cloud-laden sky. After throwing her handbag over her head, she worked on the knot holding the dinghy. "Come on, come on." Her fingers barely moved the rope.

“What the hell!” Derek yelled, followed by a thud and swearing.

Christie almost had the rope untied.

Footsteps thumped up the steps behind her and she scrambled away just as he burst onto the deck. “You bitch.”

The yacht began rocking heavily from blustery, hot wind, forcing Christie to clamber around the side of the cabin almost on her hands and knees.

“Get back here!” Derek’s fury spurred Christie on. She could double back and finish undoing the rope. In seconds she’d be on the dinghy and rowing harder than she’d ever done before. Near the bow, she straightened up. Derek wasn’t far behind her.

“Stop, Derek!” She cried out. “We can sort this out on land.”

Panting heavily, Derek kept coming, but with difficulty. He limped, his left foot leaving a trail of blood on the timber boards. Distracted by his foot, Christie misjudged how close he was and now there was nowhere for her to run. He stopped, bracing his legs apart to counter the movement of the boat. “You little bitch. We’ll be sorting this out here and now.”

\*\*\*

Against his better judgement, Trev gave Rupert access to his mobile phone again. He stood behind him, making sure nothing was tampered with. “You’ll get a chance to make phone calls soon.”

“It isn’t that.”

“Then what? Photos of your family?”

Rupert glanced at Trev, annoyed. His imaginary family was one of the things that got him caught. The moment he’d said ‘Julie’ instead of ‘Lucy’, he’d realised his mistake. Daphne didn’t seem to notice at the time, but Christie put it all together. Clever girl.

“I’m playing Candy Crush.”

“Smart arse.”

“I need to make sure I’ve got enough in the bank to post bail.”

“What, won’t Derek do it?”

“You know, under different circumstances I’d like to have a beer with you.”

Trev grunted. “Not feeling that. You’ve caused a lot of distress to some fine people. Not exactly a good way to start a friendship.”

“And I’ll make up for it. Told you, I’ll roll over on Ingrid. In a manner of speaking.”

“And Derek?”

“He’s just my boss. Nothing to do with this.”

Trev shut up, more interested in watching Rupert log in to his bank account. The first account had a couple of hundred in it. Then, he switched to another account. His fingers flew up and down the transactions and he swore under his breath. He logged out and handed the phone back.

“Not enough for the bail?” Trev headed for the door.

“Mate, you might want to get those detectives here before I change my mind. Derek Hobbs is behind the whole thing and unless you know where he is right now, I’d be worried.”

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As quickly as it rose, the wind completely dropped again, leaving an eerie silence. Christie held her hands up in front of her chest, palms toward Derek. There was alcohol on his breath.

“I’m sorry you’re hurt and we’ll get that looked at once we’re back in River’s End.” Her voice was calm. “You scared me. I wasn’t expecting you here and—”

“No. You we’re expecting your precious artist. Well, first things first. You and I are going back downstairs to make things right.”

“We’re past that.”

“Oh, I’d be thinking carefully, Chris. If you want that deadbeat left in one piece, then you’ll do what I say.”

Prickles of fear ran up Christie’s spine. “Why did you send Rupert?”

Derek blinked. “Who?”

“He broke into my garage. And then, he broke into three other places, doing terrible damage and causing a lot of distress.”

“I didn’t tell him to do that.”

“He wanted to buy the cottage, Derek. And I kind of admire your persistence.” Christie shuffled her feet a fraction, keeping eye contact. “I’m attached to it though, so even Ingrid going through my things wasn’t going to scare me into selling it to a random stranger.”

“That was her idea.”

“I believe you. She never liked me, not from the first time we met, in our home. Ours, Derek.”

“I told her she was an idiot. I wouldn’t let her hurt you, Christie. See, I called you Christie.”

“She always wanted you, and I was in her way.” She shuffled again. Just a little bit more and there might be enough room to get past him.

“Well, she’s well and truly gone now. She took off once she realised she’d gone too far. The police were sniffing around looking for her and they can have her. What I care about is you coming home with me.”

Christie lowered her hands. “I’m going to Auckland in a couple of days. Work.”

“With Carlo.”

“Yes, with Carlo.”

“Then you’re coming back. To our apartment?” Derek glanced at her hands and she quickly put her right hand over

her left. “Are you?”

“I don’t know how long I’ll be.”

“I do. Two weeks. In fact, I’m booked on the outward flight with you, but thought we might begin the process of reuniting early.”

*Oh God. You have been stalking me.* Sick to her stomach, Christie dropped her eyes. The shaking in her hands got worse and she curled her fingers around each other.

“Are you wearing a ring?”

“What?”

“Show me.” Derek grabbed both of her arms and spun them both around, so that his back was to the water. “Don’t walk away from me!”

“Derek, I—”

“Show me.” He yanked her left arm so hard that she cried out. He stared at her hand. “There’s only one ring that belongs there.”

It was like *deja vu*. Last year, he’d let himself in to the cottage, demanding she wear his engagement ring again. His anger-fuelled strength and her sense of helplessness had stopped her from fighting back.

“Take it off.”

“Derek, stop this now.”

“You can’t just do what you’re told. You have to make everything so hard.” His face reddened and his grip on her hand tightened. “Take it off.”

“Okay. Okay, I will. Just let go, you’re hurting me too much.”

“Say please.”

“Please.”

He dropped her hand and she started to wiggle the ring off. “It’s tight, just give me a moment.”



A satisfied smirk curled his lips. A strong gust of wind unsettled the water. The yacht rolled slightly and Christie adjusted her feet to brace herself, all the time concentrating on her hand.

Derek glanced behind himself at the churning sea and Christie slipped the ring into the outside pocket of her handbag, and pushed it behind her.

She lunged at Derek, hands in tight fists. They hit him in the stomach and as he doubled over, she pushed with all of her strength. One, two, three steps staggering back and he teetered at the very edge of the bow.

Arms flapping to regain his balance, Derek grabbed at her, missing as she dropped to her knees. This time, she wasn't helpless. *Get off my boat!* She hit his bleeding foot. He howled in pain and after one more shove, fell overboard.



## Chapter Forty-three

Christie threw herself full length onto the deck and peered over the side. Derek could swim. But he'd been drinking. *What have I done?* He burst up with a shower of foam, spluttering and cursing.

"Throw me..." he spat water out, "a line!" He waved his arms around. "You'll regret that."

No. She wasn't regretting anything now and pushed herself back onto her feet.

"Dammit! I'm drowning." He dog-paddled in a circle.

Christie unhooked a lifebuoy from the side of the cabin. "I'll send someone to fish you out."

"Throw it to me!" He screamed in fury.

"Say please."

"I'm going to kill him. Then you."

Stone cold terror filled Christie and she backed away.

"Wait, sorry. Please throw it." His pleas followed her to the stern, where she untied first one dinghy, then the other. She had to move *Jasmine Sea*. In a minute or two he'd work out that simply swimming to the stern and climbing up was an option. She sent the lifebuoy flying over his head to force him to swim away.

There was no way she could raise the anchor in time. From under the seat near the stern, she retrieved the spare key. After a couple of attempts, the motor burst into life and over it, Christie heard Derek yell.

In a fixed tackle box, she found Martin's bolt cutters. She staggered to the bow, grabbing at the railing as the yacht pitched around. Using all of her strength she cut through the anchor's chain and felt the yacht sigh in relief.

A distant rumble of thunder barely registered as she dragged herself back to the wheel, struggling now to stay upright against increasing winds. She opened the throttle and

pointed the bow toward the gap between the cliffs. *Jasmine Sea* responded, moving smoothly through the chopiness.

Somehow, she'd got away. Derek was just now clambering into a dinghy. He'd never catch her in that. She'd keep her distance until help arrived. She dug around in her handbag and found her phone.

Christie let out a sob. The phone was dead. Too many phone calls ago she'd forgotten to keep it plugged in and charging. It was almost dark now and in moments she'd have to decide where to go. *Calm down!* Regulating her breathing, she pushed the panic aside.

There was a radio downstairs, next to where Martin kept the charts. She turned off the motor and stumbled down the steps, almost falling in her haste. She pressed the on button. Nothing happened. She moved the dial and again, no response so followed the power cord behind the bench and along the wall to where it was plugged in.

In disbelief, she dropped to the floor and burst into tears. The cord was cut in two.

\*\*\*

Martin stepped out of the shower to the sound of his phone. Almost tripping over Randall, who had a thing about laying across the bathroom doorway, he struggled to swipe the screen with damp fingers.

“Martin, it's Trev.”

“What's wrong?”

“Bit of an update. Is Christie with you?”

“No. She's at Palmerston House. Why?”

“Probably nothing. Our friend Rupert decided to spill his guts and it's pretty damning about Derek Hobbs.”

Martin reached into the bathroom for a towel. “How.”

“In a nutshell, Derek sent Rupert to buy the cottage. It was all on track as far as they were concerned, with Christie leading Rupert to believe she might consider it.”

Martin put the phone on speaker and dropped it onto the bed as he dried himself. “Okay. If he says so.”

“Anyway, with Ingrid butting in and starting her chain of events, Derek got hot under the collar and told Rupert he wanted results. At any price. Your name came up quite a bit and so did hers.”

“Did he threaten Christie?” Tossing the towel into a washing basket with more force than he needed, Martin’s voice hardened. “I’m heading down there now.”

“The threats were more against you, mate. Look, we don’t know where he is. No sign of him at his office or apartment and now it turns out he booked a hire car a few hours ago.”

“So, he’s heading here?”

“Probably not. More than likely he’s gone to meet up with Ingrid and its all bluff and bravado. But keep an eye out, okay?”

“Are you coming along tonight?”

“Expect to. At this rate, I might stay in kit.”

“I’ll see you shortly.” Martin hung up and dialled Christie, taking the phone off speaker. It went straight to voicemail and he grimaced. “Sweetheart, I’m leaving in five minutes, but do me a favour and stay close to Angus. Give Trev a ring if anything odd happens, okay? See you soon.”

So much for charging her phone. *We’ll talk about that.* Calling the landline at Palmerston House would only slow him now, and he’d be there in a few moments anyway. He finished dressing and threw on some shoes.

Randall followed him through the house as Martin collected his wallet and keys. “Better you stay here.” He patted Randall’s head at the door. “No point us both getting wet on the way home.”

The air was still hot and sticky but a strong breeze warned of the imminent change ahead. Martin slid the door closed. Lightning forked into the sea out along the horizon and he turned to watch heavy clouds scuttle across the darkening sky.

A long, low rumble of thunder followed. At least Christie was safe with their friends.

\*\*\*

Not knowing how long she'd huddled on the floor, weeping, Christie jumped at the thunder. *Pull yourself together*. There was a way out of this mess. The yacht was drifting and with no anchor, anything could go wrong.

Back on deck, she realised just how far away from the mooring she'd come. Much longer and those rocks around the cliffs would have sunk the boat. Once the motor was started, she brought *Jasmine Sea* back to the channel. "Safe passage means keeping an even distance from each side. It's a good channel, deep and quite predictable in any weather, but also narrow. Stay in the middle."

His words spun in her head. *Deep*. Yes, of course the water was deep here. She scrambled to the seats and found a life jacket.

Derek wanted to kill Martin. She had no way of warning him or anyone else, thanks to the power cord that Derek must have cut when he boarded. He'd really thought of everything. Charm her with champagne, but just in case, make sure she had no way of calling for help.

"I'm not your little doormat anymore!" She screamed toward the beach. The wind whipped the words away but she didn't care. She had stood up to Derek. Stopped him from hurting her. Now, she had to protect the man she loved.

With a careful hand and using the last moments of dull light to guide her, Christie steered *Jasmine Sea* between the cliffs. The storm loomed from the south-west which would help her get to River's End. It was only around the headland, just a couple of nautical miles. This might be the hardest thing she'd ever do. But do it she would.

Martin had spoken of the laws of attraction. Christie visualised the jetty. It would be dark and the tide tricky, but she could get there and safely tie the yacht. Then, she'd get to his house, fly into his arms and he'd make everything alright

again. A huge gust of wind slowed the yacht, the motor complaining. Christie cut it.

Now there was just the sound of the water and the occasional thunder. She was on the open sea. Above deep water. *The jetty*. She forced her feet to move and her hands to follow the instructions she gave them. The boat creaked and groaned as she raised the sails and then the spinnaker filled and *Jasmine Sea* raced toward River's End.

\*\*\*

Saturated, bleeding, and fuelled by an anger that made his head pound, Derek rowed to shore. In his whole life he had never been so humiliated. So hurt. As if his heart had been ripped out and thrown overboard alongside him. He'd gone to so much trouble to make things right and she'd lost her mind. He was going to find Martin Blake. And then he'd find Chris.

The dinghy stopped abruptly a couple of metres from shore and Derek swore as he clambered out into knee deep water. Everything hurt. He left the dinghy where it was and trudged onto dry sand. His shoes were on that yacht. Along with his fiancée.

"I love you, Chris." He did. She was his and one way or another, despite her confusion, she would find that out very soon.

Derek tried to make the torch on his phone work but not even one light would flicker. He threw it into the ocean. There was a torch keyring on his car keys, so he took those out and this time there was a small beam. He had to keep his thumb on the button, but after a couple of stumbles, got himself to the car park.

His foot still bled from sliding on the ice cubes, straight into the leg of the table, slicing between his toes. God, it hurt. He'd probably pick up some disease. Martin Blake would pay for that as well.

The trees enclosed him and he lost his bearings. His cut foot hit something metal and he almost screamed in pain, dropping to his knees. It was a crowbar. Pain forgotten, Derek

got back up and worked out where he was. He smiled. First the artist.

\*\*\*

Palmerston House was a picture as Martin drove Thomas' old four wheel drive along the driveway. The first sprinkle of rain had begun as he'd left his house, so he'd gone back for the car keys and thankfully it started first time. It occurred to him that having something other than his motorcycle would be a likely addition in the future. Christie's Lotus was all very well for her needs, but once they had a family, they'd need a second car.

Soon, Thomas and Martha would be home, and Christie was only going to be away for a fortnight. He'd use the time to finish his painting and make a plan for them both. Then they could work out the details and decide a date to marry. For the first time in his life, Martin had purpose beyond his art.

No more days and nights that drifted into weeks and months, with him rarely leaving the property, except to shop or give George a chance to attend his council meetings. Randall was an amazing companion, but now there was more. Light and life, love and passion filling him with a yearning to begin.

He drove around the fountain and parked facing back to the road. The rain stopped. As he got out, he saw Angus come through the open front door. By the time Martin reached the steps, Angus was at the bottom, worry in his eyes.

"You look concerned." Martin shook his hand.

"It's just that..." Angus glanced down the driveway. "We thought Christie must be with you."

"Angus? Is she not here?"

"No."

Martin turned to leave, but Angus put a hand on his arm. "Come inside. We need to show you something." Angus dropped his hand and went back up the steps.

Martin followed. "When did she leave?"

"We've not seen her since this morning."



Elizabeth was just inside the door, her smile dropping when only Angus and Martin came in. “Oh. She’s not with you.”

“No. I’ve got to find her.”

“Martin, what about the note though?” Elizabeth hurried to the roses and extracted the note. “I wouldn’t pry, but Christie dropped by earlier and left these. We didn’t see her, just heard the car, but we got concerned with the storm coming and tried to call her.”

“She let her battery go flat.” Martin forced the words out. *Where is she?* “I don’t understand.”

“The note, dear. To meet you on the yacht.”

“I didn’t send a note. Or roses.”

“It says ‘meet you on the boat at five p.m.’ but if you didn’t send it, then who did?”

All the colour drained from Martin’s face. “No. No, this can’t be happening.”



## Chapter Forty-four

With no moon to light the way, Christie kept *Jasmine Sea* under tight control, preventing her from skimming across the water as fast as she wanted to. Once she'd rounded the headland, keeping a fair distance from the cliff, it took all of her strength and strategy to haul the yacht toward land again.

The further she got from Derek, the more Christie worried. Taking the yacht into open sea at night was fraught with danger and she was painfully aware of the risks. With no radio or phone, any miscalculation could be fatal. The idea of sinking the yacht made her ill. But what choice had there been? Derek would have found a way to catch her if she'd tried to row to shore. He was crazy. Something in his mind had snapped and she no longer believed he would listen to her.

What if he got to Martin first? Christie cried out in fear. But Martin was strong, fast, and not exhausted. Even if Derek attacked him, surely Martin could fend him off? What if he caught him off guard, as he had done with her? What if he hurt Randall? Round and round, one question led to another, until she buried her head in her hands. *Stop it. Get to the jetty.*

She dropped the spinnaker as she closed in on River's End. The wind buffeted *Jasmine Sea* from the side, pitching her about in high seas. To her left, the light at Martin's house was a beacon of hope. There was no way Derek would get there before her. He was injured and might not even be back on land yet. This nightmare was almost over. But she had to get to Martin.

Christie started the motor, sails down, as the jetty came into view. Although the stormy conditions increased the swell, the jetty was as safe a place as any to tie up. She kept the wheel aligned and slowly eased the yacht against the end of the jetty. The side of the boat scraped along the timber, sending a shudder through the deck. Before it could move away, Christie was at the stern, throwing the rope over an exposed pylon and pulling with all her might. It wasn't perfect, but she was here.

She turned off the motor. She'd done it. The elation vanished as her body remembered it was exhausted. *Soon. Just find Martin.* From yacht, to jetty, to sand, she forced her legs forward.

\*\*\*

Rain beat down on the windscreen. Thomas' patchy wipers were next to useless at clearing it. Protesting at the speed Martin forced it to do, the old car rattled but responded up the hill to Willow Bay.

How had he missed this? He'd spoken to Christie a few hours ago and her plans were to go to the hairdressers and then the cottage for a while. That must be where the roses were delivered. And of course she would think he'd sent them, after she'd asked him to go sailing today. My God, she must have been so happy, thinking he'd changed his mind and wanted to steal an hour with her. Instead of painting, he could have prevented this.

If Derek laid one finger on her... his fingers tightened on the steering wheel until they turned white.

His phone rang as he reached the narrow road to Willow Bay. "Christie?"

"Trev. Sorry, mate."

Martin accelerated. "Angus told you?"

"Yup. I've got dispatch on it and we'll have the bastard before anything happens. Where are you?"

"Just pulling into the car park. Her car is here. I'll call you back." Martin leapt out, leaving the door open. "Christie!" The Lotus' top was up and the car was locked and empty. He reached back into Thomas' car for the phone, then ran toward the beach.

Thunder rumbled from the other side of the cliffs. The storm was almost upon him. Wind whipped up the tide. A dinghy floated in and out with the waves. Martin waded in, hauling it onto the sand. The oars were in the bottom. Something else. He flashed his phone's torch below the seat. It was blood.

“No, no, no.” He dialled Trev and scanned the bay. A flash of lightning. “I need you here. There’s blood in a dinghy.” Another flash and this time, he was sure. Icy fingers of despair expanded from his stomach, until his whole body froze in this hot, humid night.

“Martin? Are you there?” Trev yelled. “I can’t hear you.”

She was gone. His whole world was gone in an instant. The light and love, life and passion lost. Derek had Christie and it was his fault. He was helpless and alone.

“We’re almost there.”

“Trevor. *Jasmine Sea* is gone.”

\*\*\*

The moment Christie left the jetty, Derek emerged from the shadows. He’d find her in a while, but his priority was to make sure Martin Blake was never a problem again.

There was no way the artist would leave the boat here and besides, he’d want to make sure Derek wasn’t around. This beach was no place to drop anchor and in spite of Christie’s claim of ownership, Derek knew the artist was its true master.

Derek swung the crowbar around like a sword as he hobbled across the sand. His foot was killing him and he was short on time. When this was over, Christie could look after him. Answer his every call and spend a lot of time making up for what she’d done. Once she remembered her place with him, she would never, ever leave him again.

The jetty creaked, sea spray soaking his legs again. Getting aboard was tricky with the movement of the yacht and his muscles screamed every time he moved. He could have drowned out there, even with the lifebuoy so reluctantly provided. *God, I’m forgiving.* He used the crowbar to steady himself as he clambered over the rail.

He retrieved his shoes. It was agony getting his damaged foot in and laces tied. Back in the galley, the ice had melted, leaving puddles soaking into the timber. He’d left blood behind on the leg of the table. Good DNA there so just as well there’d be no way to get it soon.

Christie's handbag was on the table near the radio, her phone half out. It was dead, but he pocketed it and went through her bag, taking her car and house keys. Her credit cards and drivers licence were replaceable, along with bits of make-up. That was it, except... in the front pocket, her ring.

Triumphant, Derek held it aloft. A diamond and four emeralds. Not nearly as impressive or expensive as the one he'd bought her in London. Maybe he'd get the stones removed and turned into something else. She'd never be able to say he'd thrown it away, much as he wanted to toss it overboard. No, this was a bonus. In case she stayed defiant.

He opened the hatch to the so-called engine room, a space barely big enough to stand in. This was the lowest part of the yacht, with just a couple of layers of timber between him and the ocean. There was a rubber mallet hanging on a hook. Inserting the sharp, flat end of the crowbar between two boards, he hit the end with the mallet. And again, and again, twisting it until, with a slight 'pop', it moved. He pulled it back out and a tiny spring of sea water bubbled up.

It had to be enough. Any faster and Martin would get into a half sunk boat. He had to hope, between the storm, the damage he'd done to the lifejackets, and the distance back to Willow Bay, *Jasmine Sea* and Martin Blake would find themselves submerged.

\*\*\*

Trev ran to the beach waving a massive torch. Martin stood ankle deep in the water.

"Martin. Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." He took the torch, pausing the powerful light on each yacht. "She's gone."

"Well, we're going to find her. Coast Guard is on their way."

"I asked you if Derek was coming here." Martin's voice was flat, completely devoid of emotion.

Trev took his torch back. "Come on, we're going to find her, but not by standing here." He put a hand on Martin's

shoulder. “Is there any chance she simply went for a sail?”

“Do you think it’s possible? That Derek isn’t even involved?” Trev’s expression gave away his thoughts and Martin stalked across to the dinghy he’d retrieved. “Whose blood is it then?”

Trev turned the light on the dinghy. “No way of knowing. Maybe she cut herself. Maybe it’s his. But speculating isn’t finding her so I’d suggest we get going.”

Both men jogged up the slope to the carpark, the wind at their backs.

“What the hell?” Trev spotted a trail of blood leading into the bushland. Just a few drops here and there, and washing away as the rain intensified, but a trail nonetheless.

“Whoa. Stop. Look there.” Trev focused the torch on a dark spot in the bushes.

“What is it?”

“Balaclava. As in, the one used by Rupert. Whoever the blood belongs to, they’ve stumbled on Rupert’s stash.”

“Stash?”

“He threw away his balaclava. And a crowbar.”

Martin was quiet. Trev glanced at him. “What?”

“The wind is coming from the south-west. Christie knows to go with the wind. We need to leave.” Galvanised, Martin rushed to Thomas’ car. The motor turned, groaned, and spluttered.

“You know, I have these things called siren and lights. Wanna lift?” Trev grinned as Martin slammed the door on the old car.

\*\*\*

Thunder rumbled across the bay as Christie staggered to the top of the cliff. She struggled with every breath, her vision blurry. Thirst racked her body. *I made it.*

At last on the deck, her hope disappeared. The door was closed and the lights off inside. He'd already left. She put her hand on the glass and rested her forehead beside it. Eyes closed, her heartbeat slowed and she drew her breath in deeply, feeling it circulate.

From the other side of the door, Randall whined and Christie opened her eyes. She slid the door across and he threw himself at her. "Hey, it's okay, doggie." Before he got wet, Christie stepped inside and when Randall joined her, closed the door.

"Martin?" It was a hopeful call. He wouldn't be here in the dark. She needed to plug her phone in and call him. And Trev and anyone else who would help.

But, her phone wasn't in her pocket.

Her handbag wasn't around her neck. It was where she'd abandoned it to follow the power cord. Her car and house keys were in it. *My engagement ring!* She knelt down to put her arms around Randall's neck.

"What do I do?" His tail thumped the ground and he licked her face. "I'm so tired, Randall." She needed the keys to the Lotus and the cottage. And she was not leaving her ring behind.

Palmerston House was a kilometre away. The yacht was half that distance. Running back down the cliff would only take a few moments and then she would cut inland beside the river. She'd go to the first house she found and get help.





## Chapter Forty-five

The patrol car only got to end of the track before pulling over when a second unit turned in. Trev got out to speak with Jacqui and Gareth.

Flashing lights, rain, night time. The terror of some incomprehensible event. Martin pressed his fingers against his temple. He barely remembered the night his parents and grandmother died. Such a little boy, secure in a booster seat. Uniformed police milled around, that he recalled. Concerned voices. *Panic*. Thomas arriving. His beloved, strong grandfather weeping at a funeral for three.

Christie promised she'd never leave him. Outside the cottage, under starlight, she'd taken his hands and assured him she would always return if she needed to work. She understood his childhood loss. Two of a kind, yet so different in the way they managed the pain. And somehow, they'd found each other.

Trev slid back behind the wheel. "We're going." He glanced at Martin as he started the motor. "You right?"

"We need to get to the jetty."

"Yup. Going now." He eased the car onto the main road and put the siren on. "Those two will dig around in the bush and keep an eye out, in case she comes back in."

"What if he has her?"

"Coast Guard isn't far away."

"We need more people looking."

"More are coming. What you need to do is stay calm, and as your friend, I know that's hard. Focus on what we know. There's a KALOF out on the car that Derek Hobbs hired."

"A what?"

"Shorthand for don't miss it going past."

"I need to update Angus."

"Call him."

Trev's radio crackled. The conversation made little sense to Martin, but a few words from dispatch and Trev accelerated. "There's been a sighting of a car that might be his."

"Where?"

"Heading to the cottage."

"Drop me near the jetty."

"Best I can do is the bridge, mate. Take my torch and follow the river. Phone me as soon as you get there. Right?"

Martin nodded, dialling Palmerston House. In a few minutes he'd be on his feet and one way or another, he'd find his girl.

\*\*\*

Derek squatted in a protected alcove near the stone steps, ready to watch Martin Blake leave on the yacht and disappear into the storm. Then, he'd find Chris. She'd be upset about the artist, but accidents happen, and after all she'd left the yacht there in dangerous weather.

Lightning flashed into the ocean nearby. Someone jogged toward the jetty, their head down against the wind. Thunder boomed and Derek backed into his shelter a bit more. He was right, the artist would never leave his precious boat tied to a jetty that soon would be under water. He laughed. Served him right for stealing another man's woman.

The figure stopped at the end of the jetty, looking back as a dog ran into view. The person leaned down to talk to the dog, then straightened. As they stepped onto the jetty, the sky lit up. Not Martin Blake. With long hair plastered to her shoulders, it was Christie.

\*\*\*

The gusts of wind and rain worked against Christie, but refreshed by water and a few moments of rest, she found the strength to jog to the jetty. There was a bark behind her and Randall galloped across the sand, tail wagging furiously.

"Oh, you naughty boy." Christie was dismayed. "How did you get out? Now we'll both be in trouble."

A flash of lightning startled her. It was so close, going straight into the ocean. One minute and they would be on their way to the river. *Just one more minute.* Randall on her heels, she got to *Jasmine Sea*.

“Stay here. I’ll be right back.” She climbed onto the deck. The boat had a life of its own, moving erratically with the wind and the waves and she realised she should have tied it from two points, not one. Christie gripped the rail until she reached the bottom of the steps. With a sigh of relief, she saw her bag.

The front pocket was empty. *No! It has to be here.* She turned the bag upside down. Her keys were gone. So was her phone. She had to get off the yacht.

Back on deck, she couldn’t see Randall on the jetty. But then there was a cold nose on her leg and she almost cried. “I told you to stay.”

Derek might be on the yacht, or lurking nearby. “Come on, doggie, we’re going to find dad.” Through the wind, she heard her name called.

“Martin! I’m here!” She shouted, peering through the rain toward his house. Nobody was there. *Stop imagining things.* She checked the rope, afraid *Jasmine Sea* would break loose.

Again, her name. This time, she looked toward the other end of the beach, where the stone steps led to the graveyard. There was a person running toward her. Not running. Hobbling.

Hand still on the rope, Christie watched in horror as Derek drew closer. He waved and yelled. There was no way to get off the boat and then the jetty. Terror froze her in place.

Randall barked. It wasn’t just about her any longer. She undid the rope with a quick tug. Before she could change her mind, Christie threw herself to the wheel and wrenched it away from the jetty.

Derek was on the jetty. He screamed at her, over and over. “Stop. You have to stop.”

He was going to kill her. And Martin. She realised she'd started the engine and just as Derek got close enough to grab the side of the yacht, she widened the distance.

\*\*\*

Angus hung up the phone and turned frantic eyes to Elizabeth. The others – Daphne and John, Sylvia, and Barry – huddled around, wanting to know what Martin said.

As each had arrived, Elizabeth had recounted the little that they knew. Christie was missing, presumed lured to *Jasmine Sea* by her ex-fiancé. Emotions from anger to fear filled the small group. Angus paced the floor, inconsolable until the phone rang.

“Martin is going to the jetty. The hope is Christie is alone on the yacht and heading for the beach.”

“How does he know that?” Daphne gripped John’s hand.

“Educated guess. He is being dropped at the bridge in a moment or two.”

“Where is Trev?” Barry demanded.

“Apparently the car Derek Hobbs hired was seen going toward Christie’s cottage.”

“I’ll go.” Barry strode toward the front door.

“Please wait. Martin might need us. The police are quite capable of going there without any of us getting in the way and we should stay here. We should gather some blankets and towels. And... well, we need to be alert.” Angus sank onto a chair and Elizabeth hurried to his side

“I didn’t think of that, but yes, we should be prepared.” Barry turned back.

With Elizabeth’s hand on his shoulder, Angus took a deep breath. “Thank you. I am so very worried.”

“Martin must be beside himself.” Elizabeth spoke quietly. Angus reached up and patted her hand.

The headlights of a car flashed across the windows. Daphne peered out. “Oh dear, it’s George. Do you think he

knows?”

“I’d think not. Perhaps it is time for us to work out how best we can assist.” Angus stood up. He kissed Elizabeth’s cheek. “We must believe Martin will find her.”

\*\*\*

The worst of the storm was directly overhead as Martin ran alongside the river. Swollen by the rain, the normally slow and shallow channel lapped the edges of the narrow track. Thank goodness Trev had insisted he take the torch.

She must be at the jetty. They’d talked once about sailing to River’s End beach and tying up there so he knew she’d remember it was possible. She had to remember.

The wind hit him as he reached the sand. The torch sliced through the rain to the jetty, but he couldn’t see the yacht. Unless it was at the very end... holding the torch up high, Martin jogged toward the tideline.

“Come back!” A faint cry reached him. There was the silhouette of a man, staggering to the beach end of the jetty. The beam of light caught the man’s attention and he looked straight at Martin. *Derek*. Fury and dread mingled into one overriding emotion. Martin flew toward him.

Derek got to the beach first. He faltered as his feet hit the sand and had no chance as Martin tackled him to the ground. The torch spun into the shallows as Martin pinned him face down.

“Where is she?” Martin put his hands around Derek’s neck. “You have one chance.”

“You’re choking me.” Derek croaked. “Save her.”

“What?”

“The boat will sink.”

Martin released him and went to retrieve the torch. “Tell me what you mean,” he shouted against the wind.

Afraid to get up, Derek gestured out to sea. “There’s a hole in the hull.”

“You bastard.” Martin concentrated the torch out past the jetty. *Jasmine Sea* was there. A long way out with no sails up and under motor. He ran to the far end of the jetty to get a better look. She wasn’t right in the water, listing slightly to one side.

“Christie! It’s Martin. I’m here. You have to come back to shore.” The wind slammed his words back.

*Jasmine Sea* was taking on water. If Christie didn’t realise and kept going, they’d both be gone forever. He pulled his phone out as he ran to the beach, noting that Derek was halfway to the stone steps. He dialled Trev, ripping off his shoes and socks.

“Is she there, Martin?” Trev answered.

“*Jasmine Sea* is a few hundred metres out. There’s a hole in the hull and she’s taking water on, but I don’t think Christie knows.”

Trev swore.

“Derek Hobbs did it. He’s heading toward the graveyard.” Martin peeled off his soaking pants.

“I’m on my way but you need to keep watch for where the yacht is.”

“There’s no time. Just get me some help.” Martin hung up and tossed the phone beside his shoes. He threw off his shirt and dropped his watch beside the phone, which was ringing. Only one thing mattered as he ran to the end of the jetty.

Lightning lit up the bay, showing him exactly where the yacht was. It listed visibly and his heart sank. With one fluid motion, Martin dived into the ocean.





## Chapter Forty-six

Something was wrong. Christie felt a change in *Jasmine Sea* as they reached the halfway point to clearing the bay. The beach was a distant shadow and Derek gone. This was a good place to stay, too far for him to reach her but close enough to shore that she would be found. If and when help came. *When help comes*. The storm was no longer directly above.

After pushing away from the jetty, Christie concentrated only on getting away from the immediate threat of Derek. He'd screamed her name over and over as *Jasmine Sea* powered into the night. Her hands shook as she battled to control the fear that Martin would indeed be his target. By leaving shore, she'd failed the man she loved.

Randall had run up and down the deck at first, barking at the waves as though this was a wonderful adventure. After a while he went downstairs, perhaps tired of the rain. The wind dropped and the engine suddenly spluttered and cut out.

Out here, the water was deep. Anything could be below the hull, lurking there. A shiver ran down Christie's spine and she tightened her hold on the wheel. The yacht bobbed up and down, but not the normal way. Almost more to one side.

She turned the key, but the engine refused to respond. Martin kept spare fuel in the tiny engine room and Christie knew how to add the diesel. She went downstairs, spotting Randall fast asleep on the bed.

The steel hatch was hard to open. Christie sat on the floor and pulled, relieved when it swung out. She felt for the light switch but it wouldn't work. It would have to be done by feel and guesswork. Christie swung her legs into the opening, reaching down with her toes for the rungs of the ladder.

She screamed as her skin touched water, instinctively pulling her legs up. On her stomach, she reached in. At arm's length down, she found the surface. The engine room was filling up and the boat was going to sink. Christie slammed the hatch down.

Scrambling to her feet, she swayed. *Jasmine Sea is sinking! I'm going to die.* Tears spilled from her eyes. This beautiful yacht would succumb to the water it loved, taking her with it. Everything was gone. No future with Martin. No family. Nothing.

Randall nuzzled her hand. Christie looked at him in shock. He sat by her side, soft eyes filled with love and trust. This dog had welcomed her into his heart from their first meeting. He'd run to greet her when she'd nervously approached Martin's house, damaged painting under her arm, in the hope that the reclusive artist would help her.

"Hey, doggie. Shall we see if we can get a sail up? Maybe outrun this silly leak?" Her voice was barely above a whisper, but Randall wagged his tail. Christie was taking Randall home. He could swim and once they were near shore, she'd make sure he got there.

\*\*\*

Thankful to have escaped from Martin Blake, Derek only wanted to get to his car and leave. Whatever happened to Chris was out of his control. She'd chosen to sail into a storm and it wasn't his fault.

Pain shot through his foot with every step. Being flattened to the ground had added to the damage and he felt blood inside his shoe. He cursed his moment of weakness in telling the artist there was a hole in the boat. But nobody could prove he put it there.

At the bottom of the stone steps he stopped to try to see what was happening out in the water, but the yacht was invisible. The hero had jumped in to save her. Good luck with that. They might both go down in the shipwreck. *How romantic.* Reminiscent of that painting, *Sole Survivor*. Not once had Chris thanked him for his generosity. Sending it to her as a gift was his way of saying sorry for any misunderstandings. No words of appreciation from her. Just silence.

He wished he'd never started this. Nobody could ever say he hadn't tried. Loving someone as much as he loved Chris

meant sacrifices. Their love would live forever, even if she didn't. He noticed an engraving on the smooth cliff face. A love heart with the initial T at the top, and M at the bottom. Another time and he'd do a replica. D loves C. Pity she'd probably never see it.

Sick of being wet through, Derek climbed the steps. He stopped a few times to look out over the ocean. The rain fell in sheets and only once did he think he'd caught a glimpse of the boat. By now it would be taking in lots of water and Christie must surely know.

He dropped his head. *Goodbye, Chris.* Finally at the top, he realised too late that his car was blocked by two police cars. Lights flashing, they barred his escape. Three police officers huddled at the back of his car. As one, they saw him.

\*\*\*

Back on deck, Randall at her heels, Christie hoisted the mainsail. The further she got it up, the more the yacht struggled. Although the wind was not as intense as half an hour ago, it still buffeted the side of *Jasmine Sea*. There was a steep lean to starboard.

Randall slid as a large wave broke over the lowered railings, spewing sea water across the deck. Christie held onto a rope with one hand, grabbing Randall by the collar as he surfed past her. "No you don't. Got to stay together." He wagged his tail but was spooked, his ears back and eyes darting around.

She sat on the timber floor, hard against the side of the cabin, holding Randall. *Think.* Surely by now Martin would be looking. Christie shook all over. Violent tremors of exhaustion and fear. Her yacht was sinking in deep water. She closed her eyes. The rain turned into a drizzle, almost like sea spray.

Not long ago, when Martin had taken sailing along the coast, she'd lain on her stomach near the side of the yacht, laughing at the pod of dolphins that accompanied them. Warm sea spray showered her as she trailed her hand out as if to catch the waves. That wonderful day was etched in her

memory. Even the more serious parts, when Martin showed her where he kept tools, fuel, and flares.

Her eyes shot open. The flare gun was in the cupboard beneath the radio. Was there any chance Derek hadn't destroyed or taken it as well? Randall refused to come down the stairs, laying at the top to watch her. The floor was wet as water seeped through the hatch. Careful not to fall, Christie opened the cupboard and uttered a cry of relief that the flare gun was in its box.

She slid the box out, half aware of a dog blanket, toys, collar, and a food bowl. Randall whined as she joined him, his tail low.

“Soon. This will show them we need them.”

She braced herself against the side of the cabin and took the flare gun out. Once she'd checked it was ready to fire, she turned so her back was against the wind and pointed it upwards. The trigger was rigid but she kept the pressure up and then with a thud the flare fired, whizzing upwards.

A sudden movement caught her eye and she spun around in time to see Randall launch himself off the other side of the boat and land in the water with a mighty splash.

“Randall!” She slid all the way across to starboard. He was swimming toward shore. “No!” The yacht lurched and Christie almost went overboard. She dragged herself to the cupboard beneath the seats at the stern. All of the life jackets were damaged beyond use, including the one she'd worn earlier. But Randall had a special one.

How Christie got down the steps again was a mystery. She was suddenly there, pulling everything out until his water collar was in her hand, undamaged. Nausea rose in her throat as she fought her way back onto the deck.

The shore was too far for Randall to swim. It was too far for her, and the water was too deep. She unclipped the water collar and shoved it underneath her top. At the side of the yacht she hesitated. Everything was bright from the flare that hovered above.

Randall was already metres away.

The ocean was dark.

And deep.

Christie jumped.

\*\*\*

Palmerston House bustled with activity. Elizabeth and Angus carried blankets, towels, bottled water, and first aid supplies into the foyer, while Daphne and John packed them into big plastic bags. In the kitchen, Sylvia made flasks of tea and coffee, and Barry put them into a basket with cups. There was little discussion, just a shared and unspoken need to be ready.

At Elizabeth's desk near the staircase, George stared at a map of the region. He traced the route that *Jasmine Sea* might take then used a calculator, and noted the findings on a piece of paper. Charlotte stood halfway down the staircase. George glanced up. "Join us, young lady."

"Can I help?" She asked quietly once she reached the desk. "What are you doing?"

"I used to own that yacht our Christie is on. Know her like the back of my hand. She's as sound as the day she was built and even in a storm, she'll stay safe as long as Christie keeps her away from rocks."

"Oh. Well, that's great news. Is Christie a good sailor?"

"Inexperienced, I'm afraid. But well trained and one of the most resourceful people I've met."

Thunder rattled the windows and Charlotte jumped. George smiled. "It won't harm you."

"Not a fan of storms." Something caught Charlotte's attention through the picture windows. "What's that light? In the sky?"

George got to his feet and followed her to the front of the foyer. "I can't be sure."

"What is it, George?" Elizabeth followed as George opened the front door and went outside. From the top of the

steps, in the direction of the beach, a bright light hung in the sky.

“That is a flare from *Jasmine Sea*.” George declared.

“Angus, Barry, everyone! There’s a flare. We need to go.” Elizabeth ran back inside.

\*\*\*

Each powerful stroke of his arms, every kick of his legs, Martin mentally recited one phrase. *Christie Blake. Christie Blake*. Imagine what will be and see it come true.

She was alive and he would find her. Their lives were mapped out. A short engagement. The most romantic wedding imaginable. Children. Happiness. More dogs. He would paint and she would follow whatever dreams she might find. He visualised their lives.

The rain was gone and the strong wind more of a breeze. He calculated he was halfway to *Jasmine Sea*, assuming she hadn’t drifted too far. He should have got more information from Derek. What part of the hull was holed? The easiest place would be in the engine room and that gave Martin some hope. If the hatch stayed secure, the yacht wouldn’t sink. Not for many hours. The risk was more around Christie losing control of the steering.

*Christie Blake*. He saw her as his wife. How he loved her. So beautiful and so very generous. Her warm heart and gorgeous smile brought a light and happiness to his world. Everyone in the whole town adored her. She’d even won over Sylvia despite their early issues around Belinda. Randall worshipped Christie and would probably live with her over Martin any day. Fortunately, Randall wouldn’t have to choose because once she was back in his arms, Martin was never letting go again.

The black night suddenly lit up and Martin thought it was a close lightning strike. But the light stayed bright and he stopped swimming to paddle upright. It was a flare and now he saw *Jasmine Sea*. She was alive. Relief warmed him. Taking a moment to let his muscles rest, he watched the yacht. It was

leaning heavily to starboard now. By the look of it, she'd had issues with the mainsail and the wind was hitting it side on.

“Christie! I'm coming!” He called with all of his power. He couldn't see her but she would be at the highest point of the deck. Once he got to her, he'd keep them afloat until the Coast Guard arrived. Martin kicked forward and resumed his rhythmic stroke. *Christie Blake. Christie Blake.*





## Chapter Forty-seven

Dark, deep, silent water. Under the surface a strange peace consumed Christie. To sink to the bottom was not such a bad thing, where the warm arms of the ocean would carry her to a restful seabed. There she would sleep. So weary, every bone and muscle ached and her mind demanded sleep. Bubbles ascended. Just another moment of rest.

*Randall.* Fire filled her lungs. Her heartbeat exploded in her ears and she kicked herself upward. There was a bright light above and she reached for the surface.

With a gasp, she found the night sky and oxygen. *Jasmine Sea* was behind her, the flare slowly dropping toward the sea. Paddling, she checked the collar was still under her top as she got her bearings.

There was Martin's house, the outside light like a star in the distance. To its right were more lights, moving around on the opposite cliff. In between was the beach and just ahead she saw Randall.

Christie swam after him. Endless lessons in a pool as a child taught her little about the ocean, but over these last few months Martin had insisted she swim with him often. He wasn't one for fears and had continually prompted her to challenge hers.

She'd never swum in deep water. Not like this where the smallest mistake would claim her life, as it almost had just done when she jumped in. Exhaustion was her enemy, every bit as much as the terror somehow shelved to deal with later. It was there in the back of her mind, taunting her with images of unseen monsters, but she swapped it for a picture of Randall, back on the sofa, head on her lap.

Christie caught Randall in a few minutes. She got ahead of him and paddled again as she pulled the collar out of her top. She only had to get it around his neck and clipped, then inflate the ring.

Once he was within arm's length, Christie held the collar open. She got it under his throat but of course he kept swimming and she couldn't connect it without pulling him under the water. The collar dropped off and she dived after it. This was his only hope. Fishing it out, she swam after him and, this time, turned onto her side, matching his slower paddle.

She tossed one end of the collar over his neck and reached under his throat. She sucked in a big gulp of air and sank below the surface, kicking hard, her arms fully extended to click one part into the other. She felt it connect and let go.

Randall kept swimming in the straight line he'd followed since jumping overboard. It wasn't over yet. Her eyes stung from the sea water. She had to inflate the collar. Head down, she urged her body on.

\*\*\*

For Trev, the most satisfying moment of this whole day so far had been arresting Derek Hobbs. The man gave up once Jacqui and Gareth beat Trev to him. Soaked through, covered in sand, and complaining of a terrible injury to his foot caused by Martin, there was little mercy from the three police officers. As they stood on the edge of the cliff reading him his rights, Derek stared out to sea. Beneath the flare, *Jasmine Sea* was almost on her side, masts at a precarious angle.

"Is this what you wanted?" Trev demanded.

"I gave her that painting. It looks a bit like this moment."

"What this looks like is murder, if she doesn't survive!" Trev yelled in Derek's face, wanting to push him off the cliff. "What kind of man does this?"

"Sir, I've got him." Jacqui tugged at Derek.

"I love her, you know."

Before Trev could follow through with his wishes, Jacqui dragged Derek to her car. Gareth answered a call from dispatch. "Sir, Coast Guard's minutes away."

“I dunno if that will be fast enough.” Despair clouded his voice. “Get Hobbs locked up and come back here. I’m going to the jetty.”

Trev could hardly believe his eyes as he ran along the beach. People milled around on the high ground near a collapsible table. Further toward the jetty, John and Dave pumped up an inflatable boat, whilst others helped Barry set up portable floodlights facing the table and the jetty. *My God, the whole town is here!* He wanted to hug each and every one of them.

Elizabeth and Daphne built piles of towels and blankets. Angus lined up bottles of water and Sylvia unpacked a basket of flasks and cups. On the ground was a large first aid kit.

The inflatable was ready. Trev unclipped his belt. “No, mate. You’re needed here.” Barry kicked his shoes off. “This lot are out of control.” He gestured to the table with a grin. “Can’t be too careful once you let Sylvia and Daphne loose together.”

“Alright. But take care.”

With a nod, Barry ran down to the inflatable. John tossed him a life jacket and trudged up to the table to help. A moment later, Barry and Dave dragged the boat to the tideline. Lit up by the portable floodlights, the waves were translucent. Barry called out. “Might pay to get one of the lights on the jetty. Make searching a bit easier.”

Trev waved in acknowledgement. The group stopped what they were doing as the inflatable slid into the water. Barry and Dave climbed in and began to row and in a minute, they were almost out of sight. Angus took a few steps forward, his face pale and eyes haunted.

\*\*\*

By the time Christie caught up with Randall, he was spent. His head was low, jaw dipping into the water. He barely made forward progress. She searched the collar for the self-inflating cord. Everything was saturated, clinging to dog hair, and only

the small knob on the end of the cord told Christie that she'd found it.

She tugged. Like a miracle, the collar inflated and a light began to flash. Randall whined in surprise.

“Hey, you can stop.” Christie reached under the water to his legs and started stroking them. “Rest, doggie.” Whether he was too tired to continue, or somehow understood, Randall relaxed. The collar kept his head high above the water. They drifted for a moment, then he started swimming again. In seconds he was out of sight, just the steady flash pinpointing his progress. The flare above faded and blackness descended.

*He's safe.* Utter relief swept through Christie. He wouldn't drown and even if he didn't make it back to shore, someone would find him. There were lights along the beach. People were searching and he'd be okay. But she had nothing left.  
*Randall's safe.*

She rolled onto her back and floated. Clouds scuttled across the sky, thinning and vanishing before her eyes. Clusters of stars sparkled.

“They watch over us.” Her mother had loved the night sky and could name every constellation. Sprawled on their backs on the small patch of green grass Rebecca had nurtured with dregs of grey water, they'd spent many evenings staring at the wondrous display above.

“There is Centaurus, and that one, see it, Christie? Like a cross? That is the Southern Cross and it's also on our flag.” Mum knew everything. “But do you know which ones I like best?”

The waves rocked Christie like a baby in a cradle. She was so comfortable, so warm. Just like the endless days playing in the red sand of the outback town with Mum and Daddy never far away.

“Christie. I love Carina because it is like the keel of a boat. I know you've never seen a yacht for real, but one day we'll go and sail on one.”

“What does sail mean?”

“Beautiful yachts have giant curtains of canvas called sails and the wind fills them and before you know it, you’re flying just above the waves.” Rebecca had pointed to a squarish constellation. “Those stars there are part of Vela, which kind of means sails.”

*Vela.* Christie smiled, reaching for the pendant around her neck. Her eyes fluttered closed.

“Christie, watch the stars.”

It was too hard to do. She was ready now to sleep and drift away.

“Martin needs you. Don’t you dare leave him! You promised you’d never leave him. Wake up, Christie!”

Her eyes flew open. Mum wasn’t here. Martin wasn’t here either and Derek was going to kill him.

Arms and legs as heavy as the anchor she’d cut from *Jasmine Sea*, Christie turned over and paddled.

“Christie!”

*Stop it, Mum. I’m awake.* A ridiculous desire to giggle got sea water into her mouth and she spluttered.

“Sweetheart!”

Too afraid to believe, Christie stopped paddling. It was another hallucination. The man she loved beyond life itself was swimming toward her. He looked so real, almost close enough to touch, and then...

“I’ve got you.” Martin lifted her hands to go behind his neck. “Hold on, we’re going home.” He kicked backwards and Christie laced her fingers together. She slid onto his torso. “You’re real.”

\*\*\*

Excitement rippled through the group on the beach as the inflatable loomed out of the darkness. Two of Barry’s team waded out to help bring it in, but instead, they lifted something up and it pushed back into the waves. The young men

staggered onto the beach under the weight of Randall. Trev rushed to help, taking the limp dog in his arms.

“Help me!” He lowered Randall onto the sand. “I don’t know if he’s breathing.”

Angus sank to his knees beside them. “Let’s get this collar off first. He’s breathing, but whatever was he doing out there?”

“God knows. We need a vet.”

“Will a doctor do?”

Trev and Angus looked up in surprise as Charlotte ran toward them. She threw off a backpack. “Find me a stethoscope in there,” she directed Trev as she checked Randall’s airways.

Trev unzipped the backpack and pulled out a doctor’s bag. Inside he found the stethoscope. “Um, here.” He offered it to Charlotte.

“Can you turn him so his head is facing down? In case there’s sea water.”

“Sure—”

“Shh.” Charlotte listened to Randall’s heartbeat. Trev stared at her. After a moment she glanced up. “Okay, turn him. He’s actually conscious but exhausted. Hey dude, are you okay?” Her voice softened as she lowered her face to look in Randall’s eyes. There was the barest flicker of a wag from his tail.

“You’re a doctor?” Trev adjusted Randall as instructed.

“Sorry. I should have been a vet.”

“No. I didn’t mean that. It’s great.”

“Oh, Randall.” George leaned down to touch Randall’s head. “No, Martin will be inconsolable.”

“He’s okay, George.”

“But, Trevor, he looks...”

Randall moaned and tried to sit up. “Steady on.” Charlotte supported his head. “Can we get him onto a blanket and start drying him? And some water for him.”

Angus watched as Trev lifted Randall and in a moment, he was alone. He gazed out to sea. *Where are you?* Where was Christie?





## Chapter Forty-eight

The water was shallower now, Martin felt the difference below them. Christie's hands were locked together behind his neck and she gave feeble kicks to help. He wanted to tell her to relax, but his own muscles had little left in them.

Her eyes were afraid and exhausted and something else he couldn't work out. What she had been through he couldn't guess at. All he knew was he'd found her and she was alive. Just very, very quiet. *I found you*. If his hands were free he would have held her to him.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"You've done nothing wrong. Save your strength."

"Randall."

"The only one of us warm and dry."

"He was on board."

Gut wrenching fear tore at Martin. "Is he—"

"I got the collar on him. He was swimming to shore. I'm sorry."

"Can you swim again?"

Christie answered by unclasping her fingers and sliding into the water. Martin stayed at her side, swimming stroke for stroke. He had to get Christie to the beach, then he had to find his dog.

A blinding light flashed on him. "Christie, wait." There was a boat. "Here! We're over here!" He raised his arms.

"Got you! Hang on, we're coming." Barry's voice boomed across the water.

"Christie, it's okay." Martin reached for her, pulling her to him again. She didn't seem to understand. "Nearly over. I'll find Randall."

A moment later the inflatable closed in. "Thank God!" Barry cried. "Christie, let's get you in."

Martin steered Christie to Barry. “Lift your arms.” She did so, his arm around her until Barry took over, pulling her into the boat, where she curled up on the floor.

Barry leaned back over. “Now you, mate.”

“Randall.”

“At the beach. Look, I think... Martin, wait, we can row you back.”

Martin swam as fast as he’d ever swum. From the light of Barry’s torch he’d worked out where he was. They’d drifted down the beach quite a bit and he knew he’d get there before the inflatable. He couldn’t save Christie just to lose his dog. Adrenalin surged through him and he powered through the waves.

Close enough to put his feet down, he waded, his legs shaking. There was a group of people near the jetty. Lights. A table. Was someone having a picnic? His mind couldn’t comprehend what he saw.

“Look! It’s Martin!”

He thought that was Elizabeth. Why would she be here? He staggered into the shallows, barely able to stay upright. His vision cleared and he recognised Angus, Daphne, John. Others were too far away. A woman sat on a blanket with... it was Randall. Flat on his side.

Martin fell to his knees on the tideline with a heart wrenching cry, “RAN-DALL!” Tears blinded him. He’d failed his dog. Oh God, Thomas. The man who’d given him Randall as a puppy, loved him every bit as much as he did.

Something hit him hard and he crashed onto the sand. A wet tongue licked his face and then Randall dropped at his side.

“He’s okay, Martin. Just exhausted. Oh, I’m so sorry you thought he might be gone, my boy.” George stumbled over the sand to them. In disbelief, Martin put his arms around Randall. He was real and very alive.

George helped Martin to his feet, and then he lifted his dog and carried him back to the blanket. He gently lowered him and then his legs gave out and he sat down with a thud. Randall was happy to lay down, this time with his head in Martin's lap.

"Martin, where is she?" Angus cried in distress.

"In the boat. Look, there it is."

Barry's boys, John, and Angus met the inflatable. Martin got to his feet and his legs immediately gave way again.

Angus strode into the shallows and scooped Christie into his arms. Her head rolled to one side, her arms and legs hanging. Trev helped him to another blanket near Martin.

"Christie. Christie, it's over, sweetheart." He reached for her hand. She was so white, so lifeless. Randall whined and crawled to her. He licked her face and suddenly, her eyes blinked. Tears streamed down Martin's face as he squeezed her hand and she faintly returned the pressure. He gave in to the exhaustion and lay on his side, holding her hand, Randall between them.

\*\*\*

Outside Melbourne International Airport, Ingrid glanced at the night sky. A storm was coming. As long as it didn't delay the flight. It had taken too long to book this as it was. Australia might be her birthplace, but her time here was over, thanks to Derek Hobbs.

She wheeled her trolley of suitcases through the sliding doors and headed to business class check-in. Another day and she'd be back in London, then on a train to Switzerland. A week in the Alps and she would decide whether to reconcile with Leon, or look further afield. Pity really, Derek had been fun but his obsession with his ex was boring.

What did annoy her was the lost opportunity. Had her hands not been tied, she might have made quite a bit of money, not to mention being a thorn in Bryce Montgomery's side. Employing Rupert was a dreadful idea, and when he tried to blackmail her, she almost let him. Once she gave it proper

consideration, it was obvious that he was bluffing. With a bit of luck he would rot in some prison.

The line moved and she pushed her trolley to the desk.  
“I’m on flight—”

“Ingrid Kauffman?”

Ingrid spun around. Two Australian Federal Police stood behind her. She forced a fake smile. “Officers? How can I help?”

“We’d like you to accompany us to an interview room.”

“Really? I am a dual citizen and racing home to see my dying mother. You can talk to me when I return.”

“We’ve been advised that your mother regrettably passed away several years ago. Would you prefer to accompany us in a peaceful manner, or should we read your rights and handcuff you here?”

Her eyes darted around. People stared. The police stared. She was trapped. God, what had Derek done! “I’ll come with you.”

“Excellent decision.”

\*\*\*

“You are sure he’s locked up?” Christie asked Trev as he brought her yet another glass of water. “Thank you.” She took it and sipped more slowly than the previous ones.

Trev sat on the sofa opposite Christie, who was wrapped up in a dressing-gown in the living room at Palmerston House. Martin was having a shower now, finally prised away from Christie for long enough to attend to his own needs. Randall lay at her feet.

“He’s heading to Melbourne, handcuffed and secure. He’ll be processed tonight and we will be opposing bail very strongly.”

Christie nodded.

“You should have gone to hospital for the night.”

“That’s what I told her!” Angus stood in the doorway, a tray in his hands. “Elizabeth has made some delicious soup and insists I stay with you to ensure it is all eaten.” He came in and placed the tray on a coffee table. “There will be some for Martin once he’s ready.”

“I can come to the kitchen.”

“No. You can stay here. Now, let me take your water and I’ll put the tray on your lap.” Angus held his hand out and Christie meekly gave in.

“Thank you. Anyway, there’s a doctor staying right here.” She smiled as Angus gave her the tray and her stomach growled.

Angus sat beside Trev and they watched her eat. Randall raised his head, sniffing the air. “You must be starving, old boy.” Angus got back up. “Come on, let’s see what Elizabeth can find for you.” Randall followed him out, still a little unsteady on his feet.

“I can’t believe he almost died.” Christie looked at her soup, tears suddenly spilling over. “It was all my fault.”

“If I hear that one more time, Christabel…” Martins stood in the doorway, and his tone of voice left Christie in no doubt about his intent. She brushed the tears away.

Trev handed her a tissue from a box on the table. “I’m going back to the station. There’s going to be a mountain of reports to do and I want to be sure there is no room for doubt.”

Martin shook his hand. “I owe you.”

Trev smiled and wandered out. Martin knelt beside Christie and kissed her cheek. “Eat. That smells wonderful.”

“There’s some for you. Are you okay?”

“Yes. I’m fine now. Where’s Randall?”

“Angus is feeding him. Are you staying here tonight? Both of you?”

“Yes. Elizabeth won’t have it any other way, wonderful woman that she is.”

“I can’t believe they all came to help.” Christie scooped up more soup.

“Even Daphne in her brand new high heels. They were all so worried. I was so worried.” Martin reached out and brushed hair away from Christie’s eyes.

She lifted a spoonful of soup up. “Try some.” Martin opened his mouth, allowing her to feed him. “Has everyone left?”

He nodded. “Whilst you were in the shower, Angus shooed them all out. Daphne and Sylvia put up a fight, but he insisted. I have to warn you though they intend to reschedule the party for the night you get back from New Zealand. And this time, you won’t have the chance to escape because I’ll be with you every minute.”

Christie’s hands trembled and she put down the spoon. Martin took the tray, just as she burst into tears. He pushed himself to his feet, then lifted her into his arms. “You are the most incredible person I’ve ever met, my sweetheart.” He held her tightly against his chest. “What you did today is extraordinary. Your courage and your determination. Christie, you inspire me.” He carried her out into the foyer.

“Oh, is everything okay?” Elizabeth appeared from the direction of the kitchen.

“This little one needs to sleep. Thank you for looking after us. And Randall.”

“You both go up and once he’s had a stop outdoors, I’ll get Angus to let him in with you. Go on. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Martin carefully climbed the stairs, carrying the most precious thing in his life. By the time he put her into bed, she was almost asleep. Overcome with weariness, he slipped into bed and turned her into his arms. “Sleep, Christie Blake.”

“Hmm?” Her eyes opened. “Did you call me Christie Blake?”

“Law of attraction. I’ll explain another time. Sleep. I’ll watch over you.”

She sighed deeply. The heat from Martin's body flowed into her and she snuggled closer, going to sleep by the sound of his steady heartbeat.

A few minutes later, Angus quietly opened the door and Randall padded in. Christie and Martin were asleep in each other's arms. Randall checked them, then lay down with a contented grunt.





## Chapter Forty-nine

The calm sea mirrored a perfect blue sky. The only reminder of the storm was debris along the high tide mark, lumps of seaweed and driftwood. All the signs of the previous evening's emergency were gone, except footprints and scrapings in the high sand. Christie sat on the beach, still exhausted but free of the fog of despair. Randall was fine. So was Martin. It was *Jasmine Sea* that now broke her heart.

A few hundred metres out, a salvage operation was underway. The yacht was almost on its side, surprisingly not under the water. A towing vessel and its crew worked on bringing her upright, padding flotation devices along the starboard side. There was a dry dock in Geelong where *Jasmine Sea* would undergo repairs.

"She'll be fine." Martin dropped onto the sand beside Christie. "Drink." He handed her a bottle of water.

"Thanks. I told you I'd sink her."

"Well, you were wrong. There's always pockets of air, which was enough to keep her more or less floating. We need to get something straight, right now." Martin gently took Christie's chin and turned her face to look at him. "Derek Hobbs did this. Not you."

"Yes, but if I'd called you first, or got off her in Willow Bay, or..."

"Or what? There is one and only one thing you should have done differently." His tone matched his serious and stern expression.

Christie dropped her eyes. "Charged my phone."

He released her chin and took both of her hands.

"You don't need to tell me off. I understand the position I left myself in." She brought her eyes back to his, speaking quietly, but with conviction. "One phone call would have changed everything and I will never make that mistake again. Same as locking doors."

“Yes, well you’re not the only one at fault there. I should have locked Randall in. You might not have had a moment of rest, but he wouldn’t have pushed the door open after you.” He kissed Christie, just a brush of his lips against hers. “Big lesson for us both.”

With a groan that resonated across the bay, *Jasmine Sea* slowly righted herself, the masts pointing to the sky. Martin’s hands tightened around Christie’s. “Good,” he said. “She’ll be on her way soon. And you need to pack for Auckland.”

“Will you help me?”

“Seeing as Angus loaned me his Range Rover, I might as well ferry you around. Until we retrieve that fancy car of yours.” He grimaced as he got to his feet more slowly than usual. “I might stay out of the sea for a bit.”

Christie took his offered hand. *The sea isn’t so bad*. Not anymore.

\*\*\*

“I just can’t believe it.” Martin touched one of the paintings in the cottage entry. With no front door yet, the space was dark. “Even then Thomas was a genius.”

“Did he ever talk to you about this?” Christie flicked a torch around.

“Never. And I don’t know what he will think.” Martin stepped back into the hallway. “Or how he’ll react.”

“If it was you, would you want to have them back? To know?”

“Yes. Yes, it would change everything.”

They went into her bedroom. “Speaking of having paintings back, what about this one?”

*Sole Survivor*, still in its box, leaned against the wall. Martin revealed the painting, then sat on the bed to look at it. Grateful for any chance to get off her feet, Christie climbed onto his lap. “It’s a beautiful piece. And Trev said it is mine now. So, do you want it?”

“I don’t need it. There’s no relevance for me.”

“How so?”

He wrapped his arms around Christie and leaned his chin on her shoulder. “You were spot on when you said it was about me. But I’m not the person who painted it now.” He sighed as if releasing past demons. “I look at that man and see pain. Loneliness. Even hopelessness. That’s my past.”

She turned in his arms with a smile. “And your present?”

“You know the answer. All I focused on last night was you being my wife.”

“Christie Blake.”

“As soon as you are ready. Once you’re home, shall we set a date?”

Her reply was to throw her arms around Martin and squeeze him as hard as she could. “Easy, sweetheart.” He laughed. “Bits of me still hurt.”

“Any bits that don’t?”

“Behave.” He turned her back around toward the painting. “If you’re okay with it, we might donate it to the Coast Guard. They can sell it and get some much-needed funds.”

“That’s a wonderful gesture. They made sure *Jasmine Sea* was okay. But our little town. How do I thank them?”

“By being yourself. They love you.”

“And I love them. I belong.”

“About time you worked it out.”

\*\*\*

Christie locked the cottage and checked it twice, making Martin laugh. “Would you like me to give the key back to Barry?” Barry had dropped his set around to Palmerston House once word got out that Christie’s were missing. “He’s given the boys the day off and taken one himself. He mentioned something about returning some baskets to Sylvia.”

“Thanks. What will I do about the Lotus though?”

“Drive it?” Trev came around the corner of the cottage. “Nice to see you looking so... dry.” He shook Martin’s hand and kissed Christie’s cheek. “Feeling a bit better today?”

“Everything hurts, but yes. But how do I drive the Lotus without keys?”

“Cleared them from evidence. Here.” Trev took her car and cottage keys from a pocket. “Just one of many problems looming ahead for one Derek Hobbs.”

“Thank you so much” Christie took the keys. “Trev, was there anything... else on him?” Her voice faltered and she unconsciously touched her ring finger.

“It wouldn’t feel right for me to do this, so here, Martin.” Trev took Christie’s ring out of a different pocket and handed it to Martin.

Christie let out a small sob and tears flooded her eyes. Martin looked skyward. “Christie, no more crying! Now, this is your last chance to change your mind. Still want to marry me?”

She nodded, blinking rapidly to clear the tears, but one fell onto Martin’s hand as he took hers. He slipped the ring on and kissed her hand. Then he found a handkerchief and dabbed her eyes.

“Thanks, mate.” He nodded to Trev, who sported a big grin.

“All good. I’ll need you both for statements today. Sorry, but the sooner we do it, the faster I can escalate charges. Say, an hour from now?” He waved and headed back to his car.

“I don’t want to leave.” Christie whispered, staring at her ring.

“The cottage?”

“River’s End.”

“We’ll be here,” Martin said. “Randall and I, we will be here. And you’ll come home and we’ll get married. So, there it is.”

*You're right.* Christie smiled. "Yes, there it is."

\*\*\*

Excitement bubbled up in Christie as the Lotus hugged the final curve before home. To her left the ocean stretched out forever, sparkling and inviting under the early autumn sky. Two weeks made a noticeable difference at this time of year, particularly the deciduous trees with their blaze of yellow, red, and orange.

A quick phone call to Martin when she cleared the airport had her curious. "Go to the cottage first. There's a surprise for you." It was too far past lunch for a picnic and they were expected at Palmerston House tonight for the delayed engagement party.

She turned into her street, singing along to the radio as she navigated the familiar potholes and railway track. Instead of going up the driveway, she parked on the grass verge. Her bags could come in later. There was no sign of Martin, but then again, last time she'd returned from a job, he and Randall were already inside the cottage.

In delight, she halted at the gate. Gone was her dreadful attempt at drawing a door and in its place was the real one. Two new steps led to a security screen door. The smell of freshly mown grass took her attention. Not only mown, but there was a new path to the front door. Whatever had Martin been up to? She went around the back.

At the porch she stopped, hand over her mouth. There was a love seat and a hanging basket of jasmine. The tendrils touched her as she unlocked the door and she inhaled their scent with a smile. "Martin? Randall?" She called, stepping in.

The kitchen was finished. New sink, appliances, and re-varnished floorboards. The old kitchen table still dominated the room, but it was now lacquered a rich mahogany.

Room by room, Christie inspected the cottage, gasping at the changes. The curtains were hung, flooring all done, laundry and bathroom beautiful with brand new fittings and appliances. Like a new house! *Like a home.* Vases of flowers

adorned the bedrooms and lounge room, and Martin's painting of her hung above the fireplace. There was still plenty to do, but someone had put a lot of love and effort into this.

The end of the hallway was transformed. Christie walked right into a gorgeous little entry. Thomas' paintings adorned two walls, and there was a narrow table, clearly crafted by Martin. Beneath it, more of Thomas' paintings were lined up.

She opened the front door and the screen door, and stood on the top step smiling at the garden. What a difference from the overgrown, sad old building she'd inherited.

The sound of a car broke the silence. She recognised the old four wheel drive and wondered why Martin would come in that instead of his motorcycle.

It turned into the driveway and stopped. Christie squealed as Thomas climbed out of the back seat and opened the front door for Martha.



## Chapter Fifty

“I can’t believe it!” Christie jumped up and down, and then ran toward the driveway, just as Martin appeared from around the back of the car. Like a bullet, Randall raced past everyone, straight to Christie, and she leaned down to hug him. He whimpered and wiggled in joy, licking her face as she told him how much she’d missed him.

“Does this happen often?” Thomas asked Martin. Christie looked up at them, Martha with her arms open, Thomas shaking his head, and Martin grinning. “All the time.” Martin replied. “She has her priorities right.”

As much as she wanted to fly into his arms, it was Martha who she went to first, once she’d extricated herself from doggie kisses.

“My darling!” Martha embraced Christie and kissed her cheek. “You beautiful child! I have missed you so very, very much.”

“Stop hogging her.” Thomas complained. “What about me, young lady?”

“Oh, Thomas, I can’t believe you’re both back!” Christie dived at him and he laughed as he enfolded her in a bear hug, almost swinging her off her feet. Randall ran around them both.

“See, Martha. This is what you’ll have to get used to. Randall really only cares about them.” Martin put an arm around Martha’s shoulders.

“So I see,” she said. “Shall we go?”

“Don’t you dare!” Christie slid away from Thomas and turned to Martin. “Hi.”

“Hi.” He held out a hand and she accepted the invitation. He kissed her and tiny sparks of electricity lit up her nervous system. When she opened her eyes, it was to look straight into his own dark pools so often unreadable. Not now. There was promise and desire in their depths.



“My God.” Thomas stared at the open front door. “What have you done?”

“I remember the front door.” Martha put her hand on Thomas’ arm. “Oh. I remember everything, Tom.”

“Granddad, I should have warned you.”

“It is just a door.” Strain coloured Thomas’ voice.

Martin and Christie exchanged a worried glance. “Okay, before this gets out of hand, I insist you step through my front door, Thomas!” Christie took his hand and tugged. He stayed where he was. “Hey, trust me,” she pleaded.

Something about her tone of voice got his attention and he let her lead him to the steps. She released his hand and stood back with a smile. “It’s something good, I think.”

As though to humour Christie, Thomas stepped into the entry way. There was a moment of silence, then “Martha! Martha come quickly.”

Martha almost broke into a sprint to reach him and Christie grabbed her arm to steady her up the steps, Martin right behind.

“What is it, dear? Oh, my.”

Thomas had his arm over Martha’s shoulders and she had hers around his waist. They surveyed the paintings on the walls and on the table. Martha found him a tissue and he brushed away tears.

“Granddad?”

“You’re not in trouble. So it isn’t granddad.” Thomas emerged with a look of wonder. “Someone had better explain this.”

“Nobody knows for sure, but it seems your father sealed the paintings in. When Barry took the cupboard out, there they were.” Christie said.

“And brushes and paints, Thomas.” Martin added.

Martha followed Thomas back onto the lawn, holding tightly onto his arm. “What a day.”

“And this probably isn’t the best time, but, well I want to offer you both the cottage. As a gift from me.” Christie rushed the words. “It’s almost completely renovated with new appliances and—”

“Darling,” Martha interrupted. “This is your home.”

“Yes. But if you would live here... if you feel you could live here, then nothing would make me happier than to gift it to you both.”

“It’s not as though she’ll be living here for long.” Martin threw in and Christie turned a startled look at him. “Probably not even for another day.”

“I won’t? Okay. Yes, Martin.”

“Yes, Martin? What have you been doing to this poor child?” Thomas asked, winking at Martha. “Martha and I will talk about it.”

With a huge smile, Christie hugged him, and then Martha. “Go inside and see!” She insisted.

Alone with Martin, she stole a glance at him. “You want me to move in with you?”

“Randall does.”

“Oh. Randall does. Well, I’d better make him happy then.”

Martin reached for Christie.

\*\*\*

Music and laughter filled Palmerston House. The fountain bubbled its ever-changing coloured water and fairy lights decorated the long verandah. Inside, people danced and talked, toasted each other, and swapped stories about the night of the storm. With Thomas and Martha home, there was extra joy and celebration.

Elizabeth watched on with pride as her friends shared this wonderful evening, enjoying the bounty of food she’d prepared with the help of Angus, Sylvia, and Belinda, who was home for the occasion.

“Thank you so much, Elizabeth!” Christie appeared from the kitchen with a tray of bite-sized quiches. “Palmerston House looks magnificent and you also look stunning.” She kissed Elizabeth on the cheek.

“Me? Oh, thank you. You are the guest of honour, by the way, and should let me take that around.”

“Not a chance. Anyway, I think someone is going to ask you to dance.” Christie grinned as Angus approached. “Aren’t you, Angus?”

“What was the question?”

“Elizabeth wants to dance.”

“Christie! I did not say that—”

“What a good idea. Shall we?” Angus offered his arm. Elizabeth gave Christie a perturbed look, but took his arm, and they ventured onto the dance floor.

“Are you matchmaking again?” Martin was right behind Christie, leaning down to kiss her neck.

“Umm, no, they did that all by themselves. Just helping a bit.” What he was doing to her was not helping her concentration and the tray tilted.

“I’ll do that! You can take the world’s-best-bakery-person out of River’s End, but not River’s End out of... actually, that doesn’t make sense. But I’ll take it.” Belinda grabbed the tray. “And it is just as well that someone else caught that awful man before I did!”

“You said that earlier.” Christie reminded her with a grin. “I didn’t encourage you to go to beauty school to come up with ways to turn hair straighteners into weapons.”

“Well, I might need to protect myself one day. Anyway, you two go back to whatever you were... umm, doing.”

“Hey, nothing!” Christie said to Belinda’s back. “I’ve missed her.”

“Christie. Let’s talk.”

“Oh no. See, we did this when Thomas married Martha and... okay, I’m coming.”

Martin climbed the staircase to the top step, where he sat. Christie joined him and for a moment, they watched the party below. Barry and Sylvia chatted by the window. Trev and Charlotte were deep in a rather animated discussion. Angus and Elizabeth danced rather close to each other.

Daphne and John held hands, making Christie smile. “Daphne told me that John wants to sell up the agency and get a caravan. It was a bit of a confusing conversation and she told me she never liked her high heels anyway. I love her.”

“I love you.” Martin touched Christie’s cheek. “Tomorrow, let’s set a date. No later than spring.”

Christie nodded, her eyes wide. The music and sounds of the party were distant. All she could see was Martin, every inch of her body alive with love and longing.

“We’ve been through hell, you and me.” Martin played with Christie’s fingers, turning her hand to look at her ring. “When I couldn’t find you, I thought... I couldn’t have gone on.”

“You found me.”

“Yes. And I found myself, as well. Sweetheart, loving you makes me a whole man. Not a man with a hole in his soul. I’m not good with words or feelings, Christie.”

“I disagree.”

“Of course you do.” He kissed her with such tenderness that she melted against him. Randall trotted up the steps and stared at them. He whined and Martin reluctantly lifted his head. “Your timing is appalling, dog.”

“Do you think Thomas and Martha will take the cottage?” Christie watched them dancing slowly, their eyes on each other as if they were the only people in the room.

“I do. Which means you need to vacate the property. Tomorrow.”

“Are you sure you’re ready for me to be with you all day, every day? And night?”

“Am I sure? I’ve been waiting for you since those guys got married. Even if you work away from home sometimes, I’ll always be here.”

“Oh. Meant to tell you. I bought the hairdressers and am going to turn it into a beauty salon. One day Belinda will come work for me.” Christie’s eyes sparkled.

“You’re sure?”

“I can’t wait.”

Randall tired of the lack of attention and forced his way between them.

“Do you think this is like having a child?”

“Or two. Maybe three.” Martin wrapped his arms around Christie and Randall. “Let’s give ourselves time before we find out though. At least a few months.”

Deep contentment flowed into Christie. *We’ll show them Vela and Carina. Jasmine Sea* would be their second home and the open sea a place to explore. This town was her family. Martin tightened his hold on her and she closed her eyes with a smile.

# About Phillipa Nefri Clark

Phillipa grew up along lonely Australian beaches with wild seas and misty cliffs. From a young age she wrote stories and dreamed of becoming an author.

Now living in regional Victoria, Australia on a small acreage close to a mountain range, Phillipa's great loves - apart from writing - are her family of two young adult sons and her husband, their Labrador, music, fine wine, and friends.

Phillipa is a member of Romance Writers of Australia and Romance Readers Association Australia.



My love and thanks to Ian, Nick & Alex. Each of you helps, inspires, and supports me as a person and writer in many wonderful ways.



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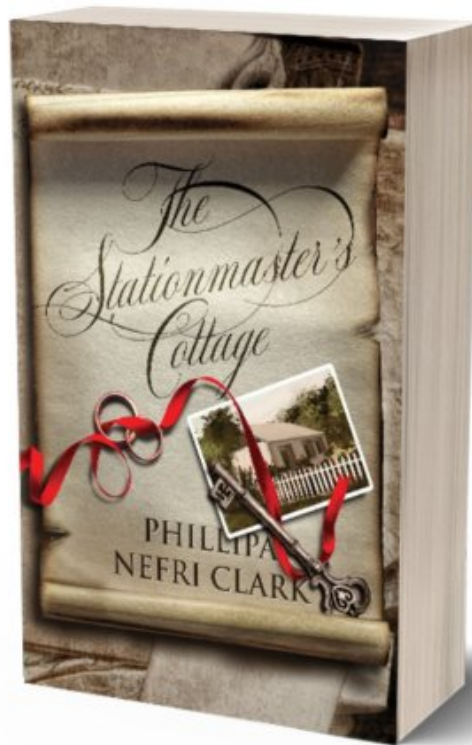
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*From my heart to yours,*

*Phillipa*



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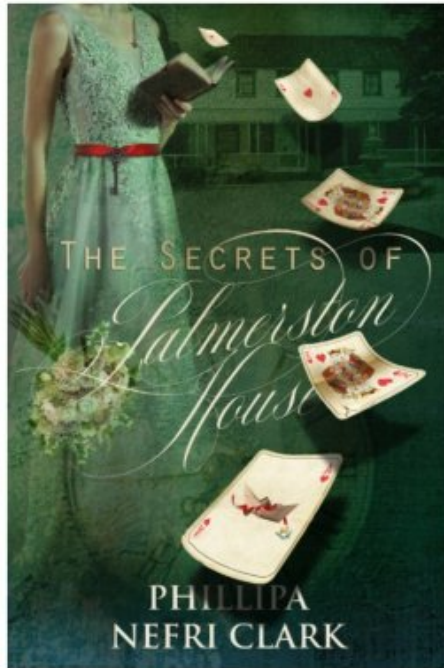
Raised by her cold, bitter grandmother following the death of her parents, Christie Ryan worked hard to build a satisfying life for herself as an adult. Nobody is more surprised when Gran leaves her an abandoned cottage in a remote seaside town.

But there is more to the cottage than she expects, with the discovery in the attic of unworn wedding rings and unopened love letters. Reading these casts Christie into the tragic, romantic world of a young couple from fifty years ago. Their love is a stark contrast to her own relationship.

Questions about what really happened on the beach all that time ago lead her to Martin, a reclusive artist who prefers to keep secrets and has a dog who adores her on sight.

As Christie faces difficult decisions about her own future, will the consequences of righting old wrongs be too high a price to pay?



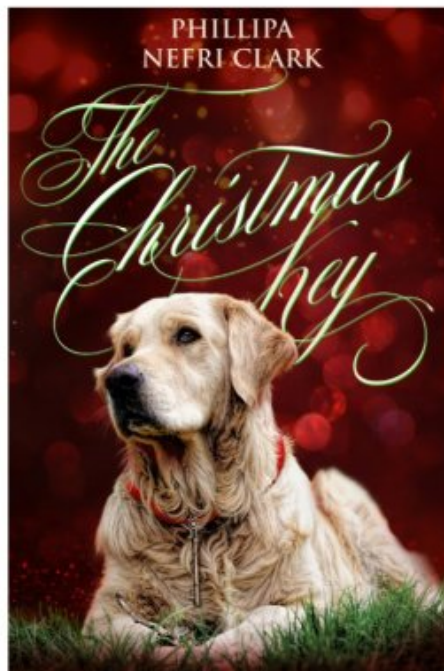


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