

Bestselling author of MR RIGHT NOW

KARLY LANE

*He wants to be her
future, but can she
forgive the past?*

Fool Me Once

Praise for *Someone Like You*

‘Karly Lane’s latest book is must-read ... there’s plenty to enjoy in this sweet, rural read.’ —*Gold Coast Bulletin/Cairns Post*

‘The chemistry sizzled off the page ... I love this story and would recommend this one to anyone who loves some humour with their romance.’ —Beauty and Lace

‘Within an authentic country setting, Karly’s trademark humour knits together a fabulous story about fresh beginnings and new love. A snapshot of Australia’s colonial history is interwoven throughout the narrative with both truth and sensitivity ... Karly’s novels are always full and rounded; reading one is like stepping into a new community for the duration and being welcomed in with open arms ... a heart-warming read that will have you flipping the pages long into the night.’ —Theresa Smith Writes

Praise for *The Wrong Callahan*

‘For romance lovers, this is the dreamy can’t-put-down read for you!’ —*Australian Women’s Weekly*

‘I loved this book ... *The Wrong Callahan* is a well-paced tale of love, betrayal, family, PTSD and small town communities. Another five-star read from me!’ —Beauty and Lace

‘I enjoyed this book immensely ... I don’t have words to describe exactly how excited I am to read the second book in this trilogy next year. I loved being on Stringybark Creek with the Callahan family and just want to dive back into it.’ —Noveltea Corner

‘Just in time for Christmas, Karly Lane returns with another winning read ... Although *The Wrong Callahan* is here to entertain rural romance readers, Karly Lane would love the audience to take away a small sense of appreciation of the work our agricultural workers commit to, day in day out. It truly is tremendous and worthy of our attention in this current challenging environment for our Aussie farmers.’ —Mrs B’s Book Reviews

Praise for *Mr Right Now*

‘To say that I’ve been waiting for the sequel to *The Wrong Callahan* might be understating just how excited I’ve been to read this book! Karly Lane has a wonderful way of creating a sense of place; and the characters leap off the page. These are books I know I can fall into time and time again and still be transported.’ —Noveltea Corner

‘*Mr Right Now* is another delightful read from one of my favourite authors, Karly Lane ... Lane’s stories have depth and explore many themes that are relevant to relationships in all forms, exploring father/son relationships and the old-ways versus the new-ways, farming accidents, diversity on the land, droughts, storms, community support, family and friendships ... I simply can’t wait for book 3.’ —Beauty and Lace

Praise for *Return to Stringybark Creek*

‘Captivating, entertaining and most enjoyable, this return visit with the Callahans encourages the understanding that sometimes there are, even from the darkest of times, huge positives to be discovered.’ —Blue Wolf Reviews

‘Lane has added additional depth to this story that highlights the plight of Australian farmers and farming communities who are under strain ... I’m grateful for the calm and considered way Lane has approached the topic. *The Callahans* has become a favourite book family of mine ... they define family and friendship and it’s been a real pleasure to read their stories.’ —Noveltea Corner

‘Karly Lane creates likeable, warm characters as she twists and turns her story ... an entertaining read with an intriguing love story set against the challenges of farming and its stresses.’ —*The Weekly Times*

Fool Me Once

Karly Lane lives on the mid north coast of New South Wales. Proud mum to four children and wife of one very patient mechanic, she is lucky enough to spend her day doing the two things she loves most—being a mum and writing stories set in beautiful rural Australia.

Also by Karly Lane

North Star

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The Wrong Callahan

Mr Right Now

Return to Stringybark Creek

KARLY
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Fool Me Once

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To my Nanna and Pop and memories of North Arm

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EPILOGUE

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Part One

One

Georgie Henderson stood at the back of the hall watching the antics of the drunken, fun-loving crowd and felt old. It should have bolstered her ego that she'd been hit on three times in the past hour, but with the majority of the room barely over the legal drinking age, she just felt like a pervy old woman in comparison.

She felt out of place, despite being decked out in one of Shannon's hand-me-downs—albeit a gorgeous hand-me-down. The royal blue silk gown had a fitted bodice and draped to the floor. She felt like a princess in it. She scoffed slightly at the idea. Maybe if a princess were more at home in a pair of Blundstone steel-cap boots than heels. She felt completely overdressed. Although, not, of course, for a B&S ball, but overdressed nonetheless *for her*.

She'd shaken her head as she'd looked at herself in the mirror earlier, trying to relate the woman in the blue silk gown with the woman she'd been barely an hour before she'd put the dress on—the woman who'd had to stop the car on the way up the driveway to chase cattle out of the new paddock of oats and fix the fence.

Why had she allowed Shannon to talk her into coming to a B&S of all things? Maybe it was because they'd been reliving old times over the phone when Shannon had called her for her birthday last week, and she'd been in a weird, nostalgic mood. At the time she'd thought it would be fun; now that she was here though, it reminded her why most people outgrew their B&S days. As she sidestepped a pair of girls staggering towards the restrooms, makeup running, she wondered if she'd ever got *that drunk* and then winced as she realised she had.

She searched the crowd for Shannon but was distracted as her gaze collided with a man across the room. She would have sniggered at the clichéd romance of it, only in that instant she was too surprised by the fact it seriously *did* feel as though she'd locked eyes with a stranger across a crowded room. Although, as soon as the fact sunk in, she immediately recoiled and tore her gaze away. She was a little irritated to discover that her pulse was not as steady as it should be.

Well, that was awkward. She was not going to look back across there again, despite the urge to do so, even if it were simply to make sure what happened the first time was just a fluke.

Damn Shannon for abandoning her to dance with some guy who'd started chatting them up a minute ago. Georgie was used to it—men had always been drawn to Shannon. She was the blonde-haired party girl. Georgie, on the other hand, had always been happier to hang back in the shadows. They were an unlikely pair, but they'd been best friends since kindergarten and Shannon was more like a sister to her than a friend. Best friend or not though, it was getting late and Georgie really didn't want to be the third wheel. 'Find someone and dance,' Shannon had said before she'd been led away onto the dance floor.

Georgie didn't feel like dancing. She was away from Stoney Creek, the property she managed, and being a *slight* control freak regarding her work, her thoughts had been constantly returning to what could be going wrong in her absence. She knew Matt, her farmhand, would have everything under control—she wouldn't have left him in charge if she hadn't trusted him, she reminded herself *again*—and yet she really wished she could be back there right now, where she fitted in, instead of standing here in this crowded hall feeling like an outsider.

The song ended and she spotted Shannon and her partner, but her hope that they'd be leaving soon crumbled as a new song started and they continued to dance. She wished she could drown her frustration in a drink or three—maybe then the roar of loud drunken voices and over-the-top laughter, which she was positive had given her this pounding headache, mightn't annoy her quite so much. But she'd agreed to drive tonight, so drinking was out of the question. It really did suck to be the only sober person at a B&S ball.

She'd momentarily forgotten about the stranger who'd caught her looking at him earlier, until she noticed him again and took the opportunity to get a better look while he was distracted elsewhere. Despite the fact all the men were dressed in suits—formal attire being the fundamental rule of a Bachelor and Spinster ball after all—*his* suit looked expensive. This was no discount-store bought suit, and he wore it as though it were an extension of himself. He exuded authority. There was a rugged kind of appeal to him—he wasn't handsome in a classical sense, but he clearly knew how to dress and act like a sophisticated businessman even while there was something not quite polished about him. A toughness maybe, which didn't go with the whole expensive-business-suit thing. She saw him watching the event through cynical, almost judgemental eyes and his attitude rubbed Georgie the wrong way even as she felt a pull of attraction.

He didn't belong in the worn old hall, standing there in that tailor-made suit;

he stood out, even though he'd loosened his tie and undone the top button of his white shirt. The other men were mostly veterans of the B&S, their suits carrying the stains and wear of previous balls. Each scuff mark on their shoes, stain on their sleeve or lovingly repaired tear was worn like a badge of honour. The man really did look out of place, and his presence was drawing attention from others, who were being a lot less subtle in their observations than she was, judging by their blurry-eyed looks.

Trouble was brewing, Georgie could tell. Unlike the stranger, most of the younger men had been here from the beginning of the evening and had been drinking steadily. At this stage of the night, with alcohol boosting egos and courage, it would only be a matter of time before testosterone-fuelled confidence tipped over into aggression and then violence. As if on cue, she heard the first slurred indications that time was up. 'Look at 'im,' she heard and zeroed in on a large bloke wearing a stained white shirt, untucked and missing a few vital buttons. 'Who does he think he is?'

Against her better judgement, Georgie decided to intervene. Nimbly avoiding splashed drinks and groping hands, she made her way across the room and came to a stop in front of the dark-haired stranger.

'Are you lost?' she asked, raising her voice over the loud country music.

He dropped his gaze to meet hers and Georgie felt that same weird pull of attraction, only more intensely up close. His eyes—a dark, almost denim blue—caught and held hers once more.

'Do I look lost?' There was a touch of amusement in his expression.

'You don't exactly look like you want to be here.'

He tipped his head the slightest bit, still holding her gaze. 'I could say the same about you. You didn't look like you were having much fun standing over there either.'

Well, he had her there. 'Nowadays these things just make me feel old,' she said with reluctant amusement.

'You're positively ancient—you're, what, all of ... nineteen?' he drawled.

Georgie sent him a derisive look. There was no way, looking around at some of the young, skimpily dressed women in the room, that he could mistake her for a teenager. 'I'm twenty-six.'

'Well now, that's made my night a whole lot brighter.'

'And why would that be?'

'Because I'm closer to thirty than nineteen and was feeling like some dirty old man.'

Georgie bit back a grin as he echoed pretty much the same thing she'd been feeling earlier. Maybe she wasn't the only one who felt as though they'd

outgrown this kind of event. ‘You *aren’t* from around here, are you?’

‘What gave it away?’ he asked with a slow grin.

‘The fact you’re wearing an Armani suit maybe? You sure as hell didn’t get that from the local menswear store.’

His deep chuckle had a husky edge to it and the sound sent a small quiver through her.

‘So what brought you to a B&S ball all the way out here?’ she asked. The hall was close to forty kilometres from the nearest large town—hardly a place you’d casually drop in and check out.

‘My brother dragged me along, and now he seems to have dumped me for a better offer,’ he said, tossing his head in the direction of the dance floor, where a couple danced slowly, oblivious to the fast country number that played, lost in their own world.

‘Yeah, well that *better offer* dragged me here to relive our youth, then dumped me for your brother,’ she told him with wry amusement as she watched Shannon in the arms of the tall, sandy-haired man maybe a few years younger than the man beside her.

They shared a look that said *hopeless!* and turned away from the two lovebirds.

‘So here we are.’

‘So here we are,’ she agreed.

She felt that strange pull again as she allowed her gaze to be captured by his once more. There was something so alive and exciting in those depths, something that dared her to let go of her usual caution, but before she had the chance to examine it further, a low voice from behind interrupted their silent exchange.

‘What have we got here, gents?’

Georgie turned and groaned. It was the big guy she’d managed to avoid after an earlier roaming-hands incident near the bar. He had the build of a rugby player, with a thick neck and stocky frame, and all the confidence of a drunk twenty-one-year-old wannabe stud. Behind him a small group of loyal mates were rallying.

‘I thought you said you were headin’ home?’ he said to Georgie, narrowing his eyes. He clearly wasn’t too drunk to forget about his earlier attempt at seduction.

Okay, so he’d caught her out on a little white lie. ‘I was, but I got ... distracted,’ she hedged, hoping he’d get the hint and leave.

‘Cool. So now you’ve got time for that dance,’ he said, grabbing hold of her arm.

Georgie was about to open her mouth to protest when a deep voice interrupted from beside her: ‘The lady and I haven’t finished our conversation.’

Georgie glanced around at the hostile faces and her stomach dropped.

‘Consider your conversation over,’ the young guy snarled, ignoring Georgie completely.

‘I think you need to back off,’ the tall stranger replied, his voice low and steely.

‘You don’t belong here, mate,’ the young guy said, curling his lip.

‘I paid to get in just like everyone else, so I’m pretty sure I do,’ the man stated calmly, although Georgie noticed his body had tensed beside her.

‘Okay. Fine. I’ll dance,’ Georgie said. If that was the only way to head off trouble, she’d endure a drunken sway around the dance floor. And then she was heading home. Only, before she could move, the dark-haired man had stepped in front of her, a meaty fist connected with the side of his jaw and she was pushed aside. The next moment bedlam broke out.

Georgie stood with hands on her hips, watching the mêlée and shaking her head in disgust. ‘You have got to be kidding me,’ she muttered under her breath.

Shannon came over to stand beside her. When her dance partner had realised his brother was in the middle of the brawl, he had quickly joined in.

Fists flew, some managing to make contact, others swinging widely and missing—an indication of how much alcohol had been consumed.

‘*Come to the B&S, Georgie. It’ll be just like old times. It’ll be a harmless trip down memory lane, Georgie,*’ Georgie mimicked.

Shannon gave a deep-throated chuckle. ‘And I was right, it *is* just like old times. Isn’t he amazing?’ she went on, gazing at her new man as he launched himself at one of the blokes wrestling with his brother.

Georgie rolled her eyes. She’d hoped that maybe she’d found someone who was at least a tiny bit interested in something other than drinking and fighting for just *one night*, but it seemed whoever the man was, age was no guarantee of maturity.

The scuffle was eventually broken up by security and the men dispersed through the crowd to reclaim their drinks and rehash their victories.

Shannon fussed about the small cut on the lip of her dance partner, crooning and praising. His brother came towards Georgie, his shirt bloodied and torn and his nose bleeding, a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

‘See, *now* you look like you belong at a B&S ball,’ she said sarcastically.

Wiping his nose with the tissue Shannon handed him, he looked down at her and smiled a crooked smile that managed to flip her stomach, despite her irritation.

‘You aren’t impressed by my manly performance?’ he said lightly.

‘Takes more than a fight to impress a country girl, buddy.’

He sent a brief flicker of a glance towards his brother and raised an eyebrow. ‘Apparently only *this* country girl.’

Georgie didn’t bother hiding her disgusted snort as she watched Shannon plant little butterfly kisses along his brother’s jaw in sympathy. ‘Oh *please*. Shannon is no more impressed by that than ... Okay,’ she conceded grudgingly, ‘maybe *she* would be impressed.’

‘But you’re not?’

‘Nope.’

‘You’re a hard woman ...’ His voice trailed off and he stared at her oddly for a moment. ‘We haven’t been introduced. Michael Delacourt.’ He held out his hand and she eyed it warily before reaching out to shake it.

‘Georgie Henderson.’

‘So, Georgie Henderson, what *does* it take to impress you?’

‘Not *that*.’ She smiled before turning away. ‘I take it you’ll make your own way home?’ she asked Shannon, breaking into the couple’s lovefest.

‘You’re not going now?’

‘I’ve had enough of reliving my youth for one night.’

Waving off her friend’s protests, Georgie made for the door.

‘Hey!’

She turned as Michael called out and caught up with her.

‘Mind if I catch a ride back into town with you? I’m leaving the car for Brent to drive back later. I really don’t want to hang around until they’re ready to leave.’ He looked at her woefully. ‘Don’t make me stand here all alone ...’

‘I doubt you’d be alone for long, prime beef like you. Especially now you’ve gone and proven how tough and manly you really are,’ she added. She’d noticed more than a few of the younger women eyeing him off with renewed interest during the altercation.

Standing before her, hands in his pockets, his expensive suit jacket slung over his arm and shirtsleeves rolled up, he should have looked rumpled and unkempt but he didn’t. He looked rugged and a little bit charming.

‘Don’t make me beg.’

Somehow Georgie couldn’t imagine this man begging for anything, ever, but she felt her resolve weaken. ‘Fine. Come on then,’ she sighed, then realised this meant she’d be alone with him.



The moment he’d walked into the hall, he’d known it was a mistake. Brent had

realised it wasn't one of his better ideas too and they'd been about to turn and leave when the shapely blonde had caught Brent's attention, and with Brent's promise of just needing a minute, Michael had been left to watch his younger brother flirt shamelessly before ending up on the dance floor. So much for *a minute*. He'd been *so close*. If they'd left a few minutes earlier, he'd have been on the road and heading back to his room and his comfy bed. But, instead, there he was standing around like a shag on a rock, waiting to catch his brother's eye so they could leave. As he listlessly surveyed the room, his gaze came to rest on a woman in a blue dress standing across the hall. He wasn't sure why she'd caught his attention; maybe it was because she didn't seem to be part of the noise and party going on around her, or maybe because, like him, she seemed sober, which was probably a more obvious way to stand out at a B&S.

She looked up, then quickly looked away. It was only a fleeting glance, but for that split-second he felt something strange pass between them. He gave a rough chuckle and resisted the urge to rub his hands across his face. It had been a long week. He wasn't even sure why he'd agreed to come along on this buying trip of Brent's. He'd only flown home from Japan the day before, after an intense two-day negotiation that had been on the verge of breaking down. Actually, he did know; it was to get out of going to Sunday breakfast with his mother and stepfather. He hadn't wanted to see the disappointment on his mother's face if he said no outright, so he'd used Brent's buying trip as an excuse. His mother was probably still disappointed, but she knew that work trumped everything else, even family. God knows she'd been married to a workaholic long enough to have learned that lesson well.

Maybe that's why he stepped into the ridiculous fight when he'd normally have defused the situation. He was angry at himself for allowing his dislike for his stepfather to get him into this stupid mess in the first place. He had to admit, it'd felt good to take a little bit of his frustration out on some nameless dickhead—briefly, until he'd realised he had the advantage of being sober. It wasn't a fair fight and he'd come to his senses before any great damage had been inflicted. He could have done without the whack to his bloody nose though. Jesus that hurt, and looking at the size of the fists on the kid who'd landed the blow, he was probably lucky the guy had been two parts cut or he was fairly sure his nose would have been spread across his face.

To cap everything off, the woman who'd made this whole miserable night almost worthwhile was about to walk away. Well, not if he could help it. He tossed the car keys to Brent and hurried to catch up with Georgie. There was no way in hell he was hanging around this place if she wasn't going to be here.

He didn't know why she was suddenly so important. Maybe it was because

she'd cast a tiny ray of sunshine across his bleak and dreary week and he wasn't ready to walk away from that just yet.

Two

The noise of the ball receded the further they walked from the small, isolated hall. The open paddock that served as a car park, where the majority of the partygoers would later spend the night in sleeping bags and swags in the backs of utes, was full of ruts. It was hard to navigate in the dark, especially in heels. Georgie stumbled, then muttered a quiet curse as a strong arm snaked out to circle her waist in order to steady her. Her breath quickened a little and she forced herself to concentrate on where she was placing her feet.

She came to a stop in front of her trusty old Holden ute. It wasn't the new sleek, sexy kind, but the earlier, squarer type. The sturdy, reliable model that she refused to give up just for the sake of fashion. The engine roared to life with a low growl and Georgie crept along the dirt track, careful to look out for bodies lying where they passed out after a long night of drinking. Her headlights lit up the narrow road, with darkness either side and in the distance beyond. It was an eerily quiet time of the night.

'Did you grow up around here, Georgie?' Michael asked.

'I'm from a bit further out west, but I lived here for a few years when I went to university in Armidale,' she told him. 'I'm just back for the weekend.'

'What were you studying?'

'A Bachelor of Agriculture and Business.'

'Best of both worlds.'

'Seemed to be the natural choice really. Farming's changed. Nowadays you need to know as much about business, rural politics, resource management and agribusiness marketing as you do about farming.'

She watched the white lines flash beneath her wheels and remembered when she'd wished her own life would hurry up and move just as fast. Then one day she'd looked back and realised it was going faster than she'd intended and she still didn't feel as though she was getting anywhere.

'So, what do you do now?' he asked.

'I manage a place.'

'Really?'

She glanced across at him. ‘Surprised that a woman’s capable of running a property?’

‘No,’ he denied quickly, then gave a bit of a sheepish grin. ‘Maybe a little. But it’s not what you’re thinking,’ he added in a hurry when he saw her frown deepen. ‘I know a lot of women working properties, but I guess I was expecting you to work maybe in some kind of corporate sector ...’ His words petered out.

‘Why would you think that?’ she asked, eyeing him curiously.

‘Well, you don’t look ...’ He hesitated, before selecting his words carefully. ‘The women I know working properties don’t look like you.’

Georgie scoffed out loud. ‘I don’t normally wear heels to work cattle,’ she said dryly.

Sadly, most people still thought of farming as a male-dominated industry. In many ways it was, but women made up a huge portion of the workforce—a lot of them going unrecognised in their role as wife or partner.

‘I didn’t mean any offence,’ he said softly.

Her initial defensiveness faded a little. She rarely wore anything other than jeans and T-shirts and dusty work boots. She tried to think back to the last time she’d got this dressed up and realised it was a very long time ago. Maybe Shannon was right. Maybe she *was* turning into a crabby old hermit.

‘The property you manage, is it a family farm?’ he asked, and a familiar sick feeling settled in her stomach.

‘No.’

‘Oh. I just assumed—’

‘That I’d only be given a management role if it were family?’ she finished for him.

‘It’s just that you’re so young ... I didn’t expect ... I should probably keep my mouth shut before I get thrown out of the car, huh?’

It was a fair assumption, she supposed, although it still irked her. ‘Do people assume you inherited your business? I mean, we’re almost the same age and you run a business too.’

‘That’s true. I didn’t mean to insult you ... again,’ he added dryly.

‘It’s okay, I’m used to it.’

‘Being insulted?’

She gave him a lopsided grin without taking her eyes from the road. ‘Most young people *do* inherit their properties from family. Or they’re married when they buy their own. I just happen to be single and a bit of an oddity, I guess. At least, I am around town ... and to Shannon.’

‘I think it says more about your strength of character than about you being odd.’

She could feel his gaze on her as she drove.

‘Are your family on the land too?’

Her hands automatically tightened on the wheel. ‘No.’ She knew her answer was abrupt, but there were just some subjects that were off limits—especially to a stranger. ‘Not anymore.’

She could sense he wanted to ask more, but she was done with this topic now.

‘So what brings you and your brother out here?’ The small hall in the tiny hamlet thirty-four kilometres from Armidale was hardly on a list of tourist attractions.

‘We’re out here on business, looking at a few investments. Brent heard about the B&S while we were in town and thought it might be fun. What about you?’

‘Shannon saw it advertised and had a sudden desire to recapture our youth,’ she replied. Her best friend was always trying to get her to go away on crazy weekends. She was wild, impulsive and fun—everything Georgie wasn’t. Not that she liked being thought of as a party pooper—she didn’t. She liked a party as much as the next person, she just didn’t have the luxury of ditching her responsibilities whenever the mood struck to disappear for a weekend, the way Shannon did. Besides, she’d agreed to go to New Zealand with the woman in a few weeks’ time. It wasn’t as though she worked *all the time*.

‘Lucky for me she dragged you along then,’ he murmured. She caught his slight smile from the corner of her eye.

In the confines of the car she could smell the warm, spicy fragrance of his aftershave and the lingering scent of woodsmoke from the hall. It was a strangely potent combination.

‘You said you were out here looking at investments—what kind?’ she asked, determined to push the heady scent of the man from her mind if not her senses.

‘I’m looking to buy a property in the area.’

Georgie nodded but didn’t comment. Rich city boy looking for a hobby farm, she figured. They went on to discuss cattle breeds and markets and new techniques they’d read about recently, and to her surprise he actually knew what he was talking about. All too soon houses began to appear, becoming closer and closer together, and as they entered the town limits, the road was lit with streetlights.

She gave a slow whistle as she drove through the fancy gates of the guesthouse where Michael and Brent were staying. ‘Nice place to slum it,’ she said. It put the small, slightly rundown motel room she’d booked to shame.

He gave a twist of his lips. ‘I don’t slum it if I don’t have to.’

‘So I see.’ She rolled the car to a stop. ‘Well, it was nice to meet you. Good luck finding a property.’ She spoke quietly. In the dim light she could make out

his wide shoulders and strong jawline and she felt jittery again.

'Don't go yet, Georgie, come inside with me,' he coaxed gently. She saw him lean towards her and felt the heat of his skin as he hovered a mere breath away from her. The soft, hesitant touch of his lips sent a hum through her body.

As he pulled away slightly, she opened her mouth say no, but heard Shannon's exasperated voice in her head. *You live like some kind of reclusive spinster. One day you're going to wake up and realise you're old and grouchy and all alone.*

Firstly, she was *not* all alone. She saw people ... all the time ... well, some of the time—she went into town for food and supplies. Georgie frowned. Fine. She'd show Shannon. If she was supposed to be reliving her youth, then okay, why not?

'Okay,' she heard herself say, as though from a distant place.

They didn't bother with the lights. The moment the door shut he stepped close and took her face in his hands, kissing her with such tenderness that all thoughts of protest instantly melted away.

Standing in the centre of the room with the soft glow of moonlight falling across them, Georgie watched as Michael unbuttoned his shirt. She stared at his wide shoulders for a moment, before reaching out to place her palms against his chest. She felt the rhythmic thump of his heart beneath her hand, and lifting her eyes to meet his, she skimmed her fingers down the smooth skin of his torso as though committing each muscle, each dip and bulge, to memory.

When her fingers reached his waist, they went to the button of his trousers and she gave a frustrated growl as she fumbled with the hidden fastenings.

His deep chuckle made her quiver once more as he pressed gentle kisses along her throat. He removed her hands and finished the job for her.

'You know, you look good in Armani ... but you look even better out of it,' she told him, stepping back to admire him openly. She wondered briefly where this sassy confidence was coming from but gave up trying to work it out. Tonight she wasn't responsible, rational Georgie. Tonight she was fun, carefree Georgie—the Georgie she had been at uni. Just for tonight.

She slid the straps of her dress slowly down her arms and let it pool at her feet in a shimmering mass of blue silk. As she held his eyes, she saw the amusement of a few seconds before dissolve into a smouldering liquid heat that scorched a path along her skin in the wake of his hungry gaze.

Turning, she walked towards the elaborate bathroom and crooked a finger in his direction.

'I smell like stale beer and bonfire smoke,' she said, smiling as she turned on the taps of the shower and stepped into the stall. He followed her, dwarfing the

area and pressing up against her body. Beneath the stream of hot water, she felt her pulse go into overdrive. The touch of his naked skin, sleek and wet beneath her hands, banished all rational thought.

Three

In the early morning light, Georgie stared down at the man still asleep in the bed. His dark hair lay in stark contrast to the crisp white of the pillow, and the sheets were draped low on his hips.

It had been an amazing night, but she knew better than to think a man like Michael Delacourt would be interested in her once he left town and headed back to the city, no matter how sweet his words or how seductive his skills in bed. Nope, the party was over, Georgie girl. It was time to get back to reality.

With a heavy heart, she drove back across town. It was still dark outside but there were the faintest streaks of daylight on the horizon—erasing the last shadows of her magical, one-night escape from reality. At home, she'd normally be up by now, preparing for the day ahead, but she wasn't at home just yet. Shoving away tiny beginnings of guilt, she decided to do what normal people did on a Sunday morning and go back to bed for few precious hours of sleep. She let herself into her poky little motel room that smelled of damp carpet covered up with bathroom cleaner, and climbed in between the cold bedsheets ... alone.



Michael woke up from a pretty amazing dream, slowly opening his eyes. As his room came into focus, the events of the previous night replayed through his mind and two things suddenly registered. The first was that he hadn't been dreaming and the second was ... he was alone in the bed.

He sat up and listened for the sound of running water or some other sign of Georgie, but her clothes were gone from the floor where they'd been discarded last night and the room was silent.

What had he expected? He'd known last night that this would probably be nothing more than a pleasant surprise. He sure as hell hadn't gone out with the intention of picking up a random stranger—not exactly the usual expectation for a B&S ball, he had to admit. He hadn't even wanted to go to the damn thing in the first place, but as usual his younger brother could talk him into pretty much anything. He rubbed his jaw—it was still a little tender—and he gave a small

grunt of self-deprecating mirth.

Disappointment cut through Michael when he realised he wouldn't see Georgie again. Usually he was level-headed. He took risks in business, but they were always well thought out. He wasn't an impulsive man who blindly jumped into situations, but meeting Georgie last night had thrown his usual caution to the wind.

Sure, he'd had his share of one-night stands in his younger days, but not recently. Over the past few years he'd been too busy building his business to worry about dating or relationships. His whole life had centred around the need to succeed and to prove his stepfather wrong.

Derrick Matthew would have liked nothing better than for Michael to fall flat on his face, ever since the massive blow-up that had resulted in Michael walking out of the family business and starting his own company. Whenever Michael felt as though he was done and couldn't make things work, all he had to do was hear the smug words his stepfather had thrown at his back as he'd left the house that evening: *You'll come crawling back—you won't make it out there without me steppin' in to save your arse*. Even now, years later, the memory of those words still sent a steel-like determination through him.

It took a minute to release the familiar tension that followed the memory. He'd proven his stepfather wrong. He'd built his company into a profitable business and had nothing more to prove to anyone. Although he told himself this, it was still hard to let down his guard completely. It was still his greatest fear: failing and knowing that Derrick would always be there waiting to gloat.

Last night had been the first time he could recall stepping out of that tightly controlled discipline into which he'd been locked for so long. He'd felt freer and more alive than he had in a very long time. Somehow, meeting Georgie had opened a part of him he'd thought had been lost forever. Which was what made him feel so deflated now, as he lay back down and stared at the empty pillow beside him. He wished she'd still been here this morning. He wanted to find out more about her life, who she was, what she wanted to do. Was there really something special about Georgie Henderson or had last night been a trick of his imagination? Somehow, he knew it wasn't a trick. There'd been something different about her; he'd seen it the moment she'd realised he'd been watching her from across that old hall. There'd been chemistry then—before they'd even spoken.

Now she was gone. As soon as the thought entered his mind, he rejected it. She couldn't be gone. He didn't want it to end like this. Maybe he'd realise in the harsh light of day that she *had* just been a pleasant diversion after all, but what if it was more? What if this had been his only chance at something special

and he just let her walk out of his life without even trying to stop her? As quickly as that thought came, another followed swiftly on its heels. *Why* had she crept from his room without waking him to say goodbye? Had she realised *she'd* made a huge mistake? A twinge of hurt stabbed him in the chest. Last night he'd felt a connection—surely she'd felt it too? After all, he wasn't the kind of guy who normally dwelt on things like this; in fact, he couldn't think of a single time he'd sat and questioned things the way he was right now. That in itself was alarming. He didn't want to believe it, but this felt a lot like wounded pride. *Why* hadn't she wanted to face him this morning?

Michael sat up on the side of the bed and reached for his clothes. He wasn't going to stop thinking about her all day anyway. The sooner he found her, the sooner he could settle this debate once and for all.



Georgie frowned at the sound of knocking on the motel door. Reluctantly, she threw off the covers and grumbled as she made her way across the room to answer it, staring dumbfounded at the man before her.

'How did you know where I was staying?'

'I called my brother.' His low, gravelly tone sparked memories of his warm body against hers just a few short hours earlier.

'What are you doing here?'

Behind him, the first stirrings of Sunday morning could be heard along the street.

'I came to find you and ask what you think you were doing creeping out of my room like a damn thief in the middle of the night?'

'I—' she started to explain but was cut off as he continued.

'I don't know what kind of men you *usually* sleep with, but if they're the kind who don't care about getting the courtesy of a goodbye before you leave, then maybe you need to change the type of men you see.'

Georgie's eyes narrowed dangerously. 'I *really* hope you're not implying that I sleep around,' she fumed. *Who the hell did he think he was?* 'And look who's talking. *You* picked me up at a B&S ball. Real classy.'

'As I recall, you accepted without too much arm twisting,' he shot back, a dark expression etched onto his face.

Okay so he had a point. 'Well, for your information, I *don't* make it a habit.'

'Me either.'

They stood staring at each other, wearing matching expressions of pain and injured pride.

'Why did you leave?' he finally asked. His voice had lost the annoyance of a

few moments before.

‘Because I didn’t want to have the “I’ll call you” farewell, which roughly translates to “Thanks for the tumble in the hay, don’t hold your breath that you’ll ever hear from me again,”’ she told him wearily.

His face relaxed a little at that and he shook his head. ‘I won’t lie to you, I’ve been guilty of that in the past, *in my youth*,’ he stressed, ‘but I’ve become a lot more discerning as I’ve got older. I don’t play games, Georgie. I’ve never met anyone like you before and I feel as though we’re a long way from saying goodbye just yet.’

Georgie let out a long breath. How did he shake her carefully erected defences and common sense with just a look? She’d had her share of romances, but nothing serious and few that ever went anywhere other than the occasional movie or dinner. In one night, this man had managed to sneak under her defences and defuse all her alarms.

‘Look, I don’t really know anything about you, and I wouldn’t normally have done what I did last night.’ Her voice stammered a little as the memory of exactly what she *had* done last night, and she cleared her throat quickly. ‘I would never usually go home with a stranger. I’ve *never* gone home with a stranger,’ she corrected weakly, as the implications of her actions sank in. What if he’d been a serial killer or something? She had been fairly certain he wasn’t, but still ... *that was probably exactly what every victim of a serial killer thought too.*

‘I guess we’ve just established that last night was a first for both of us then,’ he said, relaxing and leaning his shoulder against the doorframe. ‘I can’t say I’ve ever felt a need to track down a woman this early in the morning before either, but here I am.’

She felt herself relax too as she took in his wry grin. ‘So why have you?’

‘I don’t know.’ He shrugged. ‘I woke up and realised you’d left, and I couldn’t shake this horrible feeling that letting you go would be a big mistake.’

A little bubble of surprise and excitement fluttered around inside her at his words. She couldn’t deny that she’d felt a pang of regret as she’d turned at his guesthouse doorway and taken one last look at him before leaving. Whatever last night was—as foolish as it may have been—a tiny piece of her was glad she’d done it.

She liked his grin, the one that tugged his mouth up slightly on one side. The dark stubble covering his chin and jawline wasn’t the designer stubble that some men sported these days, his was the kind that had grown overnight and she could imagine the feel of it now against her skin as he kissed his way down—

‘Georgie?’

‘Sorry, what?’ she said with a notable start, snapping from her momentary

lapse in concentration.

‘I said, it was fun though, wasn’t it?’

Swallowing over her embarrassment, Georgie could only manage a brief smile. ‘Yes, it was, but fun isn’t something that fits into my life right now.’

‘That sounds like a pretty depressing kind of life,’ he said doubtfully.

‘Well not *all* fun, obviously, just *that* kind of fun.’

‘What if there was more to this than just fun?’

‘There isn’t,’ she said pointedly.

‘But we can’t know that.’

‘Yes. We can. The fact that this was completely out of character for both of us tells me that this was only ever supposed to be an escape from reality. In our real lives, we would never have even met, so how could this possibly be anything more?’

‘I’d like to get to know you better and find out.’

Georgie gave a shake of her head, perplexed by the man’s stubbornness. It was too early for this; she hadn’t even had coffee yet.

‘Would you like to come in and have coffee?’ She stepped back and allowed him to enter the somewhat claustrophobic room.

‘I’d like,’ he said, stepping closer and slipping his arms around her waist, ‘to pick up where we left off last night.’

With his body so close to hers, familiar feelings from the night before began to reawaken and all her protestations flew out the window.

Later, when they collapsed exhausted on the bed, he lay close and she had no urge to run away.



They ventured outside to buy breakfast, which was really closer to lunch, and spent the day driving around the countryside. The scenery was breathtaking at this time of year. Huge Chinese pistachio trees throughout town were a magnificent spectacle of colour. Leaves of red, yellow and orange had burst into life everywhere. Georgie and Michael walked down to the lush green park to lie in the sunshine beneath sweeping willow trees and stare at the clouds.

Georgie smiled to herself. This was not what she’d expected when she’d agreed to a weekend away with Shannon. The B&S was one thing, but she’d imagined today would be a lazy recovery day and catch-up before they headed their separate ways. Shannon had called earlier to make sure she was okay, and to gush about Brent. She was full of apologies over their girls’ weekend not turning out to be quite so girl focused, and Georgie listened patiently as Shannon rattled on about this amazing guy she’d just met. She sounded positively smitten.

Which wasn't unusual for Shannon. She'd always been the one who was boy crazy. As kids, when they imagined what their futures would be like, Shannon's always involved finding her knight in shining armour and a fairytale wedding. So far she'd only managed to find a bunch of not-so-shining tossers in tinfoil.

'I promise I'll take a week off soon and come out to stay so we can really catch up,' Shannon had said.

'Don't worry about it. This whole weekend was kind of spur of the moment anyway—we only really decided to do it as a bit of a laugh.'

'I know, but I feel bad that I talked you into taking time away from the farm and then I abandoned you. Although apparently *someone* wanted to find out where you were staying ... Is anything happening there that I should know about?'

'Nope, nothing to report,' Georgie said lightly. Nothing she was willing to share right now anyway. Despite Shannon being her best friend, Georgie preferred to keep some things private—especially when she couldn't even figure out herself what last night meant.

'I don't want to leave you by yourself today. Do you want me to see if Brent can track down Michael and we can all do something together? Although he's apparently even more of a workaholic than you are,' she added, lowering her voice.

'No, that's okay, don't worry about it. I might go shopping for supplies and have a bit of a relax. I'll be fine.'

'Then let's meet up for breakfast before you go tomorrow. Brent's talked his brother into flying back and he's going to drive me home. We can meet up before we all take off.'

'Ah okay, sure.' She looked across at Michael. 'Breakfast tomorrow with Brent and his brother would be good.'

Michael lifted an eyebrow, sending her an amused look.

'I'd better go, I need to check in at home. I'll see you in the morning.'

Michael turned his head to look at her as she put her phone away. 'So Shannon isn't aware that we spent the night together,' Georgie began. 'And apparently Brent's driving her home and we're all having breakfast in the morning before you fly out.'

Michael pulled out his phone and looked at the screen. 'Two missed calls from Brent,' he said ruefully. He listened to the messages before replying to a text, then put his phone away. 'Apparently I'm flying home,' he informed her dryly, 'and Brent's taking a few extra days to drive to Brisbane, via Sydney.'

'Oh dear,' Georgie said with a lopsided smile. 'I hope that's not a problem for you.'

‘Nope. I should have expected it. Brent does have a tendency to fall for pretty women. A little too often sometimes.’

Georgie frowned at that. ‘Should I be warning Shannon?’

‘You think she’d listen?’ Michael asked doubtfully.

‘Maybe we should be warning your brother. Shannon doesn’t really do serious relationships ... just frequent ones.’

‘They’re both old enough to take care of themselves without us butting in.’

‘I suppose you’re right.’

‘Was there a reason you didn’t tell her we were spending the day together?’

Georgie fought against the urge to squirm. ‘I just didn’t want her making a big deal out of it. She’s always trying to hook me up with men or push me into dating,’ she said irritably. ‘I’d just like to keep this between ... us.’

‘Fair enough,’ he said lightly. ‘What are you doing tomorrow after breakfast?’ He linked fingers with hers and turned his head to watch her next to him on the grass.

‘Going home.’

‘Can you stay longer? Spend the day with me?’ he asked.

Georgie blinked up at the sky. What was happening to her? She was always so reliable, dedicated. Her work always came first and yet here she was, actually considering changing her plans to spend the day with a man she barely knew. She hesitated at that though. Technically, she supposed he was still someone she’d only met the night before, but they’d spent so much time together today and she’d found herself telling Michael things she’d never considered telling anyone before—certainly not someone she’d met on a date. This, however, was not a date. Somehow, after last night they’d skipped the first date and moved on to something else. It wasn’t just the intimacy of the sex that had propelled them ahead; the feeling that had compelled him to come and find her this morning had been lingering within her too.

She felt different when she was around him. She opened up about things she’d never consider telling anyone else. She was a bit of a hermit, all things considered. Other than Shannon, whom she spoke to most days in some form or other, Matt was the only person she was around on a regular basis and they didn’t have these kind of deep conversations. It didn’t feel like she and Michael had only just met—she felt as though they’d known each other for far longer.

‘If you can’t, I understand,’ he said, finally breaking the silence between them.

‘It’s not that I don’t want to,’ she sighed.

‘Then explain it to me,’ he said, heaving himself onto one elbow to look down into her face.

Distracted by the shadows that played across his face, intensifying its rugged appeal, it took her a moment to remember his question.

‘I don’t just take days off ... I guess I’m kind of boring like that.’

‘I don’t think you fit into the boring category,’ he assured her as he lightly traced the outline of hip.

‘Shannon’s always trying to get me to go away more, but she just doesn’t get it. I actually *like* being on the property. I have responsibilities, it’s not a nine-to-five job like hers.’

Georgie had a plan, and plans didn’t come cheap. Her goal was to work her butt off, save like crazy and gain enough experience so she could secure a loan to buy back her family property. Tamban. The name always brought a mix of joy and pain whenever she thought of it. The memories of her childhood were always bittersweet. She’d had the perfect childhood—fresh air and sunshine, animals to care for, the room to run and roam as she pleased. There were always chores and plenty of helping around the property, but she’d loved it. She’d been her dad’s shadow as a kid—afternoons spent sitting beside him as they drove out to check fences and feed livestock had been some of her most treasured. Whenever she thought about home, she could almost smell the scent of warm biscuits just out of the oven and her mother’s beautiful smile and tight hugs. But invariably linked with those memories were the ones that hurt, and she could never have one without the other.

‘We’re very alike,’ Michael interrupted her thoughts. ‘I’m usually considered a bit of a workaholic. Brent’s always on my case about getting out and having fun too.’

Georgie smiled and reached up to run her hand down the length of his face and along his jaw. She watched his eyes darken and zone in on her gaze. No one had ever looked at her the way this man did. It wasn’t so much looking at her as looking *into* her.

‘Georgie, I know this puts you in a tough position, but I don’t want this to end yet.’ His voice was gravelly and low, each word sealing her fate.

‘Me either,’ she admitted softly. This guy was dangerous. When she was around him, she didn’t feel like reliable, grown-up Georgie anymore.

Later, when they went back to her motel, Georgie looked at the luxurious new four-wheel drive parked next to her ute and glanced uneasily at Michael.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asked warily.

‘Nice wheels.’

He flashed a smile and gave an offhand shrug. ‘It’s not really mine, it belongs to the business.’

He must have really thought he was slumming it getting into her poor old

beast. A niggling voice in the back of her mind kept trying to raise the concern that this guy was too far out of her league, but every instinct told Georgie he was being honest with her. He genuinely seemed to enjoy her company as much as she enjoyed his. Then again, what did she really know about relationships? She'd never had a serious one before. She'd always had bigger plans.

Four

Michael glanced at the woman lying on the blanket beside him and gave a silent, rueful chuckle. If anyone he knew could see him now, they wouldn't recognise him. Michael Delacourt didn't do lazy weekends picnicking in the park. He couldn't even recall the last time he'd done anything that didn't involve work on a weekend. The drive out here, he and Brent on a spontaneous road trip, had opened his eyes to just how much of life seemed to be passing him by.

This was the first time he'd been in the New England region of New South Wales, and its vast national parks and rugged, ancient mountains had touched something inside him. Brent had had his eye on a place that had been up for sale for a while now and he'd been trying to convince Michael to branch out down this way with the business, but until Michael had seen it with his own eyes, he hadn't truly appreciated the beauty of the place.

It wasn't just nature that was blowing his mind on this trip, he conceded as his gaze followed the gentle curves of Georgie's body as she dozed in the warm autumn sunshine. What was it about her? Her honey-blond hair wasn't styled in any kind of fancy cut, like the women he usually associated with. Last night it had been pinned back at the nape of her neck, but today she'd left it loose, the natural curl in it falling just below her shoulders. He suspected Georgie Henderson didn't spend a lot of time in a hair salon, and the lighter highlights he could see were more than likely courtesy of the sun rather than hairdressing chemicals.

She was shorter than any women he'd previously dated. Not that there were that many—dating wasn't something he'd done much of in the past couple of years. Taking out the women his mother suggested didn't count as *real* dates. He only did it because it was easier than arguing with her. Georgie's head came to just under his chin. She brought out the possessive male in him; he had to smirk at that. Christ, he couldn't believe he'd gone to a B&S and got into a fight ... at his age. He was beginning to wonder if he'd fallen into a time warp or something. He couldn't remember the last time he'd done so many out-of-character things, and all within the space of twenty-four hours. What scared him

the most about the realisation was that he kind of liked it.

Maybe he'd been a little stalkerish, tracking her down and knocking on her motel door, but he wasn't a man who believed in letting an opportunity slip by if he sensed it might be important. He wasn't sure how he knew, but somehow he was sure Georgie *was* important. Nothing about their time together since had suggested otherwise. In fact, the opposite was true. With each minute that went by he could feel the certainty solidifying inside him.

She was amazing. Everything about her fascinated him, from her dry sense of humour to that stubborn determination he could read in her eyes. She was beautiful in a clean, healthy, outdoorsy way, and she stirred something to life within him that had lain dormant for a very long time.

He had no idea where this thing between them was going, but he intended to do everything in his power to see it through.



Michael was in his element. He seemed comfortable and sat back, relaxed among the elegant furnishings and romantic candlelight. While Georgie wasn't a total country hick, she didn't dine out in restaurants and she didn't drive swanky new cars. Her roots were country through and through and she could see the gap between them beginning to widen.

A fire had been lit in the fireplace behind him and Georgie watched the glow reflect through the red wine in their glasses.

'Tell me what's going through that head of yours, Georgie Henderson,' he said, snagging her gaze across the small table.

'I'm just wondering what you're doing with me,' she finally admitted quietly.

'I thought that was obvious.' He grinned, raising an eyebrow.

'Other than *that*,' she corrected.

'What's the problem?' he asked calmly, once he realised she was serious.

Biting her lip, she wondered how to broach the subject delicately, before giving up. She would just be herself and come right out and say it.

'Is this some kind of "see how the other half live" fling?' His eyes seemed to harden, but she ploughed on. 'Come on, you saw my car, while you, on the other hand, drive around in a vehicle that costs as much as a house out here. With your looks and money, you could have any woman you want, and I can't imagine why you'd find anything about me interesting, which confuses me.'

He sat back in his chair, watching her. She'd seen his jaw clench throughout her observations, but he didn't comment straightaway.

'I didn't pick you for a class snob, Georgie,' he finally said, reaching for his glass and taking a sip.

Raising her eyebrows in surprise, she folded her arms and rested them on the table in front of her. 'Me?'

'You're accusing me of having what? Too much money? And that somehow means I'm supposed to only be attracted to women who are rich?'

'I didn't say that.'

'You think I care what kind of car someone drives or where they live?'

'I don't know, I guess that's what I'm trying to work out.'

'I may have money now, but I've worked hard for what I've got. My family has money, but that has nothing to do with me. It belongs to my stepfather and I don't intend to ever take a single cent of his money.'

Georgie picked up on the hardening of his tone when he mentioned his stepfather and stored it away to think about later. 'All right, so you're a self-made man. You're still the complete opposite of me.'

'Then it might surprise you to know that I grew up on a property in Queensland. When my father died, my mother moved us to the city and remarried. I may have done most of my growing up in the city, but I've never been able to get the country out of my blood. We're not as different as you may think.'

She thought it wise not to comment. He couldn't even see how opposite-end-of-the-spectrum they were. It seemed that if you had enough money, you were able to ignore small details like that. She doubted he'd ever known what it was like to live the way she'd grown up, with debt hanging over his head or to worry about how to put food on the table for your family.

'Tell me about the place you manage,' he said, changing the subject when she didn't comment further.

'At the moment we run beef but I'm trying to convince the owner to set up a farm stay as a side business.'

'He's not interested?' Michael asked curiously.

'It's not so much that he's not interested,' she hedged. 'He's old school, you know?' she said, eyeing him levelly. 'He's always been a cattleman, just like his dad and granddad before him. Farm stays are something completely out of his frame of experience.'

'It sounds interesting. What made you think about heading in the farm-stay direction?'

Georgie felt herself relax a little. His interest seemed genuine and they were back on a safe topic. 'Funnily enough, it was Shannon who got me onto it.' She grinned. 'There'd been a big wedding back home and accommodation was really scarce—everything close by had been booked out and Shannon volunteered my place up to billet a family with a couple of kids. They'd come from the city and

hadn't really had any kind of farming experience before, and I don't know, we just had so much fun. I'd never really thought about the things I do every day as *activities*, but these kids couldn't get enough of collecting eggs or watching the dogs work the cattle ... just everyday stuff. They ended up staying an extra night and we had a bonfire and cooked damper and made billy tea ... It was awesome. It got me thinking that maybe there was a possibility we could add an extra income onto the place—especially when things get tight during bad seasons. It'd be good to have at least some kind of income coming in then.'

'I agree, it sounds like it has great potential. Whereabouts is this?'

'Just outside of a little town called Timboora.'

'Is it nearby? Your place?'

She shrugged slightly as she took a sip of her wine, relishing its warmth as it slid down her throat. 'About three hours' drive.'

'Have you decided to stay?' he asked, and Georgie sensed a wariness lingering behind his casual comment.

'I guess there's nothing my farmhand can't handle,' she said.

She was surprised when he added, 'But?'

'But it's hard to let go of the reins, I guess.' She smiled self-consciously.

'I get it,' he said with a nod. 'Would it be rude to invite myself out to your place? I could be a guinea-pig farm-stay guest,' he said, watching her sip her wine.

Georgie eyed him doubtfully. 'You want to come and stay at my place?'

'As a paying guest,' he added. 'I wouldn't expect you to put me up without paying.'

Georgie couldn't ignore the hint of excitement that had sprung to life at his suggestion, despite the little voice that questioned her sanity. This was not like her at all. In fact, this was something Shannon would do, which should have been a flashing red light.

'You're more than welcome to come out and stay.' She heard the words, and she wasn't entirely sure she'd actually said them out loud until he broke into a relieved smile. *Oh well, too late to back out now.*

'Great. I was only booked into my room one more night, and unless you particularly wanted to stay in yours for an extra day, why don't we head off to your place tomorrow morning?'

She was fairly sure she wouldn't miss her motel. 'Sounds good to me.'

'So, the only decision left to make is,' he said, lowering his voice to an octave that sent goosebumps up her arms, 'your place or mine?'

'Hmm, let me think?' she hedged. 'Squishy shower and wet-dog smell, or spa bath and room service? Wow ... that's a really difficult decision to make.'

‘Mine it is, then. Let’s get out of here.’

Five

As they drove the next day, Michael held her hand. It was a new experience for her, and one she was beginning to like a bit too much. He was working his way further and further into her lonely heart every minute. It was almost as though they were a couple, and it was all too easy to envision her future with him in it. That thought alone scared her senseless. In all her dreaming of the future there'd never been anyone else in the picture. It had always focused on buying back Tamban. She hadn't really got further than that.

As they rounded a bend, Georgie felt her excitement grow. 'Here it is, Stoney Creek.'

Driving through the gates, she pulled the car over and turned off the engine.

Michael climbed out and scanned the view before him. As she walked around the ute to join him he pulled her in front of him, circling her waist, and rested his chin on her head. 'This is one beautiful piece of land. How big is it?'

'Around twelve hundred hectares, or close to three thousand acres in the old scale,' she answered with quiet pride.

This place had been like a balm to her raw grief. It had helped ease the pain of losing not only her dad but also her home. That last year of uni had been a terribly hard one and there had been times when she hadn't been sure she was going to make it, but she had. Somehow. Guilt still shadowed the pain of remembering though.

She forced the thoughts away.

It was funny how Michael had assumed earlier that she'd used her degree to go into the corporate or government sector. It wasn't a far-fetched assumption, she supposed. Graduates with her degree were employed across a wide scope of both private and business sectors. That had never been her plan though. She'd applied for a position, freshly graduated, right here at Stoney Creek. Her friends had thought she was crazy.

'You've got a degree, Georgie. Why would you take a job as a farm labourer?' She understood why they thought she'd lost her mind, but at the time she'd just needed something to take her mind off everything she'd so recently

lost and all the dreams that had been stolen from her.

Harry Tompkins had been a godsend. He was a gruff, no-nonsense, hardworking bushman, born and raised on Stoney Creek, but he also had a heart of gold and had seen something in Georgie that she hadn't seen herself.

'How long have you been on this place?' Michael asked.

'Just going on four years.'

'How does it work with the owner? Are they hands-on, or do they let you have the run of the place?'

'If it were up to Harry, he'd never have hired a manager.' She smiled ruefully. 'I originally started here as a general farmhand, but after the first twelve months Harry's health started to really decline. He's eighty-nine,' she added. 'Not that you'd have known it, the old bugger worked harder than someone half his age.'

'So he worked this place up until recently?'

Georgie nodded. 'It wasn't until his daughter and doctor stepped in and forced his hand that he put me on as manager.'

'Doesn't sound like he'd be the kind to go willingly?'

'He isn't. He had a fall and that pretty much sealed his fate.' It still made her sad when she thought about that time. She'd been on the sidelines for much of it, feeling torn between excitement that she would have a chance to manage the place, and despair when she listened to Harry's daughter badgering him to leave the property. She understood her concern, she really did. Harry wasn't a young man and farming was hard work. Her nagging came from concern and love, but her father was a proud man and it hurt to watch him lose so much of his independence after the fall.

Losing control over things you had worked so hard to create was a pain she knew all too well.

She'd watched her own father lose something he'd dedicated his life to. Although for him it was more that he gave up and watched it all fall apart. By the time he cared enough to feel bad, it was too late. She could relate more to Harry and his situation. She'd had to stand by, helpless to do anything, while her future had been ripped away from her and sold off.

Harry had returned to Melbourne with his daughter, intending to come back to Stoney Creek and retire once his hip had healed, but every time it seemed to be getting better, something else would flare up. It was almost as though once he stopped, age decided to sneak up on him and drag him down. It was so unfair.

'I think if he had a say in it, he'd still be here, looking over my shoulder and telling me what I was doing wrong.' She smiled sadly. 'He's in Melbourne, stuck in some aged care home. I don't think he'll be coming back.'

'I'm sorry, Georgie. He sounds like an amazing man.'

‘Yeah. He is. He’s like a grandfather figure, I guess. And a friend. He didn’t have any family that wanted the farm, and he didn’t want it sold off.’ She’d asked him once why he’d chosen her, and he’d said because no one else wanted to work for the lousy pay he’d been offering, but later, after his fall, he told her in a rare moment of emotion that he’d chosen her for the job because he’d seen in her the same passion and love for the land that he had, and he knew his place would be safe in her hands. It was the greatest compliment she’d ever received.

‘I reckon he was lucky to have you,’ Michael said, his arms tightening around her in sympathy. ‘So this was your plan? After university? To manage a property?’

‘Not exactly,’ she hedged, then sighed when she realised he wasn’t prying, not really. He seemed genuinely interested. ‘My plans for after I graduated changed ... unexpectedly. I wasn’t really sure what I wanted to do, but after a few years managing this place, I figured I could use it as a stepping stone.’

‘Stepping stone to what?’

‘To ...’ She stopped. She rarely talked about her dream. Somehow it always sounded so far-fetched—unattainable. ‘Buy my family property back one day.’

Michael looked at her, a little surprised, and she hurried on. ‘One day. I mean, it’s just one of those stupid dreams you have,’ she said with a helpless little wave of her hand.

‘It doesn’t sound stupid. What makes it seem so unattainable?’

‘It just is.’ She eased out of his arms and forced a smile to her lips. ‘It’s a long story, and I’d rather not go into it now.’ She knew by the strange way he looked at her that he really wanted to know more, but thankfully he didn’t push her on it. She wasn’t sure why she’d even told him that much.

‘Well, the place looks great. Good feed. Does it have water?’

Georgie smiled, relieved that he was happy to move on. ‘The river runs the length of the property. It’s one of the main attractions. It’s perfect for fishing and swimming.’

‘I can see why it would be a hit with visitors. This is a really beautiful property, Georgie.’ The admiration she detected in his voice made her feel ridiculously proud. They got back into the ute and headed down the long drive towards the main house. The house was old but she adored it. It had been the first thing she’d fallen in love with the day she came here to meet with Harry about the farmhand job. The original house had been built more than a hundred years before and made up the rear of the current home. Over the years, as the family had grown, the owners had expanded the small farmhouse and had built an extension—effectively a second house—joined to the original with a double-pitched roofline and wide timber verandah wrapped around the entire building to

make one large house. Over the years the house had been lived in by different family members and experienced more than a few lean years when its maintenance was the least of their concerns compared to other farm priorities. The years of wear were beginning to show.

She parked the ute and instantly they were greeted by a black-and-tan wriggling bundle of excited canine.

‘Someone missed you by the looks of it,’ Michael commented as he stood back and watched her greet the kelpie affectionately.

‘This is Titch,’ she said, rubbing the dog’s head between her hands. ‘Oh, I missed you too,’ she said, laughing at the dog’s raucous behaviour. ‘Come on inside,’ she said, straightening.

‘You don’t lock your doors?’ Michael asked as they crossed the verandah and she opened the screen door of the farmhouse.

‘Matt’s here somewhere,’ she shrugged as she looked around.

After Harry left, the other part-time farmhand he’d hired left too. Without notice. Apparently he didn’t like the fact she was given the manager job when there’d been a perfectly good man who could have had it. She’d been working herself into the ground when Matt had turned up on her doorstep one day, asking for a job. After a week’s trial, Georgie knew he’d be perfect for the place. His friendly, carefree character and quiet efficiency allowed him to handle whatever work needed to be done without her having to tell him what to do.

Michael dropped her overnight bag on the floor as he looked about him with interest.

‘Matt? Being your ...’

‘My employee,’ she finished dryly. ‘You think I keep an extra boyfriend around here or something?’

‘Just checking.’

‘Well, I’m glad we’ve established that,’ she told him drolly.

‘So, will this be the accommodation for your farm-stay guests?’ he asked, changing the subject.

‘It’s one of the options. I’d like to put in a few small cabins down near the river. I think they’d be popular with families and fishermen. The main house would be for the overnight visitors. We’d have to build camping facilities and a shower and toilet block. That’s the plan,’ she said, pulling herself up abruptly. ‘But Harry isn’t really interested, so it probably won’t happen.’

‘It sounds like an awesome plan. I don’t think you should give up on it.’

Georgie gave a shrug. ‘It’s not my decision unfortunately.’

‘Could you go to Harry’s daughter with it?’

‘I couldn’t do that to Harry. He already feels like everything’s been taken

away from him. I mean, it has, but I always call him each week with an update and he still reads over all the financials and paperwork. I think it's the only thing that keeps him going, to be honest.'

Initially he hadn't wanted anything to do with the place. He'd fallen into a deep depression when he'd first moved down to Melbourne, but Georgie had refused to give up and continued calling him and talking about the farm as though he were still there and they were chatting about the day-to-day running over dinner at the kitchen table. Eventually he came around.

'Ideally I'd like to educate people while they're on a holiday. I mean there's such a widening gap out there, with misinformation being spread around. The agriculture industry as a whole needs to start explaining to the general public how things are done and why, so that producers can stop being thought of as heartless animal abusers. If people could only see how much we care about the animals we raise, they wouldn't so readily believe the propaganda that's going around.'

'That's always been there though, hasn't it?' Michael countered.

'To an extent,' she agreed, 'but social media, makes it so much easier to spread misconceptions ... all you have to do is read a story online and hit share without even knowing if it's true. I know farmers who've had hate campaigns run against them by animal activist groups. It's ruined businesses, families ... I don't want to see that happen to anyone else.'

'I think that's a great idea ... in theory,' he replied. 'Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying it's not needed, but I don't know, I'm not sure you can change people's minds if they're determined to see only one side. I think the farming fraternity should just concentrate on their work and ignore all the extremists.'

'Those extremists tend to have very loud voices that attract the media. If we don't stand up and show our side of the story, then the general public are going to start believing all the scaremongering they're doing.'

'Fair point.'

Georgie studied him curiously. Clearly his early farm roots weren't as strong as he thought they were, which made her think that his 'find a farm' venture was probably just as she'd originally thought—a way to recapture his childhood with a weekender in the country. She tried to push away the green-eyed monster, but there was a prickle of irritation at the thought there were people out there who could afford to buy property with about as much thought or care as buying a new car. She wondered what that kind of life would feel like, then quickly dismissed the idea. She'd rather work her butt off and earn everything she owned than take it for granted because it came too easily.

'So,' she said, dropping the keys on the kitchen bench, 'would you like a tour

of the house or a tour of the property first?’

His smile slanted a little and she knew what he was going to say before he said it. ‘I reckon we should start with a tour of the bedroom.’

‘Of course you do,’ she chuckled.

‘But if you’d rather do a tour of the property first ...’ he said, making a move towards the front door.

‘I didn’t say that,’ she said, catching his hand as he moved past her and tugged him closer. ‘It probably makes sense since we’re already inside anyway,’ she said as his lips drew closer to hers. After that it was a moot point really. Who’d have thought a tour of the house would end at the bedroom and go no further for most of the afternoon?’

Six

As they sat outside on the verandah, Michael watched the sun pick up the highlights in Georgie's hair, the warm tones adding depth to her chocolate brown eyes. He wished he could dive into those eyes and drown.

'Tell me about your family.'

He watched as the sparkle left her eyes and sadness crept in. Immediately he wished he could take back his question.

'My mum died when I was thirteen. My dad about five years ago.'

'That must be really tough. I'm sorry. I know how hard it was losing my dad when I was a kid, I can't imagine losing my mum as well.'

'It was ... *is* hard,' she amended. She'd never got used to not having her mum there for all her major milestones and on hand to talk to about the normal things mums and daughters talked about. There were days when she missed them both so much.

After her mother's death, Shannon's family had filled the gaping void in Georgie's life. She spent a great deal of time with the Sinclairs. At their house there was no need to walk on eggshells for fear of setting her father off in a rage. She was able to laugh and not feel guilty. She could be a kid over there and not worry about bills her father refused to deal with or work out what groceries they could afford for the week. And best of all, she never had to eat alone at the Sinclairs'. To this day she hated eating at a table in silence. She'd prefer to eat outside on the verandah with the sound of insects and farm animals nearby than sit in the lonely kitchen and eat by herself.

'It makes sense that you'd want your property back. Had your family been off the land for long?'

Georgie sent him a confused glance.

'It's just that, I assumed your family sold the property some time ago ... since you didn't inherit it ...' He stopped at the look on her face. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to pry.'

'No, it's okay. Dad sold the farm while I was away at uni. It was a bit of a shock.' She dropped her gaze to the weathered boards of the verandah. 'I wasn't

aware that things were so bad. I thought I'd be able to come home and help him turn the place around,' Georgie said with a bitter twist of her lips. 'Like I was somehow going to sweep in armed with a degree and save the day. He'd never said a word to me that things were as desperate as they were. There was no warning at all. I should have been paying more attention.'

'Surely you couldn't have done anything though.'

'I should have come home more often. I could have made him talk to me.'

'I'm sure he was doing what he thought he had to do to protect you. He wouldn't have wanted you to worry,' Michael said gently.

'That's not the point though,' Georgie said and let out a slow breath. 'My dad ... he was never much of a talker,' she said with a lopsided grin. 'After Mum passed, he was even less so. The house was so quiet all the time. I hardly saw him—he'd be out working when I went to school in the morning and sometimes he wouldn't come back in until I'd already gone to bed. I'd cook dinner and leave it in the fridge for him, and in the morning the plate would be there in the sink, but there'd be no sign of him. It was like living with a ghost.'

Michael frowned.

'The thing is,' she hurried on, 'I should have made him talk to me but instead we just coexisted. It became normal to ignore how dysfunctional it was to have a house where there was barely any conversation and where we just pretended everything was fine. Once I left for uni, Dad didn't even bother to hide his drinking anymore. I made excuses not to come home for so long—it was just too sad. I saw him deteriorating, but I couldn't get him to get help ... the only time I actually saw anything like emotion in him was when I told him I wanted to drop out of uni and come home to help out.'

Michael slid his hand over hers and squeezed it gently. 'You were a kid, Georgie. You can't blame yourself.'

That was just it though. She did. She felt as though she'd let him down, and being able to see things with an adult point of view did little to comfort her. When she looked back now, she realised there'd been lots of signs she should have picked up on but hadn't. She remembered him looking at her—really looking at her—for what seemed like the first time in years and her throat still closed up when she remembered how, for just a split second, she'd seen the father she remembered from when she was younger ... before their lives had fallen apart. *You make something of your life, you hear me?* he'd said. *You're going to do great things, George. I know it. You get that degree.* So she'd ignored everything inside her telling her to do something to help him and she'd gone back to uni instead. Even now, years after it had all ended, the pain and anger were still raw wounds.

‘I can understand how your dad selling must have been really hard to accept, but from my experience, sometimes as hard a decision as it is, it’s often better than being under a cloud of debt and stress.’

‘Maybe. Although not in Dad’s case. He was hounded into selling to a large corporation. When he refused, they put more pressure on him, then hovered like a pack of vultures until he had no choice but to sell to them for a fraction of what they’d first offered.’ She stood up and walked down the front steps and he followed. ‘He sold without even telling me.’

‘Sounds like he didn’t have much choice,’ Michael soothed.

Georgie snapped her eyes to his. ‘He didn’t. Not by then. But if he’d just stopped drowning his sorrows and stopped being too proud to ask for help, maybe we could have held on to it long enough for me to graduate and come back and help him. I had so many plans for that place,’ she said sadly, blinking back unexpected tears. ‘I just wish he’d fought harder instead of giving up on it ... on me.’

‘I know it’s not the same as your own place, but you’ve got your chance to put all those plans into action here. That has to count for something, doesn’t it?’

Georgie nodded her head, pushing away the pain of the past. ‘I love this place, but you’re right, it’s not the same. It’s not mine.’ They both contemplated in silence for a few moments. ‘I think that’s why I hate them so much,’ she said. Michael looked confused. ‘The corporations. All they see is dirt and profit. They haven’t put their own blood and sweat into these places, they have no connection to the land they buy, they just accumulate it.’

The old house groaned as though sympathising with her pain and she walked across the clearing, her shoes kicking up puffs of dust in her wake, to rest her arms along the top of the weathered wooden stockyards.

‘I hate knowing someone else is driving down the track that leads to the dam my grandfather built or past the hollow where Shannon and I built our clubhouse when we were eight. They won’t even realise that Barney, my first horse, is buried under the big fig tree, or that the ridge was the last place I sat with my mother and watched a sunrise before she died.’ She swiped at the tears, angry that after all this time she still fell apart if she talked about it.

Michael stood next to her, his hip touching hers, silently offering his support.

The fact that he didn’t offer token words of sympathy added more points in his favour. Georgie hated to cry, but she hated crying in front of someone else even more.

They listened to the squabble of birds settling in for the evening and Georgie pushed away from the fence, turning so that her back rested against it.

‘So your old place was bought by a corporation?’ he asked slowly. ‘Chances

are it won't be put up for sale as it was. They usually sell properties as part of a package, made up of multiple parcels of land. Buying back your property may not be possible.'

Her frown deepened as she tapped the heel of her shoe in the dirt.

'You have no idea how much I loathe those people.' She remembered watching them buy out countless families around the district, waiting until the owners were at their lowest point, then scooping up their land in a big net. 'I don't care how unlikely it is, I'm not giving up. One day I'll get Tamban back. You just wait and see.'

Michael studied her quietly, and she gave herself a mental shake. This was why she didn't like to talk about the past. It was just too depressing. 'Come on, I want to show you something,' she said, pushing away from the rail and forcing away thoughts of Tamban.



The sound of an engine approaching made them stop and turn around and Michael watched as a lanky man on a quad pulled up.

'Hey,' Georgie greeted him. 'Matt, this is Michael.'

Michael leaned across Georgie and shook the man's hand, noting the firm grip and holding his measured look.

'G'day,' Matt said, releasing Michael's hand.

'Michael's staying for a few days,' Georgie said, and he thought he detected the slightest touch of nervousness in her tone.

'Good-o,' Matt said, turning his curious gaze back onto Michael again.

'We're just heading down to the creek. You coming up for dinner later?'

'Nah. I'll grab something in town. I'm heading into the feed store in a sec, before it shuts. See ya around,' he said, sending a nod to Michael as he restarted the quad and left them to their walk.

'Seems like a decent guy,' Michael said in the silence after the engine noise had faded.

'Yeah. He's great,' Georgie answered, sounding a little distracted. 'The thing is, I've never really had anyone stay over before,' she said after a few moments. 'It felt a little weird.'

'I see.'

She looked up sharply and frowned. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Nothing. Only, if he's your work colleague, why would it be weird introducing us?'

'Because I've never had to introduce a ... male *friend* before. Matt and I don't really share our private lives ... I mean, I don't ask who he goes into town to

visit.'

He lifted an eyebrow at *friend*, but bit back a smile. He thought she'd been about to use the word boyfriend and changed her mind. He couldn't recall the last time he'd been a boyfriend to someone, probably not since high school. 'He seemed okay with it.'

'Yeah. It's all good, it was just a bit ...'

'Weird,' he supplied with a grin. It cheered him up immensely to know that he was the first guy she'd ever wanted to bring out here.

They headed down a trail that eventually led to a river and Michael was immediately captivated by the gentle sounds of water trickling over smooth rocks. It was certainly a beautiful place, but his mind wasn't on the scenery. Something bothered him. Tamban. The name sounded familiar, but he wasn't sure if it was because he'd heard it somewhere or Georgie had mentioned it earlier. Either way, he had a strange sensation of warning and he had no idea why.

The water was freezing, but they rolled up their jeans and paddled in the shallows. He listened to her as she told him more about her plans and his heart swelled with a strange longing at her soft laughter. With the last rays of sunshine on his shoulders and her head tucked beneath his chin, they sat together on the warm rocks beside the water and it felt like he'd finally found his way home.

Late that night as Georgie slept, Michael made his way outside to make a phone call. Punching in a number, he waited for the grumpy voice on the other end to answer.

'Yeah, I know what time it is. Sorry. Listen, I need some information. Does the name Tamban mean anything to you?' He heard his younger brother mumble some expletives as he struggled to wake up. 'Look, just do me a favour and do some digging. Let me know if anything comes up. I don't have internet.'

'Where the hell are you?'

'I'm relaxing. Isn't that what you keep telling me to do?'

'Like you've ever listened to me before,' Brent yawned. 'What's this about anyway?'

'I don't know yet. I just heard the name and it rings a bell. I'm just not sure why. Call me back when you get anything, okay? Oh, and keep it to yourself.' He disconnected the call and stared out through the darkness as the crickets chirped, merrily oblivious to the turmoil swirling inside him.



The next day they drove around the rest of the property. It was mostly cleared grazing land, the majority flat and with a good supply of grass to sustain a fair-

sized herd of cattle. Already Michael had begun calculating the numbers and was impressed by the potential of the place. The Stoney Creek National Park, the inspiration for the farm's name, backed onto the property across the river and there were plenty of hiking and sightseeing activities to include as part of the farm stay's activities. He looked over at Georgie while she drove and she took her eyes from the track, sending him a shy smile. Every time he thought he had her figured out she threw him off course.

'Did you decide on that property you were looking at in Armidale?' she asked.
'Not yet.'

'If you do decide to buy it, does that mean you'll be relocating there?'

Michael wasn't sure how to answer. He didn't want to lie to her, but he also wasn't sure he wanted to get into details of his business just yet. 'No, probably not. It'd be used as a fattening property.'

Georgie nodded. 'How big is your other property?'

Michael shifted in his seat. *Which one?*

When he hesitated, she sent him another of those looks that said she clearly thought she was talking to someone a little slow on the uptake. 'I'm assuming if this one will be a fattening property, then you must have another one somewhere you're sending them from?'

'Oh. Yeah. It's ah, pretty big.' Pretty big? What the hell was wrong with him? Why couldn't he just tell her upfront what his business really was? *Because you're worried you know what she'll say*, a little voice whispered back at him.

'I knew it. You're such a city boy. You probably have a manager on your place, don't you?' she chuckled.

'Ah, yeah, actually I do.' He did. Several managers actually ... over a number of different properties.

'I knew it from the moment I saw you in that suit. Bigshot city boy who decided to dabble in some land and cattle. What kind of business are you in anyway? You know ... your day job?'

Shit. 'Import, export. Finance. That kind of stuff.'

'And you're based ... where?'

'Brisbane, mainly. That's where the head office is.'

'So why buy a property down this way?'

'Brent had a friend recommended it. Figured we'd check it out.' He needed to shut this line of conversation down now. Lying had never sat well with him, but damn it, he really liked her. If she could just get to know him first, see what kind of man he was, maybe she wouldn't immediately shut him out once she heard the truth.

Lying to her wasn't exactly showing her what kind of man he was, he

conceded silently, but the fact was, after hearing the loathing in her voice when she'd told him about the corporations who'd bought out her father, he decided it was probably smarter to keep his mouth shut for the time being until he could prove to her that not all corporations were the same.

He was proud of his business. He'd built it from scratch. He'd thrown everything into it to make it the success it was today and he had nothing to feel ashamed about. Whatever corporation had bought Georgie's family's place wasn't run with the same integrity he prided himself on, and he knew that once he showed her how he did business, she'd understand. But he also wasn't stupid. Her past was still a painful issue and he'd need to tread carefully if he wanted to see where this thing between them could go.

'Tell me about your family,' she prompted, bringing him back to the present with a thud.

'There's not much to tell.'

'Do you have any other siblings?' she prodded.

'No. My Mum married Derrick after my father died. It was just him and Brent before Mum and I came along. I guess technically Brent's my stepbrother, but we don't think about it like that. To me he's always just been my younger brother.'

'I'm sorry about your dad,' she said softly.

Michael gave a brisk nod. He'd had a lot longer to adjust to the death of his father than Georgie had, but it never really got any less lonely thinking about him not being around.

'I often think about how things might have turned out if Dad had remarried after Mum passed away. I can't actually imagine it though.'

'Yeah, well, I used to sometimes wonder what it would have been like if Mum hadn't remarried ... but then I wouldn't have had Brent. Although there are days when I reckon I would trade him in, given half a chance,' he said with a lopsided grin.

'You don't get on with your stepdad?' she asked curiously.

'We're not close,' he said, trying for a diplomatic response. It was grossly understated. His mother's second marriage had made him highly cynical about love and relationships. He'd struggled for a long time over the fact that his mother, who had supposedly loved his father, had remarried barely a year after his death, to a man who was the complete opposite.

Derrick Matthew had never made a secret of the fact he found Michael lacking, almost completely ignoring him in favour of Brent, his own flesh and blood. It should have driven a wedge between the two boys and maybe it would have if Brent had been any other kid. His little brother had led a sheltered and

isolated life after his mother had died, so gaining a big brother had filled a hole in his lonely kid's heart.

Anger simmered away inside Michael's gut as he thought about the man who had made his younger years so miserable. Still, had it not been for Derrick Matthew, Michael probably wouldn't have felt the burning desire to prove himself and work hard in order to become every inch as successful as his stepfather.

So how, then, had he suddenly found himself captivated by a woman he'd only just met? What had happened to Mr Keep Everyone At A Distance? He was renowned for not having had any long-term relationships, but that didn't mean he didn't respect women—he did, a great deal. He simply didn't want to hurt anyone with false expectations. He'd never found someone he could imagine himself waking up next to for the next fifty years. His gaze fell on the woman beside him and his heart gave a lurch. *Until now.* The words seemed to echo around him. *What the hell?* He wasn't even sure where the thought had come from. And yet, here he was, acting like a lovesick fool over the woman.

After the initial surprise, he found that he wasn't as alarmed as he'd expected to be. Over the years he'd learned to trust his gut when it came to making decisions—hadn't it always served him well in the past? Whatever this was between them ... was *right*.

There was only one aspect that continued to niggle a warning, but he was working on that and confident he could sort it out before it became an issue. If he couldn't ... well, that didn't bear thinking about. Once Michael Delacourt set his sights on something, he'd move heaven and earth to make sure he got it.



That night they cooked their meal on the barbecue. There was a nip in the air, but it was too nice to stay inside. Coming over to stand beside Michael as he cooked the sizzling meat, she teased him lightly. 'You look so big and manly with those barbecue tongs in your hand.'

'I feel so big and manly with them in my hand. How's the salad coming, wench?'

Wrapping her arms around his hips, she felt him go still before he turned to look down into her smiling face.

'Am I crazy or do you feel it too?' he asked roughly.

She didn't bother asking what he meant, she knew. 'I feel it. I don't understand it, but I feel it.'

Snuggled against his chest she heard the beat of his heart and wondered at the unexpectedness of it all. She'd been working so hard over the past four years

she'd rarely given any thought to a serious relationship. She'd supposed sometime in the future she'd eventually have a husband and kids, but it really hadn't been anything she'd wanted right at this moment in her life. She still had so far to go. Maybe her dream of buying back Tamban wasn't going to eventuate, but it was something that kept her focused and working hard. It was *her* dream. How would a husband and family fit into that plan? How could her dream possibly be as important to the man she married? No matter how she'd looked at it, that scenario just hadn't fitted into her life ... until now.

The thought brought her back to earth. Would Michael be the kind of man who would allow her to continue to follow her dream? In theory, he seemed like a very supportive kind of person. Maybe, being a businessman, he'd understand her need to continue to run her own business, make her own decisions ... but as a husband, would he be so understanding? *Getting a bit ahead of yourself, aren't you, Henderson?* Yes. Yes, she was. She'd just met the bloke, for goodness sake. That's what was so scary. She barely knew anything about him and yet she felt as though she'd known him forever. He just felt ... right.

There'd be time for reality to hit once he returned home, but for now there was just the two of them and if this was her momentary escape from real life, then she intended to enjoy it while it lasted.

Seven

Georgie glanced over at her phone on the bench and saw Shannon's name flash across the screen as it rang.

'Georgie, it's me.'

'Shannon? You made it back to the city safe and sound, I take it?'

'I did ... but I have some news.'

'Oh? What news?'

'I'm moving to Brisbane.'

'You're *what*?' Georgie saw Michael's head snap up at her startled reply.

'I know, I know, it sounds crazy ... but I'm so excited.'

'Shannon,' Georgie put down the spoon she'd been stirring the coffee with and sent a swift glance towards Michael on the lounge nearby, 'what are you doing?'

'I'm going to work for Brent. You know I've been looking for something else—I'm sick of my old job and Brent offered me a management role in admin. It's too good an opportunity to turn down.'

'But you hardly *know the guy*,' she all but hissed, lowering her voice a little, mindful that the guy in question's brother was sitting within hearing distance.

'I know enough—besides, it's the job I'm moving for ... the hunky boss is just an added bonus.'

'What happens when this whole thing blows over? Do you really want to be stuck working for a guy you once ... dated?' *For want of a better word.*

'Who said it will?'

Georgie hesitated. Who was she to be lecturing anyone? She was acting just as irresponsibly. Although *moving* to be with him was going above and beyond a weekend fling.

'Are you sure you've thought it through? Maybe you should give yourself a week or so to decide. See if it's still a good idea once everything's back to normal.'

'You've got to take opportunities when they present themselves, George,' Shannon said in a soft, solemn voice, and the use of her father's nickname for

her hit home hard. 'I'm excited about this. I need a change. There's just one small problem,' she added hesitantly, and Georgie waited for the bad news she knew was coming. 'I'll need to go to a conference ... and it's on the same week we were going to New Zealand.'

'What!'

'I know. I'm sorry,' Shannon said with a groan. 'I feel shitty about it, but at least we hadn't booked the flights yet and the accommodation can be cancelled without a drama.'

Georgie let out a small sigh. 'It's okay. I guess we can do the trip some other time.'

'I promise we'll rebook it as soon as I'm settled. I'm really sorry.'

'Don't worry about it,' she said, then gave a frustrated shake of her head. It was Shannon's life; she was an adult and could make her own choices. There was no denying she sounded excited, so who was Georgie to put a dampener on things? 'It's okay. If this is what you want, then I'm happy for you.'

'I love you, George.'

'Love you too. Call me when you're there.' She hung up and let out a long sigh.

'Who was that?' Michael asked, watching her from the lounge.

'That was Shannon, and your brother just offered her a job and she's moving to Brisbane. Can he even do that? I thought you were the boss?'

'Well, technically Brent runs his own division,' he said with a grin. 'But I could overrule him if you want me to,' he added. She wasn't altogether sure he was joking.

'No, Shannon reckons this is the best thing that's ever happened to her. She'd never forgive me if she found out I'd sabotaged the whole thing.'

'If it makes you feel better, when it comes to the business, Brent's a professional. He wouldn't offer her a job if he didn't think she could do it. He's clearly seen that Shannon's got talents we could use.'

'Oh, I'm certain he knows all about her talents,' she scoffed, then rolled her eyes. In all fairness, when it came to her career, Shannon was a perfectionist and whoever employed her always went out of their way to accommodate her because she was great at her job. And she *had* been starting to get restless. She loved her job working in the finance sector, but she'd gone as high as she could in her department and the job she wanted was held by a woman who'd been there for twenty years and wouldn't be going anywhere until she retired. Still, this job must have something pretty impressive to have lured her away.

'Just how big is this import-export business of yours anyway?' she asked, eyeing him curiously. Over the past couple of days, she'd almost forgotten about

her initial impression of him in that expensive suit.

‘It’s a little more complicated than that. I mean, the export side of things is only a part of the overall business,’ he started to explain, after a brief hesitation that made him look almost uncomfortable. Her phone rang, cutting him off, and she glanced down to see Matt’s name on the screen. ‘Sorry, just a sec,’ she apologised, turning to take the call.



Michael let out a slow breath as she turned away to take the call. He wasn’t sure if he was grateful or annoyed by the interruption. She’d put him on the spot with her question, and for the briefest of moments he’d been ready to explain exactly what his company was. It’s what he should have done straightaway and would have done without even thinking if she hadn’t made it clear how she felt about corporations.

It was stupid really. He needed to come out and talk about it. He knew putting it off was going to make things seem weirder the longer he took to tell her, but his gut was still warning him not to bring it up yet. Something wasn’t right; he just wished he knew what it was. Just because he ran a business—some might refer to it as a corporation, he conceded—didn’t mean it was anything like the unscrupulous ones she viewed with such open hostility.

But would she hear him out? If he told her about his company, would she listen to him or would she immediately shut him down? From what she’d told him about her father’s experience, he knew she was justifiably angry. The wounds were still raw, but surely she would understand that corporations were run by different people adhering to different morals and *his* company didn’t run people off their properties or intentionally do harm.

He disliked the fact he wasn’t being openly honest with her. Honesty was something he prided himself on, and it hurt to realise that despite the fact he hadn’t *lied* to her, he was treading a very thin line by omitting certain facts. The company *did* deal in export ... his livestock export trade was a major part of his business. He just hadn’t revealed the scale of it to her.

She assumed he dabbled in cattle on a smallholding somewhere as some sideline interest and ran his actual moneymaking business separately. That wasn’t the whole truth. His smallholdings were, in fact, vast holdings. His company, Delacourt Holdings, owned large tracts of land—and most of it had at one time been family farms just like Tamban. Only, he knew that he’d never resorted to strong-arm tactics or shady deals to acquire any of his properties. But would she listen to that if he told her now? He could still hear the pain in her voice when she’d spoken about her dad, and he daren’t risk it ... not yet. He

needed time to show her the kind of man he was. They'd only had a few days to get to know each other and he needed more time for her to trust him. To believe him when he showed her the proof—let her see with her own eyes how this kind of business was run when it was done the right way.

'Sorry, I just had to tell Matt something before I forgot,' Georgie said when she came back.

'All good.' He caught her hand as she moved closer and she curled up on the lounge beside him. 'So what trip were you talking about with Shannon earlier?'

'We were going to go to New Zealand for a holiday next month, and now thanks to your *brother*,' she said with added emphasis, 'she isn't going.'

'Are you disappointed?'

'A little. Although if I'm honest, I'm also a little relieved. I didn't want to fork out money on a holiday when I could have been saving it.' She'd been on such a strict budget for so long that Shannon had practically had to force her to use money from her savings to set aside for the holiday.

'There's my practical girl,' he chuckled.

She lightly elbowed him in the ribs. 'It's all right for some.' She snuggled back into his body and wriggled her hips provocatively in order to get a response, then added as an afterthought, 'I wanted to go to Hawaii anyway.'

'Well, I don't know about Hawaii, but I can take you to heaven and back,' he growled in her ear and turned her swiftly so that she lay beneath him.

'That is *the worst* pick-up line I've ever heard,' she scoffed.

But she soon found herself biting her lip as he went on to prove it. Clearly she wasn't above falling for a corny line or two.



The long weekend came to an abrupt end and the thought of saying goodbye to Michael was every bit as miserable as Georgie had anticipated.

The drive back to Armidale was in stark contrast to their trip out. Had it really only been a few days? She felt as though it had been so much longer. How could one person, a complete stranger until days ago, suddenly become the centre of her world? She had never felt like this before. She was always the first to scoff at movies that pushed the idea of love at first sight; she usually wondered why the heroine never worried the guy could be a serial killer or something. And yet here she was ...

'Change your mind and fly to Brisbane with me,' Michael said as large billboards began appearing by the side of the road, advertising Armidale businesses. She felt it too—the approach of reality.

'I can't,' she said sadly. She was pretty sure it wasn't a serious request, just a

last-minute attempt to hold on to whatever this crazy moment had been.

He was quiet for a few minutes as the airport came into view. ‘I’ve got two important meetings coming up this week that I can’t get out of, but I’m going to get my assistant to juggle the rest of my schedule so I can be back here by the weekend.’

‘You’re coming back?’ She hadn’t meant to say it with quite so much alarm.

‘That’s not what you want?’ he asked hesitantly, which Georgie was pretty sure was not a common reaction from this man.

‘No, I mean, yes, that’s what I want,’ she said feeling flustered. ‘It’s just ... your business ... don’t you have to, I don’t know, *run it?*’

‘That’s why I have assistants,’ he pointed out, his fingers playing with the hair at the base of her neck.

‘If it’s too much ...’ he said after she didn’t reply. ‘I know this whole thing’s been pretty intense.’

‘No, it’s not too much,’ she said quickly, pulling into a car space and turning to face him. ‘*It has* been intense, but I want to see you again ... I just don’t know how it’s going to work. The distance thing.’ She waved a hand in the direction of the airstrip.

‘It’s not that far if we fly,’ he shrugged.

‘Michael, I can’t afford to buy plane tickets all that often.’

‘I’ll take care of it,’ he said and kissed her, deep and full of longing. It distracted her from her brief moment of unease when he promised to *take care of it*. As he rested his forehead against hers, that terrible emptiness filled her once more. It was over. He was going back to his world and leaving her far behind.

She felt rather proud of herself for not crying. She just stood there and watched him walk up the stairs and into the small aircraft that would fly him out of her life. Then she turned and walked back to her faithful old ute and drove herself back to the humble farm-manager job that was waiting for her.

He wasn’t coming back.

That was the thought that continued to echo through her mind as she attempted to drag herself back to reality. It was one of those once in a lifetime, tell the grandkids stories—well, maybe not the grandkids—but that’s all it was. And now it was over. The sooner she accepted that, the less it would hurt when the weekend came and went, and no fantasy man stepped back off the plane to greet her.

Eight

For the first part of her drive home, she wallowed in self-pity and listened to sad country songs, adjusting to life after Michael Delacourt. However, a little over an hour into the trip her phone began to ping and after three message notifications she pulled over and dug her phone from her bag.

Landed. See? Nothing to this distance thing.

Miss you.

Rearranging the schedule now.

Georgie shook her head and chuckled, putting her phone back in her bag and pulling out onto the road. *Nothing to it*, she thought as she stared down the long straight road ahead. He'd arrived in Brisbane before she was even halfway home. Maybe he was serious, she thought a little hopefully. But the cold voice of reason only raised an eyebrow at her doubtfully. *Don't get your hopes up.*

By Thursday afternoon Georgie was dragging her way through the day. She'd been stuck in the office paying bills and ordering feed for most of the morning, and Matt had come up at lunchtime to tell her the tank pump that pumped the water from the creek up to the top paddocks, where she currently had the cattle, had blown up. She'd called the hardware store in town to check they had the part she needed for the repair, only to be told it had to be ordered in. The pumps had been on her list of things to bring up with Harry. They needed updating. They were all old, and while they'd outlasted pretty much anything that was made nowadays, they'd all been repaired to within an inch of their lives too many times and it was getting harder, not to mention more expensive, to track down parts for them. They'd have to move the cattle until they could fix the pump, which was no easy feat given the number of cattle.

When she eventually arrived back at the house, jeans filthy, her hair sweat-soaked and caked in dust, the last thing she felt like doing was dealing with the unexpected visitor in a hire car.

She parked the quad bike and walked towards the house, wiping an arm across her face in an attempt to at least look presentable, but her steps faltered as the man on her verandah stood up and grinned down at her from the top step.

‘Hey cowgirl. So this is what you get up to when I’m not here to distract you?’

Georgie felt her mouth drop open—she knew she looked like a stunned mullet, but she couldn’t help it. She literally would not have been more surprised if the cows she just mustered had all stood up on their hind legs and performed a flash mob dance.

‘Michael?’ she squeaked, her brain still struggling to come to terms with the fact the man she’d convinced herself wouldn’t ever be back was indeed standing right in front of her.

His deep chuckle set off a tsunami of emotion inside her and as he started down the steps, she launched herself into his arms with a small cry. He felt so good, his strong arms holding her tightly against him, and he also smelled so good—instantly she pulled away. She smelled like cow and dust, with maybe a touch of wet dog thrown in for good measure.

He looked down at her, confused by her abrupt move. ‘I’ll get your clothes dirty,’ she murmured, feeling self-conscious. She looked like a train wreck.

‘You think I care about my clothes?’ He hitched up an eyebrow and she felt her insides melt as he tugged her back against him and kissed her.

She’d missed this so much. It had only been three days since she’d seen him, but it had felt like a year. *He was really here.*

When they pulled apart again Georgie could only stare at him. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I couldn’t wait till the weekend,’ he shrugged. ‘I finished what I had to do early, so I came out today to surprise you. *Surprise,*’ he said lightly, but Georgie wondered if she’d imagined the slightest trace of uncertainty underneath.

‘It worked.’ She smiled up at him and felt a ridiculous urge to cry. *Seriously?* What was going on with her lately?

The sound of a motorbike engine in the distance reminded her where they were, and that Matt would be wondering what the hell was going on if he turned up and saw them. ‘Come inside. I should get cleaned up.’

‘Now that’s a great idea. I think you did get my clothes all sweaty and dirty,’ he said, dusting at the front of the blue business shirt he wore, unbuttoned at the throat and the sleeves rolled up. When he looked up at her mortified expression he grinned. ‘Pretty sure I’ll have to take a shower now.’

‘Oh really? How convenient. You can go first then,’ she said, walking past him and heading inside to the hall cupboard. She handed him a towel with a smug glance.

‘Even *I* know you can’t waste water in the country,’ he said, shaking his head sadly. ‘Looks like we’ll have to share the shower.’

She smiled after him as he walked towards the bathroom and beckoned her with a crooked finger. Like he even needed to encourage her, she thought, already unbuttoning her shirt. It was funny how she was able to forget all about her crap day, when everything had gone wrong, the minute this man walked back into her life. If every crap day ended like this, she wouldn't mind how many of them she had.



Timboora was a small village off the beaten track. It was inland from everywhere and no major roads ran through it, so for all intents and purposes it pretty much didn't exist for the rest of the world. It had a population of just over two thousand, and Georgie loved the big wide streets and shops with old-fashioned verandahs that lined the main street. As far as small rural towns went, Timboora was well serviced. They had most of the essentials: a chemist, bakery, grocery store, petrol station, café and takeaway, and no country town is complete without the iconic pub. Once upon a time Timboora had several, but now only one remained and it did a great counter lunch, which was where Georgie had decided to take Michael.

'Hey, Georgie, I haven't seen you in here for ages. How's things going?' asked a lean woman with the leathery look of someone who'd spent their life outdoors.

'Hi Peg, things are going great. How's Pully doing?'

'Oh, you know Pully. Won't let a little thing like a heart attack keep him down,' the woman said drolly, but her gaze had fallen on Michael, and Georgie saw undisguised curiosity light up her eyes. 'Who have we got here?'

'Peg, this is Michael,' Georgie said, trying to keep things as light as possible.

'Oh really?' Peg tilted her head like a curious bird as she inspected Michael from across the bar.

Georgie felt a blush creeping up her neck and inwardly cursed. She was a grown-arse adult and didn't owe any kind of explanation to anyone about her personal life. Who cared if the locals felt a need to gossip?

'Hello, Peg. It's nice to meet you,' Michael said, leaning across the bar to extend his hand.

Peg took it without hesitation, but her eyes still shone with a glint of curiosity. 'Here for a few days?'

'Just a short break, yep,' Michael confirmed.

'I see.'

'Anyway, we'd like to order lunch,' Georgie jumped in, hoping to bring a halt to any further speculation.

Peg picked up her notepad but sent Georgie a knowing look, thankfully taking their order without any further questioning. Georgie wasted no time finding a table for them nearby.

Michael refused her offer to come with him to buy drinks, and when he returned he was wearing a wry smile.

‘Oh no, what now?’

‘I just met Rocky,’ he said drolly.

‘Oh, yeah. I forgot to mention Rocky.’

‘It’s okay. He filled me in on your ... relationship.’

‘I’m sure he did,’ Georgie said hesitantly. ‘You know he’s a little bit ...’

‘Crazy?’ Michael filled in helpfully.

‘Different,’ Georgie corrected with a small grunt. Rocky had once been a boxer, and apparently a pretty good one, but a few too many knocks to the head had resulted in him being forced to leave his profession and return home to Timboora, where his uncle gave him a job bartending and as the unofficial bouncer and groundskeeper. Georgie had developed a soft spot for the gentle giant, but at some point he’d convinced himself Georgie was his girlfriend. No amount of talk had managed to convince him that they were just friends, and his steadfast refusal to stop calling her his girlfriend had turned into general acceptance within the town. Although it was considered more of a harmless joke, Georgie had sometimes wondered what would happen if she ever got a real boyfriend. It hadn’t been an issue ... until now.

Was that what Michael was? Her boyfriend? The term seemed too ... trivial for the way she was feeling. This was far more intense. She couldn’t even imagine Michael being called someone’s *boyfriend*. A shiver ran up her spine as she replayed last night and the feel of that stubble on his jaw as it rubbed coarsely against the soft skin of her ...

‘Georgie?’

She gave a start and lifted her gaze to his amused eyes. ‘Sorry?’

‘You stopped talking midsentence.’

She cleared her throat quickly, forcing her mind back to the conversation at hand. ‘He’s harmless. It’s just a thing he goes on about.’

‘Yeah well, I certainly don’t ever plan on pissing him off ... just to be on the safe side.’

‘Probably a good idea.’

‘It’s a nice old pub,’ Michael commented, taking a sip of his beer and looking around.

‘It’s beautiful. I love country pubs.’ This one was built in 1881 and it still retained the architectural beauty of the era.

‘You come here often?’

‘Is that another pick-up line?’ Georgie asked, hitching an eyebrow.

Michael’s lopsided grin made her heart go a little giggly. ‘Nope. Just curious.’

‘I come here if I’m in town and have time for lunch. The food’s fantastic.’ Almost as though on cue, their order appeared.



Michael watched Georgie eye the plate of food in front of her with unrestrained glee. He’d never dated a woman who loved food as much as Georgie. He could watch her face light up like this all damn day.

‘Is there something wrong?’ she asked, catching him gazing at her. ‘Is it not what you ordered?’

‘It’s fine. Looks good,’ he said, picking up his cutlery and looking away. He felt like a clumsy kid around her. He hadn’t felt so out of his depth before with a woman—at least not since he *was* a clumsy kid. She’d thrown him completely off his game. Not that he played games, but the women he used to date had never been anything like Georgie Henderson. God how he’d wished for someone like her back then. He’d grown bored of high-maintenance socialites. He’d always wanted someone he could have an actual conversation with—to discuss things he was interested in, not just listen to idle gossip and the latest scandals about the people who ran in the same social circles as his mother and stepfather. And now, when he hadn’t even been looking, Georgie had been dropped into his life, as though his fairy godmother were waving her wand and making all his wishes come true.

Maybe it *was* magic. It sure as hell didn’t feel like anything he’d experienced before. If anyone had told him they’d fallen in love with someone the moment they’d laid eyes on them, he’d have laughed it off as crazy. And yet here he was. He’d gone back to the city to attend to the few things he couldn’t leave to other people, and then he had come straight back to Georgie. If he’d been worried that whatever was between them was some freak moment of insanity, he shouldn’t have been. He couldn’t stop thinking about her. Even work—the one sure way to forget anything else going on his life—had failed to distract him. She was everywhere he looked and everything else around him only served to annoy him because Georgie wasn’t there. Then he’d opened an email from Brent that had ruined everything. He’d reread the message and felt a wave of dread rise up inside him. He’d almost forgotten about the investigation he’d asked Brent to do.

Hey bro. Finally looked into Tamban as you asked. It’s a property out past a place called Jacks Creek. It’s one of the holdings the old man owns. Should I be concerned at your interest?

He'd pondered what to do with the information for the past two days. The right thing would be to tell Georgie and get it out in the open. That's what he'd decided to do, face to face, which was why he hadn't waited until the weekend to come out. He couldn't stand the turmoil it was causing in him. Only, the minute he'd seen her swing her leg off the quad bike and walk across to him, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, dressed in tight dusty jeans and a green work shirt, he'd forgotten what he'd come to talk to her about. She couldn't have looked any sexier if she'd tried and he knew she'd think he was nuts if he told her—but it was the truth. Dirt smeared across her face or dressed up for a B&S ball, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

He'd wanted to clear the air and tell her that his stepfather was the man behind the corporation that had purchased her father's farm, but he knew if he did, he'd lose her. So he'd kept his mouth shut. But he couldn't completely push aside the uneasy feeling that lingered.

'Is something wrong?' Georgie's voice cut into his troubled thoughts and he forced a smile.

'Not a thing,' he said. He looked down at his meal, but he'd suddenly lost his appetite.

Nine

After lunch Georgie suggested a drive around the area, pointing out some of the town's highlights. Michael had become unusually quiet during lunch and she wondered what was wrong. Was he having second thoughts about being out here? Had the novelty worn off? He held her hand as he drove, and she was sure she'd never get used to that, but surely if he was sick of her he wouldn't want to hold her hand?

She indicated he should turn left at the intersection, then bit the inside of her cheek as they drove along the long, narrow road. Pasture grew on either side of the grey ribbon of bitumen; fat cattle grazed in some paddocks, while crops filled others. It had been a great season out this way. Everyone seemed to be having a good year. It could be deceiving if you visited the region in a year like this—it'd be hard to think that in previous years these paddocks had grown little more than weeds and dirt. It was amazing what a good season of rain could do.

'Up ahead, take that turn,' she told him. He slowed the vehicle to leave the sealed road for the dirt and she stared out the window, catching the plume of dust behind them in the side mirror.

They passed a large gum tree on the side of the road, where a small cross with her father's name had been nailed to the wide trunk.

'That's where my dad died,' she said quietly.

Michael pulled the car to a stop.

'Georgie, I'm sorry,' he said quietly from beside her.

'I was the first one on the scene of my father's car crash,' she said, breaking the gentle stillness around them. 'I remember standing there and having no idea what I should do first.'

'That must have been an impossibly hard situation to be in, seeing your father injured like that. You can't blame yourself for being inexperienced.'

Georgie gave a small shrug. 'They told me later he would have died on impact, so nothing I could have done would have made any difference. But I still remember that feeling.'

'No one should have to see someone they love in that kind of situation. I can't

even imagine how hard that must have been.'

Horrific was what it had been, and not something you ever forgot, although thankfully shock had dulled some of the memories. When she thought about it now, which wasn't as often as she used to, she found there were lots of foggy moments, which she supposed was her brain's way of protecting her from the worst of them.

'This wasn't what I brought you out here for. It's just a little bit further up the road.'

Michael looked over his shoulder before pulling back out on the road.

'Pull over here,' she said, pointing to a wide area beside a closed gate.

She swallowed past the familiar lump in her throat. It never got easier. She thought it would—someday.

Matthew Enterprises was printed on a sign that hung on the gate beneath a timber slab with *Tamban* etched into it.

'My grandfather hand-carved that sign,' she said and tried to keep her tone light. 'I kind of wished I'd taken it.'

'Why didn't you?' Michael asked gently.

'It felt wrong. It belongs here.'

In the distance she could see the house and the machinery sheds. There'd been some new silos built and a few extra sheds put up. Nothing looked overgrown or neglected; the fences had all been replaced and no longer sagged. It looked exactly the way she'd always imagined it would look ... when she took over.

'I'm so sorry, Georgie,' Michael said.

She glanced over at him and saw regret etched on his handsome face. She blinked away the sting of threatening tears and tried for a small smile. 'I haven't been here in a long time. It's not like I sit out here like a stalker.'

'I didn't realise your old place was so close.'

'Sometimes I kind of wish it was further away. Maybe then I'd forget about it.'

'And you can't?' he asked hesitantly.

'I've tried. I know holding on to the past is never a good idea ... that I should let go in order to move on and all that.' She shrugged. 'But this place is part of me, you know? It's my childhood. It's all my best memories. Maybe some people can move on from their past—leave places behind—but *Tamban* is special. It's more than just land. It's my heritage.'

She saw him swallow hard and something fell into place inside her. He cared. He *got it*. 'Anyway, I just wanted to show you my home.'

'Thank you,' he said, leaning over to kiss her gently, before resting his forehead against hers. 'I'm glad you thought I was worth sharing this with.'

She wasn't sure why she'd done it really. It wasn't as though she ever came out here for a lazy Sunday drive, and she'd never come out here with anyone else. There was just something about Michael. She'd *wanted* to show him this place. Maybe she thought he'd somehow understand.

'Want an ice cream?' she asked, pulling back and striving for a lighter tone. 'I know a place.'

'Isn't it too cold for ice cream?'

'Too cold for ice cream? There's no such thing.'

'Okay, if you say so. But if I get a brain freeze, I'm blaming you.'



Georgie gave a woeful chuckle as they parked the car and climbed the steps to her house. 'I *cannot* believe you got a brain freeze.'

'I tried to tell you it was too cold.'

'You were drinking a milkshake.'

'They used extremely *cold* milk,' he told her gruffly.

He loved seeing her laugh—he was pretty sure it was something she hadn't done a great deal of recently—and after seeing the way her eyes lit up and sparkled, he vowed to endure a thousand brain freezes if that's what it took to get her to laugh that hard again.

When she left to change into work clothes, his face fell slightly. He'd felt sick once they'd pulled up outside the gates to her old family property. Matthew Enterprises had gloated from the signage and his neck prickled with guilt. There was no denying the sadness in her eyes as she'd looked across at the place she'd grown up and his family was the cause of her grief.

He knew he'd heard that name before. Once Brent confirmed it, he remembered. Vaguely. He'd seen the correspondence; he'd sat in meetings that had talked about how close they were to breaking the owner. He recalled terms like breaking point, forced sale, aggressive negotiation. It was after sitting through many similar meetings that he'd finally had enough and left his stepfather's business to start his own. Now he was witnessing the other side of that business. The personal side that wasn't anything to do with good business or profit margins. The side of devastation.

He wanted so badly to make things right for Georgie. He wanted to gather her into his arms and protect her from anything terrible ever happening again. He wanted to tell her the truth and vow to take on his stepfather like some big hero. Only, he'd heard the disgust and the pain in her voice when she'd spoken about the corporations like his stepfather's, like *his*, and he knew he couldn't.

It shouldn't matter. He should trust that after a while she'd cool off and he'd

have another shot at it. But something told him that was not how it would play out. At all. He'd seen something in her eyes when she'd spoken about losing their property—a cold certainty. There was more to her grief than just selling to a corporation. He knew her father had betrayed her too, in her eyes at least, and the hurt she was carrying around because of that was all connected to losing Tamban. There was no way she'd listen to him try to explain if he opened his mouth about it all now. He had to wait. He had to earn her trust. It would take time and gentleness and a whole lot of patience. But it'd be worth it. He had no choice. He was still not ready to walk away from Georgie Henderson.



She listened to the phone ring and waited for the familiar gruff voice to answer.

'About time you called. I was beginning to think my manager had nicked off and left the place,' Harry said in lieu of a greeting.

'I've been a bit busy, sorry.'

'So I've heard. You got some new fella, I hear.'

She shouldn't be surprised. News always travelled fast in this place, and just because Harry was hundreds of kilometres away didn't mean he didn't still keep tabs on the local gossip from his numerous mates in the area. 'Don't worry, I'm still working.'

'Never said you weren't,' he quipped back. 'Although Matt's not overly impressed,' he added. 'Should I be concerned?'

Georgie's mood changed from relaxed to annoyed in a split second. 'Why would Matt not be impressed?' she demanded.

'I don't know, seems to think he's a bit too ... citified.'

'Who I see has got nothing to do with Matt.'

'Settle down, he's just lookin' out for ya.'

'I don't need him looking out for me. I'm quite capable of doing that myself.' What the hell was wrong with him? Matt had never run behind her back and tittle-tatted to Harry before.

'Now don't go tearin' strips off young Matt,' Harry cautioned.

'Well, he shouldn't have gone to you about my private life.'

'He didn't. I called him to find out what he thought.'

Oh, for goodness sake. 'Well, in case either of you would like to know my opinion on the topic, I'm quite happy, thank you very much.'

'All right, don't get your knickers in a knot. I was just checkin' to make sure you were okay.'

'I'm fine, Harry. It's not a big deal.'

'Well, maybe it should be,' he said. 'Sometimes I worry that you're missin'

out on life. You're too young to be stuck out there alone.'

'I'm not alone, and I'm happy doing what I do.'

'Yeah well, I just don't want you wakin' up one day and realisin' you've missed your chance. There's more to life than work. Took me a lifetime to realise that.'

She knew he was thinking about his daughter and the family he hadn't taken the time to connect with once his wife had died.

'Thanks for checking up on me,' she said gently. It was nice to know she had someone who cared.

'Right, enough of that,' Harry said, clearing his throat. 'What are you doin' about those bloody water pumps?'



Early the next morning, Georgie smiled as Michael came out onto the verandah. He was shirtless, barefoot and wearing only a pair of unbuttoned jeans that exposed a tantalising V of dark hair. She might have thought it was a ploy to distract her back into bed had it not been for the fact he had his arms wrapped around his chest, cursing the cool morning air.

'Why didn't you wake me up to come and help you?' he demanded in that authoritative tone that probably made other people jump to attention but she found rather sexy.

'You were sleeping.'

'So? I can help.'

'I've finished now. All chooks, horses and assorted farm animals are fed and watered, and I've already moved one lot of cattle to their new pasture.'

'I thought you had someone to do that for you?'

'Matt,' she said dryly. 'His name is Matt, and it's his day off.'

'All the more reason I should have been helping.'

She kicked off her boots at the front door and slipped into his arms. 'Why are you half naked out here in the cold?'

'I was waiting to get *all the way* naked when you got back.'

'I see,' she murmured. 'Well, what are you waiting for? I'm back.'



'Favourite movie?' Georgie asked, lying under the shade of the big tree on the rise overlooking the surrounding paddocks. They'd packed an impromptu lunch and a blanket and Georgie was beginning to seriously wonder why she'd never taken time out to do this more often.

'*Die Hard*,' he said.

Georgie turned her head to look at him suspiciously. 'You hesitated.'

'No, I didn't.'

'Yeah, you did. Come on, *Die Hard* is every man's favourite testosterone movie ... what's your *real* favourite.'

'You'll laugh.'

'No, I won't,' she promised.

'Yeah, right, from the woman who laughed at a man in the midst of a major brain freeze.'

'Hey! I didn't promise not to laugh at that. I'm only human after all,' she muttered under her breath. 'Come on, tell me.'

She saw Michael give a reluctant sigh and close his eyes.

'*The Man from Snowy River*,' he said finally.

Georgie bit the inside of her lip.

Opening one eye, Michael shook his head wearily, 'See? I told you you'd laugh.'

'I'm not,' she smirked. 'No, seriously, I'm not. I just wasn't expecting that.'

'It's an Australian classic,' he said with only a touch of defensiveness.

'It is,' she agreed. 'And it's my favourite too. I had a bit of a crush on Jim Craig growing up.'

'Yeah? Well, I had a thing for Jessica Harrison. Maybe that's why I was drawn to you,' he said, but his smile turned serious. 'Actually, you're a lot like her.'

'I don't have long black wavy hair and big green eyes.'

'Not in looks maybe—that was Sigrid Thornton anyway, I'm talking about Jessica, the character. Think about it: you're both strong, intelligent, independent women,' he said. 'Both stubborn. Love horses. She was an only daughter with big dreams of running her family property ...' He sat up and grinned. 'I think all those nights of wishing for Jessica finally came true.'

'You're even more delusional than I thought.'

'Maybe. But I think I'll stick with finding my dream woman.'

Georgie scoffed slightly.

'I think you might be, you know,' Michael said. 'If someone had told me I'd go along to some B&S ball in the backblocks of nowhere and fall for a woman, I'd have thought they were insane, but here we are.'

'Here we are,' she agreed faintly. She was still reeling about the *falling for* part ...

'Now I have a hankering to watch *The Man from Snowy River*,' he said, leaning back down on one elbow beside her.

‘Well, today is your lucky day ... I just so happen to have it on DVD ... *The Man from Snowy River* one and two. Feel like a movie marathon?’

Curled up beside Michael on the lounge later, Georgie found herself shaking her head. It was the middle of the day and she was sitting inside watching a movie ... and she didn’t even feel guilty. She also wasn’t sure how she’d ever go back to watching a movie alone after this. It was so nice having his big body curled around hers as they shared a bowl of popcorn and took turns reciting the lines of the movie as it played.

Where was this thing going? She didn’t even know what this *thing* was. People would think they were crazy ... Georgie groaned silently as the same questions continued to run through her head on a loop without finding any answers. Did she really care what people thought? *Must* it have a label or a name put on it? Couldn’t she just relax and enjoy whatever it was for as long as it lasted? As Jim Craig pulled Jessica into his arms on the top of that high-country mountain ridge, Georgie decided to take their lead. There was no point wasting the time they had together with what-ifs. She’d just live in the moment and see where it went.

Ten

For the next few days Michael worked from Stoney Creek and Georgie found herself getting all too used to having him around. When he finally had to go back to his office, the goodbye was just as hard as the first one, but this time she knew he'd be back.

They talked constantly through the day or texted, depending on how busy they were, but they always talked at night for hours on end. She sometimes wondered how they didn't run out of things to talk about, but it never happened. Georgie felt like a teenager again, laughing to herself when she thought about the topics they managed to cover.

She'd offered to come to see him in a few weeks' time, once she got the next lot of cattle ready for sale, but two weeks seemed such a long time to wait.

It turned out to be too long. Michael was knocking on her door two days later.

'One day you're going to do one of your surprise visits and I won't be home. What'll you do then?' she teased, leading him out into the kitchen from the bedroom later.

She'd been in the middle of cooking chicken and pasta when he'd turned up, and after their somewhat energetic greeting, she was now starving.

'I'll be right back,' he said, retracing his steps to the front door where he'd dropped his overnight bag on arrival.

'What are you looking so pleased about?' she asked, stirring the sauce into the pot on the stove.

'I got you a surprise,' he said, waving a big white envelope.

'What's that?' she asked with a curious glance at his face.

'How soon can you pack a bag?'

'For?' she asked dryly, wondering what he was up to this time.

'Hawaii.'

She froze, spoon poised in mid-air. 'What are you talking about?'

He handed over the envelope and she pulled out the stapled pages with a travel agent's name on the top. She looked up at him expectantly.

'I just booked us two tickets to Hawaii.'

‘You did *what?*’

‘I know you were disappointed about not going to New Zealand, so I thought I’d make it up to you with Hawaii.’

‘But I told you, I didn’t want to spend the money,’ she said quietly. She really couldn’t believe he’d just booked a holiday ... on a whim ... *Who the hell did that?*

‘You don’t have to spend a cent. I’m taking you away.’

Georgie stared at him, disbelief plastered across her face. ‘You can’t be serious. I can’t just go overseas with you.’

‘Why not? You had your passport sorted for New Zealand, all we need are visas, which I’ll have pushed through, and we’re set.’

‘You don’t just go on a holiday ... like that,’ she stammered.

‘We can do whatever we want. Whose permission do we need?’ he asked with an amused tilt of his eyebrow.

‘It’s not ...’ She stopped, frustrated. ‘Nobody does that!’ she said, throwing her hand in the air.

‘Well, I just did, so let’s start a new trend.’

Slamming the papers onto the bench, she spun away. She grabbed her keys as she passed by the hall table.

‘Where are you going?’ he called, jogging to keep up with her.

‘Out.’

‘Georgie, wait up, just stop for a minute,’ he demanded as she reached her car. ‘Georgie.’

Spinning on her heel she turned to face him angrily, ‘What?’

‘What’s wrong?’

‘You honestly have no idea?’ she asked, disbelief colouring her tone.

‘I honestly don’t,’ he said, shaking his head and looking perplexed.

‘You can’t just go around buying me off. I can’t afford a holiday to Hawaii, and I don’t want to be put in a position where I feel like I have to pay my way.’

‘Pay your way ...’ His voice faded as a dark expression crossed his face. ‘You think I’m expecting you to sleep with me as payment?’

‘That’s what it feels like.’

‘Christ Georgie, I thought you knew by now. I’m crazy about you. I’ve never, in all my life, felt this way about anyone. I want to take you to Hawaii to *be with you*, to see you enjoy yourself, to forget about your struggles and your past for just a few days. I want to do this because I ...’ He stopped abruptly and fought to get his emotions back under control. ‘I know you’ll find this hard to believe but I’m not usually like this. I’ve never blown off work to spend time with a woman and I’ve never bought anyone a ticket to Hawaii either. I’m sorry if I’ve

offended you, it wasn't meant that way,' he ended stiffly, walking away and letting the screen door bang behind him.

As suddenly as her anger had flared, it vanished.

Taking a deep breath, Georgie calmed herself and walked inside. She found him sitting on her lounge, sprawled with his long legs out in front and his head tilted back against the headrest. He refused to look at her as she stood in the doorway.

'You didn't finish what you were going to say out there. You said you did it because ... *Why?*' she asked quietly.

His jaw tightened and he stared at the wall in front of him. 'Does it matter? You obviously think I'm some kind of sleaze who expects payment for favours.'

'I don't think that, Michael.'

She moved closer and stood in front of him, waiting, until he finally looked up. When his expression remained stone-like, she took matters into her own hands, sliding onto his lap.

'Tell me what you were going to say,' she whispered.

She saw his eyes ignite with a flame hot enough to burn down the entire house.

'I did it because I'm in love with you.'

His face showed the same confused struggle that had been playing out inside her, and she knew, as insane as this was, it was also right. She realised she'd half-expected the feeling to wear off once they spent more time together. Surely a person like her, so used to taking care of herself and comfortable with her own company, would grow tired of constant companionship? But she found it was the opposite. The more she had of him, the more she craved.

She leaned forward and kissed him. She knew he was hurt about what she'd said, and she was sorry for that. It was her pride and the fact he'd caught her off guard that caused her to snap at him. She felt him holding himself back from the kiss, his lips gently moving under hers but not initiating anything the way he normally would. She pulled back slightly and searched his hooded gaze.

'I'm sorry I jumped down your throat,' she said softly. 'You confuse me.'

'No more than you confuse me, I'm willing to bet,' he said with a reluctant half-smile. 'We don't have to go to Hawaii.'

She saw a lingering sadness in his eyes.

'You just can't throw things like that at me. We're different that way. You don't give money a second thought, but I have to. I don't come from a place where people just decide to head to Hawaii for a few days. Shannon and I had been planning that trip to New Zealand for a year.'

He lifted his hands from where they'd been resting by his sides and settled

them on her hips. 'You're right. I should have thought it through a little better. Sorry, I acted like a spoilt brat,' he said. 'For the record, I'm not one of those people who decides to go to Hawaii for a few days either—normally. I can't even remember the last time I went anywhere for a holiday.' He shrugged. 'It was my attempt to play the knight in shining armour for you. I could tell you were disappointed about the New Zealand trip and I wanted to do something nice for you.'

She gave a rueful grin at that. 'Flowers or chocolate didn't cross your mind?' she asked dryly.

He gave a slow nod. 'In hindsight, I guess that would have worked a lot better.'

Georgie felt her smile slip as she looked down into his face. Under her hands she could feel his cheekbones, the strong lines of his face. She saw the vulnerability the words had cost him.

'I want to go to Hawaii with you, if you still want to go,' she said.

Something flickered to life in his eyes.

'I miss you so much when you're not here,' she whispered, and shook her head. 'Trust me to fall in love with a city boy who lives so far away.'

His hand had been stroking her hip on one side as she'd been talking, but it stopped when she'd finished. He stared at her warily.

'You have?'

She smiled slowly. 'Well, I googled my symptoms: lack of concentration, heart palpitations, bouts of sadness ... and it gave me a few suggestions: atrial fibrillation, diabetes, Lyme disease or lovesickness. I'm leaning towards the latter.' His smile made her heart rate speed up again, which only proved her point.

'I'm crazily, stupidly, head over heels,' she said with a long sigh before leaning closer to kiss him once more, and this time his lips moved under hers hungrily.

When he tried to take control, she eased back and shook her head, resuming the kiss and setting the pace. She smiled against his mouth when he gave an impatient groan as she deliberately kept the kiss deep and slow. She reached down and pulled the hem of her shirt up over her head then dropped it on the floor, holding his smouldering gaze. She leaned forward, dodging his mouth and planting open-mouthed kisses along the tanned skin of his wide neck, taking small nips and sucking gently, feeling the tremor that ran through him as he tipped his head back, further surrendering to her ministrations.

'You're killin' me,' he groaned when she moved against him slowly.

'You won't die, you big baby,' she told him smugly as she swung her leg off,

standing to remove the rest of the clothing that was in the way, before lying back on the lounge and pulling him down with her.

‘Although, you may *think* you’ve died and gone to heaven,’ she told him, trying to keep a straight face.

‘And you reckon my pick-up lines are bad?’

‘Really? That wouldn’t do it for you?’ she asked, lifting an eyebrow.

‘You could read a grocery list and it’d do it for me,’ he told her bluntly.

‘Good to know,’ she murmured, running a hand down his side, before dipping lower and ending any more conversation.

Eleven

Hawaii was so much more than she'd ever dreamed it would be. The spectacular sunsets, white beaches and the lush tropical surroundings were like a balm to her soul. They spent their first couple of days on the beach and driving around the island, exploring at leisure. It was her first overseas trip and she was loving every minute of it.

Her thoughts did sometimes stray to Stoney Creek, although she tried to forget about work and embrace all the new experiences she was having. Calculating the time difference, she took the opportunity to make a quick call while Michael went down to discuss something with the front desk, dialling the home number and watching the resort room door nervously.

'Stoney Creek Station,' Matt's voice sounded on the other end, and Georgie felt a wave of homesickness wash over her.

'Hi. It's me.'

'Georgie? Hey. How's the trip? Everything okay?'

'Everything's fine, trip's been awesome so far. I was just ringing to see how things are going back there.'

'Yeah. No worries, all good. Had a bit of rain last night.'

'That's great.'

She'd been counting on follow-up rain for the feed she'd planted to get them through winter. Well, that was one less worry. She listened as Matt went on to give her a rundown of the jobs he'd finished and the things that were still left on his to-do list.

'Okay, well, I guess I better let you get back to it. Sounds like you've got it all under control as usual. Thanks Matt, I know it was a bit sudden and all ...'

'No worries. Everything's fine here.'

They said their goodbyes and Georgie was just putting her phone down on the bedside table when Michael opened the door.

'You couldn't help yourself, could you?' he said, grinning at her as he crossed to the bed.

'I was just—'

‘Checking in,’ he finished.

‘I really miss Stoney Creek. I miss my horses and the cattle.’

‘Hawaii’s not doing it for you?’ he asked.

‘It is. It’s beautiful,’ she added quickly. ‘But I guess I’m just a country girl at heart. I don’t think I’m cut out for the travelling life. I don’t know how people can leave and backpack around a country for months on end.’

‘To tell you the truth, I’m happier when I’m home too.’

‘But you travel pretty regularly?’

‘When I have to. But if I can get out of it, I do. Brent usually jumps at the chance, so I’m lucky that way.’ He put his hand out and tugged her to her feet, circling his arms around her waist. ‘Do you want to go home early?’

Georgie smiled. ‘We’re only away ten days, I think I’ll survive. But thank you anyway.’ He really was the most thoughtful man.

The phone call home had done the trick in easing her homesickness. Over the next few days she was excited as they drove up to the top of a volcano and wandered through small beachside villages. Looking down at their entwined hands, Georgie couldn’t even remember the last time she’d spent this much time alone with one person in, well ... ever really. Matt didn’t count. They worked together, but not always side by side, and he had his own place where he spent his downtime. She meant this twenty-four hours a day kind of togetherness. Come to think of it, they were pretty much joined at the hip—whenever they were together, they were touching. They held hands or lay close together ... it should have felt claustrophobic, but it didn’t.

In another week or so they’d be back in Australia and what then? They hadn’t spoken about the future. He couldn’t stay away from his business indefinitely. How long would they be able to continue the long-distance relationship?

She tried to picture a day without him there and felt empty. She gave herself a swift shake. *You’re a grown woman. You survived just fine without anyone in your life before Michael.* But the pep talk only made her feel sad. She didn’t want to do fine without him. She’d miss him. Terribly.

‘Everything okay?’ he asked as they pulled their little red convertible up in front of yet another beautiful beach, the late afternoon sun slowly beginning to dip below the horizon.

‘Yeah,’ she said, forcing a smile. ‘I was just thinking how fast this is all going. We’ll be back home soon.’

‘Yeah. We will.’

She swallowed nervously and chewed her lip a little. ‘I don’t know how we’re going to juggle this thing long-term. I mean, you can’t keep leaving your office indefinitely.’

He kept his gaze on the smooth bay before them, but she sensed a sadness lingering between them. 'Yeah, I think Brent's ready to quit if I don't go back to the office and at least show my face pretty soon.'

'Well, we knew it was only a matter of time,' she said, feeling helpless. What was there to say? They lived in different states. She supposed they could take turns visiting each other, but realistically she knew the distance would ultimately take its toll on the relationship. It wasn't as simple as flying from one city to another. She lived in the sticks and it still required a long drive to reach the airport. Soon the novelty would wear off and the visits would get further apart.

The sunset was spectacular, but its beauty was dimmed as they both seemed lost in their thoughts. An end was coming, and it hurt all the more because neither of them wanted it.

They were almost through their first week away, and with the end of their trip fast approaching, they walked hand in hand along the beach, the sky a riot of orange, red and yellow. Suddenly Michael stopped walking and turned to look down at her.

'Georgie, I know this is crazy, but I can't walk away from you after we leave here. I don't know how we're going to do it, but I give you my word, we'll figure it out.' He paused. 'Marry me.'

Georgie stared at him, speechless. The sand, cool beneath her bare feet, reminded her that she was standing upright and had not, in fact, been hit by a truck as she initially suspected.

Marry him? He was asking her to *marry* him? The empty feeling that had come over her when they'd discussed the holiday coming to an end was replaced with surprise, excitement, hope. 'I ... this is ...' *Unbelievable? Insane?* 'Yes.'

For a moment she wasn't sure she'd actually said it out loud, but as his face lit up with that heart-stopping sexy grin she knew she must have, and instead of blind panic at what she'd just done, all she felt was ... contentment. Having never had the slightest need or desire to think about getting married overseas, she was amazed at how easy it was. They didn't need to show anything except a driver's licence to apply for a marriage licence and it was approved on the same day.

For such a momentous event, it seemed extraordinarily easy. Their ceremony was simple, elegant and the single most beautiful moment of her life. While Georgie had assured Michael she was happy to attend a registry office for the ceremony, he wouldn't hear of it. Instead he spent the better part of two days organising for a ceremony on a secluded beach. The only thing she had to do was find a dress.

She'd browsed shop after shop and tried on more dresses in a single day than

she'd worn in a lifetime, and still she had no idea what she was going to be married in. She missed Shannon. Not for the first time, regret filled her. How could she get married without her best friend by her side? But they'd agreed it would be too difficult to get Shannon and Brent over here on such short notice. She'd all but given up looking for her dress when, as she wandered through a market, a sarong caught her eye. The long white silk with shells and crystals sewn along the hem was simple yet stunning. She immediately bought it. The resort's hairdresser preformed a miracle and created the most amazing hairstyle Georgie had ever worn in her life, and the makeup artist transformed her into someone she barely recognised as she looked at her reflection in the mirror. She'd given the smiling Hawaiian woman strict instructions not to use too much makeup. She wanted to look natural, and she'd done exactly as she'd been asked. Georgie knew she hadn't used copious amounts of makeup—she'd been watching, anxiously, the whole time—and yet, staring at herself now, she couldn't believe the beautician had managed to turn her into the sophisticated, beaming woman staring back at her.

Michael, dressed in a loose white linen shirt and black pants, looked like every woman's fantasy come to life. As she walked towards him down a red carpet laid on top of the white sand, her heart swelled with love. Nothing could make her regret this decision, she thought to herself as she felt the magnetic pull. Not one single thing.

Georgie felt as though she'd stepped into an alternate universe. She figured Michael was well off, but nothing had prepared her for the reality of it. As though they weren't already enjoying a honeymoon in Hawaii, for their actual honeymoon Michael hired a private yacht. It was utter bliss. They spent long, leisurely hours making love and soaking up the warm sunshine, exploring private beaches when they managed to drag themselves away from their bed, and feasting on fine food and wine. It was like nothing she'd ever experienced.

She was too scared to ask how much her engagement and wedding ring had cost. She looked down at them now and caught her breath as the square-cut diamond sparkled in the sunlight. She had to be dreaming. This couldn't be her life.

'Happy?' Michael asked close to her ear.

'Yes,' she said after a brief silence, before turning to face him. 'Yes, I am.'

She thought she saw a flash of relief follow her words, but why would he even doubt she was happy? 'Are you?'

The solemn look he levelled at her made her heart skip a beat.

'I never imagined I could be this happy, Georgie.'

Georgie saw the absolute truth in his eyes, yet she couldn't help but feel there

was something sad, a shadow of sorts, hovering beneath his happiness. ‘Are you worried about how fast this all happened? About what your family will think?’

He shook his head and gave a wry grin. ‘I’m not worried—but I’m not looking forward to the lectures. They’ll get over it.’

‘I’m not sure Shannon will. Maybe we should have waited until she could at least be our witness.’ Shannon was not going to be happy ... in fact, Shannon was going to be furious.

‘I don’t regret it, Georgie. This was about us, no one else. Shannon and Mum and anyone else who might have their nose out of joint will just have to suck it up and get over it.’

‘I’m not sure your mum should be told to suck it up,’ she told him dryly.

‘You don’t know how persistent that woman has been over the last few years in trying to marry me off. Trust me, if nothing else, I can be spared the torture of being forced to endure surprise guests joining us at family dinners and accidental meetings with single daughters of her friends.’

‘I see. So I was just a means of getting your mother off your back?’ she said, lifting an eyebrow.

‘Yep. It was all part of my genius plan. Go to a B&S ball, find a woman, whisk her off and marry her just to stop my mother’s matchmaking attempts.’

‘Hmm, so you were scouting out a suitable bride all that time before I came along to save you?’

He chuckled and pulled her closer. ‘You did save me,’ he said, looking into her eyes, his face turning serious. ‘You have no idea just how much.’

‘Maybe we saved each other,’ she said quietly. For so long she’d only had the farm and her dreams to keep her company, but now she had Michael. They were a family. The shock of that thought felt as though it stopped her heart midbeat. A family. The one thing she’d been too scared to think about for so long.

She tried not to dwell on how much she missed being part of a family. She was never truly alone—Shannon’s family had as good as adopted her and she’d never had to spend a Christmas or Easter alone since her father had died. She sometimes felt guilty when she thought about her parents and how it’d been before her mother passed away. Compared to the Sinclairs and their loud, friendly teasing, life in the Henderson household had been very subdued. Her parents had both been quiet people, and there’d been a lot of years where her mother had been unwell and had needed to take things easy, so Georgie had learned to entertain herself a lot and let her mum sleep. Finances had always been tight, but she’d enjoyed the quiet and she was happy enough with just the three of them. She’d talk her dad’s ear off in the ute as they checked water troughs and fence lines, and he’d give the required grunt or make an interested

sound—just enough to fill in the gaps—but she'd never really been sure whether he was listening to her or just tuning out. Still, he must have enjoyed their time together or he wouldn't have taken her along with him as often as he did.

Now she was married and she would have her own family.

The past few weeks felt as though they'd been happening to someone else, as though some other part of her had suddenly decided to take over her life and say yes to things the old part of her would never have agreed to. Maybe Shannon had been right after all. Maybe she had spent far too long shut off from the rest of the world and this was what happened when you opened up—you started taking risks and throwing caution to the wind. She should be panicking about it, but she wasn't. As crazy as this all seemed, there was nothing inside her screaming that she'd just made a huge mistake. All she felt was intensely happy.

Twelve

While her arrival into Sydney should have been somewhat of a letdown as reality hit, for Georgie it was anything but. Coming home was the beginning of a new chapter for her. She'd left the country a single, albeit besotted woman and returned a married, even more besotted *wife*, ready to start her new life.

There was so much to work out. She'd tried to broach the subject with Michael several times since the wedding, but he had shut her down each time, telling her there was plenty of time to deal with all that after they got home. And he was right, they only had a handful of days away to enjoy and they had gone all too fast.

They spent two nights in Michael's family's apartment near Darling Harbour, no less, before Michael had to fly back to his Brisbane office and head off a crisis, preventing their planned trip to meet and surprise his family with their news.

'Are you sure you don't want to come with me?' Michael said again as they reluctantly moved from the bedroom of the apartment, their bags packed and ready for a taxi.

'I need to get back to Stoney Creek. I'll fly up in a couple of weeks after I've sorted out a few things back home.'

'Try and make it one week. I'm not sure I can last two.'

'I'm sure you'll be fine. You managed a lot longer than that before you met me,' she teased.

'I don't know how. I can't even remember what it was like before I met you,' he said seriously, and it should have sounded stupid, only he was right. They'd spent every waking moment together and her whole world had changed. Two weeks did sound like an eternity.

'I'll see what I can do,' she promised.

A taxi honked outside and Georgie swallowed over a lump in her throat. *You're being ridiculous*, she chided herself firmly. She stepped outside the front door as Michael set the alarm behind them and followed her towards the car waiting at the curb.

A strange fear gripped her as she slid into the back seat of the taxi. Why did it suddenly feel as though everything was going to fall apart if she let him out of her sight? It had to be nerves. They'd been secluded in their own little bubble, away from reality and it was now hitting her that she'd miss him terribly. However, the feeling seemed to linger, refusing to go away the entire trip to the airport.

When they finally dragged themselves apart to go their separate ways, she watched Michael walk away with a hollow feeling filling up the space where before there'd been only happiness. 'Don't be stupid,' she muttered under her breath, forcing herself to turn away. 'It's two weeks.'

Georgie found her gate number and sat down, watching the planes out on the tarmac as they prepared to board or deliver their passengers. Her phone beeped and she pulled it out of her bag, smiling as she read the message from Michael.

Miss you already. Absolutely won't last more than a week.

She wasn't sure she would either.

Long after she knew Michael's plane had taken off, she watched the sky through the window, a heavy cloud of something she couldn't identify weighing her down.

It would all be fine once they were back together again. She repeated this a number of times while she waited for her flight to be called, and for the rest of her long trip home.



They decided to keep the announcement of their marriage a secret, planning a surprise reception for their family and friends once Georgie could join Michael in Brisbane. It was pure torture keeping the news from Shannon, although the fact that she was completely absorbed with her own budding romance helped.

Shannon had always been the adventurous one. Unlike Georgie, who'd always known she wanted to return home after university, Shannon's aim had been to move as far away from the country as she could. She'd always had her sights set on the city. Shannon was outgoing and fun—she was the quintessential party girl. For Shannon, meeting some guy and moving states to take a job on the spur of the moment wasn't out of character. But when she learned about Georgie eloping with a guy she'd only just met and not even telling her—well, that was going to be a whole other story. Georgie was bracing herself for the repercussions.

During the first few days back at Stoney Creek, Georgie was kept too busy to spend much time pining for Michael. But at night she found herself moping about, and the occasional doubt would begin to creep into her mind as she

waited for his phone calls and the reality of what she'd done would strike her with full force.

She'd married a stranger.

When they were together, it didn't feel like that at all, it felt as though she'd known him all her life, but the reality of it was she'd only known him a handful of weeks. She'd always been the logical, cynical one. She'd never been gullible or made decisions without careful planning and thought. This decision didn't make logical sense at all ... only, it felt *right*. When she was with Michael, she felt as though she belonged.

It had been almost a week since her return, and Georgie was waiting at the counter of the feed store when she heard her name and turned with a smile to see Peg from the pub.

'I haven't seen you around for ages. Thought you'd run off and left town or something.'

'I went away for a few days,' Georgie hedged, unwilling to start a conversation she feared would be spread around town by the close of business that day.

'Hey, I meant to tell you. Your new fella was in the paper. Recognised him as soon as I picked it up. Caught yourself a good 'un there,' she winked.

'Sorry?' Georgie frowned a little. When Georgie continued to look lost, Peg clicked her tongue impatiently. 'The fella from the pub you had lunch with. Go get the *Farmer's Daily*, there's a big write-up about him in there.'

Georgie stared at Peg's back as she paid for her purchases and walked out of the shop. *What on earth was that all about?* She gave her order to Fred Provost behind the counter when he returned to serve her and waited until her supplies were loaded in the ute before parking in front of the newsagency.

A trickle of unease crept up her back as she scanned the row of newspapers on the stand, searching for the *Farmer's Daily*. She resisted opening it in the store, paying for her purchase and swapping idle chitchat with the newsagent, trying unsuccessfully to edge towards the door. It was a relief when another customer walked in and asked for some assistance locating a magazine, allowing Georgie to make her escape.

Inside the cabin of the ute, she opened the paper and began flicking through the pages of ads and market reports until a photograph leapt out at her and her heart stopped momentarily.

NEW HOLDINGS KING

In a record-breaking deal, Michael Delacourt outbid his stepfather and former mentor, land tycoon Derick Matthew, buying one of the largest parcels of land in central Queensland and overtaking

Matthew as the largest Australian owned pastoral company.

Michael Delacourt, who until three years ago had been working alongside Matthew, started his own company and swiftly began making a name for himself in the beef industry, securing land and contracts worth millions. Yesterday's news thrusts Delacourt firmly in the limelight, with his total land holdings now the largest for an Australian owned and operated company.

A photo halfway down the page of a family standing in a dusty paddock next to a For Sale sign accompanied an article about the increasing exodus of rural families from their land as the economy and weather wrought havoc on farms all over the country. She glanced over the story, but it was the photo, the pain and despair on the faces of the family in the picture, that held her captive. The woman stood hugging her two small children protectively, a look of weary resignation etched in the lines around her eyes. The man in the photo could have only been in his mid-thirties, but he looked older. His eyes reflected a look of utter defeat that tore at her heart, and she was once more back there, watching the auctioneers selling off her own family's belongings piece by piece. Her father sitting under the tree in the backyard, drinking from a bottle to drown out the microphone and the bids and his daughter's accusing eyes.

Her gaze was drawn to the one name: *Matthew Enterprises*. The same company that had bought out her father. Her hand shook, and she was forced to place the paper on the seat beside her.

Michael was not only in the industry she loathed, he'd been *working* for Matthew Enterprises.

His family were the very people who now owned Tamban.

How could he have sat there and not said a word? He'd started his company three years ago ... which meant he'd still been working with his stepfather, almost five years ago ... when they'd hounded *her* father to an early grave.



Michael gave a long, drawn-out sigh as he dropped the phone back down and rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingers.

'You look worn out. Is there anything I can do for you?' asked Celeste, his PA, leaning against the edge of his desk, her arms braced either side of her hips.

Michael was pretty sure she was deliberately showing her cleavage to full advantage, and he averted his eyes. Brent had hired her a few months earlier on the recommendation of their mother, who was a friend of Celeste's, assuring Michael that she came with glowing references. She was efficient and did her job well, but her flirting, once something he brushed off without much thought, now got on his nerves. She may have been the kind of woman he once found attractive, but she wasn't Georgie.

God, he missed her.

His thoughts went back to his earlier phone call. It had rung out, just as it had the three times before when he'd tried. *Where was she?* He'd been so busy with this last merger that they'd been playing a frustrating game of phone tag for the past twenty-four hours.

'There must be *something* I can do?' Celeste said.

'Well, actually ... there is,' he said, leaning across the desk to pick up a folder, before holding it out to her with a smile. 'If you have time, can you file these for me? I'm off to my meeting.'

He headed towards the door, ignoring the huff he heard beneath her breath as he left.

He was a married man and he wanted to shout it out to the whole damn world, but he'd agreed to wait until Georgie was here and they'd told his family. He just hoped he could get hold of Georgie when he tried again after the meeting. It wasn't like her to not have returned his call.



That evening Georgie continued to ignore the phone. Her mobile registered four missed calls and she turned it off, placing it on the kitchen bench without a second thought. She couldn't speak to Michael yet, not because of what she might say, but because she literally could not form any words. Even at her lowest point, after her father's death and the sale of Tamban, she hadn't felt this numb.

For the next two days she forced herself to function, grateful to be outside on her own for most of the time and not having to concentrate on paperwork. Never had she been more grateful for a worker who didn't like to talk much. If Matt noticed she was quieter than usual, he didn't comment, and for that Georgie was grateful.

The arrival of a vehicle at Stoney Creek late that night wasn't completely unexpected—she'd been anticipating it ever since she'd stopped taking Michael's calls—but it still made her stomach knot in apprehension. She'd rehearsed a thousand times what she wanted to say to him, but none of it came to mind when she opened the door, staring at her husband.

'Georgie? What the hell's going on? Are you all right?' he asked as his dark eyes swept over her quickly. She took a step back when he reached for her, and she saw the crease between his eyebrows.

'Why haven't you been answering your phone?'

He looked tired and worried and still wore his work clothes and she struggled not to care.

‘I wasn’t entirely sure what to say to you.’

‘Damn it, Georgie, what’s wrong?’ His tone would have tugged at her heart if it hadn’t been frozen solid. ‘Has something happened?’

‘You’ve saved me a trip to Brisbane. I was going to drive up there this weekend.’

She turned away from him and headed into the kitchen. Behind her she heard him following. Stopping beside the bench, she scooped up the two gold rings and held out her hand, dropping them into his. ‘To return these.’

For a long moment he stared blankly at the rings, before shaking his head.

‘You’re not making sense. Why would I want your rings back?’

Leaning across, she picked up the newspaper and slapped it against his chest, clenching her jaw in order to keep tears tightly in check.

Slowly he lowered his uncertain gaze to the newspaper, laying it flat on the bench and scanning the page. His expression remained perplexed until he spotted the article and she saw his baffled look transform into one of defeat.

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes. ‘Georgie, I was going to tell you.’

‘Really? When?’

‘This whole deal ... it blew up unexpectedly while we were overseas. I was planning on telling you all about it once we came back and we were settled, but I didn’t have time to fill you in before it hit the press. I didn’t think you’d see it before I had a chance to explain. It’s not what you think.’

‘Oh, so you’re *not* part of an industry I despise, and your family weren’t the vultures who bought Tamban?’ she demanded sarcastically.

‘It’s not all about this,’ he said, waving the paper at her in frustration. ‘You’re only seeing it from one side.’

‘Yeah, the victims’ side—pardon me if I don’t have a great deal of sympathy for the mega-rich CEOs who make a fortune off other people’s suffering.’

‘It’s not like that, Georgie. I was planning on taking you out to *show* you first-hand how we run these places, how *I* run *my* places,’ he corrected angrily.

‘You thought I’d want to see that? You thought I’d care?’

‘I was hoping you’d have shown the maturity to try to see it from my perspective, yes.’

‘You lied to me.’

Michael stood his ground. He held her angry gaze with a deeply intense one of his own.

‘I didn’t reveal the complete story,’ he corrected. ‘I admit that was wrong, but I knew you’d react this way if I told you. I can help you get Tamban back, I *want to help* you, but I knew you wouldn’t listen if I tried earlier.’

‘So instead you asked me to marry you? What did you think was going to

happen, Michael? That I'd be so in love with you it wouldn't matter?'

'Actually, yes,' he admitted calmly.

Georgie gaped at him in disbelief.

'Just let me explain.'

'Were you or were you not working for Matthew Enterprises when my father sold his land?'

'Georgie ...'

'Just answer the question, Michael.'

'It was my stepfather's company.'

'You were there. You were part of it. You were one of the heartless bastards who pressured Dad into selling,' she said, barely able to squeeze the words out through her rapidly closing throat. 'Weren't you?'

'I—'

'Weren't you?'

'I worked with my stepfather during that time, but I—'

'Get out,' she said coldly.

'Georgie—'

'Get out! Take your rings and your lies and your goddamn company and get the hell out!'

'Georgie, please. We just need to talk.'

'I swear, if you don't leave right now, I'll call the police. And wouldn't *that* make an interesting newspaper headline.'

He held her stare, and for the briefest of moments she thought he might refuse to leave, but slowly he lowered his head and sent her a tight grimace. 'I'll stay in town at the pub tonight and we can talk in the morning, once we've both had time to calm down.'

'I have nothing else to say to you, Michael. I'll be waiting to receive papers to put an end to this ridiculous marriage as soon as you get back to the city.'

'Then you'll be waiting until hell freezes over. We made a promise and we're sticking to it,' he said, standing with arms folded across his wide chest and jaw clenched tightly.

'You honestly believe this is something I'm going to change my mind about?'

'That's up to you. I hope you'll have the decency to at least hear me out once you've had time to think about it.'

'Decency?' she breathed the word in disbelief as she searched for something to throw. She found nothing except a plastic food container drying on the sink, which bounced harmlessly off his wide chest as he stood calmly facing her across the room. 'You're the one who lied to *me*, you arrogant bastard.'

'I'll call back tomorrow morning.'

He left her heaving great gulps of outrage and frustration and headed outside, slamming the door behind him.

Only once she heard the car drive away did she give in to the grief, sinking into a nearby chair, allowing the tears to fall in this one moment of release, before she pushed it to the back of her mind and moved on. She'd had practice at that. She knew what to expect and, more to the point, she knew she could go on with life. It didn't end just because you'd had your heart ripped out and stomped on and were left broken and bleeding.

Thirteen

Michael swore loudly, thumped the hire car steering wheel and pulled over to the side of the dirt road. On the hill in the distance he could see the lights of the old house mocking him.

It never occurred to him that she'd find out like this. He wasn't expecting anything to hit the press so damn soon.

When he hadn't been able to get hold of her, he'd rung his brother, hoping to casually find out if Shannon had heard from her recently, citing friendly curiosity after spending the weekend with her a few weeks earlier. His brother thankfully hadn't thought too much of the odd request and told him that Shannon hadn't been able to reach her when she'd tried calling. His frustration at not being able to reach her had instantly turned to panic. What if she'd injured herself out on the property? He'd been assuming her farmhand would be there, but what if he was away and she'd been working alone?

He'd known on some level he was probably overreacting, but he hadn't been able to shake the feeling that something was terribly wrong. It wasn't like her not to call him. He'd caught a flight and driven like a madman to get to the property. When she'd opened the door his relief had been short-lived, thanks to her oddly cold welcome. He knew he should have told her. Way back in the beginning. But how could he? Once she'd told him about her father and losing her family property ... he'd seen the heartbreak, heard the pain still there today.

He knew he was responsible—not physically, he hadn't been involved in the actual negotiations for the Henderson property. The company dealt with multiple acquisitions and his main interest had always lain in managing the beef production on the properties they already owned. But he did remember it. He recalled discovering the farmer who'd just sold his property to them had killed himself and he'd felt sickened by the news and the heartless comments about it that had been thrown around by his stepfather and his cronies.

He needed to explain to Georgie that even though the facts seemed black and white on paper, he wasn't the monster she thought he was. His company did good things. He'd just needed time to prove it to her. Damn that bloody

newspaper story.

Michael checked into the pub—an older man behind the bar handed him his key and didn't ask any questions. He was relieved it hadn't been the woman from his previous visit. She wouldn't have let him escape to his upstairs room without some kind of explanation, and the last thing Georgie needed was rumours running rampant around town on top of that damn article.

The next morning, after a sleepless night, he checked out and drove back to Stoney Creek. The tall farmhand, Matt, walked out of the shed towards him. The fact he wasn't wearing a welcoming smile told Michael that Georgie had sent Matt out to head him off.

'Hey,' Matt called out, but Michael ignored him and walked straight past.

'Mind your own business. This is between Georgie and me,' Michael tossed over his shoulder without pausing. He'd almost reached the front steps when Matt's voice halted him in his tracks.

'She's not here.'

Michael turned around, lifting an eyebrow. 'Did she say to tell me that?'

'Yep. As she drove off.'

Michael spun around and searched the large shed nearby, noticing there was indeed no sign of her old ute. 'Where'd she go?'

'Dunno. She didn't say.'

'Then I'll just wait right here until she comes back.'

'Suit yourself. It'll be a long wait though. She told me to cover for her for a couple of weeks.' He shrugged before turning away.

'Weeks?' *What the hell?*

'That's what she said.'

He watched Matt return to the shed and disappear inside without further comment.

Michael swore silently, gritting his teeth until his jaw ached. Where the hell would she go for two weeks? He contemplated his options. He could call her bluff and stay here a while, wait her out ... or he could call this a strategic retreat and give her a couple of weeks to cool down and then try again.

He was a patient man—he had to be in his business. Part of the reason he was so successful was because he knew when it was the right time to hold out, and when to make a move. On this occasion, it made sense to give Georgie some breathing space in order to process everything she'd discovered.

He hadn't wanted her to find out about his link with her father and the selling of Tamban, but now that it was out in the open, he felt better ... somewhat at least. He hadn't liked keeping the truth from her, and maybe now the wounds she'd kept hidden for so long could at last do some healing.

Some things were important enough to wait for. Georgie was one of them, so he'd wait as long as he needed to.



Georgie rubbed her gritty eyes and blinked as headlights lit up the interior of her old ute. She needed to pull over and rest. She found a truck stop and parked her car, ready for a toilet break and needing to buy supplies for the rest of the trip. She managed to shut her eyes for a brief, uncomfortable rest, as her seat wouldn't recline very far, before heading off once more.

Melbourne was a long drive. The insistent ringing of the phone had roused her from her seat where she'd remained long after Michael had left. She hadn't felt like talking to anyone and wouldn't have answered if she hadn't seen the name flash across the screen. Harry.

Only, it wasn't Harry calling. It was his daughter, Veronica, and the news she'd delivered was like a second kick to her stomach. For a short while Georgie had felt as though she couldn't breathe, but she had managed to pull herself together and within half an hour she was on the road.

Harry had suffered a massive stroke. They weren't expecting him to recover, and it was likely he'd pass away before she got to him, but Georgie didn't care. She wanted to be there. Maybe it was selfish—maybe this was the perfect excuse to flee—but thinking about Harry took away some of the numbness of ending her marriage.

Melbourne was huge and Georgie barely remembered how she found the hospital, but she was met by Veronica and ushered inside a dark, quiet room at the end of a ward. 'This may sound crazy, but I told him you were on your way and I think he's been waiting for you to get here. The doctors are surprised he's still hanging on,' Veronica said quietly. The sound of machines beeping was the only noise.

The man in the bed looked frail and old. He'd lost a lot of weight after his fall and it made her sad to see him looking so vulnerable.

'I know you think I'm a horrible person for making him leave the farm,' Veronica said, her quiet words sounding loud in the stillness of the room.

Georgie glanced up at the woman in her stylish black jumpsuit and gold jewellery. At first glance she might look like she had it all together, but on closer inspection Georgie saw weary creases etched across her forehead and dark circles under her eyes that even the most cleverly applied concealer couldn't quite hide.

'I don't think that,' Georgie said softly.

'He did,' she said, throwing a sad smile at the man in the bed. 'I took him

away from his beloved Stoney Creek.'

Georgie knew Harry could be a grumpy old so-and-so sometimes and she could imagine that he wouldn't have made any bones about reminding Veronica that he hadn't wanted to leave his home.

'I just wanted him to get to know his grandkids and great-grandkids,' Veronica continued. 'He barely knew them and they're grown adults with almost grown children of their own.'

Georgie remained silent, sensing that somehow Veronica wasn't talking to her as much as to her father.

'I always felt like such a disappointment to him,' she went on. 'He wanted a son to carry on farming and all he had was me. Then I ruined his plans again when I left home; instead of marrying some local boy who'd be happy to work the farm, I couldn't wait to leave Stoney Creek and run off to the big smoke,' she said dryly, and Georgie knew how well that would have gone over with Harry. 'After Mum passed away, he gave up trying to stay in touch. She was the one who made all the phone calls and sent the birthday cards.'

She smiled a sad smile and Georgie thought about the photos of the woman Harry used to have on the fireplace mantle. She hadn't known Vera—she'd died more than thirty years ago—but she felt as though she had. Harry had left the house almost exactly as it had been when his wife had been alive. Doilies Vera had crocheted adorned all the side tables and the old piano, and a pair of her reading glasses still sat on a small table beside the lounge chair, as though she'd just left them there to come back to.

'I guess I just wanted him to be proud of me. See what I'd made of my life down here.'

'He used to talk about you all the time,' Georgie told the older woman gently. 'He was very proud of you.'

'Silly old bugger never said it,' she said, shaking her head as she stared at her father. 'As much as he liked to complain about how much he hated it down here, though, I think he was glad he had a chance to get to know his grandsons.'

Georgie smiled at the memory of one conversation in particular she'd had with Harry a few months after he'd moved to Melbourne. He was telling her how he finally had a house full of grandsons and not one of them knew one end of a cow from the other. There was always a quiet pride in his voice when he spoke about his grandsons, though.

Veronica left her to say her goodbyes, slipping from the room. Georgie took Harry's callused old hand in hers and thanked him for everything he'd done for her.

She wasn't sure if he could hear her, he didn't give any sign that he could, but

she felt as though he were listening like he always had, silently offering her an ear to vent when she needed it. She remembered how he'd wait for her to finish and then ask, 'Can you do anything about it? If you can't, well, fix the things you can do something about and let the rest go.'

Some things were harder to let go of than others.

She left the hospital and checked into a cheap motel nearby, planning to have a sleep and then go back to the hospital, but only two hours later Veronica called to tell her that Harry had passed.

Fourteen

Georgie stayed for the funeral and was sad to see how small the turnout was. It was to be expected of course, seeing as Harry only had family down this way, but Georgie couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. If the funeral had been in Timboora, the church would have been packed. Harry had lived in Timboora all his life and the community would have turned out in force to farewell one of their own. Still, it all came down to practicalities and none of Harry's family had any ties to the old town anymore.

After the ceremony, Veronica surprised Georgie with the news that she was coming up to Stoney Creek in a few weeks to spread Harry's ashes.

'Harry would like that,' Georgie said.

'The old bugger would haunt me if I didn't take him back,' she said dryly, but her smile was tinged with sadness.

Harry belonged at Stoney Creek. It just made sense. When a place got into your blood that way, it felt right that eventually, when your time had come to an end, you were returned to it. She hadn't done this for her own father and part of her still regretted it. Instead she'd buried him next to her mother in the cemetery. It'd seemed wrong somehow to take him to the farm. It was no longer in the family and she wouldn't be able to visit him there. Not that she'd been to visit his grave in a while anyway.

She said goodbye to Harry's family, knowing she'd be seeing them at Stoney Creek in a few weeks, and headed back home.

She wished she had somewhere else to go—the thought of Michael turning up on her doorstep for round two of their argument was too much to handle right now, but there was nowhere else she wanted to be. She needed to be busy and in a place that was familiar, so she headed back to Stoney and threw herself into work.

At first she ignored Shannon's calls. While she'd been away she'd had time to think, and one thing she couldn't stop thinking about was that her best friend must have known who Brent's family were this whole time ... and hadn't said a word.

Her initial anger had been a knee-jerk reaction, and after she'd had time to process it, she was able to think things through with a little more clarity. Shannon didn't know about her and Michael. Maybe if she'd known, she would have said something. At least Georgie hoped she would have. It still didn't excuse the fact she hadn't told her about Brent being the son of Derrick Matthew, the man behind the company who destroyed her family.

Try as she might to stay angry with her friend, though, the messages Shannon had been leaving were weakening her resolve. And when she next called, Georgie reluctantly answered.

'Thank goodness, George. I've been so worried about you. I heard about Harry, and Matt said you'd gone down to the funeral. Why haven't you been returning my calls?'

The sheer relief of hearing a familiar, loved voice opened a floodgate of emotions.

'Why didn't you tell me, Shan?' she asked, hearing her voice crack under the strain of trying to hold it all together.

'Tell you what?'

'About Brent. About who his father is.'

The silence on the line lasted only a few seconds but it was enough to tell Georgie all she needed to know.

'I saw the article about Micha—his brother,' she corrected quickly. 'I know who he is.'

'George, I wanted to tell you, I really did, but I swear, I had no idea for the longest time myself.'

'How? How is that even possible, Shan?' Georgie demanded.

'I don't know, I just didn't piece it together. I was so caught up in everything else, asking about his father was not exactly high on my list of priorities.'

'But you *did* find out ... and you didn't say anything?'

'I had no idea, George, you have to believe me. It wasn't until just before Brent took me to dinner to introduce me to them that I realised. I felt sick. Honest to God, George, I could have thrown up when I realised. I told Brent that I couldn't meet them, and why, and he was as shocked as I was. But I love him, I really do, and it was important to him that I meet his parents. I couldn't not go.'

'Why didn't you tell me once you found out?'

'I did. I tried to call you a bunch of times, but you were away. Matt said you'd taken a couple of weeks off which, I might add, you didn't bother to tell me about.'

The wedding. Shannon had been trying to call her while she'd been in Hawaii marrying a two-faced bastard. If she hadn't felt so guilty about calling Shannon

while she'd been getting married behind her back, she might have saved herself the humiliation of marrying a liar.

'I'm worried about you, George.'

'I'm fine. It's just been a rough few weeks.'

'I know, and that's why I was going to wait. I *was* going to tell you, I swear.'

'I just don't know how you can stand the thought of being around that family.'

'Brent can't help who his father is, and it's not fair to be angry at me. I don't agree with how his father treated yours, but it has nothing to do with Brent and me.'

She understood that, logically ... but the pain she'd been carrying around for so long wasn't ready to listen to logic just yet.



A few weeks later she received a phone call from Harry's lawyer, explaining that Harry's will had instructed that Georgie be given first option to purchase Stoney Creek if the family decided to sell, on top of a sizable gift of money that she supposed counted as a redundancy package if the property was ever put up for sale. The lawyer followed up this piece of unexpected news by letting her know that the family *would* be selling and would email her the details about the sale for her consideration.

When she'd left Melbourne, Veronica had told her it was business as usual, but Georgie had known it would only be a matter of time before the family decided to sell Stoney Creek. She'd already started looking for other jobs, keeping her ears open for anyone needing a manager, but with Harry's death and her breakup with Michael, she really wasn't in a positive enough frame of mind to think seriously about her future. She knew she had enough savings to be okay until she found a new job, but that was her Tamban money and she hated the thought of whittling it away after all her hard work accumulating it.

The lawyer's news about putting the property on the market and giving her first option was both exciting and depressing. Exciting because in all her planning she'd never thought about buying Stoney Creek, and depressing because the reality was there was no way she could afford it. When the email arrived, Georgie felt sick with nerves as she opened it, wincing as she read through the attached letter and preparing herself to see the astronomical amount she knew the property would be valued at. But when she reached the business end of the letter, she gaped at the figure in disbelief. It had to be wrong. She quickly reread the letter and frowned. There was no way this was the correct value of the land and cattle.

She picked up her phone and dialled Veronica, exchanging pleasantries and

asking how she was doing before launching into her reason for calling.

‘I think there’s been some kind of mistake.’

‘No, there’s no mistake. I know how much Harry valued your loyalty and hard work. He’d want you to buy the place, Georgie. We had someone look it over and we believe it’s a fair price.’

‘Are you sure this person was someone who knew what they were talking about?’ Georgie asked doubtfully.

Veronica chuckled on the other end of the line. ‘You’re not supposed to try to talk the vendor into *raising* the price of the property.’

‘It’s a very generous offer,’ she said quietly. ‘If it’s okay, I’ll need to do some calculating of my own and see if I’m in a position to afford it. If I could have a few days to think about it, that would be great.’

‘Of course. Let me know what you decide. And Georgie?’

‘Yes?’ she answered, hesitating at Veronica’s serious tone.

‘Dad always knew you were something special. He would never have left the farm if you hadn’t been there. I know it seemed like I forced him to leave, but the truth was, if Dad hadn’t believed you were capable of running that place, and loved it as much as he did, there’s no way we would have got him down here.’

Georgie heard the soft click in her ear as the call disconnected and a tear ran down her face, warm against her skin.

Later Georgie did the sums and double-checked the amounts, biting her lip thoughtfully as she sat back in her chair. She pulled out the business plan she’d been painstakingly putting together for Tamban and read over it critically. She could use this for Stoney Creek and take it to the bank to apply for a loan.

It *could* actually work. But did she want to do it? To use her savings for Tamban to buy this place instead? What about her dream? *What dream?* she thought bitterly. Ever since discovering Michael’s connection to Matthew Enterprises, she’d realised there was no dream to hang on to anymore. She could hardly bear to think about it, the betrayal was too fresh, too raw. She blinked away the tears that were threatening and focused on the paperwork instead. This was something real. It wasn’t just a dream or a plan in a notebook.

She glanced over at the phone as it rang and smiled faintly. Things may have been a little rocky between them, but she knew that when it really mattered Shannon would always be there for her.

‘Hey Shan,’ she answered.

‘Hi ...’ There was a brief pause before Shannon asked, ‘What’s going on? You sound weird.’

Now that she and Brent were settling into a steady relationship, her old friend was beginning to reawaken to things going on around her. Georgie knew she

wouldn't have the luxury of her best friend being oblivious to everything now and was grateful it hadn't been like this earlier or she'd never have been able to keep everything hidden the way she had. 'I've just been told Stoney Creek is going on the market.'

'Oh no. George!'

'That's what I thought too, until Harry's solicitor informed me that I have first option on buying it.'

'Buying it? Can you? I mean, can you afford it?' Shannon asked carefully.

With her savings, and the money she'd invested from her inheritance after her father had died, she was fairly certain she'd have enough for a sizeable deposit. 'I think I could,' she said calmly—far more calmly than she was actually feeling.

'Oh wow, George. This is huge. Are you going to do it?'

'I don't know, I mean I always knew that when Harry was gone there was a possibility the family would want to sell, but I was counting on it taking a long time and then possibly the new owner wanting to run it with a manager. I hadn't ever considered becoming the new owner myself.'

'Harry loved you like a granddaughter,' Shannon said gently. 'I'm sure if he could have, he'd have given it to you.'

'With the price they're asking, he pretty much is.'

'Then it sounds like you've got your answer.'

Georgie let out a somewhat shaky breath. Shannon was right. This was an opportunity that wouldn't come around again, despite the fact it would mean risking her dream of ever owning Tamban. Everything she had would be tied up in Stoney Creek for a very long time. If Tamban suddenly came on the market, she wouldn't be in a position to do anything about it. Was it worth taking that risk? She knew the possibility was a slim one—Michael had said himself, it was unlikely the property would be sold once the corporation had hold of it, but it still felt like a betrayal of something sacred to give up on a dream that had kept her moving ahead when she'd felt like giving up.

Now though, every time she thought of Tamban she also thought of Michael. The property was tied up with too many painful memories.

Stoney Creek had no connection to Michael, to her painful family history. It could be hers, with no ties to the past. A fresh start on a blank sheet of paper.

Part Two

Fifteen *Brisbane, eighteen months later*

Georgie dropped her head in defeat. How hard could it be? All she had to do was catch a plane to Brisbane and check into her hotel, but it seemed that was beyond her today. The flight had been delayed and her luggage had apparently decided to go on its own adventure to Adelaide—without her—and now the baby-faced concierge behind his shiny marble-topped reservation desk was delivering more bad news.

‘I’m sorry, ma’am, but your reservation isn’t here.’

Georgie’s mood plummeted even further. Biting back her frustration, mindful that the man behind the counter was only doing his job, she forced a smile.

‘Okay, well, could I just book a room now? I’ll sort out the mix-up later.’

‘I’m terribly sorry but we have a conference on this weekend and we’re completely booked up.’

Her smile flickered then died.

She saw the concierge’s gaze dart to a point behind her and then she heard his voice.

‘There has to be a mistake, my brother booked the rooms personally over six months ago.’

Georgie spun around.

‘I’m sorry, sir, as I’ve already explained, we’re booked out or I would offer Ms Henderson an upgrade in apology, but as it stands, I have nothing available.’

Georgie felt as though the floor was tilting beneath her feet. She’d hoped to be better prepared before she set eyes on Michael again for the first time in over eighteen months.

‘It’s okay, I’ll just go to another hotel.’

She didn’t need this right now, on top of everything that had gone wrong today. She hated that Michael was seeing her when she was flustered and out of sorts. None of this was going the way she’d planned it in her head. She backed away from the reception desk, a smile aimed carelessly towards the frazzled

concierge.

‘Georgie, wait up a minute. I think you’ll find there won’t be anything available anywhere at this late stage. The Ecce is on this weekend as well.’

‘I’ll find something.’ She didn’t wait for a response, just hurried across the foyer and out into the bright sunshine and the bustling inner-city street. Shoving on her dark sunglasses, she debated which way to try first, when a hand came to rest on her arm.

‘Georgie?’

She turned, letting out an irritated sigh. ‘I don’t have time to chat, Michael, I need to find a room. Shannon’s expecting me, and there’s still a heap to do before the wedding.’ She’d already wasted enough time stopping off at a department store to replace the basics of her missing luggage.

‘I have a solution.’

She knew it was going to be a solution she wouldn’t like, by the careful way he was gauging her reaction.

‘I have a suite and there’s a spare bedroom that you’re more than welcome to.’ She was shaking her head before he even got the last word out. ‘I thought you were here to help Shannon, not give her more grief,’ he accused.

She bristled at his tone, her eyes narrowing dangerously.

‘Do you think she’s going to be thrilled when she discovers you’re not even staying in the same hotel? Not to mention how stressed she’s going to be if you can’t find another room, because you know she won’t rest until she’s sorted something out for you.’

He was right, of course. Shannon was a control freak. She would take it upon herself to personally knock on every hotel door until she located a room, even if that meant putting off important jobs still yet to be completed for the big day.

Damn it.

‘Fine.’ She gave in reluctantly and more than a little ungraciously. ‘But I’m going to keep looking for a room, and if one comes up, I’m taking it,’ she added.

‘Of course, I wouldn’t expect you to do anything less than be completely contrary,’ he muttered.

She let that slide, conscious of the time. She only had an hour before she was due to meet with Shannon.

While Michael registered, Georgie took the opportunity to sneak a look at him. He hadn’t changed at all in the past eighteen months—if anything he seemed even more attractive. Damn him to hell. How was that even fair?

He wore a dark blue business suit and he’d already loosened his tie and looked about as ready for a shower as she was. An image of his broad naked back in a steamy stall flashed before her eyes and she immediately slammed the brakes on

that train of thought.

‘Georgie!’

She turned and broke into a huge smile.

‘Shannon!’

The two women grabbed each other in a warm hug and Georgie blinked back happy tears. ‘I can’t believe you’re finally doing this. You’re going to be a married woman at last.’

Shannon’s radiant smile lit up her beautiful round face, and her eyes sparkled like the sapphires they resembled.

‘I’ve got so much to do before Sunday. I’m so happy you’re here, I don’t think I can do all this by myself.’

‘It’s okay, it’s only Thursday. We have plenty of time to pull this thing together,’ Georgie assured her.

‘Excuse me, ladies.’ Michael appeared from behind the women and came to a stop next to Georgie. ‘How about I organise your luggage to be sent to the rooms and then you two can go and do whatever it is you need to do to prepare for the wedding?’

‘That’s a great idea, thanks, Michael.’ Shannon smiled gratefully.

Plastering a smile on her face, Georgie handed over her packages.

‘Travelling light nowadays?’ he queried with a hitch in his eyebrow.

Georgie shook her head. ‘Don’t ask.’

‘Brent is waiting for you in our room. You two are due at the tailors for a fitting, then we’re all meeting up for dinner,’ Shannon rattled off, taking Georgie’s arm and steering her towards the lift.

In the basement car park Georgie slid into the passenger seat of Shannon’s BMW and whistled admiringly at the leather upholstery and flashy gadgets on the dash.

‘It’s a wedding present from Brent. I know,’ she said, holding up a palm and rolling her eyes at Georgie’s cynical expression, ‘it’s a little extreme, but oh my God, Georgie, I still wake up feeling as though this is all a fairytale.’ She sounded like a besotted woman in love and Georgie found herself smiling at her happiness.

For a moment the heavy weight of regret settled on her heart as she recalled a time when she’d felt the same way. Had she really been that in love? She knew the answer was yes, otherwise the separation would not have hurt so much. And it *had* hurt—it’d almost killed her. She’d always thought people who said that kind of thing were being melodramatic. How could a breakup almost kill a person? But now she knew better. Maybe it couldn’t *literally* kill you, but it’d felt like *something* had died—hopes, dreams, happiness . . . it had hurt a lot more

than she'd thought possible before falling in love with Michael Delacourt.

She'd been lucky in a twisted kind of way. Everything had happened at once: losing Harry, buying the farm, suddenly finding herself with a large property and loan for which she was solely responsible. That in itself had been enough to ensure she didn't drop the ball, no matter how many times she'd wanted to. Had she not had all those distractions she wasn't sure how long it would have taken to get over Michael and their sham of a marriage. *Get over?* She pushed the little niggly voice out of her head. Of course she'd got over it. It was a whirlwind moment of insanity. How on earth could anyone think you could fall in love with a complete stranger, get married and expect it would actually last? It sounded like a stupid reality TV program and boy did those shows annoy her. She was not a human guinea pig and her life was not some social experiment. At least she hadn't done it on national television and been forced to endure public humiliation on top of it all. She supposed that was one positive to take from the whole disaster.

She looked sideways at her best friend and thought how different all this might have been if she and Michael had told everyone about their wedding. It was the first and only time she hadn't included Shannon in something important and she'd felt bad about it, until now. Now she was glad they'd never told anyone. Having everyone know how stupid she'd been might have been enough to keep her from being part of this wedding. She didn't think she could have faced all those curious stares and questions. No, it was better this way—dead and buried. Life had gone on and so had she. She couldn't imagine Stoney Creek not being hers, and she felt proud of all the hard work she'd done to make that happen.

She was a long way from being a financial success, but her decisions and careful planning were helping her reach her goals. She wasn't in this to become a millionaire—there were easier, far less stressful ways of achieving that than farming. She was doing it because this was what she was born to do. She was a farmer and she loved the land and there was no other place she'd rather be.

As Georgie and Shannon travelled across the city going from florist to caterer to photographer, they chattered non-stop, catching up on news and reliving old times. The afternoon seemed to fly past and Georgie could see that her friend hadn't been exaggerating—there was a lot to do and time seemed to be stuck on fast forward, disappearing before their eyes.

Late that afternoon, after they'd been to the last appointment, Shannon left Georgie at the elevators, with a warning not to be late for dinner as she hugged her goodbye.

Smacking a hand to her forehead in frustration as she watched her friend

vanish down the corridor, Georgie realised she'd forgotten about dinner when she'd done her hasty wardrobe shopping earlier. Turning on her heel, she ran out the front door and hailed a taxi. This was proving to be a very expensive wedding. She'd done more shopping in the past few hours than she'd managed to do in years.



Michael sank down on the chair in the suite and took a long sip from the glass in his hand. He'd been steeling himself to see her again, counting down the days until his brother's wedding, and yet it had still felt like a swift kick to the gut.

He'd almost high-fived the concierge when he heard there'd been a mix-up with the room booking. He couldn't have planned it any better if he'd tried. Finally something seemed to be going his way. Christ, she was even more beautiful than the last time he saw her. Although if her lack of enthusiasm over his solution to her problem was any indication, she was still just as unimpressed with him as she had been a year and a half ago.

Had it only been eighteen months? It'd felt like an eternity. He was a patient man—he'd mastered the art of waiting out an opponent in business, and he could hold a poker face with the best of them, a skill he'd had to utilise in order to hide the fact he'd been going through hell ever since Georgie had shut him out of her life and the bright future he'd imagined had died a slow, painful death.

Hearing her voice today, for the first time in God only knew how long, had almost brought him to his knees. He'd missed her, more than he thought humanly possible. She didn't answer his calls—their only communication was via the occasional email, which could have been some interoffice generated memo for all the personal touch it usually held, reminding him to do something about their divorce.

She flat out refused to meet with him face to face after that night he'd driven out to Stoney Creek to see her. He thought back to how desperate he'd been, and that helpless, hollow feeling stirred once more inside him. Swearing softly, he stood up and took his drink to the glass window that overlooked the city below and stared out, not seeing any of it. He was lost again in that dark place he'd been unable to climb out of since Georgie gave back her rings and effectively ended their marriage. Only, she hadn't officially ended it, and he point blank refused to do it. So they were in a holding pattern of sorts. They were still legally married, and until something was done to change it, there was still a chance he could make things right.

He took another long drink. Maybe it was pointless to keep hoping—there were times when he knew it would be better for his sanity if he just gave up and

moved on like she seemed to have done. Yet, call it sheer bloody-mindedness, he refused to believe they couldn't salvage this relationship. He knew it was his fault—he shouldn't have left it so long to explain everything—but surely, after this long, she'd be in a better place to listen to him. Surely she would let him prove to her how different his business was, not to mention that his bloody stepfather wouldn't play any part in their future. He'd been biding his time until now, knowing they'd see each other again—on neutral ground at his brother's wedding. This was it. This was when he was finally going to make her see that what they had was too important to throw away.



Georgie gave a tentative knock on the door to the suite, waiting as she listened to footsteps approaching on the other side. Her breath caught as the door opened and she came face to chest with Michael. He wore black dress pants, and an unbuttoned silver shirt hung open, exposing a wide chest with dark hair sprinkled across tanned skin. His short hair, cut close to his head, was still wet from the shower. He seemed harder nowadays, and standing this close she detected a scent—a mixture of ocean, sun-warmed skin and ... man. He'd always smelled nice, something that tugged at her memories. Swallowing over a suddenly dry throat, she dropped her gaze and it came to rest on the arm holding open the door for her. For a guy who spent most of his time behind a desk, he certainly seemed to keep fit—that much was evident.

'Are you going to come inside or shall I just pass your clothes out to you?'

Stepping past, she was careful to avoid brushing against him as she moved further into the lush suite. The hallway opened out onto an open-plan living area complete with leather sofa and massive widescreen TV. A large glass door led to a private patio with magnificent views of the city and river below. She paused in front of the two open doors of the bedrooms.

'I put your things in the bedroom to the right,' he informed her in a low voice that was doing its best to stir up old feelings.

'Thank you. I'll just have a quick shower if that's okay,' she said over her shoulder as she entered the bedroom and shook out the items she'd purchased onto her bed, hastily pulling off tags.

In the doorway Michael watched with a bemused expression. 'I remember a time I had to drag you into a shopping centre, and yet here you are buying the place out.'

Sending him a brief glance, she continued to pull out paper stuffing from inside new shoes and cut the price tags from a shimmering silver cocktail dress. Turning around, Georgie froze when she saw Michael swinging a pair of her

new lacy underwear on his finger nonchalantly.

Snatching the garment, she felt her face flare with humiliation as she heard the intimate chuckle that could once—and who was she kidding, *could still*—send a tingle up her spine.

‘They lost my luggage and I’ve had to replace a few things,’ she muttered through clenched teeth.

Immediately he straightened. ‘Did they give you credit to replace your clothing?’

‘No, it was going to take too much time, I was already late. It’s no big deal.’

‘You should have told me earlier. How much have you spent? Here, take this to cover it, and make sure you tell me if there’s anything else you need.’

Georgie narrowed her gaze at the man holding out a wad of colourful notes to her. ‘I don’t need your money, Michael.’

Slowly he dropped his arm and a tight expression replaced the teasing glint of a few moments before. ‘I think you’ve made yourself more than clear over the last year and a half.’

She headed into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her and leaning back against it wearily. Delayed shock made her hands shake and suddenly her legs had all the consistency of jelly. Why did she have to be stuck with *him* of all people? All she wanted was to get this damn wedding over so she could leave Michael bloody Delacourt in her past where he belonged.

She had a quick shower before sliding into her dress. She’d get through tonight and the next, and before she knew it, the wedding would be over and she could go home and forget all about Michael ... again. Her resolve suitably strengthened, she pulled her hair into a messy loose bun and gave her reflection a quick once-over.

When she came out of the bathroom Michael was standing with his back towards her, staring out over the bright lights of the city. He caught her reflection in the sliding glass doors and lifted his head slightly. ‘If you’re ready, we should go,’ he said without turning.

A small stab of guilt fluttered in her stomach. His tone was curt, and she knew he’d been hurt by her outburst earlier. ‘Michael, we need to talk about the div—’

‘We’re going to be late.’ He cut her off abruptly, stalking across the room and holding the door open for her.

She felt her shoulders droop at his refusal once again to discuss the topic she’d been unsuccessfully trying to bring up for the past eighteen months in emails. It wasn’t worth getting upset about now though; this was Shannon’s weekend and it wouldn’t be fair to the happy couple to have the best man and bridesmaid shooting daggers at each other throughout the entire wedding.

Shannon wore a smirk as they approached the table out on the deck overlooking a small man-made lagoon. ‘I didn’t realise you two were going to colour coordinate your *entire* wardrobe. Really guys, just for the wedding day would have been enough.’

Georgie glanced down at her dress and then over at Michael. It hadn’t even registered during their earlier squabble that they were in fact both wearing silver. The silk material of Michael’s shirt gleamed like moonlight across water—it was almost exactly the same shade as the slinky cocktail dress she wore.

They took their seats and the wine was poured. Gradually Georgie felt herself begin to unwind. Throughout the meal, she laughed with Shannon as they relived old times growing up together on neighbouring properties. Talk soon turned to Georgie and her business, and Shannon’s shameless praise made her blush as Michael’s eyes danced with quiet amusement.

‘Did you know Georgie’s business just received a tourism award?’ Shannon announced with a proud beam at her old friend.

Michael tipped his head and smiled. ‘I read about it. Congratulations, Georgie.’

Her eyes shot to Michael’s in surprise.

She’d thrown herself into making her business a success. Considering she’d been planning the farm stay for years, never really expecting Harry to agree to it, and thinking that maybe one day down the track on her own place she could do it, she’d pretty much hit the ground running once the sale of Stoney Creek went through. She knew exactly what she wanted to do, and she did it. The recognition that the nomination had given her had been fantastic for both her cattle and the farm-stay side of business. Life was looking up. Well, career-wise anyway.

‘Congratulations, Georgie. I’m really glad you’ve managed to move past everything that happened with the old man,’ Brent said.

Beside her she saw Michael’s hand freeze as he lifted his wineglass to his lips, and across the table Shannon quietly put down her dessert spoon.

Georgie managed to swallow her mouthful of cheesecake and gave him a tight smile. ‘Thanks.’

She saw Michael’s mouth straighten into a thin line, and an uncomfortable silence settled over the table.

Brent sent a confused glance towards his fiancée. ‘Sorry, I just meant you’ve done really well, getting your own place ... and everything,’ he said, his words petering out as Shannon gave a slight shake of her head.

‘It’s okay, I know what you meant. Thanks Brent,’ Georgie said, and was relieved when the conversation moved on to other topics. It was her own fault,

she supposed. As much as she loved Shannon and was happy that she'd found the man of her dreams, she hadn't been able to bring herself to spend any time really getting to know Brent, so she could hardly blame the guy for at least attempting to make conversation. Maybe it *had* been unfair to allow her dislike of his family get in the way of knowing him, but in her defence, she *had* been incredibly busy since becoming the owner of Stoney Creek. Managing a place was very different to suddenly becoming the owner, responsible for absolutely everything. She hadn't had time to do much of anything except work.

Thankfully dinner was soon over and Georgie, pleading a headache—which wasn't actually a lie—said goodnight. Michael discreetly passed her the room key, and with mumbled thanks she left the bar.

As she wiped the makeup from her face, she stared into her reflection. The earlier conversation had dredged up memories and they ran through her mind like film clips. Her hand began to shake as she remembered the last time she'd seen her father, his vehicle around a tree on a lonely stretch of road leading away from their property.

Turning from the mirror abruptly, she pushed away the memories and climbed in between cold, crisp sheets. An hour later she heard the front door open. She held her breath as Michael paused outside her door, before obviously thinking better of knocking and instead continuing on to his own room.

For a long time afterwards she heard nothing over the loud thudding of her heart, and she spent the rest of the night staring into the shadows of her lonely room.



Michael watched Georgie leave the table and fought the urge to go after her. He knew her well enough to know she'd resent his presence if he followed her to the room right now. As usual when her father or Tamban were mentioned, the defences came up. Some things clearly hadn't changed.

He ordered a drink at the bar and stared down into its amber depths, lost in thought.

'She's not always like this,' Shannon said from beside him.

'Who?' Michael asked, unsure where this conversation might be leading.

'Georgie,' she said, pausing to give the bartender her order before turning back to look at him. 'You know, I can't work out what's going on with you two.'

It took all his concentration not to react to the unexpected remark. 'There's nothing going on,' he told her dryly and could at least say *that* without lying.

Shannon tilted her head slightly, as though studying him, and he tried not to squirm. 'She's different around you. I noticed it last time too. She says there's

nothing going on either, but she forgets how well I know her.'

Michael sent his soon-to-be sister-in-law a slanted grin and shook his head. 'Don't you have enough on your plate to worry about at the moment without trying to play Cupid?'

'Cupid?' she snorted, and his smile slipped a little. 'You think I'd match you and Georgie up?'

Well, that was not what he'd been expecting. He hitched an eyebrow curiously.

'Oh, come on, Michael, you seriously think Georgie is anything like the women you take to all those fancy events? She's not into all that. I can barely get her to come and visit for a weekend. You'd never drag her away from that farm of hers. Nope, I'm afraid the only way you'd get Georgie's attention is if you suddenly grew four legs, a pair of horns and started mooing.'

He was glad he didn't take offence easily or his ego would be stinging right about now.

'But I have to say, I get a very strange vibe around the pair of you when you're together, so I know *something* happened,' she said, narrowing her eyes at him. 'Stay away from her, Michael. She's not one of your casual *playthings*,' Shannon said, using air quotations.

'Playthings?'

'Celeste? Your PA? You've taken her to the last three fundraising events your mother's hosted and I know her type.'

'Shannon, I don't think—'

'Look, who you mess around with is your business, but you are not going to mess around with my best friend. She's not into quick flings and she's had too much heartbreak in her life to need any more. Besides, you aren't even her type,' she added.

'No, really Shannon, please don't soften it, tell it to me like it is,' he drawled, not even trying to pretend he wasn't hurt by her comments.

'Okay, I may have had a little too much to drink and we both know I have no filter,' she admitted with a dramatic sigh.

He knew she was talking about the first time she'd met his mother and stepfather for dinner and had had a bit too much Dutch courage beforehand. It had been a memorable first meeting for all the wrong reasons.

'But you have to admit, Michael, you don't have a great track record when it comes to women. Your mother is constantly trying to set you up with women who are wife material and you go out of your way to avoid them. So you stay away from my best friend,' she said, poking his chest to emphasise each word.

'Okay Cinderella, I think we better get you to bed before your glass slipper

falls off,' Brent cut in, sending Michael an apologetic grin as he bundled his fiancée under his arm and led her away.

Michael mulled over Shannon's words and realised how it must look to the people around him. He *did* go through women, but not in the way Shannon supposed. He didn't sleep with any of them. He only went out with them because he was expected to attend a number of business functions and it would only raise more suspicions if he went alone. He took Celeste because it kept his mother from trying to set him up with dates.

Once she'd understood he wasn't interested in her in any way other than as his employee, she'd given up flirting with him in the office. Celeste was happy to be his cover date and it was a win-win situation for them both. She got to attend the sort of functions that gave her access to the men she liked—eligible, rich ones—and he was seen out and about with a glamorous woman, which kept his mother from asking too many questions about his private life.

He knew she was worried about him and she desperately wanted him to find a nice woman to settle down with, but how could he do that when he'd found one ... and was already married to her? He didn't want anyone else. He had a wife and one day soon she was going to forgive him and they'd work everything out. He had to believe that, because the alternative was too miserable to contemplate. He was still in love with Georgie and he wasn't going to give up on her yet.

Sixteen

It was the countdown to the big day. Only seventy-two more hours to endure and she'd be home. She missed her animals and the peace of her farm. Although exciting to visit, the city held no real appeal for her, and she longed to be back in open spaces with wide blue skies above her.

Michael was out on the balcony when she emerged, dressed and ready for an early start.

'You're an early riser for a city boy.' She slid the door shut behind her and took the seat across from his. The sun had barely risen, and the morning held the gentle coolness of an August morning. It was rather peaceful, if you ignored the steadily increasing traffic below.

'And still you keep jumping to conclusions,' he said with a dry smile, his denim eyes holding hers with a small challenge.

'You don't live in the city?' she threw back.

'I still have the apartment here, but I also spend time on my properties.'

'Of course.' Her expression hardened. His properties, which he'd fleeced from struggling farmers.

'You return my money,' he said, breaking the silence between them.

'Every month,' she agreed without removing her gaze from the city below.

'I can afford it.'

'I can't,' Georgie said hollowly as she looked over at him.

The beep of his phone cut through the tension that had flared between them. Michael's jaw clenched as he snatched up his mobile and barked a terse greeting.

Georgie took the opportunity to slip back inside and make coffee in the kitchenette, leaving him to his phone call.

While the jug boiled, she sat down and pulled on her boots. Her *good* boots as opposed to her work boots. It was usually a bit of a pain finding something good to wear out. She didn't do *good clothes* very often. Her missing bag had turned up and been delivered to the room, but she'd chosen the pair of jeans she'd bought yesterday. She couldn't remember the last time she'd worn anything other than work clothes through the day. The cows didn't particularly care how

she looked—they weren't judgemental like that.

'Did you want a coffee?' she asked when Michael wandered inside a few moments later, tossing his phone onto the bench, his brow creased in a frown.

'I'll wait and have real coffee downstairs at breakfast.'

'Silly me, I should have realised you'd only drink the best.'

'Sometimes I like to indulge myself in the finer things of life.'

Georgie lifted her eyes to his with a look that almost scorched him. 'Sometimes you learn to be happy with instant.'

Michael stared at her, his face intent, refusing to shy away from her anger. 'When are you going to stop hating the world and place the blame where it's actually deserved?'

'And just where would that be?'

'It's not at me, it's not even at Matthew Enterprises. Has it ever occurred to you that the corporations you hate so much aren't always the monsters you portray them as?'

'Has it occurred to me that the big, rich corporations would ever be taking advantage of the small, downtrodden farmer?' she asked sarcastically.

'Do you know what happens when there's no big business interested in someone's land? The land sits on the market wasting away, using up resources those landholders don't have, until the banks come in and foreclose, or the neighbours start circling. You might think Derrick screwed over your father—okay, and let's face it, the man does nothing unless he's set to make a decent profit from it, but even so, there's no way any of the families around you back then could have scraped up anything like the amount your father got. Do I agree with my stepfather's tactics? Hell no. I never have and it's the main reason I got out. I wanted to do things better. It's not all about making the biggest profit. It's about creating a business that has principles and that can make *a lot* of people money, not just the CEO. The truth is, Georgie, there was nobody to blame for losing Tamban but your father. But he got a better deal from selling to a corporation than he would have had a hope of getting from anyone else. When you face that, then you'll be free to allow yourself to be happy.'

Georgie froze, his words as cold as a slap. 'When I *face* that? How dare you —'

'What? Speak the truth? You've used your past as a crutch for too long. Someone needs to make you face the facts.'

'And that someone is you?'

'Why not? I *am* your husband.'

Georgie narrowed her gaze. 'That gives you no right whatsoever.'

'As your *husband*,' he emphasised pointedly, 'what affects *you*, affects *me*.'

Georgie gave an abrupt scoff, pushing away from the counter. ‘That’s ridiculous.’

‘Is it? When I made those vows, I was serious. I have no intention of dishonouring them.’

‘Oh, for goodness sake. We were—’

‘Married,’ he cut in firmly. ‘For better or for worse. I’m a patient man, but the time has come to stop using your father and what happened as an excuse.’

‘We were *stupid*,’ she corrected firmly. ‘It was a mistake and I want it fixed once and for all.’

‘I don’t recall having to drag you to the altar.’

‘That was before I discovered you’d left out one tiny piece of information.’

‘Maybe, but you knew exactly what you wanted.’ His eyes caressed her face and his voice softened. ‘That fire you had—for your business, for your future ... for us ... it was all-consuming.’ His voice lowered and she found her eyes trapped by his gaze.

He was standing so close she could feel the heat of his breath against her face moments before his mouth was upon hers. Emotions she’d pushed away, feelings she’d ignored in order to survive those dark days after she’d sent him away were trying to burst through the floodgates. Pulling away, she found her breathing laboured and struggled to control it.

‘That’s all you know how to do, isn’t it, Michael—*take*. You and your greedy company take whatever you want and don’t give a damn about the carnage you leave behind.’ The venom in her voice seemed to set him back on his heels momentarily.

‘Your leaving was never about what happened to your father and Tamban. It was about you being too stubborn to listen to my side,’ he said softly.

Her eyes flashed as his words hit home and she instantly came to her senses, moving away.

‘There is no *your* side. You deliberately kept your family connection to what happened to my father a secret. You treated me like a ... a child, for goodness sake!’

‘Then stop acting like one. At some point over the last eighteen months you could have stopped feeling sorry for yourself long enough to take me up on one of my invitations to meet and talk.’

‘Just like *at some point*,’ she threw back at him, ‘you could have stopped being so bloody arrogant and accepted the fact that I’m not interested in talking to you ... or anything else for that matter.’

‘I never would have picked you for a coward, Georgie.’

Georgie took a step back. He didn’t stop her walking away, but his quiet

words unsettled her more than she cared to admit.



When are you going to stop hating the world and place the blame where it's actually deserved? Michael's words came back to her in the dark later that night.

There was nobody to blame for losing Tamban but your father.

She wanted to hate him for saying those words, but she knew she couldn't. Not when they were the truth. She'd felt betrayed by her father for failing them. As an angry teenager all she saw was his selfish drinking and inability to fight for their land, for their heritage. With a few years of maturity up her sleeve, she knew there was a lot more to the story than that. Her mother's death had been devastating. Georgie had been so caught up in her own grief, she hadn't even considered her father's.

Her parents had grown up together. They'd been high-school sweethearts. Best friends. Her father had lost his soulmate. But Georgie hadn't been thinking about that back then. She'd been forced to take over the role of mother, trying to look after her dad and run the house, and she'd had no idea how to help the man who had turned to alcohol to dull the pain. Yes, he should have stepped up and been a father and a provider, but he'd got lost somewhere along the way and Georgie had been too young to know how to help him.

Maybe if the farm hadn't already been on shaky ground before her mother got sick, maybe if there hadn't been a drought ... maybe, just maybe, her dad would have come through the other side of his grief and been able to get them back on their feet again. But by the time her mother died the bank was already sending notices. He knew there wasn't anything he could do to save Tamban and it was easier to avoid facing reality, to simply stay drunk.

She wished she could have done something, even though common sense told her that there was nothing she could have done back then. She wished she could take back some of the horrible things she'd yelled at her dad the day of the auction when they'd sold off the last of everything they'd owned.

'I'm doin' it for you, kid,' her dad had said almost belligerently when she'd arrived home in time to witness their neighbours, friends and bargain hunters from all over gathering around, looking for a cheap deal. That had been the part that had hurt the most: people they'd known all their lives picking through their belongings like they were at a Boxing Day sale.

She'd only found out by accident about the auction when Shannon told her. She hadn't even known her father had sold the property. Numb with disbelief, she'd driven home, positive she'd find it was all some big mistake ... but it wasn't. Her father had stared at her like a thief caught in the act. She'd

demanded to know what was going on, and after only the briefest flash of regret, he'd taken another swig of his drink and told her he'd sold to Matthew Enterprises. They'd worn him down. There was nothing else he could do.

'I know I'm a disappointment,' he'd said, staring down at the dirt beneath his worn work boots. 'But I can't let you take all this on. You're young. You deserve a chance to live without all this shit hangin' over your head.'

'This is what I've always wanted to do,' Georgie said, fighting the urge to scream at him. 'You know it is. I had plans ... I know I can make something of this place, Dad. You just have to give me a chance.'

'I don't want you to have to suffer the way I have,' he yelled. 'I'm doin' it for your own good. There's only heartache in farming. Drought and death and worry. Year after year. You really think I want to watch you grow old before your time? Get sick with stress and worn down to nothin'?''

'That's not how it would be,' she'd argued.

'It's exactly how it would be. You're too young to know what you want to do. I'm givin' you a shot a life no one ever gave me. You'll have money to invest ... a future. One day you'll thank me,' he'd said quietly.

'Thank you?' she'd repeated shakily. '*Thank you?* I will never forgive you for this. Do you hear me? This was my future and you've gone and sold it out from under me. You don't care about me. All you care about is yourself. You're selfish. Mum would be so disappointed in you.' The words had caught in her throat and torn her apart inside, but she wanted to hurt him as terribly as he was hurting her. The years of bottled-up frustration and pain had come tumbling out that day and she hated herself for it, but she couldn't take it back. Her dad seemed to deflate before her eyes at her words.

Not long after, she'd heard him drive off in his car. And then she'd heard the god-almighty roar and crash as he hit a tree further up the road.

That had been his plan all along. The money from the sale was always intended for her because he hadn't planned on staying around.

She wished she could have taken back the angry, hurtful words. She wished she'd known what to say to make him try harder ... to stay with her.

Hot tears fell from her eyes and trickled down onto the pillow.

Seventeen

If Georgie thought the previous day had been busy, it had nothing on today. There were fittings, hairdresser and nail appointments and a trial run with the makeup artist to get through.

They *did* manage to squeeze in a coffee though, at a small boutique coffee house, where Georgie almost choked on the remainder of her café latte with a shot of caramel and white chocolate when the bill arrived at their table. Shannon simply waved it off and handed over a credit card without a blink of her perfectly tinted eyelashes.

She was so cut out to be the wife of a millionaire, Georgie thought with an affectionate smile at her old friend.

‘When do your parents get into town?’ she asked.

‘Tonight. We’re having dinner with them, the practice dinner, *remember?*’

‘Oh, yeah ... the dinner.’ Georgie cursed beneath her breath as she remembered she’d finally be coming face to face with Derrick Matthew.

Unlocking the door to the hotel suite later, she heard the shower running and forced her thoughts to stay focused on getting ready for dinner. She didn’t dawdle under her shower—there was something a little too intimate about them both being naked in the same apartment—and so she was dressed in record time and applying her makeup when she looked up and saw Michael standing in the doorway watching her, wearing only a white towel around lean hips.

Do not look at the towel, she told herself sternly, keeping her eyes on his face, which wasn’t much safer. Everything about his expression told her all she had to do was ask and he’d gladly remind her how good they were together.

‘Checking to make sure we’re colour coordinated again?’ she asked, feeling proud of herself for holding his gaze calmly.

‘I’m going with black tonight,’ he informed her. ‘They say it’s slimming.’

‘More like it matches the colour of your heart,’ she muttered beneath her breath, noticing her hands were unable to hold her makeup brush steadily.

‘It’ll be okay tonight,’ he said softly, making her glance up at him.

Georgie gave an offhand shrug and looked back at her reflection, trying to

concentrate so as to not make herself look like a clown.

‘Look, I know this must be a big deal for you, meeting Derrick there, but I’ll be there with you.’

Georgie slid him a glance in the mirror and gave a small scoff. ‘And that’s supposed to comfort me?’ she asked dryly, instantly regretting how mean she sounded as she caught his look of concern change to hurt.

‘Okay, you deal with it like you deal with everything else,’ he snarled, pushing away from the doorway. ‘On your own.’

She opened her mouth to say sorry but closed it abruptly as she stared at the empty space where he’d been standing. She didn’t want to be this person any more—it was exhausting putting so much energy into fighting, but at the same time, she didn’t know where things could possibly go from here while he refused to accept she didn’t want to be married to him any more. She just wanted things to go back to the way they were before—before she’d had a taste of a fantasy life that had been too good to be true.



It was great to see the Sinclairs again. Even though she kept in regular contact via phone and email, she hadn’t seen them in a long time. It was too painful going back. So many memories were held prisoner there—the good as well as the bad, but it was the lingering anguish that hurt the most. The pain of being so close to her home and yet no longer part of it.

Michael had hit a nerve yesterday when he’d talked about laying the blame where it was deserved. Yes, a large portion of the blame did belong to her father, but it wasn’t as cut and dried as that. Her father’s depression and drinking had got out of control after her mother died, which then resulted in him neglecting finances and the running of the property. It was followed by the drought, and then a fall in stock prices, which only intensified the growing debt issues. If he’d talked to someone, or taken up help when it’d been offered, the property could have been turned around at a number of points, but he’d given up and just watched as it all spiralled out of control around him. She knew her father wasn’t blameless, but it was the cold-hearted way the corporation had gone about applying pressure to a man who was already broken that incensed her. They’d been ruthless.

And Michael had been right, the state the property had been in, there’d been no buyers wanting to invest the time and money needed to get it back up and running again. If there had been, if a farming family had bought it, it’d still have crushed her, but maybe she’d have been able to move on from that. Knowing that some greedy corporation had bought it, turning it into just another piece of

their oversized jigsaw, really got to her.

The house stood empty. There were no children to play on the old rusty swing set. No home-cooked meals made in the kitchen. No Christmas decorations hanging up in December ... If she were completely honest with herself, she'd have to admit that most of those things had been missing from Tamban for a long time before they lost the property, but the image was so real—she could see it so clearly when she closed her eyes—that she almost believed it herself.

Tonight though, for the first time in a long while, Georgie was part of a family once more and she basked in the warmth of the feeling. She loved everything about the Sinclairs, openness, their warmth, their good humour. The Matthew clan, on the other hand, were a whole different kettle of fish. Cold fish, more aptly.

It was the first time Georgie had set eyes on Michael's mother and stepfather. Watching them unobtrusively from across the room, it seemed strange that technically these people were her in-laws. The ramifications of that sent a shiver of horror through her. How ironic that she would find herself a member of the very family who had destroyed her own?

She snagged a passing waiter and selected a tall flute of champagne from the tray. She took a hefty swig and winced, having never really acquired a taste for the stuff, but it burnt a warm track down her throat and into her stomach and before long she felt the tension begin to ease.

Harbouring thoughts of retribution, she saw herself marching over to confront the land tycoon, revealing with dramatic flair that he had stolen her future and birthright. Then cringed. Drama was not her thing, nor was making a spectacle of herself.

Her eyes moved to Michael's mother. Her fragile beauty was a stark contrast to her son's dark good looks. She wore an indulgent smile on her face as she watched her stepson across the room, gesturing as he talked to his table of friends. Her blonde hair, cut in a flattering bob that framed her delicate face, swung forward as she leaned across the table to speak to the couple opposite.

His stepfather was a sophisticated-looking man with grey hair. He had a restrained air about him, and not once so far had she witnessed him laugh or show any emotion that resembled delight over his son's upcoming nuptials. He had a shrewd expression, one that seemed to suggest he was weighing up those around him, calculating their worth, before abruptly discarding anyone he deemed unworthy of his time. For so many years this man had been a faceless name behind a ruthless company. Her fingers clenched around the stem of her wineglass. How did he sleep at night? Could a person really be so blind to the harm caused by his business? Did he feel any remorse at all for the people who

were sacrificed for the profit he made as he acquired property after property? A queasy feeling lingered in the pit of her stomach and she dragged her gaze away from the table.

You couldn't have had two more opposite groups of people in the same room if you'd tried. The Sinclairs, with their good-natured teasing and genuine happiness for the bride and groom, and the Matthews with their polite distance and restrained manners.

'Why don't you come over and be introduced?' Michael's deep voice made her jump guiltily, as though she'd been spying, which of course she had. 'Something that should have happened a long time ago.'

Startled, Georgie only began backpedalling once they were halfway across the room. 'What are you doing?' she hissed.

With his hand under her elbow and his body propelling her before him, she was unable to halt their progress without creating a scene, so she had no option but to keep her mouth shut and hope the panic she felt wasn't plastered across her face.

As they approached, she saw much to her relief that Michael's stepfather had left the table.

'Mum, I'd like you to meet Georgie ... Henderson.' His hesitation made her heart jump in alarm. Surely, he hadn't been about to introduce her as Georgie Delacourt? 'Georgie, my mother, Lorraine.'

Michael's mother looked up and Georgie saw that her eyes were a similar colour to her son's. Bracing for a cool greeting and prompt brush-off, she was a surprised to see the woman's face soften and a smile touch her lips. 'Hello, Georgie. You're Shannon's bridesmaid?'

Georgie mustered up a smile in return and nodded slightly. 'That's me.'

'Shannon's been filling me in on all the shenanigans you two got up to, growing up.'

Georgie's face must have registered her wariness because immediately Lorraine chuckled and put her hand on her arm. 'Oh no, there was nothing but good things mentioned.' Her tinkle of laughter was a pleasant surprise.

Maybe she'd been too quick to judge the woman—up close there seemed little that was cold and pretentious about her.

'Oh, there you are, darling,' she said over Georgie's shoulder. 'This is Georgie, Shannon's friend, the one she's been telling us about.'

She knew just by the tightening of Michael's features that his mother was addressing his stepfather. She turned her gaze to the man she'd privately wished to the depths of hell over the years. She held his cool stare, lifting her head a little higher at his calculating scrutiny.

‘Shannon speaks very highly of you. I hear you’re quite the little businesswoman.’

Her hackles rose and behind her she felt Michael shift his weight, his hand firm beneath her elbow.

‘I run a working cattle property with a farm-stay operation. It’s doing pretty well.’

‘She’s being modest, her farm stay just won a tourism award,’ Michael said.

‘Maybe I should snap you up to come and work for me. We’re always on the lookout for new talent. Unless you’ve already been approached by the competition?’ Derrick added slyly.

She opened her mouth to tell him what he could do with his job offer, but Michael jumped in smoothly. ‘I think Georgie has plans to work her own place.’

‘Well, you won’t make a profit on a small scale. You’ll need to think big if you want to make any real money, and tourism won’t be the way to do it, young lady,’ he informed her in a condescending tone.

‘Not everything is about making a profit.’

He gave a guffaw at her reply. ‘In this world *everything* is about profit.’

‘And damn the consequences, right?’ Georgie added with a low growl.

A charged silence hung in the air between the small group. The conversation hadn’t been loud enough to attract attention, but one glance at the body language, had anyone been looking, would have immediately indicated a change in the atmosphere.

Georgie held Derrick Matthew’s arrogant stare for a moment before turning her back on him to face Michael’s mother. Softening her tone, she forced a smile to her lips. ‘It was nice to meet you, Mrs Matthew.’

She received a brief, confused smile in return as the woman tried to work out what had just transpired before Georgie pulled her elbow free of Michael’s secure hold and said pointedly, ‘Stay and catch up with your family, I’m sure you have a great deal to talk about.’

Once or twice as the evening progressed she caught Michael’s glance from across the room, as she sat safely among the Sinclair clan. She felt a twinge of pity for him, then reminded herself he was big enough to look after himself. He had certainly proved himself more than capable of getting whatever he wanted from the world—a millionaire in his own right even without the wealth of his family behind him. A simple country family like the Sinclairs was not something a man like Michael would value, of this she was certain.

Taking another glass of champagne from the passing waiter, she downed it with a recklessness she seldom showed. Damn Michael Delacourt to hell. Well, one thing was for sure, he was not going to be a part of her life after this

wedding, and he could bet his sexy, Armani-clad arse on that.



Michael took a long drink from his glass and ignored the burn of the whisky as it slid down his throat. He wished he could numb the thoughts in his head as easily. Having Georgie so close over the past two days and not actually *having* her was killing him.

He watched her sitting beside two older women—relatives of Shannon’s, he assumed—looking relaxed and at ease. He recalled her telling him how close she was to the Sinclairs and he could see it now. She talked and laughed in a way he hadn’t seen her do since their wedding—and sure as hell not since arriving here.

He looked across at his family and wondered how different his life would have been if his dad hadn’t died. Would this side of the room be as loud and happy as the Sinclairs? He didn’t have any contact with any of his father’s family—there weren’t many of them left. His dad had had two brothers, but they were both gone, and his parents had passed before Michael was born. They’d been farmers like the Sinclairs though, and he liked to imagine they’d been just as warm and welcoming as Shannon’s family.

Of course, they probably wouldn’t be gathered in a swanky five-star restaurant in an expensive city high-rise. He probably wouldn’t be the head of a multimillion-dollar company, wearing an expensive suit and owning more land than he could ever have imagined. But he wouldn’t have lost his wife. He wouldn’t have had anything to hide from Georgie. Regret surged through him at the thought. Michael Delacourt, small landowner, farmer and husband would have been a hell of a lot richer in everything that mattered than he was now.

He looked over at his mother as she lifted her gaze and smiled. He knew she hated the rift between son and stepfather. Tonight was the first time Derrick and Michael had been in the same room for close to two years, which was a miracle in itself. They were business rivals, and after Michael walked away from Matthew Enterprises there was no real hope of salvaging any kind of relationship.

Michael watched his stepfather holding court. As usual his opinions dominated the conversation and no one else would get a chance to disagree. They could try of course, but they’d just be talked over. Some things never changed.

He hadn’t realised how much having Georgie and his mother meet meant to him until tonight. He’d always thought when he introduced her it would be as Georgie Delacourt. He’d almost done it. For one crazy moment he’d considered it. At least then everything would be out in the open at last. Georgie would be

furious, but she wouldn't have been able to continue to hide their marriage like some dirty secret. Of course, it would have probably pissed her off more and ended any hope he'd had of them working things out.

He sat back in his chair and looked across at Georgie. He had to get through to her before this wedding was over because he knew he'd never get another chance. If they could have some time alone—just the two of them—to reconnect, he knew she'd rediscover those feelings that had drawn them together in the first place. They were still there. She still had the power to bring him to his knees with one look. She was his future, and that was worth fighting for.

Eighteen

Having said goodnight to Shannon, Georgie headed for the elevator.

Bed. Just the thought of it almost made her weep in relief. Her feet ached, the champagne had made her drowsy and she wanted to forget all about Michael and his arrogant stepfather.

As the doors began to slide shut, a large hand appeared, forcing them to spring back open again. Georgie groaned as she caught sight of the body attached to the arm. Was there no escaping this man?

‘Going up?’ he asked cheerfully, grinning at her groan of dismay.

Inside the elevator, the shiny chrome and glass glared brightly, too brightly for her tired eyes, and the ride up to the room in its small confines seemed excruciatingly long.

‘Do you think you can stand up while I unlock the door?’ he asked, having taken her elbow to guide her along the hallway.

Georgie sent him a baleful glare. ‘I’m hardly legless.’

The fact that the floor was rolling like one of those weird tilt-a-whirls at the show was completely beside the point.

Inside the room it was blissfully cool and quiet and as she sank down onto the sofa and slipped off her heels, she couldn’t contain the moan of relief that escaped her lips. Falling back against the soft cushions of the sofa, she wriggled her toes blissfully. She looked up and noticed Michael remained standing by the doorway watching her.

She closed her eyes. She was too tired to deal with him now. ‘I don’t think my feet will ever be the same again after tonight,’ she groaned.

Beside her, the cushion dipped and before she had time to open her eyes her feet were lifted and placed sideways across a warm, inviting lap.

‘What are you doing?’ she gasped as two strong hands encased her feet and began to rub them in a manner that stilled further protests and drew out a long, deep moan of contentment.

‘Feel good?’ His low voice sounded like the rumble of an approaching thunderstorm, with an intensity to match.

‘Oh my God. So good,’ she murmured as his strong hands worked their magic on her aching feet. Okay, maybe she could deal with him if he was going to do this.

While she didn’t doze, her body *did* relax and the tension she’d carried around all day evaporated. It took a moment to realise that his hands had moved from her feet to her calves—the effect was like a bucket of iced water over her head.

Swinging her legs from his lap, she placed them back on the floor, feeling more than a little flustered and suddenly quite sober.

‘Ah, thank you ... that was ...’ Her words petered out as she realised she had no idea how to respond to such an intimate gesture and still keep her dignity intact.

‘You’re welcome,’ he said softly, and she could feel his gaze searching her face once again.

Her flighty gaze darted about the room in search of something to force the conversation back to neutral ground. ‘Ah. A bar fridge.’

‘Don’t you think you’ve had enough for one night?’

‘No.’ Selecting a small bottle at random, she searched for a glass then decided to drink straight from the bottle instead. She was a grown woman and could do whatever the hell she liked. She didn’t need Michael Delacourt, with his perfect teeth and his perfect smile and his perfect bloody body ... for a moment she forgot what she was angry about, before a quick glance at his *perfect* brow frowning in disapproval at the bottle in her hand reminded her. How dare he sit there and scowl at her? Who the hell was he to judge?

Turning away from him, she tipped the bottle to her lips. A burning like she had never experienced before ran down her throat, making her gasp and cough and splutter. Tears flowed from her eyes and her nose began to run. Fumbling to put the bottle back on the kitchenette bench, she groped for a tissue, gratefully accepting a glass of water offered from over her shoulder.

‘Seasoned Scotch drinker, I see, Georgie,’ he drawled sarcastically.

Once the coughing subsided, she blew her nose and went into the bathroom to wash her face.

The reflection in the mirror made her grimace: red nose, watery eyes and tousled hair. She dragged off her clothes and turned to start the shower. The thought of standing beneath the spray of water and letting the water wash over her was too attractive to resist. She reached for the soap and swore softly as it jumped from her hands like a slippery fish. She performed a brief drunken juggling act as she attempted to catch it before it fell to the floor. Too tired to bother bending down, she left it there, resting her head against the tiles, letting the warm water massage her tired body. It was so relaxing she almost fell asleep.

A knock on the shower screen startled her.

‘I was worried you’d fallen asleep.’

Spinning around, she lost her footing as she trod on the small rectangular bar of complimentary soap. Her gasp was cut short as the door was yanked open and two strong arms reached in to grab hold of her.

Shock, distress and something that caused a slight prickling sensation, not altogether unpleasant, flooded her instantaneously.

They stood there, Georgie naked and wet under the stream of hot water, and Michael, shirtsleeves rolled up to expose muscular forearms, his soaked shirt clinging to his chest. He seemed oblivious to the fact he was standing under a shower fully dressed.

The steam circled them, weaving about their bodies seductively, enfolding them in a world where only the two of them existed.

Michael’s eyes darkened and his lips lowered towards hers.

The touch of his mouth sent a ripple of longing through her body. As if of their own accord, her arms circled his neck and he stepped into the shower stall, dragging her wet, sleek body, tight against his own. The kiss seemed to go on forever, igniting a cinder inside her she’d thought long dead.

The clothing melted from his body, although she did recall later that her fingers had been eagerly helping undo buttons.

Her hands wandered across broad shoulders and down a flat stomach. A gasp of surprise escaped her lips as he gently pushed her back against the cold tiles of the shower.

His hands were flat against the shower wall on either side of her head and his hard body, so achingly familiar, slid with delicious torture against her own.

‘I want you, Georgie,’ he whispered in a husky voice close to her ear.

God help me, she thought desperately. The sound of his voice sent a thrill of desire through her body. Her hands fluttered lower, across his abdomen, drawing a rugged hiss of desire from his lips.

Catching her face in his hands, he turned her head to look at him. His eyes bore deeply into her own, forcing her to see him and acknowledge what they were about to do. Holding his penetrating gaze, so dark and heavy with need, she forced her mind to cooperate with her mouth—so hard to do when the man was distracting her with the hard length of his body pressed tightly against her own.

‘Is this what you want too?’ he asked, and his voice sounded tight with need.

Georgie couldn’t make her mouth work at first but managed a jerky nod. ‘Yes,’ she whispered. She’d tried to fight it, but there was no point in denying the obvious truth. She wanted him very badly.

Slowly, deliberately, he entered her. His uneven breathing matched hers, and

for a moment they savoured the feeling until blatant, urgent need overshadowed the desire, and she clung to his shoulders, her legs wrapping around his waist tightly as he carried her back to a time when everything had been perfect.



Georgie opened her eyes, and saw glorious sunshine pouring in through the window across from her massive bed. She stretched, feeling the crisp white sheets against her smooth naked body ... and froze mid-stretch ... *naked body?* She never slept naked.

In a rush, it all came back to her: steam and wet kisses on hot skin ...

Scooting up against the headboard, Georgie scanned the room, searching for other clues. Surely it had all been a dream?

The tangled mess of the sheets and the damp towels on the floor were indisputable proof otherwise.

Slamming her eyes shut in mortification, she recalled just how much of a willing participant she'd been in the whole escapade.

Michael.

She wondered where he was. The bed was empty beside her—only a small indent in the crisp white of the pillow showed anyone had even been there at all and there was no sound of him outside.

Gingerly she slid from the bed, her muscles feeling tight and well used and she felt a flutter of excitement as she recalled the reason behind that. Gathering the clothes hanging in her wardrobe, and wrapping a towel securely around her, she headed for the shower.

A quick glance around the main living area confirmed she was alone. Her shoes from the night before had been lined up neatly beside the bedroom door, and the glasses they'd used were drying on the small sink in the kitchenette.

Closing the bathroom door behind her, she reached into the shower stall and turned on the taps, adjusting the water temperature until it was warm enough to step beneath. Images of last night began to replay in her mind but she forced them away as she lathered the soap across her body and washed her hair. Turning her face into the spray of water, she allowed it to cleanse the remaining dregs of sleep and passion, clearing her head. It was the day before the wedding and she was going to need to focus.

As Georgie was dressing, her phone's ringtone echoed throughout the quiet suite and she ran for her handbag, still sitting where she'd left it on the coffee table in the other room. Digging through the bag, she pulled out her mobile and answered, sounding more than a little breathless.

'Where are you?' Shannon's amused voice greeted her with only the slightest

hint of stress colouring her tone.

‘I’m on my way down ... where are you?’

‘We’re in the dining room, waiting for you to get down here so we can eat breakfast. Hurry up, we’re all starving.’

‘Who’s we?’

‘Michael, Brent and me ... Hurry up!’

‘Okay, okay, keep your hair on, I’ll be down in five.’

They disconnected the call and Georgie took a deep calming breath. Well, at least she didn’t have to face Michael alone in the cold, harsh light of day ... just in front of her best friend and a crowded dining room.



Michael reached for his coffee as he listened to Shannon talking to Georgie on the phone. He bit back a grin. He’d been doing that all morning, ever since he’d woken up with Georgie sleeping beside him. He’d been too scared to move at first, he didn’t want to wake her and face the regret he might see in her eyes. He knew her well enough to realise she’d fight what had happened between them last night, but at least he knew now that it was there—the chemistry that’d drawn them together in the first place. There was no way she could look him in the eye and deny she still had feelings for him. That’s all he’d needed to know. While those feelings remained, there was a chance they could salvage this marriage.

‘She’s on her way,’ Shannon informed them needlessly. ‘She picked a great day to sleep in.’

‘It’s still early, there’s plenty of time to get everything done,’ Brent soothed his jittery bride. Nothing ever fazed Brent.

Michael’s gut clenched as he spotted Georgie walking into the room. He wished he had a few more minutes to hold on to the memory of last night when she’d been the Georgie he remembered: sultry, sexy and needing him ... Then she was there in front of him and his heart hit his chest at her nervous glance. He was still so in love with this woman. They had to make this work. He wasn’t sure he could survive losing her again.

Nineteen

Pushing through the large doors of the dining room, Georgie took a moment to scan the tables before Shannon, waving her arms like a lunatic, drew her and a few other gazes to their table.

It never ceased to amaze her how easily Shannon could light up a room. It was almost as though she possessed some kind of magnetic field that attracted people to her. She still couldn't believe a man had finally been able to curb her party-girl ways and make an honest woman of her—and to think both she and Michael had been witness to the event. Who would have thought going to a B&S ball, in what was supposed to be a last hurrah to their misguided youth, had been the turning point of Shannon's life ... and the biggest mistake of hers.

Coming to a stop before the table, she nervously thanked Michael as he moved her seat out and waited for her to sit down. If there was one thing the brothers had in bucket-loads, it was manners. They were always opening doors: car doors, front doors, shower doors—no door was safe.

'Sleep well?' he asked in a deep tone that reminded her of a lion's purr.

Ignoring the blush that she felt beginning to touch her cheeks, she smiled, not quite meeting his eyes. 'Great thanks, you?'

'Unbelievably well.'

Clearing her throat, she toyed with the cutlery before Shannon eagerly suggested they eat. Rising to her feet quickly, she was forced to wait until Michael moved aside to allow her to pass. With a resigned sigh, she lifted her eyes to meet his deep blue gaze, telling herself the sooner she faced him, the sooner it would be over.

'We need to talk tonight, Georgie,' he said, his eyes holding hers.

'We have nothing to talk about.' Although she continued to smile, her eyes glittered with conviction. 'Unless you want to finally do the right thing,' she added with a touch of sarcasm.

He lowered his head to a mere inch above hers, blocking out the noisy breakfast diners surrounding them. 'Tonight.'

Her breath lodged in her chest as she waited for his mouth to touch her own.

Then the moment was gone, and he moved away without fulfilling the longing that had suddenly flared inside her at the thought of kissing him.

When he moved away to join the others at the buffet table, she noticed her hands were shaking and she took a deep, calming breath. It would be over very soon. One more day.

Thankfully, the day was so busy and fun filled that she was able to push all thought of Michael to the back of her mind. Shannon's mother and aunties joined them for a morning at the spa where they were pampered with massages, pedicures, facials and champagne. Although Georgie declined the champagne—last night was still too fresh in her mind *and stomach* to face it again so soon—she had a fabulous day and couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed and smiled so much.

She'd missed these people. They were good, salt of the earth folk who loved the land as much as she did, and they knew how to live it up when the opportunity arose.

The night before the wedding, Shannon and Brent bowed to tradition and decided to spend it separately. Much to Georgie's relief, it gave her the opportunity to avoid Michael, so she happily grabbed her clothes to have a sleepover in Shannon's room.

They attended a brief dinner with Shannon's family in a nearby restaurant. It was a relaxed affair and perfect for calming the last-minute wedding jitters that both bride and groom seemed to be succumbing to.

There was a tearful farewell at the lift, when the two groups split in different directions, and Georgie couldn't help but laugh and shake her head as Shannon clung desperately to her groom.

'You'll be seeing him tomorrow, now let the poor man get some sleep, he's going to need all his strength for the wedding night,' Georgie said.

Kicking off their shoes back in the room, the women collapsed onto the bed.

'I know I'm a big sook, but I can't help it, I just love him so much. I hate being apart from him.'

Georgie gave a dramatic eye roll. 'You're hopeless.' She softened it with a smile. 'But it's great to see you so happy.'

'It was the best thing we ever did, going to that B&S, wasn't it,' Shannon sighed.

Georgie didn't answer but flashed a small smile.

A loud beep from her handbag announced a message had arrived and she dragged herself from the bed to read it.

Michael's name appeared next to the message notice. She read the text quickly before tossing the phone back into her bag.

‘Who was that?’ Shannon asked, looking as energetic as a starfish in the middle of the bed.

‘Just a message from Matt, letting me know all is fine back at home,’ she lied.

‘So, anything going on there with you two?’

Georgie gave a small chuckle and wrinkled her nose. ‘Between Matt and me?’

‘Yeah, why is that so hard to imagine? He’s not bad looking, has a killer body, worships the ground you walk on ... *and lives with you.*’

‘He doesn’t *live* with me, he has his own cottage on the farm, and no, there is nothing going on there, he’s just my foreman.’

‘He does have a killer body though.’

Georgie shook her head in despair at her friend’s never-ending endeavour to find her a man.

‘Speaking of killer bodies ... What’s with you and Michael? Brent and I always thought after that weekend, you two might end up together. You’ve never talked about what went on with him.’

‘I gave him a lift back into town,’ she shrugged, adding silently, *and married the lying bastard. Nothing exciting.* ‘Why don’t you go and have a nice long soak in the spa while I dart back to my room and grab a few things,’ she told Shannon, who looked as though she could barely keep her eyes open.

‘I think I will ... I’m wiped out.’

Once outside, Georgie stormed along the corridor until she reached her room and swiped the key impatiently. She found Michael seated on the balcony, taking in the panorama of the night-lit city before him.

‘I’m here, start talking,’ she said without preamble, standing with her arms folded across her chest and her eyes flashing. She hated his high-handed summons to the room but knew he’d make true his promise of coming to Shannon’s door to get her if she didn’t turn up.

‘We need to discuss last night. There won’t be time tomorrow and we haven’t had time today.’

‘There’s nothing to discuss. I drank too much, you were here, and we had a good time ... that’s it.’

‘That’s it?’ he echoed.

‘If I hadn’t drunk so much, I wouldn’t have allowed it to happen. I accept my part in it, but that’s it. It won’t happen again.’

‘Are you saying I took advantage of you?’

‘No. I’m saying I wasn’t thinking straight.’

Slowly he stood from his seat, towering above her as he stared down into her apprehensive eyes. Georgie stood transfixed by the sheer presence of the man.

He moved his hand slowly towards her face, cupping her cheek in his large

palm, never taking his eyes from her own.

‘Are you thinking straight now?’

Her heart thudded painfully against her ribs. ‘Why won’t you just give me the divorce, Michael? End this once and for all?’

‘I don’t give up, Georgie, not ever.’

She saw that he meant every word he said. ‘Well, unfortunately for you, neither do I.’

He slid his hand from her cheek, into her hair and dipped his head to touch her lips. He was like a drug. She tried to resist him, but he always managed to intoxicate her with his heady kisses. This animal attraction was what had got her into this whole mess in the first place. Her traitorous body responded to the warm, musky scent of him and blocked all common sense.

Then from somewhere deep and dark, an image from the newspaper flashed before her eyes. A farmer and his bedraggled family, their eyes empty. Dragging her mouth from his warm lips, she pulled away, breathing heavily.

‘I have a proposition for you.’

Georgie gritted her teeth but remained silent.

It didn’t faze Michael in the least. ‘I’ll give you your divorce. *If*, after a week together, you can still tell me you feel nothing for me.’

Her eyes flared with resentment. ‘I don’t have to prove myself to you, Michael, and I sure as hell have better things to do with my time than waste it playing games.’

His voice, soft and deep, floated across the small distance between them. ‘Sounds to me like you’re afraid you’ll lose the bet.’

Turning away, she pulled open the door with more force than was necessary and headed to her bedroom. His words stayed with her as she rode the elevator back to Shannon’s room, and she tried not to listen to the voice that pointed out maybe he was more than a little bit right.



It was hard to sleep that night, although Shannon apparently had no trouble—she was asleep and snoring before her head even hit the pillow, leaving Georgie to toss and turn, grasping for the sleep that continued to elude her.

Giving up, she went out onto the balcony wrapped in the bed quilt and stared up into the dark night sky. The last few days she’d been inundated with memories, but in truth they’d started when she’d received the phone call from Shannon and the news that Michael was to be her partner in their wedding party. If it’d been anyone other than Shannon, she would have refused to be bridesmaid.

The thought of seeing him again had cost her many a sleepless night in the lead-up to the wedding. She'd refused to look back over their tumultuous relationship and wonder what might have been. There'd been no point. The pain she'd felt was still a raw wound she carried within her.

It had become easier over time to ignore the pain and concentrate more on the shame. She'd always considered herself a level-headed, down-to-earth woman who had her future carefully mapped out before her, not some lovestruck fifteen-year-old. It was hard to believe that she'd allowed herself to become so caught up in a romance that she'd pushed all common sense aside and married a man she'd barely known. It'd been madness.

Those unbelievable few weeks of her life she'd been swept off her feet and had had her whole world turned upside down. She'd believed in the fairy tale, only to have it all ripped from her in the time it took to read a newspaper article. Just like that, her happily-ever-after had come crashing down around her. The memory of how stupid she'd been still stung.



The morning of the wedding dawned with brilliant sunshine. The sky was a perfect cloudless blue, and it was the last day Georgie would have to be stuck here with Michael.

With hair and makeup done, she slipped on her bridesmaid dress, a beautiful beaded satin charmeuse in a shimmering sky blue that hugged her body like a second skin. The ruched back was draped and dipped to reveal her lower back. Georgie had protested that it was too sexy for a bridesmaid dress, but Shannon had brushed away her concerns and clapped her hands in delight.

The slinky material felt like a cool cascade against Georgie's skin and she'd never worn anything so gorgeous in her entire life.

In almost reverent silence, she helped her best friend get into her wedding gown and stood back to look at the reflection in the mirror. It was hard to imagine this day was finally here. All those years the two girls had played dress-up and make-believe in their bedrooms, Shannon had always been the magical princess bride. Where had those years gone? The happy carefree days before reality took hold of Georgie and taught her so many harsh lessons about life and love. Before her mother was taken away, along with Georgie's little-girl dreams. She'd never had the chance to share this moment with her mum. Or her dad, she thought, thinking of Shannon's parents and the part they would play today in their daughter's wedding. She wiped at the dampness brimming on her eyelashes and cursed silently for allowing the memories to creep up on her today of all days.

‘Don’t you dare,’ Shannon warned in a husky voice. ‘We are not going to redo this makeup.’

Georgie hugged her and put on a bright smile, then all too soon there was a knock on the door and it was time to head downstairs to the cars. A long sleek limousine awaited them at the front of the hotel, and Shannon waved like a celebrity to the small crowd of onlookers who called out their congratulations and good wishes, her dad looking proud as punch as he helped her into the car.

Georgie felt her throat close up a little as she fought to hold back the unexpected rush of emotion.

The trip to the church would take them a little over forty minutes. Shannon had her heart set on an old stone church she’d discovered one day out sightseeing. It was up in the hills, overlooking the valley below. As they drew up in front of the church, Georgie could see why her friend had been so stubborn in her resolve to be married there. The views were breathtaking and the little old church with its moss-covered walls and cottage-like appearance made the perfect fairy-tale church.

With a final hug as the first strains of the wedding music started, Georgie took a deep breath and began her walk down the aisle. The church was full, almost bursting at the seams with friends and family eagerly craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the bride.

More than a little out of her comfort zone, Georgie struggled to keep the smile on her face as she made her way down the aisle. As much as she loved getting dressed up, she was far more at home in boots and jeans, chasing cattle and riding horses.

Her gaze lifted towards the front of the church where the minister stood patiently. The encouraging beam of his kind round face sparked a genuine smile from Georgie. Sliding her gaze sideways, she sent a confident grin to Brent, who looked as though he wanted to fidget with the collar of his white shirt. Then she moved further along to Michael, looking as calm and cool as if he were waiting in line at a checkout.

One glimpse of his slow, sexy grin set her heart racing and her step faltering. With only the slightest of stumbles she regrouped and continued, hoping no one else had noticed. She couldn’t risk another look at him—she wasn’t sure she could make it to the front of the church without falling flat on her face otherwise. That man certainly knew how to wear a tux.

As she reached the altar, a collective gasp from the congregation behind her announced the arrival of the bride.

Shannon and her father made a majestic sweep down the aisle, and more than a few tissues were dabbing at eyes by the time they reached the front. Looking

over at Brent, Georgie saw that his gaze hadn't left Shannon's face the entire time. He was the picture of an infatuated groom. A small smile touched her lips and she knew she wore a wistful expression as she thought once again how happy her friend was to be marrying the man of her dreams. Like a magnet though, her eyes were pulled towards Michael and she saw his thoughtful gaze resting upon her.

The service started and Georgie was immediately lost in the magical world of promises and pledges, trying hard not to let her own cynical experience tarnish the moment.

Twenty

Michael tossed and turned all night thanks to the constant turmoil Georgie Henderson sparked inside him. Infuriatingly gorgeous, stubborn woman that she was. He'd spent the morning trying to calm his besotted brother's nerves and keep him on track. Brent was so uncharacteristically tense that without constant prodding to remind him it was time to get dressed and put on his shoes, they wouldn't have made it to the church at all.

At least it had kept him from thinking about Georgie *all* morning. His thoughts still managed to wander back to the night they'd spent together, tormenting him by selecting choice images of their lovemaking, making him harden uncomfortably as a result. He'd fallen back into that teenage boy nightmare, where his body decided to take on a life of its own, choosing the most inappropriate moment to do so.

When Georgie walked into the church he felt as though his heart stopped beating for a moment, before thumping so painfully against his chest that he wondered whether he might be having a heart attack. He'd always found her beautiful, no matter what she wore, but seeing her appear in that doorway with the afternoon sunshine streaming in around her, she was breathtaking. She was like some silken goddess floating down the aisle towards him and he had to swallow over a hard lump that formed in his throat.

Watching her throughout the ceremony, he wished he could read her mind. Was she remembering their wedding vows? Did she ever remember how good it was at the beginning, before she shut him out of her life?

As the ceremony came to an end, he watched her hand Shannon's flowers back to her and step away, waiting for the new Mr and Mrs Matthew to pass by. Her radiant smile faded slightly as she looked up at him, taking the arm he'd extended to escort her from the church and out into the church grounds for the photographs.

His breath caught as he glanced down and noticed for the first time the way her dress exposed the length of her bare back. It sent a wave of longing crashing through him. He itched to run his hands down the smooth tanned skin and feel

her shiver in anticipation. His thoughts were put on hold as a wayward, rather rotund aunt of the bride clasped his cheeks firmly between her pudgy hands and pulled him down into a lip-smacking kiss.

‘Welcome to the family, son.’

Beside him, Georgie smothered a giggle but stepped in.

‘Aunty Betty, this is Brent’s brother Michael. It’s easy to mix them up.’

Her gentle nature was another thing he loved about this woman. She had a way of making people feel good, never drawing attention to their flaws or mistakes and often making fun of herself in order to save someone else’s embarrassment.

One way or another he was going to win Georgie back. He was buggered if he knew how, but he’d find a way, even if it took the rest of his life.



The reception was held in the hotel, the function room upstairs transformed into an elegant ice castle fantasy. White silk had been draped from the roof to billow softly above the guests and create a magical winter wonderland. Huge ice sculptures were scattered around the room with miniature ones in the centre of each table. Candles flickered against white backdrops and fake icicles were hung from tables and suspended from the ceiling.

As usual, after the beer and wine began to flow, things loosened up, and once the formalities ended, people were free to move around and chat. Georgie loved catching up with old neighbours and people she hadn’t seen in years.

Admiring the decadent wedding cake with a few other guests, Georgie was suddenly swept off her feet and into a strong pair of arms. She let out a squeal of surprise as she clung for dear life to the shoulders of her abductor. It turned into a laugh of delight once she discovered his identity.

‘Ben!’

‘Long time no see, Henderson.’

Georgie slapped his shoulder and demanded to be put down. Placing her back on her feet, Ben took a step back and looked her up and down.

‘Wow, you sure filled out in all the right places,’ he said with a long whistle that made her blush like an idiot.

‘Knock it off.’ She couldn’t help but laugh at him. He’d always been a larrikin, even as a kid. His family owned a property further down the road from Tamban, and he and Georgie had gone to the same school. Even though Ben had been a few years above her, they’d been good mates.

‘It’s good to see you again. What have you been doing with yourself?’

‘I’m running the old place now. Dad and Mum have buggered off to the Gold

Coast to enjoy a bit of the good life.'

'Good on them. They deserve it.' She remembered Ben's parents. They'd been good, hardworking people, and his mum had often dropped by with a casserole when her dad had been at his worst.

'Are they here?' She craned her neck to search the sea of faces but couldn't spot them.

'Nah, Dad's just had an operation, so they couldn't get here.'

'Is he okay?'

'Yeah, you know Dad. Tough as nails. Had a few heart issues but the doc reckons he'll be good as new.'

Georgie gave a small shake of her head at the blasé answer. A few heart issues could mean anything, but clearly if Ben was at the wedding and not his father's bedside, then maybe it wasn't as serious as it sounded after all.

'I'll tell them you said g'day,' he said.

'Do that. I'm sorry I didn't get to catch up with them.'

They headed over to the bar to get a drink and sat down to continue their chat. Ben was a typical country boy, tall and well built from a life of hard outdoor work. His sandy hair curled a little around his ears and powder-blue eyes sparkled at her in frank appreciation. She shook her head, grinning at his open flirtation.

Time had certainly done him no harm either. He was much better looking than she remembered from when he'd been a scrappy schoolkid riding home on the bus.

Laughing together over a shared memory of Shannon and an underage drinking incident, a deep voice cut through the jovial atmosphere.

'Georgie, we're needed for the bridal waltz.'

'Sorry Ben, duty calls. It was nice to see you again.' She bent down and kissed his cheek. 'We'll catch up a bit later and I'll give you my number.'

Raising his glass in a show of agreement, Ben gave her a wink and a slow grin.

She could feel Michael's disapproving silence radiating beside her and bit back the rush of irritation. *He doesn't own me*, she told herself angrily.

As instructed, Georgie and Michael were to wait until the bride and groom had completed a full circle of the dance floor and then join them before other guests were invited to take part. Placing her hand carefully in Michael's, Georgie did her best to ignore the butterflies that fluttered against her ribcage.

'It's only one dance,' Michael said, breaking into her thoughts and reading them as accurately as ever.

With a small snort, she said, 'Be thankful Shannon outgrew her desire to have her bridal party do a fully choreographed dance routine.'

‘Now *that* would have been interesting.’

‘It was on the cards when we were kids.’ Memories of long hot days and school holidays, staring up at the cloudless blue sky above sharing dreams of the future swarmed her senses. She could, even now, smell the grass and the eucalyptus, hear the noisy insects in the trees and feel the sun on her face.

‘And what was your wedding daydream, Georgie?’ Michael asked, dipping his head close to her ear.

‘I don’t know. I was always Shannon’s bridesmaid.’

‘Your talents are wasted as a bridesmaid. Good thing I have first-hand knowledge of you as a beautiful bride.’

Her breath hitched at the solemn tone of his voice. He’d always had the ability to make her feel as though she were the most gorgeous woman ever created—but then again, he was a good liar ...

Michael took her hand in his and slid his arm around her waist in a firm hold that drew her tightly against his body. As they glided onto the dance floor, she felt the heat of his hand on her naked back and a shiver raced through her. Beneath her palm, the fabric of his tux felt coarse; his shoulders wide and solid. As they made a circle, he pulled her a little closer and her hand moved further across his broad shoulder towards his neck. She knew that if she moved her fingers just a little higher, she’d touch the trimmed, neat edges of his short hair where it tapered down the back of his wide neck.

The heady scent of his aftershave, a woody, spicy concoction that no doubt cost a month of her wages, was intoxicating. It floated between them and she was tempted to bury her face against his smooth throat and give him a good sniff. The thought of his reaction if she actually did this made her giggle unexpectedly.

‘Now what are you thinking about?’ His drawl was low and lazy and she heard the smile in his voice even though she didn’t pull back to see it.

‘Nothing,’ she lied quickly; she didn’t want to give him any more ideas than he was already having.

‘Have you thought about my offer?’

She let the music drift between them for a moment, before she answered, ‘I’m flying home.’

‘I didn’t pick you for a chicken, Georgie. Scared I’m going to prove you wrong?’

‘I have a business to run.’

‘You have someone caretaking for you, one more week won’t make any difference.’

The song ended and a new one began. Pulling out of his grasp, she backed

away and shook her head. 'It might not make a difference to a corporation like yours, but it does to me. Thank you for the dance.'

He didn't try to stop her leaving, and Georgie tried not to worry about the fact he'd let it go so easily.



Michael didn't know where the idea for the offer had come from the night before—all he'd known was that he was desperate, and time was running out. It was out of his mouth before he realised what he was saying, but actually, he was kind of impressed. He wasn't as confident as he'd seemed that it would work, but if nothing else it bought him more time. A week to be exact.

He smiled politely as his mother introduced him to some of her friends and was glad of the opportunity to take his mind off his frustrations for a while. When his brother made an announcement that he and his new bride would be leaving, Michael immediately searched the room for Georgie, spotting her in the middle of the crush of well-wishers lined up to say their farewells. By the time the couple had left, he'd lost sight of her and he decided to go up to his suite, hoping they might have a better chance to talk alone. On his way out, he found himself delayed further saying farewell to guests as they began to head off, but hid his impatience behind a polite smile. There'd still been no sign of Georgie and he was eager to catch her before she headed to bed.

As soon as he entered the room, he knew she wasn't there. There were no shoes kicked off in the lounge room where she usually left them as soon as she escaped an outing, and a glance into her bedroom revealed all her belongings were gone. He sank down onto the end of her bed. He was too late, she'd left.

Twenty-One

Pulling up at the gate, Georgie rolled to a stop and sat for a moment listening to her diesel engine idling as her eyes wandered over the sign welcoming guests to Stoney Creek Station. It still gave her a thrill to come home to her little piece of heaven. The smell of eucalyptus and wattle drifted towards her. The warm air caressed her cheek and she tilted her face up to the sun to allow herself a moment of indulgence.

It'd been a long trip. She'd left the reception, packed her stuff and booked into a motel close to the airport, ready for her early flight the next morning. She knew if she stayed, she'd only weaken again and that would just make things even more complicated. Chemistry had never been their problem; it was just the other things like honesty and trust that ruined everything.

It was good to be back. As she drove, Georgie gave the place a careful once-over. It was ridiculous—she'd only been gone four days, but it was an automatic response. She'd become even more pedantic with the farm-stay side of the business taking off. It was imperative in this age of social media where a review—good or bad—could make or break a business.

While the families who came out here expected a certain level of comfort, the real experience was in enjoying the simple pleasures of country life, pitching in with chores, riding horses and campouts. There were the odd exceptions, of course; some guests just wanted to get away from the city and do nothing, and that was perfectly fine as well. Georgie tailored the package to suit the individual. It was this attention to detail, and respect for the client's request, that had earned Stoney Creek Station its reputation.

Parking the ute in the shed, she unloaded the supplies she'd picked up in town and carried them into the house. The main house was where she lived, but it held a dining room where guests could come for their meals if they felt like a change from their small self-contained cabin. There were also three guest rooms and a communal lounge area.

Georgie had her own rooms at the rear of the house, her sanctuary after a long day of entertaining active children and fun-loving families.

While the farm stay was the pretty packaging, the real money was in the livestock. Thanks to Harry's family and their more than generous pricing of the property, and the fact Stoney Creek already had an established stock breeding program, she had been able to secure a loan with the bank and had renovated the main house as well as built cabins for guest accommodation. The whole venture had seemed to unfold without a hitch. Everything happening just the way she'd envisioned ... if you overlooked the small hiccup of having a husband she didn't want refusing to give her a divorce.

The work dogs barked a happy welcome as she passed them. Stopping to say hello, she knelt down and rubbed Titch behind the ears, then climbed the few steps up to the verandah and pushed open the door with a weary sigh. She kicked off her shoes and collected a cold beer from her fridge, then flicked through the mail left on the kitchen bench for her. She looked up when a light tap sounded on the back door.

'Hey, Matt. How'd everything go?' she asked, heading for the fridge to grab a second beer and hand it to her foreman.

'Hey yourself, Miss Socialite. How was the big smoke?'

Rolling her eyes, she took a sip of her drink and he grinned in shared sympathy. 'Couldn't wait to get home, huh?' he guessed, pulling the tab of the beer can with a satisfying crack.

'You know me too well.'

She sent him a grin and noticed that he eyed her with a look that seemed almost thoughtful. 'No problems here?' she asked, leaning back against the sink.

'Nope, all quiet on the western front. We only had the one lot of guests, three fellas here for the fishing. They left yesterday, all with glowing comments, and made a booking for this time next year for six people. They reckon they have a few more mates who'll want in next time.'

'Excellent.' A quiet sense of fulfilment filled her when guests left happy. It meant she and Matt were doing the job right. 'Thanks for taking care of the place, Matt.'

'No worries, just doing my job.'

The two distinct sides to her business, the holiday stay and the cattle property, had both grown enormously over the past couple of years. She wouldn't have been able to manage everything without someone as capable as Matt as her right hand.

As Georgie looked at him now, Shannon's comment suddenly came to her mind. Why had it never occurred to her that people might suspect something was going on between the two of them?

He was good-looking, in a tough, sun-hardened country way. She realised

with a start that she'd been staring at him and found he was eyeing her curiously.

'Something wrong?' he asked when she took a quick sip of her beer to hide her discomfort.

'Nope.'

What was she thinking? Matt was a mate. He was her work colleague and friend.

The phone rang and Georgie jumped. Saved by the bell.

'Thanks for taking up the slack while I was away,' she said, moving past him as she headed toward the office. The sooner she put the weekend out of her mind, the sooner life would return to normal.

Twenty-Two

Georgie had planned to set aside the first week back from the wedding to tackle a list of maintenance jobs. Fencing needed attention in the back paddocks and she had to fix the tractor and pumps—messy jobs that even the most eager visitors didn't find terribly appealing. So it was more than a little annoying when a travel agent she hadn't used before called to book a room for that week. No amount of reasoning could persuade the woman to get her client to change the dates, and when the woman offered to double the usual rate, the business side of her stepped in and she accepted. Who was she to turn away a customer with more money than sense?

Now, instead of tackling the tractor like she'd planned on her first day home, she was putting the finishing touches to the largest of the guest suites in the main house. While it did at least make life somewhat easier having a guest staying in the house, she would have preferred them out in one of the cabins or down by the river in the camp ground, but the instructions had been clear: they wanted the best room in the house.

Georgie flicked the last crinkle from the sky-blue bedspread and straightened the towels on the base on the bed. The sound of gravel crunching beneath tyres drew her eyes across to the window. The sheer material of the white curtains fluttered gently in the early morning breeze and the smell of lemon gums floated through the air.

A four-wheel drive pulled up and she gave one last glance around the room, ensuring everything was perfect, then headed out to greet her guests.

The deep murmur of voices carried towards her as she came down the front steps and walked towards the vehicle.

'Hello, welcome to ...' Her smile faltered and the greeting died as she saw the man Matt had already come over to greet.

'Hello, Georgie.'

Matt's gaze switched warily from Michael to Georgie.

'I don't have time for this, Michael. I have a guest due to arrive any moment,' she dismissed tightly.

‘I can wait,’ he assured her amicably, leaning back against his car and folding his arms across his chest.

‘I don’t *want* you to wait, I *want* you to leave,’ she fumed, livid at his infuriating patience.

‘Georgie? Everything all right here?’ Matt asked.

Dragging her angry gaze from Michael’s unruffled face, she realised she’d momentarily forgotten Matt’s presence. ‘Yeah ... thanks. Why don’t you go and make a start on the tractor?’ After a brief nod, he turned his gaze upon Michael.

‘Nice to see you again, Matt,’ Michael said with only a hint of sarcasm.

She noticed the two men swap a measured look. ‘I’ll be around if you need me,’ Matt said to Georgie without taking his eyes off Michael, clearly wondering what the hell he was doing back here after last time.

‘Michael, what are you doing here?’ Georgie asked wearily when Matt had walked away.

‘I needed a holiday,’ he said with a shrug.

‘Well, go somewhere else, I’ve got real guests to worry about.’

‘That’s not terribly professional of you, Georgie. I mean, what if I were a paying customer? That attitude of yours wouldn’t be very good for business.’

‘Well you’re not, so we don’t have to worry about it, do we?’ she snapped, her composure completely ruffled by his unexpected appearance.

‘Actually ... I am,’ he told her with a smug grin.

Georgie stared at him with a terrible sense of impending doom. ‘You are ... *what?*’ she asked slowly.

‘A guest. I’ve booked for the next week. I believe you received my payment last night and I have a confirmation ... So, which way to my room?’

Georgie closed her eyes and counted very slowly to ten. When she opened them, her temper had not subsided.

‘I can’t believe you’d go this far, Michael. Don’t you have any destitute families to steal land from or something?’

She saw that her taunt sparked at least a small reaction and felt a childish stab of glee.

‘How badly do you want that divorce, Georgie? If you’re positive that it’s over between us, you won’t have a problem with me being here ... Otherwise you might want to save both of us a lot of drama and admit there’s still something there,’ he said with a raised eyebrow.

‘Do what you want,’ she finally fumed, throwing her hands in the air. ‘You can stay a month, it’s not going to change a thing.’

She didn’t like the twinkle of triumph she saw in his dark blue eyes. Turning on her heel, she walked back to the house. ‘But I hope you can entertain

yourself, city boy, because I have too much to do to play babysitter,' she called over her shoulder.

She heard his footsteps and the door closing behind him. When she reached the hallway, she opened the door to his room and waited until he walked past. 'This is your suite. Bathroom is through there and those doors open onto your own section of verandah where you can take your meals if you like. Otherwise come into the dining room by seven if you want to eat with Matt and me.'

'Sounds cosy.'

Georgie held his disgruntled gaze steadily. 'You don't have to eat with us,' she shrugged.

'I'll be there with bells on,' he assured her in a dry tone.

Turning away, Georgie held back a tired sigh. This was so *not* what she needed right now. She was trying to forget about Michael Delacourt, not entertain him.

Well, do your worst, Delacourt, she thought bitterly. One week and he'd finally be out of her life for good.



Georgie heaved the toolbox into the back of her ute and wiped her sleeve across her forehead. Michael's presence had one benefit—to work out her anger she'd thrown herself into the jobs and accomplished quite a lot.

There'd been no sign of him all morning and she wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or not. Wiping her dusty hands on her jeans, she opened the door of her ute and whistled to Titch to get in before she settled behind the wheel. Reaching out to turn the key in the ignition, she jumped as the passenger side door opened and Michael slid into the seat next to her.

'What do you think you're doing?'

'Thought I'd tag along. It *is* a farm-stay holiday,' he reminded her, raising one eyebrow expectantly.

'I'm fixing a fence ... I'm sure it's nothing you'd find terribly exciting.'

'I disagree, it sounds fascinating. Let's go.' Rubbing Titch behind her ears, instantly winning the dog's undying affection, he sat back and waited for her to drive.

Clenching her teeth, Georgie bit back a curse. She put the ute into gear and headed down the dirt road away from the homestead. Glancing sideways, she noticed he'd changed out of the casual cargo pants and shirt he'd arrived in and was now wearing a pair of jeans, a button-down shirt similar to the one she had on, and an Akubra and work boots.

Much to her chagrin, none of his clothes looked as though he'd bought them

recently. They looked well-worn and comfortable.

‘You’ve done a great job here, Georgie,’ Michael said, breaking the silence inside the cabin. ‘Hardly looks like the same place.’

She shrugged. ‘I’ve been lucky.’

‘I visited your website, I think you’re being modest. You’ve got rave reviews—that takes more than just luck.’

She wasn’t sure why the warm approval in his voice made her feel so good, but it was unsettling enough to keep her quiet as she pondered it.

They pulled up next to a section of fence that sagged and Georgie pulled on the handbrake. ‘We’re not too far from the river, if you feel like taking a look while I fix this,’ she offered.

‘Why don’t I give you a hand here, then you can come with me to the river?’

‘You might get dirty,’ she told him dryly, climbing out of the ute and shutting the door on his protest. Why did he have to follow her back here of all places? It had been hard enough trying to escape the memories of him when everywhere she’d looked she’d been reminded of the time they’d spent here. Throwing herself into work had been the only way she’d stayed sane. Now she’d have a whole new set of memories to ignore and little hope of erasing him from her life.

Distracted by her thoughts, she startled when he appeared beside her and dragged the heavy toolbox towards him.

‘What are you doing?’ Her voice was weary.

‘Helping.’

‘Do you even know *what* we’re doing?’

He glanced over at the fence then back to her with a gleam in his eye. ‘At a rough guess, we’re tightening the fence?’

Peeling off the long-sleeved cotton shirt she wore over a singlet top, Georgie tossed it into the front seat of the ute and pulled on a pair of thick work gloves. ‘Make yourself useful then and bring over the toolbox.’

Georgie dug through the tools and found the wire strainer before attaching it to the sagging fence.

‘This section looks a bit old,’ Michael pointed out, following the wire as it stretched off into the distance.

‘It’s some of the original fencing. I’ve been lucky; most of it was in good nick when I bought it—I haven’t had to replace any of it so far. If it floods it might be a different story though.’ She gave the handle of the wire strainer one more ratchet with a small grunt. ‘Who knows, maybe I’ll have sold it before then,’ she added, taking the tool off the fence and moving along the section to start again.

‘So, the big picture is still Tamban, huh?’ Michael asked from his position hunkered down next to the toolbox. She watched as he rubbed a handful of

topsoil between his fingers, inspecting it idly.

‘Maybe. Any truth to the rumours it’s not making much of a turnover for your father?’ she asked, pinning him with a withering stare.

A slight smile touched his mouth as he dropped his gaze to stare at the dirt on his fingertips. ‘I have no idea. I don’t speak to my *stepfather*,’ he emphasised, ‘about business.’

‘Why not? Didn’t he teach you all you know about pillaging?’

‘Despite what you think, Georgie, he and I don’t operate in the same manner.’ He got to his feet slowly and lifted his gaze. ‘We had a difference of opinion one too many times and now it’s just as easy not to speak.’

‘I know the feeling.’ She bent to pick up the toolbox, but his hand reached out and covered hers over the handle.

‘That’s not the case with us. I never wanted to keep my distance, I just did, to allow you time to come to terms with our relationship.’

‘Our relationship? We had a handful of days together,’ she said bitterly. ‘And as far as relationships go, I’m fairly certain honesty plays a big part in having one, which you conveniently decided to overlook.’

Slipping her hand from beneath his, she pulled off her work gloves and headed back to the ute, throwing the gloves in the crate she kept in the back.

The toolbox made a loud bang as Michael deposited it in the rear of the vehicle. ‘Is it seriously easier to stay this angry rather than face the real reason you keep running?’

‘And what would that be?’

‘That you want our relationship to go back to how it was, but your pride won’t let you. Seems a waste if you ask me.’

‘I wasn’t asking.’

‘No,’ he said with a long sigh. ‘I guess you weren’t.’

They drove back to the house in silence. A quick glance from the corner of her eye revealed he was lost in thought as he stared straight ahead through the windscreen. She tried to ignore the little voice that seemed to be shaking its head in disappointment that she’d hurt his feelings and should be ashamed of herself.

Twenty-Three

Usually Georgie had something prepared for the evening meal so all she needed to do was cook it, but today her routine had been thrown off by Michael's appearance and she had to start from scratch. Luckily it was a warm afternoon, so she could get away with a simple barbecue. Once she'd made a salad and had the potatoes peeled and cooking for a potato bake, she went to set the table on the verandah to eat outside.

After a quick shower, she headed back to the kitchen to check on dinner. Smelling something burning, she panicked, quickly opening the oven door and grabbing the pan without thinking. She yelped as her hand came into contact with the hot metal and she dropped the pan into the sink with a clatter. Matt came inside at the same time, rushing to her side at her cry of pain.

'You okay?' he asked, shoving her hand beneath the stream of cold water from the tap.

'Yeah, I don't think it's too bad. Just gave me a fright.'

Matt stood close, holding her wrist to keep her hand steady beneath the cold water. A movement from the corner of her eye caused her to look up to find Michael standing in the doorway watching them with a tight expression on his face.

'Am I interrupting something?'

'I just burnt my hand. I'm fine.'

Michael's face instantly turned to concern as he came towards her. 'I can take it from here thanks, mate,' he said to Matt, reaching out to take hold of her arm to inspect the damage.

'It's okay. We've got it under control,' Matt replied, keeping her hand under the stream of water and ignoring Michael's dismissal.

She saw Michael's gaze narrow slightly as he stared at the other man's back. 'You mind stepping away from my wife?' he snapped, his voice losing its earlier coolness and turning quietly serious.

Matt turned his head to stare at him in surprise. 'Your *what*?'

'Wife,' Michael bit out impatiently.

Georgie shut her eyes and groaned. 'It's okay, I think the worst of the pain is gone now ... thanks,' she said lightly.

Slowly Matt released her wrist and stepped away from her side, eyes locked on Michael's suspiciously.

'Matt, can you take the meat out to the barbecue and start cooking?' she asked, shoving a plate of steaks into his hands without waiting for his answer, then opening the fridge door and pulling out a bottle of wine.

'Michael, would you like a drink?'

Dropping his gaze to hers as the other man left the kitchen, Michael ignored her question, his expression remaining tight. 'Is he your lover, Georgie?'

She almost dropped the wine bottle in surprise. 'That's none of your damn business,' she managed to splutter.

'I'm making it my business.'

'Are you telling me you haven't slept with another woman since we were together?' she taunted.

'Would it bother you if I had?' he asked, taking a small step closer. 'Would you care if another woman touched me the way you used to?' His voice dropped and he stood within touching distance.

'Stop it,' she snapped, moving away from the tantalising scent of him. 'Just ... stop it.'

'That's exactly how I feel when I picture another man where *I* belong,' he said in a husky whisper that made her shiver, despite the throb of her burnt hand.

'You stopped belonging *anywhere* near me the day I learned the truth about you,' she told him as she took down three plates from the cupboard and put them on the counter.

'You wouldn't even give me the chance to explain,' he countered, and his voice came out in a low growl.

'Explain?' She turned to face him incredulously. 'Were you or were you not working for your stepfather when Matthew Enterprises bought Tamban from my father?' She saw his frown deepen, then jumped in quickly. 'Did you or did you not speak up when I told you about my father losing Tamban and how much I detested the corporations who took over family properties?' Her own frown deepened between her eyebrows. 'You did *not*,' she supplied, refusing to give him the chance to reply, picking up the plates and shoving them into his hands to carry outside.

Michael took the plates reluctantly. 'I've already admitted that I should have told you about my business from the start. You're right. There was no excuse for that, only that I couldn't risk losing you over something that had nothing to do with me.'

Georgie stared at him. ‘Nothing to do with you?’

‘Yes, I worked for my stepfather, but it wasn’t my decision to buy your father’s place. I left and started my own company *because* of the crap Derrick used to pull. You don’t know the first thing about my business, and you wrote me off before I could even defend myself. *I’m not Derrick Matthew.*’

‘Really? You covered up the truth in order to get what you wanted. Sounds *exactly* like something he’d do.’ Georgie caught a brief flicker of something that resembled uncertainty but in an instant it was gone and once again Michael’s face became unreadable. ‘Why won’t you just let this go, Michael?’

‘Why won’t you?’ he shot back.

Georgie gave a frustrated sigh. ‘This is getting us nowhere.’

‘Then drop the “poor me” attitude and listen to my side of the story for once.’

Her eyes flashed white heat at his harsh tone. Further discussion was interrupted as Matt appeared in the doorway and announced the meat was ready.

Georgie saw Michael straighten his shoulders as he turned a ferocious glare on her foreman, the two men staring at each other and reminding Georgie of two dogs circling warily. Well, they’d better both just zip up their trousers and get out of her way. She had enough on her plate without the added drama of two men marking out their territory.

As far as awkward meals went, it had to be right up there with the all-time greats. Matt made short work of his food, keeping his head lowered and scooping his food into his mouth.

Michael, on the other hand, ate slowly, seeking out her gaze and holding it with deliberate provocation. Her feeble attempts at conversation flickered and died like kindling that refused to catch light. Even though the meat was tender, it tasted like sawdust in her mouth and she ended up moving it around the plate without eating any of it. The clink of cutlery on plates scraped against her nerve endings like fingernails down a chalkboard and she took refuge in her glass of wine, tossing it down her throat in an effort to escape the uncomfortable tension at the table.

Georgie jumped when Matt scraped back his seat and stood up a few minutes later, breaking the awkward silence. ‘I think I’ll head off early tonight,’ he said, looking at Georgie. ‘If everything’s okay here?’

‘It’s fine, Matt. Thanks,’ she added. She knew it probably didn’t seem fine—he’d just discovered his boss was married and she and Michael weren’t exactly sending out marital-bliss vibes.

He sent her a brief nod before walking away from the table.

‘He seems a little surprised by our relationship,’ Michael commented, leaning back in his chair and linking his fingers behind his head casually.

‘Why would I have mentioned it to him? It’s not like I ever expected you to turn up here again.’

‘So, he’s more than an employee then?’

While he didn’t change his position, she saw his body had tensed.

Standing abruptly, Georgie leant over the table and stacked the plates and cutlery.

‘Yes, he is more than an employee.’ How dare he sit there and demand answers to questions he had no right asking. Matt was also her friend. She knew by his tightly clenched jaw that Michael was thinking more along the lines of lover, but she decided not to correct him. Let him stew.

‘Georgie.’

His low voice stopped her as she reached the back door with the plates stacked in her arms. She waited without turning around for him to speak.

‘We *will* resolve this before I leave,’ he warned.

Withholding a weary sigh, she closed her eyes before forcing herself to walk through the door.

When Georgie went back outside to finish clearing the table, after delaying as long as she could, Michael was no longer there.

The door to his bedroom was open and he wasn’t inside, she noted, after she finished cleaning up and headed for her office to deal with a few last-minute emails and accounts.

Two hours later when she walked up the hallway his door was closed, and she told herself the tiny rush of relief was no more than she would feel for any of her guests if they’d been wandering outside in the dark and were finally back, safely in their room.



The cool air felt good on his face as Michael walked along the track leading away from the house. He had no idea where it went to, he didn’t care, he just needed to blow off some steam. The moon was bright, bouncing off the gravel and making it glow slightly so he could see where he was going. He was enjoying the feel of the wide-open spaces around him bathed in shadows. It matched his mood.

The minute he’d walked into the kitchen and found Matt standing close to Georgie, he’d seen red. Deep down he’d always feared there could be something serious between the two of them—even before he and Georgie had got married, Matt had been there, lurking on the fringes, and Michael had never quite been able to shake the feeling that the guy was a threat. He had nothing concrete to base his fears on except the fact that Matt lived here with Georgie and Michael

didn't.

Why had he opened his stupid mouth and asked Georgie about her relationship with the guy? Hearing her answer had only made things worse. He hadn't been kidding earlier—the thought of her with another man was like a knife to his soul. Maybe he'd been naïve to think she'd never find what they had with anyone else.

He wasn't sure what this meant. Part of him wanted to stay angry at her, but there was still a small, sane part that cautioned him to calm down. Something hadn't rung true about her answer. Matt didn't act like a guy who was sleeping with her. If that had been him, he'd have been up at the house on the first day demanding to know who he was. He sure as hell wouldn't have sat quietly and eaten his meal with some other man at the table if he was having a relationship with her, certainly not if he discovered the man was her husband. It didn't add up. Of course, they could be casual lovers ... friends with benefits. But even that didn't feel right. He knew casual wasn't Georgie's thing. So she'd lied to him. That was the explanation that made the most sense. Or was he just clutching at straws? Michael gave a frustrated groan and kicked at a rock on the track, letting out a long string of profanities as pain shot up his leg. It was a bigger stone than he'd realised. He did, however, feel better afterwards, having released some of the built-up tension he'd been carrying since dinner.

He eventually turned around and headed back to the house, noticing the office light was on but choosing to avoid it, unwilling to get into any further arguments. There'd be plenty of time for that tomorrow.



‘So, this guy—he’s your husband?’

Georgie glanced over at Matt as they loaded the ute early the next morning. In the tray was the quad bike and several large drums of petrol they'd need in order to bring the cattle in from the far, back paddocks for the upcoming sale.

‘It’s ... complicated,’ she finally muttered, after trying various explanations in her head.

‘It usually is,’ Matt grunted. ‘When did that happen?’

Matt wasn't normally one for small talk, and today, more than any other day, Georgie had hoped he'd keep the conversation to a minimum. But then, when did anything in her life run smoothly these days?

‘When I went to Hawaii. Look, can we not talk about it? It was a stupid mistake and I just want to forget about it.’

‘I figured something had happened when he turned up here ready to rip my head off that time lookin’ for you.’

Georgie didn't reply, but she shut the tailgate with a little more force than was necessary.

'You know,' he continued, and she smothered a growl of irritation that her usually tight-lipped foreman suddenly seemed set on getting in touch with his conversational skills, 'I can't say I like him any more now than I did back then. He never really seemed your type,' he announced with a confused look.

'I thought he was ... different. It was a stupid mistake,' she said, bending to lift a bag of tools into the back of the vehicle.

'So, what are you going to do? Is he planning on moving here?'

Georgie gave a snort of impatience. 'No, he's not planning on moving here—he's just ... out to prove some kind of point. He'll get sick of it soon enough and be hightailing it back to the big smoke.'

Matt shook his head thoughtfully. 'I don't know, Georgie, he seems to be settling in.'

'Well, he can just *unsettle*—I don't have time for his crap at the moment. I've got a business to run. So, if you're finished giving me the third degree, can we get on with it?' she snapped, turning towards the ute and climbing inside.

She felt a small twinge of regret for her harsh reply, but she was pretty much on her last nerve and hadn't been able to get anywhere near the amount of sleep she needed in order to function civilly. The sooner Michael bloody Delacourt went back to his life and left her the hell alone, the better.



Georgie wiped the sweat from her brow with her forearm and took a drink from her water bottle. In the distance, she caught a brief glimpse of Matt as he rode the quad bike, searching out stragglers and bringing them back to join the main mob.

A broken fence had allowed the livestock access to some of the rougher terrain on the property and made the task of finding them a lot more difficult. Usually they used the quad bike and the ute for mustering, but upon discovering the herd's location they'd been forced to reassess the plan. The terrain wasn't suitable for the quad and there was no way her ute would make it up some of the rough tracks beyond the ridge. They'd need the horses and so Georgie was about to head back to the homestead to bring them out.

Michael's door had been shut when she'd left earlier. It'd been an extra early start to the day. His breakfast was set out ready for him, and all he had to do was cook his bacon and eggs, something she was positive he'd be able to figure out.

The rev of the quad rose in a shrill scream, making Georgie spin around in alarm. Without taking time to think about it, she jumped into the ute and headed

back towards the last place she'd seen Matt and the bike.

She pulled the ute to a stop and scrambled from the vehicle.

'Matt! Oh my God, are you hurt?'

As she ran across to where the quad lay on its side, she breathed a sigh of relief when she found her foreman on the ground nearby, sitting up.

'I'm okay,' he said, wincing as he tried to get to his feet.

'You don't look okay,' she said doubtfully, as she leaned down and he put an arm around her shoulders so she could help him stand.

He let out a sharp breath and went pale as he attempted to put weight on his right foot.

'Sit down,' Georgie ordered, lowering him back to the ground.

'I'll be all right once I catch my breath a bit,' he said, closing his eyes and dropping his head on his other raised knee.

Georgie knelt beside him, placing a hand on his shoulder. 'We need to get you checked out. Do you think you can make it to the ute?'

She saw him give a nod, before taking a deep breath to brace himself to stand again. Using her to support his weight, Matt hopped his way to the car and eased into the passenger side, grimacing as she tried to carefully move his leg into the footwell.

'What about the quad?' he protested as she headed back to the house.

'Don't worry about that, I'll come back later and get it. I just want to get that foot looked at.'

'It's probably just a sprain or torn ligament,' he told her, bracing the leg with his hands as she tried to avoid the roughest part of the track.

Georgie didn't need a medical degree to know that it was most likely *not* going to be a sprain or a torn ligament. She'd be very surprised if it wasn't broken.

When they arrived at the emergency department a little over an hour later, Georgie waited as the doctor ordered an X-ray. They were told Matt did have a fracture and he'd be off work for at least six weeks.

'I'm sorry, Georgie,' Matt said after the doctor left to prepare the cast.

'It's not your fault, it could have happened to anyone.'

'Yeah, but we need to get the cattle in and you won't be able to do it alone.'

She knew he was feeling bad, but there was nothing they could do about it. She was just relieved it hadn't been a lot worse. Quad bikes were notorious for causing very serious injuries, and even if all the correct procedures were followed, as was the case with Matt, accidents could still happen to the most experienced riders.

As he'd be stuck on crutches for some weeks, it was decided Matt's sister

would take him back to their parents' place in Tamworth till he recovered.

Later, when Georgie pulled her ute to a stop at home, she turned off the ignition and sat in the car listening to the quiet tick of the hot engine and rubbing her fingertips against her forehead in despair. This was terrible timing. She felt for Matt—she really did, he hadn't meant to break his foot—but it couldn't have happened at a worse time. She had the sale to get ready for, cattle to move, and only a week to do it all, and now not only was she down a foreman but also a quad bike.

Damn it.

Twenty-Four

She got out of the ute with her thoughts jumbled and her frustration rapidly rising. When she caught sight of Michael her heart stumbled for a moment. He stood, one booted foot on the bottom rail of the stockyards, his arms folded and resting against the top rail, watching the horses as they grazed in their yard.

His jeans lovingly moulded to his long legs and curved tightly around his firm butt—a butt that looked sinfully good even at this distance. His shirt, a pale blue, stretched across his broad shoulders and he'd rolled his sleeves up to mid forearm. He looked every inch a pin-up boy for a modern Aussie stockman, right down to the black Akubra, which fitted comfortably on his annoyingly perfect head.

Guiltily, she allowed her gaze to linger on him for a few extra moments before taking a deep breath and making her way across to him.

'How's Matt?' he asked. She'd called him earlier to tell him she'd was heading to the hospital.

'He'll be okay, but he's off work for six weeks.'

'Is there anything I can do?'

Georgie gave a humourless chuckle. 'Not unless you can magically repair a written-off quad and find me a stockman.'

'So, when do I start?'

Georgie sent him a derisive look. 'I know you like to buy up land, Michael, but owning half the country isn't the same as actually working it.' She headed towards the dog kennels and opened the gate, greeting each of the three animals and giving them a pat.

'I do sometimes get my hands dirty, Georgie,' he said as he watched her with the dogs.

She sent him a doubtful raised eyebrow.

'Fine, so don't believe me, no skin off my nose, I'm here on holiday anyway,' he shrugged.

Annoyed at wasting time arguing when she had so much to do, she said, 'Look, you'll have to get your own lunch today. It's in the fridge ready to go.'

Just grab it out when you're hungry and help yourself to the kitchen. I have to get out there and start moving these cattle in.'

'I'm coming too.'

'I don't have time to mollycoddle a guest today. This isn't part of the farm-stay itinerary. We need two employees for safety precautions.'

'Well, there's only one guest and I'll sign a waiver against any accident. You don't have to worry about me.'

Georgie gave a whistle and her chocolate-coloured mare came trotting over, tossing her head in a friendly greeting. Two of the four other horses in the yard followed. With slow, calm movements Michael reached out and caught hold of the halter of one of the larger animals.

'I don't have time to argue.'

'Good, that'll save time,' Michael shot back, stroking the gelding's neck affectionately. 'This one okay to ride?' he asked, looking him over confidently.

'All my horses are okay to ride. I can't risk a guest riding a temperamental animal.' She led her horse out of the yard and over to the sheltered end of the tack shed. 'Fine. You can ride Elvis, but if you can't keep up, you'll have to make your way back here alone,' she snapped.

'I'll do my best.' Something in his tone made her glance up suspiciously, but his face was the picture of sincerity.

She entered the dark shed where all her riding equipment was neatly stored and heaved a saddle and blanket off its rack, sitting it over the railing next to Michael. 'I'll just get the bridle and saddle him up for you.'

Returning with the bridle, she missed a step as she saw to her surprise that he was tightening the girth strap, having deftly saddled his mount. 'Well, at least you didn't put it on back the front,' she murmured, refusing to meet his smug grin. 'Here you go, may as well make yourself useful and finish the job.' She handed over the bridle and made her way back into the shed to retrieve her own gear.

As she hoisted herself into the saddle, she heard Michael's low whistle from behind. Gritting her teeth, she sent him a withering glance over her shoulder, which had no impact whatsoever on the lopsided, sexy grin he wore.

'I think I could get used to watching you do that all day.'

'Don't get too used to it,' she snapped, before giving her horse a small kick to get her moving. She clenched her jaw as his deep chuckle floated to her from behind.

Walking past the homestead, Georgie leaned down from the back of her horse and opened the gate that led out of the house yard and into the paddock beyond. Michael rode through and Titch ran after him, followed by the two younger dogs

racing eagerly ahead to investigate. With a click of her tongue, she urged her horse through the gate and slipped the chain back over the latch, securing it shut behind her.

As they rode together, she couldn't help but notice how at ease Michael looked on his horse. She hated to admit it, but he handled the animal like a seasoned pro. For some reason it annoyed her. She thought she'd had him pegged. She didn't want him to begin proving her wrong, because if she'd been wrong about this then she could be wrong about ... She quickly clamped down on that train of thought. She hadn't been wrong about Michael. Everything she'd discovered about him had been true; he hadn't denied any of it, so there was no reason to start second-guessing him. She ignored the little niggle of doubt that tried to surface.



'I have to ask,' Michael said after they'd been riding in relative silence for a while. 'How did he get the name Elvis?' He leant down to pat the horse's neck apologetically.

'He has Elvis Presley eyes—look at those big brown babies,' Georgie sighed.

'Too bad you had to remove the poor bugger's testicles.' He winced as though feeling the gelding's pain in a show of male commiseration. 'Talk about adding insult to injury.'

'Pity it's not more commonly done; makes males easier to train,' she smiled, throwing the comment over her shoulder sweetly.

His deep chuckle floated to her. 'We'd be no fun if you broke us in too easily.'

A comfortable silence followed her small humph of agreement. A forlorn cry of a crow in the distance and the buzz of insects were the only sounds above the gentle clip-clop of horse hooves and the occasional snort and flick of a tail.

'Tell me about you and your stepfather,' she surprised him by asking after a while. 'I know why *I* don't like the man, but he's the man who raised you. Why don't *you* like him?'

Michael was unsettled by the question. At first he opened his mouth to give the standard, 'We respect each other', but then he stopped. Georgie had made him stop and think the other night when she'd accused him of being exactly like his stepfather. The thought made him panic. He didn't respect Derrick Matthew, he didn't even like the man—and yet that was also not quite true. He had to give Derrick credit for making his mother happy.

Noticing that Georgie was looking at him over her shoulder, he realised that she was waiting for him to answer.

‘I guess it was the old “two bulls in one paddock” syndrome.’

‘It must have been hard, losing your dad and then having a new man in his place.’

Understatement, he thought bitterly.

‘It was a shock to the system,’ he said dryly. The wind through the trees was a soothing backdrop to their conversation. He watched as it lifted the long hair that hung down her back beneath her hat, then, noting that her tone had been gentler than he’d heard her use in a long while, he continued, ‘I guess I’m partly to blame. I didn’t make it easy for him. He had Brent, and he never made a secret of the fact Brent was always going to inherit everything. I couldn’t work out why my mother married him. He was nothing like my dad and I pretty much let him know that as often as possible. I suppose I can’t blame the guy for giving up trying with me.’

‘You were just a kid, hurting. He shouldn’t have given up on you that easily.’

Michael considered her response. It almost sounded as though she cared. ‘It all worked out in the end.’

The look she sent him clearly said she didn’t believe him, but he was growing uncomfortable with the focus squarely on his dysfunctional family dynamics.

‘So why did you give me the impression you and Matt were more than friends last night?’ he asked.

He saw her shift a little in her saddle before taking an extra careful interest in the land ahead of them. ‘Who said it was an impression?’

‘Because Matt doesn’t act like a guy who’s sleeping with you.’

‘How would you know what—’ She stopped midsentence and he chuckled at her face when she realised what she was saying.

‘Yeah. That,’ he said dryly.

‘Well, you don’t know Matt. He may just be better at hiding his emotions,’ she said.

‘I doubt it. Come on, Georgie.’

‘He is more than an employee. He’s a friend.’

‘So you let me believe it was more than friendship to make me jealous?’

‘To get you to give up.’

They walked along in silence for a few minutes as her words settled between them.

‘I’m not planning on giving up, I thought by now you’d have worked that out. We have a week and I’m going to use it.’ He sighed as she shook her head wearily. ‘I gave you my word I’d get the divorce if you gave me a week and still didn’t want to be married. I meant it, but I’m not going anywhere until my week is up.’

'It's your time and money,' she shrugged.

She rode slightly ahead, signalling that she was done talking, but he was okay with that. He had a week and they both knew what could happen in the space of just a few hours.

Twenty-Five

‘It gets rougher from here on in, you think you’ll be okay?’ Georgie asked as they rode through the opening in the fence she and Matt had widened earlier.

‘No worries.’

She was beginning to realise he was telling the truth when it came to his riding ability—he was no novice horseman.

They rode in companionable silence, each concentrating on directing their mount across the rougher terrain, allowing the animals to pick their path in the roughest of spots and keeping their eyes open for wombat holes and snakes, two things that could potentially spook or injure a horse out here.

They steadily climbed the ridge and Georgie kept a keen lookout for the dogs and any sign of the cattle. It wasn’t too long before Titch’s barking indicated she’d found the herd.

The cattle, roused by the intrusion of the noisy dogs, began to shuffle in agitation, tossing their heads and bellowing.

Georgie rode over to stand beside Michael as they looked down on the herd in the narrow gully below them.

‘Keep your eyes open for Hulk.’

‘Hulk?’

‘Our bull. You know, like the Incredible Hulk ... he can be all sweet and cute one minute, and the next, turn into an angry raging lunatic.’

‘Of course,’ Michael muttered, tilting his hat back on his head slightly.

‘He’s not going to be too happy about being brought in, so just watch him.’

Whistling to the dogs, she set to work, barely needing to direct them as they took to their job enthusiastically, doing what they’d been born to do—run and herd. Georgie never tired of watching them at work.

Then from behind a grove of trees came a bellow that echoed loudly through the hollow. Hulk made his appearance with all the drama of a seasoned movie star, letting out another bellow and snorting his displeasure at the sudden interruption by both humans and dogs to his peaceful grazing.

He was a magnificent animal. Solid muscle and a head as wide as Georgie’s

torso. He was the star of her breeding program and she had big plans for his future. He was also worth a small fortune, which was the only reason she put up with his fiery temper and pompous disposition.

Michael worked alongside her without needing instruction, and between the two of them they worked the herd steadily back towards the lower paddocks.

Georgie felt the sweat trickling down between her shoulder blades and breasts. Beneath the rim of her hat, her hair stuck to her forehead, damp with perspiration. Glamorous work this was not, but as she listened to the creak of leather and felt the solid strength of her horse beneath her, she couldn't have felt more alive if she tried. This was where her heart lay. She only ever felt this alive when she was out among the animals and could feel the sunshine on her back. No matter where her dreams took her from here, she was proud of how far she'd come. She felt a surge of gratitude as she swept her gaze across the herd of fat cattle and the homestead in the distance.

As she turned, something caught her eye. Titch, although dutifully moving back and forth, keeping her charges in line, was limping.

Immediately Georgie whistled and called her over, sliding from her horse and crouching low as the dog made her way over to her in obvious discomfort. Georgie moved gentle hands down the canine's leg, searching for the cause of the limp. A deep gash between the pads on the bottom of Titch's paw seeped blood all over the leaf matter beneath their feet.

'Hey, girl,' she crooned tenderly. 'What have you done to yourself?' Big brown eyes looked up at her, loyal and willing, as the dog waited for her next command. Georgie's heart twisted with a fierce love. Why couldn't all relationships be this simple? This honest? 'Let's get you fixed up, huh?' She stood and turned to her saddlebag, retrieving the small first aid kit she kept there.

Michael rode over and dismounted. His eyes were immediately drawn to the blood across the front of her shirt and he raised his eyes to hers in alarm. 'What happened?'

'Titch's cut her foot.'

His gaze dropped to the dog waiting patiently at Georgie's feet, barely panting even after a day's work out in the hot sun.

Working quickly, she wrapped the front paw and fastened it with a butterfly clasp to hold it until they got back to the house.

As she worked, Michael stroked the kelpie's fur, soothing the animal, and Georgie felt herself weaken. Beneath his rough exterior he was a gentle man, capable of great compassion and a determination equal only to her own. She bit her lip to keep silly tears of gratitude from falling. This man with his big hands, comforting the injured animal, still held her heart, even after the pain and

turmoil of the last year and a half.

Scooping the dog into his arms when Georgie had finished bandaging the paw, Michael walked over to his horse. He handed her the dog as he mounted with a graceful ease and leaned down to take Titch from her.

‘I’ll carry her back so the wound doesn’t open further.’

All she could manage in response was a brief nod, and she turned her back to hide the swell of tears. Quickly blinking them away, she mounted and gave a click of her tongue, forcing her mind back to the task of getting the cattle back.

The other dogs kept the herd in check, and with only a short distance to go, the cattle were brought home with no further disruptions.

Once they had moved the last of the herd through the gate and into the paddock closest to the homestead, Georgie dismounted and slipped the lock over the gate with a satisfied nod. Titch struggled from her position on Michael’s lap to get down and Georgie carefully put her on the ground with a command to *stay*.

Michael sat on his horse, the reins held loosely in one hand as he rested his arm across the top of the saddle’s pommel and watched her.

Leading her horse towards him, she stopped and tilted her head back. ‘Thanks for your help today. You’ve done this before.’ Her words held a self-mocking note.

He sent her a lopsided grin. ‘I did try to tell you.’

‘Yes, you did,’ she agreed, leading her horse past him and towards the tack room.

Looping the reins over a post, she made quick work of unsaddling her animal and wiping her down. Michael arrived moments later and worked just as efficiently beside her. It was a different kind of silence that fell between them as they worked now. Georgie’s mind was busy absorbing this new side of Michael—this capable, professional side of him—she’d never chosen to see before. Thinking back, she realised that if she’d only been brave enough to really look at the man, she’d have recognised he was as much at home on the land as she was. But, of course, she’d been scared to look too deep in case she discovered he *wasn’t* the fraud she’d accused him of being. She was ashamed to say she’d been a coward.

For the rest of the afternoon they worked side by side to finish the chores and see to the remaining feeding and watering of the livestock. Then she stopped outside the cage she’d put Titch in, taking her into the tack room, where she sat her up on a workbench. Carefully, Georgie cleaned the cut. She was relieved to find it wasn’t as deep as she’d first thought. She applied antiseptic and made sure it was clean of any debris, then reapplied the bandage. With a small chuckle

she lifted the cone-shaped plastic collar, which she kept on hand for her injured dogs to prevent them from chewing at their wounds, and placed it around Titch's neck. 'It's not the most fashionable of looks, I know, girl, but it'll stop you chewing that bandage off before your foot has a chance to heal.'

She laughed again at the clearly unimpressed look the animal gave her back, the smile still in place as she glanced up at Michael leaning against the doorway, watching quietly.

Suddenly self-conscious, she turned away and cleaned up the first aid equipment, unable to trust herself to examine all the familiar emotions that were beginning to rise in her again.

'I'll go start dinner.' Without waiting for a reply, she moved past him, chiding herself for taking that extra deep breath as she did and finding the mix of horse, dog, sweat and man had strangely become some kind of aphrodisiac.

'Where did you learn to ride like that?' Georgie asked later, after they'd finished their meal and were watching the sunset transform the land.

'My father.'

Georgie realised they'd never talked about his real father before. 'You said you grew up on a property, how old were you when he died?'



He wasn't used to talking about his father. It still gave him that empty sense of loss if he allowed himself to dwell on it too much. 'I was ten,' he said quietly and shifted in his seat.

'You must have learned to ride young.'

He slid his gaze to her face in slight surprise. 'Mum says I was riding my first pony at two.' He smiled as her lips turned up at the picture of him at two seated on a pony. 'Hard to imagine I was ever that cute?' he teased.

'Not really,' she murmured.

He raised an eyebrow but didn't push her to elaborate. He was praying this tentative venture at conversation on Georgie's part wasn't going to end too soon.

'How much time do you spend riding nowadays?'

Reaching for his glass, he took a sip. 'Not as much as I'd like. I spend as much time as I can out on the ground, but I usually end up dealing with paperwork or staff issues. Thanks to modern technology I seem to get harassed by phone calls and emails even out in the most remote places. It's been nice the last few days to leave the phone behind.'

'Won't your empire fall apart without you?' she asked with a touch of sarcasm.

'I've left it in good hands. I think it'll survive for a week. There are some

things that are more important than the livestock trade and profit margins.'

Georgie lifted her chin slightly. 'Like buying out broken farmers?'

His frown returned and his jaw clenched. 'Believe it or not, I've never forced anyone to sell me their land, Georgie. I'm not responsible for the bad management of others. I just buy properties once they're put on the market.'

'It's not always through bad management. You can't predict weather and bad prices,' she argued quietly.

'No, but if you're smart, you figure out how to manage what you have and get yourself through the rough times. Farming is like any other industry, you have to keep up with the changes, be adaptable. You know that as well as I do. Relying on doing everything the way they did it fifty years ago won't cut it nowadays. That's the biggest problem with the industry, trying to get people to accept that they have to do things differently. Advance with technology.'

'It doesn't change the fact that I know first-hand the heartache that goes along with losing your home.'

'You can't think with your heart in business, Georgie.'

'I guess no one can ever say that of your industry.'

'I'm nothing like my stepfather—when are you going to open your eyes and see that?' he demanded angrily. 'Watching how he did business made me decide to do it differently.' He softened his voice. 'I know what he did to your father, Georgie. I know he hounded and threatened and bullied him, but I swear, I wasn't involved with any of that at the time. And my business is nothing like his.'

Michael toyed with his fork on the table silently for a few moments. 'He accumulates things for the sake of it. I invest in property to *use* it. The land is my life. It's my business, and it provides jobs and opportunities for people who otherwise would have to leave their communities and families to find work elsewhere. If my company had been around when your father was going bankrupt, there's a good chance I could have bought it and you'd have still been living there. Working it. I'm not about buying properties and kicking people out to move in my own workers.'

When he saw that she was listening to him—really listening—he stood up quickly. 'Wait here, I have something to show you.' He went to grab his laptop, returning quickly, knowing this was a fragile opportunity but one he had to push in order to show her what he'd been wanting her to see for a long time.

Twenty-Six

Georgie bit her lip anxiously as she waited for Michael to return. There was a strange emotion churning inside her that felt a lot like hope.

He came back and placed the computer on the table between them.

‘I want to show you what we do.’

She watched as he clicked on an icon and an impressive professional web page opened on the screen, the bold logo of his company displayed prominently across the top.

He clicked on a side bar and opened a gallery of pictures showing the properties he owned. In the pictures, smiling faces greeted her, and he pointed out that the people who worked on each property were all from the communities surrounding the land. As he flicked through the photos on the screen, she suddenly sat forward and asked him to go back to the last picture.

‘These people,’ she said, peering at the photo intently. ‘I’ve seen them before,’ she breathed, her mind already connecting the faces with the image that occasionally flashed before her eyes. She hadn’t recognised the smiling faces on the screen at first because the last time she’d seen them they’d just lost everything they owned.

‘This was the family in the newspaper, in that article about you and your stepfather.’

Michael nodded calmly, his eyes flicking from the screen to her face. ‘I bought their land and re-established them as managers on the property. Now they get a salary, holiday pay and they get to live in their own house without the financial stress of running the property.’

Georgie blinked back a prickling sensation behind her eyes and stared at the smiling faces.

Michael’s eyes glittered with a dark emotion she couldn’t quite interpret, but suddenly the foundations of the anger she’d been standing on all this time began to wobble beneath her.



Michael dropped his gaze from her face as memories from one of the worst moments of his life came flooding back. It'd all started with that bloody article in the paper about his stepfather's business—the one that had butchered any chance he might have had at a life with Georgie. At least that's what he'd funnelled all his anger and grief into when Georgie had refused to listen to him and then vanished into the night without so much as a goodbye.

He'd needed something ... someone to take out his anger on. Derrick Matthew had been the source of years of frustration, and Michael, in no frame of mind to think rationally, had driven straight to his stepfather's house and confronted him.

The visit had not been the usual politely indifferent affair.

His mother had been confused when he'd strode past her in the hall and headed straight for Derrick's office. Like everything in the man's life, the office was extravagant and unapologetically expensive. The whole house was for that matter, but the office—his domain—was something from an English manor with its timber panelling and leather chairs scattered around a huge marble fireplace. Stag heads and various other game were showcased on the walls, and a massive timber desk took up centre stage in front of a huge bay window.

Derrick looked up sharply when Michael entered the room without knocking and strode across the room to stop in front of the desk.

'If it isn't the new holdings king,' Derrick greeted him, nodding towards the folded newspaper on a stack of other rural magazines and papers. 'Although I think the press have been a tad premature—one win can't match forty-five years of experience.'

'I'm not you. I didn't come here to gloat.'

'I should think not. It'll take more than one fluke to impress me, son.'

'I'm *not* your son,' Michael bit out, staring at the man coldly. 'I've never been your son and I'm sure as hell not trying to impress you.'

'Come on, we both know everything you learned you learned from me. Before you threw a tantrum and sulked away.'

Michael had learned to ignore the insults Derrick wielded like weapons—he'd figured out early in life it was easier to let them roll off his back. Derrick was a hard man with little patience for anything in life that didn't meet his high expectations. In all fairness, Michael hadn't made it easy for the man to like him, he was the first to admit that. He'd been an angry, grieving and confused kid when his mother had remarried. Maybe deep down he *had* been trying to get Derrick's approval, but he could never bring himself to actually admit it. In hindsight, he was probably just desperate for *any* kind of male approval. He missed his dad, and Derrick was the only role model he had. Although Derrick

had been right—he *had* taught him everything he knew about business—and Michael suspected this recent win of his may have rattled his stepfather’s cage.

‘I left because I didn’t want to do business the way you do it.’

‘And yet here you are.’

‘I came here to tell you that win wasn’t my last. I intend to make sure you don’t get your hands on any more family-owned properties.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Your way of doing business is outdated. I’m just here to give you a friendly warning.’

‘Well, look at you,’ Derrick said, leaning back in his chair thoughtfully. ‘If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were threatening me. Are you tellin’ me there’s a spine in there somewhere after all?’

‘You ruin lives, and people suffer because of your decisions.’

‘I run a business, not a charity. And here’s a piece of friendly advice—you can’t do both and stay number one. You can outbid me as many times as you like ... all I have to do is stand back and wait. You’ll go broke and I’ll scoop up your little business and merge it with mine. So go ahead. Do your worst. You’ll be helping me double my holdings in the long run.’

‘Darling, do you want something to eat? Can I get you something to drink?’ his mother interrupted smoothly, no doubt calculating the best way to defuse the tension in the room.

‘I just don’t get it—what do you see in this bastard?’ Michael asked, turning towards his mother. ‘He’s not half the man my father was and he never will be.’ He was too angry to feel remorse at the hurt on her face.

‘Get out,’ Derrick’s smug face was now thunderous.

‘The two of you need to calm down,’ his mother said, glaring at them.

‘If you think I’m going to allow this kind of disrespect in *my* house—’ Derrick fumed.

‘*Our* house,’ Michael’s mother snapped. ‘This is my home too and you’re right, there’s far too much disrespect in this house and you’re both to blame. Just once, could we have a visit without the two of you being at each other’s throats?’

‘I’m sorry, Mum, but I can’t do this anymore,’ Michael said, walking out of the room.

‘Michael please,’ his mother said, following. ‘I know he can be argumentative.’

‘Argumentative?’ Michael stopped and stared at her. ‘He’s a mean old bastard.’

‘You two rub each other the wrong way—you always have. Neither of you has ever seen the other the way I see you. I don’t know how to make you

understand that.'

'I love you Mum, and I want to see you happy, but he's always seen me as his competition and now he's right, I am.'

'You haven't given each other a chance.'

'He was never going to be the father Dad was.'

'Michael, I know you feel loyalty to your father, he was a good man. A good father ... but he was a terrible husband.'

Michael stared at his mother, feeling sideswiped by her unexpected words.

'I know,' she nodded slowly, 'it's hard to hear. But you're not a child anymore. Maybe I should have had this talk with you earlier, maybe it would have helped ... I don't know, but it's time you heard my side.'

'Your side of what?'

'Of everything. You blamed me for remarrying so soon after your father's death and I know how it must have seemed, but you were a child and there were things you didn't understand.'

Michael stared at his mother, perplexed.

'I loved your father, more than I've ever loved anyone in my entire life—besides you,' she amended softly. 'But sometimes love isn't enough. It can hide faults—differences in people. That's what happened with your father and me. We were so different, in upbringing, in how we reacted to things ... He was reckless with money, spending what little we had on things he wanted, not things we needed. He'd go off chasing prize money from rodeos instead of swallowing his pride and asking for work locally. There were times when we had no food,' she said, turning wide eyes on Michael. 'Nothing. I'd have to go to our neighbours and ask for some bread and eggs just so you'd have something to eat until I could find some money to buy groceries. We were at breaking point so many times over the years.'

'I thought about leaving him, just taking you and going back to my parents, but then I knew how humiliating that would be, since they disowned me when I married your father in the first place. So really, I was just as bad as he was—refusing to ask for help because of pride. And then he died.'

Michael saw his mother swallow painfully. 'I was racked with guilt. I was mourning the love of my life, and yet at the same time a tiny part of me was thinking, "You're free!" Do you have any idea how gut-wrenching that was to acknowledge? I became depressed and was on medication for a while. I knew I wasn't able to continue the way I was, not when I had you to try to comfort and take care of, so I sold the farm to pay off our debts and I went home with my tail between my legs to face my family.'

'Derrick saved me, Michael. I know you don't want to hear that, but he did.'

My parents took us in, but they hadn't forgiven me. My depression got even worse, and then one day Derrick heard I was back in town and he came to visit. We'd grown up together, I'd known him since I was a child, and suddenly life got better. He swooped in like a knight in shining armour and put all my pieces back together.'

Michael was shaking his head. This wasn't how he remembered it. Sure, he remembered his mother was sad, but so was he ... He didn't remember their story the way she was telling it. For a minute his adult brain stepped in and interrupted his childhood memories. He knew there was no way she'd have allowed him to witness how low she'd got. She'd always protected him.

'After all those years of having nothing ... years of uncertainty ... not knowing when we'd have money coming in or when your father would leave again, I craved stability and security, Michael, and Derrick offered that.'

'That's why you married him? Because he gave you a better life?'

'He gave us both a better life,' she corrected. 'But no, it wasn't only that. I had feelings for him. We'd known each other since we were children and I fell in love with him. You're a grown man, Michael, surely you understand there's more than one kind of love. It's possible to love people in different ways.'

Michael was feeling as though he'd been hit by a bus. Maybe it was the stress and emotion of the last few days catching up with him, or maybe it was discovering there'd been a whole other version of the history he remembered, but suddenly he was too tired to fight any more.

'I'm sorry Mum, I know you just want us to get along but we're too different. I'll always be here for you, but I won't set foot inside this house again.' He kissed his mother's cheek and hugged her before heading out to his car.

And he'd been true to his word since. He'd never gone back.

He'd left town and headed out to his most remote property, throwing himself into work, burying his pain and trying to prove himself to Georgie. Fat lot of good it had done. He hadn't been able to convince her of anything, not even that his business was run on a whole different model to his stepfather's. But now he had the chance he'd been waiting for, to show her what he did. Now, maybe, she was ready to see.



Georgie stood abruptly and walked to the end of the verandah to stare out over the darkened landscape. She heard the nicker of horses and the restless shuffle of the cattle in the holding yards across the clearing. She felt him come to stand behind her, the warmth of his body behind her back radiating through her own.

'I'm not my stepfather, Georgie,' he said in a soft voice, barely more than a

whisper.

A sob broke free from her chest, and within seconds she was wrapped in his strong embrace. ‘You should have told me from the beginning. Do you have any idea how betrayed I felt having to find out through a newspaper article? To find out you were related to *him*, of all people?’

‘I wanted to tell you,’ he murmured into her hair, his voice low and rough. ‘But I knew how much you hated him—us,’ he corrected bitterly. ‘I had no idea he was behind buying your father’s property until you mentioned Tamban. When I found out, it was too late. I was in love with you and I knew you wouldn’t believe me if I told you it had nothing to do with me. We hadn’t had enough time together.’ He rubbed his chin across the top of her head and his voice was husky with emotion. ‘I honestly thought once we’d spent enough time alone, once I’d taken you out to show you the places I run, you’d forgive me for not telling you earlier.’

Georgie shook her head. ‘It all happened so fast. I’d never fallen so hard or fast for someone ... it was so out of character for me. I think I talked myself into believing it was a mistake because it scared me ... how much I loved you.’

Michael leant back to look into her face with a fierce glint. ‘It may have been many things, Georgie, but it wasn’t a mistake. You think it was normal for me?’

Pulling out of his arms, Georgie ran a hand through her hair, agitated. ‘Normal people don’t fly off to Hawaii after a couple of weeks and get married. It was insane.’

‘Maybe, but I hate to break it to you, there’s nothing normal about either of us. Look at your life. Look at mine. You really think we have any idea what normal is?’

She gave a small grunt of agreement but remained unconvinced. ‘I don’t know what you want from me, Michael,’ she finally admitted. ‘Besides the obvious,’ she added dryly.

‘You think I just want you for the sex?’ he asked roughly, his response surprising her with its intensity. ‘Do you honestly believe if all I wanted was that, I couldn’t find it in a simpler and a much less frustrating way than trying to get through to you? You actually believe I’m that desperate, that I’d willingly put up with the amount of rejection and cold-shoulder treatment you’ve dished out just to sleep with someone?’

‘Well, I don’t know, do I?’ she snapped, pulling away from his grip. ‘I barely know you.’

‘And whose fault is that? You’re the one who won’t give us a chance.’

‘All we do is fight. How on earth do you think we could ever live together?’

Stepping towards her, he took her lips in a kiss that silenced her outburst and

effectively ended her tirade.

Raising his head to stare into her stunned expression, his eyes raked across her full, red lips, still glistening as she struggled to catch her breath.

‘We don’t always fight. When we create that much chemistry, how on earth can we *not* live together? I fell in love with you the moment I laid eyes on you. That hasn’t changed even after all this time.’

He stepped back and his boots sounded loud on the timber verandah as he stalked away, leaving her staring after him, her thoughts as tumultuous as the brewing storm on the horizon.



Michael felt the gravel crunching beneath his boots as he stepped from the verandah and headed out towards the open plains and comfort of darkness. He needed to get away from temptation. He needed to take a breath and cool down before he forgot all his good intentions. He had wanted to wait until she made the first move and welcomed him back into her life of her own accord. Well, a lot of good that pep talk had done—this was the second time he’d jumped her like some sex-starved kid in as many days.

Bending down, he picked up a rock and tossed it in his palm a few times, taking its weight and throwing it as far as he could into the paddock before him. He was a grown man, for God’s sake. He ran a multimillion-dollar corporation, and after five minutes in Georgie’s presence he was acting like a lovesick teenager.

He swore softly as his mind went back to the moment in the tack shed when she’d turned and smiled. How many times had he closed his eyes after she’d left and tried to capture that smile? It lit up her face and made her eyes shine. He loved the way her soft chuckle made him warm inside. To see that smile again after the past few weeks of nothing but loathing and resentment had been the first sign that the old Georgie was still in there somewhere and maybe there was a chance that she’d come back and remember how good they’d been together.

He threw another rock and stared out after it, watching the lightning dance in the distance. It summed his mood up to a tee: wild, ruthless with a need to release the pent-up frustration and ache he’d carried around for the past eighteen months. Unfortunately, unlike the approaching thunderstorm, his inner storm didn’t seem likely to find a release any time in the foreseeable future.



Georgie couldn’t sleep.

The rumble in the distance grew closer with each passing hour and the lightning, still some distance away, lit up the shadows outside.

There was a stirring inside her that had nothing to do with the storm and everything to do with simple, unadulterated lust. Closing her eyes only brought up images of Michael's hard, tempting body. Her imagination sent her senses into a tailspin as she swore she caught the tantalising trace of vanilla, spice and sex—a scent so purely the essence of Michael that she tossed back the covers in exasperation and went to sit by her window to watch the lightning, giving up all attempts of sleep.

The memory of his gentle touch with Titch earlier and the way he'd looked at her in the tack room continued to provoke a battle between her heart and her head. Suddenly, with a clarity she hadn't experienced since uttering the words 'I do', she knew what she had to do.

Spinning from the window she almost ran down the hallway to the room at the end, opening the door and marching in to slay her demons.

Michael sat on the edge of his bed, his bare chest seeming to glisten as the lightning flickered in the sky beyond him. He wore only a pair of jeans. His elbows were balanced on his knees and his hands cradled his head, as though bowed in defeat.

He looked up as she walked towards him.

Georgie's breath snagged in her chest as she caught the expression on his face, something between despair and longing.

Taking one last step, she was finally within touching distance. Slowly she reached out and traced the line of his strong jaw, feeling the rough bristles of his day-old growth.

In a swift movement he dragged her to him, pulling her against his naked chest and pinning her with the fierceness of his gaze. The torrent of built-up desire and hunger simmered between them. He claimed her lips and she pushed closer, demanding more of him with each plunge of her tongue and press of her mouth.

Beneath her fingers the solid muscle of his shoulder bunched, and she felt him shiver in response to her touch. It gave her the confidence to explore the length of his torso, moving her hands lower to cross the ridges of his ribcage until she encountered the stiff band of his jeans.

'You're wearing too many clothes,' she whispered.

With a small grunt of acknowledgment, he shucked off his jeans in record time, giving her a triumphant grin. 'How's that?'

'Impressive,' she breathed, reaching for him but instead having her hands captured in his and pinned above her head.

‘Now you’re the one wearing too many clothes,’ he told her in his deep sexy voice.

‘Well, I can’t take them off without my hands,’ she pointed out with a slow smile.

‘Then I guess I’ll just have to do it for you,’ he shrugged and the sexy grin that spread across his face set her heart galloping. Without breaking eye contact, he took her hands into just one of his above her head and with the other slowly traced a path down her neck to hover above the dip in her cleavage of her T-shirt.

Releasing her wrists, he slowly slid the soft fabric up her stomach, across her ribs, inch by inch, before moving it over her head and arms in one fluid movement.

Her eyes followed him hungrily as he sat down on the bed to unclip the top button of her jeans. He lowered the zip slowly, and with each agonising millimetre her breathing became more laboured.

Peeling away the stiff denim, he eased it down her thighs, tossing the jeans to the floor without removing his gaze from her now scantily clad body.

His burning gaze sent a pool of liquid heat to her very core and she squirmed beneath the weight of his desire.

‘Don’t move,’ he said, and she heard the strain in his voice and knew that he was as affected by the thought of making love to her as she was to him.

He slid a finger beneath her bra strap and moved it down her shoulder, before repeating the action on the other side. Reaching behind her back, he deftly unclasped the garment and she saw his eyes darken as her breasts spilled from their confines, his gaze scorching her with its intensity.

When his big hands gently cupped them, her eyes fluttered shut.

With a burst of need raking her body, she threaded her fingers through his short hair, tugging him up to eye level.

‘I want you,’ she said in a steady voice that seemed far removed from the turmoil raging inside her.

‘You’ve always had me,’ he said simply.

Georgie couldn’t speak. His words had stolen her last breath from her lungs and as he gently pushed inside her, the world exploded.

Neither of them noticed when the storm rolled past without breaking overhead, fading away and denying the land its promise of a downpour, leaving a heavy humidity in the air.

Twenty-Seven

Georgie stretched, her eyes still closed, and wondered for a nanosecond why she felt so sore everywhere. Her eyes flew open and she turned her head to find Michael, his arm draped across her hip, watching her through half-closed eyes.

‘Did you know you snore?’ His voice was low and gravelly and sent a flood of warmth to parts of her that had been well used through the night.

‘I do not.’

‘You do. It’s a soft little snort, very cute. I meant to tell you before, but I never got around to it.’

Georgie flushed slightly, feeling somewhat exposed being so close to him after so long apart. ‘I should get up, I have to check on Titch and the cattle.’ She made to move, but he tightened his grip on her hip and stopped her.

‘It’s still early, even for you. Lie with me a while longer.’

‘Once I’m awake, I usually can’t go back to sleep,’ she told him, her body responding automatically as he pulled her to snuggle against him.

‘Then we’ll have to think of something to keep you occupied, won’t we?’

He grinned, leaning forward to nuzzle her neck. There was no point arguing; her body was already moving against him and a soft moan escaped her lips, sending an answering groan from Michael as together they tumbled back into bed.



‘You’ll have to stay put today, old girl,’ Georgie told Titch, rubbing her face against the kelpie’s sleek black fur. ‘That foot needs to rest and heal.’

‘How’s it looking?’

Georgie turned as Michael walked into the tack room and slid his arm around her waist.

It took a moment for Georgie to realise she enjoyed the comfort of his contact. Shaking herself mentally, she tucked a strand of hair that had fallen loose from her ponytail behind her ear.

‘It should mend up pretty well, providing I can keep her from running on it

too much and busting it open again.'

With a final pat, she pushed her loyal friend back in the smaller pen and shut the gate. 'Don't give me that look,' she told the dog as Titch stared up at her with sad brown eyes. 'It's for your own good.'

Heading back outside, she put her hat on and went out to the yards to look over the cattle.

'Thanks for feeding them for me, you might be pretty useful around here after all,' she said nonchalantly, sending him a sideways glance.

'Yes ma'am,' he drawled with a tip of his head.

Her grin widened as she turned to face him. 'Seriously, you've been great. I couldn't have managed all this on my own.'

'I have no doubt you would have more than managed. It seems there's nothing you can't do once you set your mind on it.'

His phone interrupted and he sent her an apologetic smile. 'I'm sorry, but this better be life or death or someone won't have a job when I get back,' he said, then walked across the yard, talking as he went.

Scooping the grain into a bucket, Georgie was busy feeding the horses when Michael came back out to the yards. 'Trouble at work?'

'Trouble getting people to use their own initiative,' he muttered.

'So, tell me, what's your plan now?'

'My plan?' he queried with a raised eyebrow, leaning against the rail and looking down at her.

'You came here to prove a point, which you did last night, now what? Where do we go from here?'

'Well, I guess that's up to you.'

Georgie sent him a brief glance then returned to mixing the horse feed. 'I don't have the staff to up and leave this place on a regular basis, and I can't see you moving from your headquarters in the city to here, so where does that leave us?'

'We could hire more staff for here,' he suggested.

'We could, but *I* won't. This is my business and I run it hands on.'

'I thought you were open to the possibility of selling it.'

'I am. I just don't know when or even *if* I want to put it on the market.'

Michael seemed to hesitate briefly before speaking. 'Georgie, come and work with me. You saw how well we work together. We make a great team, and I need someone like you beside me. Think of the scope you'd have to work with. With your background you'd fit in perfectly. You could put your degree to use on a scale most people can only dream about.'

'You think I haven't been putting my degree to use out here?' she asked, her

tone dropping to a low simmer.

‘I didn’t say that. I said you could use it on a bigger scale.’

‘I’ve never said that’s what my aim was.’

‘You wanted to build up Tamban.’

‘Well, I didn’t mean I wanted to take it to a corporation level,’ she muttered, somewhat irritated by his assumption. ‘See Michael, this is where we differ. You’re all about making money. I just want to work a property, have a family and give them back the legacy of the land. I don’t want to become part of a corporate conglomerate.’

Michael stared at her, disappointment etched upon his face. ‘I guess I just pictured us working together and got a little carried away. It’s no big deal, you can still do your own thing, whatever it turns out to be. I’ll support whatever decision you make.’

Georgie bit back a sigh. What was wrong with her? Why did she always feel as though she had to fight him every step of the way? He was offering her more than most people could even dream about: a dream job, a life of prosperity and luxury, the ability to afford whatever her heart desired, and yet ...

‘I don’t know what I want to do. I need some time to think about it.’

The washing machine–like sound of horses grinding their feed as they ate filled the quiet between them.

‘I waited eighteen months, I can wait a few more,’ he told her quietly.

A heaviness settled in the pit of her stomach. She didn’t have the answers—when it came to their relationship it always seemed to involve an impossible choice. She wasn’t sure there would ever be a solution.



The next two days passed in a blur of hard work, fun and dusty cattle. In the evenings, Georgie and Michael swam in the creek and just enjoyed being together and strengthening their fragile bond. The topic of their future was one neither broached again, fearing an end to the delicate truce they’d declared.

Today, from the herd they’d brought down from the back paddocks, she’d had to cut out the cattle that would be heading to the sales and tag and drench the younger ones from the previous season. It had been a long day and it was on dusk as they prepared to finish up. Passing Michael and feeling dusty and hot, she couldn’t help a playful bump of her hip, catching him slightly off guard and earning a splash of cold water from the hose he held as he filled up the troughs. Giving a yell as he tried to regain his balance as dogs weaved and raced excitedly between their feet, Michael fell backwards and landed butt first in the water trough.

Georgie let out a gasp of surprise that quickly turned into a giggle. Slapping her hand across her mouth, she saw his initial shock slowly turn to thoughts of revenge.

‘Oh, this is funny?’ he asked quietly, getting out of the trough and advancing upon Georgie with gleeful malice.

Standing six-foot-tall and dripping wet, Michael was a comical sight. Georgie could hardly contain her laughter as she tried to retreat from his advance.

‘It’s a good thing you can ride a horse better than you can keep your balance,’ she pointed out.

His retort was cut short when the homestead phone rang and she turned to run to answer it. She chuckled as Michael walked past her, headed for his room to shower.

Georgie scooped up the phone from inside the back door, ‘Stoney Creek Station,’ she answered breathlessly.

For a moment there was silence on the other end. ‘Hello?’ she repeated.

‘Georgie?’

For a minute the familiar voice surprised her. ‘Veronica? Hi. How are you?’

‘I’m fine,’ she answered hesitantly, and Georgie frowned a little at her confused tone. ‘Well, this is strange. I’m not sure how I managed to dial your number.’

Georgie gave a chuckle. ‘I hate when that happens. I hit the wrong contact all the time.’

‘Actually, I called Delacourt Holdings to get in touch with Michael Delacourt and they gave me this number.’

‘Michael? I had no idea you two knew each other.’

‘Oh. So he *is* there? Well, at least that part makes more sense,’ she said, sounding a little less confused.

‘How do you two know each other?’ Georgie asked. The old saying about what a small world it was had never applied more. This was one hell of a coincidence.

‘I don’t know him terribly well, but he contacted me once, about buying Stoney Creek, actually,’ she said, and Georgie felt a jolt of surprise run through her. ‘But that was ages ago. I’ve actually got a friend who’s selling a property. I thought maybe he might be interested.’

‘Ah ... he’s not here at the moment,’ Georgie heard herself answer and was glad her voice at least *sounded* normal. ‘I’ll get him to call you back when he comes in. I’m sorry, Veronica, I have to take another call. It was good to hear from you. I’ll get him to call you. Bye.’

‘Oh. Yes, okay, bye.’

Georgie hung the phone up and found herself staring at the countertop numbly. *'He contacted me about buying Stoney Creek.'* The words replayed through her mind. What the hell was going on?

Twenty-Eight

Michael came out into the kitchen and found Georgie sitting at the bench.

‘Is everything okay?’ he asked, something about the rigid way she was sitting alerting him that something was not quite right.

‘I’m hoping you might be able to tell me,’ she said. ‘That phone call I just took was from a friend of mine, only she seemed surprised when I answered the phone since she was calling to talk to you.’

‘Who was it?’ he asked, confused and wary. Clearly something was wrong here, he just had no idea what.

‘Veronica Tompkins called. How exactly do you know Harry’s daughter?’

Michael took a moment to search his memory bank for the name, until Harry’s name was mentioned and suddenly he knew where this was leading. ‘It’s not what you think,’ he started quietly, already fearing it was too late to explain.

‘Really? So you didn’t contact her about buying Stoney Creek once?’ she demanded.

‘Not in the way you’re probably thinking ...’

‘What other way *is* there to think? Either you tried to buy this place or you didn’t?’

‘I did put an offer to her, but she didn’t take it.’

‘*Why* would you be making an offer?’

‘When I heard Harry’s family were selling this place, I called her,’ he admitted, hating the accusing look that was transforming her face before his eyes. ‘But Veronica turned me down.’

‘So you were trying to buy this place out from *under me*?’ she said, staring at him dumbfounded.

‘No!’ Christ, why couldn’t he get the words out to explain. He chaired meetings where he spoke to a room full of board members, but standing in front of her right now, he couldn’t manage a single word in his defence.

‘That’s what making an offer to buy the place means,’ she said, glaring at him.

‘That’s not how it was ...’ He ran a hand through his hair and swore. ‘I was

trying to help ... I was worried you wouldn't be able to afford the asking price. I was going to buy it and sell it to you for a *better* price, but Veronica said she'd already made the offer to you.'

'So you're telling me that as the head of a company that buys up prime farming land, you were intending to buy this place and sell it *at a loss* to me, instead of keeping it for yourself?' she asked cynically.

'That's exactly what I'm telling you. Come on, Georgie, do you really think I'd do something as low as buying Stoney Creek out from under you?'

'You and Brent were out here looking for property to buy at the time, remember? You told me that was the reason you were out here. If this place came up for sale, it wouldn't be a stretch to imagine you jumping at the chance,' she said, hitching an eyebrow.

'That's not why I was offering to buy it,' he grated out. Goddamn it. He had no way of proving what he said was the truth, and as much as it hurt him to admit it, he could see why she might be having her doubts. 'I swear I made that call with good intentions. I knew how much this place meant to you, do you seriously think I'd be stupid enough to buy it when I was trying to keep our marriage together? That'd be the final nail in the coffin.'

'Then why haven't you told me about it before now?'

'When would I have done that? You weren't taking any calls from me at the time, and later it didn't matter, Veronica had already given you a reasonable offer. It was a phone call. That's all.' While she still seemed angry, she was at least looking at him. 'I swore to you I'd never keep the truth from you ever again and I meant it. This was an attempt to help you that turned out not to be needed. It wasn't a cover-up. It was nothing more than a phone call I made two years ago. I've got nothing but my word to prove that to you. I guess it just comes down to you taking a leap of faith. If we're going to make this work, then at some point you have to trust me again.'

After a few moments, Georgie got to her feet. 'I need to clear my head and I can't do that around you.'



Georgie turned and went outside. She didn't know what to think. She wanted to believe what he was saying was true, but old fears were creeping back in. Derrick would do it without a bat of his eyelid, because he'd consider it perfectly good business sense, and while she wanted to believe Michael wouldn't, hadn't he been the one who had told her that you can't let your heart rule in business?

Michael's words crept back into her head. He was right, she was going to have to trust him again if this was going to work out between them. She didn't want

always to be doubting him. Only this *did* feel a little like before when he justified not telling her about something because he'd been worried about how she'd react. Was a phone call made so long ago worth throwing away the trust they'd been rebuilding? Her head told her it wasn't, but there was still a tiny scared part of her heart that remembered feeling so hurt and betrayed before and it was hard to reassure it right now.

The sky had darkened considerably since they'd been outside earlier, not helped by the large, dark clouds that hung ominously low in the sky as thunder rumbled not too far away. She headed across to the fence that overlooked the horse paddock and in the darkness she could just make out the faint shadows of the happily grazing animals. The cool breeze against her face felt good and there was a subtle scent of rain in the air.

She'd told herself that once they'd divorced, she'd be able to get over Michael once and for all. But after being with him again ... opening the door on the past the way she had, she knew how much she had been lying to herself.

She could have started divorce proceedings if she'd really wanted to. It was a factor that initiating proceedings meant finding money she didn't really have, but she had used it as an excuse to leave him to be the one who made the end of the marriage final.

The first fat drops of rain splashed on her face, making her blink and wipe her cheeks. She looked out at the lightning that flashed in the distance, frowning when the deep rumble of thunder followed only a few seconds afterwards. The storm was rolling across fast and she needed to get out of it. She turned and retraced her steps back to the house. As another flash lit up the sky, she picked up her pace, jogging the remainder of the way. By the time she reached the verandah, the rain was falling in a cold, bone-drenching deluge.

Georgie shook the worst of the water from herself and pulled off her work boots at the back door, then headed inside. She took down the towel she kept hanging on a peg in the kitchen and rubbed her hair and face dry. Her work jeans clung to her, wet and uncomfortable, her shirt plastered to her chest like a second skin. Looking up, she was surprised to see Michael seated at the kitchen table, a cup in his hand, watching her silently.

'I was worried,' he said, when it seemed she wasn't going to acknowledge him.

'No need. Just a bit of rain.'

'Did you reach any conclusions?'

Georgie moved around the kitchen, putting the jug on and taking down a cup. 'I believe you,' she said calmly, but her heart was heavy. 'I just ...' She gave an impatient sigh. 'It just feels like every time we start to put things back together,

something comes back from the past to haunt us. I want to trust you again, Michael, I do ... but how many more *not important things* are going to appear down the track?’

‘So it comes down to this again. The past being thrown back at me,’ he said wearily, getting to his feet.

She held his gaze steadily. ‘I can’t give you a guarantee that I won’t do that anymore. I want to leave what happened to us in the past, but just now I doubted you. It’s a reaction. I don’t want to be constantly putting myself through this each time something happens between us. It’s not fair to you or me. Added to that the logistics of our relationship ... No matter which way I try to look at it, I just can’t figure out a way to make us work.’

‘Don’t do this, Georgie,’ he said quietly. ‘I swear to you, if you’re worried about this whole offer on Stoney Creek—’

‘I’m not,’ she said quickly. ‘I do believe that you weren’t going to buy Stoney Creek out from under me, but I should be able to believe it automatically, without needing space and time to think about it,’ she said with a sigh. ‘We make great lovers, but we have two separate lives, Michael. I don’t want to give up my place, and you can’t just move here. Marriage isn’t going to work for us and we’re kidding ourselves if we think it can.’

She saw his face fall and the tenderness slip away. Taking a step back, he braced his hands on the back of the chair, his head bowed in frustration.

Outside the howl of the wind increased and goosebumps rose on her arms.

‘What do you want then?’ he asked wearily.

‘What I’ve always wanted. A divorce.’

With a violent expletive, he pushed the chair away and stalked from the kitchen, slamming the door to his room a few moments later.

Georgie remained where she was as a horrible empty hole inside her grew. He wasn’t going to be able to live like this any more than she was. The past would always hover over them, eventually driving a wedge between them. Why drag out the inevitable—it would only hurt more the longer they tried to ignore it.

A loud crack of lightning shook the house and Georgie felt the boom of thunder resound through her chest. The kitchen light went off and she was left in sudden darkness.

The shrill scream of a horse in distress sent her scrambling for her boots, pulling them on as she hopped to the back door.

‘Georgie?’ Michael’s voice came from down the hallway. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Something’s wrong with the horses.’

His warning to wait, and curse when she didn’t, fell on deaf ears as she ran

along the timber verandah and out into the rain. As she approached the fence, she swung the torch around the dark shadows of the paddock, searching for the horses.

‘Georgie!’

She slid through the rails and wiped the rain from her eyes with her arm. As the beam of her torch arced, it fell upon a frightened mare with her fetlock tangled in a length of wire. Without hesitating, Georgie moved toward the animal and tried to soothe her.

‘For God’s sake, Georgie, wait.’

Realising for the first time that Michael was there, she yelled over the wind and lightning that a tree had taken down part of the pasture fence on the other side of the paddock where the cattle were, and the animals were now roaming free. The frightened mare must have become tangled in it as she ran from the noise of the storm.

‘I have to get a rope on her.’

Michael tried to stop her but she tugged free of his grip and ran back to the tack room in search of rope. When she returned, he took it from her hands before she had a chance to protest. ‘You go back inside, I’ll get her untangled.’

‘You can’t do it alone.’

Water streamed from his face and dripped from his chin as he turned and headed for the terrified animal, her eyes rolling madly as the wire twisted about her hooves and the wind continued to howl.

With a practised ease he looped the rope over the horse’s neck and drew it tight. He handed Georgie the end of the rope and then, making his movements as calm as possible, he eased closer to the animal, reaching out slowly to run a hand down the horse’s sleek neck.

Georgie realised Michael’s steady presence comforted the mare and she remained still as he eased down and began to carefully remove the wire.

Thankfully it hadn’t been wrapped too tightly, just jumbled and entwined, and within a few minutes he’d worked it free of her. The mare began to prance and nicker anxiously the minute she realised her leg was no longer wrapped in wire.

Michael led the mare to the safety of the stockyards and opened the gates. He watched the sleek flanks of the horse walk past the herd of cattle yarded nearby. They lifted their heads and shuffled together to protect themselves from the worst of the weather.

Georgie removed the rope from the mare’s neck and was about to walk away when she heard the loud bellow of an angry bull. Too late, she remembered Hulk, and as she turned around, she caught sight of his massive bulk parting the herd.

Her reaction time was slow, a combination of cold extremities and slippery mud hindering her ability to make a run for the safety of the fence.

Slipping backwards, she landed hard on her butt, and Hulk's massive head lowered in a charge, aimed directly at her.

Georgie felt strong hands drag her to her feet and automatically began to scramble backwards away from the impending danger of a thousand-kilogram bull. As she climbed the fence, she realised Michael was not behind her, and she turned in time to see him tossed to the side as bull and man collided.

Her scream was swallowed in the howl of the wind and a deafening rattle of thunder and for a moment, she lost sight of him as the rain blinded her. Then she saw him, just as Hulk turned and made another charge, this time rolling Michael beneath his flying hooves and tossing his head.

Georgie raced towards the kennels and threw open the doors. As she ran back to the yards, the dogs overtook her, sensing her panic and leaping through the fence of the stockyards without hesitation. Without the dogs, she had no chance of distracting Hulk in his blood lust, but she already feared she was too late.

Michael lay face down in the mud, his big body lifeless as the rain pelted down around him. With a quick glance, she noted the dogs had the bad-tempered bull distracted at the other end of the yard. The two younger dogs were fearlessly holding their ground against the much larger, angrier bull, who tossed his large head and pawed at the muddy ground indignantly.

Falling to her knees, Georgie rolled Michael over, knowing it wasn't the correct thing to do but, under the circumstances, necessary. He'd smother in the mud and dirty water if she didn't. The rain pelted against her back and plastered her hair to her head.

Listening to his chest, she whispered a prayer of thanks when she heard the faint sound of a beating heart and watched his chest move ever so slightly.

'Michael, can you hear me?' Her voice broke as she yelled above the roaring noise of the wind and rain.

There was no response.

A frantic barking signalled to Georgie to lift her head, and she saw that the dogs were beginning to lose their advantage as Hulk became increasingly agitated.

'Michael, please,' she begged, her tears mingling with the rain and her face looking up at the dark sky in vain. She had to get him out of the yards, but he was a dead weight and too heavy to move on her own. It couldn't come down to this. She couldn't lose him now—it just wasn't fair.

With no hope of moving him herself, Georgie forced herself to calm down and think. Getting to her feet, she ran across and opened the gates, whistling for the

dogs to hunt the cattle out. The truck coming to collect them would have to wait. She'd deal with that later. For a moment the big bull hesitated, reluctant to give up his attack; however, with his girls eagerly making their escape from the yards, the chance at freedom proved too tempting to resist and he turned and trotted after them.

With a sob of relief, Georgie ran through the gates, securing them shut, and locking Michael inside, safe from the threat of further trampling. Then she ran for the mobile to call the ambulance. As she gave the information to the operator, she grabbed a tarpaulin from the shed, then took a blanket from the ute to warm Michael's cold body. She draped the tarpaulin over them both, then gently cradled his head in her lap as she waited for the ambulance to arrive. It was an agonising wait for help.

'Please open your eyes, Michael,' she whispered, leaning over him. She slid her hands to his wrist, checking his pulse, terrified she wouldn't find one, he was lying so still and pale. Titch came up beside her, giving a small whimper as she nuzzled close to her side, lying down to help keep watch over the injured man.

'He's going to be okay, girl,' Georgie said, looking into the dog's loving brown eyes. 'He has to be.'

Twenty-Nine

The cold plastic seat pressed hard against her back and she shivered as another tremor raked her body.

The ambulance had called for a rescue helicopter to meet them at the hospital in Armidale to fly him to Sydney, after realising he would need emergency surgery.

Having only taken the time to secure the dogs back in their pens and grab a change of clothes, Georgie had been shaking so much behind the wheel of her ute that it had taken three attempts to turn the key in the ignition.

She'd arrived barely twenty minutes after the ambulance and had been able to travel down in the chopper with Michael.

After they'd taken Michael into surgery, she'd tried to track down Shannon and Brent, still away on their honeymoon. She'd had to leave a message explaining what had happened so they could inform his mother.

A nurse came down the hallway and Georgie looked up hopefully, but she continued walking and Georgie let her tired eyes flutter shut as she listened to the nurse's footsteps fade away.

She awoke with a start, looking up into the weary face of a scrub nurse who bent over her, a gentle smile on her face.

'You can see your husband now.'

Georgie followed the nurse down a corridor and past a blur of rooms before they stopped in front of the intensive care unit.

At Georgie's expression, she touched her arm reassuringly. 'It's okay, he's only in here so we can keep an eye on him for a few hours, and then hopefully he'll go into his own room. You can't stay very long, but it's okay to sit with him for a while.'

'Thank you,' she murmured, her eyes already on still form in the bed. Michael looked so weak and pale, nothing like the big, vibrant man she knew.

She carefully pulled out a chair and sat down, her eyes fixed on his bruised face and steadily moving chest. The insistent beep of the machines in the room was the only sound as she tentatively reached out and touched him, careful to

avoid the tubes taped to the back of his hand and attached to a drip beside the bed.

Relief surged through her body and tears welled but she refused to allow them to fall, knowing that if she did, she may never be able to make them stop.

A little while later, the surgeon came into the room and reassured Georgie that Michael was doing well. The young doctor had bloodshot eyes and shaggy dark hair and looked as though he hadn't slept in a week, which he probably hadn't. His kind smile was almost her undoing, and she had to dig her fingernails into her palm to concentrate on keeping it together.

'He's a lucky man,' he said after going through the operation briefly with her. 'That must have been one angry bull he took on.'

'Keep your eye out for some steak coming your way real soon, Doc,' she murmured, her gaze once more resting on Michael's bruised face.

She could still see his body lying so terribly still in the mud and a shudder ran through her body.

'We'll take good care of him, but there's going to be nothing you can do for him tonight, and I think right now you could do with some rest too. Have you got somewhere to stay?' he asked as he jotted down something on Michael's chart.

Looking down at herself, she realised the clothes she wore were muddy and damp, and suddenly longed for a hot shower.

'Not yet, there wasn't time to do much of anything before I got here,' she shrugged.

'Well, how about I get someone to make a call to one of the motels relatives stay at—it'll be affordable and close to the hospital.'

Georgie sent him a grateful smile and within half an hour she'd caught a taxi to the motel and was standing beneath the steady stream of hot water, finally able to release the pent-up emotions she'd refused to acknowledge.

When her sobs had finally subsided, she emerged from the bathroom, set the alarm and lay down on the bed with a weary sigh, falling into an exhausted sleep.



Arriving back at the hospital, she hurried to ICU, her footsteps faltering as she heard raised voices outside the doors to the intensive-care waiting room.

Derrick Matthew stood nose to nose with a formidable-looking nurse.

'I don't give a damn about your policies. I demand that you let us in to see our son.' If it wasn't already shock enough seeing the man here, hearing him refer to Michael as his son was enough to make her mouth drop open.

‘As I said before, you can’t go in to see him at the moment, and if you don’t lower your voice, I’ll have to ask you to leave the hospital.’

Georgie slowed her steps as she approached the small group of people milling in the waiting room. Shannon glanced up and saw her, jumping to her feet immediately. ‘Georgie, we came as soon as we could. Do you know anything? They won’t let anyone in to see him, his mother is beside herself.’ Shannon had returned her call and had informed Michael’s mother of his accident, but Georgie had been brief and hadn’t given many details, and she was dreading the fact that now there wouldn’t be any escaping some pretty uncomfortable questions.

‘They said the operation went well. He had internal injuries and a few broken ribs, but they’ve managed to stop the bleeding. He’s going to be fine. ICU is just a precaution,’ she told them calmly, feeling awkward with all eyes upon her.

Michael’s mother looked as impeccable and stylish as always, even in this sterile environment, but small lines creased around her eyes and between her perfectly shaped eyebrows, and she looked close to tears.

‘How did this happen? What was he even *doing* at your place?’ Shannon asked.

‘He was ...’ *Yeah, nah, there was no way she was going to manage to go into those kind of details right now.* So instead she chose to ignore that question. ‘He stepped in front of a bull to save me,’ she said softly, hearing her voice catch.

When his mother opened her mouth to ask more questions, Georgie quickly backed away. ‘I’ll go and speak to the nurse and see if I can get you in to see him,’ she said.

‘If we can’t get in, what makes you think they’ll listen to you?’ Derrick demanded with his usual touch of superiority.

Georgie’s gaze snapped to his, but her voice was calm. Suddenly an unexpected confidence washed over her. ‘Because I’m his wife.’

She heard the collective gasp and almost smiled at Derrick’s open mouth as he stared at her, for once at a complete loss for words.

Crossing to the nurse’s station, Georgie lowered her voice. ‘Would it be okay if Michael’s mother went in to see him? She’s pretty worried about her son. She can take my visit.’

The nurse considered her silently for a few moments before leaning over the desk and lifting her voice, her tone definitely on the cooler side of polite. ‘You have five minutes, and only you,’ she said, nodding at Lorraine before pointedly glaring at Derrick.

As she walked towards the door, Michael’s mother hesitated briefly in front of Georgie with a bewildered smile, then she pushed open the door and slipped

inside the quiet room.

Taking a breath, Georgie turned around and prepared to face the music. She wasn't disappointed. Shannon came to a stop in front of her with an expression that volleyed between hurt and confusion. 'You're his *wife*?'

'It's complicated.'

'Ya think?' Shannon asked sarcastically. 'When did this happen? You two were hardly on speaking terms at the wedding, and why didn't I get an invite?' she demanded, and Georgie briefly squeezed her eyes closed in dismay as she heard her best friend's voice quiver.

'Shan, it wasn't ... *no one* was invited. It happened a while ago.'

'How long?'

'A year and a half. Give or take.'

'A year and a ...' She gasped, unable to continue as she stared at her lifelong friend as though she were a stranger.

'Shannon and I only met a year and a half ago,' Brent pointed out uncertainly. He'd been a quiet, if confused, bystander to the entire drama until this point.

'I'll come back later. You all need to be here with him now ... I ...' She turned and almost ran from the accusing stares. It was too much to face alone and she wasn't in the right frame of mind to deal with questions right now.

Georgie bought a coffee and sat outside drinking it. Her emotions were in utter chaos. So much had happened in such a short time and she was having trouble processing it all.

She knew Michael loved her; he'd risked his own life to save hers and she knew with certainty she'd have done the same for him. She also knew they had something special. No other man before, or since, could affect her the way he did.

'Georgie?'

She jumped as she heard her name.

'Mrs Matthew.'

'Please, call me Lorraine.'

'Has there been any change?'

'He's with the doctor now and they're assessing him. He was awake but we didn't get to speak. I wanted to thank you, for what you did back there.'

Georgie gave a flicker of a smile. 'You're his mother, you should have been able to see him.'

'And you're his wife ...'

Georgie swallowed nervously. She saw the questions in the older woman's eyes and braced herself. 'I guess it's a bit of a surprise.'

Lorraine gave a small shrug and sat down on the bench beside her. 'I knew

something devastating happened to him a while ago.'

Georgie looked up uncertainly into the other woman's face.

'He came back from an unexpected trip to Hawaii a different man. He was like the son I used to know before his father died.' She blinked back tears, straightening her spine and forcing a smile to her peach-shaded lips. 'He was the happiest child, content with life. He loved the land so much. It was a tremendous shock when his father died and we sold the farm. I simply couldn't afford to work it, we were in a lot of debt, and the truth was, I didn't like being a farmer's wife.'

Georgie saw a brief almost apologetic smile touch her lips at the admission.

'After that, Michael changed. He became a shell of the child he was.'

She stopped and took out a tissue from her designer handbag, delicately touching her nose and dabbing her eyes.

Georgie felt her own heart becoming heavy. She could picture Michael's childhood so vividly, and he'd been right, they were a lot more alike than she'd given him credit for. She also realised he hadn't used his past as a grudge, as he had once accused her of doing.

Uncomfortably, she realised she'd been acting like a spoilt child, blaming him for something that wasn't his fault. Using her anger and hurt to push him away, time and time again.

Lorraine composed herself and turned her eyes, so similar to those of her son, upon her once more. 'Then he came home from Hawaii and he was ... happy. *Really* happy. He wouldn't tell me why, just said it would all be revealed in due course. But then he vanished for three months, buried himself in his remotest properties, and when he eventually resurfaced, he was back to his distant, tight-lipped self ... only worse. He refused to talk to me about it. It was almost as though he were grieving.'

Georgie cringed, knowing she was the cause of his pain.

'It was only at Brent's wedding that I saw a glimmer of that old Michael once again, and I wondered if you'd had something to do with it.'

'Mrs ... *Lorraine*. Michael and I ... it was a bizarre, whirlwind relationship. We barely knew each other. It couldn't have worked,' she said, shaking her head sadly.

'Did he ever tell you anything about his father and me?'

Georgie gave a small snort. 'No. He left out quite a few details about his life.'

His mother tilted her head slightly as though studying her thoughtfully. 'A friend from boarding school invited me home with her one holidays in our senior year and we went to a rodeo. That's where I met Michael's father.' She smiled sadly. 'We fell head over heels in love the moment we met. I ran away with him

two days later and we were married within weeks.’

Georgie stared at the woman in astonishment.

‘Like you, it was instantaneous and crazy; we were complete opposites in every way.’ She smiled and shook her head at the memory. ‘I was a spoilt little rich girl, and he was trying to scrape together a living on the rundown farm his parents had left him. We had absolutely nothing, but I loved that man so much.’ Her voice caught and she paused, her gaze falling to the ground between their feet. ‘My point is, Georgie, you can’t always pick who you fall in love with. Sometimes your heart just decides, regardless of your background or your family ... or even your common sense.’ She lifted her gaze to meet Georgie’s. ‘Don’t throw away what your heart truly desires. Because once it’s gone ...’ She stood abruptly and turned away, but not before Georgie saw the longing and heartache written across the woman’s face and felt her own heart lurch in sympathy.

Georgie stared after her and felt a strange sense of calm. Getting to her feet, she tossed her empty cup in the bin and straightened her shoulders. When she got to the ICU, she was told her husband had been transferred to another ward. She retraced her steps quickly, searching for room numbers.

Stopping outside the room, she heard voices and knew a room full of curious eyes would be waiting inside. She almost chickened out, but after a few moments she somehow found the courage to push open the door.

Shannon immediately rose from her seat and greeted her with a tight hug. ‘I’m sorry, Georgie. I was so caught up in myself, I forgot to be there for you.’

Georgie smiled gently, ‘It’s okay, nothing like dropping a bombshell first thing in the morning.’

Her eyes went to the bed and she froze as she found two dark blue eyes fixed upon her face intently.

Moving towards the bed, she turned her gaze upon Derrick Matthew, who sat in the chair next to the bed with his arms folded across his chest. ‘Excuse me, Mr Matthew, I’d like to sit beside my husband,’ she said firmly.

‘Get up, dear,’ Lorraine said drolly from behind her. ‘Let’s go and find something to eat and leave these two alone.’ She clapped her hands like a schoolteacher and herded them all out the door.

Georgie took a breath and let it out slowly as she sat down next to the bed. ‘How are you feeling?’ she asked, needing to break the sudden silence.

‘Like I was trampled by a thousand-kilogram bull. I also wondered if I might have some kind of head injury when I woke up and saw Derrick. I must have been pretty bad if he turned up.’

‘You kinda shook everyone up a bit, I think,’ she said softly.

His chest was bare but covered in bandages, a multitude of tubes still attached.

The skin she could see was a riot of blues, purples and reds.

‘You saved my life, Michael. It should be me in that hospital bed, not you.’

‘Well, from what I hear, you saved mine, so I guess we’re even.’ His voice was husky and it seemed to hurt him even to speak.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Georgie.’

They both spoke at once and Georgie bit her lip uncertainly. ‘Sorry, you go,’ she said, blinking rapidly to keep her tears at bay.

‘I’ll arrange for my solicitor to be in touch and we can get the divorce underway.’ His voice sounded hollow, as hollow as her insides suddenly felt.

It was a good thing she was sitting down, because she felt as though the room were beginning to spin. She’d come in to tell him what an idiot she’d been, and he was offering her the one thing she’d been demanding for over a year and a half.

He’d dropped his eyes to the bedspread and it seemed as though he’d said everything there was to say.

She wanted to argue, but for the life of her she couldn’t get a single word past the swelling of her throat, now clogged with tears.

Getting to her feet, the chair squeaked loudly on the waxed floor and she cringed at the abrasive sound. ‘Well, I guess ... I’ll get going then.’

He turned his face away to stare out the window.

Georgie felt as though she were about to turn into a sobbing, crumpled mess and hurried to the door before she made an even bigger fool of herself.

Outside she took three steps before sinking onto a chair in the hall. Burying her face in her hands, she let the tears fall, her shoulders shaking as sobs wrenched from her aching chest.

Then his mother’s words floated back to her and she remembered the sadness in her face as she’d spoken of his father.

No.

She was not going to let this happen.

She’d been an idiot and she might not deserve a second chance, but she had to try—she couldn’t leave it like this. Jumping from her seat, she wiped away the tears with her fingers and opened the door—to find Michael, his face grimacing in pain, attempting to sit up in bed.

‘What are you doing?’ she yelled as she raced to his side, helping him to lie back down against the pillows.

‘I was trying to get up,’ he growled.

‘What on earth for? Are you crazy? You just had surgery.’

‘I was trying to stop you before you left,’ he bit out angrily.

Georgie stared down at him uncertainly. ‘Why?’

‘What did you come back for?’ he countered, and she saw that his face was tight with a combination of pain and uncertainty.

‘I came back to ...’ She faltered under his heavy stare but she took a deep breath and forced herself to continue. ‘To tell you I don’t want a divorce,’ she finished defensively.

His expression remained tense and she winced. He was probably thinking she was an irrational, unstable woman, and after everything she’d put him through lately, she had to admit he’d be quite justified.

Then slowly his tension eased and a small sigh escaped his dry lips.

‘I was trying to catch you to tell you I didn’t mean it.’

‘You didn’t?’ she ventured as a small ray of hope began to glow inside.

‘Of course I didn’t! I never wanted it. I was only offering it because you’ve kept telling me it’s what *you* wanted,’ he scowled.

‘I was just so tired of going around in circles all the time ... but almost losing you ... it scared me, Michael.’

‘So you *don’t* want the divorce?’ he asked, uncharacteristically tentative.

She shook her head and carefully laced her fingers through his where they rested on the bed. ‘When it all came down to it—when I thought I might lose you—I realised that nothing else matters—the property, Tamban, your stepfather ... none of it matters. None of it hurts anywhere near as much as the thought of losing you.’ She wiped at an annoying tear that refused to blink away. ‘I love you,’ she said simply, lowering her gaze. ‘But that’s never been our problem. It’s been my past and your fear that I’ll leave that’s torn us apart. I can let go of the past, if I know you can stop hiding things because you’re scared of how I’ll react.’

He opened his mouth to protest and she held up a hand. ‘I know, you had good reason to be worried about telling me who your stepdad was, but maybe if you’d told me as soon as you realised, instead of waiting so long, I wouldn’t have felt so betrayed ... It’d still have been a shock, but finding out after we’d shared so much ... that felt like a big betrayal. I trusted you.’

‘You’re right. I was scared of losing you. And I did,’ he pointed out.

‘I was upset and shocked about your business and who your stepfather was, but you lost me because you hid it from me. You have to stop doing that. You have stop thinking you need to protect me or to fix things for me. If this marriage is going to work, we have to be a team. Equal partners.’

‘I guess I always thought it was my job to protect you. Take care of you. That’s what husbands do.’

‘It’s what parents do to kids. I’m your wife, Michael, not a child.’

‘I never meant it that way.’

‘From now on, we deal with things together. Okay?’

‘Okay.’ His thumb rubbed across her hand gently.

‘And you are *never*, ever to scare me like this again, do you hear me?’

Images of that huge beast tossing Michael like he was no more than a sack of potatoes played across her mind.

‘I’m all right, it’ll take more than the Hulk to do me in,’ he joked, seeing her tears.

‘He’s headed for the meatworks the minute I get home,’ she vowed, wiping her eyes.

‘No way, he’s worth too much to end up on a barbecue.’

‘I should have got rid of him a long time ago—he almost killed you.’

‘Don’t get rid of him, Georgie. We need him for a bit longer.’

‘We?’

‘Well, if my wife agrees, I’d like to use her bull in a breeding program with some of my own cattle. It would be a purely business proposition,’ he added hastily.

A smile touched her lips as she stared at the face she loved with all her heart, had *always* loved but had been too scared to acknowledge.

‘I think we can come to some arrangement,’ she told him, leaning over to touch his lips gently. ‘Stud fees, huh.’

‘For the bull,’ he added dryly.

‘Oh, I don’t know, I think you could fetch a pretty good price as well. Maybe we can do a trade.’

‘I’ll have my people talk to your people,’ he agreed, but smiled as she kissed him again.

‘I love you, Georgie.’

‘I love you too,’ she answered, and his teasing melted into a look so tender that she felt tears once more swell and overflow, falling on his face and mingling with their kisses.

Epilogue

Stoney Creek Station had never looked more beautiful. It was three months since Michael's accident and life had been a blur of activity.

They'd just renewed their wedding vows before family and friends and were now mingling with guests on the lawn, having transformed Stoney Creek into a magnificent reception venue, complete with large white marquees and elegant white tables.

Sipping her champagne and watching everyone enjoy themselves, Georgie tensed slightly as Derrick Matthew approached her.

He took his time surveying the scene before him as he stood quietly by her side.

Georgie quickly tossed down the remainder of her champagne, feeling a need to fortify herself against whatever it was Derrick had on his mind.

'I understand there's a shared past between us. I know about your father and buying his property some time ago,' he started stiffly. 'It was pointed out to me that my business dealings could have been conceived as slightly ... aggressive.'

Georgie felt a surge of anger beginning to swell inside her but forced herself to remain silent. Not even Derrick was going to spoil her wedding day, even if it was her second.

'I can't apologise for that. It's how I do business, how I've got where I am today. However, I do apologise for any pain it may have caused you and your family,' he finished imperiously.

If he expected her to fall at his feet in gratitude, he was in for disappointment, she thought indignantly, but she grudgingly realised it must have taken a lot for this arrogant man to extend this version of an apology. She was very proud of how far she'd come. Not so very long ago she wouldn't have accepted any kind of apology from him.

She'd worked hard to let go of her anger over the past. She'd forgiven her dad. Laid that part to rest. Forgiving herself had been a little harder—she still wished she could take back some of the things she'd said in anger and grief, but she was getting there.

‘Thank you, Derrick,’ she forced out politely.

It wasn’t perfect, but it was a start.

‘I also have something for you. A wedding gift,’ he said, withdrawing an envelope from his pocket.

She smothered a sigh of exasperation. Typical—when in doubt, hand over money. After all, money was what made the world go around!

She accepted the envelope graciously. ‘Thank you. You shouldn’t have,’ she added, hoping it didn’t sound as hollow as it felt. She didn’t want his bloody money.

‘Aren’t you going to open it?’

Forcing a smile to her stiff lips, she put down her glass on the nearby table. ‘Of course,’ she murmured. *Yes, let’s count it all out so everyone can see how generous you are,* she thought savagely.

She opened the envelope and paused, a frown crossing her face as she discovered it was not cash as she’d been expecting.

Withdrawing the paper tucked inside, she began to read and felt the forced smile slip away to be replaced by stunned bewilderment. ‘But this is ...’

‘The deeds to the land I bought off your father. It’s yours. Worthless really, but you never know, between you and Michael you might be able to do something with it,’ he dismissed lightly.

Tears blurred her vision and a great emptiness in her heart suddenly began to fill. Raising her eyes to his, she blinked uncertainly before throwing her arms around his neck and kissing his cheek. ‘Thank you so much,’ she said, her voice husky.

He seemed taken aback and slightly flustered, but a smile tugged at his mouth as he backed away, mumbling an embarrassed, ‘More than welcome,’ before disappearing into the crowd.

‘I think you scared him off,’ a soft voice whispered into her ear.

Turning, she buried her face against Michael’s chest as emotion overwhelmed her.

‘I see he gave you the wedding present.’

She saw his eyes were full of tenderness and his smile blurred as she blinked rapidly. ‘This was *your* doing?’ she accused lightly.

He shrugged. ‘They wanted to know what to buy us for a wedding gift.’

‘Just like that? A property isn’t something most people give as a gift,’ she said.

‘It’s no big deal for him.’ His expression turned serious and he gently tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. ‘The deed is in both our names, but I’m going to have it transferred into yours, so you know that it will always belong to you

and no one can ever sell it out from under you again.'

Laughing and crying at the same time, Georgie placed a hand against his cheek.

'No. I want this to be ours, something we share.'

She closed her eyes as he kissed her, and with the sound of happy laughter and music in the background, she finally felt like she'd found home.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to give a huge thanks to my wonderful editor, Julia, who has worked with me since my very first book ten years ago. Where has that time gone? This will be the last full book we work on together and the end of an era. Thank you for helping shape my stories into the books they've become.

Special thanks to Kaitlin, Jess and Lyn for being my tireless readers and brainstormers.

It seems fitting that this story will be published in this anniversary year as it was originally written around the time I first became published and has evolved and grown as a story, much as, I'd like to hope, I have as a writer.

When I first sat down to write this book, I, like Georgie, was holding on to the hope of reclaiming a place that held many treasured childhood memories for me. After coming back to this story a little older and wiser, I realised I'd figured something out: that sometimes holding on to the memories of a place distorts the reality of it. Memories are very powerful things, and sometimes when we go back to treasured childhood places and see them as they are now, it can be painful to realise they're not as we remembered.

As much as I'd still love to buy back my grandparents' farm, I realised after visiting it not long ago, for the first time since I was a kid, that so many of the memories I held so dear had passed on with my grandparents. The place had changed too much. Often it's the people in those places that make the memories so incredibly powerful. Sometimes letting go and accepting that our memories are far more precious than the actual places is what makes those memories so special.

While I'm still happy to give Georgie her happy ending (and I have to admit, I'm a little bit jealous of that), I can't help but wonder if she ends up discovering the same thing I did ... although I suspect with Michael by her side she'll probably be too distracted to notice!

As always, I'd like to thank all our amazing farmers who work so hard to keep this country going. They've been doing it tough for such a long time and I can't imagine the strength it takes to continue to get up each morning and keep doing

the best with what they've got during this unrelenting drought.

Below are a few of the organisations that provide assistance to our farmers and are making a difference. These organisations also deserve a huge thank you for working tirelessly to support our farmers and their families.

Another way we can all help is to visit small towns in rural Australia. These communities are doing it tough too. When farmers are hurting, their local communities also feel the effects. Take a weekend trip and stay overnight in a rural community. Eat at their local restaurants and pubs, stay in local accommodation, buy your fuel there and visit local attractions in the region. This will all help keep small towns afloat until it rains and we can rebuild and regrow.

If you can, please help.

Rural Aid has a number of great initiatives for donating money, fundraising and volunteering.

Rural Aid: <https://www.ruralaid.org.au/>

Buy a Bale: <https://www.buyabale.com.au/>

Farm Army: <https://www.farmarmy.com.au/>

Aussie Helpers: <https://aussiehelpers.org.au/>

The Naked farmer: <https://www.thenakedfarmerco.com.au/>

For help and to talk to someone:

The Royal Flying Doctor Mental Health Outreach Program: 1300 887 678 seven days a week (24-hour service)

Lifeline on 13 11 14

Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636

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What she didn't expect was the almost immediate 'gift' of a very noisy donkey named Errol. Nor did Hayley expect to meet her handsome new neighbour, Luke Mason, when she was covered in mud trying to drag Errol out of Luke's dam. The strange thing was though that Luke seemed very familiar to her.

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KARLY LANE

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It's hard getting to know her new husband under the eyes of his entire family but, never one to shy from a challenge, Rilee is determined to win over her in-laws and the townsfolk of nearby Pallaburra. Unfortunately, her city ways and outspoken views only seem to alienate them further.

Worn down by the town's ill-will and Dan's lack of support, Rilee flees the station to think about the future. This wasn't how her life was supposed to turn out. Can her marriage survive?

ISBN 978 1 76052 885 0