



THE GIFT OF BINDARRA CREEK
Bindarra Creek Small Town Christmas



LINDSAY DOUGLAS

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BINDARRA CREEK SMALL TOWN
CHRISTMAS ROMANCE

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We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn, and work.

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CONTENTS

1. Happy Holidays
2. In A Twinkling
3. Away They Both Flew
4. Dash Away
5. Please Don't Hurry
6. Bring Us Delight
7. Dreams To Share
8. Visions Of Gingerbread
9. Someone Special
10. Take The Road Before Us
11. Over The River
12. All The Tender Sweetness
13. Epilogue: Valentine's Day

Thank you!

Also by Lindsay Douglas

Excerpt: The Grinch of Bindarra Creek

Excerpt: Sure Thing

About the Author

Introducing Erin Lindsay McCabe

HAPPY HOLIDAYS

Carissa Cole was an expert at keeping her cool, most of the time, but she was completely out of spoons. “You’ve got to be kidding me.” She stared at the ticket agent and tried to keep from raising her voice. “You’re certain there’s no other flight?”

“Not until tomorrow.” The woman in her snappy blue uniform accessorized with her blinking Christmas light necklace and her snowman earrings gave a little smile. The kind that said ‘don’t murder me, please.’ “I apologise, but since the pandemic we’ve reduced the number of flights—”

Carissa put a hand up. “Forget it. I know it’s not your fault.” It was no one’s fault. Her flight out of San Francisco had been delayed because of fog— enough so that more than twenty hours later and despite the pilot’s assurances that he had ‘made up lost time,’ she’d still landed too late to get through customs and make her connection. Even worse, her luggage *had* somehow made the flight she hadn’t, and was winging its way to Tamworth, while she was stuck at the Sydney airport for another twenty-four hours.

“If you’re in a rush, you could rent a car?” The ticket agent’s voice was tentative, as if she was almost afraid to make the suggestion.

“No.” Maybe if she hadn’t just spent a 20-hour flight not sleeping and starving half to death on the pitiful airline food, she would’ve taken the suggestion and driven herself the five plus hours to Bindarra Creek, where her bestie lived. But she

knew her limits, and she had already surpassed them, which was made even more clear when her stomach rumbled. No way could she safely drive—on the ‘wrong’ side of the road, no less—and get to her destination in one piece when she was exhausted and hangry. “I guess put me on standby for tomorrow’s flight.”

After giving her information to the ticket agent, she went back to the waiting area and dropped down into one of the seats.

“Crap!” So much for keeping herself together. She must’ve spoken louder than she’d meant to, because the mother in the seat opposite her shot her a narrow-eyed glare and started explaining to her barely school-aged kid that ‘some people use words that aren’t very nice when they’re upset.’

She pulled out her phone and almost dropped it. “Holy shi—zzballs!” With a quick glance at the mom across the way, she managed to course correct just in time, earning her a half-hearted grimace-smile from the other woman.

While she’d been talking to the ticket agent, her phone had blown up with a million texts from her bestie, Lena. Carissa scrolled through the requisite ‘OMG NO’ and ‘UGH how awful’ and ‘I’m soooooo sorry’ and ‘you must be so exhausted’ texts. Finally, at the end of Lena’s text barrage was a message that simply read:

New plan. Call me. Immediately

She’d barely pressed ‘call’ and the phone hadn’t even finished its first ring before Lena answered. “I can’t talk long—got a colicky horse and the vet on the way—but can you get yourself to the Bankstown Aerodrome?”

“Um...aerodrome?” Carissa put the phone on speaker and pulled up her maps app, quickly typing the location in.

Lena laughed. “Aerodrome, airport, whatever. Bankstown. Can you get there? In the next hour or two?”

“Yeah, I can get an Uber or something. But... why?” She was pretty certain Lena had skipped over several crucial pieces

of information. “I can’t exactly afford a private jet.” Which was what a quick internet search told her flew out of Bankstown, along with business, corporate, and chartered flights. None of which were in her budget, because as of five days ago, she was unemployed, the racetrack where she’d worked permanently closed. Not that she’d been all that flush with cash when she’d still had a job. As a freelance exercise rider, most things had been out of her budget. Heck, she’d scrimped and saved all year just to be able to manage the flights to visit Lena.

“Well, it’ll be private, but it’s not exactly a jet.” Lena let out another little laugh. “Heath’s friend—he’s a pilot. With a plane. And when he heard you were stuck, he offered to come get you. He’s already on his way.”

“Are you kidding?” Kidding was apparently the word of the day.

“Nope! Bankstown Passenger Terminal. He’ll find you there. I gave him your number so he can text you.”

“Okay, but—”

“Shoot, the vet’s here. I’ve got to go, but don’t worry. You’ll love Lachie. Everyone does.” With that, Lena was gone.

Carissa stared down at her phone. She shouldn’t complain, but she was too tired for Lena’s barely sketched plan. How was she supposed to even find this guy she didn’t even know in the middle of an airport terminal? She didn’t even have his full name, or his number. Not to mention, she didn’t want to head to some alternate location in a city she didn’t know, in a strange country, to meet a strange man and entrust her life to him while he flew around in his ‘private’-not-a-jet plane. That part *really* worried her. She’d barely held it together for the take-off and landing on the monster jet that had gotten her to Australia. How was she going to keep from dying of anxiety in an even smaller plane?

Nope. Carissa didn’t like anything about the plan. And who the heck was this friend of Heath’s? She was certain Lena had never mentioned anyone named Lockie before. She would

remember that, because *Lockie*? What the heck kind of name was that? Was it short for Locket? Padlock? Lockjaw? Lockbox? Or was it Lochie, as in the diminutive of a tiny little Scottish lake?

Her phone buzzed with a text. From Lena.

Lachie's info

Attached to the message was a contact entry, which only said 'Devine' and included a phone number and nothing further. Was it even the right contact number?

Great thx. But how will I recognise him?

can't miss him. Now get going or he'll beat you there

If she hadn't been in public, Carissa would've let out a frustrated growl over that last text. Why couldn't Lena just send a pic? This was a woman who had been known to delete apps just to have enough space on her phone for more photos. The only consolation was that Lena had said "everyone loves Lachie." At least he wasn't a jerk. Also not a locket or a tiny Scottish loch, if the spelling of his name was anything to go by.

Carissa's phone buzzed in her hand, startling her. Another message from Lena.

stop worrying. Go!

Her bestie knew her too well. She pushed herself to standing and gathered up her carry-on bag, then headed out to the taxi ranks. She felt jittery, with too many questions and unknowns bouncing around in her brain. But Lena wouldn't send a horrible person to come pick her up at the airport. Nor would an awful human being volunteer to fly for several hours to pick up a friend of a friend. She would find her way to this aerodrome and she'd meet up with this stranger. Someday it

would all be a jolly little holiday travel mishap story she'd tell for laughs. Later, once it was all over and she'd survived, it would be a fun memory. Meanwhile, she was having an adventure. Maybe it was more of an adventure than she'd planned on, but as she selected a car on the Uber app, she decided she was just going to have to be flexible and roll with it.

SHE COULDN'T HELP SMILING when her Uber driver greeted her with, "G'day!" Between that and the hot summer weather—so different from the foggy winter she'd left behind in San Francisco—it was the first time she truly felt like she was in another country and not just an airport.

Once her driver figured out she was an American on holiday, he kept up a steady patter, asking her questions about her trip and her plans. It was a relief, because at least it kept her mind off Lachie and his private not-a-jet.

"You're going to be in Bindarra Creek the whole time?" The older man met her gaze in the rear-view mirror, which had a reindeer ornament dangling from it. "Not much to do out that way, is there?"

She laughed. "I don't even know. But it's enough, to get to see my best friend."

"You sure you don't want to go round the other way?" He hooked a thumb over his shoulder as he prepared to pull onto the motorway. "Then I could take you to see the Opera House at least."

"I'm afraid I've got a flight to catch." Except unlike a normal flight, she had no idea when her departure time was. Her stomach twisted at the thought.

In the end, it took less than thirty minutes to get to the cinderblock building that said it was the Bankstown Passenger Terminal. She felt almost forlorn, as her driver pulled away from the curb, leaving her standing on the walkway to the small building. She checked her phone. No new messages.

She saved the contact Lena had shared with her and then fired off a text to Lachie.

Hey there! This is Carissa, Lena's friend. I'm here outside the Bankstown Terminal. Do I go in?

She waited. And waited. The message stayed on 'delivered' and no reply came. On the one hand, she appreciated the fact that if Lachie was flying, his focus was where it was supposed to be. But on the other hand, she had no idea what she was supposed to do or how long she should expect to wait. Well, she could play the Foolish American Tourist if she had to and ask the ticket agent all the dumb questions about how to check in for a flight that may or may not exist.

She took a deep breath, pulled her shoulders back, and marched for the doors.

She didn't know what she'd been expecting. Something like a regular airport terminal, but smaller. Instead, she walked into a mostly deserted room, with zero ticket agents or security personnel. It was how she imagined airports had been, before 9/11. There were a handful of people scattered around the space, which was filled with very upright faux wood chairs and a smattering of what she thought of as 'institutional lounge furniture.' She chose one of the unoccupied seating clusters—two armchairs across from an uncomfortable looking, sturdily upholstered loveseat—and sank into the couch, suddenly overtaken by exhaustion. She checked her phone one more time. Still no new messages. She scrolled to Lena's number.

Made it to the Aerodrome. No sign of Mr. Devine

That done, she pocketed her phone and closed her eyes. She'd just rest for a minute.

THE NEXT THING SHE KNEW, there was something large, warm, and heavy on her arm. A hand.

“Don’t touch me!” She startled hard, into a confused wakefulness, her surroundings completely unfamiliar. Where the heck was she? She struggled upright before she’d even processed who the hand was attached to. Australia. She was in Australia. And there was no one in the entire country—no, continent!—who should be touching her. Especially not a man.

A tall, sandy-haired, broad shouldered man, who was now holding both hands up, as if in surrender, and backing away from her. He was dressed casually, in shorts and a T-shirt. How long had she been asleep? She’d closed her eyes only a few minutes ago, right? Definitely not long enough for her rescue pilot to arrive. The man had to be another passenger, waiting in the practically empty terminal. Ugh. She pulled out her phone, and nearly dropped it when she saw the time. She’d been asleep for over an hour. But when she checked her messages, there was no reply from Lachie. Her message still just said ‘delivered.’

“Pardon me. I’m so sorry, but...” He was speaking—had been speaking the whole time, she realised—in that Australian accent that glossed over r’s. It somehow made him sound friendly, even when he’d been grabbing her arm and shaking her awake. Or maybe it was the huffing, bemused laugh barely contained behind his words that did that. Or the way his bright, sparkling eyes met hers. The man was undeniably attractive, with even features and just the right amount of muscles. Biceps and pecs that his slim fitting black T-shirt clung to. Not that she cared. Especially not when she noticed what was on his T-shirt: a picture of Santa Claus emblazoned on the front with the words ‘Big Nick Energy.’

She snorted. Of course a man who looked like that would be cocky and would *advertise* it. “I’m sorry, but who let you out of the house like that?”

“Like what?” He looked genuinely confused.

“Wearing a shirt with a dick joke on it.”

He glanced down at his shirt, his cheeks flushed. “My cat?” *Of course* he would say something like that.

She shot him her death stare. “Seriously? Your cat? Does your girlfriend know you talk about her like that?”

“No! I don’t—” He ran his palm over his mouth. “Truly, I have a real, actual cat, not a girlfriend. I didn’t mean anything else. Look.” He met her glare with the most puppy-dog eyes that had ever puppy-dogged. “I’m just here to pick you up.”

That had to be the worst pick up line ever. Leave it to a man to interrupt her nap to try to flirt. Repeatedly. Badly. Well, she was not having it.

IN A TWINKLING

Lachlan didn't understand how he'd so completely botched things.

"You're picking me up?" She did air quotes around the 'picking me up' part of the sentence and her voice was full of venom. "Is that so?" Her hands were on her hips, but he was not letting his eyes leave her face. He was definitely not letting himself look at the way her leggings clung to every curve.

"Absolutely."

"More like *absolutely not!* How dare you wake me up with a stupid pick-up line!" She made her voice go low and husky when she said 'pickup,' like she was mocking him.

Things had started going downhill when he couldn't wake her up, and had gently shaken her arm. She'd gone from passed out in REM sleep to awake in high-alert, hyper-vigilance mode, with nothing in between. In retrospect, he should've completely changed tack when the wiry blonde had leapt off the couch, her fists clenched before she was even fully upright, her cheeks pink in a way he probably shouldn't have let himself think was attractive.

"That's not what I—" He backpedaled, trying to start again. "I think there's been a misunderstanding. You're supposed to be expecting me."

"I'm 'supposed to be'?"

He couldn't understand how his attempts to defuse the situation kept making her angrier, and he was starting to regret

volunteering to come get her. He'd expected to be greeted with gratitude, not hostility.

"No, please. Listen." The minute he told her listen he wished he hadn't, because everything about her got suddenly more intense, like she was gearing up to explode. He rushed the next question out before she could. "Are you Carissa by any chance? Lena's friend?"

The question made her sharp gaze soften just a little bit. There was no doubt in his mind that the slight woman staring at him with fire in her eyes was Lena's friend Carissa, but she shook her head.

"Oh my god. Are you... I mean, why don't you tell me who you are first?"

Good lord the woman was leery. He'd already figured out she was one of those nappers who woke up grumpy. That was fine. He had a lot of experience with people who came off as grouchy—his friend Heath for example. In his experience, a crab was compensating for something else—maybe she was worried, or tired, or hungry. Given the circumstances, his guess was all three, made worse by the adrenaline spike she must've had when he'd shaken her awake.

He stuck out his hand and flashed her the grin that his friends said was his secret weapon, which he was clearly going to need if he was going to unruffle her feathers. "Lachlan Devine." When she stared at him and didn't immediately take his offered hand, he turned it palm up and made a flourishing bow. "At your service."

"Heath's friend Lachie?"

Finally. The relief he felt was like a cool breeze. "That's me!"

"But you said 'Lachlan.' Is that what I should call you?" She said his name like she was testing it out. "That seems respectable enough. More respectable than Lachie anyway."

Respectable? He hadn't realised they'd time-traveled back to the 1800s. Luckily he had enough self-preservation not to say that aloud.

“Ah, see, my mates call me Lachie, but as we’re newly acquainted, it’s Lachlan for you. Once we’re friends, you can call me anything you like.” He gave her a quick wink, to let her know he was joking more than anything. She didn’t crack even a hint of a smile, but she’d come up with his nickname on her own, which meant she was putting together who he actually was.

“I thought maybe ‘Lachie’ was short for Padlock or something.” She was loosening up, just a little, and he liked that she was ribbing him instead of fighting.

“Padlock?” He couldn’t help but huff a laugh. “That’s a new one. Is that a common name over in the Americas?”

“Oh yes.” She smiled and it changed everything about her, not a softening so much as a lightening. “Right up there with Lockjaw and Lockbox and Lochie the wee Scottish lake. You can see why I was a little worried.”

“Well, person-who-might-or-might-not-be-Carissa, I am here to alleviate your worries and eliminate your troubles.” He made it sound teasing, but he meant it. He liked setting things to rights, and he was prepared to do exactly that. “But are you Carissa? Because if not...” He made a show of looking around the terminal. “Maybe that bloke over there is the person I’m looking for?”

“Okay, fine. You’re right: I’m Carissa Cole, Lena’s friend.” She was the one to reach out a hand this time and he immediately took it, surprised by her firm grip. “It’s nice to meet you. But, dude. You should not be wearing dick joke shirts to meet women you don’t know. Though I apologise for getting all defensive. You startled me, and I...”

“No worries.” He was still holding onto her hand. He didn’t want to let go for some reason. “I’m sorry I startled you.” He truly was, too. He should’ve thought it through before he’d touched her shoulder, but he’d been at a loss to wake her, when saying her name hadn’t worked. “Even sorrier I wore this shirt.” He really wished he’d worn something that wasn’t a joke. Something plain. He’d thought it would be festive and funny. Guess not.

“I’ll get over it, Big Nick.” She pulled her hand from his, but pinned him with a glare he was pretty sure was all show. “Maybe. Do you really have a cat?”

“I do! Her name is Pickle.” He pulled his phone out, found his pictures, and scrolled to his favourite one. In it, Pickle was curled on his bed, her long ear-whiskers backlit by the sun, her eyes in the half-squint he’d read was a sign a cat liked you. He was always happy to talk about Pickle.

“Pickle?” Carissa’s voice was dripping with skepticism.

“That’s right. You can’t convince me it’s not cute.”

“Well, your cat is definitely cute.” Her smirk was devious, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

He decided to let that one go. “Shall we go on out to the plane?”

Just like that, Carissa’s entire demeanor changed again. He’d gotten her to relax, finally found her sense of humour, and one question made her mouth go straight and her skin fade to a paler and greener shade. He didn’t think she’d physically moved away from him, but he could feel her draw back. “About that. I’m not getting on a plane with you unless you have a license or something you can show me to prove you’re qualified.”

This woman. She’d gone right back to being wary and suspicious, which was not what he’d expected. Not that he could really blame her. She only had her friend’s boyfriend’s opinion to recommend him to her. And Lena’s... but she was friendly and bubbly and open. She liked everybody. The opposite of how Carissa seemed.

He pulled his wallet out of his pocket, opened it, and held it out to her, so she could see his license. “I was a pilot in the Royal Australian Air Force. I promise I’ve flown in much more dangerous conditions and lived to tell the tale.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to question your skill. It’s just...” She trailed off and he decided to spare her from admitting anything she didn’t feel like telling him.

“You’re thorough. I get it.” Now it all made sense why Lena had told him Carissa was a “planner.” She’d been giving him a warning, in the nicest possible way, about what to expect. “And you’re in luck, because I’m as skilled as they come.” It wasn’t a lie. Or even an exaggeration. He had the medals and commendations and accolades to prove it. He flashed her his winning grin again, but if it made her feel any better, he couldn’t tell. “Let me take your bags and—”

She’d already grabbed her carry-on and hooked the strap over her elbow. “I’ve got it.” And now he saw the control freak tendencies Lena had also mentioned.

“Where’s the rest?” He’d met plenty of light packers, but all Carissa had was a purse and a backpack.

“In Tamworth, supposedly. My luggage flew, but I didn’t.”

“Lucky for you, Tamworth is where we’re headed, so we can pick it up when we arrive. Come on, then.” As he brushed past her, he swiped her bag up and off her arm, swinging it over his shoulder. When her mouth popped open to protest, he filled the space before she could. “It’s a bit of a trek to the plane, and my mum would be appalled if she found out I let an exhausted woman carry her own luggage all the way out onto the tarmac.”

“So you’re a gentleman then?”

“You’re in Australia, sweetheart. You’ve got the wrong country, if it’s a gentleman you’re wanting.” He didn’t know what made him say it, but he liked the way her cheeks flushed when he teased her. She took a breath, like she was winding up to make some kind of retort, but he went on before she could. “But I try to be a good man. I like to think my family is proud of me. And Pickle seems to like me.” He held the door leading out onto the tarmac open for her.

“It’s definitely saying something if you can get a cat to like you.” She slipped past him as a gust of hot wind lifted the tendrils of her hair framing her face. The scent of her shampoo wafted his way. Something botanical.

“Do you have a cat?” He came up alongside her and gestured across the airfield to where all the small planes were parked.

“None of my own.”

“Lena says you ride horses. Are you a jockey like she is?” He didn’t know much about horses, but he did know they were unpredictable. He couldn’t quite wrap his head around how a control freak could ride racehorses.

Carissa laughed. “Not a jockey. I’m not that crazy. I was—I *am* an exercise rider.”

“What does that entail?” Given that his best friend’s girlfriend was a jockey and his home base of Bindarra Creek was often described as “horsey,” maybe he ought to know more about racehorses. But he didn’t, and he didn’t mind asking stupid questions, especially if they kept her talking. The more she told him, the less crabby she seemed to be.

“Riding ten to thirteen horses a day, six days a week.”

“That’s a lot of horses.”

“Yep. It’s kind of like doing squats for four to five hours every day.” That explained her wiriness. “Only better, because you get to do it while riding a horse.”

“Do you have favourites?”

“That’s a forbidden question. They’re all my favourites.” Some emotion he couldn’t name flickered across her face—sadness? Uncertainty?—but just as quickly it was replaced with another of her smirk-smiles. “Except the really naughty ones.”

“Which ones are the nice ones?”

“The ones who are easier to ride.” Her whole face lit up, and then she was off, talking about the horses she loved.

She kept chatting about Satsuki and Clever and TaTa and Salty, all the way across the airfield without a single complaint about the blazing hot sun and the even more scorching wind. But when he set down her bags on the tarmac next to his

Cessna Skyhawk, whatever she was telling him about horses died in her throat. “That’s your plane?”

“Yep, this is her.” He gave the passenger side door a pat, not unlike the way he imagined Carissa might pat one of the horses she rode. Then he beamed his brightest smile at her. “Welcome to Devine Air.”

“Absolutely not.”

“What?” He’d heard her perfectly fine but he didn’t know what she was objecting to.

“I’m absolutely not flying in that.” She’d gone pale, which kept him from feeling more than mildly irritated that what he’d thought was going to be a simple flight ferrying a friend of a friend was turning out to be a lot of work. It was a good reminder of why he wasn’t a private pilot. He flew for charity or fun now, or not at all.

He did the math on what he knew about her: crabby napper plus control freak plus pale plus arms crossed. It all added up to one thing: anxious flyer. It also made him keep his tone gentle. “All right, then. What do you propose instead?”

“Something bigger?”

“I wish I had a cool ten million to spring on LearJet or Dassault, but...” He patted his Skyhawk again. “Even she was a stretch. And she’s the only plane I have. What were you expecting? A private jet?”

“No, but...” She’d dug her feet in, and he couldn’t help but wonder what she’d do with a horse who was being as balky as she was.

From some shadowy corner of his brain, a voice said *whip it*. He almost laughed, imagining how that would go over. Definitely not well. Luckily he was more of a carrot kind of guy, rather than the sort who liked sticks. “Afraid this is all I’ve got, Ladybug, but it’s more than big enough to fly away home in.”

“You know that nursery rhyme doesn’t exactly have a happy ending, right?” The wind gusted again, lifting her hair. He wanted to get in the air, now. Five minutes ago. The sooner

the better, because the wind wasn't dying down, and the forecast said it wasn't going to. It wouldn't have mattered if she wasn't nervous, but now he knew she was, waiting would only make things worse.

"Look. This is one of the safest airplanes you can fly in. It's used by flight schools, that's how safe it is. It has a"—at the last second he stopped himself from uttering '*fatal*'—"accident rate of .56 per 100,000 hours. That's half the industry standard. And, you've got something even better than everyone else who flies in one." He stopped and waited. He could see she was sinking into herself, going somewhere in her head that wasn't good. He needed to get her talking again. The moment dragged and he cleared his throat, just the tiniest bit.

Her eyes flew to his. "What?"

"You've got me. A decorated combat veteran. And I'm a diamond under pressure." Plenty of his friends didn't like to talk about that part of their service. Or, in Heath's case, any part of it. But the service had taught him he was at his best when the peanut butter hit the fan. "What I'm saying, Carissa, is I'll keep you safe."

"Is that a promise?" She was back: the same feisty woman who'd been ready to fight the instant he'd woken her up.

"One hundred percent." He met her gaze and held it so she'd know he meant it, and then he watched as she took a deep breath, pulled her shoulders back, and steeled herself.

"Okay. But I'm holding you to it."

He knew he shouldn't say the words that popped into his head, but she was more fun riled up than nervous. "You can hold me any time." He just caught her eye roll as he opened the passenger door, stepped on the foothold on the landing gear, set her bags in the back row of seats, and turned to offer his hand to her.

"You're terrible, Big Nick."

"Yeah, but nah. I'm the best, Ladybug. You'll see."

"I better." And then, she put her hand in his.

AWAY THEY BOTH FLEW

Carissa hated it. Maybe Lachlan thought *he* was the best, but his plane was the worst contraption she'd ever been forced to sit in. For one thing, the cockpit was full of a ridiculous number of dials and switches and gauges that no single human could possibly monitor properly. For another thing, just sitting in the tiny space while Lachlan did all his pre-flight checks was sending her blood pressure sky high, pun absolutely intended. Every time he moved, his arm brushed against hers, and that wasn't helping the blood pressure issue either.

To distract herself, she shimmied, struggling to get her arms into the shoulder belt. Despite her best efforts to stay entirely on her side of the plane, her elbow crashed into his.

"Sorry, Big Nick, I was really not expecting this to be so small." She was putting on a brave face, but it was hard. Between the fact that the little plane had what looked like a climbing harness for a seatbelt and the cockpit was a zillion times more complicated than she'd even imagined, she didn't know how she was going to keep from having a heart attack once they were actually moving.

He kept on with his checks, not even looking her way. "You know what they say about size..."

"I think in this case it does matter. What if I bump you in the middle of the flight and we go off course?"

He shook his head, still touching various toggles and levers. "Not going to happen. You can bump me all you like

and we'll still survive. I told you, Ladybug, I've got this."

Ladybug. It was the third time he'd called her that, and she hated the fact that it made her feel melty. How had this guy already come up with a nickname for her? Because he was a charmer, which was all well and good, but she didn't trust charmers. And yet, she was going to have to entrust her whole life to him.

She let out a long sigh, a sure sign she was stressed, and started counting all the things on the instrument panel as a way to distract herself. She was approaching number seventy-three when he reached his arm into her field of vision and held out a headset to her. "Put this on."

She fitted the headset over her ears, and her stomach took the opportunity to do a barrel roll. The nauseous feeling must've shown on her face because his voice, warm and steady and with that accent, was right there in her ears, "Breathe, Carissa. The flight's going to be louder than what you're used to, and the headset is just so we can hear each other better. That's all."

"What about this?" She pointed to the controller that jutted out of the dashboard on her side of the plane, identical to the one in front of him. "Do I have to do anything with it?"

"You don't have to do a thing except sit tight. You ready?"

"No!" The answer popped out of her mouth, the whole truth.

"You tell me when." And he just sat there, waiting for her.

She took another steadying breath. They had to go some time. She wanted to see Lena and meet her boyfriend Heath—the one who had made Lena's insane move-to-Australia plan worth all the trouble. But what she hadn't come all this way to do was sit on the tarmac at some small-time Sydney airport in what was practically a toy airplane.

She forced the words she didn't really feel out. "Okay. I'm ready."

"Brilliant. I'm going to start the engine." Lachlan's voice was back in her ear, but his eyes were forwards. He flipped a

few switches and nudged a lever. “And now we’re going to taxi.”

He talked her through every step, explaining every little turn and noise and each adjustment he made and somehow it all made her feel better. “I’m going to put some music on.”

Her ears filled with the soft strains of a piano, playing an instrumental version of *O Holy Night*. With the hot weather and the sterile airport environment, she’d practically forgotten Christmas was one of the reasons she was here.

There was a burst of radio communication she couldn’t understand, and then Lachlan was back. “We’re going to take-off now, and there’s a fair bit of wind, so there’s going to be some turbulence. It’s going to feel like more than you’re used to in a jet, but it’s completely normal. All right?”

It was absolutely, one hundred percent not all right, and there was nothing at all for her to grab onto. Normally she clutched the armrest during take off and landing. Or, if she was in the middle seat, she clawed her fingers onto the edge of the seat-back tray. All Lachlan’s plane had was a tiny grab bar on the frame near the window, but if there was one thing she didn’t want to do, it was lean closer to the door or the window.

The engine whined louder and the whole aircraft vibrated harder. As the plane shot down the runway, picking up speed, fishtailing slightly across the tarmac, she felt like if her heart didn’t explode, then all her veins were going to rupture. She was too freaked out to dig her phone out of her pocket and scroll through pictures of all the things she loved—the horses she rode, flowers, her brother. Instead, she dug her fingers into both her knees.

Just as she thought she couldn’t take it anymore—the rattling of the plane, the grinding whirr of the wheels on the roughly paved tarmac, the jostling—a big warm hand slid over hers.

“Oh my god! Two hands! You need two hands.” She couldn’t watch, the view from the wide windscreen way too expansive, the scenery visible out the side windows whizzing past in a blur. She squeezed her eyes shut.

“Shhhh, Carissa. Listen to the music.” His voice drowned out the noise and she wanted him to keep talking. But then he took her hand and placed it on his thigh. “I’m right here, and this is so routine, I could do it in my sleep. We’re going to lift off in about two seconds and it might be a little bumpy but it’s like driving on an old dirt road. Nothing to worry about.”

He hadn’t even finished talking and her stomach lurched with the awful, untethered feeling she always got the instant the plane left the ground, and her eyes flew open.

“There you are. Up in the air. And look at that view.” The plane climbed and shook and heaved and she clutched onto his muscled thigh.

She had to be hurting him, that’s how tight she was gripping. “I’m so sorry.” She made herself relax her hold, but the plane pitched and she simultaneously sucked in a breath and grabbed onto his leg all over again. She couldn’t help it.

“No worries, mate. You keep holding on. We’ll get to our cruising altitude and once we get over the Blue Mountains, I’ll find you some smooth air.”

And that was exactly what he did. As the ridged edges of the mountain range appeared ahead, he told her that the road always got a bit rough, thanks to the unique air currents. “That’s true whenever you fly over any mountains. There’s always more turbulence there.” Why had no one ever told her that before?

The land stretched out beneath them, and somehow, it didn’t seem as unfamiliar as she thought it would. It looked a lot like California did in the summer, a patchwork of goldens and browns, dotted with the dark green of trees.

Lachlan kept the music playing and any time the turbulence started up, he talked. He told her about the readings on the instrument panel. He explained how he was keeping the wings level and what speed they were going and what altitude they’d climbed to. He told her when he was adding power and adjusting the nose and trimming and a whole bunch of things she didn’t understand. At some point, he said he was using his

feet to fly and dropped his hand back over hers. Gently, and oh so slowly, he pried her fingers off his thigh, one by one.

“You want to try being the one at the controls?”

In no universe did she want to be responsible for keeping the plane in the air. She gave him a tight smile. “Maybe next time I fly Devine Air.”

“So, you think there’ll be a next time?” He turned to look at her and when she met his gaze, he gave her a little wink.

He might’ve held her hand and played her music and been better at soothing her anxiety than anybody she’d met ever, but that didn’t mean anything. He was too charming for it to be real, too perfect for it to be anything other than an act, and no way was she falling for it. So she did what she did best: sass.

“Depends on how you land this thing.”

“Is that a challenge?” Lachlan actually grinned.

“If you want it to be.”

“I do. But I’m going to need to know what has to happen for me to win this game.” His whole demeanor hadn’t exactly changed, but he thrummed with even more aliveness than before. The man obviously liked a competition, a game. “What’s the criteria for this landing?”

Carissa ticked off the particulars. “One, it has to be a smooth landing. It has to feel like the wheels just glide seamlessly onto the runway. No hard bounces. Two, no excessive braking. I do not like getting thrown forwards the second the plane lands. Three, the plane has to stay level on the approach. No swooping and swaying from side-to-side, like we might miss the runway altogether.”

“That’s it? You sure you don’t want to make it a little harder for me?” His confidence was something else. Maybe it was just what she needed when they were in the air, but she wasn’t sure she’d like his swagger so well once she had two feet on the ground again.

“Nope!” She made her voice chirpy to hide her very real nerves. If he could hit even one of the things on her list she’d

be happy.

“And if I win, how long do I get to collect my prize?” He was taking the challenge far more seriously than she’d expected.

“Let’s say...” She wanted to keep the pressure off. “A year.”

“All right, so within the year, I get to take you up again, and hand over the controls to you.”

“Yup!” Just thinking about it made her stomach do a loop-de-loop. Good thing she had zero intention of flying with Lachlan ever again, not after this trip, no matter how beautifully he landed. Unless her bestie had a job for her, in a little more than two weeks, she’d be headed back to the States, she’d never see him again, and no way would he hunt her down just to claim his so-called prize. She’d bet her non-existent savings he’d forget all about their agreement as soon as he found someone else to charm the socks off.

“You’re on, Ladybug.”

Her heart rate was almost back to normal when he pointed to the air control tower jutting up in the near distance. “That’s us. You ready? I’m going to start our descent.”

The second he asked, her pulse revved up and her hands went back to her thighs. “I’ll never be readier.” Her mouth felt like she’d swallowed cotton or dust.

“You need something to grab onto, you know where to find me.”

She told herself she was going to be tough, but the plane juddered and that was it: her hand was back on his thigh. It was way too familiar to be touching him like that, but she needed the steady strength of him, the solid warmth under her palm. The reality of him brought her comfort. For a fleeting second, anyway. Then Lachlan banked the plane to the right, and seeing the left wing jutting up into the sky and the right one pointing down to the ground meant she had to squeeze her eyes shut.

She could feel the plane slowing, and her ears popped, letting her know they were getting lower, but it seemed like they were hovering forever, trapped in that space beneath the sky and above the earth, the engine roaring. She could hardly stand the limbo any longer. “Tell me when it’s over.”

“I guess I won then?” He had to be joking, or else trying to trick her into opening her eyes.

“Very cute. You can’t be declared the winner before you’ve even landed.”

“Open your eyes, woman. We already touched down.”

Her eyes flew open and—she couldn’t believe it. He’d landed so smoothly, she would’ve sworn they were still flying. She hadn’t felt a thing except the unshakeable sturdiness of him beside her: he hadn’t so much as twitched.

“I guess you did. Congratulations! You’ve won yourself the delightful company of an aerophobic.”

“We’ll get you cured of that in no time.”

She drew her hand from his leg and slid it back to her own lap, but the prickling awareness of him didn’t go away. And neither did her embarrassment when she saw she’d left finger marks on his bare skin, just below where his shorts stopped.

DASH AWAY

Either there'd been a mistake or Lachlan had misunderstood—which seemed to be the theme of the day. Lena already had her luggage, but the security officer had ducked into the back room and was searching for something else.

“Oh, hooray!” Carissa let go of the purple roller bag the officer had brought her and clapped excitedly as the burly bloke wheeled out another carry-on sized bag and a full-sized suitcase.

Her smile as she grabbed hold of the second carry-on was a revelation. One because he'd drastically underestimated the amount of luggage she'd brought and two because it was the first time he'd seen her face without a trace of worry or anxiety or concern on it. He was glad her tension was finally starting to unwind. She was pretty all the time, but when she was relaxed and happy enough to smile like that? *Beautiful*. That was the only way to describe her.

He'd thought she was pretty when he'd first caught sight of her sleeping at Bankstown, and the longer he spent with her, the more glimpses he got of who she was when she let her guard down, the more attractive she was. He liked every version of herself she'd shown him so far—when she was ribbing him, when she was nervous, and definitely when she was happy. But it was a mistake for him to be thinking about her in that way. If he was smart, there'd be no more of him holding her hand or her grabbing his thigh. In the first place, trauma bonding wasn't his thing, and if they were going to

touch, he'd rather it be under positive circumstances, because they wanted to, not because someone was panicked or upset. But as much as he'd like to explore the idea of positive touching with her, 'it was an ill bird that foul's its own nest.'

She was his best friend's girlfriend's bestie and Lachlan had already gathered from the way Lena talked about Carissa that she was as good as a sister. There was too much at stake if he messed things up, which meant he needed to keep her in the friend zone.

"Earth to Big Nick..." Carissa's tone snapped him back to the present moment and alerted him to the fact that the security officer had set the *third* bag in front of Carissa. Either lots of people's luggage had been tagged as Carissa's or... "A little help here, maybe?" She angled the largest of the bags in his direction.

Three bags weren't a revelation, they were a problem.

"Lena didn't say you were moving in." In fact, when Lena had told him about her bestie, and shown him her picture so he'd be sure to recognise her, he was certain she'd said Carissa was just coming to visit; yet another reason to keep her in the friend zone.

His comment made her narrow her eyes and glare at him. "I'm not—I'm visiting until New Year's."

"That's it? Two weeks? But..." He looked between her and the bags and she scowled at the unspoken implication.

"You think I overpacked?"

"I don't *think* so, I *know* it."

Her hand was back on her hip. "Did you forget it's Christmas? It's not like I can very well show up without a single gift. I didn't know what I'd find here." She gestured as if to encompass the entire airport and the expanse of open land outside it.

"How much of this is gifts? One of the carry-ons?" It was none of his business, really, and he should've taken Heath up on it when he'd offered to let him borrow his ute. But it was too late for that now.

“Well...”

“Anything breakable in there?”

She shook her head. “Nothing fragile.”

“Good. Because this could get interesting.” The woman had packed as if civilization was on the other side of the globe. And to think his first impression was that she’d packed light!

“Interesting how?”

Lachlan didn’t reply. “Let’s go.” He grabbed the handles of her biggest suitcase and the next heaviest, and headed for the door, without even a backwards glance to make sure she was coming, all the while mapping out how exactly he was going to make this work.

She balked for the second time of the day, when they reached his parking spot.

“You brought a motorcycle? Unbelievable.” She was shaking her head as she pulled her phone out and immediately tapped into her Uber app.

“Don’t have a car.” It was true, but he could’ve easily borrowed Heath’s. The actual truth was that he’d thought it would be exciting for Lena’s friend to get picked up on a motorcycle. And if she’d had an ordinary amount of luggage, it would’ve been no problem. As it stood, he was going to have to get creative. She barely looked up, too busy typing ‘Tamworth Regional Airport’ into the search bar of the app.

“Put that away. I’m giving you a ride.” He touched her forearm, and it ignited a ripple of sensation that went all through him. It had been the same damn thing when he’d taken her hand on the flight, when he’d put it on his thigh. It had been a good thing she’d gripped his leg so hard she’d left fingernail imprints in his skin, because the pain kept his mind where it was supposed to be.

“No way my luggage and I are all going to fit on that bike. Who brings a motorcycle to take someone home from the airport, anyway?”

“You have an exquisite eye roll.” She also had a fair point and judging from the look on her face, did not appreciate his compliment. He was not conceding. “I thought I told you.” He hooked a thumb at himself. “Diamond under pressure. I’ve got this.”

He’d done plenty of treks on his motorbike, carrying camping gear and luggage and food on his after-market luggage rack. The rack was why he’d felt confident he could give her a ride home on his motorcycle in the first place. He just had to figure out how he was going to fit everything else she’d brought and her, without resorting to making two trips.

Carissa heaved a sigh. “Fine. I’ll give you thirty minutes to make magic happen, and then I’m getting an Uber.”

“Before you set the timer, I don’t suppose you have boots in any of this luggage, do you?” Her trainers would be fine in a pinch, but sturdy leather was better on a motorcycle. Safety first, and all that.

She pointed to her purple roller bag. “My riding stuff is all in there.”

“Very good. Why don’t you dig your boots out and put them on while I strap on the rest?”

“‘Strap on’? Really? We’re not good enough friends yet for that level of innuendo.”

“You really don’t let anything slide, do you?” The words were out and she was staring at him with the world’s most put-upon express before he realised what he’d said. “Oh, god. I apologise. I swear it’s unintentional—” His cheeks were blazing, and he supposed that’s what save him from her wrath, because she guffawed.

It was the least ladylike sound he’d ever heard, and he loved it.

Carissa poked his biceps. “I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt this time, Big Nick, but when you show up with that kind of joke on your shirt, it’s a little hard to cut you slack for your double entendre game.”

“I promise, I didn’t—”

“You know your time is already ticking away, don’t you?” She flashed her phone screen at him. He’d already lost four minutes. No chance he was going to let her call an Uber.

Within a minute, he’d fished the tie-down straps and ratchets he always carried out of his handlebar bag and in another he’d secured her largest suitcase to the rack behind the seat and over the rear wheel. He stashed her purse in the bag the tie-downs had come out of.

Carissa would have to wear her backpack, but her carry-ons both fit on the side racks he’d had installed. It would be tight, but there was just enough room for her to squeeze on the seat behind him. Satisfied, he threw his hands up in the air. “Time!”

“Not fair!” She gave a mock pout. At least he hoped it was mock. “Seriously. How was I supposed to know you had tie-downs in your pack?”

“Ye of little faith. I was prepared for you. I’m a little hurt you have such low expectations of me.” He’d meant to tease her, but judging from her reaction, his statement hit a mark he didn’t know he’d been aiming at.

“I expect the worst, hope for the best, and am pleasantly surprised less often than you might think.” It sounded like a practised line. “But you’ve more than pleasantly surprised me so far today, Big Nick.”

Big Nick. The more she called him that, the more he regretted his shirt choice. “Maybe instead of having chronically low expectations, you should just ask more questions. I would’ve told you I was ready for at least some of your luggage.” He gave her what he hoped was a mischievous smirk. Then he unlocked the helmets and jackets from the bike frame. He pulled his on and slung his leg over the saddle of his motorcycle. He was going to have to drive more carefully than he’d wanted, with all the added weight, but he could handle that.

He flipped his helmet’s visor up and held out the spare he’d brought for her. She gave him a dubious look.

“I’m getting the sense that ‘no’ is your default answer to everything.” It was an aggressive thing to say, but he wanted to know what made her tick.

“Nah, just everything you suggest. And I’m getting the sense that you’re an adrenaline junkie.”

“Maybe.” Definitely. If there was one thing left over from his time in the service, it was his need for excitement—the kind you only got from physical risk. “I get it, you don’t trust me. But I got you this far safely, didn’t I?” He was serious-as-could be, but Carissa laughed. “And I brought you safety gear.”

“You did.”

“And you ride racehorses for a living! It’s not any more dangerous than that.”

“That can’t possibly be true, not when you have to share the road with cars. For another thing, a racehorse’s top speed is about 45 miles per hour. What’s your motorcycle’s top speed?”

“Want me to show you? It’ll be fun.” He meant it. His Ducati Multistrada topped out at 270 kilometres per hour, not that he’d admit to getting it up that fast.

But Carissa’s mouth popped open and he knew what she was going to say, so he said it before she could. “Yeah, I know, ‘absolutely not.’ I promise I won’t scare you. We’ll just have fun.”

When Carissa stayed rooted to her spot, he twisted to pat the seat behind him. “C’mon Ladybug. Put the helmet and leathers on and mount up!”

She let out a long breath, and that’s when he knew he had her, even before she shrugged into his old leather jacket. It looked damn good on her, even though it was way too big and hid all her curves. Once she’d zipped it up, she pulled her hair out of its messy bun. For the briefest moment it cascaded around her shoulders, a mass of golden waves, but just as quickly she finger combed it into a low pony tail at the nape of her neck before jamming the helmet on over it.

“We’ve got helmet-to-helmet intercom,” he touched where the small device attached and she mirrored the gesture, “so we can talk or listen to music or whatever you’d like.”

“Christmas music?”

“Sure. Your wish is my command.” He pulled up the playlist on his phone and as the first song, *Joy To The World*, started, she placed her hands on his shoulders.

He hoped she couldn’t tell how he stiffened as she threaded her leg between him and all her luggage, settling into the seat behind him. It did things to him, having her hands on him again, but when her chest pressed to his back, it sent a zinging current of pleasure straight through him. Having her front, from breasts to thigh, snug against his back made him feel like he hadn’t been touched in a million years. He might as well have never been with a woman, that’s how good, how exciting her body was to him. And with her luggage blocking the passenger grip bars, she had no choice but to hold onto him. The instant he realised that fact, she slipped her arms around his waist, gripping tight.

“Keep holding on like that, because that’s going to keep you on the bike.”

“You better not get me killed, Big Nick.”

“The important thing is you keep your centre of gravity matched to mine. I imagine in your line of work, you get plenty of practice with that.”

He started the engine and as it rumbled to life, she grabbed him even harder, crushing herself to him. “How far is it?”

“About forty minutes.”

He took it slow through the airport, so she could get used to the feeling of riding the motorcycle and he could calibrate to the added weight. As she eased into him, he edged the speed a bit higher, loving the feel of her making adjustments as he shifted his position to follow the curve of the roundabout.

From there it was a short ride at relatively slow speeds to get out to Tamworth Road, which would take them north to Bindarra Creek. He stopped at the turn off, putting his feet

down to balance while he checked on Carissa. “You doing all right? Having fun?”

“Sure. It’s fine.”

“Good, because now we get to really ride.” He hoped she could hear his smile, even if she couldn’t see it. “And don’t worry. I’ll be careful with you.” And then he opened up the throttle.

PLEASE DON'T HURRY

Carissa wasn't sure if she was laughing or screaming. All she knew for certain was that she was clutching to Lachlan for dear life as he sped out onto the narrow highway and they flew down the road.

"Too fast!" She couldn't hold onto him any tighter, and ordinarily she would never cling so hard to anyone, let alone a stranger.

"Yeah, but nah. I'm going the speed limit, Ladybug."

"What's that? A hundred miles per hour?"

He laughed, low and rumbling. "Eighty kilometres an hour. Just a little faster than your racehorses."

"At top speed. I don't usually go top speed." She didn't know the exact conversion, but if Lachlan was telling the truth, she figured they were going fifty miles per hour. Which felt a lot faster when the wind was whipping past and every part of her body was exposed to the elements. Not to mention the cars zooming past on what felt like the wrong side of the road.

It was enough excitement to kill her. Lachlan might've said he'd be careful, but the man liked adrenaline. If she'd gathered anything about him in the first hours of their acquaintance, it was that he didn't know what it was like to *not* be a thrill seeker: if he wasn't flying a tiny airplane, he was screaming down the road on his motorcycle.

“Welcome to the Australian bush!” Maybe she was imagining it, but she heard a hint of pride behind his teasing tone.

They’d left behind the clusters of houses along the road and were out in open country. It reminded her of the land where she’d grown up—stretches of dry pasture behind wood rail and barbed wire fences, punctuated by scattered stands of trees or an occasional outcropping of rocks. It wasn’t especially exciting scenery, but she *liked* it.

“It reminds me of home.” In fact, the longer they rode, the more comfortable she was, even as she marveled at the sheer fact of being in a new country, in a new part of the world, with unfamiliar plants and animals.

“How’s that?” He sounded surprised.

“I don’t know. The feel of it. I like it. The open space, the livestock, the heat.” It was hot enough it might’ve been her hometown in summer— but it was days until Christmas. She wanted to take it all in, to see *everything*, to read each of the strangely charming names that appeared on the street signs: things like Wallamore and Tangaratta and Moonaran. The town and street names were unlike anything she’d ever encounter back in California.

But as the minutes stretched as long as the highway before them, and she got used to the speed, exhaustion crashed over her. It wasn’t just her fatigue from not sleeping on her flight, but the added physical exertion of staying on the motorcycle. She wasn’t laughing or screaming anymore, she was constantly leaning as Lachlan swooped through a curve or shifting ever so slightly as he steered around a rough patch of road or bracing against the buffeting of the wind. The sun warmed her and the rumble of the motorcycle was like a lullaby that made her want to drop her head onto Lachlan’s shoulders, close her eyes, and sleep. The nap he’d woken her from hadn’t been enough to take more than the slightest edge off her fatigue.

She was drifting, her eyelids so heavy. She knew she shouldn’t—couldn’t—fall asleep. It wasn’t safe, and she

couldn't rely on muscle memory to keep her holding on to Lachlan. She didn't know she'd fallen asleep until she jerked awake. Lachlan must've felt it, because he'd slowed way down, and was edging toward the side of the road.

"You okay back there?"

"I'm sorry, Lachlan. I'm so tired. Aside from that nap in the airport, I haven't slept since... I don't know when. More than twenty-four hours ago. And I have no idea when I last ate a real meal. The food on the plane was pitiful."

"Can you make it to Lena's? It's maybe twenty minutes. Or there's a place we can stop, just at the edge of town."

"I can't make it to Lena's." She'd gotten a little jolt of adrenaline when she'd startled awake, but it wasn't going to last her until she could crash at her bestie's, and she didn't want to put them both at risk if she couldn't stay awake. Food would help.

"We'll stop. Just a few more minutes."

As they drove, houses started appearing with more frequency, and then Lachlan slowed as they approached a sign saying *Welcome to Bindarra Creek*. She was surprised by the cocktail of emotions she felt, seeing it. Relief that she'd finally made it, even if she wasn't all the way to Lena's house yet, and a twinge of sadness. She didn't want to say goodbye to Lachlan yet. Which was weird. She didn't even know the guy. There was just something about him—maybe whatever it was that had made Lena say 'Everyone likes Lachie!' was working on her, too.

Just beyond the town sign was a mechanic's shop. It had a huge mural of a river rushing through a gorge and a red-tailed black cockatoo winging through a blue sky. On the other side of the road was a place called Beth's Truck Stop.

With an arcing turn, Lachlan steered to the parking lot for Beth's and pulled into a space right in front. He waited while she slid off the motorcycle, then dismounted himself.

They'd been so close for so long, it felt strangely awkward to suddenly have so much space between them. To distract

herself from how she wished she could just lean into him and let her body relax, she took her helmet off and then peeled off the leather jacket. The breeze was warm, but it felt good on her overheated skin.

When she turned to Lachlan, he'd already done the same, and his eyes were on her. Had he been checking her out?

He cleared his throat. "I'll go in and get us some takeaway. You good with a rissole or do you want a meat pie? They've got pretty good ones here."

She laughed. He might as well have been speaking a foreign language. "What's a rissole?"

"Uhhh... Like a meat patty, on a bun."

"A hamburger?" She didn't know why she was using the American term like he'd know what it meant and whether it was the same thing as a rissole.

He shrugged. "Yeah, but... yeah. Is that good for you? Or they have fish and chips and sausage rolls... but I think the rissoles and meat pies are more likely to be a pleasant surprise after your low expectations." He gave her one of those winks that she was starting to think of as his signature move.

But this wink didn't disarm her so much that she wasn't surprisingly touched by how he'd paid attention to what she'd said. "A rissole for me then."

"You want the works on it? Egg? Bacon? Cheese? Tomato? Beet root? Pineapple? Onion?"

"Egg and beet root and pineapple? I've never had any of those on a burger!"

"Is that a yes? From you?"

She gave him a little shove that didn't budge him even an inch. "Yes. I'm saying yes to everything."

He did a mock stagger, like he might faint. "Hot damn, I like it when you say yes!"

Before she could think of a thing to say in retort, he'd disappeared inside.

She was feeling much more awake when Lachlan came back out, carrying bags of food. “There’s a nice park a couple blocks that way—” He pointed toward town.

“It smells too good and I’m too starving to wait.” As if on cue, her stomach rumbled, embarrassingly loud.

“All right. How about over there?” He pointed to a rock outcropping at the edge of the parking lot.

He scrambled a top it first, setting the food down, and then reached a hand to help pull her up beside him.

She laughed when she saw the size of the burger. “What am I supposed to do, unhinge my jaw?”

“Want to trade?” He showed her one of his meat pies, which looked a bit like a mini pot pie.

“No, but can I try a bite?”

“Of course.” He immediately held one of his meat pies out to her and she bit into it while he kept hold of it. “Everything tastes better when you share it.”

“Mmm.” The pastry was light and flaky and the meat filling tasted of wine. “That’s pretty good.”

“You like it?” Lachlan looked genuinely surprised, and for the first time she wondered what kind of first impression she’d made on him. Maybe not a very good one.

“Yeah, I do. Call me pleasantly surprised.” And just for fun, she gave him a wink of her own.

“Do you want more?” He was so generous. She hadn’t let herself really see it before, but he’d been generous with his time, hours and hours he’d spent collecting her, and now he was sharing his food, before he’d even had a chance to eat a single bite.

“No, I’m good. But,” she held out her burger to him, “do you want some of mine?”

“Nah. I think you need it more than I do. I haven’t traveled around the world in a single day.”

“Okay, but you have done a lot of traveling today.” Without thinking about it, she’d laid her hand on his thigh, right where she’d left marks on him earlier. She couldn’t believe she was touching him, like they’d known each other forever. She didn’t go around touching *anyone* like that, especially not people she’d just met. “And suffered while doing it too. I’m sorry about that.”

He shook his head. “No suffering involved. I was glad to do it.”

“Well, I appreciate it. And what do I owe you, for lunch and gas and...”

He leveled a stare at her and holy hell, the intensity of it made her feel like a deer in the headlights. “You don’t owe me a thing...” She was just about to protest when he broke the tension with that mischievous smile. “Except for that second plane ride you let me win.”

She knew she shouldn’t say it, but she did anyway. “You’re supposed to forget about that!”

He shook his head at her. “You’re out of luck if you think I’m ever going to forget.”

The air between them practically shimmered with heat, but she couldn’t tell if it was from him or her or the warm weather. For just a moment she let herself pretend that maybe he was more than just charming, that maybe he really did want to spend more time with her, that maybe there was something special about the connection she felt between them.

They settled into the kind of silence that fell when good food was involved, though Lachlan finished his in about three minutes flat. He sat next to her, thrumming with a kind of restlessness the racehorses she rode sometimes got—the kind where they stood still, but she could feel their every muscle was coiled and ready, itching to move.

When she finally finished her gigantic burger, she felt almost like herself again. “Oh, I feel so much better. Thank you. I needed that.”

“You’re welcome.” Lachlan smiled at her as he gathered up their trash. “Wait here.” She did what he said, and she didn’t mean to but her eyes traced his path as he strode back towards Beth’s. Of course she’d noticed how handsome he was when he’d first woken her up back at Bankstown, but this time she let herself really appreciate the swing of his broad shoulders and his powerful stride as he moved across the parking lot.

When he came back, she could tell he had something in his pocket. “Dessert?” He held out a package to her that read TimTams across the front.

“Oh! Lena’s told me about these! I’ve been wanting to try them!”

“Thought they might be a winner.” God his smile was gorgeous.

She imagined him climbing back up on the rock, the two of them splitting whatever was in the package, maybe letting herself lean into him... Then she came back to reality. Whatever she felt crackling in the air between them fleeting, temporary. It was charm and flash, not substance.

“Let’s save them for when we get there?” She was here to see Lena. Not crush on some friend of her bestie’s boyfriend. And her bestie was only minutes away.

Something flickered in Lachlan’s expression—disappointment? Or was that just what she wanted to see?—and he slipped the package back into his pocket. When he looked back up at her, it was to offer both hands to help her down from the rock. “Ready?”

She could easily hop off just fine without any assistance, it was what she *should* do, but screw it. She took his hands anyway. His grip was firm and steady, and she told herself there was nothing sexy about it, it wasn’t sweet concern or heartfelt consideration or some archaic shred of protectiveness that drove him to want to help her, it was pure politeness. What had he said? His mum would kill him if he was anything other than a good man? That’s all it was: duty. Habit. Good manners.

But her body reacted to those manners like he was a match and she was kindling. And when he kept hold of her hand all the way across the parking lot until they were back at his motorcycle, there wasn't anything she could tell herself to make her stop from liking it.

She liked being on the back of his motorcycle too.

And as Lachlan swung the motorcycle onto Main Street and she got her first glimpse of the town, she decided it was another thing she liked it. She took in the soldier statue in the centre of the roundabout, and the wreath laid at its base. Swathes of greenery hung criss-cross above the main street, their centres decorated with red and white poinsettias. Further on, the shop windows were all decorated for Christmas—some of them festooned with garlands and dangling ornaments, others frosted with snowy scenes, even though it was the middle of summer. Stretched up between light posts was a banner in festive colours, announcing the town's Carols By Candlelight, coming up on December 16th. It wasn't exactly the same thing, but it reminded her of the Victorian Christmas and holiday light parade she'd grown up going to in her little hometown of Shady Draw. For the first time since she'd arrived in Australia, it felt like Christmas really was just around the corner.

They crossed a bridge over a sparkling river and, as Lachlan drove away from town and into the surrounding countryside, she understood Lena's decision to stay there even more, because it was definitely horse country. It was no secret she'd been initially skeptical of Lena's plan to move to Australia, and her bestie most certainly hadn't followed her advice and managed her expectations about what it would be like. But even though the situation Lena had encountered with her long-distance boyfriend had been heartbreaking at first, in the end, it had all turned out for the best because it had led her to Heath.

“How long have you lived in Bindarra Creek, Big Nick?” Lachlan had gone quiet since they'd left the truck stop, since she'd turned down the TimTams.

“I don’t really...well, I grew up not far from here and when I got out of the service, I thought with the army training facility it would be a good home base.”

Something about his answer made her intuition prickle, and she was about to dig into what he meant by ‘home base’ when he turned off the paved road and onto a rough dirt lane.

“Getting close now,” Lachlan said and it made her want to squee with excitement.

The feeling only increased when he pulled onto a driveway that ended in front of a rambling old farmhouse with a wide porch, set under several large shade trees. Off in the distance were the barns. There were no vehicles were parked in front which she took as a good sign—the vet must’ve come and gone.

She was off the motorcycle the instant Lachlan cut the engine, running for the porch steps. “Leen?” She banged on the door, but no one answered.

Of course Lena would be at the barn, and Carissa had been too wrapped up in talking to Lachlan to remember to text an update about her ETA.

She whirled, only to find Lachlan already carrying her luggage up the steps. He was probably in a rush to get back on the road and home to his own place, but for half a second she let herself think it was thoughtful—no, *charming*—of him. He was definitely not trying to show off his arms, but it was hard not to notice the way his muscles bulged under his shirt and—she needed to stop thinking about him like that.

“I knocked but no one’s answering. I’m sure Lena’s out in the barn, so if you just want to drop my stuff on the porch and get going...” She was rambling, excited to see Lena, and covering for being far too sad about having to say goodbye to Lachlan. “I really appreciate everything—”

“That’s okay, I’ve got the key. I can let us in. Or I can bring your stuff inside and you can go find Lena?”

“I thought you were—don’t you live—?” She’d suddenly lost the ability to form words. Lachlan was Heath’s friend,

but... why did he have a key to Lena's house? She was missing some crucial piece of information. He'd told her he was single, hadn't he? That he lived with his cat?

"It's cool. I'll take your stuff up to your room while you and Lena catch up."

"Wait. You live here?"

Lachlan shook his head. "I'm sorry, I thought you knew—Pickle and I are staying here, through the holidays."

"But I thought you said your home base was Bindarra Creek."

"It is. But the lease on my old place was up and my new place isn't quite ready yet, so I'm staying here until it is."

He smiled, and she swore she was going to faint. She'd thought once Lachlan had dropped her off, she likely wouldn't see him again, that he'd be busy with his own holiday plans. But he wasn't going anywhere and she didn't have to say goodbye to him. At least, not tonight.

BRING US DELIGHT

Lachlan knew when to make himself scarce, and the moment Lena and her dog emerged from the barn was it.

Carissa was still fish-mouthing on the porch, because no one had thought to tell her she wasn't the only guest staying at Lena and Heath's place, but when she saw Lena, she let out the kind of shriek that only excited women made. "Lena! Coppy!"

Even at a distance, the reaction to Carissa's voice was electric.

Coppy took off at full, butt-lowered, cattle dog sprint, making a beeline for the porch, and Lena charged after him, calling, "Oh yay! You're finally here!"

At the same instant, Carissa blew past him, launching herself down the porch steps and taking off toward the barn.

She was met first by Copper, who had turned into the world's wiggliest, waggiest dog, barely able to contain himself at the sight and scent of Carissa, who crouched down to greet him. The dog put his paws on her shoulders, while she crooned at him. "Give me hugs and kisses, Coppy! Aren't you the world's best dog? Oh, I've missed you too!"

When Lena arrived a few seconds later, Carissa leapt to her feet and the two women embraced, rocking side-to-side and both of them talking almost at once, their conversation a flurry of exclamations—You look great! Why has it been so long? I can't believe you're really here! This place is amazing! I love it already! I can't wait for you to meet Heath!

Lachlan felt a twinge at the scene. It wasn't exactly jealousy, but something close, mixed with a side of what he guessed was yearning. Heath had become a great friend in the year since they'd met at the Returned Service League, and so had some of the other blokes, but there was no one in the world who would greet him the way Carissa and Lena greeted each other. Not even Pickle, though he figured that had more to do with her being a cat than the strength of her feelings for him.

His lack of attachments was by design. Emotional entanglements made his job more difficult—anyone who'd seen combat learned that the hard way. He travelled for work a lot, and goodbyes were never easy. But just because he intentionally avoided putting down roots didn't stop him from sometimes missing strong ties like the one Carissa and Lena had.

"I can't believe I forgot!" Carissa leaned away from her friend. The two of them were a study in contrasts—Lena dark haired and bubbly, Carissa fair-haired and cautious—but she hardly seemed the same wary woman he'd woken at Bankstown. "How's the colicky horse?"

"Better now, thankfully." Lena wrapped an arm around Carissa's waist and Lachlan felt another pang as the two women and Copper headed for the barn. He wanted to be the one at Carissa's side—which was an impossibility. He dated casually or not at all. He'd never been interested in being tied down to anything besides his cat. He liked keeping his options open, and he wasn't going to risk imploding friendships over something short-term. That was all a relationship with Carissa could be, especially considering it was hard to get farther apart than Australia and California.

Except, why was he thinking about relationships at all? It didn't make sense, and neither did the way he felt a little left out, like an intruder, watching the two women walk arm-in-arm.

Instead of stewing, he got busy, making good on his promise to bring Carissa's bags up to her room. When he'd arrived, Lena had offered him his pick of the guest rooms and

he'd chosen the one at the top of the stairs, the smaller of the two, leaving the one at the back with the prettiest view of the barns and fields for Lena's friend. Now that he'd met Carissa, he was doubly glad he'd given her the better room.

That task done, he poked his head into his room to check on Pickle. She was right where he'd left her, curled at the foot of his bed. He smoothed a hand over her long, softer-than-soft fur. She let out a little trilling meow, opened her eyes to slits, just enough to confirm it was him before closing them again and going back to sleep with a rumbling purr.

Then he did what he did best: he got out of there.

He thought about going for a swim at the rock pool, which was just a quick walk away at the end of Digger's Lane, but what he really wanted was to clear his head, and for that he needed speed. He'd tried to outrun his thoughts when he and Carissa had been on his bike, roaring up Tamworth Road, but that had been impossible with her laugh-screaming through the helmet intercom directly into his ear. Her laugh... He'd liked it. Too much.

He was just settling onto his motorcycle when Heath's ute pulled in the drive, a gum tree waving its branches in the back. His friend had been pulling long days, working overtime in his woodworking shop on the neighbouring property, finishing all the custom orders he'd gotten for the holidays and delivering them. If all went according to plan, Heath's cottage on the same property would be vacant by January first, and Lachlan would be renting it as his home base.

"Hey mate! You get the girl home all right?" Heath jumped out of the ute and went straight to the back of it.

"Yeah, they're out in the barn." He hooked a thumb in the direction of the stables. "Horse is better, sounds like."

"Good." Heath gave him a nod. "Thanks for doing that. Means a lot to both of us." There was a pause. "What's she like?"

"Carissa?"

"Yeah."

“Different from Lena. More...” He couldn’t think how to describe her without giving too much away. He opted for a variation of what Lena had told him. “Opinionated. Less... flexible.” Lena was just plain nice. Carissa was more prickly. Like Heath, but Lachlan wasn’t going to say that.

Heath nodded, as if this information was a confirmation of what he already knew. “I just want it to be a good visit.”

“It will be. Those two are thick as thieves. She might start off a bit wary, but I was a complete stranger. She warms up out of it. Probably she’ll warm up faster to you since you won’t be dragging her onto an airplane.”

“She wasn’t impressed?”

“In her words, ‘absolutely not.’” It might not be the whole truth, but he wanted Heath to know he wasn’t going to do anything to mess this visit up for his friend. If Heath needed Carissa to like him, if he needed her to have a good time but not *that* kind of good time, then he could deliver.

Heath gave him a slap on the back. “The Devine smile finally wore out, did it?”

“Didn’t work on her a bit.” They both laughed, though that pang of longing was back. Truth was, the minute he’d seen her, he’d wanted to impress her. He wanted the way she’d held onto his hand at Beth’s Truck Stop to mean something. And he desperately needed it not to.

“Give me a hand with this? I want to wash it off, make sure there aren’t any uninvited guests hiding in the branches.” Heath grabbed onto the potted gum tree and pulled it out of the ute bed. “I thought we could surprise the girls and get the lights put on at least.”

“We’d better get to it, then. Carissa was pretty tired by the time we got here, and they’ve been out in the barn awhile already.”

“Doing the evening feed?”

Lachlan shrugged. “No idea.” Horses weren’t his thing. Though if Carissa was going to exercise horses with Lena, he wanted to watch her ride.

AFTER COPPY, Carissa was the first one through the door. “What’s this?”

Lena was right on Carissa’s heels and the instant she stepped inside, Heath flipped on the power strip and the tree lit up. Lena gasped and clapped her hands together in front of her lips, as if she was saying a little prayer. “Oh! Our tree! I love it!” She threw her arms around Heath, then stepped back. “Did you check it for... friends?”

Behind her Carissa snorted. “You mean spiders?”

“I did, Christmas Girl.” As soon as he said it, she was hugging him again.

“I love it, Grinch Guy!” Then she gasped again. “But how rude of me! Heath, this is Carissa, my best friend in the whole world. And Carissa, this is Heath, my favourite.” She beamed as the two of them finally, officially met. Then she turned to him, her smile still just as bright. “And Lachie!” She had a hug for him, too. “You’re a star! Thank you so much for bringing Carissa home!”

“It was my pleasure.” He didn’t mean to, but his gaze went right to Carissa when he said it, and maybe it was his imagination, but he thought her cheeks went pink.

Lena whirled away, back to Carissa. “You.” She pointed at her friend. “What do you need? Shower? Sleep? Food? Drink? I know how you get when you’re hangry. Do you have tree decorating in you tonight?” It was obvious from Lena’s expression that she hoped Carissa did, and equally obvious to him that Carissa was about to drop.

“Shower. Immediately. When I come back down, ply me with beverages, and I’ll supervise your decorating.” Carissa straight out said exactly what she needed, and he liked it. “Oh, and we brought something to share for dessert.”

She meant the TimTams—he’d nearly forgotten about them.

“Drinks and dessert: Deal.” Then Lena pointed at him. “And you! You’ve done enough for today. You sit on that couch and Heath and I will take care of dinner. After I give Carissa the tour!”

He’d rather be on the tour, in whatever room Carissa was in, but that was out of the question. He was lowering himself onto the couch when Carissa stopped on the first stair.

“Does the tour include getting to meet Pickle?”

“I’ll introduce you to Pickle any time you want.” He shouldn’t have felt so happy Carissa had remembered his cat and wanted to meet her.

“Now, please.”

And just like that, he got his wish. Instead of sinking onto the couch to sit alone, he followed the women upstairs, while Heath got started in the kitchen.

Pickle was a hit. Carissa knew just how to scratch under her chin and was rewarded with all of Pickle’s vocabulary of trills and purrs. His cat even rolled onto her back and used both paws to grab onto Carissa’s hand, without using any claws.

When Carissa declared, “She’s adorable,” it made him happier than it should.

He could hardly stop staring when Carissa came downstairs after her shower, smelling of mint, and plopped onto the couch at the opposite end from him, wearing the shortest pair of candy cane pajama shorts and a tiny, tight tank top that didn’t hide a thing. He ached to have her next to him, as close as she’d been on his plane, fitted against him like she’d been on his motorcycle. When Pickle cautiously picked her way from his lap, across the back of the couch, and sat on the armrest next to Carissa, he had to tell himself it wasn’t a sign or a stamp of approval. It was just a cat, being a cat.

Lena had turned on Christmas music and pulled a box full of ornaments out of a closet, but as she sashayed into the living room, bearing a tumbler of what looked like extra thick milk, she stopped in her tracks.

“You look exhausted, Carissa.” It was true: her friend’s head was nodding. Lachlan was shocked she’d stayed awake as long as she had. “Should we save it for another night?”

“No. Gimme that egg nog.” Carissa shifted, sitting more upright and taking the glass from Lena. “This is exactly what I imagined when I told you I was coming for Christmas: decorating, music, nog...and the best company.” She took a long draught of her drink.

“Okay, but if you fall asleep, I’m leaving you there.” Lena raised both her eyebrows at her friend. “I’m not risking life and limb to get you up to your room.”

“That’s fine.” Carissa took another sip of her drink. “Is anyone else having egg nog? Lachlan?”

“I’ve never had egg nog... is it good?” He couldn’t even remember having seen the stuff in the grocery store before.

“I had to ask for it special at the IGA.” Heath grimaced. “I think it’s an acquired taste.”

“Want to try a sip?” Carissa leaned across the couch, holding her glass out to Lachlan. “It can be your adventure for the day. I promise it’s not going to kill you.”

He wasn’t going to turn down what amounted to a dare. He took the drink from Carissa, the slide of her fingers against his sending a tingle up his arm. While Heath watched with his signature serious expression plus a side of repulsion, Lachlan drank what was left like it was a shot.

It was thick, sweet, and spiced with cinnamon and nutmeg. “That is objectively disgusting. You like that?” He thrust the empty glass back at Carissa.

“Love it.” Carissa and Lena spoke in unison, then both cackled.

“I’ll take more, please and thank you.” Carissa held the glass out for Lena, who refilled it and then set the carton of egg nog on the coffee table.

Carissa and Lena clinked glasses and downed another round.

“Now, is anyone going to decorate this tree?” Carissa set her glass on the coffee table and gestured toward the box of ornaments. “Because I for one would love to see a eucalyptus turn into a Christmas tree before I fall asleep. And if I do fall asleep, I give Big Nick over there permission to carry me upstairs.”

“Big Nick?” Heath furrowed his brows.

“My new nickname.” Lachlan pointed at his shirt.

“I’m never letting him forget that he wore a dick joke shirt the first time we met.” With that, Carissa rested her head on the throw pillow and closed her eyes.

DREAMS TO SHARE

She woke up in her room, with no memory of how she got there. She'd been on the couch, drinking egg nog, teasing Lachlan one second, and the next she'd opened her eyes to bright sunshine and a quiet house.

In the shower the night before, she'd decided to follow the advice she'd given Lena almost exactly a year ago: GET IT.

She was nothing like Lachlan—one look in his room and the disaster that was his unmade bed and the jumble of clothes piled in his suitcase was enough to confirm that, if the plane and motorcycle hadn't already been a massive clue. Maybe his taste in T-shirts was suspect, but she liked him. He'd been kind when she'd been freaking out. He had a cat he clearly adored. He was definitely attractive. And if they had a holiday fling, it would be over before their differences had time to annoy her and he had enough time to disappoint her. It seemed like a solid plan. They'd both have fun, and when the holidays were over, he'd go back to his real life and she'd go back to... well, she wasn't sure. But they'd go their separate ways and likely never see each other again. Maybe if Lena and Heath got married, she'd see him at the wedding, but that would be manageable. She'd worked it all out. Which was exactly why she'd offered Lachlan a sip of her drink and told him he could carry her upstairs if she fell asleep on the couch. She'd been flirting, and she'd been hoping if he did carry her, she'd wake up enough to enjoy it.

Apparently not.

She grabbed for her phone and couldn't believe how late it was—half the day already gone. There was a message from Lena though, sent hours ago.

Come out to the barn if you feel like riding

OMG why didn't anyone wake me?

Figured you needed your beauty rest. You were passed out so hard you didn't even blink when Lachie picked you up

WELL, that explained why she didn't remember being carried to her bed.

You coming to ride? Or should I come up?

I'll be there as soon as I get dressed

She went to the adjoining jack 'n' jill style bathroom. It had two doors, one that opened onto her bedroom, and one that led to Lachlan's, making the bathroom into a hall or a secret passageway. When Lena had given her the tour and Lachlan had introduced her to his cat, she'd noticed Pickle's litterbox in the bathroom, and they'd worked out a system so the cat could have free rein. She'd keep the door to her room closed all the time, but Lachlan would use the hook-and-eye latch to lock it from the inside when he needed privacy.

Still, it felt weird to just yank the door open and barge into the bathroom. What if he'd forgotten to use the extra latch?

She rapped lightly on the door. When there was no answer, she knocked a little louder. Satisfied, she pushed the door open.

The bathroom was mercifully empty and the door to Lachlan's room was wide open, his bed still an unmade tangle

of sheets. Pickle was curled on his pillow, sleeping in a sunbeam, but there was no sign of the man himself. It should've been a relief, but instead she wondered what he was doing. She'd assumed he was on vacation—why else would he be staying with Lena and Heath?—but she really didn't know anything about him other than he'd been in the Air Force. She hadn't even asked him what he did for work now or how he spent his spare time. She knew plenty of guys who got out of the service and couldn't hold down regular jobs. Lachlan didn't seem troubled, but some people were good at hiding those kinds of scars.

She brushed and quickly braided her hair, pulled on her favourite breeches, and dug her safety vest and helmet out of her roller bag. Lachlan was right that she'd packed more than was necessary for a two-week trip—and that was something she needed to talk to Lena about, preferably before she got too far down a certain path with Lachlan. The time hadn't been right the day before. She'd been too tired, and Lena had been too excited showing her everything about her training operation. The last thing Carissa wanted was to be a downer, but the truth was, she had no reason to rush back to California. Other than a rented room and a brother who was busy living his own life, she had nothing.

On that depressing note, she headed downstairs, which was just as deserted as upstairs had been. She helped herself to a granola bar, admired the work Lena and Heath must've done on the Christmas tree while she'd been passed out on the couch, and headed for the porch.

“There you are, Ladybug! I thought you'd never wake up!” Lachlan was sitting on the porch swing, a book—something spy-thriller-y from the look of it—in his hand. She hadn't pegged him for a reader.

“And I woke up thinking I was still on the couch.”

“You going riding?” He hadn't closed his book or put a bookmark in it, but instead he put it down on the swing next to him, splayed open, the spine breaking. It made her twitch to see it, so instead of stopping to chat, she kept on walking.

“Yeah, Lena says she’s got some horses for me.”

He was on his feet and down the porch steps before she was. “You mind if I come along?”

What was she going to say? No? It wasn’t like she could really stop him.

“It’s fine by me, but—”

“Good! Because I’ve been thinking it would be fun to see you in your element.”

“You didn’t let me finish.” She strode up the driveway toward the barn. “Like I was saying, it’s fine with me if you want to come, but there’s a tax if you stay to watch.”

“A tax?”

“Yup. In this case you have to—wait, let me back up. Have you ever ridden a horse before?”

“Once or twice.”

In her experience, when someone had only ever ridden a handful of times, it typically meant their last experience was bad. A rented trail horse gone sour. A beach gallop that turned into a runaway. A summer camp horse-turned-bucking bronc. “Really memorable then, was it?”

“No, not really. As I recall, I wanted to go faster and my horse was determined to stop and eat grass. It wasn’t exactly thrilling.”

“You and your thrill seeking.” She didn’t know him well enough to make claims like that, not really, but she must’ve hit a mark because he leaned away from her and gave her a mock-shocked face.

“I didn’t know I’d spilled all my secrets to you.”

“You didn’t, you’re just transparent as hell. Plus I know a thing or two about veterans and their desire for adrenaline. So your tax is getting on a horse again. If I have to fly, you have to ride.”

He stopped and met her gaze. “So long as you’re there, it’ll be a treat.” And then he gave her a wink so quick, she second

guessed whether it had even happened.

That was when she noticed his shirt. It said *Tree-t Yourself*. “C’mon Big Nick. Let’s get your treat.”

The fact that he wanted to tag along meant she wouldn’t get her chance to talk to Lena about her whole work situation, but his company made her feel like she was floating. But in a safe way, not in an airplane thousands of feet above the earth way.

“You up for riding some greenies?” Lena didn’t even bother waiting for an answer. She handed Carissa the reins of the horse she’d just finished tacking up, a leggy bay, while she went to get her own mount out of his stall.

“You know I love a big baby.” She looped the reins over her arm. Then she adjusted her stirrups and checked the girth was tight enough to keep the saddle in place. It was more to keep herself busy than out of any necessity.

“Pre-flight check?” Lachlan’s eyes had been on her the entire time, and dang if it didn’t make her feel about five degrees too warm.

“I guess so, but with a lot fewer gauges and toggles.”

He laughed—not his half-hearted chuckle, but a real laugh—and oh, did that smile look good on him.

Lena brought her mount out of its stall, this one a huge chestnut. “These two are pretty good. They can get a little silly at times, but nothing bad enough to get themselves on the naughty list.”

Carissa followed as Lena led the way out of the barn, past the outdoor arena and to the gallop track. She still couldn’t believe her friend had found a facility as nice as this. It had everything that could have been on Lena’s wish list.

Once they were outside, they used what Lena called her ‘trusty bucket’ as a mounting block. As soon as Carissa’s seat hit the saddle, she felt at home in a way she hadn’t since the race track back in California closed, and it was another confirmation of what she needed to do with her career. She’d thought maybe she’d take the forced opportunity to get a more

standard job, one that was horse-adjacent or horse related, but didn't involve riding other people's horses constantly or risking her life. She could sell equipment in a tack shop or become a sales rep for veterinary supplies... But the instant she'd settled onto her horse's back she knew: a new job in a related field might pay the bills but nothing would ever compare the feeling of putting her trust in her mount and communicating with a creature from a whole other species. And it was obvious Lena could use her help.

"You look good up there." Lachlan had situated himself at the rail, directly at the finish line. Though there wasn't anything to mark it other than the red and white striped fence post.

"Thanks." Carissa was pretty sure he was more interested in the way her butt looked in her breeches than in how she actually rode. She could feel the heat of his gaze even as she steered away from him and out onto the track, and she didn't hate it. But she had work to do, and it required a different focus than wondering what Lachlan saw when he watched her. She kept her horse alongside Lena's, but not so close they'd bump into each other or that their horses would be able to kick one another.

As they worked the horses, Carissa planned out what she would tell Lena about her job, and how she was going to ask for what was probably the biggest favor she'd ever contemplated asking anyone. By the time they were cantering back down the homestretch, she was as ready as she'd ever be.

But there was Lachlan, his gaze trained on her, burning with an intensity that was a zillion times hotter than the blazing sun. She needed to get away from him if she was going to have a real heart-to-heart with Lena.

She twisted slightly, so Lena would be able to hear her above the rhythmic blowing of their horses as they eased them out of the canter and into a trot again. "Are these two good enough to cool out with a little hack?"

Lena's eyes flicked toward Lachlan and back to Carissa. "Sure, let's do it. You want to tell him or should I?"

“You.”

“Lachie! We’re going to ride up toward the cottage to get some hill work in. We’ll meet you back at the house, okay?”

The man looked like he was legit pouting, but he raised a hand in a salute-wave and left.

“Now what is it you want to tell me that no one else can hear?” The best and worst thing about her friendship with Lena was that the woman could see right through her.

“Did you see the news about the track closing?”

“What? No!” Lena’s mouth hung wide before she snapped it shut. “Oh my god, what are you going to do?”

“Well, I thought maybe I should move to Southern California and ride at one of the tracks down there. Or else go to work for some sport horse trainer. Or get some other job.” It was the simple truth, but saying it aloud made her feel like she might throw up. “But none of those options feel right. And now that I’m here...” She didn’t know why it was so hard to just *ask*. Maybe because the question was bigger than just a job, and mixing business and friendship was risky.

“OMG! YES! Stay and work with me!”

Her bestie was a mind reader. And as terrifying as it was, it was exactly what she wanted to hear; she’d loved it when she and Lena had worked at the track together, before Lena left for Australia. Working with Lena would be like coming home. But even though it was exactly what she’d hoped Lena might say, maybe it was too good to be true. “Really? You mean it?”

“Of course I mean it, dummy! Wasn’t I just telling you yesterday that I wanted to expand, but I can’t until I have good help?” Lena beamed at her. “This would solve all my problems!”

“But...what if we end up hating each other? Or what if there’s not enough work?”

“No buts! Is it something you’d want to do?”

“Yes. Absolutely.” Only now that it wasn’t just an idea in her head, but an actual possibility, it seemed huge. Maybe she

hadn't thought it through enough.

"Well, okay then. We'll just have to figure it out."

"I really don't think it's that simple." She didn't know the first thing about what was involved in moving to a whole other continent. She couldn't just stay in a foreign country indefinitely. "Wouldn't I have to get a work visa or something?"

"We'll work it out. I bet Lachie knows about that kind of thing. He's always traveling for work."

"What does he even do?" Carissa knew she should focus on the job Lena had just offered her. She also knew if she had questions about Lachlan, she ought to ask the man himself. But it hadn't escaped her that if she took a job with Lena, maybe Lachlan could be part of her life too, and asking Lena about him was so much more expedient. And it was far less of a risk to let Lena see she might be a teensy tiny bit interested in Lachlan than it was to give him that impression.

"He's a military consultant, but I never understand what it is he actually does. Oh! That reminds me!" Lena beamed at Carissa. "I hope you brought some holiday stuff to wear, because I've got something planned for you. And Lachie." Lena waggled her brows. "You two are going to be great together!"

VISIONS OF GINGERBREAD

Lachlan wasn't sure exactly what he'd been roped into, but he was always up for any kind of adventure, big or small. He'd done all kinds of things during his time in the service and since—parkour in Paris, scuba diving in Japan, snowmobiling in the Alps, climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro. New experiences were invigorating. He just hadn't really expected to be having them at Christmas. But he was here for whatever new ideas these American girls had about the holidays. First it was the egg nog (as terrible as its off-putting name suggested) and now it was whatever Lena had concocted for the evening.

Lena clapped her hands. "Everybody! Welcome to the first annual Gingerbread House Deco-race!" She was in her element, wearing a full holiday get up: bright green shorts and a red tank top with *Merry and Bright* emblazoned across it in sequins. Now it made sense why she'd been so determined to decorate the Christmas tree the night before. Its lights twinkled from its place in front of the lounge's picture window, making a festive backdrop.

Lena had also decorated the room to the hilt. The folding tables she'd set up for the guests were topped with a red and green plaid tablecloth and each had a stack of gingerbread house kits in the centre. All of the windows were strung with gold star garlands that caught the light, and the mantel was festooned with gum tree boughs and red globe ornaments and candles. Three stockings hung from brass hooks, the names *Abilene*, *Heath*, and *Copper* emblazoned in more sparkly sequins. He never would've thought that someone as serious

as Heath would end up with someone who loved so much sparkle. He guessed opposites really did attract, at least some of the time.

The buzz of conversation that had filled the lounge quieted. The lounge was brimming with people. He knew Carissa, of course, but he also recognised several of the older ladies from town, who were all active in the Country Women's Association and were at almost every community event the town put on. There was Mariah, who he knew from the vet clinic where he took Pickle, and Holly, who'd made up the holiday gift basket he'd gotten for his mum. Heath had also convinced a couple blokes from the Returned Service League to attend—which explained the extra beers in the fridge.

Lena went on, explaining the rules. “You'll have an hour and a half to complete building and decorating your gingerbread house.” She pointed at the table nearest the front door, piled high with the most eclectic collection of candy he'd ever seen. “Over there, you'll find all the decorating supplies: frosting, candy canes, gumdrops, peppermints, marshmallows, sprinkles, chocolate chips. You name it, it's probably on that table. Help yourself to anything you want: it's all up for grabs.”

He raised his hand. “If this is a competition, then how is the winner decided?”

“I am so glad you asked that!” Lena's eyes were shining and her smile hadn't dropped from her face once. She truly did look happy. “Once your house is finished, we'll take a picture of it. I'm going to post all the pictures to my social media accounts and ask our friends and family and followers to vote on which one they think is the best. And you're all welcome to share my post and try to get more votes.”

“And what's the prize for the winner?” If it was a competition, then Lachlan wanted to win, no matter the prize.

“Bragging rights? The glory of winning?” He got the distinct feeling Carissa was poking at him for his focus on the competitive aspect of the evening.

Lena was unfazed. “Nope! The lucky winner will receive a prize pack that includes two CWA candles for Carols by Candlelight and a \$20 gift card to the Cyprus Cafe.”

Heath shifted in his seat at the head of the table, and damn if the man wasn't besotted, his expression full of warmth as he watched Lena. Lachlan never would've expected it from the bloke he'd met the previous year while they were both working the barbies at the town picnic. Anyone who'd seen Heath then, before he and Lena were an official couple, could vouch for the fact that Lena had been the best thing that had ever happened to the man. She'd brought him back to life, stopped him from becoming a full-on recluse. If tonight wasn't proof of that, nothing was.

Lachlan wasn't the only one noticing the way Heath looked at Lena, either. Carissa's eyes went from Heath to Lena and back again, almost like she was cataloguing what she saw.

“Can we compete as teams?” If he was going to blow the rest of the competition out of the water, he needed some help in doing it. And he had just the person he wanted in mind.

Lena beamed at him. “You can!”

There was an awkward silence as everyone present took stock of the competition and calculated whether they wanted to work alone or with a partner. At least, that's what he assumed was happening, because it was exactly what he'd already done. He'd made his decision when he'd asked the question. He cleared his throat, trying to catch Carissa's attention. When she finally looked his way, he made his move.

“Want to help me win this thing?”

Carissa pinned him with a look he couldn't quite read, either mischievous or calculating. He wasn't sure which. “Winning isn't everything, Big Nick. Maybe you should just enjoy the experience.”

“And I like to experience success.” She laughed and shook her head at him, and he decided to try another tack. He leaned across the table, like he had some great secret to share with

her. Then he went straight to the argument he hoped would generate the most sympathy.

“Look, I’ve never built a gingerbread house before, let alone decorated one. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Wait... what?” Carissa reared back and stared at him, her head cocked. “Are you serious?” He got the distinct impression she thought he was lying.

“Never been more serious.”

“You’re telling me you’ve never made a gingerbread house?” She narrowed her eyes like she was studying him for any tells that would prove he wasn’t being honest.

“Never, not in all my years on this planet. It’s a little more... domestic than I usually go in for.” He knew the instant he said it that it was the wrong thing.

“Domestic?”

“Crafty. That’s a better word. What I mean is, I’m not really much of an arts kind of bloke. Not that there’s anything wrong with it, only that it isn’t my skill set, generally.”

“You’re more of an action and adrenaline kind of guy?” He wasn’t sure he liked how much she seemed to understand about him.

“Exactly.”

“Well, I guess if you want to win this thing, I’d better show you how it’s done.”

“Is everybody ready?” Lena held up her phone, showing the timer set for an hour and thirty minutes. A general murmur went up from the group. “Okay, here we go in three...two...one...you have ninety minutes!”

Carissa leapt into action, pulling one of the gingerbread house kits from the middle of the table to the empty space between them. The picture on the front showed a tiny village of three different gingerbread cottages. “Okay, so the first thing we need to do is figure out our base. I think we should build the gingerbread houses on the box. Maybe you could—”

“Why do we need a base?”

“Because we’ve got three houses, and we’re going to need to be able to move—” She shook her head. “Look, if you’re going to make me explain everything, it’s going to waste time. C’mon action-man. We need a base.” She opened the box and emptied it.

“What do you want me to do?” There was what looked like the equivalent of a shark feeding frenzy going on at the supplies table, as the other guests grabbed candy to fill their bowls.

She pushed the box toward him. “You break this box down. And—do you have a knife?”

He reached for his pocket and she smiled.

“Excellent. I hoped you would.” It shouldn’t have made him feel anything, but he swore it gave him a little buzz to know he’d met her expectations. “You cut off the flaps, so we have a good flat rectangle of cardboard, and I’m going to go snag some supplies.”

He didn’t mean to, but when she’d pushed away from their table and turned to thread her way through the other guests, he couldn’t stop himself from watching her. Gone were her travel leggings and her too-short pajama shorts and her curve-hugging riding pants. Instead, she wore a short, swingy skirt that flounced as she walked. He’d seen more of her legs—*felt* more of her—when he’d carried her up the stairs the other night, but that skirt... He liked what he saw as much as he’d liked imagining what he couldn’t.

“You working on something there, Lachie?” Heath stood at his elbow.

“A base, I guess. Carissa says we need it.” He’d already flattened the box and had cut off the end flaps, but he didn’t look up. He wasn’t an idiot, and he knew Heath wasn’t only asking about the gingerbread house project.

“Grinch Guy!” Lena had sat in the seat next to Carissa’s. “Leave Lachie be!” She widened her eyes and jerked her head to the seat on the other side of her. “Carissa’s a big girl.”

“You really like her?”

Was it that obvious? “Yeah, I think I might.” He wasn’t going to bare his soul in public.

With a grunt, Heath gave Lachlan’s shoulder a squeeze. “Maybe you should do something about that.”

It didn’t take a genius to understand that Lena had as good as given him a green light to pursue Carissa and Heath had more than co-signed the idea. That squeeze was a reminder not to mess things up, but his takeaway as Heath sat down next to Lena was the same: the brakes he’d thought were holding him back were gone. Not that he knew what he was going to do about his feelings. Whatever he did, it could only be for the short term. Enough to get her out of his system and move on.

By the time Carissa got back, their base was finished.

“That looks good.” Instead of sitting across from him like she’d done before, she dropped into the chair next to him, shooting him a little smile, and damn. He liked making her smile. “I’ve got a plan, but first we need to build our little houses.” She plunked a tube of icing in front of him. “You’re basically going to use this like caulk.” The corners of her mouth twitched as she realised how the last word sounded. “Like glue. I mean like glue.” She looked so cute when she was embarrassed.

He couldn’t resist. He grabbed for the tube and without looking at her, he took two sides of the smallest gingerbread house and held them at right angles to each other. Then he squeezed a line of frosting into the gap where the pieces met. “Like this?”

“Yeah, just like that.”

“So, I’ll stick the tip in all the cracks and fill them up, and then the house will be nice and tight. Is that right?” Carissa’s cheeks flushed the prettiest pink, and on the other side of her, Lena made a strangled sound.

“That’s perfect.”

He held the tube of frosting out to her. “Do you need this caulk?” She snorted and he had to bite his lip to keep from

laughing.

“You’re terrible, Big Nick.” Her gaze was pinned on him, as she swept her golden waves back over her shoulder. She’d said the exact same thing before—when he’d promised to keep her safe if she’d just get on his plane.

“Yeah, but nah. With your big plans and my caulk work, you and me are going to be the best, Ladybug.” Carissa covered her mouth with her hand, stifling a giggle and going a deeper shade of pink. “We’re going to win this whole thing so hard.”

“We better.” Then, without looking away she added, “Because I do, in fact, like winning. Especially when I’ve worked hard for it.”

“Now, are you going to tell me this plan of yours to bring home the big win, or are you going to keep telling me how to use my caulk?” He kept his attention on gluing together the next side of the gingerbread house, but he could tell from the breathless squeaking coming from the other side of the table that Carissa was struggling not to lose it.

“Stop it!” She laughed. “We’re wasting time! We need to focus.”

“Fine. I’ll be serious.” He’d frosted the four walls of his gingerbread cottage together, so he moved to attaching the roof. “Tell me your plan.”

She showed him how she wanted to arrange the three little cottages on the cardboard. “Like we’re making a little town square, only... I don’t know what to put in the middle. I grabbed some cotton candy—” she pointed at the selection of candy she’d brought over.

“Fairy floss.”

“What?”

“That’s called fairy floss, not cotton candy.”

“Okay, stop being a stickler! My point is, I thought we could use the cotton—fairy floss to make snow drifts, but... I

don't know. We can't just make the whole middle snow. It seems too boring."

"We'll come up with something." He set the first assembled gingerbread cottage on the cardboard base. "You can start decorating this one, and I'll assemble the next one."

"But how I decorate it might depend on what we put in the middle—"

She was worrying because they didn't have a complete plan. He could fix that. "What goes in a town square during the holidays in the States?"

Carissa frowned. "I don't know... a big huge Christmas tree? But I don't think there's anything that will work to make one."

He surveyed the supplies she'd brought. "Do you have anything blue in there?"

"Blue? Why?" She pawed through the candy in her bowl and pulled out a package of long, flat, blue candy strips. "How about Sour Strips, like these?"

"Here's what we're going to do." He lowered his voice. "We can use a few of those to make an iceskating rink or a frozen pond, there in the middle of the houses."

Carissa's whole demeanor went from tense to enthusiastic in a blink. "Oh my god, that's perfect! And I can use the mini-candy canes to be little street lamps to light up the skating rink! Oh, and we can make a fence around it with graham cracker quarters. You're a genius!"

He didn't point out that he hadn't come up with any of those ideas, he'd only suggested the one that had sparked her creativity. "Teamwork." He put his hand up for a high five, just for a chance to touch her, and then he told himself that the tingles he felt after her palm smacked his was just because she'd put too much power behind her high five.

THEY WERE the last ones to finish, but they squeaked in under the deadline, Carissa frantically tossing fairy floss around their

ginger-cottages, covering up the last of the cardboard base, while he added sprinkles to the frosted roof tops. Their finished village looked pretty good, if he did say so himself, and no one else had thought to make anything like their ice-skating rink.

He leaned over to whisper into Carissa's ear. "I think we've got this in the bag, Ladybug."

She shook her head, her eyes trained on Lena, as she used her phone to photograph Holly's beautifully frosted and precisely decorated house. "No. We've got to stage our photo."

He had no idea what she meant but when it was finally their turn, she gestured at their entire village. "Can you pick that up?"

"Sure." He slid the cardboard base to the edge of the table and then gently supported it with his palms.

Carissa directed him toward the Christmas tree, and while he held the ginger-village in front of the tree, she called Lena over to photograph it.

While Lena wove her way between the other guests, Carissa leaned closer to him. "Everyone else is just letting Lena take random snapshots, with whatever happens to be in the background. But this"—she gestured toward the Christmas tree—"is a way more festive backdrop. It's going to make all the difference."

Lena snapped their village from a bunch of different angles, Carissa directing the shots she wanted. Finally, when his arms were about to fall off from the awkward position, she said, "Yep, that's the one!"

"No, one more! Get over there next to Lachie." Lena waved her hand, indicating where she wanted Carissa. When she was satisfied with her friend's positioning, she held up her camera phone. "Oh. Oh!" Her mouth dropped open in feigned surprise and with her free hand she pointed up.

He almost tipped the whole gingerbread village over when he saw what they were standing under: mistletoe. But instead

of Carissa saying ‘absolutely not’ and glaring at her best friend the way he expected, Carissa rolled with the surprise.

When she slipped her arms around his waist and went up on her tiptoes, the front of her pressing against the side of him it felt better than he had the right to enjoy. For half a second he told himself he shouldn’t want anything more from her than friendship. That anything more would just end up in heartbreak, when he left or she went home. He bent as close as he could to her and still keep hold of the gingerbread village. “Don’t do anything you don’t want to, just because of some silly tradition.”

He was half certain she was going to give him a peck on the cheek, and then she said, “Oh, I want this whether Lena orchestrated it or not.” In that instant, whatever remnant of caution he might’ve still had completely vanished. He wanted more from her than friendship. He had, since the first moment he’d grabbed her hand in his plane. The only thing holding him back now was the fact that this was no kind of first kiss, in front of an audience. What he wanted to do to her, no one else should see.

He was going to give her his cheek but at the last second he turned his head. If he could’ve shoved their village at someone else to hold, anyone, he would’ve done it, just so he could grab her and pull her to him. As it was, he carefully balanced their creation, and as her lips brushed across his, it was all he could do not to groan with the pleasure of it. The soft slide of her lips against his sparked a riot of fireworks exploding everywhere she touched.

“Are your T-shirts accurate, Mr. Big Nick Energy?” Her eyes dropped to his shirt and then lower as she pulled away.

“You know they are, Ladybug. That was only the tiniest taste of what I want to tree-t you to.”

And then she did something he didn’t think he’d ever tire of: she laughed.

SOMEONE SPECIAL

As soon as Carissa could move her legs again, she'd wobbled over to collapse on the couch. That's how much the kiss and Lachlan's whispered answer had affected her.

Which was embarrassing.

Even more embarrassing was the fact that she was still there, even as the party was breaking up, the ladies from the women's club saying they wanted to get home before dark. Lachlan had deposited their gingerbread village in the kitchen somewhere and gone around the room, looking at everyone else's creations and exclaiming over them, and now he was helping clear off all the tables while Heath and Lena walked the last of their guests out. Everyone except Mariah. She was lingering, asking questions about Pickle, who she apparently knew from Lachlan bringing his cat into the vet clinic where Mariah worked.

"So Pickle and Copper get along?"

"They sure do. Copper is really gentle, and when Pickle attacks his tail, he looks extremely concerned but he never does anything." Lachlan was open and friendly and warm—the way he always was.

"But you don't let Pickle roam the house?"

"Well, I've had some... incidents with her and houseplants, and I just thought, with the Christmas tree..." He looked over in Carissa's direction, like he was checking in on her, but Mariah quickly followed up with another question.

She seemed to have an endless supply of curiosity about Pickle—what food Lachlan fed her and what kinds of toys were her favourite and what kind of carrier he used when he was travelling with her. Each question seemed to require Mariah to stand even closer to Lachlan and touch his shoulder. Despite the fact there had been several other men from the RSL in attendance—men whose gingerbread creations had been abominations, marking them as clearly unattached—Carissa was pretty sure Mariah was angling to get Lachlan under the mistletoe herself. She was surprised at just how much she hated that idea. Which was ridiculous.

It wasn't like she had any claim on Lachlan, but she'd convinced herself she wouldn't mind a quick little fling with him. She'd even allowed herself to wonder what might happen if she was going to be staying in Bindarra Creek, to help Lena....

And that kiss...

“Can I help you out to your car? How about I carry your gingerbread house, and you get the doors?”

“You are so sweet, Lachie!” As Mariah's giggle faded into the night and the front door closed behind them, Carissa felt a pang. She didn't want him outside walking Mariah to her car.

Lachlan had flirted with her. They'd held hands at Beth's Truck Stop and on the plane, though that probably didn't count. They'd kissed, and he'd said it was just a taste of what he wanted to treat her to. That kiss had been so good she was flat out on the couch. But maybe she was reading more into their kiss and his flirtation than she should. What if it was nothing special to him?

He was the one who'd said a kiss in public under the mistletoe was just the product of a silly tradition, not any true feelings. And now that she thought about it, she was certain the kiss was far more chaste than it had felt to her. To her, the moment she'd kissed him under the mistletoe had been a study in paradoxes—she'd felt weak and alive, she'd felt hot and not nearly hot enough, she'd been overstimulated and not even close to stimulated enough. She must've been imagining that

the room around them had gone silent and the air expectant. The charge between her and Lachlan had all been an illusion, a product of her brain going haywire thanks to sensory overload. It hadn't actually been real.

The house settled into quiet, everyone outside except her and she closed her eyes and tried not to feel let down that she'd let herself be so charmed by what was clearly meaningless flirtation.

Her phone pinging startled her from the nap she was sinking into. It was Lena texting her the pictures she'd taken and a one word message:

HOT!!!

get out here. Lachie needs rescuing

OMG did you fall asleep on the couch again???

She was too busy looking at the pictures to respond. In every frame, Lachlan's eyes were on hers, the *heat* of his gaze evident. She hadn't been imagining how he'd leaned into her, or how there was nothing chaste about that kiss at all. Anyone could see the attraction between them. At least it semi-justified her being laid out on the couch like a fainting Victorian lady.

The door eased open, then quietly clicked closed.

"Carissa? Are you asleep again?" Lachlan's warm, soft, deep voice filled the silence.

She hastily flipped her phone over, leaving the screen flat on her stomach. "Almost." Her voice came out husky, as if to prove the lie.

"Lena sent me to come get you. Everyone's gone home and she and Heath are hanging out on the porch." Quiet footsteps approached. "Come on, sweetheart." His fingers slid under hers as he took her hands and gently tugged, until she was sitting up.

“I’m just so tired.” It came out plaintive and she hoped he couldn’t tell she was talking about more than being physically tired. “I didn’t *mean* to fall asleep again!” She really hadn’t, and she could easily claim her jet lag was still off the charts, because it was. But the truth was she was tired of all the doubt and uncertainty in her life. It wasn’t just that she’d given in to an attack of doubt about Lachlan. It wasn’t only that her entire life back home had disintegrated. It was everything, all together. As hard as she tried to plan everything and keep her ducks in a row, nothing ever went the way she expected.

“How about we leave Heath and Lena alone, and get you upstairs and into bed, yeah?”

“Bed is good.” She must’ve been deeper asleep than she’d realised, because she was barely putting sentences together.

“I agree.” He gently pulled her to her feet, and then before she knew what was happening, he’d bent at the waist and was throwing her over his shoulder, in a fireman’s carry.

She shrieked, fully awake now. “Oh my god, what are you doing?”

“Exactly what I said. Taking you to bed, Ladybug.” His arm was across the backs of her thighs, just under the hem of her skirt, the warmth of his touch radiating everywhere, making her go heavy and loose-limbed. If his mistletoe kiss had sent her into overwhelm, it was nothing compared to the way she felt as he carried her up the stairs, as easily as if she weighed nothing.

With his free hand he opened the door to her bedroom, and was across the room in three huge strides. Then, with one hand cradling the back of her head, his fingers threading through her hair, he eased her onto the bed. For a split second, she thought maybe she was going to get what she wanted, without having to ask for it. She’d been an idiot, doubting that kiss. She was going to find out what he’d meant when he’d said he’d treat her. She was going to have her fling, and it was already so very good.

But he didn’t climb onto the bed after her the way she wanted, the way she expected. He leaned forwards, his lips

against the shell of her ear. “I don’t want you to be tired. Goodnight, Carissa.” The whispered, breathy words raised goosebumps all down the right side of her body. “Sleep well.”

He slipped away, his hand smooth on the skin of her thighs, raising more goosebumps. And then he left her lying there, alone.

HE’D CARRIED HER UPSTAIRS. Again. Only this time she remembered it and how he’d left her wanting.

She tossed and turned, her body craving his. On the other side of the bathroom door, he moved around in his room, the deep rumble of his voice as he talked to Pickle too low for her to make out the words. Then there was a rush of water as he turned on the shower. She waited for him to finish, forcing herself to stay awake, hoping he’d come back to her, but he didn’t.

‘I don’t want you tired,’ he’d said. What did that even mean? She hoped it meant that he wanted her fully present and awake if they were going to kiss again, for real. Or do something more than kiss. But what if he meant exactly what he’d said, that he wanted her to get some sleep? What if it meant he wasn’t actually interested in anything more with her?

She spent half the night trying to answer that question, spiraling back into doubt about everything all over again. Eventually, she’d drifted off. She woke again, fully dressed, in the pre-dawn gloom, strange clouds visible through her open window, hovering in the distance. She laid there, wondering what would happen if she just snuck through the bathroom and into his room. Despite telling herself she should take her own advice and go for it, she wasn’t brave enough to find out. Instead, she got up and got ready to join Lena for the morning’s exercise rides, figuring it wouldn’t hurt to try the partnership out before she committed to her decision.

“The results are in!” Lena held out her phone for Carissa to see the instant she walked into the barn.

“What results?” Carissa’s first thought was something to do with the horse who’d been colicking on the day she arrived—blood work or something like that.

“You and Lachlan are the clear winners! Your gingerbread village and ice rink already has twenty-seven votes. No one else is even close.”

“But it hasn’t even been that long. You should probably wait to call it.”

“Nope! I’m calling it now. You two have won the candles and the gift certificate to the Cyprus Cafe. Looks like you have a date to go on tonight.” Lena bounced her eyebrows, her expression far too knowing as they walked down the barn aisle, headed for the feed room, Copper trotting on ahead. “If you can manage to stay awake.”

“Leen.” Carissa put her hand on her friend’s shoulder to stop the flurry of words. “I was awake when he carried me upstairs last night. But he said he didn’t want me to be tired, and he just left. What guy does that? I don’t think he’s really that interested in me.”

“Are you insane?” Lena rolled her eyes harder than any tween girl. “Did you even look at those photos I sent you? I’ve never seen Lachie like that with anyone. I’ve never seen *you* like that with anyone. That kiss was fire.”

Carissa sighed. “I thought so too. But—”

“No ‘buts.’ Look—” Lena bounced her head from one side to the other, as if weighing whether to say more or not. “You should know, the guy miiiiight have an eensy bit of a reputation for being committed to his freedom, if you know what I mean. And he travels for work a lot. He’s never gone on more than a few dates with anyone, in the time I’ve known him. But he likes you, C. He told Heath. Even if he hadn’t, I know what I saw, and all I’m saying is, you should text Lachie and let him know you two won. And then you should go out tonight and see what happens. Maybe he’s just... being careful. Either way, I doubt he was planning on going to Carols by Candlelight unless someone dragged him.”

“Careful? Lachie? Have you seen the guy on his motorcycle?”

“There’s different kinds of careful. You know that.”

“Ugh, why do you have to be so smart? Fine. I’ll text him. But are you and Heath going?” Carissa knew a little bit about Carols by Candlelight because the previous year, she’d gotten a bunch of panicked texts from Lena after Heath had disappeared at the showgrounds where the community concert was held. Things had clearly gotten better since then, but she knew Heath still struggled with panic attacks.

“I don’t think so. Last night’s party was enough for me, and I don’t think either of us is quite ready to revisit the way things went for us last year. But don’t let that stop you! We’ll be fine here at home.”

It seemed weird to be planning something without Lena, when she’d come to Australia to visit her. But if she was going to stay, then maybe it wasn’t so strange to spend time with someone else.

“Okay. I’ll text him.” She pulled out her phone.

LACHIE, ARE YOU FEELING IT?

She was surprised when he immediately responded.

Feeling what?

The glory of winning!

Lena says we won the contest, so we have to go to Carols by Candlelight tonight. And dinner first

There was hardly a pause before her phone dinged with a response.

Did you get any sleep last night?

She wasn't sure how to answer. If she told him she'd tossed and turned all night, would he decide they shouldn't go out?

Some

Good

I'll pick you up at six-thirty

“He's on board? Is that what your smile means?” She hadn't realised Lena had been watching her the entire time she'd been typing.

“Yeah, he didn't even hesitate. He's picking me up at six-thirty. Which seems weird when he's staying here?”

Her phone buzzed in her hand again and they both looked down at it.

wear pants. Jeans if you have them. Or leather.
Leather is even better

Lena snorted. “Well, he's direct.”

“But what does that even mean? He has a leather fetish?”

“Because of the motorcycle, silly.” Lena bumped her shoulder against Carissa's. “I have the perfect thing. But even if it's for some other reason...” Lena fanned herself. “Answer me this: Do you like him?”

Her brain immediately shouted YES, but it was too soon for that. She hardly knew him. Instead of blurting her answer, she pretended she was thinking about it. “Yeah, I do.”

“Then why not just go with it? And... I know you like everything planned out, but as a very wise woman once asked me: ‘did you feel a zing?’”

“Yes.” And a lot more.

“Then, you know what to do. He doesn’t have to be your everything. He can just be your fun thing for right now. But, honey. You need some fun things in your life.” Lena reached an arm around Carissa’s waist and gave her a squeeze. “Or, as the immortal Carissa Cole said almost a year ago to the day, after I ended up stranded on a certain Grinch’s doorstep with nowhere to stay: ‘Holiday fling for the win!’ And if you stay here and work with me like you one hundred percent should, then maybe you can try expecting more from him and he’ll rise to the occasion... Worked for me!”

“Shh! We’re not talking about anything beyond tonight.”

“Fine.” Lena pretended to be put out. Then she hip checked Carissa. “Now let’s get these horses worked so you can be done on time to get ready for your hot date!”

LENA SENT her on ahead to the house while she finished the horses’ evening feed. She was coming up the porch steps when Heath came out of the house.

She must’ve startled him, because he took a deep breath before he spoke. “Carissa, hey. Do you have a minute?”

“Of course!” She hadn’t talked to Heath much unless Lena was there too, but she’d seen the way he watched Lena the night before, the way both of them were always tracking where the other was. The connection between them was a palpable thing, the energy that flowed between them somehow real. She didn’t know how to explain it, but she could feel it whenever those two were near each other. And she knew from talking to Lena how hard Heath had worked to be the kind of partner she deserved. He might not have been the type of guy she’d imagined for Lena, but seeing them together had convinced her that he and Lena were perfect together. She’d never say it out loud, but she wanted someone like that, someone who didn’t just meet her expectations, but exceeded them. Someone she could depend on. She’d never had anyone like that in her life, except Lena. And she wanted someone who looked at her the way Heath looked at Lena, like there was no one else in the world who mattered more. To hear Lena

tell it, Lachlan *did* look at her that way. She had the pictures Lena had taken to prove it, but somehow she couldn't make herself believe it. It wasn't just that he'd flirted with Mariah. She could almost convince herself he'd just been polite and kind. But then he'd carried her upstairs and just left her in her room. She was resistible, when what she wanted was a man who thought she was irresistible. Maybe she just expected too much.

Heath cleared his throat, pulling her attention back to him. "There's uh... I was wondering if you could help me with something, next week."

"Depends! What is it?"

He glanced quickly to the barn, then lowered his voice even though there was no one else in sight. "I want to surprise Lena with something, at the community picnic. So if you could help keep her busy, and then make sure she gets to a particular location at a particular time? I'm still working out the details, but I thought I should ask you first."

"Is it a good surprise?" She knew it had to be, but she wanted to hear him say what it was.

"Yeah, it will be, if things are the way I think they are between us."

It was a cagey answer, but it felt honest. Like he wanted to keep whatever the surprise was between him and Lena, which was the way it should be, if her guess about what he was going to do was right. "Of course I'll help. Tell me what you need from me, and as long as it doesn't involve being in an airplane, I'll do it."

Heath smiled at that. "I appreciate it." He continued past her, down the porch steps and she headed for the door. "Oh, and Carissa?"

She turned.

"Lachie's a great mate, and a good bloke. If you can trust anyone with your life, it's him. He deserves someone special."

If that wasn't an endorsement, she didn't know what was.

TAKE THE ROAD BEFORE US

S *tay*. That was Lachlan's first thought when Carissa walked down the stairs. He wanted to stay right where he was and drink her in and he wanted to take her back up the stairs and stay in for the night. The night before, he'd wanted to stay in her room, and it had taken everything he had to leave, to let her sleep... But she'd said she was tired, and if that wasn't a version of 'no' he didn't know what else it was.

"Will this work?" Her question snapped him out of his thoughts. She'd stopped on the bottom stair. She was wearing jeans and black ankle boots, and her hair was loose around her shoulders, cascading in waves. But what snagged his attention were the black leather chaps she was holding out. "If you're serious about this leather business, I can put these on—"

"Stay just like that." His voice came out graveled and rough, like he hadn't spoken all day. It wasn't that he didn't want to see her in the chaps, but the weather was sultry. And she was smoking hot. In leather she would be too much for him. "You're perfect."

She flushed that pretty pink again, and he wished he could start where he'd left off last night: throw her over his shoulder and toss her on her bed. But she was expecting a real date—dinner and Carols by Candlelight—and he wanted to do better than just meet her expectations: he wanted to show her a good time.

"Thanks." She stepped off the last stair, leaving the chaps slung over the bannister. "I'm ready if you are." She came

close enough he could smell the clean, floral scent of her, but she didn't head for the door. Instead, she stopped and tapped a finger on his chest, right over his heart, which took the opportunity to hammer against his ribcage. "I like this look on you, too."

"I hoped you would." He had, too. He'd decided to dress to impress her, pairing a slim fit, button-down short sleeve shirt with his jeans. If he was lucky, she'd find out what he had on underneath later. "You okay with a motorcycle ride?"

"Yes." Her hand was still on his chest. He took it up in his and pressed a kiss to the back of it.

"Good." He kept her hand in his and led her to the door. Heath and Lena were sitting in the porch swing when they came outside.

"Here's your candles." Lena held out two battery operated candles for Carissa to take, but when they didn't fit in her jeans' pockets, she handed them to Lachlan. "And your gift certificate." Lena held out an envelope to Lachlan. "Have a great time, you winners."

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do." Heath made everything sound so serious.

"Mate, I wouldn't have done half the things I've done in my life if that was the rule I followed."

"I know it." They both laughed.

Then they were off the porch. Just like before, he had a helmet and his old jacket for Carissa. As good as she looked in his leather, the weather was hot and muggy and he wished he had an air conditioned car to take her out in. But when she slid onto the motorcycle behind him and fitted herself against him, her arms coming around him and her palms resting on his pecs, whatever regrets he might've had evaporated. "This ride is going to be a little different than last time." He spoke to her through the helmet intercom, as he rolled on the throttle and pulled away from the house.

"How so?"

“Just don’t let go.” *Don’t let go*—that was the thought that had been running through his head, every time he was around her, since the first time he taken her hand. It was new to him; every other woman he’d dated had always gripped too hard and made him want to bolt. He hadn’t wanted to stay with any of them.

He took things slow on the dirt lane, but once they were out on the main road, he edged the bike faster until he hit the sweet spot that made Carissa scream and laugh at the same time. Exhilaration, that’s what it was, and the way she pulled herself tighter against him when he hugged the turns made it even better.

He backed off the speed once they were closer to town. It was already more crowded than usual, as people came out early for the concert. Luckily parking wasn’t too hard to find for a motorcycle and there were still a few tables available at Cyprus Cafe.

He liked being seated across from her. Liked watching her study the menu, a little furrow appearing between her brows as she trailed a finger down the items.

She glanced up and caught him staring. “I don’t know what to get. What do you like here?”

“I’m mad keen for the baklava.”

“We can’t have baklava for dinner!” The way she looked so outraged at the suggestion made him smile.

“Why not? I think you should have whatever you want.”

“Because we’ll get hungry again in an hour if all we eat is sugar. I don’t do well when I’m hungry. You might remember.”

He supposed she had a point. “Well, if you insist baklava isn’t enough for dinner, then the pastitio is excellent. Thea makes it from scratch herself.”

“I’ll have that.” She set her menu aside and smiled at him. “What are you having?”

“I told you: the baklava.”

“Really? You’re impossible.” She’d mastered the ‘exasperated older sister’ look. “I hope you know I’m not sharing my pastitio with you.”

Their waiter came and Carissa placed her order.

“I’ll have what she’s having. Plus the baklava. Two orders of it.” As soon as he said it, her mouth dropped open, but she quickly recovered. “I like sharing, but only to a point.”

“You’re terrible, Big Nick.” Then she smiled at him. “Tell me about your mom. I think she must be a saint if you didn’t drive her absolutely crazy.”

“Ah, yeah. I drove her quite mad, especially when I was a teenager. But she has a good sense of humour. Likes to say I gave her grey hair and kept her young and scared all the blokes away who might’ve been second husband material.”

“Will you see her for Christmas? Does she live around here?”

“Yeah, she’s over near Tamworth, so I’ll drive out that way for the day. I was actually on my way to visit her when Heath called to see if I could pick you up at the airport.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry I intruded on your visit!”

He waved her remark away. “No worries. As soon as she hears how it turned out, she’ll forgive me.”

“How did it turn out?”

“Me on a date with a nice girl. She’s always going on about how I’ve had enough adventures for the both of us, and now she wants to see me settled. Says she has no intention of being a ‘cat grandmother.’ She’ll be ecstatic you dragged me to Carols by Candlelight.” It all spilled out of his mouth so fast, he didn’t think about how much he’d revealed of himself until it was too late. “What’s your mum like?”

As soon as he asked it, he wished he hadn’t. The change in her was immediate, tension evident in her posture.

“A disaster.” If she was going to elaborate, it didn’t happen because then their food arrived. He watched as she took a bite of the pastitio. “But this is excellent.”

He knew an intentional subject change when he heard one and as much as he wanted to know more, he wasn't going to press. This night was about fun.

By the time they'd eaten their dinner and dessert and he'd paid the cheque, it was almost time for Carols by Candlelight. He held out his arm for her. "Shall we walk? It's not far."

"Look at you being the gentleman again." She gave him a little smile before threading her arm through his.

The whisper of her skin against his felt better than it should have, especially when it was so hot and humid. As if by reflex, his other hand covered hers.

"Look at that sunset." She pointed at the brilliant blood-orange wash of colour across the horizon, which made for a stark contrast against the dark clouds looming. "Is there supposed to be a storm tonight?"

"Looks like maybe."

Cars were streaming down the road that led to the showgrounds, and they joined the throng of pedestrians that flowed through the entrance, children with glow sticks hanging on strings around their necks bobbing and skipping through the crowd as they made their way to the grandstand.

They'd only just sat in the bleachers when the first performers, a musical group of elementary school aged kids, began. From the first off-key and high-pitched note, he knew he was in trouble. Unless there was a mosh pit involved, concerts weren't high on his list of fun activities in the first place. He liked to be doing, not sitting. It was never his strong suit, and especially not on such a hard, uncomfortable seat.

Carissa, on the other hand, was rapt, and he was pretty sure her eyes were shining with unshed tears. "Oh, this is precious."

"Sure is." He was looking at her when he said it, willing her to turn and see that he meant her. The kids were fine, they were cute, but Carissa...

He didn't realise he was jiggling his knee until Carissa put her hand on his thigh, like she'd done in the plane, but with a

lighter touch. It was distracting enough that he stopped fidgeting, but when she shifted her hand upwards it sent a rush of blood straight where he didn't need it going, not in public anyway.

He dropped his hand on hers and twined her fingers through his, gripping tighter when she tried to slide her hand upwards again. When she tried a third time, a smirk playing across her lips, he moved their clasped hands so they were resting on her thigh instead. He wasn't sure it was any better.

He lost count of how many songs the group was on when they launched into a slow one, and he wondered how many more acts were on the program they hadn't remembered to grab. There was a reason he never came to these things, and it wasn't because he didn't like music or appreciate performers. It was just that with nothing to occupy his hands or channel his energy, he found himself restless and antsy. With Carissa beside him it was even worse than usual. He was buzzing inside, had been since the night before when he'd left her on her bed, that skirt of hers barely covering her. Tonight, every little touch, every time she moved a finger or her thigh brushed against his, every time she smiled or her lips parted as she mouthed along with the Christmas carols, he just wanted to be somewhere else, somewhere private.

“Oh wow. I love this. But...” Carissa leaned out and scanned the crowd before sitting back and tipping her head toward his. “Are we supposed to be doing something with our candles?”

“Ah, I forgot.” There was a sea of candles, both real and battery operated ones like theirs, flickering throughout the audience. He pulled his hand free of hers and found theirs in his pocket and flipped the ‘on’ switches. “Here you go.”

Her face glowed with the faint, flickering artificial light, and she swayed to the music, whisper-singing along to yet another Christmas song. She'd never looked prettier.

“What?” She'd caught him staring.

“Nothing.” It was a lie though. What he was feeling was too much to put into words. It needed to be put into action, but

the middle of packed bleachers was not the place for that.

When the applause for the kids' performance died down and the next group was getting ready, Carissa turned to him. "This isn't really your scene, is it?"

For a split second he considered lying, but she must've caught his hesitation because she narrowed her eyes. "No. Not really."

She was on her feet the instant he said it. "Let's go." She pulled on his hand.

He could've kissed her right then and there, except after their mistletoe kiss, he wanted the next one to be *real*. Not that he'd faked any part of that first kiss. Every part of it had been good, except for the audience. It was just that the next time he kissed her, he wanted it to be between the two of them, and no one else. If he was going to explore anything more with her, he didn't want to feel like he had to hold back.

Carissa didn't even bother trying to be sneaky getting down from the bleachers, and as soon as they got out into the carpark, she took one look at him and then took off running.

"C'mon, Big Nick! I'll race you!" He liked the view from where he was just fine, though, so he let her win all the way until the very last. Then he poured on the speed and beat her to the motorcycle.

"You're a closer, are you?" Carissa panted the words out breath by breath.

"Always. I like to be the one to bring it home." Their eyes met, and he swore a charge went through him. "There's somewhere I want to take you."

Maybe it was his imagination, that she pulled on her helmet and jacket faster than before. What he knew for sure was that the instant she was settled on the motorcycle behind him again, it felt more than good. It felt right. She was close to him, where she belonged, and once they were speeding off into twilight, the wind rushing past them, it was even better.

With almost the entire town at Carols by Candlelight, the roads were as good as abandoned, and the farther he got

outside of town, the faster he pushed his motorcycle.

“Where are you taking me, Big Nick? Some secluded murder spot?”

Shit. The last thing he'd meant to do was make her nervous. “Secluded, yes. Murder spot, no. It's my favourite place in Akuna Park. You'll love it.”

IT WAS ONLY about twenty kilometres to get from town to the park entrance, but the place he wanted to go was a bit beyond that. The entire time he drove, Carissa never once loosened her grip on him, even though there were handles she could grab, now that they weren't blocked by her luggage. It almost made him want to keep riding all night, just to have her hold him.

But when he finally parked at the end of the dirt road, and she dismounted and pulled her helmet off, shaking her hair out like some sort of motorcycle-girl cliché, he was glad he'd stopped.

“This is incredible.” She threw her arms wide, encompassing the wild landscape. “It reminds me so much of home. We spent every summer in the river.”

Before them was the deep gorge the river ran through, the swimming hole below cut into the rock, as if some giant had used a spoon to carve a bowl. Above, the clouds still hung in the sky, but peeking through them were the bright pinpricks of thousands more stars than were visible in town. The moon cast a silvery glow and the night was filled with the night sounds of crickets, frogs, and owls.

“What's that sound?” Carissa turned to him, her eyes wide.

“Boobook.”

She laughed. “What the heck is a Boobook?” Her expression was a cross between incredulous and amazed, as if every new sound was a delight.

“An owl. Very common in Australia.”

“That does not sound like any owl I've ever heard.” A chorus of howls came from off in the distance. “And that?”

“Dingos!” He didn’t think her expression could get any more wonder-filled, but it did.

“Oh my god, I love it! They kind of sound like coyotes.” She stood listening, and seeing her reaction was like experiencing the bush for the first time, the sounds that caught her attention things so common they were background noise to him.

He thought she might stand there listening all night, but he had other ideas

“Do you want to go night-swimming? I come here all the time.” He pulled off his jacket and then peeled off his button down, so he was just in the T-shirt he’d chosen special for the night. Even with the clouds, the moon was bright enough for him to make out the narrow footpath that zig-zagged down the bluff to the river below. Or, if she was really brave, the water was deep enough to jump from the cliff. He’d done it enough times in the daylight to know it was safe.

“Not yet.” She slid back onto the bike, sitting in front of him this time, facing him as she straddled the bike and as good as sat in his lap. He was instantly hard, his cock pressing uncomfortably against his zipper. She leaned back, the moonlight highlighting the curve of her breasts, and took in his T-shirt.

“Seriously? Is this another Pickle approved shirt? Is your entire wardrobe off-colour?”

He’d chosen it specifically because it wasn’t another dick joke, which he knew Carissa disapproved of. With one finger, she traced the line drawing of Santa, standing on a rooftop next to a chimney, with the words *Goes Down All Night* printed above it. “Pickle says it’s what women want. And she’s a good pussy cat, so I thought she would know.” He winked at her, because if he didn’t do something to cut the charged atmosphere between them, he wasn’t going to survive.

Carissa shrugged. “I’d say it depends on the woman. And how good her partner is.”

“I’m very good. On Santa’s Nice list every year.”

She huffed a laugh. “Is that right?”

He nodded, mostly because his brain was too busy processing all the sensations as her hands slipped around his neck and into his hair. Her fingernails scraped against his scalp and he didn't think he could get any harder.

She leaned so close, they were breathing the same breath, inhaling the same air. “What I want right now is for you to kiss me.”

She was so plain about what she wanted, he didn't see how he could do anything else.

OVER THE RIVER

Carissa's blood was a roaring river, rushing through her like a flash flood. Her heart was a drum, pounding furiously. She knew she was breathing because she could hear herself, but she couldn't seem to get enough air.

Maybe it was a small thing, but she'd told herself she was going to go after what she wanted, that she was going to open herself up to possibility, even if it meant she might be disappointed or worse. She'd done exactly that, and now she was terrified. Admitting she wanted a kiss felt too huge, because she didn't just want a kiss. And she didn't just want a fling, either. And even though she'd only known him for a handful of days, Lachlan could be more than that to her, if she stayed.

She waited one heartbeat, then another, her eyes pinned on Lachlan's.

"Funny." His voice rasped. "Kissing you is exactly what I've wanted to do all night."

Even in the moon's half-light, she saw the exact moment his pupils dilated, like a cat's the instant before it pounced. She didn't know who moved first, only that they crashed into each other, and when his lips met hers, she was swept up in the current of desire that flooded through her. A moan escaped her, or maybe it was him—she couldn't tell, not where he ended and she began, not anything except she wanted his touch *everywhere*. She hadn't felt that way about anyone, ever. She *always* held back, but with Lachlan she didn't want to.

She pressed into him as close as she could and it wasn't close enough. He took her mouth, exploring it, his lips sliding over hers, his tongue tasting her. For the first time, instead of pulling away, she matched his intensity, and there was no way to ignore that he was just as aroused as she was.

She was the one who broke the kiss, mainly because she was so breathless she felt light-headed.

“Holy hell, Ladybug.” He was panting too. She trailed her fingers down to his chest, his heartbeat reverberating through her hands. He took a deep breath, then planted a kiss on her forehead. “You ready for that swim, now?”

They had to do something to cool things down, because she wasn't prepared to take things any further out in the middle of nowhere.

“I think I'm going to stay.” She didn't know she was going to say the words aloud until she blurted them.

The only way to describe his reaction was startled. He pulled away from her, ever so slightly. “What?”

“Instead of going back to California, I'm staying. Lena says I can work with her, help her build up her training business, and...it's not like I have a better offer back home.” “That's fantastic. That's really great.” He was saying all the right words, except it didn't seem like he was feeling them.

“Yeah, I think it will be. But if we do this, it means...” There was more she wanted to tell him: the rest of what she wanted, more about what she hoped. Only when she opened her mouth, the words wouldn't come. “Lena said you might know about work visas? Because you travel so much for your job?”

“My job?” Lachlan wasn't tracking the conversation, and her heart went from the steady furious pounding of intense desire to something irregular and floaty. “Shit, Carissa. My job. I never, I didn't think I needed to tell you—We weren't supposed to—” Both his hands went to his temples and he let out the kind of sigh that was never good.

She needed distance, but getting off his bike from the position she'd gotten herself into was so awkward, she stumbled and practically fell over.

“Carissa. No. Wait.”

He reached for her, but she needed to not feel his touch. “What didn't you tell me?”

A fling. This was only ever supposed to be a fling, and his reaction was exactly why. She'd wanted too much, even though she'd planned for it to be a fling. That's all it was. No one had to get hurt, because it was only a fling. *A fling, a fling, a fling.* The word rang in her head over and over.

“I'm leaving on a work trip, after the New Year.”

It was exactly how long she'd originally planned to stay in Australia. The exact expiration date a fling with Lachlan would've had, if she'd stuck to her itinerary. It shouldn't bother her. But suddenly having only two more weeks with him didn't feel like enough. “Okay...Where are you going?” She could tell there was another shoe about to drop, because of the way he was parceling out the information, one tiny fact at a time.

“Malaysia.”

“What are you doing in Malaysia?” She knew the temperature couldn't have dropped, but with each question she asked, each time she tried to pull more information from him, she went colder, as if all her blood was rushing to her heart, which was slowly breaking.

“I'm a defence consultant. I help create training models, mostly.”

“That sounds... exciting. And you always go to Malaysia?”

He shook his head. “That's just this assignment.”

This time, she didn't ask a question. She waited. He could be the one to fill the silence. He could fill in the gap in the information he was avoiding telling her.

“I'll be gone for three months.”

“Three months?” She refused to let her legs buckle, even though her knees were trying their damndest to give out.

“Yeah. I know it’s a long time, but I didn’t think—”

“It’s always the same.”

“What’s always the same?” He was off the bike now, coming toward her, his brows furrowed. She hadn’t realised she’d spoken the words aloud until he’d repeated them.

“Everyone leaves and then things fall apart.” Her voice warbled, and she didn’t know what was happening. She’d never said it aloud before, but it was the exact thought she’d had every time anything bad happened in her life—because it was always true. Still, it was supposed to be an inside thought. Lachlan must’ve caught her so off guard that her filter had completely malfunctioned and she was just saying whatever popped into her head.

“What are you talking about?” Lachlan’s hands were on her elbows, supporting her, keeping her upright. “What’s falling apart?”

Me, she wanted to say. *My whole life*. The dream she’d been clinging to, of what her life in Bindarra Creek might be like.

Instead, what tumbled out of her mouth was, “My dad left and my mom fell apart.” It was ancient history, but as soon as she’d uttered that one fact, the rest of her story was like a river she couldn’t dam if she’d tried. “Without him, she couldn’t keep our ranch going. She tried, kind of, but then she started drinking, taking pills, and she lost it. Herself. The ranch. Us—me and my brother. All of it. That place was supposed to be mine—mine and my brother’s. The whole life I’d planned out for myself, just gone. But you know, I wasn’t going to let myself be like her. I wasn’t going to disappoint myself like that. I picked up the pieces. I moved to the city and got a job at the racetrack. And that was really good for a long time. Only then my best friend left. Lena left, and everything fell apart again. Not a year later, and here I am. My whole job, everything I worked for is over. There is no racetrack, anymore. Not in the Bay Area. It’s gone. But I thought maybe

I had a chance here. Working with Lena, and then—” She darted a glance at Lachlan, trying to gauge what he was thinking, how he was taking all this. His expression was a blank mask, his eyes the only thing moving, searching hers.

“I thought if I stayed here, maybe you and me... we could...” She couldn’t say what she’d hoped, she couldn’t make it real only to have it yanked away. “But you’re leaving.”

“I’m not *leaving*, Carissa. I’m doing my job.”

“I’m just so tired of things not working out. I’m tired of wanting so much and never getting it. I’m tired of being disappointed. I thought maybe this would be different.” She grabbed for the leather jacket, shrugging his hands away so she could pull it back on. Her thoughts were swirling, words she hadn’t weighed or considered just falling out of her mouth. “Lena said you knew about things like work visas, and I should ask—”

“Is that what this is about? A work visa? Carissa, I don’t —” Lachlan stood between her and his bike, his arms open, but she couldn’t make herself walk into them. “I can help you figure out a work visa, if that’s what you need, to be able to stay. But is that what this is about?”

She knew he was trying to be helpful, that he wanted to be kind, but it was so far from what she needed, what she’d hoped.

“Just take me back to Lena’s. It’s fine. I’ll figure it out.” If she’d ever been more miserable in her life, she couldn’t remember when. She reached for the helmet she’d left hanging on his handlebars.

“Carissa. Stop.”

Her eyes flew to his.

“Listen to me. I don’t know how to say it any more plainly. I’m not leaving you. I’m leaving for work. It’s completely different. If you get a work visa or don’t, if you stay here or if you fly away home, it doesn’t matter, Ladybug.”

Hot anger ripped through her and unshed tears made her nose burn. How dare he call her that name, when it didn't mean anything. When he could kiss her like he'd done and turn around and say she didn't *matter* to him. "Okay. Got it. That's how much this" —she gestured between them —"matters to you. I understand. Now I'd like to go home."

She knew it wasn't fair, but that *word*. She'd never mattered to her mom, not enough to stop her from drinking or losing the ranch. She didn't need to hear that she didn't matter to some flirtatious charmer she'd just met a few days ago.

He let out a low growl and pulled the helmet out of her hand, looking for a moment like he wanted to throw it away from them. Instead, he set the helmet down at his feet and took up both her hands, giving them a squeeze. "What I mean is, it doesn't matter where you go or where you are."

He kept saying that. *It doesn't matter*. And every time, she heard *you* don't matter. She tried to pull away again, an involuntary whimper clawing out of her, that's how much his words hurt. But he held fast.

"Listen." He ducked to meet her eyes, then released her hands. It took all she had to stay and hear him out. "It doesn't matter, because what we have doesn't have to be here or there. It can be anywhere. We can see where it goes, see where it takes us. What we have can be an adventure. And it can just get bigger."

"What are you saying?"

He tipped his head back in pure frustration and huffed out something that wasn't quite a laugh or a sigh. "I'm saying, even if I have to leave for work, I still want to explore what we have. I want you to be the one I miss. I want you to be the one I come back to."

"You do?"

"Yeah, Ladybug. Well. You and Pickle."

She didn't know how he kept finding ways to make her laugh, but he did.

“You don’t think maybe you’d rather be dating Mariah?” If she was going to bare her hang ups and insecurities, she might as well go all in.

“What? No! Don’t you get it?” He gestured between them, mimicking the way she’d done earlier. “I want to see if this can turn into something more, and I think you do too. So, stay. Or don’t. Either way, I’m coming for you.” He pulled her closer, his mouth pressed to her hair. “If that’s what you want. If it isn’t, then you’d better tell me ‘absolutely not’ and put us out of our misery.”

Fifteen seconds before she’d felt like crying, and now he had her laughing. She was a wreck.

“Absolutely that’s what I want, Big Nick.”

His breath came out in a rush. “Thank god.” He squeezed her so tight she couldn’t breathe and lifted her feet off the ground. “Now take your clothes off.”

“Absolutely not!”

He laughed. “Get your mind out of the gutter. We’re going swimming.” But when he whipped off his shirt, swimming was the last thing on her mind.

Over the swell of his pec, just above his heart, was a rose compass super imposed over a map of the continents. There were words in script at the top and bottom, but in the moonlight she couldn’t quite make them out.

She traced the script with her finger, smiling when his nipple puckered and goosebumps rippled across his skin. “What’s this say?”

“Die with memories, not dreams.” His voice had gone rough again. “It’s what my mum said to me, the first time I shipped out. She didn’t want me to enlist, but...” He swallowed hard. “She knew I needed a bigger life than the one she’d had, than the one she’d been able to give me.”

“But I thought you said she wanted to see you settled.”

He laughed. “She does, now.” He closed his hand over hers, pressing them both onto his heart. “But when I was a kid,

she told me about all the dreams she had. All the places she'd wanted to see and all the things she'd wanted to do, before she met my dad." His expression didn't go dark, but it went more serious than she'd ever seen it.

Her mouth popped open, though what she was going to say, she didn't know.

"It's okay, Ladybug. She wasn't bitter. She always says I'm the best thing that ever happened to her. And she used to say she liked her life small. But...she was young. And alone. And her life turned different than what she'd dreamt." He pinned her with a look. "She couldn't give me all the things I wanted, but she wanted me to always have choices. And when she said that to me, when I shipped out, I decided I was going to make enough memories for the both of us."

"And have you?"

"Yeah, but nah. I've got a few more to make, I think." He released her hand, long enough to shuck off his jeans.

When he straightened, his hands went to her shoulders, helping her out of the leather jacket she'd stupidly put on. While he folded it over the seat of the motorcycle, she pulled the hem of her shirt up over her head.

His hands were at her waistband, working at the button before she'd finished getting her shirt off. She sucked in a breath as he pushed her jeans down over her hips, his hands skimming her thighs.

When they were both in their underwear, he took her hand and led her across the smooth dirt path, stopping at a semi-circle worn into the edge of the bluff. "Do you trust me?"

She thought of Heath, telling her she could trust Lachie with her life. She thought of how Lachlan had talked her down on the plane. "Yeah."

"Are you ready?"

"To swim?"

"No, Ladybug. To leap." He released her hand. "It's your choice. But I promise it's deep. No rocks, no snags."

She hesitated, but as he bent his knees, readying himself, she snatched his hand in hers. When he made the jump, out away from the cliff, and toward the pool below, she was right there with him.

ALL THE TENDER SWEETNESS

Lachlan dropped a whisper of a kiss on Carissa's temple—light enough not to wake her, because he knew how dangerous that could be, but noticeable enough to make her let out a contented sigh. Her golden hair was spread like a halo around her head, and Pickle was curled on the pillow beside her, purring. He ran a hand over the cat's back, and she rumbled even more loudly.

The night they'd swam in the river, she'd asked him to carry her upstairs "one more time" and he'd been happy to oblige. After he'd thrown her down on the bed, she'd asked him to stay, and he had. And he'd kept staying. They'd shared the bed in Carissa's room every night since, and given Pickle the run of both their rooms. But she always ended up on their bed—usually on the pillow between them, or else sitting on Carissa's chest. He decided it was a sign after all, and he'd started making plans.

Today though, the community picnic and Heath's plan were the priority, and as tempted as he was to crawl back into bed and kiss Carissa awake, he had things to do.

He went through the bathroom to his room, got dressed in the shirt he'd saved specifically for the day, and then went downstairs to meet Heath.

He found him in the kitchen looking, not exactly ill, but not himself, either.

"Morning." The bloke was always on the quiet side—in contrast to Lena who was chatty as hell—but he was damn

near silent as he cooked scrambled eggs.

“Where’s Lena?”

“I’m right here!” Her voice was sing-songy as she came in the front door, Copper dashing ahead of her, wiggling and dancing at Heath’s feet, obviously fully aware that what Heath was making was for him.

Lena went to Heath and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “How soon do you have to leave?”

“Now.” He scraped the eggs into a food bowl and set it on the floor for Copper. Then he fished something out of his pocket and handed it to Lena. “This is for Copper. For today.”

Lena looked confused at the jumble of red and green material in her hands.

“It’s a new collar. For Christmas. But I thought you’d want to show it off today.”

“Awwww.” Lena beamed at Heath, and if she noticed he was at all ‘off,’ she hid it well. “This is so sweet.”

“Put it on!” Carissa came into the kitchen, in the same short skirt she’d worn the night of the gingerbread house decorating contest, but paired with a T-shirt that read *Jolly AF*. He liked to think that he’d influence her Christmas shirt game. “So Heath can see it before they go.”

“Oh! Right!” Lena knelt and swapped the new collar out for Copper’s old one. It had a huge bow, which Lachlan—and Carissa—happened to know hid the key component of Heath’s plan. He still couldn’t believe his mate had decided on something so public for the proposal he had planned.

When Lena stood up, she threw her arms around Heath, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “I love it, Grinch Guy. Thank you!”

Heath just nodded.

“We’d better hit the road.” Lachlan knew they didn’t really have to worry about being late—lunch wouldn’t really get started until around eleven—but Lachlan was worried if they

stayed any longer, Lena would realise something was going on with Heath.

“All right! Carissa and Copper and I will see you two later!”

With that promise, he and Heath went out to his ute.

“Nice shirt, mate.” Heath pointed at Lachlan’s shirt—which had a picture of a snowman on it, above which it read *Stay Frosty*. He figured all the RSL blokes at the barbecue they’d be manning would get the real, military meaning, and everyone else would think it was a good joke on one of the hottest and most humid days of the summer so far.

“You’ve got everything ready?” From what Lachlan could gather, which wasn’t much from his silent and taciturn friend, the idea was to create a repeat of Lena’s first Christmas Eve picnic, minus last year’s dog-related emergency. Just like last year, Heath and Lachlan would be working at the RSL barbecue. Lena and Copper, with the addition of Carissa, would be enjoying the booths and activities until it was time for Heath’s surprise. Lachlan would help him get ready, and Carissa would get Lena to the meeting spot Heath had arranged.

“As ready as it can be. Except for this.” Heath eased the truck to a stop at the intersection of the dirt road and the road into town. He dug into his pocket, and pulled out a set of keys. “These are for you. Assuming all goes well.” The man swallowed hard. “And if it doesn’t, then I’ll need them back.”

“Got it.” Lachlan took the keys. “But there’s no doubt in my mind it’s going to go well.”

NO MORE THAN twenty words passed between him and Heath the whole rest of the drive or the entire time they were prepping and cooking the barbecue for the picnic. The event seemed bigger than the previous year, with more booths and more activities and definitely more people. They’d been cooking non-stop for hours but finally Heath gave him the signal to text Carissa.

TEXTRSTART_It's go time_TEXTREND

TEXTLSTART_on it as soon as she finishes here_TEXTLEND

HEATH WAS DRESSED in his costume, and pacing despite the heat when the next text came.

TEXTLSTART_omw_TEXTLEND

“IT’LL BE ANY MINUTE, mate. They’re on their way.”

Heath didn’t stop pacing until the moment the final signal from the soaking wet mayor came.

“Stay frosty, mate,” was the last thing Lachlan said to him, before he climbed into the dunk tank.

Lachlan waited until he heard Heath taunt the crowd—so out of character for the bloke, but that was the beauty of his Grinch costume—and then he slipped out into the audience.

Carissa was yelling, “Smash it!” when he sidled up next to her to watch Lena try to sink her Grinch Guy.

He was standing at her side when Lena succeeded. Heath splashed into the water and Carissa grabbed Lachlan’s hand and squeezed it hard.

She didn’t let go until after Heath had gotten out of the tank and gone down on one knee and Lena and Coppy had given him their answer, to the crowd’s applause.

“Hey, Ladybug.” His voice in her ear startled Carissa. Her eyes glistened, as if she might cry, but her smile was radiant.

“I’m so happy for them!”

“Yeah. It’s brilliant.” He hesitated, wondering if it was bad form to pull her away from the moment unfolding before them. But it wasn’t their moment, and he had his own surprise. “Did you pack your overnight bag like I asked?”

She nodded, her eyes sparkling. “It’s upstairs at the house.”

“Good. Let’s go get it.”

“Shouldn’t we tell them where we’re going?” She was a sly one, his girl, trying to get him to inadvertently reveal information.

“Already did.” He loved the moment when her mouth dropped open, as if she was outraged that she was going to be the last to know.

“Haven’t I told you that I like plans, and knowing them?”

“Nah, but yeah. Don’t care. Because I like surprises.”

SHE PESTERED him the whole drive back trying to get him to tell her where they were going. At first, he told her the truth—one of them: To Lena and (now, officially) Heath’s.

When that just made her mad, he tried appeasing her, by not giving yes/no answers to her questions.

“Is it somewhere I’ve been?”

“No, but you’ve seen it.”

“Is it a hotel?”

“No, and it’s not a tent or a house, either.”

She let out a growl of frustration.

When they pulled in front of Lena’s house, he gave Carissa another clue. “It’s close but you’ve driven way past it.”

Then he went upstairs to get their luggage.

He came back downstairs to find her rocking viciously on the front porch swing. She kept right on swinging as he strapped her overnight bag and then his own to the motorcycle.

He almost felt like a jerk for making her put on the leather jacket and helmet—but only almost.

When he pulled out onto Digger’s Lane, and then made an immediate turn into the next driveway, she yelled into the

helmet intercom. “You’ve got to be kidding me—here?”

“That’s right, Ladybug. Welcome to the cottage formerly known as Heath’s.” As soon as they parked, she was off the bike, her helmet set aside. While he unstrapped their bags, he watched as she took in the place, with its corrugated tin roof and wide porch, its gable and bay window, the gingerbread style trim, already hung with Christmas lights. He’d been to the cottage of course, but as far as he knew, she’d only driven or ridden past, and there wasn’t much of it visible from either the road or from the fence line the property shared with Lena’s farm.

“Can we go inside?”

He laughed and jingled the keys at her, then took up their luggage. “Yeah, we’re staying here tonight.”

She followed him through the gate and onto the porch, and when he unlocked the door and held it open for her, she stepped inside and gasped.

“There’s a Christmas tree!”

While she’d been riding horses with Lena all week, he’d been busy. Getting a Christmas tree was one of the things he’d done. All it had was lights on it—but it was still pretty, and festive.

“And look at this coffee table!” It was one of Heath’s creations, part of the collection of spare furniture that Heath had made specifically for the cottage. “And that console!”

The more excited she seemed about the place, the more he couldn’t wait. “Carissa.” Something about his voice must’ve sounded weird, because she whirled. “There’s something under the tree for you.”

Her eyes went huge, but instead of excited, she looked almost petrified.

“Don’t worry, Ladybug. I’m not proposing.”

“Okay, good. Because my great uncle and great aunt *did* get married after only knowing each other two weeks, and they

had a long and happy marriage, but that's just crazy. And I don't need to get married to stay in the country, right?"

"Right." He wasn't going to comment on family members he didn't know and their sanity. Especially when his gift was slightly insane. "Well... are you going to open it?"

"Wait! Are we doing gifts now? Because I have something for you, too."

He was surprised by the warmth that flooded him as she went to where he'd left their bags just inside the door. He hadn't expected anything from her. They hadn't talked about exchanging gifts.

When she turned around, she had two small wrapped packages for him. "It's not much, but..." She glanced at the tree. "I think you should open this one first." She pushed the smallest of the gifts toward him.

He tore into the paper and opened the box to find a green, lumpy, glass ornament. "What's this?" He held it up by the ribbon loop at its top.

"A pickle!" She was beaming with pleasure.

"For a Christmas tree?"

Her smile faltered in the face of his confusion. "Yeah, because you have a cat named Pickle. But also... Wait. Is this like egg nog? Do you not know about pickle ornaments? Are they not a thing in Australia? Because none of the shops had any, and I had to special order that one."

"I don't know. I've never heard of a pickle ornament before."

She laughed. "Okay, well, the tradition is that you hide the pickle ornament somewhere on the tree, and whoever finds it on Christmas morning will have good fortune all the next year."

"I like that."

"And, you have a cat named Pickle! Of course you should have a pickle ornament on your tree!"

He didn't want to point out that he could just get an ornament that looked like his cat, because it was cute how excited she was about her gift.

“There's something else in there, too.”

He pawed at the tissue paper and uncovered another ornament. No, two. These were cursive beaded letters, one an 'L' shape, and the other a 'P.' “More ornaments?”

She nodded, and suddenly she looked almost embarrassed. Or vulnerable. “I made those. For you. I guess...Ornaments are kind of a tradition in my family. We always get at least one new one each year, usually related to something we did that year. And then you have a little memory to put on your tree every year after that.”

She always traced the words of his tattoo, any time he had his shirt off, but he hadn't known how much she'd taken the idea of making memories to heart, how she'd connected it to her own traditions. “So you have a tree full of memories.”

“Yeah. And love.” She met his gaze and held it. Then she blinked, and the moment was gone. “Okay, open the other one. It's just silly.”

He ripped the paper off the second gift, and inside was a stuffed jar-shaped toy with an opening in the top from which three stuffed pickles jutted. He must've looked perplexed.

“It's a cat toy. A pickle jar for Pickle, with catnip stuffed pickles.”

He laughed then. “She's going to love this.” What he loved was that she'd thought of his cat, not just him.

“My turn?”

He nodded, his mouth dry as dust.

She carefully undid the tape, then slowly peeled away the paper, completely the opposite of how he'd shredded the paper she'd wrapped his gifts in. She opened the box inside even more slowly, then pulled out the keychain in the shape of Australia. From it dangled a single key.

“What's this?” It was her turn to look confused.

“It’s a key. To this place. I’ve leased it from Heath for myself, but I thought you might want a place of your own, to give the newlyweds over there some space.”

“They’re not married yet!”

“But they will be. And I thought—it doesn’t make sense for you to only have a room over there, when you could stay here. If you want it to be just yours, Heath said that was fine, and you could sign the lease and I’ll give it over to you. Or we can both sign it—” He hadn’t thought out what he’d meant to say well at all. What he’d thought was so simple suddenly seemed so convoluted. “What I’m saying is, if you don’t want this to be our place, it doesn’t have to be. It can just be yours. I have a pet passport for Pickle, so she can travel with me.”

Carissa stared at him. “Why wouldn’t I want it to be our place?”

“I don’t know, I just thought, you might think it was too soon for that.”

“It probably is...” Her words made his insides feel floaty, the way they sometimes did when he was flying and hit a pocket of turbulence. “But I like your crazy idea.”

“You do?” It was the best gift he could’ve gotten. *She* was the best gift.

“Yeah. I like being your home base. But—” She bit her lower lip. “Are you sure it won’t make you feel too... settled?”

“No. I think I’m ready to feel a little settled.”

The way she looked at him then—he wished he could bottle it up and take it with him when he had to go away. But luckily he wouldn’t be travelling far. He hadn’t told Carissa yet, but he’d managed to swap assignments with one of his younger colleagues, and it meant he’d only have to travel so far Sydney a few times a month. The rest of the time, he could work remotely. Before he told her that, though, he needed to know if she was going to move in with him.

“Okay. I say yes. It’s ours. Yours, mine, and Pickle’s.”

And then she kissed him to seal the deal.

EPILOGUE: VALENTINE'S DAY

ONE YEAR, ONE MONTH, AND THREE WEEKS
LATER

She still hated it, but she'd made a promise, or a deal, depending on who you talked to, and she meant to uphold her part of it, even if she was a bit late.

Plus she loved the man sitting beside her. Which was the only reason she was in Lachlan's plane, counting switches and toggles and dials while he did his preflight check.

"You ready, Ladybug?" His warm, low voice coming through her headset still soothed her, and she loved that he always asked her that question, every time he was about to spring some adventurous thing on her.

She nodded her head and let out what she hoped was a cleansing breath. "Ready as I'll ever be." She flashed him a smile at the same moment that music filled her ears.

Edith Piaf, *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien*. I regret nothing. She had to laugh at Lachlan's sly humor. Maybe he didn't regret winning the bet he'd made with her about his ability to smoothly land his own airplane, but she was pretty sure she regretted making that deal. She hoped she wouldn't regret this flight.

Just like he had the last time she'd been in his plane, he talked her through taxi'ing, and each of the adjustments he was making.

"We're going to take off now, but it's a clear day. No wind. Nothing but smooth air ahead of us."

Just like the first time, he took her hand and put it on his thigh, grounding her with his body until they'd leveled off their ascent. Finally she opened her eyes. Below them was Bindarra Creek, its neat grid of downtown streets right next to the river easily recognizable.

"You ready?" Lachlan was practically bouncing out of his seat with anticipation.

"I don't know why you're so excited about me flying." She would've thought he'd at least give her a minute to acclimate first.

"Extra adrenaline." Then he smiled. "But don't worry, your wingman's got you." He was far too pleased with the joke T-shirt he was wearing. It was read in honor of Valentines Day, and it had Cupid on it, above which it read *The Original Wingman*. "So, are you?"

"Am I what?" She was stalling and he knew it.

"Ready. To take the controls?"

She heaved out a sigh. It was better to get it over with sooner, rather than spending more time agonizing. "Ready."

He counted down, and on one, she gripped the controller in front of her, her knuckles going white the instant Heath sat back and crossed his arms.

"Put your hands back!" She knew, logically, that he could fly the airplane with his feet. He'd told her this. But having his hands so far away from the controller made her more anxious.

"Not a chance. You're doing great."

An alarm buzzed on the dashboard. "What's that mean?"

"Nose up a little bit more."

She tried to do what he said. "There. I made an adjustments. Now take the controls back before I crash.

"I seem to recall I spend significantly more time on the back of a horse..."

"You're terrible, Big Nick." She couldn't take her eyes off the expanse of sky before her, but she could tell he was

smiling.

“There is something we need to discuss.” His voice had gone serious.

“Not while I’m flying we don’t. This is enough serious business for right now, thank you very much. Our lives are in my hands. I have to focus!” Maybe it was overly dramatic but it was how she felt.

“Speaking of our lives in your hands...” Lachlan reached over and dropped his hand onto her thigh. Only it wasn’t his hand at all. It was small and velvety, and when she dropped her eyes for a millisecond, she saw it was a very small box, propped open to reveal a ring inside.

“Oh my god, why would you do that right now?” Her hands were shaking on the controller and her heart was flapping around inside her ribs like a caged bird.

“Ask you to marry me?” He was staring at her, when he should be monitoring all the gauges and dials she didn’t know how to read.

“Ask me a life-altering question when I’m already afraid I might screw up and kill us both?”

“Well, are you thinking about crashing anymore?” She couldn’t look at him but she could tell he was smiling just from the way his voice sounded.

“Yes!”

“Does that mean yes ,you’ll marry me? Or yes, you’re worried about crashing?”

“You are terrible. The absolute worst.” She peeled her eyes away from the windscreen just long enough to catch him staring at her. “Yes, both. Now take over so I can put that ring on!”

He did as she commanded.

And when he put her hand on his thigh in preparation for landing, her diamond ring from her diamond under pressure glinted in the sun.

“I told you I wouldn’t forget, Ladybug.” Of course he winked. “And it was my favorite flight yet.”

That ‘yet’ and his eternal optimism was just one more thing she loved about him. And would keep loving, for the rest of her life.

THANK YOU!

Thank you for reading my Bindarra Creek Christmas Romance, *The Gift of Bindarra Creek*. I hope you loved Carissa and Lachlan's story at least as much as I enjoyed writing it. If so, I'd be grateful if you'd write a review and help other readers find books they'll fancy. Speaking of which, there are more Bindarra Creek romances for you to enjoy, including Lena and Heath's story, *The Grinch of Bindarra Creek* (keep reading for a sneak peek and excerpt!).

About the Multi-Author Bindarra Creek Romance Series

Welcome to Bindarra Creek, a struggling country town where people work hard and love deeply. Set in the picturesque tablelands of New England, Australia, Bindarra Creek is a fictional, rural community full of romance, intrigue, adventure, drama and suspense.

This latest series, **Bindarra Creek Small Town Christmas**, is the sixth multi-best-selling author 'series' set in the fictional small town of Bindarra Creek.

Bindarra Creek Small Town Christmas – released 1st December 2023

The Glitter or The Gold – Suzanne Gilchrist (aka S E Gilchrist)

Christmas at the Cyprus Café – Susanne Bellamy

A Place to Belong – Annie Seaton

A Magical Summer - Rhonda Forrest

Destined to Stay – Kerrie Paterson

Home for Christmas – Lauren K McKellar

The Christmas Surprise – Linda Charles

The Gift of Bindarra Creek – Lindsay Douglas

The other romances are as follows:

A Bindarra Creek Christmas Romance 2022

The Mistletoe Wish – Suzanne Gilchrist (aka S E Gilchrist)

The Christmas Jinx – Susanne Bellamy

The Grinch of Bindarra Creek – Lindsay Douglas

Christmas at Forrest Glen - Rhonda Forrest

Mistletoe Magic – Erin Moira O'Hara

Mistletoe and Blue Jeans – Linda Charles

A Clever Christmas – Annie Seaton

Tangled by Tinsel – Phillipa Nefri Clark

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Secrets of River Cottage – Annie Seaton

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Take Me Home – Suzanne Gilchrist (aka S E Gilchrist)

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Worth the Wait – Annie Seaton

With Every Breath – Lauren K. McKellar

Stealing Her Heart – Simone Angela

A Twist of Fate – Erin Moira O’Hara

Promise Me Forever – Juanita Kees

Bindarra Creek Short & Sweet

What’s in a Kiss – Linda Charles

My Forever Valentine – Sandie James (not available)

Pearls and Green Beer – Susanne Bellamy

Full Circle – Annie Seaton

Date with Destiny – Erin Moira O’Hara

A Letter From the Queen – Lee Christine

Love’s Sweet Challenge – Suzanne Gilchrist (aka S E Gilchrist)

The Widow Maker – Lauren K. McKellar

Out of the Blue – Noelle Clark

Bindarra Creek Romance

Bindarra Creek Makeover - S. E. Gilchrist

Shadows of the Heart - Lee Christine

Second Chance Love - Susanne Bellamy

The CEO Mechanic - Sandie James (not available)

Reach for the Stars - Kerrie Paterson

Home to Bindarra Creek - Juanita Kees

Stolen Sanctuary - Stacey Nash

Tempting Fate - Erin Moira O’Hara

One More Day - Linda Charles

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Full details and buy links for all books in Bindarra Creek world can be found at:

www.bindarracreekromance.com

ALSO BY LINDSAY DOUGLAS

Bindarra Creek Christmas Romance

The Grinch of Bindarra Creek

Keep reading for a Sneak Peak and Excerpt!

Note: This novella is a closed-door, small town romance, featuring Carissa's bestie, Lena.

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THE
GRINCH OF BINDARRA CREEK
Bindarra Creek Christmas Romance



LINDSAY DOUGLAS

EXCERPT: THE GRINCH OF BINDARRA CREEK

Click the link to grab your copy of [*The Grinch of Bindarra Creek*](#) (Bindarra Creek Christmas Romance)

A jilted California tourist, a hunky Grinch, and one hot Australian Christmas...

Sick of her streak of coming in second place in every possible way, California jockey Abilene Snowden takes a huge gamble, putting her dog on a plane and heart on the line to orchestrate an unforgettable Christmas surprise for her long-distance boyfriend. Except her unannounced arrival in Bindarra Creek goes horribly awry and she's left not just heartbroken but stranded. On a handsome stranger's doorstep. And the guy's definitely *not* on Santa's Nice List: he's a total grinch!

All veteran Heath Fletcher wants for Christmas is one thing: to be left alone. Maybe that makes him a recluse, but peace and quiet is the only way he's found to keep his panic attacks at bay. So when a pretty Christmas caroler knocks on his door, he can't get rid of the American tourist and her dog fast enough. Only that's the problem—he can't get rid of them at all: every hotel in Bindarra Creek is booked.

But the longer she's forced to bunk at his cottage, the more Abilene sees past Heath's crabby facade—and the more her relentless efforts to bring festive cheer and holiday sparkle to his house start to seem like a gift Heath never knew he wanted. Can the Grinch of Bindarra Creek find a way to welcome

Abilene not just into his home but into his heart, and convince her that if she stays she'll always come in first with him?

The Grinch of Bindarra Creek is a grumpy/sunshine Christmas novella set in the world of Bindarra Creek. You'll get lots of chemistry, some kisses, and a rom com vibe in this closed door romance.

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EXCERPT

CHAPTER ONE: Season's Greetings

Lena Snowden's stomach did a twist-and-drop combo, like it had decided to take up gymnastics. She was used to dealing with adrenaline rushes and the strong emotions that came with them—she rode racehorses for a living, after all. But the cocktail of excitement and anxiousness that flooded her the moment she spotted the *Welcome to Bindarra Creek* sign was something new altogether. Maybe because she was more accustomed to physical risks, instead of emotional ones.

In fewer than fifteen minutes—assuming her phone's GPS was correct—she'd be pulling up in front of her new home. She'd be throwing herself into her boyfriend Zach's arms after more than eight months apart.

She was jittery as all get out, her left leg on jiggle mode for the past hour, and she'd be lying to herself if she didn't admit she had her doubts about the whole plan.

“Deep breaths, Copper.” She reached over and stroked her dog's head. The one-year-old cattledog cross was a trooper. The pup had made it through the required quarantine in Melbourne, the flight to Sydney, and now the long drive. The logistics had been insane, but no freaking way was she moving to Australia without her dog, the dog Zach had given her last Christmas. “You're better than any engagement ring though, aren't you Coppy?” The dog licked her wrist. *Exactly.*

The trip to Australia was a dream and a massive gamble: Zach had no idea she was coming for Christmas. Or that she was planning to stay. It was her big surprise, her grand gesture. Their relationship had survived months apart, but she was done waiting. She was tired of stagnating while Zach kept saying he wanted to ‘get established first.’ Who even said that, outside of a Jane Austen novel or a costume drama?

What she was most sick of, though, was how hard it was to connect with Zach in real time. One of them was always at work, or going to sleep after a long day, or—and this was an excuse Zach was the only one to ever use—it just wasn’t a good time. Whatever that meant. Lena felt like they hardly ever actually *talked* anymore. Though maybe their relationship had always been like that. It was getting hard to remember.

Christmas Day, the day Zach had announced his new job, seemed like an eon ago. April Fool’s Day, when she’d kissed him goodbye at the airport was a lifetime. But the waiting was almost over. It was impossible to contain herself. She let out a little *squeeeeeee* that made Copper cock his head. “Sorry puppy. It’s just so exciting. We’re finally here! And look!” She flung a hand out in an exuberant gesture to encompass the entire view.

She slapped it back on the steering wheel just in time to ease the car around a roundabout, at the centre of which stood a monument of a soldier leaning on his rifle, and then slowed even more to take in her new town. “Not exactly a bustling city, is it, Copsy?” She was glad for the lack of traffic, so she could creep down the block and gawk to her heart’s content.

Bindarra Creek’s Main Street was the epitome of quaint, as if someone crossed a California gold-rush town and small-town Ohio, and plunked it down in rural Australia. The street was lined with all the essentials—mechanic, bank, pharmacy, bakery. She made a hard left to follow the road and found more cute shops: a bookstore, an antiques gallery, a dress shop, a hair salon.

“Awwww, look Copper!” All along the block, Christmas lights blinked and—she let out a laugh—revealed shop

windows painted to look frosted. In the middle of a sun-scorched summer. She loved this town already.

“Christmas in summer is definitely going to be a new experience, eh buddy?” She ruffled Copper’s scruff, then went back to gawking as the sun dropped and dusk approached.

She hadn’t meant to get in so late, but the drive had taken longer than she’d thought, mostly because the adjustment to driving on the ‘wrong’ side of the road was a lot harder than she’d expected. Plus they’d stopped more than she’d planned, the last time right outside of town so she and Copper could get their surprise outfits on.

“Is this a good place for us or what?” Copper just kept looking out the window. At least he wasn’t chewing on the red-and-green plaid bow tied around his neck. “Zach said it was perfect.” He’d also said she’d never believe the cottage he’d found for them.

The cottage. After years of living in a ludicrously priced studio apartment on the outskirts of San Francisco, California she could not wait for an actual house to call home. “You’re going to have your own yard, Copper! Can you believe it?” She’d been spinning stories for Copper—and herself— ever since he’d been released from his ten day quarantine. If the past eight months had been an eon, those ten days had been an eternity.

She took a hard right turn and there snaked the sparkling water of a river. “Oooh, we are going to do so much swimming!” Copper whined. “Not today, silly. We’re all dressed up, remember?”

She crossed what her GPS said was Kingfisher Bridge and as suddenly as the town had appeared, it receded behind them. Instead, the Australian countryside stretched out before them, golden fields dotted with little farms. She veered left, crossed another bridge over a creek and kept going. Zach had clearly had her in mind when he’d picked out their new house— according to him the town was “very horsey.” She’d fit right in, he’d said back in August when he’d first told her about the cottage. Three-and-a-half months she’d waited for him to tell

her it was ready for her to move in. Well. Today was the end of all that. She'd taken matters into her own hands.

When she finally turned off the main road and onto a dirt lane, her mouth went as dry as the dust billowing behind her car. "We're really close now." Just saying it made her heart skitter into some weird, syncopated rhythm, the sensation so disorienting she almost missed the even narrower dirt drive she was supposed to turn on.

As they bumped over the rutted lane, Lena's stomach tried to detach itself again, and she almost felt like throwing up. It was just nerves. And excitement. It was natural, considering she hadn't seen Zach—even on Zoom—since well before she'd left California, too afraid of ruining her surprise to do anything more than text him. She'd barely even heard his voice in the past few months. But they were good. They texted on the regular. She woke up to funny memes or interesting articles or pictures of kangaroos almost every morning. Okay, maybe every other morning. If she was lucky. Whatever distance had crept between them was just because of the actual, literal distance. And the ridiculous time difference. But that was all over and done. She was in Australia, in the same time zone, in the little town Zach had chosen for them to live in, and they were going to be together forever. "That's the plan." Copper didn't even look at her—he was too busy smushing his nose against the window, as if he might get the scent of the place through the glass.

The rutted dirt driveway was longer than she'd expected, and somehow not long enough. She rounded a curve and there it was: the cottage.

Without meaning to, she jammed on the brakes, raising a cloud of dust. She waited as it settled, idling where the driveway emptied into a graveled parking area in front of an honest to goodness picket fence. But that wasn't what snagged her attention.

"He got a new car." It was quite possibly the stupidest observation she'd ever made. Of course Zach had gotten a new car. He'd sold his before moving to Australia. The vehicle that sat parked off to one side was unexpected though—four-wheel

drive and big enough to haul a horse trailer. She smiled again. Zach had always been a sports car kind of guy—but he'd obviously been thinking of her and their new life together when he'd decided to buy a truck.

Copper whined again. "I know buddy. I just..." She didn't know what was wrong with her. Her hands were shaking and her eyes stung. "I need a sec. To take it all in."

The cottage was perfect.

Better than she could've imagined.

Surrounded by bottlebrush trees and beneath a corrugated tin roof, there was a gable with a bay window and a wide porch with gingerbread style trim. It was the perfect house to hang Christmas lights on, though it was entirely bare of any festive decoration. She'd have that fixed in the next twenty-four hours, if her Twelve Days of Christmas idea went according to plan. A bench sat beneath one of the two windows that looked out over the front yard. The drapes were pulled, making the place look vacant, except muted light glowed behind the curtains in the bay window and she thought she saw a slight fluttering movement at one. It was hard to tell in the growing dark.

She hadn't come all this way to stay in her car, gaping. If Zach were peeking out the window, she couldn't keep waiting. It was just that, now she was here, it suddenly seemed every bit the crazy idea her bestie Carissa had said it was. Her parents had been even more blunt. 'Reckless' her dad had said. 'Foolhardy.' Her mother's contribution had been 'asinine.' Well. They never approved of anything she did anyway. She was done trying to please them.

She pulled on the Santa hat she'd stashed on the dash, smoothed her hair in the rear-view mirror, then touched up her cinnamon-flavoured lip balm. Last, she fitted the antlers headband onto Copper. "You look cute, puppy-dog." She hoped Zach would agree. Copper was a totally different animal than the puppy he'd last seen months ago.

"It's go time!" She took a deep breath and flung the car door open. Copper rocketed out right behind her, and while he

sniffed the gate posts, she hauled the large, flat rectangular box out of the jam-packed back seat.

She'd always been the rip-the-bandaid-off type, so once she started moving, she practically ran right to the front door, Copper at her heels. The porch light snapped on—a motion detector light—which was good because it meant Zach would really be able to see her outfit. It was the pièce de résistance. She knocked on the door, rapping faster and harder than she'd meant to, but no matter.

Footsteps thudded on the other side of the door. She took a deep breath, then launched into her song, pitching her voice as loud as it would go so he'd be sure to hear. “On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me, a puppy and a”—she thrust the box she'd brought forwards so the picture of the fake Christmas tree would be visible just as the door jerked open—“fake tree!”

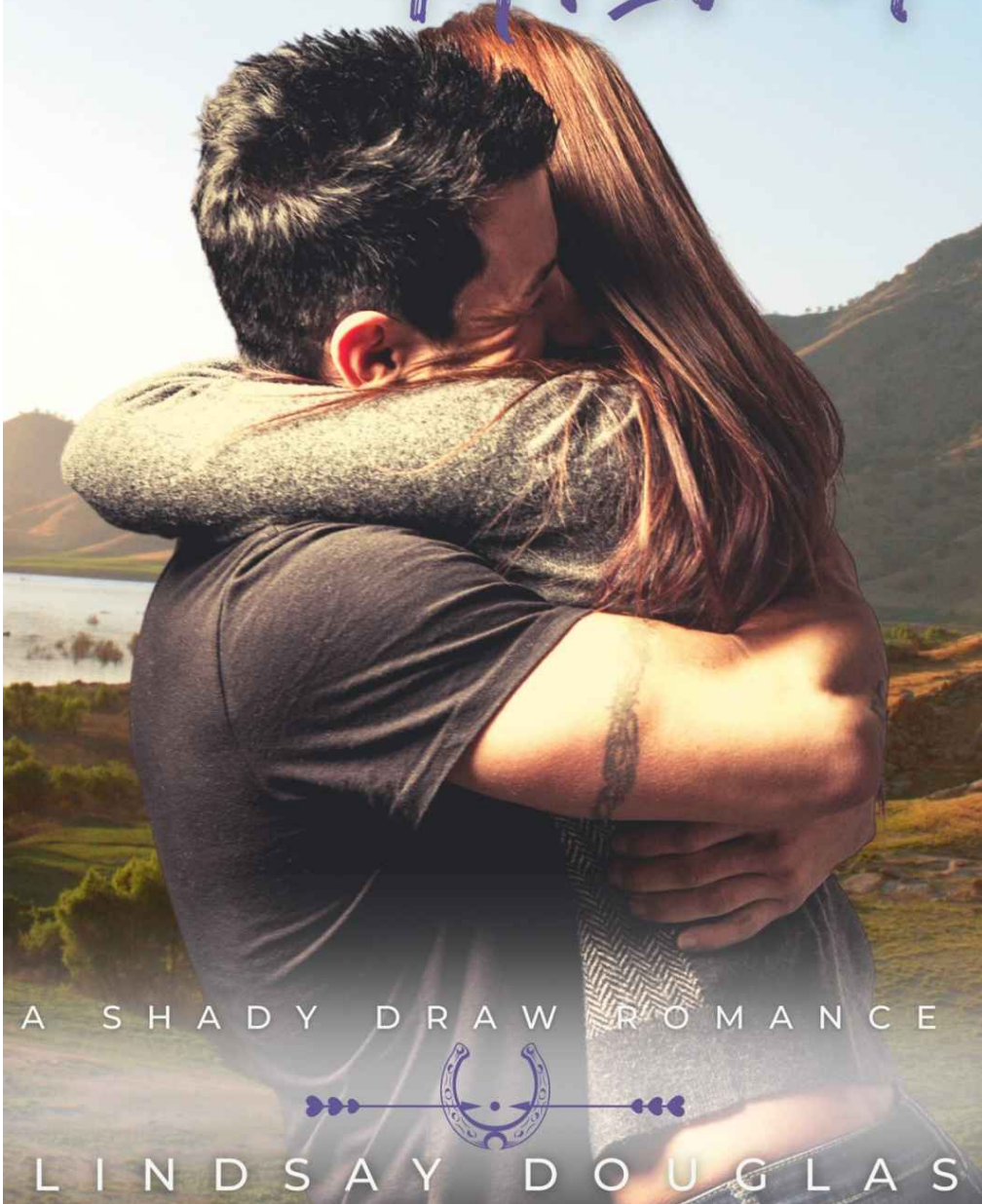
The last note of her song died on Lena's lips as a man practically exploded out of the house. “What the hell's going on?”

Copper let out a sharp warning bark as Lena scrambled backwards, out of his way.

The tall, powerfully muscled man standing before her, bare chest heaving, his gaze darting as he scanned the front yard, was one hundred percent hot especially with the tattoo snaking around his bicep, but he was also one hundred percent *not* her boyfriend.

Click the link to grab your copy of [The Grinch of Bindarra Creek](#) (Bindarra Creek Christmas Romance)

SURE THING

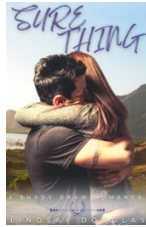


A SHADY DRAW ROMANCE



LINDSAY DOUGLAS

EXCERPT: SURE THING



Click the link to grab your copy of [*Sure Thing*](#) (Shady Draw Romance Book One)

He should be her enemy. She should be out of his reach. But being together feels too right to be a one-time thing.

After her last relationship broke her heart and ruined every one of her plans, Lauren Markland swore her horse, her dog, and her ranch were all she needed—until she rescues a slaughter-bound pregnant mare off the internet. When hunky Matthew Grady and his trailer pull up in her dusty barnyard to deliver her new horse, she should hate everything about the man—especially how he earns a living. Instead, his gentle ways have her wondering if a night with him might be the thing to finally erase the memory of her ex.

With his dad's sudden death leaving his aunts eager to sell the land that's been in his family for a hundred years, Matthew will do anything to save Grady Ranch—even if it means working for a shady horse dealer to earn extra cash. He doesn't expect a baseball-bat wielding horse lady to tug at his heart or make him fantasize about a whole different life. But without his ranch, he's nothing, and he doesn't have time for unrealistic fantasies. He hightails it away from Lauren—until a panicked phone call proves leaving was a mistake.

Thrown back together, Lauren must decide: is a fling worth the risk of losing her heart again if neither of them can see their way to a future together?

Click the link to grab your copy of *Sure Thing* (Shady Draw Romance Book One)



EXCERPT

CHAPTER ONE. COME OUT SWINGING.

Lauren Markland had been trying not to pace since approximately seventeen seconds after the text message had buzzed on her nightstand.

about an hr out. Give or take.

About. Give or take. The man couldn't have been more vague unless he'd said "arriving sometime." It was going on two hours now, and she'd been not sleeping for way too long. If he'd wanted to spike her anxiety, he couldn't have found a better way to do it.

She went out the front door, peering past the small golden circle her porch light threw into the dark. Nothing. She leaned back inside, flipped the switch off, and looked back down her drive, to the dirt road beyond. No headlights. Nothing but frogs singing, a riot of stars glittering across the sky, the dark shadow of oak trees against the night, and not a single light visible from any neighbor's house. It was just the way she liked it. Usually.

Behind her, Wax gave a low growl.

"What is it, buddy? Do you think it's him?" The dog came to sit at her side and her ex's poisonous voice slithered through her head. 'If anything happens to you, there won't be anyone to notice— not for days.' She couldn't remember the number of times Gary'd actually said it, but she'd heard it in her memory about a million times more.

Nope. Nope. Nope. Shut up, Gary. I don't listen to you. Not anymore. What I do is not up to you. Maybe it was a line from Wonder Woman, but it made a damn good mantra.

She flicked the light switch back on and scratched beneath Wax's collar. He didn't take any notice, his ears pricked toward the road.

"Stop with the cattle dog stare, dude. You're making me nervous." She prodded him with her toes just as Wax let out a low throaty bark and made her jump in her skin.

In the distance, the low purring rumble of a diesel truck rumbled and a flash of headlights cut through the trees, then disappeared.

She grabbed her flashlight off the porch chair, her baseball bat from just inside the door, and jammed her feet into her boots, her heart rate galloping as she wondered for maybe the four thousandth time what kind of fool idea it had been, buying a horse off the internet, from a fifty-six second long video. A horse fifteen hundred miles away, in Texas.

But of course, she knew what she'd been thinking. After years of living at a busy boarding stable, Fancy was lonely out in her very own pasture, the pasture Lauren had busted her ass to be able to afford, the property 'in the middle of nowhere' that had turned out to be a deal breaker for Gary. Frita and Laya, the two goats Lauren had gotten Fancy for company were adorable, but Fancy was having nothing to do with them, preferring to stand in the corner of her field and whinny towards the neighbor's horses— more than half a mile away— or else stare out her stall in the other direction, scrutinizing the few cattle still roaming her other neighbor's eighty acres.

If Lauren had anything, it was plenty of space for another horse. And she had enough money, though she was supposed to be saving up to renovate the old farmhouse. *Renovate*. That was putting it nicely. The house was a wreck. Make it habitable was more like. Or maybe tear it down and start over.

But the plain bay mare with the tattooed lip and too-long hooves and too-big belly had been slated for slaughter in Mexico—at least that's what the guy in the video said—and her big brown eyes had pulled at Lauren's heart. Lauren didn't need a big old rambling farmhouse anyway— her Tiny House was just fine. It wasn't like she and Wax needed more space.

Besides, the thing about horses was that they might be heartbreakers, but they never shattered your heart on purpose. Not like Gary, the asshole. Her heart and worse.

So Lauren had sent the money in the middle of the night, half-hoping someone else had already paid for the mare before she had and in the morning she'd find an email in her inbox saying her money was back in her bank account.

But what she'd gotten instead was a phone call, in a warm-sounding drawling voice—a slow, deep, male voice—confirming her purchase, and asking when she'd be picking Tag number 7439 up from the lot. She'd deleted the stupid apps that had allowed her to make such an impulsive, damn near reckless purchase the instant she'd hung up.

“Never again, Wax. I am never going to be such an idiot again.” She rushed out onto the driveway, headed for the road, wondering for the four-thousand-and-first time whether she really was batshit after all, just like Gary had said, even as she prayed the rumbling diesel belonged to Matthew Grady—the hauler—finally coming with the mare she'd saved.

According to the man from the Vance Auction in Texas, Matthew Grady was “cheapest and best! And got just a few slots left on the next load to California, last I heard.” If it wasn't Matthew Grady's headlights blinding her as she stood in the middle of her dirt road, then she prayed Wax, who was still glued to her side, would be enough to warn off whoever was showing up at her place at 2:17 a.m.

“Get ready, Waxy.” Wax licked her wrist, and she steeled herself because she didn't own a shotgun—never would—and though she didn't really cotton to the idea of taking her baseball bat to anybody either, she'd come out swinging if she had to.

CHAPTER TWO. ASSETS.

All Matthew could see when he pulled off the one-lane graveled road and onto the even narrower dirt drive was a pair shit-kicker boots, the blunt end of a baseball bat in the bright glow of his high-beams, and a mottled cattle dog in the flare of one of those super-powered flashlights.

The skinny-jean clad legs attached to the boots started walking before he'd even slowed, until a slip of a woman, her hair pulled back into a pony-tail, appeared at his window.

He punched the button to roll it down, and before it was even half-way, she was saying, "Can I help you?" in what had to be the least hospitable, least helpful sounding voice he'd ever heard. Horse ladies, man. Bossy as hell and sharper than a devil head in his experience. And surprisingly strong. He'd thought maybe they'd be different in California—more blonde, for one thing—but sure didn't look that way. The only difference he saw so far was this one didn't have a big belt buckle or any spangles on her jeans.

"Name's Matthew Grady, ma'am." He drew out his Texas drawl extra, stupidly pleased when it made her eyes lose a bit of their glare. He had to work to keep from grinning. He'd kinda hoped his accent might have that effect on a California girl. "If you're Lauren Markland, I reckon you're expecting me? And if you aren't, well... I do apologize."

He eyed her baseball bat, but he knew he was at the right place. He recognized her from the photo he'd seen on her social media profile, when her payment for the hauling came through, though in person she looked more like the girl-next-door type than he'd expected. In her profile photo, she had her head thrown back just a bit, her mouth open as if she were laughing, her wavy red hair cascading around her shoulders. Pretty, had been his first thought. But there was a reason sorrel mares were always the last and cheapest ones to sell, had been his second thought, when he'd noticed her 'single' relationship status. He guessed it might be the same with redheads of the human variety. But at 2 a.m., apparently she was a nice girl, trying to look tough. That was horse ladies, through-and-through. Tough exteriors, hearts of gold. They were easier to deal with if you didn't rattle them. Just like mares, he thought. Things went better if you were subtle, if you finessed them a bit.

"You're late." Her eyes— blue? Green? He couldn't tell, but he refused to call them hazel. *Damn Aunt Hazel*—went back to being narrowed.

“Sorry ‘bout that.” He didn’t like the way she was looking at him, like she was appraising him. Like maybe she was getting wise to who he was, where she’d heard his voice before, where she’d *seen* him before. The last thing he needed her figuring out was that he’d been the one to call her from Vance’s Auction, or that he’d referred his hauling services to her himself, or that he’d been the one riding her horse in the video he’d posted on Vance’s Auction social media page. That was a whole conversation he didn’t want to have. He shouldn’t care, but for some damn reason, he wanted her to like him. Which she was sure not to, if she knew he worked *at* the auction yard, not just as an independent hauler for them. Even if his job there was just a temporary thing. “Took a wrong turn. And turns out I don’t have good cell service out here or I would’ve let you know my give or take was a lot more give.”

“I just hate waiting is all.” Her shoulders lowered a touch. Maybe she was softening up. “And I never thought you’d be this late.”

“Me neither.” He gave an exaggerated shrug. “But not much I could do about that. It’s a helluva a drive from Texas.”

“Did she do okay?” She threw a glance back at the trailer. “Miss Connection?”

He’d been driving for twenty-three hours and thirty-seven minutes and she was asking about the horse she’d bought sight unseen. That was the other thing about horse ladies. The horses always came first. And then their dog, if they had one — which she did. Ginger hair or not, it probably explained her relationship status. No man likes coming in third place. But despite himself, he liked the eagerness that suddenly filled her expression. Damn if some part of him didn’t wish he could be the one who inspired it.

“Well,” he drew the word out, just to see if he even could get a reaction out of her, now that talk had turned to horses. He almost smiled again when it did. “Why don’t we get her unloaded and you can see for yourself.” He took good care of the horses he hauled—no one would ever be able to accuse him of anything in that regard.

“Come on, then.” Lauren turned to walk back up the driveway, her dog at her heels. “It’s just at the end of the driveway. You’ll see the barn. Outside light is on.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He fought back the smile that wanted to creep over his face at the way she reacted to being called ma’am, like she wasn’t used to it and wasn’t sure whether she liked it or not.

The energy drink he’d pounded at the last gas station had barely been cutting it the last 45 minutes of the drive, especially once he’d pulled off the interstate and hit nothing but narrow, dark country roads. But he was wide awake now, and damn if he wasn’t enjoying the view. That was another thing about horse women, he thought as he eased his foot off the brake to trawl along behind her— he generally liked their assets.

But who was he kidding? He was just a small-time Texas rancher, scraping by on odd jobs and side-hustles, like riding rank horses through the auction ring and doing whatever else Vance needed done in between one hauling gig and the next— making phone calls, riding the kill pen horses for marketing videos, feeding stock, and giving medications to sick horses. His truck and trailer were the only assets he had to his name, and if his aunts had their way and sold the family spread like they wanted, he’d soon have even less to recommend him. Dad would be rolling in his grave—

He shook his head, cleared his throat and swallowed hard to get rid of the painful lump that had suddenly lodged there. Six months and seventeen days. That’s how long since his dad’s ashes had been scattered to the four winds that blew hard over Grady Ranch and the grief still kept on catching him by surprise. Three months and two days ago, his aunts had announced they wanted to sell the ranch that had been in their family for a hundred years. ‘We’ve got it listed—just to test the market,’ Aunt Hazel had said into Matthew’s stunned silence. But it was clear: he and his brother Colton had been outnumbered, three to two. ‘If you want to buy out our shares, Matty,’ Aunt Hazel had said, ‘we’d be happy for the ranch to stay in the Grady name.’ What she meant was, they’d be

happy so long as they got the fair market value a developer would be willing to pay. They'd be happy so long as they got enough money to retire on, in their sleek ugly ass city condos. His dad had worked himself to an early grave, keeping that ranch going, and his aunts couldn't wait to be rid of it. Never mind that with whatever share of the proceeds he and Colton got, they could never replace the land his father and grandfather and great-grandfather had sweat and bled into. The land his mama had cried and prayed over. The herd of cattle his father and grandfather had bred for generations. The life he'd planned out for himself—the cattle, the horses, the run-down house, the hayloft he and Colton had played hide-n-seek in, the creek he'd imagined his kids and Colton's would spend summers swimming and fishing in, just like they had—all of it would be gone before he'd hardly had a chance to get started on it.

He shook his head again, startled to see a ghostly white farmhouse looming out of the oaks on his left, and Lauren, using her flashlight as if she were directing an airplane to the terminal, gesturing for him to drive past her and around to the right, where a weathered old barn stood, the huge light dangling from its eaves shining on the dusty, hard-packed barnyard in front. Some other family's ranch, he thought, as he swung the trailer around. Some other family's history. If any part of the Grady ranch was left after the developers got hold of it, that was all it would ever be to anybody else.

And what would he be? He already knew the answer, had known it deep in his bones the moment his aunts broke the news they wanted out of the ranching business. Nothing. He'd be nothing, and have nothing. So there was no point in even imagining what it might be like to come in first with a woman like Lauren Markland. Any part of that dream would have to wait until he scraped together enough money to buy out his aunts.

But all thoughts of doing anything but getting back on the road fast flew right out of his head, the second his headlights landed back on Lauren, her hands fisted on her hips.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

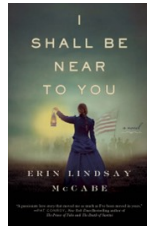
Lindsay Douglas is the pen name for Erin Lindsay McCabe, a USA Today Bestselling author, a 2014 GoodReads Choice Awards semi-finalist, and the holder of a fancy MFA in Creative Writing. As Lindsay Douglas, she writes small town romances about strong-willed, animal-loving heroines and the determined, flawed men who dare to love them. Her slightly swear-y stories range from sweet to steamy but always have a happily-ever-after.

A California native, she lives in the Sierra Foothills with her husband, son, and a small menagerie that includes one dog, two cats, three horses, not enough goats, and too many chickens.

You can find her on Facebook and Instagram—usually when she should be writing a tricky chapter.



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