



Island Proposal

darry fraser



an Australis Island novel

Island Proposal

by Darry Fraser

ISLAND PROPOSAL

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Fraser, Darry

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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

DEDICATION

With love and thanks to Lyn & Graham of Stranraer Homestead
and to Vicki MacLean, Marriage Celebrant Extraordinaire.

Special thanks to my editor, Susanne Bellamy

Island Proposal

Unorthodox. Old fashioned.

*A business partnership only, something which
would satisfy the terms of the will...*

An Australis Island novel

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

CHAPTER ONE

Troy Charles slumped in his chair with one long leg draped over the padded arm, the other thrust out in front. “If you want me to marry, you find me a wife.”

“I might just have to do that.” His father looked up from the Sunday newspaper. “Fulfill your dearest Grandpa’s last wishes, and soon.” Liam Charles sipped the excellent coffee brewed moments before on Troy’s verandah. The city of Adelaide sprawled to the west, with the Gulf of St. Vincent beyond, and Australis Island to the south.

“Good old Grandpa. I’m eternally grateful.” Troy slumped further. The hangover banged his eyeballs together.

Liam leaned forward. “It is your responsibility.”

Troy met his father’s gaze. “We’ve been over this a hundred times.”

“And a hundred times more until you get it. Abide by the conditions or we both lose.” Liam took up his newspaper. “Unless your nuptials happen within six months, the inheritance will go to some Home for the Bewildered.”

“That’s not funny anymore.”

“Neither is your reticence. Your wedding by twenty-eighth of October or I go to the poorhouse.”

Troy squinted. “You could’ve remarried again regardless of Grandpa’s will.”

Liam dropped his chin. “You well know my not remarrying is because of your grandfather’s will. Carol and I are happy enough as we are.”

Troy closed his eyes. His grandfather Petronius, Petny to the family, had ensured that Troy’s inheritance would be greatly reduced if his dad remarried. His grandfather was protecting the remaining child of his only child, Angie, Troy’s mother, whose death in a car accident along with her other son, Marc, devastated everyone.

Liam didn’t give a toss for himself and his father-in-law’s millions but for his remaining son, Troy, he wanted the best, and Grandpa Petny had bequeathed a lot of money.

Liam gave the open newspaper a couple of shakes. "We come from hard-working stock, and I know you understand the values of that hard work. But your grandfather's money will ensure your financial future."

"I know all that." Troy clapped his hands to his head. And man, that was a mistake. His head protested a clanging thump inside. "Aww, why me?"

"You know 'why me'. Because your brother died, too. Because your mother was Petny's only child." Liam slid a look at his son. "I know you want to get married one day. No-one wants to live a solitary life."

"I was talking about this bog-awful hangover." Troy thrust on sunglasses, closed his eyes and leaned back in the deck chair. "If you want me to marry in a big hurry then you better get off your butt and find me a wife. God knows you'd be good at it."

"That's my boy."

"Find me a good woman, that's all I ask."

"I'll see what I can do."

Troy lifted the sunglasses with a finger. "I don't like that look."

"I might have a plan."

"I have a sinking feeling and I definitely don't like that look. What is it?"

"Unorthodox. Old fashioned. A business partnership, something which would satisfy the terms of the will." Liam shrugged.

"You've already got someone in mind."

"Just thinking."

"You don't just think. *You* connive."

A shake of the newspaper. "*You* are so right."

Madelaine Hart stared at her accountant. "Uncle El, what are you saying? I can understand the words, but you'll have to explain the meaning of it."

El sat forward, his elbows on the desk. He took off his glasses, swiped a hand through his silver-grey hair then tapped the whiteboard behind him. "I mean, that while you're in a very good position in the market-place here," he underlined in

red pen, “the business needs an injection of cash here,” another underline, “and you don’t have it. You owe as much as you own.” He streaked two vertical lines against her bank balance and sat back, brows furrowed, lips set in a firm line.

“Yes.” Madelaine shrugged. “And the ramifications are?”

He slipped his glasses back on, glanced down at the paperwork on his desk and glanced up again. “You’re not solvent right now.”

Now that was not an enviable position. “Not solvent? But my future bookings are good.”

“Yes, they are. And solid. Your catering business is very good, but you lack back up capital, or any ready cash for expansion, or – heaven forbid – to cover a disaster. You have nothing spare to market Australis Island Catering and nothing in the back pocket. You need to be able to pay more staff and to grow the business and we need to do something about all of that.” He threw his hands in the air. “I’m just saying.”

Madelaine sat back in her chair and twiddled locks of hair around her fingers. His lean frame looked so relaxed. He had a casual easiness about him. But she knew better. “So, what’s this grand plan? I know you’ve got one.”

El held a finger in the air. “You need a partner. Silent preferably and locked in tight for say, three hundred thousand dollars at an attractive, but not over-the-top rate of interest. That’s just for starters.” He sat back and steepled his fingers in front of his face.

“Three hundred thousand?” Madelaine sucked in her cheeks. A silent partner. “I know we’ve been over this before, Uncle El, but do they stay silent?”

“Oh yes. They don’t have any operating rights, or controls. That’s vastly simplified, of course. It’s all quite above board and is usually successful.”

She tapped her fingertips together. “I know you have someone in mind. That’s how you work. You break things to me gently when you already have everything in place.”

“That’s what you pay me for.” He leaned back in his chair. “Yes, I have someone in mind. And it’s us.”

“I’m not so sure about that idea.”

“We have money for investing, have a wide and varied portfolio and we’re interested in tourism on Australis Island. It’s time to trust me and my advice.”

Madelaine frowned. "I do trust you and your advice. But you want to have your money in my business. That's a little bit close to home."

"It's a calculated risk. I know your business well, and you. We would remain silent but with sort of a family guidance..."

"Not silent then."

"There are other clauses et cetera, a bit extra to add, and it might even be a little unorthodox, old fashioned even. But a business partnership nonetheless and something which might suit both parties." El nodded. "Take a look at the contract, Madds. Have Mike Hennessy look over it for you."

"I have an appointment with Mike later today. First my accountant, then my solicitor. I figured I'd need to see you both."

"Good." El nodded once and almost as an afterthought, continued. "I've also got someone who can help in the kitchens. A hands-on person, a chef with good experience in most aspects of a business like yours." He watched her over the rim of his glasses. "He's quite capable, versatile."

She nodded, distracted. A staff member was welcome, especially one with a recommendation from El. But that was not as important as the finances.

A flutter in her belly felt a little like panic. "Australis Island Catering is all I've got..."

"Madelaine. You had a wonderful idea and you've set up a great business." El sat back in his seat, reached around and tapped the white board's SWOT comments—strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats. "There's no one else on the island catering for the upmarket four wheel drive and coach touring companies supplying their gourmet lunches or budget meals, prepared by their own cooks in their own kitchens."

So far, the very remoteness of the island south of the Australian mainland had protected her. But if she lost the business, she'd lose her precious lifestyle, her income, and a beautiful paradise for a home within the wild Australian bush.

She hadn't worked so hard since Jeff left just to let it all go for the sake of her pride, but she didn't like the idea of another man pulling any strings. This was her business; there wasn't anything left of Jeff in it.

Madelaine picked up the sheaf of papers. "A partnership. It makes me nervous, but I'll have a look at it."

"I'd never put you in a bad place, Madelaine. My gorgeous partner, your mother, would kill me and after ten years or so with her, I know that for a fact."

"I know you wouldn't. But I'm a grown-up girl now, Uncle El. Have to think for myself. Thank you. I think."

El nodded. "Mike will find things straight up and perfectly legal. If it goes ahead, your problems will be solved immediately. And I could keep an eye on things for you."

"Yes, okay. Email me the details. If Mike can't see a problem..."

El waited a beat. "See Mike. He knows all about my plan. And don't worry, I'll organize the hired help."

Mike Hennessy looked at her over his glasses. Then took them off and laid them on the desk in front of him. "It looks fine to me, Madd, certainly a watertight contract. Needs an extra clause or two before you sign it, nothing we can't fix, but it's certainly all above board. El wouldn't risk anything with you. Or his money, let's be real about that." He picked up his coffee. "Did he suggest anything else?"

Madelaine shook her head. "Only that there was a bit extra to add, and that it might be unorthodox and something-or-other. That he was organising hired help, would get them to the island for me."

"That's all he said?" He sipped and looked at her. "That he'd get them to Australis?"

Madelaine pulled her earlobe. "That was enough, trust me. I don't need any more. The damned thing almost sounds like an arranged marriage as it is."

Coffee shot out of Mike's mouth and nose, leapt out of his mug and splashed over his shirt and tie. He hunched over the desk, a hacking cough convulsing him.

Madelaine ran around to his side of the desk, grabbed the coffee cup and set it down. She thumped him on the back. "For God's sake, Mike, be careful. It wasn't that funny."

CHAPTER TWO

Madelaine gazed out to sea from the living room in her home set high on a hill on the north coast of Australis Island.

“Madd, once this chef fella is living in your house, can you get rid of him if things don’t work out?”

“I’ll cross that bridge if I have to.” Madelaine glanced at her pregnant friend.

“Well, when’s he coming?”

“Soon. And if you hang around any longer the baby will be born right here.” At seven-months pregnant, Fiona had a tank-full of protective mother syndrome.

“That’d put him off, wouldn’t it?”

“Fiona!”

“All right. I’m going. But I’ll-Be-Back.”

“All I need, a pregnant Terminator. And if you don’t go now, you’ll have to reverse all the way back up the drive.” Madelaine took her friend’s arm and steered her towards the back door.

Fiona’s mouth dropped open. “He’s due here now?”

“Down that very track.” They stopped and gazed at the steep track that led down to where they stood at Madelaine’s home, *Secluded*.

“I take my life in my hands when I drive up and down that track. I’m terrified I’ll have to reverse. Do you know what time he’s arriving?” Fiona’s gaze didn’t leave the dirt road up the hill.

“We-ell, could be anytime now, it’s getting pretty late in the day.” Madelaine stared at the dirt road, too. “Time to go.”

“Maybe I’d better go.”

“Good idea.”

“Why do I get the impression you’re fobbing me off?”

“Because I am. Now please drive carefully.” Madelaine turned to hug her friend and felt a kick on her ribs. “Ooh. Did you feel that?”

Fiona chuckled and rubbed the spot where the little foot had given her friend a boot. “Seems you’re being told to behave yourself.”

“Junior’s got a power punch, that’s for sure.” Madelaine opened Fiona’s car door and helped her belt in. “How can you still wear those things?”

“If I don’t wear my seatbelt, I don’t drive.”

“The time is coming, kiddo.”

“I know. It’s just that—” Fiona peered over Madelaine’s shoulder.

“What?” Madelaine was afraid to look. A snake, or maybe a kamikaze plover?

“It’s a car. Seems your friend has just arrived. Great, now I get to see him.”

Madelaine slammed the door. She stood bolt upright and stared at the approaching vehicle racing down the driveway. “He’s not a friend. Now, get going, Fiona Brown.”

“No way.” Fiona’s gaze was still fixed up the hill. “Did you say you trust Uncle El? Jeepers, with rellies like that, who needs enemies? Look at the way he drives, Madds.”

Madelaine focused on the hefty 4WD hurtling down the steep track, rocks and dust spitting and flicking under its wheels. It lurched over the deep corrugations and bounced in and out of the potholes. “Must be some absolute bloody cowboy at the wheel. He’d have to be charging down that hill at sixty ks an hour.”

At the bottom of the track, the one tonne piece of turbo-charged machine bore down on them, swung itself around the last bend, its grate and bull-bar almost baring teeth as it charged closer.

Fiona screamed. “Run, Madds – run!”

Madelaine was rooted to the spot.

The vehicle roared over hidden corrugations. She waved her arms madly as if that would help divert the charging vehicle.

It skewed on to the flat parking area, its great wheels skidding on the track and tossing its heavy chassis across her vision. Madelaine threw her arms over her head, doubled over and screamed.

Dust and pebbles and twigs and wallaby droppings flew in her face as the car slid sideways. Impact inevitable, she cringed—

And it stopped. Dead in its tracks. The chassis bounced forward, then back, into deafening silence.

A moment passed then Madelaine crabbed a step or two and dropped her hand inside Fiona's car. She clutched her friend's arm. "You all right?"

"Yeah," Fiona whispered. "You?"

Madelaine shook a pellet of wallaby dung from her shirt. "Yeah."

"Think I can go now?"

"Unless you want to witness a murder." Madelaine patted the car door without looking around

She barely heard Fiona start up her vehicle and head off, her car sput-sputtering away as fast as it could take her.

Bent over as he was, she couldn't decide if he was dead, unconscious, or too scared to look up. She shuddered and another pellet of wallaby poop plopped out of her hair. She stepped closer to the big vehicle, innocuous in its sudden silence. The heat coming from under the bonnet was a worry, but more worry was the inert form at the wheel.

He wouldn't dare be dead.

Then he lifted his head, squinted at her and spoke. "You still have something dark and turdy in your hair." He turned from the wheel and leaned out of the car's open door.

"If you had a brain it would be a fucking peanut," Madelaine ground out. "I don't care who the hell you are, but you can leave my property right back the way you came."

She heard a gravelly cough from deep in his throat. Then, "I came here to work."

"I don't need someone who drives like you. Take this heap of—of—"

"Rubbish?"

"—out of my sight." Madelaine brushed herself down again. Wallaby poop rolled off her clothes and landed around her feet with pathetic little plops.

The man stepped out of the vehicle. Madelaine would swear there was something familiar about him, something in the lean, easy style, but couldn't pin it down. And was he was holding back a great big laugh?

The idiot.

"My brakes failed." He was concentrating on a very stubborn patch of invisible lint on his jeans.

Jeans he filled out admirably. Madelaine blinked and reset her face. Admirably echoed through her head.

Oh yeah? What was so admirable about some maniac toying with her rogue driveway?

"Failed?" she squawked. "Failed? Anything with intelligence would know how to handle that driveway."

His head jerked up. "You expect quite a lot from a fucking peanut."

"You have to leave. I can't employ you."

"This is a hire car," he explained loudly, waving an arm in the direction of the offending vehicle. "You don't think I'd deliberately drive something dangerous, do you?"

"Well, didn't you?" she flashed back. "My uncle is very much mistaken if he believes I need your help."

"Now, wait a minute—"

"No. You wait," she said and stepped forward, daring her legs to move, and pointing her finger at him. "If you are the responsible driver you think you are, that hill—"

"That hill is a piece of cake. The brakes failed—failed, in case you misheard the first time. There was nothing I could do until I got to the bottom of the hill and pulled on the hand-brake." He hesitated a moment. "I'm sorry about the wallaby shit you copped."

He was laughing. Those dark, dark eyes were twinkling, creasing slightly at the corners as if his mouth, his generous, laughing mouth had organised a smile.

Her heart kicked and a fierce heat threaded over her chest.

"I'm Troy P. Charles."

Oh, the smarmy bast—

Wait a minute. Troy Charles? Troy Charles? “You’re Uncle El’s *son*?”

He nodded. “We have met before, some time back. P is for peanut.”

What the hell was El thinking sending his son to work in her business?

Back-peddle a bit, Madds.

She’d only met Troy once or twice years ago, just before he went off travelling the wide world. That gangly youth hardly resembled the man he was now.

Was he really the only person available? By what Uncle El had often said, Troy Bloody P. was highly qualified. Perhaps too highly qualified...

What a crock.

She stood taller. “Please get into that heap of crap and take it back up the hill.” She didn’t want to look at him, the lean frame lounging against the sorry vehicle. “I don’t think I’ll be requiring a chef, after all.”

“Not what I was told. I’m a chef, you’re a cook and the entrepreneur. You need to get back to ‘entrepreneur’ only.”

His voice was cool, deep. And she was what—totally unfazed by her stoic resistance to his many attractions? Starting with the good strong boots, and long legs, well fitted in form hugging jeans with an RM Williams belt. A chest, broad and deep encased in a stark white shirt, its sleeves rolled up and scrunched to reveal powerful forearms.

She swallowed. *I’m gonna murder Uncle El, not just kill him.* “Your father has the wrong idea if he thinks I’m in need of your assistance.”

Troy-bloody-P-bloody-Charles leaned on his car, arms folded. “Has he? Funny. He recommended someone and you accepted, sight unseen.”

Madelaine shook her head. “I didn’t know he would be sending you.”

“Your step-brother?”

“Not funny. You are so not a step-brother. Your father is a very close friend of my mother’s, that’s all.”

“Very close.” Troy waved a dismissive hand. “Look, if it makes any difference I own my own kitchens—”

“Happened to be at a loose end then, did you?”

“We did the best we could do.” He brushed himself down. “This is all a bit by the by, wouldn’t you say? El said that you need the help.”

That stopped her short. Well, didn’t she?

“And here I am.”

“I wanted more of an all-rounder. Office person, cook, driver. That sort of thing.”

Troy spread his hands. “Just show me what needs to be done. Peanuts can be versatile, too, you know.”

Versatile. Just what El had said. Madelaine wanted him out of her sight. “I’m going to call Uncle El.”

She adjusted her shirt and jeans, brushed off any lingering dust and wallaby poop; hard, little, oval-shaped pellets, dry, and thankfully not evil-smelling, before marching past him

“Good. I’d like a word with Uncle El myself.” He was talking to her back. “But before you do, can you let me know which room is mine? I’m totally knackered.”

You’ll be totally knackered, all right. Madelaine slammed her way into the office. She grabbed the phone and punched in her uncle’s number.

“Charles Holdings, this is Trish. How can I help you?”

“Trish, this is Madelaine Hart. Is El in, please?”

“Hi, Maddy. Just a moment, I’ll check.”

Madelaine waited impatiently. A shadow fell across the office doorway. Troy Charles was standing on the threshold. She glared at him, but he shrugged.

“Er – Madd?”

“Yes, Trish?”

“Liam is in a VIP meeting. He wants you to leave a message, and I’ll pass it on. He needs a really good reason to interrupt this meeting.”

“Just tell him that his recommendation fell flat on its face and the sooner he relieves me of it, the better.”

“Oh.” The pause was noticeable. “You want me to relay exactly that?”

“Please.” Madelaine turned and stared into brown eyes. Suddenly a picture of warm, thick, dark chocolate winding its way down her bare belly sprang to mind.

She turned away.

Trish’s voice spiraled down the line. “Madd? He says he can’t help right away and to give it a chance. Does that make sense? I’m sorry, that’s all he said.”

“Oh.” Madelaine’s shoulders dropped. “Okay, but—”

“Okay, Maddy. ‘Bye.’”

Madelaine stared at the phone then looked up at Troy Charles.

No-one should have that thick head of raven hair just asking for her fingers to run through it. No-one should have that easy grace, that confidence as he watched her from the door way.

No-one should be able to make her tingle all over just by looking at her like he was.

No-one.

Give it a chance, Uncle El said.

A warm thrill scampered deep in her belly. She stared into those eyes.

He gazed back. “You didn’t tell me where to put my bags.”

Troy applauded Madelaine’s restraint. Clearly fuming, she led him to his quarters. Throwing her hand in the air indicating he should follow her, he watched the pert sway of her backside as she marched ahead of him.

Her hair, a mass of dark *richy-reddy* colour caught in some sort of clip high on her head, slipped lower and he watched, fascinated as it bobbed and swayed in time with her backside.

He should get his hands on that before too long...her hair and her backside.

He stopped just in time to avoid barging into her as she shoved open a door.

“Your quarters.” She stepped inside, stalked across the room and threw open the curtains.

He hissed out a breath. The quarters themselves were not luxurious.

Spacious, sparse but adequately furnished, it wasn't the furniture which took his breath away. The glorious view of the ocean, rolling hills, steep gully and the rugged coast was nothing short of staggering.

He'd been so engrossed getting down her driveway in one piece that he'd missed the view. The sun was low, and the soft lemony glow tipped the scudding clouds checkering the sky.

"This is breathtaking." He glanced at her over his shoulder. "You must be the luckiest person around." He turned back to the view, mainland Australia a hazy mass to the north over twenty kilometres of ocean.

"I appreciate every millisecond I have here, and luck has nothing to do with it. Which is why I guard it so carefully."

"And you don't like interlopers."

"You guessed. I prefer to be here on my own."

Troy turned back to her, watched as she gazed past him. "In paradise alone. You prefer it?"

Her gaze returned to him for a full ten seconds. "Yes, I prefer it."

"Unless Uncle El can convince you otherwise."

Madelaine didn't move. "It won't be Uncle El convincing me. It'll be you, and so far, you're not doing too good a job."

He jammed hands in his pockets. "I promise to do a much better job of it, starting tomorrow." He ducked his chin. "I'm sorry you weren't aware El would be sending me." Good ol' Uncle El. Just you wait.

He turned and stared out to sea once again. How many people had stood where he was standing and done the same...watched the rolling waves, the sea eagles soaring on thermals above. And he could see dolphins.

This was a paradise he'd really never imagined. Oh sure, he'd travelled to some exotic spots, had seen some far away places, but never had the feeling that he was home.

It was a moment or two before he realised he was alone.

His shoulders sagged and he felt an urge to fall to his knees and curl up with a pillow. Late nights, too much booze, the travelling...

He kicked off his boots, shucked his jeans and pulled off his t-shirt. He stretched out on the big bed and propped up pillows so he could watch the sea rolling in from the horizon.

An eagle dived for prey. A couple of kangaroos across the gully bounded up the hill.

His eyelids were heavy. He'd have a quick nap, just to energise...

Unorthodox. Old fashioned. A business partnership only, something which would satisfy the terms of the will.

Barely awake, eyes dry, scratchy. Where was he? It was dark inside and out...he'd slept longer than he'd intended to, but he couldn't quite rouse himself fully awake.

He rolled over, closed his eyes and dragged the doona over him.

Oh yeah.

That Madelaine Hart was really something. Handfuls of female in all the right places, hair to get a good grip on, mouth to take you to places—

Breasts and bum jiggling and wobbling and shaking and bobbing.

Over him, under him, around him...

He rolled on to his stomach and groaned. Too tired, too tired even for that stuff now...

Madelaine Hart. What luck was it that brought him here?

Unorthodox. Old fashioned. A business partnership only, something which would satisfy the terms of the will.

Grandpa Petny and his will. It almost sounded like...

Troy sat bolt upright in bed and stared into the darkened night.

Don't be friggin' ridiculous!

Nobody does this marriage of convenience shit anymore...

CHAPTER THREE

“The trouble with good looking men is that they know it.” Madelaine waved her wine glass a little as Fiona popped every second strawberry into her mouth. They hulled a large punnet. “You’ll get raging indigestion doing that.”

“No kidding.” Fiona patted her large belly.

“And, they usually get the women they’re after.” Madelaine took a large swig.

Fiona rolled her eyes. “Madd, I mean, if he’s locked eyes on you and you think he’s...like, you know—yummo, and he knows it, you’re dead in the water.”

“The only thing men like that know is one night stands.”

“True,” Fiona agreed, popping more strawberries.

“And the other cluey thing they do is tell you they’re only interested in one thing.”

“They do?” Fiona asked. “They don’t,” she said disbelieving.

“Yup. They say things like, ‘Now, Maddy, are you sure you want to do this?’ like they know it’s only a one night stand and you’re supposed to understand the rules.”

“Uh, and you don’t?”

“Hell, no. All you understand after they’ve got you into a state of swooning, is that if you don’t get it, you’ll die. Oh, they’re clever, all right.”

“You said ‘swooning’. You should lay off the booze.” Fiona looked at the half mast bottle of champagne. “Some more strawberries?” she offered.

“And you’re probably wondering how I’m such an expert here.”

“No.” Fiona removed Maddy’s glass from her hand. “I’m not.”

“Well, it’s happened to me, my girl,” Madelaine enlarged. “Don’t you worry, I know what I’m talking about.”

Fiona looked at her friend. “In just over the three weeks Troy-bloody-P-bloody-Charles has been here at your house, the place had been transformed.” She set down the strawberry bowl and wagged a forefinger. “He’s planted a small garden. Not

flowers or anything, I know, but native trees and shrubs, he's protected the young saplings from possums and wallabies. He's weeded, fenced, landscaped, hammered-n-nailed and generally tidied the place." Fiona waved her hand towards the ceiling. "He's fixed the downpipe, cut a skylight in one of the bedrooms, changed God only knows how many leaky tap washers and even laid some concrete." She huffed her hair out of her eyes. "What's not to like?"

Madelaine knew it. The place looked a million dollars. Cleaned up, tidied up. Better than it did before. Somehow sharper, more loved. More energized, like him.

Man, how she needed a helping hand like that.

He'd checked over Madd's recipes, the meals, the quantities, the orders. He'd checked forward bookings to be more properly prepared. He could even put together a reasonable dinner for the two of them on the odd occasion that she'd let him get away with it.

And so he should, he's a chef. And he'd acted as the host, bright, cheerful and accommodating. He was also an experienced carpenter, used to fixing things around him.

And Maddy hated it. Or hated loving it. Or loved to hate it.

Maddy loved it.

She just wouldn't admit it.

Maddy knew she'd got it bad.

"Time's getting away, Troy."

"Can't do much about it from here, Dad." Troy tucked the mobile under his chin and opened the car window. "Thought I'd be well back by now."

"You thought you could single handedly turn it around in a day or two."

"It doesn't need all that much. Just the injection of cash and a few tips to get things cranking again before the new season."

"Where are you? The signal's not great and your voice is cutting in and out."

Troy was sitting in one of Madelaine's four wheel drives. "I'm on the hill above the driveway at Madd's place. I just delivered the last of a meal order to Island Prestige Touring. I only just remembered to call."

“And you’ve got those few tips underway?” Liam asked.

“Some. Maybe.”

“So what’s keeping you?”

Madelaine Hart. Troy shifted in his seat. He didn’t want to tell his father he was enjoying himself. He didn’t want to say that the sights he most enjoyed were not only the hills and the ocean and the mainland. He didn’t want to talk to his dad about Madelaine Hart and that maybe—maybe he wouldn’t need anybody else working on an unorthodox plan. “She’s a tough nut to crack.”

“Is she now? Keep chipping away. I’ll see you next week.”

“Too soon.”

“Troy, you need to keep your eye on the prize. You haven’t got much time. Get the place organised and get your arse back over here. You’ve got wife-hunting to do. Goodbye.” His dad hung up.

Troy slumped over the steering wheel, his phone dangling in one hand. Well, bucko, that all went your way.

His father wasn’t letting him drag his heels any longer over finding a wife before the deadline. Which was fair enough in the big picture. Liam wanted the best for his son, and wanted his birthright realised.

Madelaine Hart...

And Troy’s birthday was coming up fast. Then there was the added pressure of needing a marriage licence a month prior to the day, so really that only left three months to find a girl to marry.

And not just any girl because why would he bother getting married to someone he didn’t love only to risk all that he would inherit? Oh sure, pre-nuptials. Yeah, they work—they went down a treat with any self-respecting future wife.

Madelaine Hart would never stand for that.

He shook his head. Maddie. Impossible. He just couldn’t see it happening.

He drove back to the house. An image of his hands moving through Madelaine Hart’s deep auburn hair startled him.

He'd wanted to touch that head of hair and her beautiful face from the first day he saw her; it was burning a hole in him. Not to mention all the other bits of her he wanted to touch, to linger over, to kiss and taste, savour...

He took the steep driveway carefully—as he had done ever since his first day on the job—squinting against the bright sunlight. He parked by the garage and walked back up to the kitchens, the early afternoon sun warm on his face.

Madelaine Hart would make his days forever sunny.

The day after he'd been 'dismissed' in his room, he'd found the kitchens by taking a short hike further up the hill. The understated building was nestled in the surrounding scrub. He'd let himself inside.

If the view from his room had left him bereft of words, the view from higher up was nothing short of spectacular. He'd gazed at the sweeping panorama over hills and gullies, and land that sharply dropped away to ocean. The wide expanse of view led out to sea and across the strait to mainland Australia.

He couldn't believe anyone actually did any work when they were in this place. He'd stood for long moments, hands in pockets and had surveyed all at his feet.

And the commercial kitchen itself was something to behold, even if you weren't a cook or a foodie.

The sturdy, stainless steel benches were spotlessly clean, the cool-room, though sparsely filled—clearly not a busy time at present—was spotless, too.

He'd checked the stove and ovens. Cleverly designed, a bank of three inverter ovens and the cook-tops stood idle. The usual pots, pans, utensils and baskets adorned the area, and when he turned to the prep bench, the magnificent view stopped him in his tracks again.

He knew this building alone had set Madelaine back a couple of hundred thousand, money her father had left her but, until now, the economic downturn on the world stage hadn't started to bite. By the time Liam had flagged a need for some financial assistance, Madelaine's business had already begun to falter.

Clearly Liam thought a lot of Madelaine. It surprised Troy that his father hadn't spoken much of her before, or not that he'd remembered anyway. Maybe he hadn't taken any notice. He hadn't dwelled on that. There'd been other things to concentrate on.

Now, as he got closer to the kitchens, he could hear a droning hum as he stepped through the main doors.

Madelaine was bent over the bench chopping a large pile of vegetables. She had earphones in and was jiggling on the spot to some melody he could barely hear. She wore backside-hugging track pants, gym shoes, a slim cut hoodie top and that lustrous hair was pinned precariously atop her gorgeous head.

Her boobs bobbed and shook with each set of moves and he thought he'd never seen anything so wonderful in all his life.

She jigged and tapped, hummed, moved her head from side to side, every so often she mimed a few lyrics as if she was on stage, her long handled wooden spoon an air guitar, or drumsticks, or her microphone.

Then she'd swap her 'microphone' for a knife, a rapier-sharp blade and carrots, celery and capsicums would succumb to its staccato chop-chop.

He already knew she loved to create her dishes from scratch, used only the finest of appliances to whiz, slice and dice when she was time-poor. He knew that her time in the kitchens was her escape, and that whatever she created here was what held her catering business ahead of the others in her industry.

There was no one else like Madelaine Hart on Australis Island. Or anywhere else, he thought.

Madelaine Hart, the girl I'm going to marry.

He stood in the doorway, his mouth not quite closed and heard the words again inside his head... Madelaine Hart, the girl I'm going to marry.

He couldn't speak. He couldn't even make a noise to let her know he was standing there. She was the most perfect woman he had ever seen.

She turned on a loud note, belting out some screechingly bad tune he had no hope of recognizing and spied him standing there.

"Shee-it," she yelled, and her knife clattered to the floor. "What the hell do you think you're doing creeping up on me like that?" She yanked out the earphones and threw them on to the bench.

Troy held his hands out. "I thought you'd have seen me."

I'm going to marry Madelaine Hart. All he had to do was convince Madelaine Hart of it. And quickly.

Liam Charles thought for a moment. Speaking to his son had given him all the clues he needed. He smiled, gave a little fist punch then reached under his desk and removed a loose square of carpet. He keyed in a series of numbers on the heavy metal door at his feet, popped the latch, reached into the hole and pulled out a sheaf of papers.

Petny's will. He read, then re-read the clause relating to his eldest son.

It only mentioned a marriage. It didn't mention whether or not there had to be an heir in the arrangement. Just a marriage.

He wondered if he could really pull it off. He wondered if Troy would be willing... and Madelaine, of course.

He'd have to talk to Carol about it.

CHAPTER FOUR

And there he was, that delicious Troy Charles staring at her as she did her best Pink rendition.

“Gave me a helluva fright.” She bent to retrieve her knife and slid it into the sink to wash. She straightened, tugged her top back over her hips after reaching for that last big note. Didn’t want quite so much of her muffin top exposed to the very sexy interloper who was sleeping under her roof. “So, what are you up to?” A tingle whipped up her spine.

He had an odd expression on his face. “I, um, just delivered those meals up the road to Cloudy Bannon’s shed.” He walked to the bench and rested his elbows on it, chin in hands. “Was wondering, perhaps you’d like to go for a walk?”

“A walk where?” Those eyes of his were guarded and inviting at the same time. How could that be?

“Anywhere. But I haven’t had a good look down there.” He pointed to the gully leading to the sea. “Wouldn’t mind some company.”

Then he smiled at her and some weird little thrill scampered in her belly. “I don’t know. There are a few more chores to do here.”

“We could kill two birds, so to speak. Get a leg-stretch and I could run a few strategies past you at the same time. We would actually be working.”

Madelaine slowed her racing thoughts and stared back into those *mocha-chocolada* eyes. “What strategies?” she asked, still not moving.

He held her stare. “I think there’s more you could do for the self-drive market. Possibly even cater for functions around here, maybe advertise a marquee, equipment... You’ve certainly got the land.”

She nodded. “I have thought of doing more, just never could see my way clear.”

“How about that walk and we go over a few points?” He straightened up, stretched and turned to gaze at the ocean. “I haven’t been down that slope yet.”

Madelaine couldn't find anything reasonable to argue against going for a walk. "All right. It's a nice time of the day." She scraped the chopped veggies into a saucepan and put the lid on it. The stock could wait a little bit longer.

"Great. I'll backpack a bottle of wine and a couple of glasses."

"Thought we were working."

"We are. But it's one of those civilized think-tanks." He turned to the cool-room, then back to her. "Just one thing."

Madelaine looked at him. "Yes?"

"No singing."

They found a sheltered spot on the west side of the hill overlooking the deep gully. The view was breathtaking over the strait, and a panorama of hills, tall timbers and sections of scrub dotted along the coastline before them.

"This never ceases to amaze me," he said, pouring two glasses of crisp Chablis.

"It's a beautiful place. I don't want to lose it."

"You won't." He glanced at her. "There's no need whatsoever to think like that. We can—you can get it going again."

Madelaine looked sideways at him. "I didn't want help." He sat beside her, close enough to touch her arm if she just leaned a little further.

"I know, but I don't think I've been too intrusive."

"Of course you haven't." Intrusive was not a word she'd have used. Distracting, yes. Hormone-inducing sex-bomb, yes. Sleep-disturber, yes.

"You have a really good business here, and with some new money, you could expand, make it even better."

Madelaine turned to look out over the ocean, because if she stared any longer at his face, she'd do something silly, like go all girly and sidle across to him to fit neatly under his arm and nestle her head against his shoulder. The way he sat there, the glass of wine dangling in his hand, his forearm resting on a bent knee... "It all takes time."

"Yes."

She wrinkled her nose. "But I still don't like it much."

They talked briefly about her business. Madelaine kept it light, not wanting to get into a deep financial discussion with Uncle El's son.

Big, lean, gorgeous, softly spoken, easy grinning, eye twinkling with promise, hard-muscled son.

They gazed out to sea in silence. Madelaine sneaked another look sideways and felt decidedly youthful when her glance met his. Heat crept up her neck.

"Funny that we only met a couple of times before." His dark gaze was steady on her.

She gave a small shrug. "I've known Uncle El a fair while now, but mostly after you went away travelling. Then I came here."

"Our parents all knew each other way back, apparently."

"Was a long time ago. My dad's been gone a number of years now."

"So has my mother. And my brother. They died in a car accident about fifteen years ago."

Madelaine nodded. "Yes. Awful for Liam and you." Her mother had told her of the family's tragedy.

She decided at this minute that it was better not to look at him unless she was talking to him. Better not to let her gaze linger on his mouth, or to rove over his beard-stubby jaw and chin. Better not to reach over and soothe his fine brows with her fingertips. She wanted to so badly that she was sure he could tell simply by being next to her.

She sipped a few times, staring across the strait to the mainland.

"I was also thinking," he said and propped himself on one elbow, "that you should come back to the mainland with me this week for a break."

She shot him a look. "I didn't know you intended to go to the mainland."

"My days off. There's a break in the bookings, too. Why not come?"

"To do what?"

"I don't know, maybe just have a break."

"Maybe." She thought for a moment. Her chest grew hot. Maybe she'd have to stay a few hundred kilometres from wherever Troy stayed. Being away in Adelaide with

him for whatever reason might not be a good idea. She had hormones jumping all over the place. Mainly in his direction.

He looked out over the view.

She could go over to Adelaide. There was a break in the bookings, he was right. It might be a good time to put her many questions to Liam direct, rather than pussy-footing around on email. She knew she had to sign off on their silent partner arrangement. Putting it off any longer meant she was going nowhere fast.

Heat bloomed in her chest. She took a deep breath.

“I normally stay in North Adelaide,” she said, and left it at that.

CHAPTER FIVE

Madelaine held her phone away from her ear as Fiona squealed in delight.

“Of course I’ll look after the phones for you. How delicious, going to Adelaide with Troy Charles.”

Madelaine scoffed. “It’s not like he doesn’t already sleep under the same roof, what difference going to Adelaide?”

“It’ll be like a date.”

“You’re gushing.” Madelaine felt a little squirm in her belly.

“I know I am because I reckon he’s got plans.”

“He’s got another think coming, then.” The little squirm was heating her blood.

“Crap—you’re head over heels. Go for it, you know you want to.”

No argument there. Madelaine knew she wanted to go for it. And go for it all, the dating, the sex, the marriage proposal, the wedding, the babies—What?

That thought was Fiona’s fault, her being pregnant and everything. “How’s that big belly of yours going to take the driving to and from here?”

“Madds, don’t change the subject. I’ve got four weeks to go, I’ll be fine. I like the sound of Uncle Troy. It has a certain ring to it.”

“For God’s sake.”

“Madd, he likes you. You like him. Stop fighting it.”

“How can you possibly be the big romantic after all that’s happened to you?”

Fiona sighed. “Because something nice is happening to you. Let it happen.” She paused briefly. “Now, I know where the keys are, and what to do with the computer so you just go right ahead and have a couple of lazy, lovely days off with Mr Gorgeous Rich Tall Dark And Handsome and come back married. I’ll be in heaven.”

“I won’t be coming back married, for crying out loud. I’m just going over to sign off on this silent deal thing with Liam and Mike.”

“You’re tut-tutting me, Madds. Have a great time and I’ll see you when you get back. Bye.” She hung up.

Now Madelaine was on her hotel balcony in North Adelaide looking over the city lights and sipping an icy white wine, mulling over Troy’s invite to dinner. He’d be here in thirty minutes to take her out.

They’d driven in his car to the ferry leaving Australis, then travelled onto Adelaide. They’d enjoyed a friendly few hours in the car before he dropped her off at the Majestic.

“I’ll call you about tonight,” he’d said when they’d pulled up at her hotel. It was midday. He dropped her bags at reception, then kissed her cheek and said, “See you a bit later.”

He was gone before she touched her face where his lips had pressed. The receptionist smiled at her.

Now she thought about the meeting with Liam and Mike Hennessy and what had transpired. Thought about the total package they’d put to her which was definitely altogether unorthodox and old fashioned.

In fact, it was a crazy, stupid, not-real, awful, wacky, tacky, not-nice option that Uncle El and Mike put to her. All for her benefit, they emphasized.

Well, hers and Troy’s. He stood to gain a huge amount of money if she agreed. Actually, if any woman agreed, but it seemed she was the only possum in the headlights at present.

And if she agreed to the plan, her life and her business would be safeguarded forever. So how wacky did that sound?

“I’m not easy about this, Madelaine,” Mike Hennessy had said. “There’s nothing illegal in it, but...”

“It’s not illegal, it’s just a contract.” Liam was shielding his face behind steepled fingers. “A ‘best fit’, if you like.”

Madelaine looked from one to the other. She settled on Mike. “No wonder you choked on your coffee.” She swiveled to Liam Charles. “Surely to God I could benefit from a partnership without having to marry Troy?”

Liam raised his eyebrows.

“Don’t give me that look, Uncle El. You know it’s not personal.”

“But he needs to benefit from a marriage. His marriage. I’ll be honest with you, Madelaine.” Liam sat forward. “He’s got no clue, my son. He’s got no clue what sixty-five million dollars means...to him, or to me for him.” He clasped his hands in front of him. “Or to his cousins, who would only share a minor portion, but they still do stand to benefit. All I want is an honest woman to fulfill Petny’s wishes.”

A zillion thoughts sped around her head. “An arranged marriage.”

“A contract. And I trust you.”

“I’d still be married to someone I didn’t choose.”

Mike Hennessey shifted uncomfortably. “We would get you a divorce after the appropriate time has lapsed. Maybe even annulled. The will doesn’t stipulate that the marriage has to be... ah, that there has to be children.”

“Consummated,” she said flatly. “Annulled. This is so gross.” Both men, men in their early sixties, ahemmed, and fidgeted. “Couldn’t the stipulation be contested?” she asked.

“Yes, it could,” Liam stated. “But we should have done it long before now. And God only knows how long the inheritance might’ve been held up if we did. To be honest, I thought Troy would have married well in time. But now with less than three months—”

Madelaine made a small noise.

“—it’s now at a crucial point.”

She stared. “When’s Mum back?”

Liam met her gaze. “Next week.” He spread his hands. “She knows about Petny’s will, but she didn’t know I was going to approach you about this.”

“Uncle El.”

“Madelaine, it’s not so scary. It’s a contract to fulfill a stipulation. We will protect you. I just need my son—”

“And he knows nothing of this discussion?”

Liam looked at her, suddenly hopeful. “No. Nothing. Not yet. I haven’t been able to catch him. Besides, you had to know about it first. He knows about the will, of course he does, but not about my asking you to—”

She held up her hand. “Prostitute myself.”

“You’re not doing that!” Mike was horrified. “Liam, this has got to—”

“Madelaine, it’s hardly that.”

“No use getting cranky with me, Uncle El. How do I know I won’t be under any pressure to—?”

“A contract. A *contract*.” Liam wiped his brow. “Look. You agree to marry him and we will write up your conditions. Your conditions. Then there’s a divorce in a couple of years after a round or two of mandatory counseling.” He shifted in his seat, appearing to warm to his subject. “No consummation required, though I suppose the old boy figured it would—” He broke off when he saw Madelaine’s face, “—no children required—”

“What about the living arrangements?”

“Co-habitation is required.” Liam held up his hands. “But both houses are big enough for you to live your separate lives. Modern living is different now. There is a little audit to undertake, Rosen and Battey Solicitors can contract that out, but nothing we can’t get around.”

Madelaine stared at her uncle. “Audit? I never, ever thought you—”

“Me either, trust me. I honestly thought Troy would have gone off and got himself married by now.”

She rounded on Mike Hennessey. “This is hardly believable.”

“I agree. But it isn’t all that uncommon in these circumstances, you know. I’ve heard of one or two instances before this.”

“What? That we grown-ups of the twenty-first century decide on a marriage of convenience.” Madelaine folded her arms. “Medieval.”

Liam sat back and studied her. “Say no, then.”

“A marriage where both parties benefit,” Mike soothed. He pulled at his shirt collar. “Madelaine, give it some thought—as a contract. We can’t do anything unless you agree, so the ball is still technically in your court.”

“What about the silent partnership? That’s what I came here for. What happens to that if I say no to getting married?”

Mike stared at Liam. “You didn’t explain—?”

“Don’t tell me.” Madelaine leaned forward. “It was all part and parcel of the same thing.”

Liam protested. “It was the thing which led me into the marriage idea. I admit it.” He sighed. “I started with the silent partnership thing. Troy agreed to—”

“What?”

“—the silent partnership but only if he could see first hand what your business looked like. You needed an extra hand as well, so he fitted the bill all round.” He held up his hand again as Madelaine was about to speak. “At the same time, it just clicked with me—what if you and he were to agree to marry, then we would fulfill the stipulation and you would have your business secured forever.”

She glared. “Not forever.”

“No. No, just for the terms of the contract. But I wouldn’t withdraw financial support afterwards. That’ll be written up, too.”

“But what happens to it if I don’t agree to marry?” she repeated.

“It’s not blackmail, Madelaine. It’s a plea for help.” Liam hung his head. “I’d honour our original offer, of course I would, with the usual terms.”

Madelaine remained suspicious. “How long would it take to draw up this new, unorthodox...proposal? Pardon the pun.”

Liam whooshed out a breath. “Just give the details to Mike and it’s done.”

“Almost done,” Mike qualified. “But done in time.”

“And who’s going to tell Troy that he’s stitched up like a Christmas turkey?” she asked.

“Leave that to me,” Liam said. “The later the better.”

Madelaine’s recovery took a moment or two, and then her expletives weren’t so much shocking as they were loud.

Both Mike Hennessey and Liam Charles dived for cover.

And now she had to sit through dinner, knowing what she knew and knowing Troy didn't have a clue. Yet.

Not that she'd agreed to the deal, or to sign the contract. She made sure both Liam and Mike knew they had to wait until she'd thought things through.

That had made Liam very nervous, but she wouldn't be hurried.

Could she marry for money? That was the only question she had for herself.

The fact that it would secure Troy his inheritance would be a positive. For Troy, and for Liam as his father.

Seemed like the burden of this was all hers, and hers alone.

It wasn't blackmail, Liam had said, but it certainly played on her. Yes, she would gain, but so would Troy...so she was really just a means to an end.

Would he care? Did that matter to him?

She'd tried to phone her mother, but so far Carol hadn't answered her calls.

And there was another thing; what cat would be set amongst the pigeons for Carol and Liam?

She closed her eyes. What should have been so straightforward now looked as if it was going to get very messy, very quickly.

How was she going to keep it from Troy? Why *should* she keep it from Troy? He had a right to know that she'd been lined up to be his wife. He would have to agree to marrying her so why hadn't he been brought into the discussions as soon as possible?

CHAPTER SIX

Madelaine brushed down her black Capri pants, stretched her legs out in front to check her polished toe nails and her feet in black patent slides. She pulled at her favourite black boat-neck top, smoothed it over her hips.

In fifteen minutes, Troy would be at her door.

She patted a few stray hairs that had escaped from her loose topknot then stopped the preening. Did she want to look as if she was trying to impress him?

Short answer, Madds. Yes.

She slumped. How to tell a man you were fiercely attracted to him and, oh hey, guess what? We're gonna be married for money before three months is out.

It was wrong. *Wrong wrong wrong.*

She preferred the silent partner plan to this one. She'd have to say—

Her phone trilled, caller ID alerting her. "Mum."

"Hello, love. Sorry I didn't get back. Couldn't find my phone for ages. How've you been?"

"Mum, Uncle El wants me to get married." Madelaine waited a moment in the silence. "To Troy."

The silence went on for a beat or two longer. "Troy's nice."

"Mum."

"Okay. I know about it. El ran it by me a while ago."

"I'm absolutely astounded."

"Why – because he talked to me about it, or because of the plan itself?"

"Because you never said. And because it's medieval."

"It's not the end of the world."

"Mum!"

“My darling girl, I’m not selling off my virgin twelve year old daughter to the nearest slave trader. You’re grown up, you’ve been in a few relationships. Now you’re now in need of some big cash so it seems to me to be a mutually beneficial thing. And with no strings—well, except for the initial strings. Troy gets his inheritance and there’s a contract in place to protect both of you.” Carol stopped.

“Of all people. My own mother.”

“I know you wanted to marry for love.” Carol sighed. “I know that.”

Madelaine heard the white space in the conversation. “What is it, Mum?”

“So do I.”

“So do you what?”

“Want to *marry* for love.”

A knock sounded on her hotel room door. “Mum, I want to talk more about this, but Troy’s arrived, we’re going out—”

“Oh good, a date. That’s promising.”

“A date? Yes, I suppose... No, maybe not.”

“For God’s sake, Madds, I know you’re struggling with this...”

The knock was a little more insistent now.

“...but ask Troy what he knows about his grandfather Petny. Arranged marriages are in the family.”

“I have to go. I’ll call you after.” Madelaine said her goodbyes and rang off. She opened the door and there he was. Tall, dark, handsome, smiling, and carrying a small bunch of brightly coloured flowers. “Hi,” she said.

“Hi.” He handed her the flowers. “Couldn’t resist.”

“Thanks, they’re lovely.” And they were. A little flip-flop in her belly stopped the anguish for a few seconds.

She took the flowers and waved a hand in the direction of her seat outside. “You want a drink before we go? I have a white open.”

“Why not?” He walked through her apartment and looked out over the balcony. “We have a much better view at home.”

“Yes.” She noted the ‘we’ and the ‘home’. She found a tall vase for the flowers, poured him a glass of wine, topped up her own and settled back into the chair on the balcony. He sat opposite.

“But this is nice, too.” He raised his glass. “How did the meeting go?”

“I did a lot of yelling.”

Troy gave a laugh. He looked good when he laughed, his whole face lit up as if he were delighted in all things. “So there was a bit to negotiate, then.”

“In a manner of speaking.” She sipped her wine and watched as he did the same. “Where are we going to eat?”

“Gouger Street. *Desinare*. Know it?”

She shook her head. She hadn’t been to Gouger Street for an age. And she wasn’t sure if she was going to enjoy it tonight.

It was an Italian place close to the King William Street end of Gouger. Known for its robust Mediterranean flavours as well as its excellent wines and coffee, it was hugely popular and difficult to secure a table.

After Troy and Madelaine had stepped out of their taxi, a waiter met them at the entrance to the restaurant.

“Hi, Troy. Good to see you.”

“Vic, thanks. Great to see you too. This—” he turned to introduce her—“is a friend of mine, Madelaine.”

Vic smiled at her. “G’day.”

“More Aussie than Aussie,” Troy said. “Just the best Italian food in the city.”

Vic led them inside to a quiet table along the back wall. “This one looks good.”

After a flourish of napkins on laps and water poured, Vic left them.

Madelaine looked at Troy. “This a regular place of yours?”

“It is. And my usual table.” He shrugged. “Sometimes a table for one, other times not.”

“Fair enough.”

“You must have favourites. This is mine.”

“I don’t come to the city much.”

Another waiter brought them the menu and the wine list. Madelaine opted for red wine, and Troy ordered a bottle of shiraz from the Langhorne Creek area.

“I hope you will.” He indicated to the waiter that he’d pour their wine. “Might be nice to do this again.”

Madelaine wasn’t so sure about that. Then again, if it was a-marryin’ they were, perhaps there might be more wining and dining. Maybe. Perhaps not.

What a mess.

“You look like the world’s on your shoulders. Did my father and Mike really get stuck into a few things?”

In that moment, Madelaine thought of opening up and relating the whole conversation. She stared at his eyes, his gaze steady on her mouth then her eyes.

Heat prickled down her back and along her arms to the backs of her hands. Her neck grew hot and she could feel her pulse beat in her throat. She just sat there staring right back at him.

No, it was for Liam to tell Troy what they were planning. A breath escaped her. “Um. It was pretty interesting.”

“Care to tell?”

Another hesitation. “Not right now.”

He frowned. “If it was that bad, maybe I’d better know. I could help straighten out a few things. If necessary, of course.”

“It wasn’t that bad.” *Geez, liar.* “I just need a bit of time to adjust.”

“Not worried by the turn of events, are you?”

Her head snapped up. “What do you mean?”

“That we have a stake in your business. You knew that, right?” He held the bottle over her glass of wine and she shook her head, refusing a top up.

“Yes. I knew that. That’s fine.” She took a few sips. “A silent stake.”

“A silent stake. And that I will be another partner.”

“Yes, that certainly came up. I should have known. In the light of other things today, that is not even surprising.”

“Wow. Sounds big.” He studied her face. “But I’m not going to hear it all, I know.”

Another breath puffed out and she glanced away, her fingers rubbing the seams of the linen serviette. Her eyes lit up when she saw the waiter approach with the menu. “Oh, good. Food soon,” she said and gave him all her attention.

He went through the chef’s specials then left them to decide.

Madelaine chose veal escalopes and Troy ordered baked fish and a large salad to share for their main.

“It’s going to be fine, whatever it is,” he said.

“Maybe. It’s all new to me. Will be hard to work with someone over my shoulder, so to speak.”

“That won’t happen. All it will do is ease the pain when you want to expand.”

She tipped her wine glass this way and that, watching the deep purple of the shiraz cling to the bowl. “I didn’t see anywhere in the contract...do you have to stay on?”

Troy looked surprised. “No. I don’t. But I was hoping to. I’ve enjoyed my time over there. I was considering making a permanent move.”

“Uh...”

“I mean, I’d find somewhere close by to live, of course I would. I’ve got a couple of cousins over there. I wouldn’t interfere operationally. I’d maintain the distance as far as the partnership was concerned. I’d be just another employee.”

Oh sure.

She didn’t comment further. How the hell was she going to manage this?

She should’ve had her mother deal with Liam after all. Her mother would know how to handle this. Her mother... “You know my mother, right?”

“Carol? Met her only a few times. Dad keeps their relationship pretty much under wraps.”

“Wonder why that would be?” Madelaine had met Liam too many times to count, and by calling him uncle had clearly accepted him as part of her family. While she had still been living with her mother, Liam had often been at their home. They had socialized in the time since and Madelaine had used his accountancy practice as her own.

“Don’t know.” He stared at his wine. “Maybe he thinks I’d object. You know, after Mum and Marc.”

“You don’t though, do you?”

“Of course not. They died a long time ago, but I wouldn’t mind anyway. Dad’s happy now, and he’s got a life to live.”

Madelaine sensed there was more to it. What had her mother said? That she wanted to marry for love. Her mother had also mentioned Troy’s grandfather. So she went with that thought as it popped in. “Mum’s told me that your great grandfather settled on Australis Island.”

Troy nodded. “Back in the early nineteen hundreds. He and four or five brothers, can’t remember how many. They came from the Netherlands as young men, teens probably, all big and tall blond blokes.”

“And you with your dark hair—where did that come from?”

“Black Irish in Liam’s side, somewhere.”

“So which of your ancestors built this huge empire?”

Troy leaned back in his chair. “That would be Henricus, my great grandfather. He built the whole company from scratch, employed all his brothers. They were into all sorts of things, mining, logging, construction.” He reached across and took his wine glass. “Henricus married Sybil, or Sybilla—I can never remember. I’m not good at this stuff. Then Petronius was their first born and when he married Eva, they had my mother. Apparently he was a stern old boy who made a heap more money when he took over the family business. An old miser by the sounds of things, but certainly produced big for the whole family at the time.”

Their meals arrived. Madelaine was glad of the distraction. Not that she was hungry, but she’d eat anyway. If she could.

Somewhere a mobile phone rang. Madelaine looked down at her bag on the floor. “It’s not my phone.”

Troy patted his pockets. “It’s mine. Sorry, thought I’d turned it off. It’ll go to message bank.” The phone jangled forever. “Sorry,” he said again. “It’ll stop in a minute.”

Madelaine sliced the tender veal, pushed some on to her fork. “So they had a heap of kids?”

“No. They married late. They only had my mother...” His phone rang again and he looked apologetic as he checked the caller ID.

“They want you pretty badly whoever it is.”

“Dad. If I take it, it could be a long one.”

“Take it. I don’t mind.” Madelaine ate. Her mouthful would halt any chit-chat anyway. And besides, this wasn’t really a date. They were just friends. Or friendly. Being friendly-like. Sort of.

Troy nodded. “I’ll keep it short.”

Madelaine toyed with her meal. She didn’t think it would be an overly long conversation anyway.

“Dad. No, I’m out to dinner. Madelaine. Yeah, Madelaine. What—? Not yet but what did you—? Okay. Bye.” Troy shrugged when he looked at her. “Wants me to call him after dinner.”

“Fine.”

“Not fine. He’s interrupting my plans.” He smiled at her, eyes bright.

You have no idea. “You were telling me about Petronius and Eva.”

He flexed his shoulders as though to loosen the muscles in his back. “The families must have known each other back in the old days at home. The younger two met in Adelaide and after they married, they returned to live on Australis Island.”

Madelaine speared a slice of veal and mushroom again. “A big romance. How delightful.”

“Don’t think Ooma—Grandma—quite saw it that way. The families had got together and joined the pair in holy matrimony, so to speak.”

She gave him her best blank stare.

“Arranged the marriage,” he explained. “Eva’s family had a lot of money. She

needed a husband and he needed a wife. He had money of his own as well, but a man needed to marry and have kids, and so he was found a suitable, available, willing woman.”

“Hard to imagine how that happens.” She felt like the veal had stuck in her throat. She concentrated and swallowed.

“Happened a lot then, apparently.”

Silence reigned again for some moments.

“I wonder if she loved him,” Madelaine said to her veal escalopes.

“They had nearly sixty years together, who knows? But they only had the one child. Maybe that’s another clue. I don’t know.”

“Sad to think people were tied to each other back then, with no way out if they needed it.”

“I suppose they married for keeps come hell or high water. Maybe they just had to find a way through their troubles.”

Madelaine crossed her cutlery on her plate. She leaned her elbows on the table. “Wonder what I would have done in those circumstances.”

Troy glanced up. “In Eva’s shoes?”

She shrugged. “It was a different era. Do you know much about her?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think Mum knew an awful lot about her either. The oldies didn’t do a lot of talking about themselves, and there weren’t too many accessible records back then.” He ate some more fish. “This is really good.” He swallowed, took a mouthful of wine. “So is this. Come on, what would you have done?”

Madelaine went back to her own meal. “I suppose back then, being female, I’d have been governed by my family’s wishes. And when was it, sometime in the late forties or fifties? Did they still have arranged marriages then?”

“Must have. Thank God it doesn’t happen now.”

Madelaine’s breath caught. She reached for her water and took some tentative sips. “Yes. You’d never know who you’d end up with.”

“Would have been a minefield for people back then, too.”

"I suppose that's why the older generation got to choose. Probably more about business than romance."

Troy looked up. "There would have been conjugal rights."

"Yeww."

He laughed, and shrugged. "I don't know. There might have been some good matches. Some people might have found themselves attracted to their spouses after all."

"Maybe." She finished what she could of the veal. It was delicious, but way too big a serving. "And what would you have done?"

Troy snorted. "I'd have run a million miles."

"Oh." That answer gave her a jolt.

"Then when my father had brought me back by the ear, I would have knuckled down and thought of king and country."

Madelaine smiled. "Would you have, you know, wooed her or whatever it was called?"

He frowned. "Wooed? I dunno. Would I have had to?"

"She might have held out."

"The object was offspring, a continuing of the line."

"A girl likes to be romanced."

"If she didn't like the bloke I don't reckon anything would romance her."

"True." She pushed her plate away and wondered if Eva had grown to love Petny. She wondered if one day over veal escalopes and baked fish Eva had felt a tingle in her belly that she knew was lust for him. Pure and unadulterated.

Would Eva have acted on those feelings—within the safe confines of her marriage, of course—and given her husband a nice surprise one evening?

Madelaine wondered if Eva had decided to take her own destiny by the throat and launch herself at Petny one night, petticoats a-flutter, her bustier, or whatever they were in those days, thrust under his nose and her lithe female form astride his lap, nudging into life an erection he couldn't ignore.

Madelaine felt the heat bloom within, warming her chest and neck and flushing her cheeks.

She could feel Eva's yearning...

Did Troy have a look of Petny about him?

Was Petny's new bride a match for the lusty young husband about to create an empire and a dynasty?

What would those first few heady kisses have been like, and how quickly they might have found a private place so he could lift her skirts, spread her legs and thrust in between until they cried out—

"Deep in thought," Troy remarked as a waiter removed their empty plates.

Madelaine started. "I was. I was wondering...if Eva woke up one day and thought, gee I really love my husband."

"I'm sure the old boy would have been very happy if she had." His eyes glinted.

Madelaine knew that look.

"Dessert?" he asked.

"Not for me. Maybe another glass, then I should get back to the hotel."

For a tiny moment, Madelaine thought Troy looked disappointed. She wondered why that felt good.

Taxiing from the restaurant to North Adelaide, they sat in the back seat almost touching. The food and the red wine had been delightful, the company easy, the conversation flowing.

Though they hadn't been out long, the light banter relaxed Madelaine, and she didn't feel constantly on guard, or having to direct the conversation away from her business and Liam's grand plan.

When they arrived at her hotel, Troy paid the cabbie then took her hand. "Let me walk you in."

"I'll be fine."

He steered her to the lifts. "Then let me walk you here."

He hadn't let go of her hand. A little zing warmed her arm, her belly and her toes. That was weird.

At the lifts he didn't bother to press any buttons, he just turned her back to the wall and stepped close. "I don't want this night to end, Madelaine."

The zing had turned to a thud. As she stared back at him, she wondered if she should say what she'd tried to avoid saying all night.

"Your thoughts are all over your face again."

God forbid. "Are they?"

"You look worried about something."

He was close enough that his lips brushed her cheek when he spoke.

A feathery shiver danced over her chest. "Not worried. Just not ready to spoil things right now." *Well, that was honest.*

He hesitated. Nodded. "Okay. That's good." And then he kissed her anyway.

Good God. His mouth on hers, clever, soft, and his hand in her hair as if he'd never let her go.

How to resist the light scratchy tingle of beard stubble, the touch of his hand on her neck, the scent of his bath soap, the feel of his silky hair and her hand reaching to grip it and pull him closer.

The lift dinged behind her and he stepped into the elevator taking her with him. "Just up to your floor," he murmured on her mouth.

She reached over him and pressed the level three button, grateful there wasn't too much time between the ground floor and her room. The feel of his hands on her back, confident, possessive... One slid up under her top and skimmed around her front and over bra-clad breasts.

A little gasp at his touch, the ripples of pleasure zinging through her. Her slight pressure against his hand answered the question in his eyes.

The lift thudded softly at her floor.

"Just to your door." He backed her out of the elevator, checked his footing and crossed the hallway with his mouth not leaving hers.

She broke away laughing with him. "We'll break our necks."

And then they were at her door.

He pulled her close, wrapped his arms around her. She looked up, pushed away a little. "Troy Charles, I really don't want to spoil things."

"Who said they'd be spoiled?" He planted a kiss on her nose.

Her heart swelled. Oh, that was so the right thing to say...

His mouth settled on hers for the briefest moment and his gaze held hers.

She broke away. Fiona was right. She was head over heels, but if she were to go there tonight... If she slept with him now, when he found out about the contract and that she knew about it, she'd be labelled a gold-digger.

If she didn't sleep with him now, would she be accused later of having led him on, or of teasing to get her foot in the door?

Surely not. They were grown-ups, weren't they?

"There go those thoughts again," he said.

Lazy hands warmed her back. He leaned in and nuzzled her neck, ran his chin lightly over a bare shoulder to the plump swelling of her breast. The thrill of it tripped down to her legs so fast she shook just a little.

A puff of air escaped her. She put her hands on his big chest, warm and solid under her palms and resisted. "Not yet."

He rested his chin on her shoulder, sighed dramatically. She laughed and he lifted his head. "Okay. Not yet. But soon."

She didn't answer, fished around in her purse for the room card and slid her door open. She had to push gently to slip out of his arms.

"Maybe we can do brunch, tomorrow," he said.

"Maybe. Goodnight, Troy."

"I'll call you early. Goodnight." He dug hands in his pockets, and walked away.

She watched as he headed for the lift without turning back. Inside her room, she pressed against the locked door, kicked off her shoes and closed her eyes.

If she felt this way about him now, what would this stupid arranged marriage thing do to any real chance they might have? Familiarity might breed contempt...

So muddled up.

She had to talk to her mother.

Troy knew he had to have her. That much was clear, to him, at least. But there was something else nagging him, badgering him from his subconscious.

He rested against the back wall of the elevator, felt the dip in his stomach as the lift came to rest on the ground floor. If he closed his eyes another moment or two longer he'd be able to grab that sneaking little thought—

The doors slid open and he stepped out into the foyer. No-one around. He nodded absently at the concierge, stepped outside into the night air and flagged a taxi.

Settled into the back seat and belted in, Troy let his thoughts drift.

Madelaine Hart. He let her name roll around in his head a while. He closed his eyes and drifted with the hum of the engine and stop and start of the taxi at lights and intersections as it drove through the city. He felt it bank left for the freeway and the hills.

Madelaine Hart. He had to have her, yes, but he wanted more than just a few nights curled around her in his bed...or hers.

This wasn't a new feeling for him – he knew where he was headed...straight to the part where he had to sort out if she was the One or not. He knew he risked a fair bit right now...if she was the one, would she marry him in the short space of time he had to find himself a wife and live happily ever after with sixty-five million bucks?

Would she want to? What if he didn't tell her that bit – would she still want to be married so soon?

He thought not. No one on their right mind would want that sort of scenario. It was bad enough going in the deep end and marrying even after a long period of time together, much less marrying hardly knowing the other person at all – and for no other reason than the bank account at the end of the ceremony.

What he felt wasn't 'hardly knowing'... he reckoned whatever he felt, he felt it bad. And he wasn't about to let it go.

The taxi began the steady climb up the freeway. Troy glimpsed the turn-off for Eagle on the Hill and knew they'd take the next exit to go along the new road. Home soon.

Home. A great house, a great view, full of furniture and a great sound system, but no person in it other than him. He needed his other person, his other person. And he figured that *other person* was Madelaine Hart.

Yes. That was the thought badgering him. Madelaine Hart was his other person and he needed her in his life.

Right now.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Eleven p.m. Her mother would be getting ready for bed. Madelaine dialed her number.

“Hello, my darling. Nice night? Why are you calling me?”

“Because you started to say something about marrying for love. Didn’t you love dad or something?”

Carol waited a beat then burst out laughing. “Of course I loved your dad. But I was talking about Liam and me.”

“What?”

“How long have Liam and I been seeing each other? Nearly ten years in case you don’t know.”

“Yes, okay. Where is this going?”

“There’s a reason why we haven’t married before now. It’s all to do with Petny’s will. And Liam wanting to make things right for Troy, especially because his brother died as well as his mother.”

Madelaine was quiet.

“Are you still there?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

Carol sighed down the line. “And now with the deadline looming, Liam feels very anxious that Troy honours the stipulation for his own good.”

“And why hasn’t Troy done that before now?”

“Don’t know. Being a bloke, I suppose. Or just never found the right girl. Or maybe he just plain resisted because he didn’t want to play the game. I don’t know. I know Troy only from a distance, not at all like Liam knows you.” Carol paused again. “If Troy marries, then Liam and I will get married after that.”

Madelaine’s heart strings tugged. “But why have you waited?”

“I love Liam, Madds. You know that. We hadn’t been able to ‘come out’, if you like, while Petny was alive because after Angie and Marc died, he’d threatened to strike Troy out of his will if Liam so much as looked at anyone else. When the old

boy died, we were so used to meeting at my place, and hardly ever going to Liam's it just stayed that way." Carol sighed again, then stifled a yawn, and apologised. "It's been a long road, Madds. I can understand why Liam has waited, and now he feels it's only right to get Troy married before he can finally have some happiness again as well. We're happy, it's just that we'd like to be married-happy."

Madelaine went quiet.

"I know what you're thinking," Carol said.

"Yeah?"

"You're thinking that now there's not only Troy to get over the line, there's Liam and me as well."

"I've got a big job all of a sudden."

"Madds. Sleep on it some more. There's still time. If you don't want to go through with it, Liam isn't going to hold it against you."

Madelaine was silent again.

"Don't feel pressured, Madelaine. It was put to you as a business choice, not an emotional one. I'm sorry it seems calculated and mercenary, but it is what it is." Carol waited a moment. "You won't be letting anyone down if you decide not to go ahead with it."

"Only Troy. Losing him his sixty-five million."

"Well, he seemed set to blow that all by himself before Liam even thought of you. Don't go there, Madelaine."

"And then there's you and Liam!"

"Everyone—me, Liam, Troy will be just fine if you decide against it."

"Why do I feel as if I'm the only one carrying this whole thing? It's wrong."

"It surprised you, that's all, and it's a big ask, I know, but nothing's being forced on you."

"Mum, it means I'm marrying a man in less than three months, someone I've known for just on a month, who gets a zillion dollars on our wedding night and you don't think that makes me feel bad?"

“Don’t yell, sweetheart. Have you talked to Troy about it?”

Madelaine wanted to yell some more. Instead she spoke through her teeth. “He doesn’t know yet.”

Carol groaned. “Oh, I see. All right. Get off the phone. I’m ringing Liam.”

“Mum...”

“If we’re all to be one big happy family, the bridegroom needs to know he’s in the mix. Goodnight, my darling, I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

And Carol hung up. Madelaine stared at the phone in her hand. *Bridegroom.*

Her world was going crazy. She’d been approached to have an injection of cash for her business only to learn that...well, really, that she was being lined up like a medieval bride bartered for a bunch of coins.

A big bunch of coins, she conceded. But it didn’t make her happy.

For God’s sake, all she wanted was a bit of a cash injection...

Now she was going to marry a man she was hugely attracted to...it was just that he didn’t know she was going to marry him.

And that would blow any real chances of loving Troy Charles and having him love her back.

For God’s sake, she wanted to love first then marry. And love him. She was headed there anyway, she thought.

Marrying him first before love would blow it, sure as anything. *That’s not how it’s done.* Not how she wanted it to go.

He’d resent it. He’d be trapped. If they had any chance it would be blown out of the water now.

She sat on the edge of the bed and put her head in her hands.

What to do now? What to do?

She pulled her top off over her head, ditched her capris, her undies and bra and headed for the bathroom and a shower. She tried not to think as the hot water cascaded over her.

She soaped up, shampooed, rinsed, towed off, and padded back into the bedroom to slide under the bedcovers.

She pulled the whole lot over her head and muffled a scream.

What the fuck was she going to do?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Troy stood at her door. “You look like I feel. Or the other way around.”

It was nine-thirty in the morning and they were going out for brunch.

“I had the night from hell,” she said. “You too?”

She had stopped screaming under the doona and had tried to go off to sleep. Three hours later, a couple of paracetamol capsules, a second pillow under her head and still she tossed and turned, her mind filled with options and what-ifs and conversation starters and reasons and—

All too much. The last she remembered looking at the clock, it was five a.m. When she’d woken with a start at seven, her head pounded, her throat was dry. She’d probably snored the hotel down, and her eyes were scratchy and puffy. When she got to the bathroom she looked as if she had a bad hangover, the type where you had dark circles under your blood shot eyes, fur on your teeth and probably skunk-breath as well.

“Pretty ordinary.” He leaned in the doorway looking down at her. “There’s a great café just around the corner. Feel like a strong coffee?”

“Sounds good.”

She grabbed her tote, locked up and followed him to the lifts. When they were on the pavement heading for the main street, he reached for her hand and held it lightly.

She took a deep breath and left her hand in his. It was cool and dry and somehow a comfort. She had no clue what she was going to do or say, if anything, so she wandered along beside him in numbed silence until they got to Mattie’s Café. Thankfully, it was only a few minutes’ walk.

Any longer and she might just have burst into tears. The back of her throat was tight and there was a strange weight on her chest. It hurt to think about it.

Every so often she’d glance at him only to find he was doing the same.

She couldn’t go through with it. Not for all the money in the world, whose ever it was. How could she just agree to marry someone without a shred of emotion involved?

Wrong. *Wrong*. There was lots of emotion, but it was only just starting and this was going to absolutely bloody ruin everything.

How could she go through with it, using marriage just as a means to a financial end and nothing else?

Maybe lots of people did that without a backward glance.

Yet looking at his handsome face, and knowing what she knew about him—which wasn't a lot, she conceded, but it was good—she wondered what it would mean to him if he knew that she knew what he stood to gain by it... and didn't agree to marry and assist?

Fuck fuck fuck.

"Feel like food?" he asked as they sat with menus in front of them.

"No I don't, but I'd better."

They ordered, waited for coffee and juices.

He took her hands over the table.

She'd wanted to grab his with both hands and squeeze them really hard and tell him that she couldn't do it because it was all wrong...

Yet if she didn't, it would be all wrong for him and then Liam and Carol couldn't—wouldn't and then how would she face everybody. They were putting her in this position and—

"Dad rang me late last night. Late." His dark eyes were troubled, but his gaze was steady on her. "Told me everything."

She withdrew her hands and pressed fingers above her eyes. A breath escaped her, and she shook her head. Then she thought of Liam and, looking through her fingers said, "Told you what?"

He laid his hands flat on the table. "That you've been approached to marry..."

She groaned aloud and put her head in her hands. "I feel like shit."

"I don't know what I feel, weird to say the least. Embarrassed, maybe."

"Embarrassed. That's exactly it." She looked at him, but her eyesight was blurry and she blinked a number of times to try to clear it. "I feel like a fraud."

“No, not you. I honestly didn’t believe Dad would try something like this.” Troy clasped, unclasped his hands on the table. “I’m sorry.”

Madelaine sniffed and sat upright. No sense being a big baby about it. She didn’t have to go through with it. She didn’t have to get married to him. At all.

He didn’t have to have his birthright of sixty-five million. God, that was more money than she could imagine. She didn’t have to sign any contract, marriage or otherwise. He could find some gold-digger to sign a contract, the same contract Liam had talked about and it would all be done and dusted, nothing to do with her.

She looked at him, glad that he was focused on his hands.

If he wasn’t so bloody gorgeous she might have considered marrying him for real.

If he didn’t look so burdened by the plan, just as she was, she might have considered going along just to see what would happen.

She grabbed her hair and twisted it up into a knot. Unknotted it, and did it again.

If she wasn’t so sure that it would fail fail fail, and that the business would suffer the consequences, she might have agreed to do it.

She was so tempted to reach out and place her hands on his in the middle of the table and tell him things were okay. But they weren’t. Not yet.

Coffee arrived and Troy waited until they were alone again. “I fully understand you don’t want to go there,” he said. “Contract or not, it all gets messed up with things that neither of us...” He floundered, couldn’t lift his gaze from his hands. “It messes things up. Everything. It messes everything up.”

“I know.”

He lifted his eyes. “No, you don’t.”

She shrugged, spread her hands. “Well, I sure as hell don’t want any more surprises, trust me. This is enough. I’m damned if I do and damned if I don’t.”

“I’d have used stronger words.”

“I did. I used them all up last night under the bedcovers.”

He shook his head. “I knew I had to face it. It’s my fault it’s got this far. I’ve been putting it off and putting it off believing that somehow it would come to nothing. I didn’t want to push the issue and challenge the clause. It seemed... ungrateful or something, I don’t know. I just tried to ignore it.” He scratched his ear. “But Liam

won't let it go and now it's come down to this." He looked at her. "Madelaine, I'm really very sorry that he approached you. That he tied the offer of a partnership in with this—"

"But what could it hurt?" she blurted, and suddenly couldn't stop the tears popping out and streaking down her face.

He stared at her. "What? No one in their right mind would take on something like this."

"There'd be plenty," she croaked, trying her absolute best not to croak but her throat hurt too much to hold it back. "There'd be cheats and liars and gold-diggers lining up." Her eyes kept filling up and spilling over. And she knew her face was all scrunched up and horrible because she could feel it was all scrunched up and horrible and besides she always did ugly crying, always always always.

Still he stared. She hoped his dark gaze was only following the trail of tears that spilled down her face, and not her nose was running as well. She was pretty sure it was. Not a good look, but it was all she could do to just sit there much less having to grope for a bunch of tissues. Why the hell am I crying?

She sobbed. "I'm not a cheat or a liar or a gold-digger."

"You're not. I know." His hands rested on hers.

God, those dark eyes were undoing her. His hands were warm and strong and—

"Madds, are you okay?"

She dropped her head to the table and let out a couple of great wracking sobs, her shoulders shaking. She felt his hand in her hair, sliding to her shoulder.

"It's okay. We don't have to go there, you and me." When she looked up, he squeezed her shoulder. "I can go and find a girl who'll sign a pre-nuptial—"

She made a choking noise. "No. No. I have to be the one." Now she was sobbing hard, uncontrollably, and she noticed the waiter hovering at a distance. "It's okay," she said brokenly to him. "We're getting married." Then she plonked her head back on the table and bawled for real.

Troy shot out of his chair and squatted alongside her, one arm around her, the other stroking her head. "God's sake, if this is getting married," he whispered close to her ear, "what will getting divorced be like?"

The waiter came forward. "Congratulations." He handed over a box of tissues. "I think."

CHAPTER NINE

“What does Troy think about a quiet wedding?” Her mum’s voice echoed over the phone.

“He’s just as keen as I am to get this over and done with, Mum.” Madelaine switched her phone to speaker. “When can you get here? Liam wants me to sign papers and there’s a whole heap of things to go through before...”

“Before?”

“September twenty-sixth—”

“What day of the week is that?”

“A Thursday. It’s just over four weeks away—”

“Why a Thursday?”

“—which is the absolute legal minimum required notice. I suppose no one wants me to get cold feet.”

“So you’ve booked the celebrant?” Carol asked.

“Troy said it was up to me so I asked Victoria McNeal from here. You know her. She does a good job. Well, a great job, but this isn’t her usual sort of job.”

“I’m sure she treats all her weddings as special.”

“For crying out loud, I meant that this isn’t one of her usual types of weddings.”

“It will be just another wedding. Why not enjoy it? Madds, I’ll be home in a day or two. I’ll come over to Australis and we can put some plans in place, so why don’t you visit the shops for a dress and—”

“No way,” Madelaine cried. “I’m not doing the whole bit. It’s going to be plain and simple and in my own place. Two witnesses, that’s all we need.”

Carol waited a beat. “Family will be there.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Mum, it’s a sham thing. A business contract, remember? No big fuss and bother. It’s not real.”

“Madelaine, it will be real. Absolutely. If Victoria McNeal is officiating it’s real, so no point not enjoying it for what it is.”

“I don’t know...maybe I’ll pull out of it.”

“Too late now.”

“No, it’s not. I don’t have to sign anything until later today.”

“But you’ve given Liam your word. Same thing in my book.”

Madelaine grew hot. “I have to go. Bye, Mum.”

“But—”

“Bye!”

Madelaine stood for a moment longer staring out to sea over her kitchen benches. Nothing else for it. She reached for her earphones. Turned and marched in to the cool room.

Engage the Tunes. She put on the iPod to sing away the blues.

Troy hadn’t gone back to Australis Island with Madelaine. Instead he’d stayed in Adelaide hoping to clear his head, and to keep a check on Liam who seemed to be making a helluva big deal out of his son’s impending nuptials.

Things were strange with Madelaine, really strange. She’d agreed to marry him, but had resolutely refused to go out with him either for lunch or for dinner.

She was polite, but reserved, and emphatic. No, no dates.

All he wanted was to reassure her that—

That what? That he was fine with the idea when she looked absolutely distraught? That he’d love being married to a girl who clearly didn’t want to be anywhere near him? That his life was arranged around some old fart’s notion of protecting family and financials?

Madness.

He would leave for Australis today and go back to Maddy's place, stay there and work, until he found some other living quarters. Two of his cousins, Joseph McInerney for one, and Berry Lockett for the other, both had homes on Australis, big enough to squeeze him in for a few months.

Or for however long it took.

He packed a few more belongings. What chance he thought he might have had with Madelaine now seemed out the window.

God knew it was awkward, and that was the understatement of the year. He couldn't get near her to tell her how he felt... Clearly Madelaine didn't feel the same way about him.

He'd lock those thoughts away. He had a job to do, that was all: get married, satisfy the terms of Petny's will, and get everyone off his back, then maybe, just maybe he'd go away for a few hundred years.

CHAPTER TEN

Fiona stared at Madelaine, her hands resting on either side of her big belly. “How the hell am I gonna be a bridesmaid looking like this?”

“No one’s gonna be a bridesmaid.” Madelaine dumped coffee into the plunger. “No one’s even getting an invite. It is not a wedding.”

“It is a wedding.”

“It’s not a *wedding* wedding.” Madelaine poured boiling water into the plunger and let it settle a moment. Brilliant sunlight streamed in over the stainless steel benches and bathed the kitchen in a golden glow.

“Madds, it’s a *wedding* wedding *wedding*. You’re getting married and I knew you would.”

“You were just teasing. There’s nothing funny about this arrangement.”

Fiona took Madelaine’s hand. “No, there’s not. At least Troy likes you, that can’t be so bad.”

Madelaine gave a frustrated shake of her head. “That’s got nothing to do with it. I’ll have to put my life on hold...”

“For what?”

“...until we can divorce.”

“Geez, you’re not even married yet.” Fiona released her friend’s hand.

“In three weeks time.”

Fiona checked her phone for the time. “I have to go. I might not be able to drive down here for a while. Someone will have to come get me for the big day.”

Madelaine did an eye roll. “Right. I’ll organise it.”

Fiona did her own eye roll. “Thank you.” She ambled out to her car, and drove away.

Madelaine looked at the full coffee pot. She could handle three cups, no problem.

Of course she could. Gibbering on a caffeine high was easy.

“Can I join you?”

She looked up and Troy stood in the doorway. “Of course. Freshly brewed.” She pointed at the pot and pushed a mug over to him. “Saved me a caffeine blow-out. Wasn’t expecting you back so soon.” Her hand only shook the tiniest bit.

“Changed my ferry. Didn’t think you’d mind. How’s things?” He poured a cup, blew into it to cool it down. Sipped.

Madelaine didn’t mind at all. In fact, strangely her heart beat a little faster when he was around, but she wasn’t sure what made it do that—his good looking, muscly frame, the unruly black hair and those smoky dark eyes, same as the very first day she saw him. Or the fact that she would be marrying that same man and was scared out of her brain?

“Things are weird.” *Like they were yesterday, and the day before and the day before that.*

“Yeah.” He did a thing with his mouth, a sort of upside down smile. “But despite that, I reckon we can be friends.”

“No benefits.” She snapped a glare at him and heat burned her cheeks.

“Not what I meant.” Then he was silent. Just sat there with his hands wrapped around his coffee.

She took a slurp of hot rich coffee. “It’s just a business deal. We don’t have to pretend it’s anything else.”

He shook his head. “No, we don’t.”

She reached across for the work diary. “There’s some big numbers for this week. I’ll need to get some staff in and maybe you could do a few deliveries after the prep work.”

“No problem.” He shifted on the seat as if stretching hard-to-get-at spots, rolled his shoulders once or twice.

All that flexing and rippling was disconcerting. Madelaine concentrated on the diary.

He peered over at it, flicked the pages until it opened for the week of the twenty-

sixth. "Got some big jobs on that day."

"We can handle it."

"By eleven o'clock?"

"Of course. We don't have our...date until two."

"Organised staff?"

Madelaine nodded.

Troy reached over, took her pen and drew a line through the rest of the day. "We don't need any more bookings that day."

That needled her. "Staff can handle it if I'm not available. But the business needs all the work it can get."

"It's just the afternoon off on one day. You'll be fine. The business will be fine."

Madelaine looked away from him. Swear to God she was going to make this business work so she wouldn't need to touch one cent of their money. Swear to God.

"Liam says Carol's arranging for a few family members to attend. Maybe a few friends." He ducked down to catch her eye.

Madelaine pressed her lips together. "I told her I'd rather she didn't."

Troy sat in silence again. Then, "I think we need to talk about how we proceed after the twenty-sixth."

Madelaine's gaze connected with his. "We just continue on our own separate merry way."

He nodded. "I would like to continue as we have for the past few weeks. Reckon we can manage that?"

"You'll have a huge amount of money to deal with, Troy. Business decisions, tax work, investments—"

"Nothing really has to change here, though, does it?"

"You'll be away. I'll need someone to replace you."

"Maybe. What else?"

She lifted a shoulder. "Nothing."

“Good.” He sipped his coffee.

“About the twenty-sixth. The celebrant needs to see some things before the day. The ceremony and stuff, and legal stuff.”

“Like?”

“Birth certificates. Our driver’s licences. I’ve sent her the notice of intention to...” Madelaine couldn’t bring herself to say ‘marry’.

“Right. Well, I’ll get my stuff to you as soon as possible.”

“And we have to meet her.” Madelaine’s face was hot.

“Okay.” He looked at her closely. “What’s the problem with that?”

“She might...” She waved her hands a bit, shrugged, fidgeted.

“Get the feeling that we’re not there for luurrvv.”

She nodded.

“I won’t tell if you don’t. We can agree on things before we see her. There won’t be a problem.”

Madelaine nodded again. “Sounds all right.”

They drank coffee for a bit. Troy poured himself a top up, offered one to Madelaine but she declined.

“Are you telling anyone?” Troy asked.

“No.” She looked away then back again. “I told Fiona. She wants to come.”

“Invite who you want.”

“It’s not a reception, not a beachy deal with barefoot guests.”

Troy shrugged. “We both know the deal. I just wanted to know if you’d made it public. Whether or not we need to have an engagement ring.”

Tears popped on to Madelaine’s cheeks. “No.”

Troy set his cup down and stood up, hands up in surrender. “Sorry. I—”

“Don’t.”

“Wouldn’t it make it look better if—”

“*Stop!*”

He sat down again and watched as she mopped her cheeks with a paper towel.

“I’ll get used to it, I really will,” she said. “But I don’t want to make something of it that it’s not.”

“Right.” Troy downed his coffee and stood up, hands in pockets. “I’ll get the cars cleaned up and meet you back at the house for dinner.” He left abruptly.

Madelaine watched him go. She mopped her face a bit more and took in a deep breath, let it out in a whoosh.

She held her hands out in front of her. They were shaking.

She had it bad, she decided. She just wasn’t sure what she had it bad for.

Troy started up the water pressure hose and rinsed the dust off the four wheel drive he’d been using for hamper deliveries. The other cars were due back within the hour and he wanted to be finished before they returned.

He concentrated on the tyres and under the chassis where dust and mud accumulated and watched as the dirt drained down the shallow gutter to be recycled for the garden.

The garden. He’d have to get back in there before the twenty-sixth and do a bit of weeding and pruning and—

But they weren’t being married in the garden. They were being married in the office.

Oh well, he could still do a bit of a tidy up.

Question: Why would he do it himself when he had sixty-five million at his disposal?

Answer: Because he wanted to.

He thought about that. Madelaine wouldn’t be marrying him unless she wanted to. She also gained from the arrangement, too. Liam made that very clear.

Hmm. He gained sixty-five mil, she got a few hundred thousand.

Maybe that’s why she was so cranky.

That didn’t seem to be the person he knew she was.

The hose bucked in his hand. If he didn’t slow the pressure he’d blast the sign-writing off the car. He flicked off the button, bent for the broom and bucket and began the scrub down.

Didn't take much to work up a sweat. Took a lot to keep his mind from Madelaine, to stop thinking of ways to put a smile back on her face, to have her look at him in that way which made him feel as if he was the only guy in the world.

All right. If she wouldn't go out on a date with him he'd have to 'date' her at home. He was the chef; he'd cook up a meal to win her over.

He stopped his scrubbing. She'd see right through that. Was that all he had?

He didn't have much time. The wedding was three weeks away.

How the hell was he going to get things back on track? How in God's name was he going to make this work in his favour all round? Oh sure, sixty-five mil would cure a lot of problems, buy himself a lot of fun nights out on the town, a nice house or a few nice houses. Jeez, even a small township —

But he wanted Madelaine, especially wanted Madelaine to look at him as if she wanted him, too. He knew sixty-five mil wouldn't be able to buy him that.

He dunked the broom in the bucket again and scrubbed the other side of the vehicle.

Nothing would buy him that.

So what was he doing scrubbing down cars? He needed to cook.

He needed to cook something spectacular...something fantastic and show Madelaine what a great kitchen partner he could be.

Kitchen partner? What the—?

Troy threw the broom at the bucket, grabbed the pressure hose and blasted the suds off the car. He shut off the water then reached inside the glove compartment for the chamois and set about swiping off the excess water.

He yanked open the driver's side door, turned on the ignition and drove the car into the garage. Then he bolted back up the hill to the kitchens.

Kitchen partner be damned.

Troy texted her from the kitchen.

Have buckets of native currants need a hand with new recipe.

He stared at his phone. How long would he have to wait for an answer?

He put the phone on the bench beside the cook top and stirred the mixture. Rich and luscious mouth watering aromas of bubbling fruit filled his senses, but it needed a sexy, savvy addition.

Troy set the wooden spoon on the rim and brought a bottle of Sunset Sauvignon blanc from the coolroom, unscrewed the lid and splashed in a generous cupful.

Shit! Too much...

But when he bent over the pot and stirred again, he shook his head.

Nup. Not enough.

He heard the text alert and reached down to check it.

Be there in 10.

And he poured in another cupful.

Troy took a deep breath. *Piquant. Zesty. Beeyootiful!*

He stirred, turned up the heat, stirred again, and settled in to allow it to reduce.

When Madelaine opened the kitchen door he watched as she lifted her nose on the rising vapour. “Wow. That smells divine.” She rounded the bench to peer into the pot. “Scent of wild fruit, perhaps simmering in local sauvignon blanc... can I detect a hint of lemon myrtle? Wild garlic? No! But only a touch—”

“A heady, aromatic waft of Australis Island native currant.” He waved the vapour towards him with both hands.

Madelaine’s finger was poised to dive in and scoop out a taste but he smacked her hand. “Not ready yet.” Troy stirred with her biggest wooden spoon.

“Where did you get enough currants to fill that pot?” Madelaine stared over the rim.

“Went by Graham’s place a while back, he said he’d have a couple of tubs for us this week. Nearly forgot about it.” He stirred with only a glance at her.

“They’re like gold and so hard to harvest.”

“Aren’t we the lucky ones?” His gleeful smile brought a hoot of laughter from her.

“Here,” he said, and aimed the wooden spoon at her. “Take control of this while I get the next few handfuls cleaned.”

She wound her hair high up on her head, reached into the pantry for her cap and jammed it on her head. “What are you going to do with it?”

She took the spoon and dragged it through the thick mixture.

He carefully poured the last few tubs of fruit into the sink and gave them a quick swish in the water. He looked over his shoulder. “I’m doing one batch with dark chocolate—” He pointed to the pot at the back of the stove, “—for torte, and maybe some fudge.”

Madelaine made a noise in her throat. “Heaven...”

“And this one with hummocky garlic—”

“How did you get that? Did you pinch it from Stranraer Homestead?” She stared at him. “It’s one of the only places I know it grows native here.”

“No way. I didn’t have to pinch it—I wouldn’t pinch anything. Stranraer’s only the island’s most exclusive B&B and I happen to know the owners well.” He tapped the side of his nose. “It’s for our pork fillet hamper. Not sure yet, should it be a—” he said and stopped to look at her, “—a chutney type thing or a glaze?”

She sniffed. “Glaze,” she decided.

He nodded. “Glaze.” He stared at her. “But the pork hasn’t arrived yet.”

“No matter.” Madelaine still breathed deeply. “We do have prawns.”

“Yes!” Troy agreed. “Another faultless accompaniment.”

Tantalising and heady, the sweet and spicy aroma would partner perfectly with Australis prawns. He ducked into the cool room and returned with a tray of green prawn meat. “Early dinner here – what do you say?”

When he gazed steadily at her, he thought he saw a gleam in her eye, a spark he recognized as she gave him a broad smile.

Not just a passion for the dish, he hoped, and smiled back.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Victoria McNeal leaned back in her chair. “Right. The legal stuff has all been taken care of. Now,” she said, and smiled. “I’ll need to have a copy of your wedding vows et cetera. Did you use the template I gave you, or one of the samples?”

Madelaine stared at her.

Troy shifted in his seat.

“Anyone?” Victoria still smiled and shifted her gaze between the two.

Madelaine recovered first. “We’re still just nutting out the final bits. I can email it to you by tomorrow.”

“Excellent. I need to have a little bit of time to get comfortable with it so it doesn’t seem as if I’m just reading it off a script.” She closed up the file in front of her, and let the pen drop from her hand. “Anything else you’d like to chat about?”

Both shook their heads.

“No queries or last minute bits and pieces to square away?”

Both looked at her steadfastly, shaking their heads again.

“Your witnesses are under control? I always bring my husband along to the small weddings just in case we need an extra...”

Both nodded.

“I can understand the nerves associated with getting married. But I can assure you, everything will be fine. It’ll be a piece of cake. If you’re well prepared, it will go off without a hitch.”

Both nodded again. “Great,” they said together.

Victoria stared at the pair of them. Was there something she needed to know here? Their body language was definitely not what she was used to.

She relaxed when that handsome young man reached across to his wife-to-be and took her hand, raised it to his lips and kissed it.

“We’re good,” he said, and glanced back at the celebrant.

“Nervous,” said his bride, who removed her hand.

Victoria beamed. “A good nervous though. Perfectly understandable. Well, there’s now two weeks to go, so just sit back, relax, and look forward to the day.”

They both nodded. He had smiled, but the young woman looked like a startled rabbit. Perhaps it was time for a quiet word. After all, Victoria McNeal did not want to be marrying two people when one of them didn’t want to be getting married.

Strange, though. That wasn’t exactly the vibe she was getting. She couldn’t make it out.

Then Madelaine smiled and Victoria saw the room light up when she said, “Perfectly understandable. We’re good.” And then she reached across and squeezed her husband-to-be’s hand.

He looked at her hand squeezing his. And then his face lit up as well.

My goodness. These two were a very nervous couple.

“That went off really well.” Madelaine climbed into the four wheel drive passenger seat, clipped on her safety belt and tucked her tote bag under her legs.

He looked sideways at her. “I thought so.”

“Not. She knew there was something funny going on.”

“There’s nothing funny going on. Not if you agree to get married, only if you don’t.” Troy turned the key in the ignition, reversed out of Victoria McNeal’s driveway in Regency and took the main road out of town. He chanced another glance at her before concentrating on the road. “Joseph and Cloudy have asked us over for dinner tomorrow night. Wanna do it?”

“Your cousin?”

“Yeah. Haven’t caught up for a while.”

Madelaine shook her head. “No. Thanks.” Then she shot him a look. “Have you told them?”

“That I’m getting married? Yeah.”

“Oh.”

“Well, I am getting married. To you. And he’s my cousin. We can do dinner.”

“I can’t—” Her phone chirruped and she grabbed it. “Hi, Fiona—”

“Where are you?” Fiona yelled.

Madelaine held the phone away from her ear. “We’re in Regency just heading out of town.”

“Don’t go,” Fiona yelled again. “This baby’s coming out.”

Troy poked a finger in his ear indicating he could hear Fiona loud and clear. He pulled the car off the road.

“It’s too early!”

“Tell that to my kid!”

“Well, where are you?” Madelaine could hear voices in the background urging Fiona to finish the call.

“Regency hospital. You have to hurry— Awwk!” The call disconnected.

Madelaine turned to Troy. “I have to go there.”

“We so do.” Troy made a u-turn and headed back into town.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Hello, Uncle Troy.” Fiona held out a blue bundle with a thatch of dark blond hair.

“I don’t um...”

“Sure you do. He won’t break. Have a hold.”

Troy took the tiny bundle. “He looks pretty good.”

“Have you decided on his name?” Madelaine asked. They’d tossed up all sorts of names over the months, but Fiona wasn’t taken with any of them. Madelaine peered into the bundle Troy was holding.

“Not yet. I’ll sleep on it a bit more. Now that he’s here it’ll be easier to pick one.”

Troy handed the baby to Madelaine. “I’m worried I’ll drop him.”

“Me too,” said Madelaine, who bounced the bundle a little bit, checked that he was perfect then handed him over to his mother.

“You guys,” Fiona chided and then gazed down at her sleeping baby. “Good thing you got here when you did. He came out so fast, I—”

“I think I’ll wait outside,” Troy said. “Good work, Fiona.” He pressed his lips to her forehead. “I’ll just be out there,” he said to Madelaine, and pointed to the corridor.

“Squeamish,” Fiona said and Troy nodded on his way out. “I’m glad you were here,” she said to Madelaine.

Madelaine had been in the birthing suite with Fiona, and had only just made it in time. “Me too,” Madelaine said again.

“Hope we didn’t interrupt anything.” Fiona was gazing at her bundle sleeping soundly. A nurse came in, grinning broadly and held out her arms for the baby. Fiona handed him over and watched as the nurse tucked him into his crib alongside her bed.

“No, of course not. But you must be really tired. I know I am.” Madelaine watched as Fiona closed her eyes a second or two. “I’m coming down off my delivery high and I wasn’t even breathing heavy... I didn’t expect him to come out so damn fast.”

“Same here. But you were pretty brave,” Fiona said.

"I know. I didn't faint."

"Me either."

"He's beautiful." Madelaine looked across at the sleeping cherub.

"Looks just like me." Fiona propped herself up, glanced at the crib then back at her friend. "You know what this means."

"What?"

"I can buy a new dress for your wedding."

"We should celebrate or something," Troy said as they drove out of Regency.

"I just want to get home," Madelaine answered. "We could have a drink there if you like."

"Yeah. Good idea. Safer." He glanced across at her. "You're pretty tired."

She laughed a little. "You know, giving birth."

"And to nine pounds. Big boy."

"His dad is a pretty big guy."

Troy braked at the give-way sign. "No chance of him coming back?"

"I don't think so."

"Were they married?"

Madelaine shook her head. "No. He never wanted to. When she fell pregnant, he accused her of doing it deliberately, so he packed up overnight and took off."

"Charmer."

"Well. You can never tell with some people."

He turned on to the highway towards *Secluded*, Madelaine's house. They drove in silence for a while.

The paddocks were looking good, those Madelaine could see from the road. Sometimes the roadside vegetation was so thick it was like driving in a green corridor. She couldn't see anything past the scrub on the side of the road.

A thought drifted past her and she glanced at him. "Have you actually invited anyone to the wedding?"

Troy shook his head. "No. Dad and Carol of course are coming. I have a suspicion they've told a number of people, invited a number of people."

"Yeah." She looked out the window again. "Fiona will break her neck to be there."

"You asking any mates?"

"No. There's a couple of girls interstate, one in Western Australia, one in the Northern Territory, but it's too late. Besides, it's—"

"Yeah, I know, 'not a real wedding'." He shoved the visor lower. "There are my cousins over here, and a few dozen people in Adelaide I could—"

"Don't." She stared straight ahead. "It's not real, we agree. There's no point."

"Madelaine. It is real. That's why we're doing it." He fiddled with the air-conditioning. "You're doing it because you know us and you trust us and we trust you."

"It's not right, though, Troy," she cried, surprising even herself.

He glanced over. "Are you pulling out?"

"No." She aimed an air vent towards herself. "Just want to make it clear that there are no...added benefits."

"I get it. We're not friends-with-benefits. I get it. You've said before." He shifted in his seat, gripped the steering wheel, flicked a look out the side window and back to the road ahead. "But financially there are benefits for both of us and that's all we're aiming for."

She nodded. "That's right. Good."

Troy glanced at her again.

She let the conversation die, though there was an awful lot more she wanted to say. It wasn't giving her the right space to get to know him like she felt she wanted to. It was like she was being forced into something which would have been right in a couple of years, left to make its own way but was just made a mockery of now... or like knowing they were married didn't mean they should act married, or be married or feel—

And that was the trouble. They would be married. And there was no reason after September twenty-sixth to pretend otherwise.

She just hadn't wanted her marriage to be this way.

Troy parked the vehicle in the wash bay. They got out of the car, gathered their own bags and paperwork and bits and pieces and walked into the house to their separate quarters.

When Troy came back to the living area, there didn't appear to be any drinks happening after all. He shoved hands in his pockets and turned to look back up the hill. He could see Madelaine outside, going up to the kitchens.

His shirt pocket vibrated. Troy pulled out his phone and checked it. Forgotten he'd put it on silent at the hospital.

Three messages, all from Liam.

What now?

He listened to all three in succession, then rang his father.

"So what do you think?" Liam asked before Troy had a chance.

"We don't want a fuss."

"I know that, but you are getting married and—"

"Dad. We don't want a fuss."

"I heard you the first time. But wouldn't you like a—"

"No. We wouldn't."

"Not even—"

"No."

Liam waited a moment. "It's not all about you, you know."

"Yes, it is. Me and Madelaine. And we don't want to make any more of this than what it is."

Another beat as Liam waited. Then, "Well, what if we took a few people off to Regency afterwards, had a few drinks..."

“You and Carol?” Troy waited to hear confirmation. “Dad?”

“...And about thirty others.”

“What? Who?”

“You know, Mike and his wife, some of the blokes at work and their girls, that sort of thing. Madelaine must have friends coming.”

“Only one. Listen, Dad, this is not a good idea.”

“Someone’s got to celebrate. If I foot the bill, you’ll give me the go ahead?”

Troy shook his head. He didn’t believe what he was hearing. “I don’t think money is the issue here, Dad.”

There was silence for a moment. “No. Of course it isn’t.” Liam went quiet for a moment. “Anyway, I can’t very well uninvite people, so we’ll just have to run with it. Besides, I don’t really understand the problem.”

“The problem is that we’re not marrying because we want to, but because we have to.”

“Balls. No one has to do that.”

“C’mon, Dad.”

“All right. I know what you mean. All right, all right. But there will be about thirty of us, can’t be helped. Talk to you later.” And Liam hung up.

Troy stared at his phone.

Madelaine would go nuts.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

One week to go

Madelaine stared out to sea, her favourite past-time these days. Over the years she had tried desperately not take any of this for granted, so staring out to sea without really seeing anything was not doing it justice.

A place like this could not be taken for granted. Too many things could tip the balance and any number of those things could see her shipped off for parts unknown, so she had to fully appreciate every minute.

She sighed. So Liam wanted to celebrate the wedding with a few friends. No point getting her knickers in a twist about it. Besides, she didn't really want to stop any celebrations...they weren't people she knew, so they would be here for Troy, and for Liam. That was okay by her.

She focused on the grey-blue ocean, a sou'westerly licking up a few white caps. A pod of dolphins played on the waves, clearly delighted in some action on the surface of the water. Overhead, white-bellied sea eagles hovered high on a thermal, watchful for a fish to leave itself vulnerable.

A few kangaroos had come out to graze on the hill opposite, waiting for dusk to settle in before sunset.

Madelaine looked down at her hands on the spotless stainless steel bench, and her knives neatly set alongside a well worn timber chopping board. She glanced around at the kitchen's shelves and sinks, at the cool-rooms then back at the view framed by the long windows.

No. She didn't take any of this for granted. This was her life. This was what she had worked for, and was still working for.

Liam had written her a contract stating that nothing of hers was in any way compromised by the marriage to Troy; that none of her property was at risk. That her home here at Secluded would remain hers for as long as she wished, and in her name only. It would not become part of any joint property. In fact, there was to be no joint property whatsoever.

It almost seemed as if a pre-nup had been written for Troy to agree to, not the other way around.

Her contract was water-tight. Mike Hennessey had assured her of that.

She should have been happy with that.

Well, she was. She was happy with that.

She was happy that she agreed to marry Troy so he could inherit Petny's millions before the looming deadline.

She was happy it made Liam happy.

She was happy that by marrying Troy she had secured her business for the foreseeable future and beyond. It was a water-tight plan, and everything was win-win.

She just wasn't happy being married before she had fallen in love with the man who would be her husband.

She wasn't happy knowing that her feelings had already begun to deepen for Troy, that she took delight in his quirky humour, in those wonderful eyes when he talked to her, in the warmth of his body as he stood close at the kitchen bench, or at the tailgate packing the vehicle for deliveries, or when he hesitated just before he said 'goodnight'.

Because knowing she was falling for him, and being married to him before she could explore that and savour it and respect it meant that her journey of discovery was being circumvented by things now beyond her control.

She'd consented to marry to help Troy, to help Liam help Troy.

Her mother thought it was wonderful. "You two are really lovely together so who knows, it might work."

She didn't want this to be a foregone conclusion. What if he didn't feel the same way about it? What if he did? Would being married before she had a chance to fall in love take away that delicious anticipation when two people are getting to know each other, not knowing if they would marry, or even if that would be something they'd discuss? What about all the other things they needed to explore beforehand?

Madelaine deliberately shook her head. All too fuzzy. All these thoughts flashing through her head were going too fast to catch.

Start again, Madelaine.

One. She was being married to a person she thought she could fall in love with.

Two. She probably was well on the way to falling in love.

Three. Would being married before they'd each declared themselves a real couple—*Hang on, Madds. What was a real couple if not a married couple?*—set up weird perimeters and awkward moments and expectations that would lead to disaster?

Four. No one says 'declared' anymore unless they're playing cricket.

Five. Expectations. She didn't want to go there...to sleep with Troy just because being married made it, sort of, like the 'thing' you do when you're married.

Huh?

She wasn't happy about being married to the man she had almost fallen in love with. She wanted to fall in love with him first—if she was going to.

Six. Okay. She was going to. *But she hadn't yet.*

Seven. OK, maybe she had.

Eight. Definitely had.

But all that meant she had to keep those emotions in check. In fact, checked altogether.

Else she'd be married and might end up having herself a broken heart.

She glanced at the clock behind her. Six in the evening.

A respectable time, for sure.

She walked to the cool room, reached in and grabbed an open bottle of sauvignon blanc.

Back at the prep bench, she poured herself a glass. Nothing like a glass of wine.

And now to fire up the iPod.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Victoria McNeal covered her microphone. “Ready?” she whispered and smiled at the bride and groom. “Madelaine, if you’d like to stand here... a little bit this way. And Troy, over here. That’s fine.”

Madelaine stared at her. She knew she should nod back, or smile or something. So she dipped her head once. She glanced across at Troy who was staring at Victoria as well.

Maybe it was Victoria’s outfit everyone was so entranced by. Not that it was anything but exactly right: a floaty number in pastels with sensible but pretty sandals, a simple, elegant silver neck pendant and dangly earrings.

Madelaine looked away. If she kept staring Victoria would absolutely know by ESP that there was something amiss.

Fiona, baby in one arm, stepped up to Madelaine, and brushed at something on her dress. She beamed at Madelaine, got an empty gaze for her trouble and, still beaming, returned to her place between Mike Hennessey and Carol and Liam.

Victoria moved between Madelaine and Troy. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’ll begin.”

“Begin,” Troy said.

Madelaine nodded once.

With a final glance at each of them, Victoria brought the mouth piece around and spoke to the people congregated in the garden. She’d strongly suggested the garden after she saw the size of Madelaine’s office. “Welcome, everyone. We’re here to witness Madelaine and Troy announce before us all that they want to be husband and wife.”

Madelaine squared her shoulders. She didn’t dare look at her mother. How could she look at her mother? Carol had looked radiant, her pale blonde hair caught in a

soft chignon. Her mother-of-the-bridle outfit was a stunning sleeveless two piece suit in creamy ivory, with sandals that looked like spun silver. She was holding hands with Liam, delighted that her daughter was being married.

For all the wrong reasons!

No. If she continued to think like that she'd ruin the event. It would show on her face... She needed to be attentive and cool.

Cool. Cool. Calm. Calm.

For a mad instant she wondered if she should be holding Troy's hand.

But then Troy was saying something.

What?

"...take you, Madelaine Hart, to be my wife, in good times and in bad..."

Geez, I can't do it. It's all wrong. What if I meet someone else and I have to—

What's Victoria saying?

"...and now if you would, Madelaine, please state your vows to Troy."

I've gone blank. I've forgotten what I'm supposed to say.

Victoria was smiling and nodding at her.

"Uh...I, Madelaine Hart, in the presence of these witnesses...uh..."

Fiona stepped forward, the baby tucked under her arm. She whispered in Madelaine's ear, "Take you, Troy Charles..."

"...Take you, Troy Charles..." Her neck burned and heat rushed over her chest. Her throat felt like it had a bowling ball in it. She couldn't swallow, couldn't suck enough spit to moisten her mouth. "...To be..."

She stopped, the words stuck in her throat but Fiona's elbow in her ribs was a wake-up nudge and she wasn't letting up. Then Fiona was looking at her and miming the required words.

Madelaine heard a loud snuffle.

She refused to look at her mother. It would be like when someone yawns, everyone has to do it and if she looked at her mother sniffing, she'd be bawling in two seconds flat.

The miming continued, so Madelaine opened her mouth to finish the rest of—

And then Fiona's baby let out a rip roaring squawk followed a second after by a stream of baby-puke which shot all over the arm and front of Madelaine's sage green shift.

"Yewww. Oh, yuck." Madelaine held her small bouquet high in one hand and fluttered her free hand at the splat of milk that covered her three-quarter sleeve and part of her bodice. "Oh. Yuck."

Carol rushed in with Liam's handkerchief. "Oh, dear."

"Mum. *Yuck.*"

Fiona ducked away with the baby. "Omigod, so sorry..." She dabbed at the baby's mouth with a baby wipe and scooted off to a bench at the edge of the garden.

Troy kept his distance from the bride.

Victoria stepped closer. "Madelaine, you—"

"Well, that's it then. It's done?" Madelaine looked at Victoria as she let her mother blot more baby-ick.

"No." Victoria shook her head as well as the little script.

"No," Carol breathed, blotting furiously and glancing at Liam.

"No!" Liam shot forward to be alongside his son.

"No," Troy muttered. "Apparently not." He stood by Madelaine's side. "Victoria, where were we?"

"Er... Madelaine, you have to finish your vows."

"Right." Madelaine stood taller as Carol stopped blotting. She took a deep breath and rushed the required-by-law words. "I, Madelaine Hart, in the presence of these witnesses, take you, Troy Charles to be my husband." *There. Fullstop. I'm not saying any more.*

Madelaine ignored her mother's glance. And Troy's. Ignored Liam as he leaned into her line of sight. She stared at the celebrant, willing her to continue.

"Well." Victoria McNeal smiled from one to the other. "In that case, I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Fiona rushed back to Madelaine, baby hooked under one arm. “Really? That’s it? Did I miss it?”

“Really?” Carol asked.

“Are they married?” Liam asked.

“Are we married?” Troy asked.

Victoria nodded.

“You sure?” Madelaine asked.

Victoria threw her hands in the air, but mindful of the other guests, milling and bemused, she spoke into her headset very clearly. “Yes. I’m sure. You are now very much married.”

Around of applause and a couple of wolf whistles followed Victoria’s announcement.

“Oh, thank God,” said Liam. Carol clutched his arm and beamed at him.

Fiona grabbed Madelaine and kissed her. “Oh, happy days, Madds. Here, kiss the boy,” she said and thrust the baby at her friend.

“Don’t. He’s still icky.”

“He’s not. But you are. Better get out of that outfit before it sets.”

“Yuck.”

Troy leaned over Fiona and the baby and looked into Madelaine’s eyes. “Congratulations. You’re married.”

A blush bloomed across her face as Madelaine caught the twinkle in his eye. She could be generous. She could. “Thank you. Congratulations to you, too.”

“Aren’t you gonna kiss her?” someone in the crowd piped up.

Madelaine spun around. “Oh, let me get out of this baby-ick first.” She turned to go but not before she caught Troy watching her. He’d made no attempt to advance, so she figured he wasn’t going to. But she couldn’t quite read his expression.

“Not so fast, missy.” Liam gently took hold of her arm. “Your job here isn’t finished yet.”

“I know we have to sign the register but I have to get out of this spewy dress, and—”

“That can wait.” He held out his hand. “Your mother and I have a ceremony to attend. Carol?”

“Pardon?” Madelaine looked at her mother.

“You didn’t want anyone at your ceremony, my darling, but we wanted all these people at ours. Just stand there a moment, would you?” Carol handed the icky hanky to Fiona. “Here you are, dear.” She turned to Liam. “Ready?”

“Mum!”

Liam beamed at Carol. “I most certainly am.” He took her hand. “Are you ready, Victoria?”

“I am. Madelaine, Troy, your parents have asked that you be their witnesses today.”

“Dad.”

“You getting teary, son?”

Troy stared at his father. “Why didn’t you say?”

“Wouldn’t want to spoil your fun. Stand here, would you? Madelaine, alongside your mother. Now, please, Victoria.”

“Everyone. We are still gathered here today to celebrate another marriage between Carol Hart and Liam Charles. Would you please gather close.” Victoria smiled around at her flock. “Now, Liam—”

Liam turned and took Carol’s hands in his, facing her. “I, Liam Andrew Charles, in the presence of these witnesses, take you, my beautiful Carol Hart, to have and to hold, from this day forward for the rest of my days. To love you, to cherish you above all others, till death us do part.”

Tears popped out and streamed down Madelaine’s cheeks.

Victoria just nodded and looked at Carol.

“I, Carol Thomas Hart, in the presence of these witnesses, take you, my beloved Liam Charles, to have and to hold, from this day forward for the rest of my days. To love you, to cherish you above all others, till death us do part.”

“Mike, the rings, please?”

Fiona nudged Troy and whispered, “You didn’t do rings. Are you sure you’re married?”

Troy was still staring at his father.

Victoria bent to Fiona. “Yes,” she hissed. “They are married. We can do their rings in a bit.”

“Right.” Fiona bounced the baby once or twice.

Mike Hennessey was beaming along with everyone else as he stepped forward and withdrew a ring box from his pocket. He opened it and handed it to Liam.

“With this ring,” Liam said and slipped it part way on to Carol’s wedding finger. “I thee wed.”

Carol took the remaining ring and pushed it on to Liam’s wedding finger. “With this ring, I thee wed.”

“Now, as vested in me by the state of South Australia, I can now pronounce you—”

Liam took Carol’s face in his hands and kissed her.

“—husband and wife. You may kiss the bride. Again.”

Which he did.

Madelaine stared through the streaming tears she couldn’t stop as her mother and Liam clearly enjoyed their moment.

The small crowd set up a *whoop whoop* and gathered around the two married couples. One couple was really quite into the swing of it, the other looked a little shell shocked.

Victoria held up her hands. “Due to our little interruption by baby—?” she looked at Fiona.

“I haven’t named him yet. Can we do a name ceremony now?”

“What?”

“Well, I mean, it would only take a minute and all my favourite people are here.” Fiona looked around at Liam and Carol, and at Madelaine, then at Troy. She looked down at the sleeping baby in her arms.

Victoria looked at Madelaine, and back at Liam and Carol.

“Why not?” Liam was hugging Carol close and grinning at everyone.

“Spread the love.” Carol was hugging Liam close and grinning at everyone.

Madelaine walked towards her friend. “Of course we can name him here.”

“I thought perhaps I’d call him...” Fiona whispered in Victoria’s ear. Then said aloud, “Victoria, would you?”

“I’d be delighted.” Victoria adjusted her headset. “What a day, everyone. Two weddings and a baby naming. Fiona, just come a little bit this way. Well. What an auspicious occasion on which to be named. It is my great pleasure to announce that Fiona here has decided to call her son Darcy Hart Brown.”

Madelaine smiled. “After us?”

“After you. My best friend.”

Madelaine hugged Fiona and Darcy Hart Brown squawked in protest.

“Just one last thing, before I go,” Victoria said. “Madelaine and Troy please. Back here in front of me. Mike again, if you wouldn’t mind.”

From his pocket Mike produced another small box and handed it to Troy.

“We forgot to do the rings for Madelaine and Troy in all the excitement. So if I can have your attention for just a couple more minutes. Troy.”

Troy removed the slim platinum band and held it in one hand and with the other he reached for Madelaine’s hand. “With this ring...”

“I didn’t get you one,” she blurted.

“But you will.” He shrugged and slipped the ring on to her finger.

Madelaine stared down at it. “It’s beautiful.” She looked up at Troy.

“Thank you, Madelaine.” He held her gaze. “For everything.”

She nodded without speaking.

Victoria had started to beam again. “And so, with that you may k—”

“Thank you, Victoria.” Madelaine bussed her cheek against the celebrant’s. “Was lovely. But now I really must get out of this baby-sick dress.” She turned and waved at everyone. “I’ll be fifteen minutes.” She charged up the steps out of the garden and into the house from there.

“Don’t forget you have to sign the register,” Victoria called after her.

Then everyone was hugging and slapping back and shaking hands and kissing cheeks.

Troy took some time out to speak to Victoria. “Thank you. You were great.”

“Yes, thank you,” Fiona said, pressing her free hand in Victoria’s. “I’m so glad I was able to get that done while everyone was here.”

Victoria smiled. “My pleasure. A great afternoon.” She looked towards the house where Madelaine had disappeared. She turned back to Troy. “Perhaps you would check on Madelaine and remind her about the register?”

He glanced across at Carol who was enjoying every moment kissing cheeks and hugging anyone within reach, and Liam doing the same... kissing and hugging anyone and everyone.

Troy checked Fiona who’d found a discreet place to feed her son.

He looked back at Victoria. “Of course. I’ll go get her.”

He begged off a number of his father’s guests and, for a reason he couldn’t quite explain, he took his time getting to the main house.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Madelaine had changed into buff coloured ankle length pants, a pair of soft suede leather flats and a long, draped white sleeveless top. Her hair hadn't needed attention, it was its usual meant-to-be-messed-up do, but she freshened up her lipstick and blush.

So. Married. It was done now. She looked down at the ring.

Not that she felt any different. And she was determined not to let a good party go to waste because she was feeling awkward and unsettled.

She misted more of her favourite cologne over her hair, took a deep breath then pulled open the door.

There he stood. And he looked gorgeous. He wore dove-grey silk and cotton shirts, opened at the neck, cobalt blue trousers and soft leather loafers. Liam has worn the same.

She sucked in a breath then let it out. Good God, she'd just married this hunk. She tried a smile at him, or thought she did. "Hi."

"Hi." He dug his hands in his pockets. "Victoria won't let us escape until we've signed the register."

"Right. Well, let's go do it." Did she sound like she was trying too hard to be nonchalant? She twisted her hands, then smoothed them over her pants.

"Madelaine, I—"

"Don't. I'm not ready." Her heartbeat was thundering in her ears and the prickly heat burning her cheeks crept down her neck and over her chest.

He inclined his head, stepped back and allowed her to go ahead of him, his hands still in his pockets.

When they arrived back in the garden, no one except Victoria was taking any notice. "Over here." She beckoned towards a little table and a couple of chairs. "I'll just be a minute."

Madelaine sat down and stared at the register. Troy hovered at her back.

Victoria had rounded up Carol and Liam who were laughing and crying at the same time and had brought them over to the table. "Now you four are witnesses for each other, so don't mess it up."

She guided Liam and Carol to sign where appropriate for Troy and Madelaine, and then advised the younger two where to sign for their parents.

When Carol had gathered herself enough to beam at her daughter, it only took a couple of moments for her face to crumple. "Oh, Maddy, you look so sad."

Madelaine saw Troy dart a look at Victoria whose eyes had widened and shoulders squared.

Liam gathered both Carol and Madelaine and exclaimed loudly how proud he was of both of them. With one arm outstretched he managed to pin Troy's sleeve and tug him into the hug. "We're all good," he said over his shoulder to Victoria.

Madelaine bobbed up out of the hug then and smiled at the celebrant. "We're all good."

Victoria's shoulders dropped. "All right. I'm going to leave you to it, then."

All four shook her hand, hugged her and helped her pack her bags. Troy took the little table and the iPod back to her car for her. Madelaine followed.

They said their goodbyes again and Victoria wished them luck.

Troy stood for a moment and watched as she drove up the steep driveway hill, then he turned and looked at the little party. "It's going to go on without us."

"Not for long," Madelaine replied and stepped ahead of him back to the garden. "It's not every day my mother gets married," she said over her shoulder.

"Or my father," he called a couple of beats later as he followed her.

They mingled, laughed, joked, and strenuously avoided each other.

There were photos of the happy couples taken together and separately, but Madelaine had balked at lovey-dovey pics and Troy hadn't pressed the issue.

Fiona and little Darcy bobbed up in almost all of the pictures. “These pics are going to look great at his twenty-first. ‘How I photo-bombed my aunty and uncle’s wedding day’. Come on, Madds. Another one with you.”

Everyone was a wee bit tipsy as the afternoon drew to dusk.

Vehicles pulled up to transport Liam and Carol’s guests into Regency where they’d elected to stay and continue the party.

Madelaine and her mother hugged. “Mum, you won’t mind if I don’t come into Regency?”

“Of course not, darling girl. You have your fun here.” Carol smoothed Madelaine’s cheek, but her eyes twinkled.

“It’s not like that, Mum.”

Liam planted a kiss on his step-daughter’s cheek. “Goodbye for now, my good girl. Look after my son.” He jogged around to the driver’s side as Carol settled herself in the car. “See you in Regency.”

Troy managed to get to his father before the engine ignited. “Dad, I’m not coming in to Regency. You don’t mind?”

Liam grinned. “You youngsters just have fun.” He reached over and squeezed Carol’s hand. “We can manage without you.” Then he turned the ignition over and drove off.

Amidst wolf whistles and knowing winks from the last of the guests to leave, Troy and Madelaine stood by the remaining vehicles and waved goodbye.

Even Fiona, who carefully bundled Darcy into his capsule and strapped him in, was leaving. She wasn’t going to Regency either.

“Me and the babe are a wee bit knackered. I’ll call you tomorrow, Madds.” She wound up the driver’s window and waved goodbye as she headed up the driveway.

Madelaine stood for a few moments more watching her friend leave.

Troy stood beside her. “I feel like I should go with them after all. They’ve waited a long time to get married and I could be celebrating with them.”

She turned to look at him. “I sort of feel the same. But I seem to have lost my party mojo.”

“Yeah. Me too.” He dug his hands in his pockets again, swung his shoulders from side to side. “Might get out of this god-awful get-up. Then I’m going to open a bottle of wine. Care to join me?”

“Sounds good. I’ll grab some cheeses and stuff. Will you be in the house or up in the kitchens on the balcony?”

“House is fine. I’ll put the fire on.” He headed into the house.

Madelaine turned for the kitchens. This was going to be so weird.

Troy sat on the settee, his bare feet on the ottoman, a bottle of cousin Berry’s shiraz open on the table and two glasses standing alongside.

He’d changed into a t-shirt and jeans, had stoked up the fire and its ambient heat replaced the descending cool of the evening air.

Madelaine breathed in the atmosphere, glanced out the front windows over the ocean and on to the mainland beyond. It was a different outlook to the one from the kitchens, but just as breath-taking.

Troy stood up. “Need a hand?”

She removed the plastic wrap from a tray of nibbles, hastily prepared before the ceremonies. “I’m ready for that drink now.”

He poured as she set the platter on the table.

“You’ll be going to the mainland tomorrow?” She settled into a single chair alongside the settee, touched a button on the arm and waited for the electronic foot stool to lift into place. She stretched and let her feet rest on it as she took the glass he handed her.

He sat on the settee in the space closest to her chair, sipped his wine. “Yes. And as soon as I land, I’m being whisked away to sign papers, sort the tax, check appropriate investments and roll it all into motion.”

“It’s a serious amount of money.”

“It is.” He stared at his glass. “I thought I’d feel elated or nervous or something. But it’s just another investment package to set up and keep my eye on.”

“Lucky you.”

He glanced up. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m not knocking it. Of course not. I just thought I’d feel differently about it.”

“Maybe it’ll take a little while to sink in.”

“I think a lot of things will take a little while to sink in. How do you feel?”

When that direct gaze met hers, a little flip-flop turned over inside. It powered a rush of colour to her face. She shrugged. “I don’t know yet. I admit I’m doing my level best to believe that we were at Mum and Liam’s wedding and at not ours.”

He nodded. Waited a beat. “I wasn’t sure if you’d have a drink with me now.”

“We always have a drink. Why would that change? I just want things to return to normal as soon as they can. If that’s possible.”

“We’ll make it possible. And you’re right, we shouldn’t let a little matter of our getting married interfere with a good working relationship.”

Madelaine glanced at him and when she saw his smile, she smiled too. She looked out over the water. “Anyway, it was a nice day for it.”

“The best. Baby spew aside.” Troy laughed.

Madelaine lost a hoot before she could stop it. “Vile stuff.”

“You should have seen your face.”

“And poor Fiona was mortified.”

Silence grew for a minute. Then Troy looked across at her. “Did I say ‘thank you’?”

“Yes, you did.”

“I mean it.”

“I know. Thank you, too.” Madelaine looked at her glass, took a long sip. “This was always a good drop.”

“Berry knows what he’s doing.”

“Heard he’s got himself a new lady-love. Clancy Jones. A chef I believe.”

Troy nodded. “Been a while now, coming up a year soon. I reckon they’ll make it all right. Both foodies.” He looked at Madelaine. “Both winos.”

Madelaine laughed. "Being a vintner doesn't make you a wino."

"No." Troy held his glass up to the light. "We should go down their way sometime. His restaurant was always pretty good, but Clancy seems to have made a big difference."

Madelaine nodded. "Maybe." She reached across to fill her glass, offered to fill his. As she poured for him she said, "Think you might have your diary full for the near future."

"Think you're right. Liam's taking a few days off now, but come Monday he'll be back in Adelaide at the desk. And he'll be cracking the whip for me to get on with it."

He fell silent. Madelaine didn't want to make conversation for the sake of it, or about Troy's inheritance. If anything, she wanted the conversation steered well clear of that.

They sat quietly and watched the sun go down. It seemed to hover on the edge of the horizon, bob a little, descend and drop out of sight.

A soft orange glow remained for a few moments until the remnant glow in the distance slowly gave way to pitch black, and the stars took centre stage.

"You could never get used to this." Troy spoke softly.

"I never do. Not at sunset or sunrise or midday. It is my perfect place."

"And now it's safe. It'll always be yours."

She glanced across to where he sat but the light was so dim she couldn't make out his features. The glow of the fire in the combustion heater lit one side of his face, but not enough for her to see his expression.

"I'm grateful for that."

Troy heard the sigh in her voice.

He couldn't see her clearly enough in the twilight. He looked back at the star dusted sky and the soft halo of the lights of Adelaide. They sat with their drinks in amiable silence.

She leaned over and held out her glass for a top up.

He poured. “Not exactly how I thought I’d be spending my wedding night.”

“I suppose not.”

He lifted his free hand in her direction and held it there.

She hesitated the briefest of moments, switched her glass to her other hand and slipped her free hand into his.

His fingers closed around hers. “If we just plain forgot we got married today, we would probably fool around a bit.”

She laughed a bit. “If we could forget.”

“Before I realised Dad had a contract out on us—”

She laughed again.

“—I was hoping we had something going.” He heard the intake of her breath, and felt the slight retracting of her hand. He waited a beat, then leaned towards her. “I think you know how I feel about you, Madds.”

“I don’t think it has a chance, now.”

But she hadn’t taken her hand from his. “I don’t understand why not. I wonder how Petny and Eva managed.”

“They had to stay together. It was the done thing. We, on the other hand, are just friends.”

Troy didn’t let go of her hand as he put his glass on the coffee table. He took the glass from her hand and set it down. “Come sit by me.” He wanted to wrap her in his arms and feel her heartbeat against him. Wanted to feel her warmth.

He wanted to see her smile.

Again she hesitated but only for a moment. She slid past him and settled alongside, tucking her legs under her bottom, one foot touching his thigh.

Then she turned and snuggled, and his heartbeat roared in his ears.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Fiona was on the line. “So, how did last night go?”

“I was in bed at nine.”

“Wow.”

“Alone.”

“Oh. All night?”

“Yes. All night. I told you, this isn’t a *marriage* marriage. We haven’t slept together.” Madelaine was sure that, with practice, the thud in her stomach would go away whenever she thought of sleeping with Troy.

“How can you not do it? I know you like him. A lot. You mean you never have?”

“Never.”

“Came close?” Madelaine barely hesitated and Fiona latched on. “Aha!”

“No ‘aha’ about it. Nothing happened. We didn’t even get started. And just because we got married doesn’t mean we have to sleep together.”

“Oh. Really? Duh.”

“You know exactly why we got married. Nothing to do with love.”

“That might come. Besides, I didn’t say love.”

Madelaine puffed out a breath. “It’s not a prerequisite. Neither’s sleeping with him.”

“No, it’s not. But you know you want to. Are you going to go out with him, kind of like a reverse situation?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Madelaine had no answer for Fiona. She really had no answer. Who would understand? No one, she knew that.

“You could get to know him better, you know. You might even like being married to him.”

“All I feel like is that I was forced to marry. Even though I sort of volunteered.”

Fiona tsk-tsked. “So, not forced. You volunteered. Well, volunteer to sleep with him. It’d be wonderful.”

“I feel I’ve been railroaded. By them. I feel like I’ve railroaded myself, or sold me out or something.”

“Yeah, weird, huh? But you went there. And you’re running the risk of sounding like you’re whingeing. Cut it out.” Fiona waited a beat. “Has he gone to the mainland yet?”

“Yes.” Another thud in Madelaine’s stomach. “He left this morning.”

“When is he back?”

A double thud hit hard under her heart. “I don’t know. Maybe next week. He said he’d let me know.”

Madelaine heard a small squawking in the background. “I have to go,” Fiona said. “Darcy needs another feed. We might come out and see you tomorrow or something.”

“Great. Bye.” Madelaine pocketed her phone.

Am I whingeing? Am I making all this up? Am I just afraid?

For a crazy second when she’d heard it ring, she thought it might have been Troy. She couldn’t deny her own disappointment when it was Fiona calling.

She thought back to the wedding night when she was tucked against his chest. When he’d said her name. When she told him that this was all there’d be tonight.

When he sat back and just held her. Hadn’t made a move.

Until she said she was going to bed.

His hold on her had remained and when she hadn’t moved, he shifted a little and she dipped into the protective curve of his body.

“Stay here with me,” he’d said.

“If I stay,” she mumbled into his glorious chest, “I’ll do something I’ll regret.”

“Why regret? It’d be wonderful.”

Despite the warm, delicious pressure of his erection on her back, she told him why.

Slowly, he released her and she stumbled off to her room.

Now, when she looked up from where she sat on the bed in Troy’s room, empty of all his possessions, and looked out to sea, it was the first time ever she hadn’t given thanks for where she lived.

Because she didn’t even notice the view.

Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply, hoping to pick up a lingering scent.

She missed him.

“But darling girl, what’s the matter? You’ll probably settle in to a good working relationship. You might even become close friends.”

Madelaine wondered what it was about the whole thing that meant people like her mother and her best friend couldn’t see her predicament.

On the other end of the line, Carol continued. “It’s not like you can’t stand each other. I can tell he feels quite affectionate towards you.”

“Mum, it feels like it’s that thing where familiarity will breed contempt.”

“I think you’re thinking too much.”

At least her mother hadn’t said ‘whingeing’. But she thought of something else. “And what if he expects things just because we got married?”

“If you mean what I think you mean, I’m pretty sure you’d have discussed that before the event. And you did, didn’t you?”

Madelaine sighed. “Yes. No. Sort of. Well, I said my piece. He just agreed.”

“What a good man. When is he back on the island?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh well, that shouldn’t be a worry for you. Carry on.”

“Mum—”

“If you want something to come of this, you need to talk to him and see if he feels the same way. It’s not like you can break anything. Or bust up. It’s not like any harm can come of being honest. Just try, darling.”

"I don't know if I can explain myself properly."

"I'm sure you'll think of something. And quickly. Let me know when you're visiting. Bye, my darling." And Carol hung up.

"You look a bit distracted, Troy." Liam leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head.

Troy glanced across from the window. "Gee. How can you tell?"

"It's Madelaine, isn't it?"

"You're a genius. It's the whole damn thing. Mainly Madelaine. I like her. A lot. I like her enough to want to get to know her. All that ordinary stuff."

"Right. So?"

"I'm married to her."

"And the two are mutually exclusive?"

Troy turned. "How would I know? She told me that because we're already married we'll never know if we were meant to be together."

Liam squinted. "What?"

"That everything is just too convenient so no one will try, it'll just be a given that we'll have sex, everything will be okay and the fairytale will continue."

"And the problem is?"

Troy threw his hands in the air. "I just want to take her out, make like we're getting to know each other, forget the damned married thing. She won't do it."

"Do you know why?"

"No. Do you?"

"God, no. No point asking me." Liam leaned forward to grab his coffee.

"Why not? You set this up."

"You're a grown man, you find out. You're now enormously rich and you can stand on your own two feet." Liam eyed his son over the top of the coffee cup. "At least, I think you can."

Troy glared. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means, now you have Petny's inheritance, it's time to stop procrastinating and go out and take the bull by the horns. Go and make a life for yourself."

"What is it you thought I was doing before I got married?"

Liam raised his eyebrows. "In a word? Nothing." He leaned back in his seat again, ignoring the temper on his son's face. "If you want it to be with Madelaine, do it. What are you so afraid of?"

"Not afraid of anything." Troy hesitated. "Well, that depends."

"You have a cool sixty-five millions dollars, a beautiful wife, and youth. Figure it out, and be quick about it."

"I'm afraid I'll stuff it up. Or worse."

Liam's eyebrows rose. "Worse?"

"That she'll be right."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Troy left Mike Hennessey's office late in the day, the certified copies of his marriage certificate on the lawyer's desk. They ensured his inheritance was in place.

That cool sixty-five millions dollars would be put to good use as soon as investments were finalised. Liam had earmarked a number for consideration. Troy had voiced an opinion on three worthy projects in which his cousins, Joseph, Callum and Berry were each involved, and, as Petny's will had provided for all his cousins if Troy married by the required date, he was happy to finance projects for his other family members.

Riley and Flynn were Berry's brothers, Tilla and Radisson were his uncle Ian's daughters, and Marnie, Callum's sister were all recipients of Petny's largesse. Troy had yet to figure out something extra for them from his windfall, but he would.

Because sixty-five mil was too much for any one person.

He drove home to his house overlooking a sprawling Adelaide. Traffic wasn't so bad just yet and the drive up past Eagle on the Hill had been easy. Since the freeway, the back way home was easier.

Garaging the car, he let himself in. Mrs Cranmer, his housekeeper, had been in to freshen up the place, and had lit the slow combustion heater. A cosy warmth embraced him.

He noticed the envelope propped on the kitchen bench and recognised Mrs Cranmer's handwriting.

A small sadness crept in.

He opened the fridge, grabbed a beer then leaned on the island bench and gazed out over the view. The lights of Adelaide flickered here and there across the spread of the city as the evening crept in.

He took the envelope and beer and sat on the settee. His gaze drifted to where Australis Island would be if he could see it from his house.

Was she thinking about him?

He took a swallow of pale ale, lifted the seal on the envelope and took out the card.

Mrs Cranmer hoped he and his new bride would be very happy.

Troy closed the card and set it beside him.

He and his new bride.

Did his new bride ever think about him?

He leaned forward. No use being a dick about things. If Madelaine was determined to keep him at arm's distance, there wasn't a lot he could do about it. Couldn't very well force her to like him, to want to be with him.

He thought about his job over on the island and scoffed at himself. He hadn't been doing anything there that any other idiot couldn't do.

He thought of Madelaine singing her heart out as she sliced and diced. He smiled then. Thank God she could cook.

His phone vibrated in his pocket and for an instant he thought it would be her. Nope. Just Liam.

He let it go to message bank.

He swigged his beer again.

Perhaps time to call his travel agent and take a holiday somewhere. Some place he could be anonymous and go hiking, or camping or something.

On your own is no fun.

He thought back to hiking and camping on Australis Island. Maybe he could just go and camp down at Berry's place, maybe help in the restaurant. Or do some pruning of the vines. He wasn't averse to hard physical labour. In fact, he preferred it; preferred it to the sanitized walls of an office.

Must be in the genes. His grandfather and great grandfather had been hands-on too. And all his cousins were well involved in their businesses at the grass roots level.

Then there was Joseph's business school for the Australis Island kids. He could teach there, offer a few tips.

And his cousin Callum had recently bought himself a cattle station in the Northern Territory. Maybe he'd go up to Alice and help out there. Callum Parker and his new

wife, Toni, were well into setting up a wildlife park, offering African hut style five star accommodation. He could cook there perhaps, live the outback life.

He had the money to do anything he wanted. Yet nothing really fired him up.

But he'd do something. He'd get away. Go someplace. Get over it.

He glanced out into the darkening night and saw a lone twinkle of a light far off to the south. He imagined someone on the north coast of Australis had turned on a light, maybe outside, or maybe inside to cook dinner by.

He imagined it might have been Madelaine in her kitchen high on the hill, looking towards Adelaide and the mainland hill he knew she couldn't see.

All he wanted was to have his arms around her. To have her close by him, warm and happy and loving.

He wondered if she missed him half as much as he missed her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The warmer weather brought lots more groups traveling but Madelaine could swear she had many more FITs—fully independent travelers—as well. People in twos and fours driving themselves around and in need of gourmet picnics.

Troy's extra pair of hands would have been welcome. She knew she was running herself ragged, trying to do too much and dragging the other staff along with her. She needed extra staff. And her current staff told her that, too.

Three weeks and a few days had passed since Carol and Liam had married ... since she and Troy had married.

Troy had called of course, was all business, or friendly and joking ... and sometimes there were even little silences in the conversation that she knew she should fill, but couldn't. She didn't know what to say.

Troy was due back in the next few days. He wasn't sure when. He asked about the business and she told him everything was fine. He asked if she needed staff and she hesitated.

If she told him she needed help he'd be over like a shot. Anyone could fill the vacancy he left; it didn't need to be him and she didn't want it to sound as if it did need to be him.

Truth was, she wished it could be him. She knew it could only be him.

So why not *tell* him that, she raged to herself. And for the thousandth time.

She shook her head. If he felt anything the same as she did, he'd let her know. Isn't that how it was supposed to be?

At least he was coming to the island soon, this week. She'd work something out, make a plan to sit down and have a good talk about things.

Things. *Things*.

She slapped her hands to her face and dragged them down. What things?

Her phone rattled on the bench and she snatched it up. "Hi, Fiona."

“How’s it going?”

“Good.”

“How’s it going really?”

“...Good.”

“When’s he coming?”

“Next few days. I haven’t got an exact day yet.” Then Fiona was silent for so long that Madelaine thought she’d been cut off. “You there?”

“Yeah, I’m here. What are you going to do about Troy?”

“I don’t know.”

“You got a chance here, Madds, to see if you can make something of it. I mean for real.”

“I don’t love him.”

“You do.”

“All right. I know. Maybe. Not yet.”

“But you’re well on the way, aren’t you? And when I think about how he looks at you—”

“Don’t. I don’t know how to handle this, any of it. I don’t do friends-with-benefits.”

“Oh, come on. We all do. Anyway, you’re not doing that if you feel the way you do about him. And what could it hurt? You are already married.”

“That’s just it. Would I have gone there if we weren’t married?”

“Yes. And don’t deny it—”

“*That’s* my problem. I was maybe heading in that direction and it got all stuffed up when we got married. I’ve lost control of it.” Madelaine held the phone away from her mouth and yelled, “Arrrgggghhhhhh!”

Fiona sailed on. “So if I was in your shoes, I’d just pretend I wasn’t married. Try that. Just listen to your hormones and forget about the fact you’re actually married. Take the control back.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, what a load of—” It dawned on her like a brick falling out of the sky. “Really?”

“That simple. Just put that married thing right out of your head.”

Madelaine huffed out a breath. “Well. It’s not like I went there for love, is it?”

Fiona breathed a sigh. “Nope.”

“It’s not like I vowed and declared till death us do part, did I?”

“Nope.”

“It’s not like I didn’t already like him.”

“Nope. Well, except for that first day with the car and the wallaby poop. I’ll call you in a couple of days. Darcy and I have to go for a check up tomorrow.”

“Oh, no problems?”

“No, no. Just a check up. By-eee.”

“Bye. And thanks. I think.” Madelaine closed the call. She tut-tutted herself.

She would make damn sure Troy knew that she was just out for a bit of fun with someone she liked but had no intention of settling down with.

Benefits. Friends. With.

Yes. She could do that.

Her belly tingled. She would cook dinner, wine and dine him. She would wear something simple. Stunning. Simply stunning.

Fresh flowers on the table.

Mood music...

Low lights in the bathroom.

Bathroom? Wow—she was even going too fast for herself.

But there’d be no strings attached. He wouldn’t have to hang around. She wasn’t going to cling and pretend they had something going on when there were no strings attached.

No strings attached. Friends. Benefits.

Because the strings that were already attached weren’t real strings. Were they?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Madelaine had checked the mirror thirty-four times in the last ten minutes. What was with that?

She brushed herself down—again—took a peek up the hill at her steep driveway—again—and turned back inside to try and settle her nerves. Again.

Troy had rung to say he was on the nine a.m. boat and that he should be at her place at about eleven.

Round about now.

Keep Calm and Do Something.

Best thing to do? Get working. Get thee up to thy kitchens and work.

Work.

She rushed from her bedroom through the garage and charged up the driveway to the kitchens. There was always something to do there. At least today the tours had all come, loaded up their lunches and been on their way.

She wasn't expecting any other groups and had no more orders from any independent travelers to fill, so staff had made an early day of it.

That left her alone. With Troy once he got here.

Would she still—? Wouldn't she?

She pushed the kitchen doors open and stopped dead inside.

Troy turned to look at her. "House on fire?"

Shock. Surprise. Delight. All of which she was sure showed on her face, but she shook her head. "I was going to start on some stock. Maybe some pesto. Bake a couple of beef fillets." *Rattle, stutter, make stuff up. Be a fool.*

He turned back to the view. "I'd nearly forgotten how perfect this is."

"Good to see you." She felt like she'd blurted that.

He swung around again, his eyebrows raised. "And you. How're things?"

“Good. Busy. Good.” She tried to stop nodding her head. “I didn’t hear your car.”

He had his hands in his pockets. “I cruised down from the top of the driveway. I thought you’d already be in here.”

“Coffee?”

“No.”

Madelaine hid her surprise. She grabbed an apron from under the bench, donned it and headed for the butler’s pantry. “Okay. Well, I’ll put a pot on anyway. Can’t do without it, myself.”

She dumped grounds into the filter, topped the tank with fresh water and turned on the machine.

Emerging with a tight smile she turned smartly into the cool-room. At least the noise of the refrigeration saved her from having to make small talk. Especially as her tongue had glued itself to the roof of her mouth.

She loaded up on fresh basil, pine nuts, two great butt fillets, and a tray of assorted vegetables. She almost couldn’t see over the top.

“I’ll go check the fuel tanks.” He peered over the tray.

Her heart kicked under her ribs. “No need. I got the tanker out yesterday.” Living over forty kilometres from the nearest fuel station, Madelaine had a bowser on the property so her vehicles would always have fuel available.

She set the meat and vegetables on to the bench and heaved out the processor.

“Good.” Troy nodded, hands still in his pockets. “Did he check the water pumps for you?”

“Yes. Right after.” Madelaine rinsed the basil gently. Shook it a little. Rinsed another handful.

“How many cars out?”

“Eight went out, but they’re back. Drivers have gone home.” A lot of basil and pine nuts were shoved into the processor.

“Heard from Carol?”

“She’s fine. Happy.” Madelaine glanced at Troy.

“So’s Dad.”

Fresh roasted espresso coffee aroma filled their space.

“I’ve decided...” His voice drifted.

Madelaine looked at him again. He had a need-to-touch-him-look about him. She puffed out a small breath as her heart jumped a little again. “Yes?”

“That I should go away for a while.” He swung back to the view a moment or two, then back to her.

Her making-a-little-jump heart was now thudding. “Go away where?” She poured pine nuts into the blender, a lot of pine nuts.

“Haven’t decided that. The ... extra cash is well invested, you’re okay here. I’ll check, maybe one of my cousins can do with a hand. Or maybe overseas somewhere.”

Her face grew hot. “So why are you here?”

“I said I’d come.” He stepped over to the bench, bent and retrieved two mugs. “Changed my mind about coffee.”

Madelaine watched as he disappeared into the pantry, heard him lift the pot and pour coffee.

“I’ve changed my mind about a couple of things, too.” She stopped pouring pine nuts; the blender was near to overflowing. She poured a whole heap back out into a spare bowl.

He came back with two mugs, placed one in front of her and sat on a stool on the other side of the bench.

“Why are you going away?” She pulsed the blender a couple of times.

He raised his voice. “What have you changed your mind about?”

“If you’re going away...” The blender stopped.

“I think I have to.” He closed his hands around his coffee. “Feel a bit at odds. All that money is doing my head in. Should be well used to the idea now, but I’m not.”

Madelaine left the blender, slid her coffee over the counter and came around to sit alongside him. “That’s not surprising.”

He nodded once. “I knew it was coming, or would eventually come, but it came pretty quickly. Took me a bit by surprise. And the rest. Big surprise.”

Madelaine looked at their hands, so very close together without touching. Both had their hands around their respective coffees. She stared at his hands.

Her heart thudded. Why would it thud when she stared at his hands?

Everything about him made her heart thud. Especially the news that he was going away. “Overseas, or mainland somewhere or—?”

“Haven’t decided. But soon. Especially if there’s not much for me to do here.” He stared at his hands around his coffee cup. “What have you changed your mind about?”

She sipped her coffee. Still too hot. “Well. If you’re free. While you’re here...” He didn’t move. “I thought that maybe we could dine in.”

He shrugged. “I’m not staying even tonight.”

“Oh. Okay.” Hiding sudden, fierce disappointment was not easy. “You only just got here, though and I thought—” She didn’t have a plan for this.

He turned and looked at her. “I want to get something out in the open.” He took one of her hands. Entwined their fingers. “Just as friends, I need you to know something.”

Madelaine gazed back. Those dark, serious eyes held her fast. Her breath caught. As *friends*. “Okay.”

He kneaded her fingers in his. “I don’t want to be just friends.”

Her face flamed. She was supposed to say something.

He squeezed her hands. “I know you already know that.” He waited a beat. “Right? Madelaine?”

“Yes. It’s okay. But—”

“Just friends, I know. We got married because we each had our reasons, just nothing to do with love, or long-term anything or even a proper relationship.”

Madelaine’s voice stopped in her throat. Love? *Love*? No-one was supposed to mention love. Relationship—?

“So I’m going away somewhere and you’re going to get on with it here.”

She stared at the hands holding hers. Then she raised her eyes and stared at his. Her gaze roamed over his gorgeous face. “Yes. I’ll get on with it here. Of course I will.”

The beat of that moment lasted longer than she imagined it could, and then her voice jumped out of her mouth. "I mean, we could...just jump each other's bones and—"

His eyes lit up. "Whoa." Then he shook his head. "Don't get me wrong. I've thought about it. If you were another girl, maybe. Maybe. But I don't want you to regret a thing. Not one thing." He bent to her hand and kissed it. "And you would if we went there now. I got that pretty clearly when you told me the night of our...the wedding."

He sipped his coffee again and screwed up his nose. "Still too hot and I have to go." He let her hands drop and slapped his on the bench-top. "Goodbye for now, Madelaine." He stood, and as he dropped a light kiss on her mouth, his hand lingered in her hair. He trailed his fingers down her cheek, then he walked out of her kitchen, his back ramrod straight.

Her heartbeat pounded. Her ears ached. It wouldn't be a good look to beg now. To run after him and drop to the ground clutching his leg, groveling in the dirt.

And he was right. She would regret it. She watched as he walked out of her kitchens and out of her sight. Why didn't she just run after him and—

No point trying to talk him into anything now...don't bother chasing him...

She toyed with the platinum wedding band hanging on a chain, warm between her breasts, and closed a fist over her thudding heart.

But she'd just propositioned him. And he'd knocked her back.

The shame of it.

Life seemed to have lost its shine all of a sudden.

Troy climbed back in his car. He sat for a minute, thoughts roiling around his head, nothing straightened out, nothing logical, no ducks in a row.

Just the glorious sight of her and what looked to be her struggling with whatever her next step might be.

When he finally turned the key in the ignition and drove off up the bloody hill that was her driveway, he heard himself mutter, "Well, if she wants it, she'll have to come and get it."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Madelaine stared at the letter in her hand.

“What’s the matter?” Fiona asked, bobbing the fish mobile in front of plump and gurgling Darcy as he attempted to crawl about Madelaine’s kitchen floor.

Madelaine placed the letter on the bench, continued to stare at it as she wiped her hands down her apron. “It’s from Victoria McNeal.”

“Your marriage celebrant.” Fiona scrunched her face. “Really? What could she want?”

“It says she has to do a three month audit on the contract I have with the estate of Petronius De Kluever.”

Fiona stopped bobbing. “Serious? Doesn’t that mean you and Troy—?”

“Yup.”

“Uh oh. Do you even know where he is?”

Madelaine rubbed her hands over her face, then pulled her hair high into a scrunchie on her head. “No, but I’m sure Liam does. I have to hurry, she wants an appointment in two weeks.”

Fiona picked up Darcy, held him tight while he squawked a protest, two chubby arms reaching for the disappearing mobile. “You better get your skates on.”

Madelaine nodded, but her hands shook as she picked up the letter. “Yes. I’d better.”

But would Troy come?

Liam switched the phone to speaker mode. “Madds needs you there well before Victoria’s visit.”

There was a pause before Troy replied to his father. “Dad, can you let Victoria know I’m overseas on business and that I can’t get back in time?”

Liam looked at Carol over the phone. “Troy, it’s just this one audit then you can disappear again. You knew it would be random, sprung on us like this. Come on home, just for a little while to get this sorted.”

Liam heard Troy exhale down the line after the few seconds phone delay from Fiji. “I’ll check the flights. Call you later.”

Carol wrapped her arms around her husband as he disconnected the call. She let out a breath. “Do you think he’ll come home?”

Liam kissed the top of her head. “I think he will. I think he’s just been waiting for an excuse.”

Madelaine and Troy stood at the doorway of her room at the house on Australis Island. In the distance, the ocean surged, moody and shale grey.

She felt in her pocket. “I nearly forgot again. Here, I’ve got something for you.” Madelaine took a small, grey, velveteen box from her pocket. “I didn’t get you one for the wedding.”

Troy flipped the lid and stared down at the silver band gleaming in its slot.

“It’s for Victoria’s visit,” she added.

“Of course.” He lifted it out, slipped it on to his ring finger. “Fits perfectly.” He flexed his fingers, admired the ring for a moment then stared at her. “Thanks. It’ll help make it seem more like—”

“Yes, exactly.” She inhaled deeply and waved a hand at the room. “So. What do you think?” she asked, still standing in the open doorway.

He dropped his gaze from hers, and walked around the room, poked his head in the bathroom, came back out again. “I think the shoes at the foot of the bed are a good look. I mean,” he said as he walked towards the wardrobe, “this is a dead giveaway that we live here together but—” He pointed at the rows of his shirts and pants, then at hers. “It’s the bathroom that worries me a bit.”

Startled, she headed for the ensuite. “Why?”

“It’s too neat.”

“Since when did you worry about neat?” Madelaine checked the basin for stray hairs, and toothpaste gob. “It looks fine, just clean and tidy. Chances are she won’t even come this way. She’s probably as mortified by this as we are.”

“She’ll have a checklist.” Troy took another sweeping gaze, all the while absorbing the scents and smells of Madelaine’s bathroom.

He'd arrived earlier that day and they'd set to work straight away...Victoria McNeal work.

They'd moved his stuff in from the hire car and from his room out the back, spread man-things throughout her house, set his work boots at the back door, shoved boot polish inside her laundry cupboard, plugged in his laptop in her office and spread some files of his throughout her four-drawer filing cabinet, fixed her private bathroom to look as if a man lived there—shaving crème, razors, man-deodorant, discarded tee shirts, toilet seat up.

They dug out a couple of photos of the wedding and placed one in the lounge, one in her bedroom, a pile of loose pictures on the coffee table.

Madelaine studied her fingers. "And, um, thanks for your emails, and your texts. It was good to know that there was someone looking out for the business besides me, even though you are a silent partner."

He glanced at her. "That's okay. I just worried a bit that the texts would wake you up. Never did get the hang of the time difference." He dug hands in his pockets. "And thanks for responding. I reckon it would have been in the wee small hours sometimes."

She shrugged. "Didn't matter." She checked the palms of her hands. "Was nice."

Troy smiled at her. "You look good."

She smiled back. "You do, too. Fiji agrees with you."

"Fiji agrees with everyone...if you know where to be." He checked his watch. "I'm still jet-lagged, untidy, and looking for a hot shower." He hesitated a minute. "Look, Madds, this is weird. I need to shower and all my stuff is in here. Would you mind—?"

"No, of course not. It'll look more real for Victoria tomorrow." Madelaine waved her hands. "Go for it. Here," she said and bent to retrieve bath linen from under the vanity. "Towels, a bath mat."

He stared at her. Hesitated. "Uh. Thanks. I'll high-tail it back to my room when I'm done." He watched as she beat a retreat.

He stood staring at the shut door for a moment. As she'd bent down to get his towels, he'd seen the platinum wedding ring on the chain around her neck.

He fist-pumped the air. *Yesss!*

Troy placed a cup of coffee in front of Victoria McNeal as they sat in Madelaine's lounge room.

"So." Victoria took up her coffee cup. "Wonderful to see the effort you and Troy are putting in."

"Well, yes, that was the plan." Madelaine topped up her own coffee after pouring Troy's.

"Well, we are married," Troy added. He twisted the sterling silver wedding band.

Madelaine glanced at him, frowning a little.

Victoria tilted her head. "I meant about the business." She sipped her coffee, crossed her legs. "So," she said again, "what are the plans for the future?"

"Future?" Madelaine sat up straight.

"Plans?" Troy's eyes widened. *What, like kids?*

"Expansion, a mainland business perhaps? You've put so much into it." Victoria set down her cup. "It's such a good concept here and your product is so unique, I'm sure operators there would benefit—"

"Ah, I see what you mean." Troy smoothed his hands over his jeans. "We like it here. We're busy. You know, content." He reached across and squeezed Madelaine's hand. "The world comes to us, that sort of thing."

Victoria nodded. "I suppose it does." She finished off her coffee and stood up. "Well, I think I have all I need to satisfy the audit. Strange thing, isn't it?" she asked of Madelaine, then she looked at Troy. "I've never been asked to do anything like it before. It made me feel just a little bit uncomfortable."

Madelaine stood up with her. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." She glanced at Troy. "Of course, you are being paid, aren't you? I hope they made it worth your while."

“Yes. Yes, I just meant that it is an odd thing to have to do.” Victoria waved her hand at the two of them. “To check up on the er, living space of a young married couple.”

Troy stood up and gathered Madelaine close, wrapping his arms around her. She nestled against him. “Very odd, but at least you only have to do it once. Something to satisfy some old lawyers, I think. Something about my grandfather’s will.” He smacked a kiss on Madelaine’s cheek. “We just sort of went along with it. Hope we didn’t put you out.”

Madelaine leaned in to Troy and smiled up at him.

Victoria smiled as well. “Not at all. I’ll sign the paperwork and shoot it right back in tomorrow’s mail.”

They herded Victoria out the door and stood guard as she got into her car.

Waving her goodbye, and with stiff smiles plastered on their faces, they watched as she drove up the driveway and out of sight.

“Is that it?” Madelaine asked, her teeth still clenched, faking the smile.

“Yep,” Troy answered, his teeth clenched, too. Then he laughed. “God, I’m glad that’s over and done with.”

She looked across at him and laughed as well. “Think we passed?”

“I reckon it was your undies on my briefcase that did the trick.”

“Yeah, not to mention the massage oil alongside the bed and the con—” Madelaine stopped abruptly.

Troy raised his eyebrows. “Oh. Gosh. Now you’re blushing, Madelaine. Gosh.” His gaze travelled slowly up and down her body, and as it did he felt his centre of power move from his head to between his legs. So did the blood in his head. “I thought they were pure genius.”

She fired a beautiful shade of pink. “Stop it.” The pink deepened. “I didn’t realise you’d done that.”

They stood for a moment in the car park. He in his jeans and his boots, his snug fitting t-shirt. Madelaine with her cut off jeans and crop top, sandals and jangly earrings.

Epitome of young marrieds, we are, comfortable in our skins.

Just not comfortable with each other.

He inhaled and shoved hands in his pockets. "Time to do some jobs, and I don't have much time to do them. What's on the list?"

"You can relax," Liam said over the phone to his son. "I have Victoria's paperwork here, all signed and ready for the lawyers." He looked over and winked at Carol. "You're home and hosed, Troy."

Carol smiled back at her husband, lifted her eyes and mouthed 'hallelujah'.

Liam frowned, listening to Troy. He glanced worriedly at his wife, then concentrated on the phone call. "I don't know. I haven't checked that clause...yes, I know, but—" Liam stared at Carol and said, "All right, bye. See you." He hung up.

"What's the matter?" Carol grabbed his arm. "What is it?"

Liam stared at her. "Troy wants to know how soon he can apply for a divorce."

"Madelaine, Madelaine," Carol cajoled, and glanced at Liam while she held the phone away from her ear. "I can't understand a word you're saying."

"Oh, Mum. He came here—"

"Troy?"

"Troy. And we passed the test with Victoria, and then he did some jobs and then he left. He only stayed the night and then he went." Madelaine's voice verged on a wail.

"He stayed the night?" Carol was hopeful.

"Not *that* sort of 'stayed the night,'" her daughter cried. "And then he went."

"Went where, my darling girl?"

Another wail rose from Madelaine. "I don't know where. Away! He went away."

"How much wine have you had, Madelaine?" Carol frowned at her husband's frown.

"One glass," Madelaine sobbed. "One glass. Dammit, I'm married to a guy who doesn't want to be married to me-ee." She sobbed and caught herself. "Okay, okay,

there are lots of people in that situation. But he hasn't even lived with me to know he doesn't wanna live with me."

Carol held her hand over the receiver. "Can you hear that?" she quizzed Liam with clenched teeth. "She's wailing."

Liam held his hands aloft and nodded. "I reckon one *bottle*," he whispered back. "Not one *glass*."

"Now, darling girl, under the circumstances—"

"Mum, he wants a di-voooorce. I want—"

Liam interrupted Carol, tapped her on the shoulder. "There's someone at the door. I'll get it but see if you can calm her down. There's to be no divorce." He turned away, then abruptly turned back. "Not yet."

"Easier said than done." Carol held the phone away from her ear but her gaze followed Liam as he opened the front door.

Both she and her husband gaped at Troy.

Carol swiveled her attention back to the phone. "Yes, that's very unfortunate, and I'll have to call you later." She nodded, and said, "Yes, yes. Goodbye. Call you later." And hung up.

Troy, his hair tousled, a rough stubble of beard on his cheeks and chin and his clothes rumpled, plonked down his duffle bag and glanced from his father to his stepmother. "What are you up to? You look very suspicious, the pair of you."

Liam recovered first. "Well, what are you up to?" he countered. "I thought you were having a few days on Australis."

"Too hard." Troy slid his bag across the room with his foot. "I'm opening a red. Join me?" He wandered behind the kitchen bench to rummage in a drawer. He brought out a corkscrew and headed for the pantry.

Carol glanced at Liam who lifted a shoulder.

"Sure, I'll have a red," Liam said. "Carol, too. Three glasses."

Troy came back with a bottle of St Henri's, the glassware and the corkscrew dangling from his fingers. He handed Carol the glasses.

“Something you want to tell us, Troy?” Liam took the corkscrew and the bottle from his son, stripped the aluminium capsule from the neck and plunged the screw into the cork. “Too hard on Australis?”

Troy glanced at Carol. “Think I’m just jet-lagged, that’s all.” He reached over and took an empty glass from Carol, held it out to be filled by Liam.

“It’s only a twenty minute flight from Australis Island, Troy.”

Troy cut his dad a look. “I mean, from Fiji, to Brisbane, to Sydney, to Adelaide, to Australis in less than a day. Lots of travel time, no sleep time.”

Carol tried a smile at him and sipped the excellent red. “So how was Madelaine?”

Troy pulled up a bar stool at the kitchen bench. “She had plenty of sleep. She was fine. She was fine. The whole place was fine.”

Carol raised her eyebrows at Liam.

Liam sat beside his son. “So, why do you want a divorce?”

Troy wrapped his hands around the bowl of his glass. He glanced at his step-mother. “Sorry, Carol, Dad. It’s the only right thing to do. It was wrong to think we could carry it off.”

Spreading his hands, Liam nodded. “All right.” He kept nodding. “We know there’s provision for a two year, ah ... contract, but that’s not up yet. You have to remain married for that time.” Liam took up his glass. “Now that Victoria McNeal has conducted the audit—”

Troy snorted.

“—there’s still a little way to go before we can annul—”

Troy snorted again, then swallowed a large mouthful of wine.

“—well, before you divorce,” Liam finished lamely.

Carol leaned toward her step-son son-in-law. She laid her hand on his. “Are things so bad that you can’t wait, Troy?”

Troy looked at her and he groaned, his shoulders drooping.

“Oh,” Carol said, and glanced at Liam.

Troy held his hands up. “No, I didn’t mean anything bad by that,” he said. “But it is worse than you think.”

Carol placed her wine glass on the bench then sat back on her stool. “Oh,” she said again.

Liam folded one arm across the other, his wine in his free hand. “For the love of God, we don’t have a clue what you’re talking about. What do you mean it’s worse than we think?”

Troy set his wine down. “I love Madelaine. I love her. There’s no way around it.” He looked at Carol. “No. We haven’t, you know, consummated the marriage—”

Carol blinked.

“—but I know without a doubt that I want to be married to Madelaine.”

Liam glanced at his wife then back at his son. “Then, what do you mean, it’s worse than we think?” he repeated. “You’re already married.”

Troy sat at the bench with them. He toyed with the stem of the wine glass, held the glass aloft, seemed to be checking the beautiful berry coloured wine, and said, “It’s no good if we’re already married. We have to be not married.”

Carol blinked again. “I am really confused.”

“You’re right, you’re jetlagged,” Liam said.

Troy refilled his own glass, offered a top up to his father and Carol. They both shook their heads. “It’s taken me a bit of time to work it out, but each time Madds tells me what she means, I think I grasp a bit more of it.” He glanced at his father who raised an eyebrow.

“You couldn’t just tell from the things she said originally, then, son?”

“Very funny, Dad.”

Carol reached across and patted his hand. “Go on, Troy.” She stared at Liam, and frowned.

“The upshot is, she won’t sleep with me if we’re married.”

Carol looked at Liam. Liam looked at Troy. Troy looked at both of them.

Liam opened and closed his mouth a couple of times. Carol glared at him and gazed sympathetically at Troy.

“Now I’ve heard everything,” Liam finally blurted.

“I knew you couldn’t resist,” Carol hissed at him.

“So,” Troy continued as if neither had spoken. “I need a divorce to go after her properly, which is what should have happened in the first place.”

Liam leaned back on his stool, his empty wine glass dangling in his fingers. “That is going to be tricky in the short term. There’s just under two years to go.”

“Dad, surely to God—! This is the twenty-first century, for fuck’s sake.” Troy closed his eyes. “Sorry, Carol.”

Carol reached across and squeezed his arm.

Liam leaned forward. “We accepted the inheritance. We can’t very well undo everything.” He shook his head. “Troy, I actually think it was in the old boy’s plans to ensure that a decent, er, union was made and given some time.”

“There won’t be a bloody union at this rate.” Troy swept a hand through his hair, then rubbed his face.

“I’m her mother.” Carol sat up straight.

Both Troy and Liam looked at her expectantly.

“And if I were her, I would need to know you’d chase me anyway. That you’d do anything to have me, no matter what.” She downed her wine and thrust out her glass for a refill.

“Well, I guess we could try—” Liam began.

“Not ‘we’,” Carol interrupted, and aimed her gaze at Troy. “*You’re* married to her. *You* love her, so *you* better get on it.”

Troy refilled her glass. “Yeah, but she doesn’t—”

She tapped the finger which wore the wedding band. “And there’s to be no talk of divorce, so *you* figure it out,” she finished, and glared at both of them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Late in the afternoon, Madelaine watched as Fiona's little car rattled and hummed down her steep driveway. She hadn't been expecting her friend, but that didn't matter. It was always great to see her, and, of course, Fiona's Darcy.

By the time Madelaine got outside, Fiona had pulled up in the car park. She clambered out of the car and opened the back door.

As soon as Darcy saw Madelaine pulling faces at him, he squealed and gurgled and held his arms out to her.

Fiona hefted him out. "I swear he weighs three tonne. What am I feeding him?"

Madelaine laughed. "Here, let me." She swung Darcy out of the car while Fiona, backside sticking out of the car, reached across to drag out his day bag.

"I'm thinking to put him on a diet, like only one boob per night instead of two." She slid out of the car, huffing stray hairs out of her face.

"Yeww. Please." Madelaine made a pop-eyed face at Darcy who gurgled again and grabbed her nose.

"Either that or I'll run him behind the car when we come here."

"Sure you will." Madelaine bobbed Darcy on her hip some more. "He'd beat you here, your car's that old."

"Probably." Fiona hoisted the bag. "You happy to carry him? I've got his kit, but I think I have the better deal—" She stopped a moment then looked up the hill at a white four wheel drive vehicle on the crest. "More company, but a bit late in the day."

Madelaine followed Fiona's gaze. "Wasn't expecting anyone." Darcy pulled handfuls of her hair and stuck his fingers into her ear.

"Tourists, probably," Fiona said. "And typical, driving too fast down that hill."

Madelaine squinted at the vehicle. "Oh no. Doesn't anyone read the signs? Look, Fiona, take Darcy and—"

“Jesus crikey Moses.” Fiona dropped the baby bag. “They get any faster they’re gonna be airborne.” She grabbed Darcy from her friend and headed for the shelter of the garage.

Madelaine grabbed the bag and marched over to where Fiona stood with her baby, dumped the bag then marched back to the car park and waited, hands on hips.

“Not a good idea,” Fiona called.

“I have plenty of time,” Madelaine called back. “Jeez, *déjà-vu*. How many times has this happened before?” The vehicle kept coming down the steep slope but at the bottom of the hill, its speed dropped away to a crawl. Clouds of dust followed for a few metres, then the air cleared.

By the time it had purred its way on to the flat landing of her car park, Madelaine recognized the driver, the unmistakable head of dark, sink-my-hands-in-it hair, the wonderful face under it, and the voice as he piped up out of the window.

“Thought I’d try this again, without the brake-fail and the wallaby poop. What do you think?”

He smiled, teeth gleaming, his eyes shaded by sunnies until he nudged them up on to his forehead. Those mocha chocolada eyes warmed every bit of her.

Madelaine’s heart clamoured. She blurted out a laugh. “Much better.”

“Thank the living lord,” Fiona yelled from the safety of the garage. “Thought we were about to be killed. Again. Was getting to be a habit.” She lugged Darcy back with her to Troy’s car. “So good to see you.”

Troy stepped out of the vehicle. He put his arms around Madelaine and gripped her in a hug. He scraped his cheek slowly along her neck. “I’ve missed you,” he said then let her go before she could respond. He turned and took the chuckling baby boy from Fiona. “And this little man ... boy, have I missed him.” He held Darcy aloft and wriggled him. The baby squealed delightedly and reached down for Troy who lowered him to his chest. “Hey, chubby-chops.” Darcy snuggled in as Fiona stepped up for her hello kiss.

“But no beard scraping on my neck, thanks,” she said and turned an eye to see Madelaine reddening. Troy planted one on her cheek.

He still held on to Darcy whose interest in his chest hair was intense.

“Desperate for one of your coffees, Madds,” Troy said and winced only a little as Darcy grabbed a handful of hair.

Madelaine stood rooted to the spot. Here he was, her Troy, with her best friend’s baby in his arms as if it was a regular occurrence. Her heart bounced around as if it wasn’t anchored to anything and the heavy throb of a pulse crowded her breathing.

The wedding ring gleamed on his left hand. Her own wedding band, tucked into her bra on a silver chain, hummed against her skin.

“I’ll brew one up,” Fiona said and walked back towards the house. “Then I’ll be on my way.”

Madelaine dragged her gaze from man and boy, and followed Fiona. “You only just got here.”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t staying. I’m going up to visit Cloudy. She hasn’t seen Darcy in ages.”

“Right.” Since when did Fiona visit Cloudy Bannon via her house? It was miles out of the way. Madelaine glanced over her shoulder to see Troy and Darcy jiggling and dancing behind, on their way into the house.

He looked so good with that baby.

He just looked so good.

Fiona stalked around the house kitchen, setting up the plunger and the coffee grounds, boiling the kettle, grabbing the mugs—only two—setting the sugar and milk on the breakfast bench.

“Right. It’s all there, only need to fill with water and pour.” Fiona beamed at the pair of them, and sighed. “This is great.” She swung the baby bag over her shoulder and took Darcy from Troy. “Off we go.” Darcy giggled and gurgled on his mother’s hip all the way out the door, waving his arms at Troy.

A door slammed, an engine revved and the car was gone.

The kettle boiled. Madelaine poured water into the plunger. Thick and heady espresso filled the room.

Troy came around and took the kettle from her hand. “No weapons,” he said.

Madelaine laughed and pressed down the plunger instead. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Just a spur of the moment thing. Do you mind?”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t mind.” She glanced at him. “You are a partner, after all. And you have stuff in a room here, and all that.”

“Not to mention that we’re married.”

Heat bloomed on her face. “Not to mention that.” She glanced again at the wedding band on his hand and brought a hand up to her neck, fiddled with the chain there. Then she took a deep breath and poured their coffee.

“I’d like to sit in the lounge, all right?”

“Sure,” she agreed. Madelaine handed him a cup and grabbed hers. She took a seat in a single armchair.

He sat on the settee, set his mug down on the table and sprawled on the lounge, lifted his arms behind his head and laced his hands. “I’ve decided travel can wait.”

“Oh. No pressing engagements, then?”

“Except one.” He remained relaxed. “I’ve decided that I am going to live here on Australis.”

Madelaine’s heart rate jumped and the pulse under her jaw throbbed. “Well, that’s all very—”

“With my wife. In this house.”

She sat on the edge of her seat. “Yes, but no-one—”

“I’ve decided that as I can’t get *un-married* for another couple of years, I can’t wait that long to take my wife out as if we weren’t married, and have her get to know me, and take things slowly, etcetera, so I’m just going to have to do it *married* to her. I figure if it was all right for the old boy, Petny, it’s all right for me.” He glanced across at her, then closed his eyes.

Madelaine stilled. He looked pretty comfortable with that big statement. “And what do you think Eva might have had to say about it all?”

He cocked open an eye. “I reckon she figured him out pretty early. And then they had fifty years. That’s a good go at it.”

Madelaine looked at her coffee, picked it up and sipped. She wanted to smile, but not yet. She wanted to laugh aloud, shout a laugh, in fact. But not yet. “Petny seems to have been an old bastard, by all accounts.”

"I'm not exactly an old bastard," Troy said. "But I am hardy, I can turn my hand to most things, I cook—"

"Have fifty thousand billion dollars—"

"—I can provide a good couple of homes, servants, luxury carriages with plenty of horse-power, pigs and goats and chickens, and I can afford to give you gold coin for housekeeping."

"Except for the feral stock lines, I'm tempted. Very attractive package."

"The housekeeping, right?" Troy stayed on the lounge. He turned his head to gaze at her. "I can't un-marry you, Madds, unless we divorce, but that can't happen for nearly two years." He sat upright then, clasping his hands at his knees. "But you know what? I don't want that. I absolutely don't."

Madelaine's breath disappeared.

"What I want," he continued, "is for you to want the same as me. This marriage, this home and partnership, this life together. I want to be with you. I love you, I want to *make* love to you. I want to wake up with you every morning."

Madelaine had to breathe but it seemed very difficult right at the moment.

He took up his coffee again. "I want to plant more garden here. I want to make more tour menus, bring more people here to our place and create an outdoor venue. I want to visit my cousins and have them visit us here. I want to see Fiona, and Darcy and anyone else you want. I want to be part of your life here. I want us to have a life here."

Her breath came in small puffs. Her heartbeat was erratic, her coffee cup seemed to slip in her hands. She set it down on the table.

"And then next thing I want is for you to join me here," he said, slapping the seat beside him. He shifted to allow her space on the settee. "But what do you want?"

"Well," she said after a moment. "I wouldn't mind joining you on the settee."

He waited for her. Held his arm out for her to slide in against him. "I know you wear the wedding ring on a chain around your neck."

"I didn't want to be without it." She drew the chain out from under her shirt and gazed at the heavy band dangling from it. "It would've been better to find out if we really liked each other before we got married."

Troy took a lock of hair and wound it around a finger. “I *certainly* knew I really liked you.” He gathered more hair in his hand, mussed it softly. “Petny and Eva had to make the best of it, but we have different choices. And I’d still like to give it a go. I’d like us to do what they did, and make it work. Give the old folks a run for their money. So to speak.”

Madelaine rolled the wedding band in her fingers. “I’m worried.”

Troy dropped her hair and lifted the necklace over her head. He slipped the clasp and slid the ring from the chain. “Here.” He pushed it on to her wedding finger. “Looks good.”

It gleamed, and somehow she felt a warm glow all over.

“We can do the whole ceremony again, if you want. And I want to say this if we do... ‘in sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer, forsaking all others, till death us do part’.” His solemn gaze settled on her face.

“Oh.” Tears pricked her eyes. Madelaine leaned in to him some more, afraid he would see. “There’s so much we don’t know about each other.”

“Part of the journey.”

“If it doesn’t work...?”

“We won’t die wondering.”

Madelaine tucked her legs up under her. Troy gathered her closer still. “Your stuff is still in my bathroom,” she said, her heart thudding.

“Just as it should be.” He rested his head on hers. “And I’m looking forward to a long, hot shower.”

Her pulse pounded a happy dance. “After dinner?”

“I should be able to wait that long.”

He seemed happy to sit with her, but Madelaine felt her own steam rating edge up a few notches. “I don’t know I can wait that long.”

He let her go a little and looked at her. “You remember the elevator in the hotel before I found out you were going to be my dearly betrothed?”

She laughed at that. “Yes, I remember.”

He took her face in his hands and kissed her softly on the mouth. Then he said, "I'm kinda feeling like that." He kissed her again. "Or after we got married and we sat here on the settee? I'm kinda feeling like that."

She held his wrists, kissed him back, long and slow and inviting. "Me, too," she murmured in between kisses. "I think that means we're going to jump each other's bones this time."

"Yep. But I want more of this first." He dragged her on to his lap and slipped his hands under her top, brushed her breasts with his fingers. "More of how you feel in my hands. How I'm going to get you out of your clothes and carry you over my shoulder to the shower." He pulled the top off over her head, reached around and snapped open her bra.

Fingertips played with her nipples, his mouth sank over one, then the other. Her belly squeezed, and warmth rushed through her, tingling and zinging. When she came up for air, she said, "Think we might be done here in the lounge...time for the bathroom." She reached around for her top to hold in front of her.

"Think you're right." He slid her to her feet, took her hand and headed for their bedroom. "One thing, though," he began, looking back at her.

She tottered along behind him, her legs not really moving properly. "What's that?"

He flashed his big, warm grin at her. "You don't sing in the shower, do you?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Madelaine answered the phone as she watched Troy sleeping.

Good thing it was on vibrate, she could look at him some more before he woke up. And just looking at him in her bed—their bed—was a beautiful sight. His hair was tousled and the shadow on his jaw gave him a rakish, piratey sort of look. He lay naked, on his side, the dark hair across his chest just waiting for her hands to brush over it.

She just might have to wake him up. Again.

She pressed the answer button. After all, it was a respectable hour to get phone calls, and she had caller ID.

“Hi Fiona.” Madelaine could hear Darcy cooing in the background.

“Are you properly married yet?”

“Yep. Reckon I can safely say that’s the case.”

“Go on. Tell.”

“No way. We’re not even up yet.”

“Sorry! I’ll get off the phone. Now, this really is a happy day. Love ya, Madds. Bye.” And Fiona disconnected.

Troy opened an eye. “Fiona?”

“Fiona.” Madelaine was about to slide back beside him and get skin to skin once more when her phone vibrated again.

“Bet it’s your mother.”

Caller ID... “Hi Mum.”

“Hi darling. Everything all right?”

“Everything’s perfect.”

Madelaine listened to the few moment’s silence. Then, Carol said, “Oh, that is so wonderful. So now you’re really married?”

“Mum.”

“Liam will be so happy. I’ll—”

“Bit busy, Mum, bye.”

Troy grabbed her and slid her down beside him. “Where were we?”

“We were—”

Troy’s phone clanged in the bedroom.

“Bet it’s your dad.”

He checked his caller ID. “Hi Dad.” He held the phone against Madelaine’s ear so she could hear, too.

“Troy. Good morning,” Liam said.

Troy waited a beat. “Yes. It is.”

Madelaine listened as Liam asked, “Really?”

“Really,” Troy replied, smiling at her.

“Great. Talk to you later,” Madelaine heard her father-in-law say, and then he hung up.

Troy reached for Madelaine again. “I don’t think there’s anyone else who’s likely to call wondering about our married life, is there?”

She shook her head and rolled on top of him, her body over the length of his, all warm and hard and furry, her hands framing his smiling face.

And then she kissed him. Again and again.

THE END

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