



THE CHRISTMAS JINX
Bindarra Creek Christmas Romance



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Susanne Bellamy

*Dedication: To Steve, my beautiful man. Always and
forever.*

Chapter 1

Toby Stinson drove over Gillies Bridge into Bindarra Creek, preoccupied with the arrival of his best mate, Seth, and his visitor—a pretty woman suffering from amnesia. Their visit had drawn unwanted attention and created a problem.

More of a giant headache.

Seth had asked for his help, but when Toby searched facial recognition for Angel—not her real name since she appeared not to know who she was—he'd set off a flagged file on the Australian Federal Police site.

Flagged, and with a trace attached.

He shuddered at the memory of what followed. His professional pride had taken a hit that he'd missed spotting that trace, but what followed put his career at risk.

Backing off then would have been sensible, but pride wouldn't allow him to leave a job incomplete. Besides, his friendship with Seth meant a great deal to him. Good friends—the best of friends—would do anything for one another, and if the cost of finding who was tracking Seth's friend was a bottle of rum to one of the IT blokes on the army base, Toby would happily pay it. Being on leave was a problem when he needed access to a defence computer sucked big time.

He dropped into the service station for fuel, but as he swung onto Court Street, headed for the Royal Hotel drive-through bottle shop, the setting sun blinded him. Too late, he saw the silhouette of a small car reversing out of a diagonal park and stamped on the brake.

Bang!

The ute was still rocking with the force of coming to an abrupt stop as he opened his door and strode towards the small car.

He reached the driver's door and leaned down to speak through the open window. "I'm sorry, mate. I didn't see—"

Recognising the blonde-streaked hair and tiny pearl earring swinging from the lobe of the new dance teacher a moment before he registered the hand raised to her neck, Toby opened the door and leaned in. “Lorelei? Laurie, are you okay?”

Damn it. Why did it have to be her I ran into?

Six months earlier when Lorelei Moran first arrived in town, he’d asked her out for drinks and a coffee at the Cyprus Café, and they’d had a good evening.

A great evening, Toby would have said, never doubting she’d agree to a second date. But Laurie had been on a mission. She’d lined up a meeting with Hunter Sullivan to look at two possible sites for her dance studio, followed by visits to most businesses in Bindarra Creek to meet the locals and put up posters advertising the new dance school, and the second date had never happened.

Now, this rear-ender had probably put a dent in more than just her rear bumper bar.

“Laurie, talk to me.”

Lorelei Moran flicked a gaze sideways, her green eyes dazed. “My neck hurts.”

Toby’s basic first aid training kicked in as he focused on her. “Don’t move. I’ll call an ambulance.”

Taking out his phone, he rang triple zero and, when the operator asked which service, Toby almost barked out, “Ambulance, opposite the drive-through of the Royal Hotel on Court Street, Bindarra Creek. Probably whiplash.”

“Paramedics are attending a two-car crash out of town. It will be at least ninety minutes before they are free to attend.”

There was no point letting his anger take over. It was what it was, but he was frustrated by his lack of control. Concerned for Laurie, whose eyes were now closed and skin, pale, he sought alternatives. “I understand. I’ll try to get a local doctor to see the patient.” Toby thumbed off his phone,

slipped it back into his pocket then crouched down beside Laurie.

“I’m sorry. It was all my fault. I didn’t see you.”

She raised a hand, stopping any further attempt on his part to apologise.

“Not all your fault. My foot slipped on the accelerator, and I shot out faster than I normally reverse.” Her eyes closed tightly again, and her face scrunched up with a spasm of pain.

Toby’s guilt ratcheted up another notch. He’d been preoccupied with the mysteries surrounding Angel, and his own poor handling of the trace on her file. He couldn’t blame the bright sun for the accident, not when he should have paid more attention, adjusted his speed and driven to the conditions.

“The ambulance is out of town. They’ll be at least an hour and a half, so I’ll try to get hold of a GP—”

“Do you think you could drive me to the hospital now?”

“You shouldn’t be moved until you’re wearing a neck brace.”

“Please? If you drive slowly, I’ll sit still, or lie on your back seat if that makes you feel better, but I can’t wait that long. I have commitments I have to keep.”

“Commitments can wait. I can’t put your well-being at risk by moving you.” Unlike his friend, Seth, who served as a medic, Toby had only basic First Aid training, but her request went against everything he knew.

But Laurie Moran was a determined woman, especially in the face of obstacles. She persisted until, reluctantly, Toby eased her out of the car and guided her into the back seat of his ute. Ever so slowly, he drove towards the hospital.

The Emergency Department was quiet as Toby helped Laurie to the nearest seat. The reception counter was unstaffed, and he told her, “Stay there. I’ll find a doctor.”

He dinged the bell, waited for several minutes, then dinged it again. Sister Ishya Bhandari hurried to the front

counter, glancing around as though wondering where other staff were hiding. Toby was pleased Ishya was on duty. She had a reputation for being caring and kind, but she appeared a little flustered as she tucked her hair behind her ears and adjusted a stethoscope around her neck. “Hello, Toby. I hope you weren’t waiting long. We’re a bit understaffed at the moment. How can I help?”

“Hi, Ishya. Not long. Laurie Moran’s hurt her neck. Is there anyone available to examine her?”

The nurse’s gaze slipped past Toby to where Laurie sat unmoving. Ishya cast a brief look back the way she’d come. From an open door, the intermittent groaning of a woman emanated, and Ishya frowned. “I can have a quick look then I’ll try to find a doctor to see your friend. I’ve got a first-time mother in early labour, but let’s see what we’re dealing with.” She rounded the counter and squatted in front of Laurie. “Do you have any pain, Laurie?”

“A bit when I try to turn my head.”

“And what about up or down movement? Does it hurt then?”

Laurie tried to lift her head and grimaced, and another shaft of guilt ran through Toby. *He’d* caused her pain, and now she would have a horrible Christmas thanks to his carelessness.

Ishya sat back on her heels, one hand holding Laurie’s wrist. It looked like comfort, but Toby noticed the nurse glance at her watch as she checked Laurie’s pulse. “You’re right about whiplash. Unfortunately, it’s the most common minor injury following a car accident, but most cases come good after a few weeks.”

Another groan floated down the corridor, louder than before and Ishya cast an anxious look in the direction of her pregnant patient. “I’ll page Doctor Frobisher. Laurie, would you feel more comfortable lying down?”

“Maybe.” Laurie made to rise from the chair. Her face lost colour, and Toby stepped in and slipped an arm around her

waist.

“I’ve got you. Ishya,” he said. “I know it’s not standard procedure, but point me in the direction of a bed and I’ll see Laurie safely ensconced.”

The nurse frowned and then nodded. “Of course, you have helped out in the army field hospital, and I saw you at the recent recertification course for first aid.” An anxious voice called her name, and she made up her mind quickly. “Second bed on the left. Remember to support Laurie’s head as you lower her to the bed. I’ll page the doctor as soon as I can.” Then she hurried back to her other patient, rubber soles squeaking on the hospital lino.

“Lean on me, Laurie. We’ll take it as slowly as you need to, okay?”

“Yes.” She gave the tiniest nod and bit down on her bottom lip. “I have to stop nodding in answer to questions.”

“Good idea. Now, are you ready?”

In response, Laurie glided forward with the grace of the dancer she was, and the grip of a circus strongman on his arm. At a pace slightly faster than a snail, they covered the twenty metres to the second bay and turned in.

The light in the emergency bay was low, mostly spilling from the central passage. With great care, Toby inched Laurie back until her thighs touched the edge of the bed and she let go of his hand. Setting hers down on either side of her hips, she sat then gingerly lifted one leg, then the other with Toby’s assistance.

Toby set one hand behind her head and his arm across her back. “Relax and let me lower you onto the bed. Try not to tense your muscles.”

“Easier said than done.” She held her breath as Toby guided her down. Once Laurie was supine, she exhaled her breath slowly, the sound one of relief. “That’s better.”

“My insurance will take care of the damage to your car. I don’t think it will take long to repair, but in the meantime, I’m

at your disposal whenever you need a ride.” He drew the curtain across the opening.

“Thanks.”

A few minutes later, Doctor Jessica Frobisher bustled in, a ribbon of tinsel pinned to her white coat pocket and a smile on her face. “What’s this I hear about you two running into each other?”

“You heard right, Doc. I ran into Laurie as she was reversing. Corner—sun—bang! Entirely my fault.”

He tried to keep his account of the accident factual, but the most important point was that his moment of inattention had caused injury to Laurie. She was in pain because of him, and he had to find a way to make it right.

“Laurie, I’m going to examine you now. Toby, you can head out to reception. I’ll let you know if Laurie needs a ride home, or if I’m going to keep her in overnight.”

“I can’t stay overnight.” Laurie tried to sit up. Doctor Frobisher laid a firm hand on her shoulder, and she lay back, but her gaze darted between the doctor and the clock and Toby’s gut churned.

“I’ll be right outside if the doc releases you, Laurie.”

“Okay. I’m sure she will.”

As Toby walked down the hall to reception, the doctor’s voice became no more than an indistinct rising and falling of sound. He dropped onto a moulded plastic chair, tipped his head back and studied the ceiling. Laurie had been adamant she didn’t want to hear his apology. The second it slipped from his mouth she lifted a hand and stopped him dead.

“I meant it, Toby. Don’t hog the guilt. Both of us could have been paying more attention.”

And so now, he buried his need to say sorry, knowing it would irritate her and make him feel worse because he *had* irritated her. The best thing he could do was atone for his part

by helping her however she would let him. Actions, not words would help them through this.

Doctor Frobisher finished her examination, fitted a neck brace then stood directly in front of Laurie. “When your neck is forced beyond its usual range of movement, the soft tissues—tendons, muscles, and ligaments—may be overstretched or sprained. I expect you’ve encountered this before when you’re dancing. The overstretching or sprain causes pain and discomfort in your neck and shoulders and may also cause back pain. Sometimes you can have no symptoms after a whiplash injury, but sometimes, symptoms can be severe. On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate yours?”

“The pain is focused in my head and neck. Maybe a four or five?”

“If it’s still around that level or better in the morning, I think you’ll be recovered in time for the Christmas concert.”

“The concert’s less than three weeks away. What am I going to do if it isn’t?” Regardless of shock and pain, Laurie couldn’t believe the performance had slipped her mind even for a short time. All her tiny dancers were so excited. This was their first concert and there was no way she could fail them by not showing up now.

“Pain from a whiplash injury can begin six to twelve hours after the injury. You may just feel uncomfortable now but find that your pain, swelling and bruising increase over the following days. Or—”

Laurie covered her eyes and barely subdued the “noooo” screaming up her throat. She held it in—just—to no more than a muffled groan. Her first dance concert in Bindarra Creek was going to be an unmitigated disaster. If the pain she was already feeling worsened, she had to find a way to keep her fledgling school going.

If that meant asking for help ...

I’ve failed if I don’t do it on my own.

But if she didn't, she would shatter the dreams of her students. Neither choice was acceptable.

“Laurie?”

Realising the doctor was waiting for some response, she apologised. “Sorry. I was trying to work out how to keep rehearsals running if I'm out of action. What did you say?”

“Sometimes, whiplash ends up as little more than a stiff neck for a few days. You may be lucky, but if you get headaches, or numbness in your hands, arms, or shoulders, or dizziness, vertigo, tinnitus—”

“Seriously?”

“—come and see me straight away. However, it sounds as though your rear-ender was relatively low impact. Stay positive. I'll prescribe you some tablets to manage the pain so you can sleep tonight.”

“You're not keeping me in overnight?”

“I don't think we need to, provided you have someone at home to keep an eye on you.” Doctor Frobisher raised an eyebrow. “Do you?”

Laurie hesitated. Esther Ainslie, her older neighbour across the road, was kind and motherly, and would happily pop in and check on her if Laurie asked, but Esther was in her mid-seventies and didn't see so well at night. But if Laurie said she had no one at home, would the doctor refuse to let her leave hospital?

“I have someone who can be there,” she said, mentally crossing her fingers. One of the problems about being relatively new to town was that it took time for friendships to develop. She had got to know lots of people, mostly students' mothers and business owners who she'd approached to sponsor her first concert.

But *friends*? Someone who would drop over and stay the night?

There was no one she could claim that special bond with. Not yet.

“Good. I’ll write that prescription for you and let Toby know you’re right to go home.” The doctor disappeared, and Laurie lay looking at the white ceiling and counting rows and columns of holes in the pressed panel directly above her.

“Here you are.” Doctor Frobisher returned and handed a folded prescription to Laurie then gestured Toby inside before turning back to her. “Your symptoms are likely to greatly improve or disappear within a few days to weeks. It may take longer for your symptoms to resolve completely, and you might even experience some pain and neck stiffness for months after a whiplash injury. Take it easy for now, okay.”

“Understood.” With Toby’s assistance, Laurie sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her head swam and she gripped the edge, swallowing a desire to throw up. Showing any weakness now might mean the doctor kept her overnight. Breathing through her mouth, she conquered the physical reaction then, glancing at the doctor, summoned a small smile. “Thanks, Doc. See you at the concert.”

Toby offered his arm and Laurie took it, grateful for the reassurance of his strength. No point risking falling on her face if the dizziness returned.

Casting a sideways look at Toby without turning her head, she wondered why she hadn’t made more of an effort to carve out time and go on that second date with him. Their first date had been fun, and her impression had been of a smart, fun guy who *got* her. She’d wanted to go, but setting up the dance school and recruiting students had taken all her time and energy, and the chance had slipped away.

As they exited the Emergency Department and approached his vehicle, Toby asked, “Am I taking you straight home, or do you need to stop at the pharmacy first?”

“Pharmacy please, then I have a class to rehearse for the concert.”

Chapter 2

“You can’t go against your doctor’s orders.” Thankful Doctor Frobisher had warned him that Laurie was to go straight home with her medication and rest, Toby kept walking slowly and steadily towards his vehicle, parked close to the door of the Emergency Department.

“I’ll be careful, but I can’t disappoint my students. I have a class in—” She tried to look at her watch but stumbled against him.

He suspected she’d suffered a mild wave of vertigo, such as he’d been warned to watch out for. “Not today.”

“There’s no one else to take the class. I have to be there.”

“And do what? Fall on your face? What do you think that will achieve, other than setting your recovery back days or weeks.” Toby had guessed from the first time they’d met that Laurie Moran was determined. Starting a dance school from scratch in a new town must have been hard. He was aware of the hours she’d put into it from comments friends had made, and her posters for the Christmas concert were fun and funky, drawn by her, and inspired by her unique sense of humour. While he’d been drinking coffee at the Cyprus Café, he’d even counted how many tiny Santa’s elves peeped around the Christmas tree and sleigh in her poster.

Eight.

He opened the rear door for Laurie and helped her into the back of his dual cab ute.

Her bum shuffle drew a wince, which she quickly bit off, but her smile was gritted teeth and determination. “Thanks, all good. I’ll take it from here.”

He said nothing more about her request, focusing instead on securing her pain meds. “If you’re happy to give me the prescription, I’ll pop into the pharmacy while you rest.”

“Thanks, that would be good. Ask them to put it on my account.”

By the time Toby returned, paper pharmacy bag in hand, Laurie's expression seemed brighter and more confident. He could almost see the cogs whirring in her brain and shuddered. She had a plan.

Suspicious of what was coming, he handed over the paper bag. As she took it, her free hand launched a surprise attack and gripped his arm. "Toby."

Two could play that game. He almost said it, but she pinned him with a look he'd seen before. Greater than mere determination, it warned him—he was about to lose this battle.

"I know you think I should go home and rest, but I have six little dancers arriving in fifteen minutes for their lesson. There's no time to cancel, and no one else to take their class. So, if I promise to sit and only call out directions, would you open up the hall and then set up the Christmas tree so they can practise?"

"Laurie, you can't be ser—"

Her grip tightened and her eyes implored him. "Toby, if my concert doesn't go ahead, no matter how well I recover, next year I won't have a dance school to come back to. Please?"

Torn between following the doctor's orders and fulfilling her request, it was the look in her eyes that swayed Toby. He could see it in her expression: in her mind, what choice did she have?

I caused the accident. I've got to make things right for her.

"You've got me over a barrel. If I insist you go home, you'll find another way to get to the rehearsal and probably do yourself more damage. At the very least, it will delay your recovery. And if I take you, I suspect you'll try to get up and demonstrate steps. Same result. Either way involves me giving in, in some way." Reluctantly, he acceded. "I guess I take you to rehearsal."

"Thanks." Laurie's eyes glistened and she blinked several times. A soft breathy sigh—of relief, he guessed—skimmed across his arm, and he realised she was still holding onto him.

“Okay. Until you’ve recovered, consider me your personal chauffeur.”

The thought didn’t displease him. He reversed out of the car space, then drove carefully to the community hall.

Laurie sat in her director’s chair below the stage and eyed Toby’s positioning of the Christmas tree. Actually, he’d placed it well, but looking at it through his eyes, embarrassment swept through her. “It’s not finished yet.”

“Stating the obvious. I’d call it a skeleton that needs fleshing out.”

“I was going to cut out and attach branches after rehearsal tonight, but—”

“You’re making all your sets? Don’t you have a stage manager? What about some of the parents? I’ll bet one of them could help out.”

“I’m perfectly capable of doing a bit of carpentry.”

“On top of running all the rehearsals. I’ll bet you’re helping make kids’ costumes too.”

“Of course I am.” She tried to read his expression. Hazarding a guess, she settled on a cross between annoyance and reluctant admiration. Of the two, the latter made her feel better. “There are a couple of parents who are either working full-time, or don’t know one end of a sewing machine from the other. I help out.”

He shook his head and went off stage, returning a moment later with a stack of four chairs to mark out a rough sleigh shape. When he’d angled them to her satisfaction from upstage left, he moved to centre stage and spread his arms wide, encompassing the compact performance area. “Anything else to come on stage?”

“There’ll be a small stack of presents to go near the tree that I still have to wrap, but that’s it for today. Thanks.” She reached forward gingerly and picked up her phone to control the music and a pair of compact speakers. Rehearsals always

ran better with the little ones if she set the volume to the right level before they began. She was so focused on moving carefully, it took a minute before she realised Toby hadn't moved from centre stage. When she met his gaze, he folded his arms.

“Is there a problem?”

“I can make it for you—your set. Unless you'd prefer a real tree.”

That wasn't what she'd expected to hear. “Do you know someone who grows snow-covered fir trees?”

“No, but I'm good at finding things on the internet. If you want a real one, I'm your man.”

“Seriously, Toby, thanks for what you've done, but I'm good at doing all sorts of things myself. My father taught me to build stuff.”

“Great, and I respect your self-sufficiency, but your injury means you can't measure and cut and lift wood. Not for a while, and not in time for the concert. The accident was my fault, but leaving that aside, I'd like to help build your set.”

Refusal sprang to her lips. She pressed them shut before it escaped. Was she putting her need to prove she was self-sufficient above the best interests of her dance school? If that were the case, what did that say about her motive in coming to this country town? Declaring to her parents that she wanted to give country kids the opportunity to discover and develop a love of dance like they'd given her, had seemed the most important thing when she left Canberra.

“What do you say, Laurie? Do I get the gig?”

Slowly, she smiled. “Maybe I've been too intent on thinking I had to do it all to prove myself.”

“You don't. The concert is your vision. Accepting help takes nothing away from that, but it gives others a chance to join in with the fun. Doesn't sharing make it twice the fun, or something like that?”

She caught herself about to nod and instead, smiled more broadly. Toby was a decent man, and she sensed his need to make up for his role in her accident. But if she let him, both of them would achieve what they needed. “On one condition.”

“Name it.”

“So long as you agree the accident wasn’t entirely your fault, I accept your kind offer.”

Chapter 3

Five tiny dancers jumped and skipped mostly in time with the music and Toby found himself unexpectedly amused. He'd never spent much time with *little people*, and yet, this group and their varied, *distinctive* personalities held his interest almost as much as Laurie's patience in dealing with them.

"Now skip around the Christmas tree," Laurie called out.

The only boy in the group stopped dead, and Toby imagined the child's "*what tree?*" in his bewildered expression.

Meg MacGregor on the other hand was a natural leader. At five-years-old and demonstrating her librarian mother's organisational skills, she took charge, grabbed the boy's hand, and led the dancers around the bare bones tree, skipping in time with the music.

"Now step and point and step and point and step, and curtsy. You bow, Josh."

Toby covered his mouth and smothered a laugh that threatened to burst from him. The last thing he wanted was to throw the kids off, but they were so entertaining.

"Very good, everyone. Great leading, Meg."

Young Meg seemed pleased by Laurie's praise. "Thank you, Miss Moran."

"We'll finish for the day, and next time, I want you to bring in your costumes, even if they're not finished. Okay? Josh, I'll bring yours." There were nods from the children, and then Laurie gave Toby a bare sideways glance. The pallor of her cheeks showed him she'd used up all her energy. "Can you open the doors and let the parents in please?"

"Sure."

He strode to the double doors leading into the foyer and pulled them open. Parents wandered in, giving him curious looks as they passed. He glanced back at Laurie; she was standing with her bottom against the table he'd set up beside

her chair and facing the oncoming tide of adults. She had a smile for each of her students as they bounced around her before they went to meet their parents. While applauding her courage, he worried she'd pushed herself beyond her limit.

If only it were permissible to hustle the adults and children out without standing on ceremony, but Laurie wouldn't forgive such a breach of common courtesy. Somehow, she held her smile until the last parent finished speaking with her, but as the father and daughter walked past Toby, Laurie sank onto her seat.

Toby shut the first of the double doors behind them and held the other, ready to close it behind Claire MacGregor, who was off to one side repacking Meg's ballet bag. Meg looked at him, a solemn expression on her heart-shaped face. Seeing them together, he realised she was the image of her mother in looks as well as personality.

Claire took Meg's hand and headed towards the door then stopped shy of leaving. "I heard about Laurie's accident. It's nice that you're here helping, and I'm glad to see it wasn't as bad as I heard."

"Don't let this fool you. She's putting on a brave front. The doctor ordered bed rest, but she didn't want to let her students down by not turning up. That's how I came to be here. I'm driving her home."

Claire nodded knowingly. "Ah, I wondered. Usually, Laurie is bouncing around the place and so full of energy, it's exhausting. Maybe now she'll accept my offer to make Josh's costume." Claire headed back towards Laurie, and they held a brief, low conversation before Claire returned. "She's agreed. I'll phone Josh's dad and let him know."

"Josh is Jon Johnson's youngest, isn't he?"

"Yes. Between Christmas orders, health problems with Mel's parents, and all the rain we've had, they've got their work cut out for them at the nursery."

The memory of the little boy standing on stage wondering where the tree was, returned. Josh's parents owned the nursery,

and his dad also ran the florist shop. No wonder Josh hadn't recognised the cut-out as a *tree*!

An idea sprang into Toby's mind, rising from his early throwaway remark. But it made sense. "Do you think the Johnsons might be interested in donating a tree to the concert?"

Claire frowned and glanced at the skeleton shape on the stage. "A live tree instead of a cut-out. Could be a good idea. Do you want me to mention it to him?"

"That'd be good, thanks. I'll drop by tomorrow to sort out the details." The idea had nothing to do with palming work off, but Toby felt as strongly as his friend, Seth, about the environment. If they used a potted tree that could then be planted out, it would look terrific and be environmentally carbon neutral. And kids like Josh wouldn't be left wondering *what tree?* As for Santa's sleigh ...

Toby was sure he could come up with something more suitable than a cardboard or plywood cut-out. As he turned off lights and offered his arm to Laurie, he realised, despite the accident and his ensuing guilt, he was enjoying himself.

And it had much to do with the fact he'd stumbled on an unexpected way to spend time with her, sharing what she was passionate about. Working towards her concert and spending time together, would offer a chance to make their second date happen.

Laurie lay on her bed, eyes closed and grateful she'd made it this far. The neck brace was hot and bulky and itched like crazy, and she definitely wasn't a fan of keeping her head still. But she'd made it through the extra rehearsal needed by the youngest dancers, the concert was on track, and now she was home. Not in the hospital, as had seemed a distinct possibility. She'd take whatever positives she could find from the disastrous afternoon.

A tap on her bedroom door was followed by Toby's voice. "Laurie, are you awake? Can I come in?"

“Yes.” Prostrate and in pain wasn’t how she’d have chosen to spend time with Toby, but as she watched him carry in a tray and set it on her bedside table, she added his presence to the positives column. The accident was a pain—literally—and the timing, more than a nuisance, but Toby’s response was a silver lining. She smiled as he straightened up. “Thanks.”

“I thought toast would be easier to eat, and the iced coffee has a bendy straw so you don’t have to bend your head.”

She could have kissed him for thinking of that. The idea was appealing, but no way would she say that aloud.

Instead, Laurie blinked away the rush of moisture in her eyes and commented on the surprising fact. “You remembered my favourite drink.” On their one and only date, they’d talked about a lot of things, none of which included “favourite” anything. But Toby must have been paying attention because she’d made that comment to Thea when the Greek owner of the Cyprus Café set an iced coffee in front of her.

“It’s only the homemade version, but tomorrow, I can run down to the Cyprus and get you a proper one. You actually moaned with pleasure at the first mouthful.”

Had she? Possibly. If not for the neck brace, she’d have shrugged. “I refuse to be embarrassed about appreciating great food and drink. And I *actually* called it the best I’d ever tasted. The *moaning* is a figment of your imagination.”

“Tell yourself that if it makes you feel better. I know what I heard.” She heard the smile in his voice as he slipped his forearms under her arms and raised her to a sitting position then tucked a couple of plump pillows behind her.

When she could see his face again, she said, “I’ll allow your fallible, fanciful recall because you’ve done so much for me; more than I asked for or expected. In fact, you’ve been incredibly kind, so thank you for my toast and homemade iced coffee. And thanks for sticking around through rehearsal. I imagine you were bored out of your brain.”

“Not at all. I found the kids—diverting.”

Laurie bit into a piece of toast. She didn't believe him, although she wanted to, but long ago she'd accepted that dance didn't appeal to everyone, including the men she'd dated ...

One date in particular sent a shudder down her spine. *That* guy thought the only dancing worth watching involved a young woman in minimal clothing, and a pole. She'd cut the evening short and blocked his number. But she hung on to the notion that any man she liked didn't have to love dance as much as she did but would at least be supportive of her passion.

During rehearsal, Toby had covered his mouth to disguise what she was certain had been a yawn. But by offering to build her set, he *was* supporting her, and even if guilt was the driving force, he'd made the offer.

That's a big tick on the potential second date card.

Preoccupied with her thoughts, she reached for the glass of iced coffee. The neck brace hindered her movements, and what should have been a simple action, wasn't. Annoyed by the limitation, she made a small lunge just as Toby moved to help her. Instead of grabbing the glass, she knocked it over.

Cream and coffee splattered Toby's beige trousers. He jumped backwards, tripped over the leg of the rocking chair beside her bedside table, and ended up on his backside in the middle of a puddle of liquid. Splatter became soaking and Laurie slapped her hands over her mouth.

"Oh my gosh, Toby, I—I ..."

The stain spread, Toby looked up and pulled a face, and Laurie's embarrassment morphed into laughter. She laughed so hard, it hurt. "Ouch. Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't laugh but ..."

She gulped a big breath and put a hand behind her neck, trying to hold her head still when all she wanted to do was fall back on her bed and give into paroxysms of laughter.

"Go ahead, laugh. It's good to see you smiling again."

"I'm ... sorry." She tried again and took another breath, holding it as Toby pushed himself off the floor. He stood there,

dripping, coffee spreading down the insides of his trousers, and it set her off again.

He glanced down at his legs and grimaced. “Yeah, yeah, I know what it looks like.” He lifted his wrist and checked the time on his watch. “When is your overnight carer arriving?”

More quickly than a bucket of cold water, Toby’s question stopped her laughter. “The doctor told you about that, did she?”

“Of course. Doctor Frobisher was concerned that you wouldn’t be alone tonight. I said I’d stay until the next shift arrived.”

Laurie bit her lip. The gap in her bedroom curtains revealed it was already dark out. “I meant to phone Esther Ainslie earlier and ask if it was convenient for her to pop in, but ...” She gestured towards the window. “Her night vision isn’t great.”

Toby frowned. “Are you saying you don’t have anyone to stay with you?”

“I meant to. You’ve fed me, and if you can lock the front door on your way out, I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

But Toby was shaking his head. “No deal. The doctor was clear you could only come home tonight if you had someone here. I’ll stay.”

“You can’t.”

“I won’t go back on my word.”

“But—”

He shook his head, but his expression couldn’t have been clearer. He wasn’t going to budge. “I’m here now. It’s easy for me to stay, but I have one request. Do you mind if I toss my clothes into your washing machine?”

“Of course not. Be my guest.”

Chapter 4

A too-bright glimmer of light through the curtains pulled Laurie from a heavy sleep. Reluctant to make the effort to get up, she lifted a hand to shade her eyes. Usually, after six or seven hours, she bounced out of bed, but a headache and a tightness across her forehead held her still. She frowned, figuring she must have slept awkwardly and wondered why before her hand encountered her neck brace and the memory of yesterday's accident returned.

Gingerly, she tipped her head towards the bedside table and reached for her phone. How late was it?

Her eyes were gritty, and she squinted to bring the time into focus. Nearly seven-thirty! With the concert fast approaching and today's long to-do list, her injury meant some things would have to be pushed back. But which ones? It was already December, the concert was two weeks away, and everything was important, pressing, or urgent.

Groaning, she rolled onto her side and tried to sit up. As she did, a muscle in her back spasmed and she yelped.

There was a quick tap at her door and a man's voice asked, "Laurie, are you okay?"

"What the—" Her fingers dug into her mattress. Who was in her house? Two seconds passed before her scattered thoughts regrouped. "Toby? What are you doing—"

Toby poked his head around the door. "You groaned. Are you in pain? Can I get your pain meds for you?"

Mentally, she focused on the spasm, assessing her neck, back, and shoulders. The pain was already settling into a dull ache. "Am I due for more?"

"About an hour ago, but I didn't want to wake you."

"In that case, yes please."

"Be right back."

She heard his footsteps padding down the hall, bare feet on bare boards as he turned into the kitchen. A cupboard opened,

the tap gushed briefly, and within seconds, Toby was back, tablet bottle and water glass in hand.

“Here you go.” He handed her the glass then twisted the top off the tablets and shook one into the lid, offering it to her.

“Thanks.” Instinctively she closed her eyes and tipped her head back as she swallowed the tablet. “Ow, I must remember not to do that again.”

Opening her eyes, she set the glass on her bedside table and finally realised something. “You’re wearing a bath towel.”

“Very observant. I was on my way to take my clothes out of your dryer when you groaned. That seemed more important than getting dressed.”

“Um, maybe. Please tell me you haven’t walked outside like that.” If her neighbours saw him like that, the story that they were a couple, or at the very least, had hooked up last night would run like a wildfire through Bindarra Creek and out the other side before work started for the day.

His lips twitched but to give him his due, he held back a grin as he told her, “No, but my ute is parked in your driveway. Sorry.”

“No problem.” He was unconcerned, but if he was okay with gossip linking them and flying around town, she’d have to accept it too. “Not a big deal.” And why should she worry about what other people thought? If she chose to hook up with Toby, it was no one’s business but theirs.

Not that we’re hooking up.

But her mother’s strict Catholic upbringing played on her mind as she stood, one hand on the back of the brace supporting her neck as a reminder to keep her head still.

Toby’s hands rose to help.

“I’m okay, thanks.” She needed to be. Living by herself meant doing everything for herself. Toby’s presence last night was a luxury that wouldn’t be repeated, regardless of what the rumour mill might say. In fact, she was surprised she hadn’t heard his name associated with any of the local women in the

six months she'd been in town. He was a nice guy, good looking, caring, well-built ...

With a start, she tore her gaze from his impressive, bare chest. "I'm going for a shower."

"I'll turn the water on and put a towel close to hand so you don't overreach." Suiting actions to words, he opened the ensuite door. Reaching into the shower cubicle, he turned the water on, and then slung a towel over the curtain rail. He straightened a ripple in the bathmat then held the door open as she entered the bathroom, noting a second door and the Jack and Jill layout. "I'll leave you to it."

As she passed him, a hunger Laurie hadn't previously acknowledged welled up within her. She'd been working so hard to establish her fledgling dance studio, she hadn't allowed time in her life for basic human connections. Making a go of the school had been all-consuming, but seeing Toby doing simple, caring things for her, she accepted her goal had come at a high price.

And emphasised how lonely she'd been. Seeing Toby in her bathroom, and having him take care of her following the accident, smashed that emptiness to pieces.

I could get used to this view every morning.

But it was more than just the sight of him. She enjoyed his company and conversation, and Toby's presence felt like a completion, a rounding out of her life. Even if Toby wasn't *the one*, she decided from today, she wouldn't push people away because she was too busy.

"When my neck has healed, I'm going to cook you a slap-up meal as a thank you."

A grin broke across Toby's face. Even his eyes danced. "I'd like that. You don't mind having me over again for a meal?"

"Why would you think that?"

"I reckon the parents of your students have already decided we're an item. I got a couple of knowing looks during pick-up."

Laurie drew a slow breath and a little voice in her head prompted her: *Be honest. Take a chance.*

Taking chances wasn't her forte. Safe, considered steps every stage of her life; that was how she rolled. The most adventurous she'd been was in coming to this small town and setting up her dance studio. But the idea of getting to know Toby better felt right.

Tell him.

Taking her courage in both hands, she said, "I wanted to go on another date when you asked me, but I thought I couldn't afford the distraction from setting up my school."

"So, I distracted you?" He seemed pleased by her revelation.

Emboldened, she added, "I liked you. I *like* you."

Toby nodded. "I like you too. So ... if I were to ask again, would you come on a second date with me?"

Steam wafted through the doorway, tendrils wrapping around his body.

"Yes, if you ask me. But right now, I think I should get into my shower before I run out of hot water."

Toby glanced over his shoulder then stepped aside. "Would you like breakfast?"

The question was oddly intimate. Perhaps it was only where her imagination had taken her, seeing Toby standing in her bathroom wearing nothing but a towel, but she felt as though they'd jumped from post-first date to a relationship in the space of a single question. "You've been great, staying overnight and all, but you don't have to do anything else for me. Really, you've gone above and beyond."

"Laurie, it's *breakfast*. Not a big deal. And you've invited me for dinner which you've offered to cook, so I reckon that cancels out coffee and toast, don't you?"

She was doing it again. Pushing him away to avoid committing precious time away from the studio. *No more.*

“When you put it like that, then yes please.” She pulled the door closed behind her, pulled her nightie over her head, and stepped under the spray.

Chapter 5

“Do you feel better after your shower?” A strand of hair had fallen across Laurie’s mouth and Toby curbed the urge to reach across the table and tuck it behind her ear. Morning light fell across her face, and her eyes seemed brighter and free of pain.

“Wonderful. And I’m having breakfast at a proper table with flowers, which is a treat. I usually eat on the run.” She touched one of the purple blooms, setting the delicate flower nodding.

As Toby had waited for the coffee to percolate, he’d noticed a pretty bush outside the kitchen window, and brought in several stems to decorate the small table. A simple gesture, an afterthought really, but the flowers had brightened her day.

“Any meal is nicer when someone else prepares it, even if it’s only coffee and toast.” He polished off two slices of toast and a mug of coffee and then got up and brought the pot to the table and refilled both mugs. “I’ll make a start today on building your set. Tell me what you want and give me the dimensions.”

“That would be great, thanks. That orange ring binder on the bench behind you has my sketches and rough sizes for each set piece. The stage measurements are in the plastic sleeve behind them. I printed everything out to make it easier to explain what I wanted when I ordered the plywood.”

“Okay, so where is the plywood? Here, or at the studio?”

A hint of pink crept up Laurie’s cheeks. “I planned to go in today with my order. I’ve been making costumes for three students whose parents said they can’t sew. The set had to wait.”

Which explains the skeleton tree.

“Not a problem. I prefer starting from scratch.” Toby leaned back in his chair, snagged the binder, and set it on the table. Moving his mug and plate to one side, he opened the binder and located the sketches and details Laurie had

mentioned. Her sketches were clear, although more imaginative than he could create with plywood cut outs alone.

But seeing Laurie's design, his idea for making the sleigh could be a winner.

"Is it doable?" She laced her fingers, squeezing them tightly together. "If you haven't got time for it all, the Christmas tree will do as it is at a pinch. It could be draped in tinsel and would work okay, but I need Santa's sleigh to be light enough to be pulled onstage by four of my older students."

"Teenagers?"

"Yes. The older girls are doubling up as reindeer after they perform their excerpt from *The Nutcracker*."

"Okay." Tapping the sketch, he met her gaze. "I can achieve this for you. Are you happy to leave the fine details to me?"

"At this stage, I'm just grateful you've offered to make the set. Without it, the concert won't be the same."

"I'll give you a call when I've got it sorted, unless—"

Was now a bad time to invite her on that second date? Despite the accident, they were in a friendly place, but would she feel she had to accept an invitation because of the work he'd said he'd do? Or would it be better to wait until she wasn't stressing about the concert?

Deciding it was more important that she didn't feel pressured, he shelved his invitation for the time being.

But as Laurie stacked their plates and carried them to the sink, she said, "Maybe we can meet up later—for coffee. You might have questions once you start."

"It's a date."

Blast it. The *date* word had popped out of his mouth, unfiltered because his mind had been grappling with the whole 'ask-don't ask' thing. Annoyed by his slip, he scrambled to fix it.

But if the small smile Laurie gave was anything to go by, she was unfazed by his slip. “Just one thing, I won’t be free until about one o’clock. Maybe we can grab lunch?”

Toby took the offer like a lifeline. Laurie had said she was open to the idea of a second date. He’d make sure lunch was different; special. “Sounds good. How about I pick you up around one. We’ll call it a working lunch, but that will give me enough time to check out an idea, then if it’s feasible I’ll run it by you.”

“I’m intrigued. What is it?”

He shook his head. “I’ll tell you if it looks like being a starter.”

“Then a working lunch it is. I’ll be at Hunter’s office then. Can you drop me at the newspaper office, if it’s on your way?”

“Sure. I’m your chauffeur. Your wish and all that, remember.”

##

After driving Laurie to the newspaper office where her programs were being printed, Toby dropped into the Cyprus Café.

“Hi, Thea. Any chance you could make up a picnic basket for me by one o’clock? I know it’s late notice, and not a problem if you’re too busy, but—”

Thea held up a hand. “If you don’t need any special order, I can do it. Your favourite is on the menu today, Toby!”

“Thea, you’re a star. Thanks.”

There were no rules that said you couldn’t have a working lunch beside the creek, and the day was fine and hot. Under the willow trees it would be cooler, and the burbling water would provide a relaxing backdrop.

Perfect second date setting, he thought.

With lunch sorted, Toby drove to the wrecker’s yard. He pulled up to the side of a pair of high, heavy metal gates. As he walked along the central aisle, he scanned the rusting

vehicles, stopping when he spotted a vintage VW. No need to look further.

One hand rested possessively on the rusting bonnet as Vince Gorman wandered out of his office, an ancient caravan with a clunking air conditioner that dripped water into an old bathtub. Grey scum and dust covered the water's surface, and not even Vince's junkyard dog would drink from it. The dog, a lean and aging cattle dog, sniffed at the bathtub then trotted off between two stacks of pressed metal carcasses.

"G'day, Vince. How's it going?" Toby held out his hand and they shook.

"Slow this time of year. Punters have other things on their minds than changing cars. That'll change in the new year when car yards run their last year's models sales. What can I do for you?"

Toby nodded towards the VW. "Any chance you'd consider donating that to a good cause?"

Vince's laugh roared, spluttered, and turned into choking and a bout of coughing. He thumped his chest a couple of times, coughed again then wiped his eyes. "Too many cancer sticks, my wife tells me." He cleared his throat and pinned Toby with a look that set his chances of scoring a donation somewhere below that of a snowflake approaching hell.

"Son, I'm running a business here. Feeding my family by the sweat of my brow and putting food on the table. I can't go giving away the merchandise."

"Fair enough. How about you lend it to us, and we'll include an ad for your business in the program?"

"What program?" Vince eyed him as though he was mad.

"Laurie Moran's dance concert at the Christmas carols. We need Santa's sleigh to appear on stage." Fleetingly, he wondered if he should have asked Laurie before offering ad space in her program, but too late now.

"And you want this VW—" Vince stabbed a finger in the direction of the rusting metal, "—for the sleigh?"

Toby nodded. “Yeah. Cool modern Santa, hey?”

Vince burst out laughing, coughed, and thumped his chest again before plonking himself on the step below his office door. Sweat beaded his brow. “So you borrow this rust bucket ___”

“And improve its appearance.”

Vince nodded. “It’s getting better and better. And in return, I get the car back, looking better than ever, and a free ad in the dance lady’s program. Can’t see anything wrong with that deal.” He held out his hand and they shook on it. “For that, I’ll throw in free delivery. Where do you want it?”

“Let me call Vito De Luca and see if he can squeeze in the job in time for carols night.”

“I can’t wait to see Paddy Cullen as Santa behind the wheel of a VW.”

Vince was still chuckling as Toby Googled the number for the spray painter. “That will be a front-page picture for the *Bindarra Bugle!* Paddy’s a Holden man through and through.” Glad his pitch to Vince had paid off, Toby crossed his fingers that Vito would be able to fit in an additional job during the madness of Christmas.

He was in luck and, having organised delivery to Vito who was going to clean off the rust and spray paint the VW at cost, Toby headed off to visit Jon Johnson. He found the nurseryman in his florist shop on Main Street, restocking the shop fridge with colourful summer blooms.

“Hi Jon. How’s business?”

“Crazy as. I’ve got triple the orders and still only one pair of hands. If you hear of anyone looking for a few extra hours, there’s a casual position here until Christmas at least.” Jon closed the fridge and picked up his cup of tea, grimacing as he sipped it. “Ugh, cold already.” He set the cup aside. “What can I do for you?”

“Has Claire MacGregor phoned you about Laurie’s accident?”

“And about Josh’s costume, bless her heart. She’s offered to finish making it. Poor Laurie. Lousy timing with the accident and the concert and all.”

“It is unfortunate. But people are pitching in to help make it happen; Claire with the costumes, I’m making the stage set, and Vince Gorman is lending us a small car to fill in for the sleigh. And young Vito is going to paint the car at cost.”

“That’s Bindarra folks for you. Always ready to help.”

“You said it. Look, I know you’re busy, but would you be able to lend Laurie a potted Christmas tree for the performance?”

“I’d be happy to. Least I can do for her. What with Mellie being out of town looking after her parents, and me on my own most of the time running between the nursery and the shop, I couldn’t manage, but Laurie wouldn’t hear of Josh missing out on the concert. She offered to make his costume, so yes, I can lend a tree for her show.”

“That’s great, thanks, mate.”

Jon leaned on the counter, his expression curious. “Say, are you two seeing each other now?”

The question came as no surprise. The Bindarra grapevine was legendary. In fact, Toby was only surprised Vince hadn’t asked him.

“Not exactly. I rear-ended her car. That’s how she came to be injured, and how I ended up as scenery maker and chauffeur.”

Jon shrugged. “As I said, folks here are quick to lend a hand when someone’s in need. And when it’s someone like Laurie who’s giving our kids so much, you spread the word and stand back, because help will roll in for her.”

“Thanks.”

“Listen—” Jon dived through the curtains into the back room and returned a moment later with a small potted Christmas fir. “Use this little fellow for rehearsals and tell Joshie’s little dancer friends to give it a small drink of water at

each session so it grows. I'll deliver the big tree direct to the stage for carols night."

Toby took the potted fir tree and grinned. "Reckon they'll think it's Santa's magic when they see the big tree on the night. Cheers."

By the time he'd visited the hardware store and Vito's spray-painting garage near the brewery, he'd been north, south, and east of town. It was close to lunchtime when he dropped into the Cyprus Café to pick up the picnic basket. The café was full, but Thea smiled when she saw him and held up a finger to tell him she'd be one minute as she delivered a plate of food to the table in the back of the café.

Toby still had a few minutes before picking up Laurie. Looking around, he appreciated the abundance of colourful decorations adorning the walls, but an addition since his last visit was a three-foot-high Christmas tree that faced the front door. Numerous small, brightly coloured cards hung from its branches in place of the usual ornaments.

Thea set a picnic basket with a red and white checked tablecloth covering the contents on the counter as Toby took out his wallet to pay. "I really appreciate you making it happen with not much notice. What's on the menu?"

"Two plates of my pastitsio with a side of salad, and a small platter of olives, cheese, and dried tomatoes. And for dessert, two pieces of baklava. Stavros is making your coffees now." Thea offered him the card reader and he tapped his card on the side.

"Sounds great, thanks, Thea. What's with the cards on the tree here?" He put his credit card into his wallet and slipped it into his back pocket.

Thea took one of the cards from the tree and offered it to him. "Each one is good for a free coffee. It's like the *pay-it-forward* idea I read about in an article about a city café. Customers with a little spare cash can pay for an extra coffee for someone doing it tough at Christmas. Stavros and me, we make extra cakes and sweet slices each day and add them to

the gifted coffees as a little extra. We hope it brightens someone's day."

Touched by the generosity and thoughtfulness of the Levonis family, Toby pulled out his wallet again and handed over a twenty-dollar note. "Add however many cards that will pay for."

"Thank you. That's five regular coffees or four large."

"You choose; whichever is most popular."

Stavros joined them and set two large takeaway mugs beside the picnic basket. "One soy chai latte with cinnamon, and one mocha, both extra hot. Hey, Toby, you courting that nice young dance teacher, you should take a bottle of wine too. My Thea, she always *kinder* to me when I took wine. Know what I mean?" He winked at Toby and Thea playfully smacked her husband's chest.

"What for you tell him that? Now what will Toby think?"

"He'll think I did whatever it took to win the prettiest girl in our town." Stavros dropped a kiss on Thea's cheek. "Still the prettiest."

"I'll keep that in mind. Thanks for the basket, Thea. I'll drop it back tomorrow if that's okay."

Thea waved a hand, brushing away any sense of urgency. "No rush. You go enjoy." She moved away and greeted new customers who came in behind Toby, so he stacked one coffee cup on top of the other, picked up the basket, and left.

Chapter 6

Laurie was just leaving Sullivan's real estate office as Toby reached the ute, which he'd parked where they'd agreed to meet. He set the basket in the rear floor well, put the coffee cups into the drink holders, and had the front passenger door open by the time she reached him.

"Great timing. Do you think we'll get a table at the Cyprus? The café looked pretty busy."

"It is, but never fear. We have a picnic basket, coffee, and a lunch spot with a view of the creek." He offered his hand to help her step up and into her seat.

"A picnic! What a great idea, thank you."

"And it will be much quieter." Feeling rather pleased—the idea might even be *inspired*, Toby thought—he drove to a quiet stretch of the creek. A pair of picnic tables had recently been installed as part of a community service project, and the setting was pretty after all the rain. Green grass covered the gentle slope down to the willow trees, and the creek ran high enough to look appealing.

Giving Laurie the cups to carry, Toby collected the basket and then offered her his arm as they walked down to the nearest table. The sky above was summer blue, but in the distance, thunder rumbled, the sound echoing in the far hills.

He turned towards the sound. Grey clouds stretched across the western horizon, growing darker, and full-bellied with rain. That was disappointing, but the weather hadn't been cooperative lately. Why should today—the day he was trying for an impromptu second date—be any different?

"What do you think? Shall we take our picnic back to your place?"

Laurie turned her whole body to look. Maybe his disappointment had coloured his tone. Or maybe Laurie was as keen as he was to make their date happen. Either way, she turned back and said, "I think we'll have time to eat before that lot reaches us. Come on, I'm famished."

Toby wasn't so sure, but joy filled him as he realised, they were both keen to make their date happen. He set the basket on the bench, flicked the tablecloth over one end of the table, and placed two deep foil-covered plates and the platter of nibbles on the cloth.

Laurie set the coffees down, one each side of the table. Toby had hoped to sit beside her before it dawned on him, she needed to sit across from him to avoid turning her head. The compensation would be watching her expressive face as they chatted. As they slid along their respective benches and then lifted the foil on the platter of olives and cheese, thunder rumbled, louder and closer than before.

“Are you sure you want to risk a soaking?” With Laurie in a neck brace, she couldn't move quickly to shelter.

“It won't reach us for a while. Trust me, I've already had three things go wrong this week.” She skewered an olive with a toothpick and popped it into her mouth. “It wouldn't dare rain on us.”

Toby skewered an antipasto kebab of cheese, olive, and dried tomato on a toothpick. “The old ‘things happen in threes’ belief. Are you superstitious about the number thirteen as well?”

“No, but I respect the power of numbers. What about you?” She loaded her toothpick like Toby's and ate the combination, one hand hiding her mouth. “Oh, that's good.”

“I'm partial to the number two today. Tomorrow it will be three, then four, then—”

“What's special about two today? Is it the second of December?”

“It's the third, but today is our second date. Unplanned until this morning, and long overdue since we had our first.”

Her face lit with delight. “You're right. But in that case, I'm still on one. In my system, technically it doesn't count as number two until it's complete.” She lifted a corner of the foil on the lunch plates and looked at him. “Would you mind if I

move on to the main meal? Delicious as these nibbles are, I'm really hungry."

"Allow me." They'd eaten half of the food from the platter. Toby moved it aside and took the foil off a plate and handed it to Laurie. "Thea's pastitsio is one of my favourite dishes. Have you had it before?"

"No. What's in it?"

"Lamb mince, although sometimes she uses beef when lamb is too expensive. There's a base of macaroni and a white sauce I've never been able to replicate exactly, and Mediterranean herbs."

"Yum! Do you cook?"

"I like to eat so, yes. And since Thea won't share her secret ingredient, I often eat at the Cyprus when I know pastitsio is on the menu." Maybe one day he'd share with Laurie that Thea had taught him to cook several basic dishes when he'd come back to town. She was a great teacher, and he'd discovered he enjoyed cooking.

He forked up his first piece of pastitsio, savouring the first hit of flavour on his tongue.

A raindrop hit his nose. Then another.

Toby turned to look at the sky. The line of hills had disappeared in a menacing cloud of grey. More worrying was the green tinge at their base.

"There's hail in that lot. We've got to go." He grabbed the plates and dropped them into the basket, Laurie grabbed the coffee cups then he yanked the cloth off the table. "As fast as you can, get to the ute."

Laurie's progress uphill was slow, too slow for his liking. Then the heavens opened. He put the basket on the ground and, scooping her into his arms, jogged towards the ute. She pulled the door open, and he deposited her on the seat, then slammed the door.

Thea's picnic basket!

The leading edge of hail was almost upon them when he ran back. As he grabbed the basket, the first pieces of ice fell, cold and sharp as he raced up the slope, slipping and sliding on the long grass. He jumped into the driver's seat and pulled the door shut.

Turning awkwardly, he set the basket on the back seat. The scent of their hot lunch tantalised his nose. Laurie had said she was famished, and so was he. Two slices of toast for breakfast and only olives and cheese since then had his stomach knocking against his backbone.

Glancing at Laurie, he said, "Let's get out of here and go eat."

Laurie turned her upper body towards him, and all thoughts of food or driving fled. Her eyes were wide, and one hand covered her mouth. She looked terrified and Toby's gut clenched.

"It's okay, we're safe in the ute." Hail hammered the roof so loudly, he had to shout to be heard. He wiped a hand over his face, but raindrops dripped from his hair and ran down his cheeks and neck. His jeans and shirt stuck uncomfortably to his body.

He should have pulled the pin on their picnic when he first saw the storm, but he'd been so keen to go on this date, he'd let need overwhelm good sense and now ... Laurie was anxious, and with good reason. There could be golf ball sized hail, or worse, following the small stuff. Seeking to reassure her, he took hold of her free hand. It was cool, but she squeezed his hand as though he was the one needing reassurance. Then she lowered the hand covering her mouth. Her lips twitched and ...

Laurie was—*laughing?*

She pointed at his shirt, plastered to his chest like a second skin, and her laughter grew, punctuating her speech. "I'm ... sorry, but you look—"

"Think it's funny, do you?"

Laurie gave the tiniest of nods and the corners of her eyes crinkled. She plucked at her shirt and shouted, “We’re a matching pair.”

Relief ran through him. Laurie had been the one to insist on staying to eat. She wasn’t afraid of being caught out in the storm. She didn’t care about being soaked or having to dash for the car. She thought it was *fun!*

Finally, Toby saw the humour in their rained-out picnic. “Looks like our attempt at a date is a washout.”

“Maybe not a total washout. Want to come to my place and reheat lunch?”

“Sounds good.”

During the short drive to Laurie’s house, the storm stopped abruptly, but drifts of hail covered footpaths and banked up against fences. If Toby squinted, Bindarra Creek after the hail looked a little like a snowy Christmas in the northern hemisphere. In its own way, it was pretty.

Small branches and leaves from the street trees along Banksia Drive littered the road and footpath, and a three-metre-tall tree in Laurie’s front yard had split in two. Toby pulled up at the kerb and assessed the damage. The fallen section blocked her driveway while the still upright section leaned drunkenly against the front fence.

“The whole thing will have to come down. I can get that sorted for you now. I’ve got my chainsaw in the tool cupboard of my ute.”

“That’s kind of you, but no.” Laurie picked up her handbag from the floor and searched for her keys.

“No?” Surely, he’d imagined that refusal. Had he overstepped in assuming she needed help, or was there some unwritten rule about offering to cut up a tree that posed a danger while on a second date?

He was beginning to doubt that their day qualified in any way as a date, first, second, or otherwise. Picnic notwithstanding.

“That piece of tree is putting pressure on the fence. It’s dangerous and—”

She held up the hand that gripped her keys. “I said no, not because I don’t want your help but because you haven’t eaten. I won’t be responsible for allowing a man to work on an empty stomach. Once we’ve had lunch, I’d be grateful for your chainsaw skills.”

“Um, okay. Great.”

He opened the door for Laurie, then collected the picnic basket from the back seat. He never knew what to expect with Laurie. Her sense of humour often came out of left field and left him trying to keep up with her. It gave their conversations an exciting edge.

And it started him wondering what a life with her might be like.

“Feel free to toss your clothes into the dryer. You know where it is.” Laurie figured she’d achieved the deadpan tone she’d been aiming for because Toby grinned.

“Thanks, but I don’t want you to think I only come here to wear your fluffy pink towels.”

“You do know they suit you, don’t you?” Oops, maybe she shouldn’t have let that image pop to the surface, but the idea of seeing Toby in a towel again was enticing.

“The temperature’s already climbing again now the storm’s gone. Once I start cutting and stacking the wood from that tree, I’ll dry off quickly.” He looked at the basket and asked, “What can I do to help?”

“Set the table? There are plates in the top drawer to your left. Could you put the salad out too please?”

“Leave it with me.” He opened the drawer she’d indicated and took out two plates painted in Moroccan tile designs, a small treat she’d allowed herself once she’d started her dance studio. “These are interesting. Did you paint them?”

“Bought them at a craft market in Tamworth. They make me happy each time I eat from them.” She opened a deep drawer beside Toby and took out a microwave-safe dish.

He reached around where she stood in front of the microwave and found the cutlery drawer. She reached past him and transferred the pastitsio into the dish then into the microwave. There was a rhythm and balance to the way they moved around each other in her small kitchen that felt as though they’d been doing this same domestic dance for years.

Having Toby in her kitchen was nice. He was good company and teasing him about lunch—about anything – was proving more fun than she’d expected. He *got* her sense of humour; not everyone did, and it was refreshing. It had been far too long since she’d let herself relax like that around anyone.

When Toby finished his part in preparing lunch, he glanced through the window into the back yard.

Laurie stood beside him. Sunshine blazed and blue skies made a distant memory of the hail. “Who’d believe we had to run for cover just half an hour ago?”

“Crazy weather. I’ll do a quick check outside; see if there’s any other damage. Back in a minute.” Toby left the kitchen and a moment later, she heard the back door close.

With lunch warming and nothing to do until it was ready, Laurie became aware of her clothing sticking in uncomfortable places. Her neck brace was damp too and beginning to itch. Deciding to change, she headed to the bathroom and stripped off her wet clothes, towelled off and pulled on a fresh pair of shorts. Opting for easy casual sounded sensible and simple, but as she tried to pull on a T-shirt, she realised the hole wasn’t big enough to easily accommodate her brace. In fact, she was trapped, her arms flailing at an awkward angle, and she couldn’t see a thing.

Praying for deliverance, she heard the door behind her open, heard a swift intake of breath, and sensed Toby had stopped dead in the doorway.

“Toby?”

“Ah, sorry, I’m sorry. I should have knocked. I forgot about the two-way thing with your bathroom.” Awkward, embarrassed, uncomfortable—Toby’s level of embarrassment fell somewhere between them.

A momentary flush of heat rushed up her face, but her embarrassment was nothing when set against her predicament.

“Thank God you’re here. Actually—” She tried turning towards him. Her voice was muffled, and she felt ridiculous. Maybe it *was* better she couldn’t see Toby. “I’m stuck. Can you help?”

A pause, no longer than a heartbeat before he answered, “Sure, no problem.”

Through the cotton T-shirt, she made out the vague shape of him standing in front of her, felt the heat and gentle pressure of his hands working the material over her neck brace. As her arms came free, she wriggled with pleasure at her escape. His fingers brushed her skin, a light touch that shouldn’t have meant anything, but her breath caught. Her eyes snapped open and met Toby’s chocolate-brown gaze.

He cleared his throat. “Better?”

“Much, thank you.” Oddly, the moment felt significant in a way she couldn’t quite grasp, and she would have stayed like that, teasing out the reason. But the microwave’s sharp beeps cut through whatever spell lay in his eyes, reminding her she’d eaten very little.

Reluctantly, she said, “Lunch is ready.”

His gaze dropped to her mouth.

A different hunger consumed her. An urgent need to kiss Toby. She didn’t count their first and only date when he’d kissed her cheek—all she’d allowed; less than she’d wanted. Then, she hadn’t been ready to allow anyone—not even the delectable Toby Stinson—into her personal space.

The past twenty-four hours had changed that. Now, she tilted her head in the smallest of movements. Maybe she even

leaned towards him, and maybe she expected him to do the same, but he frowned and stepped away, hands thrust deep into his pockets.

A river of air separated them. Empty. Confusing. Charged with emotion.

He turned away. "I'll leave you to finish."

"I'm finished. The bathroom's yours."

What just happened?

She blinked and stepped back. Was he giving her the brush-off? Had she misread the situation; imagined an attraction that didn't exist? How could she have got that so wrong? Feeling slightly foolish, she stepped around him. "I'll go and put lunch out."

Chapter 7

Conversation over their delayed, reheated lunch was non-existent, and their few exchanges were stilted. Laurie had moved her chair to face the window rather than sit across from him as she had at the picnic grounds. Since she couldn't turn her head and kept her gaze on the window, Toby couldn't read her expression. But for someone who had claimed to be famished, she picked at her food.

As soon as he'd eaten, Toby excused himself and went outside. He began chain-sawing smaller branches off the fallen half of the damaged tree, zipping them off quickly. His ear protection muffled the whine of the machine, but the relative quiet left his mind with too much blank space to fill.

How had their budding relationship moved from fun to fraught in one awkward bathroom encounter?

With a conscious effort, he focused on the job, mentally ticking off each safety element as he worked. Once the smaller branches were removed, he made an undercut on the fallen branch then angled the chainsaw down for the final cut to separate it from the trunk propped against the fence.

When the second half of the tree lay on the ground, Toby began cutting both trunks into manageable lengths. Another ten minutes should see this job finished. Then there was hail damage to the front guttering to be repaired. Unless Laurie had a ladder in her garden shed, that job would have to wait until another day.

Yesterday, the thought of having a reason to return would have pleased him, but after that awkward, silent lunch, he wasn't so sure. But he'd promised to help Laurie, and help her, he would.

As he cut the branches into lengths suitable for a campfire, his mind circled back to their encounter. He could pinpoint exactly when things changed between them. One moment there'd been serious attraction in her eyes. Then—she'd all but run from the room.

If only he could figure out why.

While he carried and stacked several armfuls of wood in the tray of the ute, he replayed those moments over and over. He'd been respectful and appropriate and hadn't taken advantage of the situation.

Walking in when she was tangled in her T-shirt with plenty of bare skin and honed stomach muscles on display, he'd felt bad for all of two seconds before realising she was glad he was there. Then when he'd got the damned T-shirt past her neck brace, she'd stood staring at him, wide-eyed and lovely, and he'd thought about kissing her.

He wanted to kiss her. He even imagined she'd leaned in to kiss him.

As if. She'd made it clear the concert was her priority, and dating him, a distraction.

She might as well have hung a sign around her neck: No romantic entanglements required.

Besides, he was meant to be helping her, not kissing her, and trying to kiss her after the T-shirt episode would have seemed off.

Frustrated and trying to untangle mixed messages—his problem, not hers—Toby dropped an armful of logs into the tray of the ute.

Could today's farce be called a second date? If so, it had been an abject failure and a third was unlikely. Sure as heck, he'd pinged off some god that was gleefully throwing obstacles in his way.

He moved the chainsaw out of the way, gathered another load of cut wood into his arms and stacked it neatly in the ute's tray. Laurie didn't want the wood, and her landlord had been glad to offload it in exchange for Toby's chopping down the damaged tree. It was the only win of a day that had started so well.

"Toby?" Her voice was muffled, sounding like it came from underwater.

Turning, he saw Laurie at the door, and pulled his ear protection down around his neck. “What’s up?”

“How about a break? You’ve been cutting wood for over an hour.” She seemed distant, and he imagined any chance with her had melted like hail in sunshine.

He shook his head. “Just water will be fine. There’s a lot more to do.”

He gave the tree stump a kick. Her landlord could deal with that later. It wasn’t in Laurie’s way, and he’d be better off away from her. Go lick his wounds back home.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw her wave to someone and glanced around to see Esther Ainslie, the retired librarian, crossing the street.

“Hi, Esther. I hope it hasn’t been too noisy for you.” Laurie’s greeting was cheerful in contrast to their strained exchanges over lunch.

Whatever had gone wrong was down to him, but he’d deal with it later. Summoning a smile for her visitor he said, “Hello, Mrs Ainslie. Sorry about the noise.”

“No problem, my dears. I heard the machine and thought I’d come over and ask if Laurie’s gardener could pop into my place. I didn’t realise you were here, Toby. Any chance while you’ve got your tool out, you could trim back a branch overhanging my roof? I’m worried about it coming through my kitchen with the storms we’ve been having.”

“Happy to oblige, Mrs Ainslie. I’ll come right on over as soon as I’ve cleared Laurie’s front yard.”

“Thank you, Toby. Laurie, let me know if I can do anything to help you. I imagine some things are difficult for you at the moment. I’m happy to pop in any time. Just give me a call.” With a wave, the former librarian crossed the street and disappeared into her house.

Toby picked up the rake and set to work, making piles of the smaller twigs and leaves. But even with his back turned, he felt Laurie watching him. The weight of her gaze was like a

constant tapping on his shoulder, demanding he turn and look at her.

He stopped and leaned on the rake. “Is there something you need?”

She stood tall and straight in the doorway, and her shoulders rose as though she’d taken a fortifying breath. “Have I offended you somehow?”

That was the last thing he’d expected her to say.

“What? No.” He knew it was the other way round. Why else would she have been so cool at lunch? “I thought I’d offended you.”

“Please come in for a drink. You never got around to telling me how you went this morning. We were going to talk about our progress and—other things.”

Like whether we’d go on another date, Toby thought.

That ship has sailed.

But if she wanted to talk, maybe they could clear whatever elephant was in the room.

He looked across the road towards Esther’s house. She wasn’t the sort to stickybeak, but he didn’t want to have this conversation with Laurie in full view and sound of the neighbours. Full and frank talks needed privacy.

“Tell you what, I’ll deal with Mrs Ainslie’s problem branch, then pop back for a coffee before I head home, okay?”

“Thanks.”

The chainsaw whined on and off over the next hour, interspersed with thuds as Toby let pieces of sawn-off branches drop. Laurie sneaked occasional peeks through the lounge window, following Toby’s progress in making Esther’s troublesome tree safe. While she waited, she collated her financial information. Her accountant had some plan to reduce her tax liability and wanted her first six months’ figures as soon as possible.

She totalled the expenses column, sat back, and breathed a sigh of relief. Admittedly the profit from her studio's first six months was small, but she *had* turned a profit. Maybe now, her accountant father would be proud of her.

And maybe he'd never forgive her for not following in his footsteps.

Determined to do it by herself she'd refused his offer of backing. The offer had come with conditions, of course. If she failed, she would be expected to go back home and continue studying towards her accounting degree.

But late one night, uncertain about which path to follow, she'd overheard her father telling her mother: "Most small businesses fail within the first twelve months. Don't worry; this time next year, she'll be back home with us."

That had settled it for Laurie. Win or lose, her dream was up to her, and if she succeeded, it would be on her terms, in spite her parents.

Realising it had been quiet for a while, she looked through the window, surprised to see long shadows across the road. Toby was stowing his tools and safety gear in his ute. He locked the toolbox then looked towards her house.

She cringed at the thought of being caught spying on him and stepped back.

What am I doing? I want Toby to come in.

Steeling herself for the talk to come, she opened the front door and waved. "I'll put the kettle on." She'd been brave enough to defy her parents' pressure and leave home to follow her dream, and now she had to dig up a little more of that bravery and tell Toby she liked him.

If I haven't left it too late.

Leaving the door ajar for Toby, she went through to the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. As an afterthought, she took out a bottle of Kahlua, an early Christmas present from an old school friend in Canberra, and set it on the tray beside a plate of chocolate cake.

She poked her head around the door and watched as Toby toed off his boots and left them beside the front door. “Good, you’re here.”

“Do you mind if I wash off the sawdust in your laundry tub?”

“Be my guest. Coffee will be ready in five.”

He nodded and disappeared down the three steps leading to her laundry. When he returned, he eyed off the cake. “Looks good.”

“Homemade, but not by me.”

“Let me guess, Pamela Brown’s baking?”

“I think so. Shall we take it out the back?”

“Let me carry it.”

At first annoyed the landlord had told her the heavy table and bench set were a fixture, now she was pleased. Old as it was, the outdoor furniture was sturdy, and provided symmetry to their day. Picnic lunch – picnic afternoon tea, bookending the most confusing, potentially important afternoon of her life.

Ridiculous as it sounded, she knew the dramatic statement suited. The accident had given her a second chance with Toby.

When they were settled in the shade of a low tree, she served a large slice of cake onto a funky retro plate and handed it to him. As their gazes met, she said, “I want to apologise for ___”

“I’m sorry about—” Toby’s words overlapped hers, and each broke off their apology. His gaze was intense, searching.

“You don’t have anything to apologise for, Toby.”

“Something happened in the bathroom, and I don’t know what, except I think I hurt you somehow.”

She looked down at her slice of cake and pressed her lips together. “Any hurt is my own fault. When I came to Bindarra, I was pursuing a dream that was all-consuming. I put it ahead of everything, including relationships.”

“I get it. I’ve been focused on the goal of setting up my own cyber security company and studying part-time towards a law degree.”

“Then you might understand this deep-seated drive I have to prove myself. My parents are both high achievers; ambitious, leaders for whom reputation means everything. Mum is a corporate lawyer and Dad owns his own accounting firm. They wanted me to be like them but were prepared to let me piddle around with my *hobby* for a year or so. ‘Until I came to my senses’ was the way they put it.”

“So they didn’t support your passion for building up a dance studio?”

“What resolved me was overhearing my father predict my failure within a year. He was pleased it would show me the real world and force me to return to Canberra.” She bit into the frosted cake. Nothing ever worked to banish the bitter taste of his lack of belief in her, but concentrating on its lush, chocolatey texture and taste was a consolation.

As was the man sitting opposite her.

Toby seemed thoughtful and she tried to lighten the mood.

“Thank goodness cake is the antidote to some of the world’s ills.” Setting the cake fork on her plate, she poured coffee into both mugs. “Have you tried it with Kahlua? It goes well with chocolate cake.”

“I’m willing to try anything once.”

She tipped a teaspoonful of the chocolate liqueur into each mug and gave them a quick stir. “About that ...”

“The Kahlua?” He picked up a mug and sipped.

“No, trying things. There *was* something I really wanted to try ... with you.”

Toby set his mug on the table. “Is this about what happened today?”

“Partly ... mostly. But not just today.” These moments looked so easy in the old black and white movies she loved,

the ones with Fred Astaire dancing with his light-as-air partners, yet here she was, mucking hers up.

Pressing her palms flat on the table, she tried again. “After you rescued me from my T-shirt, when I looked at you, all I wanted was to kiss you.”

“Ditto.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“How could I?”

“Because you’d seen me undressed? I wear fewer clothes and show heaps more skin when I’m swimming.”

Toby rubbed his neck. “It wasn’t about your clothes. When I walked in on you today, you were struggling with your neck brace, which you’re wearing because I ran into you. Then I took you on a picnic in a hailstorm!”

“What’s your point?”

“Our encounters include a single, very pleasant drink, one accident, and a date with hail I’d prefer not to repeat. What do you think will happen if I try to kiss you?”

That was what was stopping him?

Laurie tried to imbue all her feelings about this lovely man into one searing look and said, “I’d enjoy it.”

“I’m jinxed around you, Laurie. I don’t ever want to hurt you.”

“Isn’t that my risk to take? Besides, if you never try—”

He stood and came around the table. She swivelled to face him, and gently, he cupped her face then angled his head and kissed her.

Chapter 8

Laurie's lips were soft, and she tasted of chocolate frosting and Kahlua.

His new favourite flavours.

When Toby finally stopped and sat back on his heels in front of her, she smiled. "See, nothing bad happened."

"Aside from the mosquitoes coming out to feed. Do you have some spray?"

"Let's go inside. I want to show you the program."

Recalling his deal with Vince, and a similar offer to Vito De Luca, Toby's heart sank. "Is it finished then?"

"This is just a mock-up. I told them at the *"Bindarra Bugle"* that I have a couple more changes to make first, and they said it's fine."

She held the screen door open, and he carried the tray into the kitchen and set it beside the sink. Outside, the light was fading and bugs kamikazied into the lounge room windows as they sat on the sofa.

She took the program out of a plastic sleeve and handed it to him.

The front was a reproduction of her advertising poster. "I sat hunting for elves in this poster in the Cyprus one day. I found all eight."

"Nine. Did you spot the one peeping out of Santa's toy sack?"

Toby tipped the program towards the light and grinned. "Clever. His ears and eyes look like swirls on the ribbon ties, and I mistook his hat for the top of that sack."

Laurie looked pleased with herself, and then she asked, "What do you think of the back cover?"

He turned the program over. It began with a thank you for the warm welcome and support she'd received when she

opened her studio then thanked a host of local businesses and individuals.

“I added one more thank you to the original.” She pointed at the final short paragraph.

“A fortunate accident led to the happy addition of the skills of Toby Stinson, stage manager and good egg.” I thought of giving you a “Good Egg” award. Not many men would have done all you have, and with a smile.”

“That’s nice of you, but you didn’t have to. I’m happy to help.”

“That’s just it, Toby. You see I need help and you do something about it. You’re *happy* to help. I think that’s special.”

He took the plastic sleeve from her and set it and the program on the coffee table. Picking up her hand, he looked into her eyes. “I want to kiss you again.”

Her lips parted and she leaned towards him. “There’s nothing stopping you.”

It was mid-evening before Toby left her house with his load of wood and a promise to return tomorrow afternoon with more of the stage set completed.

Laurie stretched her arms above her head and yawned. It was a funny old world when a car accident could lead to such optimism. She picked up her mobile, turned off the lights and made her way to her bedroom. As she was putting her phone on the bedside table, it lit up with a message.

Doubting Toby had reached home yet, she glanced at the visible lines and her stomach flipped.

“Coming to see your concert and support your endeavour. What’s the date? Can you book us in if there’s any such thing as a decent hotel in such a small town? Mum and Dad.”

No “love” or kisses; that wasn’t her mother’s style. Nor was it her style to ask if there were still tickets available, or if she had room in her home for them. Assumptions and pity.

That's what she took from the message. And parents doing what they saw as their duty.

Her relaxed good humour from an evening spent discovering how much she liked Toby's kisses evaporated, and dread settled in its place.

It wasn't fair—*she* wasn't being fair to them—but that's how their opposition had made her feel. Taking several long, slow breaths, she focused her energy on transforming her negative feelings into a bunch of balloons. When she was feeling calmer, she imagined letting the balloons go, watching them float higher and higher until they were carried beyond the distant line of hills.

Her phone pinged with another incoming message. Should she risk the emotional fallout if it was her mother again?

But Toby's name caught her attention, and she picked up the phone.

“Tonight was special. Thanks—for everything. Thinking of you. Tx”

Quickly, she typed a reply, then, hugging the phone against her chest, she sat on the edge of her bed. What a difference a day made.

And the difference was Toby.

Chapter 9

A week had passed in which Laurie had spent part of each day with Toby. He'd come into town each afternoon in time to accompany her to rehearsals, and today, Vito had delivered a highly polished, bright red VW shell for Santa's sleigh, with a promise to transport it to the Christmas concert on the seventeenth.

But the four dancers who were to pull it struggled to get the car rolling in the first place, and then to stop it on their marker.

"I love the idea, but even stripped down, the car is awkward for the reindeer to pull." In fact, Laurie was blown away by Toby's idea for the sleigh; it was exactly the fun, funky effect she wanted, but the logistics of making it appear on stage were doing her head in. "I've got to find a way to make it work."

Toby went up onto the stage and set his hands on the curved bar Vito had added to attach the reins to. He pushed and pulled, then looked at the ribbon reins held by four dancers dressed as reindeer. "What if we attach a rigid bar to the undercarriage then get a fit young male to pull it? A pole would have more structural integrity and make the sleigh easy to control, but would that be in the way of the dancers?"

The dancers shook their heads and seemed relieved to have a solution.

Toby looked down at Laurie. "Oliver MacGregor is strong. He could be dressed up as Rudolph."

Hope sparked in Laurie's chest. "That's perfect. We'll need to go to Armidale for the costume—"

Toby jumped off the stage. "Better ask Ollie first."

"Straight after rehearsal. Otherwise—" She eyed Toby, and he shook his head emphatically.

"Not a chance you can convince me to do it. I'm too tall for starters."

“Just a thought. Besides, you’re too valuable as my stage manager. Speaking of which, the committee asked if you could call in and give them details of the stage set so they can assign sufficient storage on the day. They’ll be in the Council chambers until five o’clock.”

Toby glanced at his watch. “I’ll do that now, then drop into the pharmacy. I think Ollie’s working today. If you like, I can ask him about playing Rudolph.”

“Emphasise the need for muscle rather than dancing.”

Toby grinned. “You can count on it. I remember how it felt to be a seventeen-year-old male seeking validation.”

Two days to the concert

Vito had come into town and welded the pole to the VW, and, after a little ego-soothing patter about his strength and how much Laurie needed him to save the show, Ollie had agreed to play the role. But the truth was, Toby was certain the presence of Rosalie, a tall, slim brunette and one of the reindeer, was the clincher. When Toby came into yesterday’s rehearsal, the teenagers had eyed each other off, and when the rehearsal finished, Toby had spotted them under the tree, heads bent towards each other as they waited for their rides home.

Laurie had leaned close and whispered, “Young love. Isn’t it wonderful.”

Personally, Toby was glad he was no longer seventeen. When it came to Laurie Moran, whatever age they were now was better. Especially since she no longer needed to wear the neck brace.

Their trip to Tamworth for the costume had turned into a mini break, with coffee and cake at a local café. He glanced at her as they drove out of town. Even though Laurie could now drive safely, he’d insisted on taking her. “No point tiring your neck with a long drive by yourself. If we time it right, we can have an early dinner after you pick up the Rudolph costume and be back in time to watch a movie.”

“It’s my turn to choose tonight. I’m thinking ... *“Die Hard”*.”

“That’s not a Christmas movie.”

“Is too. I’ll prove it to you.” They passed through a well-lit intersection, but as they reached the road to Bindarra Creek, Laurie said, “Hey, you haven’t turned your lights on.”

Toby checked the stick on the column. “They’re switched on.” He turned the dial off and on again, then pulled off the road. “Looks like my Christmas curse has returned. We’ve lost the lights.” In a rare moment for Toby, frustration leached into his voice.

“Does that mean we’re stuck here for the night?”

“We can’t drive without lights.” Annoyed, he flicked the lever. Bright light lit up the surrounding area and an approaching vehicle honked in displeasure. When the vehicle had passed, he pulled the lever on again.

“That’s weird. High beam is working, but nothing else. I wonder ...” He indicated and pulled back onto the road, holding the lever in the on position. “It will be a pain, but we can make it home like this. It’s less than forty-five ks.”

“How many motorists will you ping off in that distance?”

“Fifty?”

“Twenty-seven. What’s the prize for the winning guess?”

Toby laughed. Already, Laurie had turned jinx into jest. “Number two approaching, so I’m going to say ... the winner gets dinner cooked for them tomorrow night. Deal?”

“Cooked or bought for them. Deal.” She reached over into the back seat, grabbed the Rudolph headdress, and flicked the switch that lit up the nose. Bright red light pulsed off and on, then settled into a steady pattern.

“What are you doing?”

“You’ll see.” With a giggle, Laurie set the headdress on Toby’s dashboard looking out across the bonnet. The nose

flashed at passing traffic in a cheery red glow. Next moment, she launched into song:

“Rudolph with your nose so bright,

“Won’t you guide my sleigh tonight.”

By the time they drove into Bindarra, laughing all the way, it no longer mattered to Toby that encounters with Laurie had been *jinxed* in some way. Because jinxes with her were opportunities. With her, they became ways to grow stronger, together.

He’d fallen for her and jinx, no jinx, or the fickle hand of fate, he knew this Christmas was special.

Because he’d found the woman, he could see himself spending his life with.

Chapter 10

Garlands of Christmas lights were strung from both sides of the stage, reflecting in rippled patterns in the nearby river, and turning the showgrounds into a wonderland by night.

The Christmas carols were underway, barely ten minutes late starting, and Laurie was excited and nervous in equal measure as the school choir heading up the evening's program finished their set of carols. Her mini concert was up next. Flicking her hands and jogging on the spot, she tried to dispel her nervous energy.

In the wings beside her, the dancers were warmed up, and the group of five-year-olds led by serious little Meg MacGregor held hands and waited as the stage was set for their performance.

Oohs and ahs rose from the audience as a tall Christmas tree was wheeled onto the stage and brightly wrapped presents piled around it. Little Josh Johnson pointed at the tree and told the others, "See, I told you if we watered it, my dad said it'd grow."

In the middle of everything was Toby, directing an army of helpers with military precision. The stage was set in record time. He checked the set then returned to her side and handed her the microphone. "All yours, Laurie. Go wow their socks off." He dropped a kiss full on her lips then turned the microphone on.

Taking a deep breath, Laurie put on her biggest smile and crossed to centre stage. She waved to the audience and looked out over the sea of candles. The applause was warm, wonderful, and welcoming. Anticipation fizzed through her veins. Somewhere out there, her parents were seated on a pair of camp chairs provided by Toby, with an esky holding a bottle of sparkling wine, and a tray of antipasto sold by the Levonis family to raise funds for charity.

And Laurie was about to show them her dream made real by her students.

“Good evening, everyone. It’s a beautiful night, isn’t it! Thanks for allowing us to present our first dance concert ever as part of our carol night. In keeping with the season, we have two short Christmas ballets for you. To open the show, the junior school will present “*Santa Claus is Coming to Town*” followed by the seniors with two excerpts from *The Nutcracker*”. Please welcome the dancers of Happy Feet Dancing School.”

Meg led the youngest dancers on stage where they took up positions around the tree. The children were happy and excited, imperfect, but gorgeous, and she couldn’t have been prouder of them. “*The Nutcracker*” dances by the older students showed off their developing skills, but it was the finale that brought an upwelling of applause as the red VW sleigh driven by Paddy Cullen was pulled on stage by Oliver ‘Rudolph’ MacGregor and four dainty reindeer dancers.

Watching from the wings, Laurie’s joy knew no bounds, especially when Toby slipped his arms around her and kissed her. She turned into his kiss and murmured against his lips, “I don’t think I’ve ever been happier than I am right now.”

“You’ve given your studio everything and you deserve to enjoy tonight.”

“Thank you for helping make my dream come true.”

“Want to slip down to the river afterwards and share a bottle of bubbly to celebrate?”

“I’d love to, but I should probably spend a little time with my parents first. They did make the effort to drive all the way up here for a long weekend.” In the glow of her dancers’ success, Laurie found it easier to accept Toby’s view of her parents. Especially after he’d charmed her mother into laughing. Even her father seemed to like him.

“You know, after you dropped us off at Fig Tree Lodge, Dad said he was pleased to see I’d found a good, decent man. You’re a hit, Toby Stinson, with the toughest crowd I know.”

“That’s because you’re a woman worth fighting for, Lorelei Moran.”

Suddenly, Laurie realised all the dancers were clapping and looking towards her and Toby wrapped in each other's arms.

"They want you to take a bow. Go on." Toby gave her a gentle nudge onto the stage then, from his position in the wings, clapped and called out "Bravo!"

Laurie joined her dancers, took their hands, and together, they bowed to their audience. The cheers ringing in her ears were triumphant, and she saw young parents checking the back of their programs where she'd included registration details.

After she bundled the excited dancers off stage into the care of the group of mothers tasked with costume duties, Toby's stage crew removed the sleigh. Laurie retreated out of their way and stood beside Vince's truck to wait until the car was hoisted on board.

"There you are."

"Here I am. I thought I'd wait with you till the car is loaded."

"Want to sit in the sleigh till Vince gets here? He could be a while. Last I saw he was chatting with Paddy and a group at the bar."

"A ride in Santa's sleigh? Sounds like fun."

Toby scooped her into his arms and sat her on the bench seat then jumped in beside her. "Hmm, being in Santa's sleigh, I think now is a good time to give you something." He reached into his pocket and drew out a blue-grey jeweller's box.

Her heart thudded, but the box was flat. Still ... "It's not Christmas yet."

"This isn't a Christmas present. It's to say, 'well done', and—open it. You'll see what I mean."

Intrigued, Laurie lifted the lid. "A charm bracelet!" She picked it up and held it to the light. "With a silver VW charm for our first concert together. It's beautiful, thank you, Toby. Can you put it on for me?" She held out her arm.

He clipped the bracelet on then kissed the inside of her wrist, right where her pulse beat faster at his touch. His lips were soft against her skin, and she snaked an arm around his neck.

“The charm has another meaning too.” He looked into her eyes. “It’s the day you crashed into my heart.”

Her eyes misted over, and she blinked to clear her tears. Nothing could be allowed to blur her memory of this wonderful day. “I think you mean you crashed into me, but yes, that’s one anniversary I always want to remember.”

“Let’s see what the New Year brings. I know what the next few minutes hold though.” He slipped his arms around her and kissed her with intent, and promise, and passion.

Lost in his kisses, she knew. Crashing into Toby was no jinx, but the single best thing to ever happen because now, next year promised to be bigger, brighter, and so much happier with him beside her.

The End

Read on below for an extract from *Under the Dark Moon* and discover more books by Susanne Bellamy.

Thank you for reading my Bindarra Creek Christmas Romance, *The Christmas Jinx*. Please consider leaving a review on Goodreads and/or the retailer from whom you purchased this book, tell a friend and share the reading pleasure, or share on social media.

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Thank you for reading *The Christmas Jinx*

Below, you can read an extract from Susanne's recent release.

Under the Dark Moon

(Ransom Women 1)

Meg Dorset escapes Darwin after the city is bombed by the Japanese. Travelling south in a truck filled with injured soldiers, she meets the charmer, Seamus Flanagan. In the confines of the army camp at Adelaide River, it doesn't take long for them to fall in love and become engaged. When Seamus is shipped out to join the war in the north, Meg is transferred to the RAAF hospital in Townsville.

On arrival, Meg is dismayed to find she is pregnant, but holds the news to herself to avoid the risk of discharge. Working as head nurse to Dr Geoffrey Ransom, Meg pushes away her growing feelings for this kind and dedicated doctor. She is engaged and carrying her fiancé's child, so she immerses herself into her work.

As her pregnancy develops Meg is torn. How can she continue with the career she is passionate about, and keep her pregnancy a secret?

Ransom Women

Under the Dark Moon

Under the Same Stars

Under the Banyan Tree

Under Clouds of War

Under the Southern Sun

Chapter 1

Darwin, 19 February 1942

Meg Dorset hit the floor with a thud. A terrible roaring filled her ears and her army-issue cot lay on its side across her lower legs. Heat beat at her face. Not the usual summer heat of Darwin; this heat was dry and fierce and—*loud*. Like the droning of a thousand giant mosquitoes circling her.

Disorientated, she pushed herself to her knees and kicked free from the bed sheet and tangle of mosquito netting. The door to the tiny rear room in the nurses' accommodation—the room she shared with Vera Grantham—hung askew on its hinges.

Explosions filled the air, banging one after another, and the floor trembled beneath her palms. Or was she trembling? A woman's scream rose from the floor below and Meg clambered to her feet. She grabbed her tin helmet and slung her first aid kit over her shoulder. Matron had emphasised that they must keep their kit and helmet within reach at all times.

"Although war has not directly touched our shores, it is not far away. Be prepared at all times, Sisters."

It looked like Matron had been right about the kit and wrong about the war. Aircraft rumbled high overhead. More explosions shook the hotel and dust rained down. Was the roof coming down?

Shoving her feet into her boots, Meg didn't stop to tie the laces. She had to get out of the building.

Heated air scorched her skin as she staggered through the doorway into the smoky hallway. At the far end of the hall where a wall had once been, the port was visible, and Meg gasped.

Flames engulfed a naval ship.

Black smoke columned and thickened like a pyre around the smokestack, consuming the ship. Grey smoke filled the gaping hole in the hotel, hiding the death throes of the

ship. Coughing, Meg scrunched her watering eyes and covered her mouth and nose with one arm. The other hand flailed for the handrail.

Her hand found the wood, smooth and warm. Blindly feeling for each step, Meg lunged forward and down the stairs. Down and down she staggered, trying not to breathe until she fell through the doors onto the covered veranda. She bent over, hands on her knees and sucked in a deep breath of smoky air. Her body was wracked by coughing and she fell onto a nearby chair. When the fit passed, she sat up, her chest heavy and heaving with the effort of breathing and looked around. *Christ save us, it's Dante's Inferno.*

Soldiers, some bare-chested, formed a bucket line that branched like a snake's forked tongue where two of them attempted to douse flames rising from the façade of a nearby building.

She bent down and tied her bootlaces, knowing there must be wounded men all over the place. People who needed her help. Where should she go? Thank God the last non-essential civilians had flown out yesterday. As a nursing sister, Meg was one of fewer than a hundred women allowed to remain in Darwin.

She pushed her hair back with shaking hands and turned in a slow half-circle. Thick black smoke poured from a stricken ship. Suddenly a blinding explosion spewed in a gold and black mushroom next to the smokestack.

Dodging debris and soldiers manning the untidy bucket line, she ran towards the carnage, even as common sense screamed at her to run the other way.

Meg reached the bank overlooking a stretch of beach at the waterfront and swallowed, sucking in air and trying to quell the panic rising from her gut and threatening to burst from her throat in a piercing, useless scream.

A skinny private with pimples motioned her over and took her arm and helped her over the steep side.

“Thanks. Any casualties here?”

“Over there, Sister.” He directed her to his right and she hurried across the sand towards a small group of soldiers.

Minor cuts and a possible broken arm by the way one young soldier cradled his elbow against his chest. She headed to him first and kneeled beside him. “How did it happen?” she asked as she examined his arm.

“Oh my God, look.” Her roommate, Vera whom she’d last seen when her shift changed over this morning, appeared at her side and pointed. “They’ve hit the hospital ship.”

Meg’s fingers dug into the rolled bandage she had just taken out of her kit. “It’s clearly marked as a hospital ship. What sort of enemy bombs wounded men and doctors and nurses?” Her gut clenched and she stood watching, anger and disbelief churning through her.

A soldier with a bandage around his head glanced at her, his expression harsh and dark. “That means nothing to the little yellow bastards. I heard they rounded up some nurses and shot them in the islands.”

They shot nurses?

Despite the heat, her skin turned clammy. When she signed up no one had ever mentioned she’d face an enemy that shot nurses. Civilians had no idea such horrific acts happened in war. Surely, Dad would have refused to let her go if he’d had any idea she’d be on the front line? He’d been unhappy about her joining up, but he hadn’t stopped her.

The front line. Where they shoot nurses.

Bile rose in her throat, burning. Frantically, she swallowed it down. She had a job to do, and do it she would. Turning back to the private she bandaged his arm then improvised a sling with another bandage.

As she was tying a knot beside his neck, a ragged cheer rose around her. “The *Peary* is firing on the bastards. Go, *Peary!*”

A single gun on the small American ship continued to fire at the dive-bombers even as other ships around were

taking hits. As they watched, the *Peary* took a hit, but she kept bravely firing until the end.

“It’s no use. The Japs are too high for our piddling little guns to reach them. The shells are exploding way below the planes.” The soldier with the head wound slumped to the ground, his head bowed.

“Sister? Up here. You’re needed.” A man’s voice broke through the nightmarish scene and recalled Meg to her duty.

“Coming.” Thankful she’d fallen asleep in her uniform after a twenty-hour shift, Meg stumbled back up the bank and across the rubble-strewn street and dropped to her knees beside a young soldier. He writhed in pain, moaning words that were all unintelligible, except for “Mum’.

“I’m here to help you. Try to stay still and let me see what you’ve done.”

One hand gripped her wrist so hard she thought her bone might break. “Mum—hurts.”

“He copped a bit of guttering when it fell. His shoulder’s a mess, Sister.” The soldier who had called for her help rose with not another word. Picking up three empty buckets, he raced off to refill them.

“Can you let go of my arm so I can help you?” Meg looked into the young man’s eyes and forced her clenched teeth to part into a smile—her professional, reassuring smile, the one she pinned in place every day at work at the top end of Australia. “I’ll look after you, Private—” She glanced at the dog tag lying on the private’s chest. “Jackson. Look at me. I’m going to check your wound and get you to the hospital, okay?”

He let go of her wrist and gently, she eased him into a sitting position and shuffled around in the dirt until she could see his wound more clearly. The hot jagged metal had cut and burned through his shirt and skin, exposing a sliver of white bone beneath the red mess that had been his shoulder. Her guts heaved, but resolutely, she swallowed and focused only on him. “I need to cut away your shirt. Do you have a knife, private?”

“Yeah.” His reply was a forced grunt, an exhalation of pain. He pointed with his uninjured arm towards his calf. “Dad give it me.”

Meg reached for the calf sheath and withdrew a short but sharp knife and set to work removing the remnant of shirtsleeve. Slicing it, she made a pad of it then dressed the wound with a bandage from her kit. That would hold him until she could get him to the hospital and clean the wound properly. Then she tucked his arm inside the remains of his shirt. No matter how careful she was, each movement elicited a moan. “Stay with me, private. We’ll get you some morphine very soon.”

Looking around for someone to help her, Meg began to grasp the extent of the situation. Everyone was battling fires or searching through rubble.

Where the Post Office had once been, smoke rose from a pile of rubble. Wires dangled from telegraph poles. One leaned crazily against the shell of the remains. The front wall was gone, and most of the building lay in untidy piles, but a solitary desk lay on its side surrounded by two walls. As she watched, they gave way and crashed, sending up a cloud of dust. With communication lines down, no one would know what was happening in Darwin. No one would be coming to help them. Panic welled in her gut but giving in to the churning emotion was a luxury she couldn’t afford. Not with a wounded soldier depending on her.

“Looks like it’s just you and me.” She squatted beside the young private and slung his good arm across her shoulders. “Come on, soldier. We need to move out of here and get you to the hospital.”

She exerted gentle pressure to get him on his feet, and he groaned, but she urged him into a shuffling walk, one arm around his waist and the other bracing his injured arm across his chest. Heat surrounded them, flames consumed the ships behind them, and smoke choked them no matter which way they turned. Ash floated in the air like black rain and a sharp pain burned her arm. She shook the ash off, biting back a less

than ladylike exclamation. Not that Private Jackson would notice.

His head hung low, but he kept moving beside her. “Sister? If I don’t make it—”

“You’ll make it, private.”

“Will you see Dad gets my knife—please?”

“I will, but don’t you go wasting my effort to fix you up.”

He grunted, a sound she took as assent as they staggered along the road, skirting debris and running soldiers. Everywhere was noise and chaos and horror. Sweat ran down her face, but Meg couldn’t risk relaxing her hold on Private Jackson to wipe it off. Black particles settled into the sweat on Jackson’s face. Hers probably looked as black.

“Get down.” As she turned, a soldier ran towards her, and the command rang loud and urgent again. “Get. Down.”

She glanced up. Lines of bombs were falling out near the edge of town. Lines of bombs from neat formations of planes.

Her breath caught in her throat, but she obeyed the order without question.

Dropping to her knees she dragged the private down with her. The lad passed out and Meg lifted her head. A thunderous roar deafened her as wave after wave of planes flew over the town. Bombs whistled as they fell then cracked and crumpled as they exploded.

Dark mosquito shapes. A ragged line of bombs raining on the street ahead of them.

She flung herself over the wounded soldier, shielding him with her body.

Dirt rained on them, and she pressed her face into his good shoulder, one hand instinctively covering her helmet even while she tried to protect his wound.

The patter and thud of chunks of dirt subsided and she raised her head.

The soldier who had told her to get down knelt in front of her, his hand extended to help her up. “Sister, you’ve got to get out of here now.”

Meg looked up. The voice belonged to an Aussie sergeant who reached for her elbow and dragged her to her feet. Blood ran down his cheek from a wound above his right eye.

“I can’t leave him. He’s badly burnt.”

“Bring your patient this way.”

“He’s out cold.”

“Damn it.” The sergeant knelt beside the private then hefted him onto his shoulders. “They’re loading trucks and evacuating the wounded.”

“But I am essential. I’m a nurse and—”

“Move, Sister. They’ll need you. Around the next corner.”

Her ears ringing, Meg moved in response to the commanding tone. “I should get him to the hospital ...”

“Hospital’s on fire. Do what you can for him once you’re out of here.” The sergeant’s words bounced raggedly as he jogged towards the corner.

A battered truck with wooden slats along the sides and no roof, was parked near the rear gates of the hospital. Benches filled with wounded servicemen lined both sides.

Examining the crammed vehicle, Meg shook her head. “There’s no room on this one.”

“You’ll fit. We can squeeze you both in.”

Meg looked up at the sound of a familiar voice. Sister Patricia Carey, who had been on the shift that relieved Meg’s three hours earlier, gestured for her to climb aboard. “Hurry up, Meg.” Pat squeezed past the legs of a couple of patients and held out a hand.

Meg grabbed Pat's hand and scrambled up onto the flat bed, dangling her legs over the tailgate. It was precarious, but there wasn't another inch of space to shuffle into.

The sergeant put the injured private beside her then shouted to the driver. "That's it. Go."

Meg eased Private Jackson's good shoulder and head onto her lap as the truck bounced into a pothole—or was it a bomb hole? He groaned as the truck bumped and ground along the road south. Covering his wound as well as she could, Meg looked back at the city.

Dust spewed up behind the truck, almost obliterating the dirt road. Smoke filled the sky and several thick black columns rose from the harbour. How many ships had been hit? How many sunk? Her heart ached at the thought of the men on those ships. Had any sailors escaped?

Pat slid down against Meg's back. "Okay there? What happened to you?"

"I'm fine, aside from being tipped out of my bed. The hotel was hit, but I made it downstairs to the street. Someone called me to help this chap. What's happened, do you know?"

"Tom said the Japs might try to invade us at the Top End. Looks like he was right."

"Tom, your brother?" The truck lurched around a bend past the road to the racecourse. Dirt spooled out as they headed south, leaving the town behind. The heavy choking smoke thinned.

"Yes. He's on the *HMAS Kookaburra*. I heard there was a wave of planes hit the harbour and the big guns first. ... Once those were out of action, they started bombing the town. My guess is the airport was probably hit, or will be."

"The Post Office has gone, and it looked like the telegraph wires are down. No one will know what's happening up here." Meg went quiet. Her head ached, her eyes were gritty, and hunger pangs hit hard. Exhausted after twenty hours on the ward, she'd fallen asleep without eating. But likely she

wouldn't be able to keep any food down. Not after the shock of waking to a world on fire. Her stomach disagreed.

A wooden signpost pointed the way to Mt Isa and Alice Springs, and Brisbane, impossibly far away. The truck slowed with a squeal of brakes and a soldier jumped out from the cab. He knocked the sign names from the post with the butt of his rifle, collected them in his arms and returned to the cab. With a wheezing groan, the truck rolled slowly onwards.

“Any idea where we're going?” They bounced in and out of a depression in the road.

Pat knocked Meg's shoulder and grimaced. “Right now? Frankly, I don't care so long as it's as far away from here as we can get.”

“Thank goodness most of the civilian population were sent away when the government decided to station our armed forces up here.”

Pat said nothing for several moments, but she leaned across Meg's shoulder and gently checked Private Jackson's wound. “That's one of the things I like about you, Meg. Even in the direst circumstances, you find something to be grateful for.” A soldier out of Meg's sight called, “Sister, can you check my mate?” She squeezed Meg's shoulder before rising and clambering between soldiers seated on the floor between the narrow benches.

Rocking and bouncing on the back of the truck, Meg felt oddly detached from events. Praying this was just a nightmare brought on by too little sleep, her eyelids lowered, and her head bent. The angle made her neck ache, but she was too tired to lift her head ...

A hand gripped her shoulder and shook her. “Whoa there, Sister, don't nod off or you'll fall out and wake up in the middle of the track.”

Blinking and wishing the cheery voice with a hint of an Irish accent hadn't dragged her from the arms of Morpheus, Meg turned to see who had saved her from tumbling into the road.

A cheeky grin slashed white across a corporal's dirt-streaked face.

She raised her gaze to a pair of blue eyes, bright beneath a bandage and intense as the summer sky.

"Thanks for the save."

"Can't let the prettiest nurse this side of the Black Stump get lost, can I."

From somewhere behind, Pat raised her voice. "Corporal Flanagan, I'm not sure whether to tell you off for being cheeky to Sister Dorset, or take umbrage that you ignored me, who's put up with your shenanigans through all the hours of night and day."

Flanagan's grin grew wider. Ah, but you're the prettiest *head* nurse, Sister."

"And you're a rascal I should have discharged this morning."

"Maybe you'll be glad to have an able-bodied man around."

Flanagan's sling and bandaged head belied his comment, but his cheery, cheeky flirting made the terrible morning bearable. And when he reached awkwardly into his breast pocket and drew out a small open packet of chocolate and offered it to Meg, she was glad he was aboard their transport.

"I shouldn't take your rations but thank you."

"Sister, I'll be offended if you turn down my gift. Besides, I got a wonderful night's sleep thanks to you." He winked, making sure she took no offence.

Her stomach growled and her mouth watered at the scent of chocolate currently wafting beneath her nose. Flanagan held it close and gave her a small nod. Reluctantly, but unable to keep from refusing his offer, she took the packet and broke off a single piece, offered a quiet "Thanks" and popped it into her mouth. Closing her eyes, she let the chocolate melt on her tongue.

A swiftly indrawn breath nearby forced her eyes to open.

“What is it? Danger?” She scanned the skies over Darwin and the surrounding bush before looking for an explanation from the corporal.

Flanagan’s gaze was fixed on her. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down before he gave her a lop-sided smile. “I haven’t seen anyone enjoy chocolate more, Sister.”

“It’s the most delicious food I’ve ever eaten.” She held out his precious bar of chocolate. “Thanks.”

“Keep it.”

“But—”

“I’m watching my weight.” He winked, and, in spite of the carnage they’d left behind, Meg’s day brightened.

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[Ransom Women](#)

[Under the Dark Moon](#)

[Under the Same Stars](#) (2023 release)

About the Author

Born and raised in Toowoomba, Susanne is an Australian author of contemporary and rural romances set in Australia and exotic locations. She adores travel with her husband, both at home and overseas (and hopes to do more one day when the world opens up again).

Her heroes have to be pretty special to live up to her real-life hero. He saved her life then married her.

She is published with Harlequin Mira/Escape and has written several self-published rural series. A popular guest speaker, she has been invited to speak in libraries, book clubs, and to community groups.

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The Christmas Jinx

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