

A
Fairytale
FOR
Christmas

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white short-sleeved dress with a colorful floral pattern and a large wide-brimmed straw hat with a bow, stands with her back to the camera. She is holding the brim of her hat with her right hand. In the background, a herd of cows is grazing in a dry, golden-brown field under a warm, hazy sunset sky. The scene is framed by decorative elements like gold stars and floral sprigs.

Penelope Janu



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Christmas*



PENELOPE JANU

FICTION



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About the Author

PENELOPE JANU lives on a farm in the Southern Highlands of NSW with a distracting husband, cattle she becomes more attached to than she should and, now they're fully grown, six delightful children who come and go. Penelope has a passion for creating stories that explore social and environmental issues, but her novels are fundamentally a celebration of Australian characters and communities. Her first novel, *In at the Deep End*, came out in 2017, her eighth novel, *Sunshine through the Rain*, was published in 2023 and her ninth novel, *The Summerfield Saddler*, will be out in December 2024. *A Fairytale for Christmas* is Penelope's third novella. Penelope enjoys riding horses, exploring the Australian countryside and dreaming up challenging hiking adventures. Nothing makes her happier as a writer than readers falling in love with her clever and adventurous heroines and heroes. She loves to hear from readers, and can be contacted at www.penelopejanu.com.

To my son Benjamin, who taught me there are different ways of reading.

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Chapter 1

Like a house from the pages of *Little Red Riding Hood* or *Hansel and Gretel*, the picturesque cabin—rough-hewn logs, lopsided shutters and a steeply pitched roof—appears at the edge of the forest. I scrape my boots against the wedge that serves as a doormat, push open the door and step over the threshold. Children's picture books, dog-eared and battered but neatly stacked in an open-sided crate, occupy one corner of the room. A weathered oak table, the surface covered with the documents I left here last night, sits beneath the window. The solitary upright chair scrapes against the boards as I pull it towards me. A week ago, as I followed a disused fire track from my rented cottage to the top of the hill, I searched for reception. In addition to that ...

I found a fairytale.

There's only one room in the cabin, like there's one stack of books and one window to frame the landscape. Powder puff clouds, glossy black cattle, patchwork green fields, a crease in the valley, a river. The farmhouse at the bottom of the hill—sandstone yellow chimney, soft brown walls, a glistening silvery roof—is in profile. Pushing my documents aside, I put my elbows on the table and my chin in cupped hands. Two white-faced herons, grey with long brown legs, fish for breakfast from the roots of a river red

gum. Kookaburras laugh and welcome the morning. When a breeze pushes through the gap above the door, I reach for a bull clip and lift my hair high, twist it into a coil and secure it in a bun. Flipping pages in twos, I find the document I was working through last night, open my laptop and place fingers on the keys. I remind myself of why I'm here.

'If I don't finish this report by Christmas, I'll lose the ballgown and slippers. I'll also lose the carriage and—'

As if I've conjured them up, three horses appear on the grassy track that runs from the farmhouse to the cabin. A broad-shouldered man, Akubra tipped low against the early-morning sun, rides a tall black thoroughbred with a long white blaze. Two rounded ponies, one piebald, one grey, trot by the horse's side. Is this the next-door neighbour Lorraine warned me about when I leased her cottage? *You won't see Beau D'Arcy if he sees you first.*

The ponies canter to keep up as the man takes a left at a fork in the track. It's been seventeen years since I had a pony. Rocket was ten years old, the same age as me, and his mane and tail were flaxen like my pigtails. Tracing the line that runs along my jaw, I feel for the bumps where the stitches went in. My stomach clenches, my skin prickles. The only other times I feel like that is when I'm at a pool or when I'm—

'No!' I push back the memories, focus on the present. Cumulus clouds, storybook hedgerows, a dip in the valley, a ribbon of water. Up in my tower, as high as Rapunzel, I can live life from afar. 'But not all day ...' I stretch out my fingers. 'I have a Christmas deadline.'

I take another document, *ASX Regulations: Corporate Restructures*, from the stack of papers on the table and methodically turn the pages. Paragraphs. Sentences. Words. I know words. I understand words.

Words don't have the power to hurt me.



'What are you doing here?'

When I spin around, my chair teeters on two legs before crashing to the floor. The man who was riding the horse is standing at the door. I glance at my laptop. Two hours have passed since I arrived at the cabin.

‘I asked you a question.’ Only a hairsbreadth separates the crown of the man’s Akubra from the doorframe, but the sun is behind him and blitzes his features.

‘Who are you?’ My voice is a squeak. ‘Why are you here?’

He pulls off the hat as he walks into the room. He’s young, maybe early thirties, and his face is all angles. High cheekbones, strong jaw. Hair short and dark, blue eyes like denim. His expression is grim.

‘You shouldn’t be here.’ He doesn’t raise his voice, but it slices the air.

‘Why not?’ I pull the chair upright, grip onto the back. ‘Why sneak up on me like that?’

He opens his mouth as if he might dispute what I’ve said. Then, ‘This is private property.’

The jangle of bits. A horse’s snort. The laughter of children. ‘Hurry up, slowcoach!’

He looks over his shoulder. ‘Thomasina! Lacey! Wait for me out there!’

‘Who are—’

‘I asked why you were here.’

‘I’m leasing Lorraine’s cottage. She said I could come here to work if I couldn’t get a signal. The cabin is hers, isn’t it?’

Jaw tight, his gaze shifts to the pile of children’s books in the corner of the room. ‘It’s mine.’

‘Oh ...’ Is he angry? Defensive? I have no idea how to read him. I turn my back, tidy the desk, look over my shoulder. ‘I came here from Sydney a week ago; I haven’t seen anybody up here.’

‘I’ve been away.’

I face him again, wave a hand around. ‘I wish Lorraine had been more upfront about reception. I need it for work.’

‘This isn’t Sydney.’

I risk a smile. ‘I bring my own water and thermos, and only use the light in the evenings. Would you mind very much if I was here?’

‘Yes.’

‘I can pay.’

‘I’m not for sale.’

Did I *suggest* he was for sale? ‘How about a short-term licence agreement? I can draw one up if you like. I’m a lawyer.’ Another attempt at a smile. ‘Pro bono.’

His gaze moves over the desk, my laptop and documents. ‘No.’

‘I’m sorry I came here without your permission, really I am. But I’d be grateful if you’d reconsider. I’ll only be here for another six weeks, just until the end of December.’ Yet another smile. ‘My parents would kill me if I wasn’t home for Christmas.’

‘I said no.’

‘You’re Beau D’Arcy, aren’t you?’ Hand extended, I walk towards him. ‘Juliette McAdams.’

A brief hesitation, but when he takes my hand, his grip is firm. ‘Laurence McAdams’s daughter.’ Not a question, a statement. When his eyes travel over my face, what does he see? Like my father, I’m tall, but mostly I resemble my mother. Hair darker in winter than summer, wide mouth, grey eyes. His hand is large, cool and call-used. I’m not aware of hanging on until he yanks it free.

‘Do you know my father?’

‘I’d recognise him.’

‘Look ...’ I indicate the documents on the table, the view from the window. ‘I’d like to continue to work up here. Couldn’t we come to an arrangement?’

‘Don’t you understand the word “no”? You shouldn’t be here.’

‘Besides the table and chair, all that *is* here is ...’ I look around him to the crate. ‘Children’s books.’

Expression unreadable, he takes a step back. ‘You heard what I said.’

I glance at the book at the top of the pile. ‘You can’t seriously believe Goldilocks cares that I’m here?’

His smile goes nowhere near his eyes. ‘You’d know.’

‘What?’

‘Entitled, argumentative, beautiful. An intruder.’

Beautiful? I push the word aside. ‘Is it an intrusion when nobody’s here?’

‘Trespass. Break and enter.’ When he crosses his arms, his shirt pulls tight across his shoulders. ‘You’re the lawyer.’

‘If I’d had any idea the cabin was yours, I would have sought your permission. Now I’m aware of the situation, that’s what I’m doing. I’d like to use the cabin because I need to get this work done and—’

‘You always get what you want.’

Aching chest. Stinging eyes. I get what I *think* I want but then ... ‘What do you know of my father?’ I clear my throat. ‘Of me?’

‘McAdams played at a golf course in Denman. You caddied for him.’

‘I would’ve been twelve or thirteen. I drove the golf cart.’

He rubs around the back of his neck. ‘I was fifteen.’

‘I don’t remember you.’

His eyes narrow. ‘You wouldn’t.’

‘Beau!’ The children’s voices are closer now. ‘We’re coming!’

Beau takes a step back and yells, ‘Wait there!’

‘Are they your children?’

‘No.’

Shoving the chair aside, I walk to the crate of books. *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. When I pick it up, the spine twists and it slips from my hand, falling to the floor with a slap. I bend and reach for it but, cursing under his breath, so does Beau. When our fingers connect, I snatch the book and take a jerky step back.

‘I can’t stay here because Goldilocks and the bears wouldn’t like it?’ I hold the book tightly to my chest.

His mouth firms. ‘Put it back.’

‘There’s no need to ... to ...’

‘Growl?’

My eyes go to his mouth. His go to mine. A traitorous warmth steals through my body, warming it inside and out.

‘Beau!’ Two young girls, identical twins around nine years old, burst through the door. ‘Why do we have to wait for so—’

When the girls crash to a stop either side of Beau, he holds his arms out, but one of them sidesteps around him.

‘I’m Thomasina!’ Reindeer hairclips glisten through the girl’s curly dark hair. ‘Are you staying at Lorraine’s house? Beau says she rips people off.’

‘I’m disappointed the cottage doesn’t have reception.’ I glance at Beau, hoping he’ll take pity on me, but his stance is resolute.

Thomasina bounces up and down on the spot. ‘I wish I had a beautiful shirt like your shirt.’

I lift the blue silk from my body, flap it around. ‘It’s a little hot, but I didn’t bring many clothes.’

‘Why haven’t we seen you at the pub?’

I laugh. ‘Are you older than you look?’

The second girl, dressed in a T-shirt, jeans and riding boots like her sister, steps forward. ‘I’m Lacey.’ Her voice is soft. ‘Our dad owns the Ballimore Hotel, so we can go anywhere we want, not just the dining room and courtyard.’

‘Should I come to lunch on Sunday? What do you recommend?’

‘Schnitty and chips!’

‘Didn’t I tell you to wait outside?’ Beau herds the girls towards the door. ‘Go and put your helmets on.’

As the girls shout laughing goodbyes, Beau’s gaze shifts from my face to the book clenched to my chest. His expression is shuttered. What is he hiding? He watches closely as I carefully place the book at the top of the pile.

‘Beau? Please change your—’

‘You’ve got until the end of the weekend.’



Chapter 2

Constitutions. Trusts. Corporate restructures. On Saturday, I work in the cabin from dawn until midnight and I'm back in my Rapunzel chair at six on Sunday morning. Gossamer mists rise from the curves of the valley as I drink coffee from a thermos, munch on an apple, eat a banana and sleepily turn the pages of *The Little Engine That Could*. A jumble of letters (I *think* they're letters) has been crayoned in the nameplate at the front. Most letters are back to front. Some are small case, others are capitals. I make out a *B* and an *e* and a *U*. Was it Beau's book? Why keep it up here? Tempting as it is to look through the other books, I resist, walking *The Little Engine That Could* back to the crate.

'I have other priorities,' I say to the illustration of the boy in dungarees waving merrily from the train. I return the book to where I found it, under *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*.

Within five hours, notwithstanding half a packet of chocolate chip biscuits, my stomach is rumbling. It's only a ten-minute walk to Lorraine's cottage, a three-bedroom weatherboard that, now I've put her sickly air fresheners outside on the porch, increasingly smells of damp. The water

system is dodgy, the windows rattle whenever a truck goes past and the reception is non-existent.

You won't see Beau D'Arcy if he sees you first.

Lorraine was wrong about that because Beau tracked me down. When I said I didn't remember him, he scowled. I got the impression he wasn't on the golf course for a lark, but why else would he be there? A search of his name comes up with a possible explanation. Beau is thirty-two, was raised by his mother and grew up in the Upper Hunter Valley. He's a landscape designer and, going by the impressive endorsements and the images on his website—private estates and public spaces including parks and exclusive golf courses—a very successful one. When he's not travelling locally and overseas on commissions, he works on his farm in Ballimore.

You've got until the end of the weekend. After Beau gave me my marching orders, he mounted his thoroughbred and led the girls and their ponies down the track towards the river and presumably his farmhouse. His words and tone should have offended me. They *did* offend me. But did I pack my bag and walk out in high dudgeon?

Like the song of a siren, the cabin on the edge of the forest drew me back. And ... I've been given until the end of the weekend.

It's a short drive, only a few kilometres, from Lorraine's cottage to the centre of town, where the Ballimore Hotel, a two-storey Federation pub with a balcony spanning two sides, stands proudly on the main street. The car park is packed with cars, utilities and four-wheel drives, and even though the shops are mostly closed on Sundays, all the adjacent parking spots are taken. I park at the top of the hill near the park where a crowd of adults and children gather at a rotunda, a round timber structure with a black slate roof. Some sit on the bench seats inside the rotunda, others chat in the gardens that surround it. A group of teenagers, mostly boys, throw a basketball around.

'Juliette!' Thomasina takes Lacey's hand and lifts it high. 'It's us!'

As the girls skip across the scrappy summer grass towards me, a strongly built man with a shock of thick white hair steps away from the crowd.

'Lassies!'

Jock Atherton, a Scotsman in his fifties, introduces himself as Thomasina and Lacey's father and welcomes me to Ballimore. As the girls

skip back to their friends, Jock tells me he's heard a lot about the glamorous young woman his daughters came across in Beau D'Arcy's cabin.

I tuck my French linen shirt into my jeans. 'I have a lot of office clothes.'

'I've also been told you're a lawyer from Sydney who has a Christmas deadline.'

'You heard that from Beau D'Arcy?'

'It's all I could get out of him.'

I force a smile. 'I have a lot of work to get done, he was right about that.'

'So close to Christmas?'

'Something went wrong at work.' I shrug like it doesn't matter. 'I'm here to make amends.'

'We're delighted to see you in town.' His smile is sympathetic.

'The pub's schnitzel and chips come highly recommended.'

He mocks a frown. 'I trust we can do better than that.'

'Why are all these people here?'

'The Ballimore Progress Association called a town meeting.'

Jock explains that although the town wholeheartedly supported the council's plans to build two basketball courts and a clubhouse—much-needed recreational spaces for teenagers—the council's original proposal has changed.

'The council was going to build on the far side of the park near the bend in the road, but now they want to build exactly where we're standing. The rotunda would be demolished, and we'd lose the gardens. There's vehement opposition in the town.'

'I'm not surprised. Why would the council do that?'

'In addition to avoiding the expense of repairs to the rotunda and upgrading the watering system, the council would have access to level land. Building the courts and clubhouse here would save thousands in excavation costs.'

'The rotunda isn't protected by heritage listing?'

Jock grimaces. 'I don't know that it's an architectural masterpiece.'

'There are other considerations. Why was it built? Who built it?'

'There was an excess of funds raised for the World War I memorial. The locals used them to build the rotunda.'

‘Is the memorial still here?’

Jock points to a stand of gum trees near the entrance to the park. ‘All the men lost, thirty percent of Ballimore’s male population, are listed on the plaque.’

‘So, given the tragedy, the locals wanted to do something positive for the town.’

‘That could help our cause?’

‘If there were public funds involved, there’ll be records. Do you know what the rotunda was used for back then? Is it still used?’

‘It’s been the centrepiece for the Ballimore seasonal markets for decades. The first market was held in mid-December, which is why our Christmas gatherings are particularly special.’

‘The town’s past and its future sit nicely together. There’d be a chance of saving it.’

‘Do you think you could help?’

I’m already working sixteen-hour days, but ... A long-legged girl, similar in age to a group of boys tossing a basketball around, peels away from Thomasina and Lacey. When the girl holds out a hand, one of the boys throws her the ball and she catches it.

‘I can help with the application, but that doesn’t get you the basketball courts.’

‘The Progress Association has already committed to a top-notch surface. Hoops and other equipment are sitting idly in somebody’s shed. Sponsors, including me, have pooled money to buy jerseys, employ a part-time coach and fit out the clubhouse. We’ve even signed up to a players’ league. The teens are keen as mustard, which makes the council’s stance particularly distressing.’

‘This is a long shot, but ...’

Jock smiles encouragingly. ‘We’ll take anything.’

‘Does the council know you’ve acted on its promise to build the courts and clubhouse? That you’ve put money behind their decision and locked in sponsorship?’

‘Absolutely, but it won’t budge. What are you thinking, Juliette?’

The teenagers are still throwing the ball around. The girl, taller than most of the boys, intercepts the ball and spins it on a finger.

‘You might be able to raise an estoppel. It’s an equitable principle that applies when, even if there isn’t a contract, one of the parties to an agreement goes back on a promise it’s made. The town has spent money because of representations made by the council to build the courts. As the council was aware of this, it would be inequitable for it to go back on its word.’

‘We have the council’s early drawings, which factored in the excavation work.’ Jock rubs his hands together. ‘Quite a lot of correspondence too.’

‘The council might be afraid of the legal expenses that would come out of defending an action. I’m assuming the additional excavation costs will be tens of thousands, not millions, of dollars? Caving in might be the council’s cheaper option.’

‘I like the sound of this!’

‘We could lodge the heritage application while putting together the estoppel arguments. My friend Po Mei is a barrister. I’ll ask her what she thinks.’

When Thomasina and Lacey run to the footpath, Jock loops his arm through mine. ‘Lunch and a glass of bubbles are on me.’

‘I’ll be back at work soon. I’d better keep a clear head.’

‘Ah, yes,’ Jock says. ‘Making amends.’

As we walk along the footpath, the sun throws dappled patterns on the concrete. Light and dark. Right and wrong. I was humiliated in court, the firm lost a valuable client, and I was put on notice. Why hadn’t I been on top of *all* of my matters? If I had a problem with the workload, why hadn’t I reported it earlier?

Words had always been my friends. Yes, they were associated with deadlines, but I was methodical and hard-working. And it’s not like I could have told the firm the truth about what had happened. I was reminded (as if I needed it) that I had quite the pedigree. Dad was a successful banker and financier, as was Jasper, my brother. After a stellar career as an accountant, my mother was the chairman of the country’s largest bank.

My firm had a project no one wanted to take on. Hundreds of documents, dating back decades, had to be read, analysed, cross-referenced, condensed. New papers had to be drawn up. I was told I would only have one file. With a disparaging smile, I was asked by the managing partner if that would make things easier.

Use your intellect.

Work hard.

Get the job done by Christmas.

Jock nudges my arm. 'A penny for your thoughts.'

I force a smile. 'My stomach is rumbling.'



Chapter 3

The mantelpiece and surround of the fireplace in the pub's dining room are warm honeyed maple. Thomasina and Lacey, dark heads together, kneel to arrange cellophane and pine cones in the broad cast iron grate. I smother a yawn as I carry my plate and glass to the bar.

'Thanks, Jock. The risotto was delicious.'

Jock, standing behind the bar with a blue and white striped apron stretched over his tummy, lifts his brows. 'No dessert?'

'I'd better get back. I'll email the points we discussed so you can search the Progress Association's records. After I have those details, I'll line up a call with Po Mei.'

'You deserve an afternoon off.'

'If I didn't go back to the cabin, I'd miss my favourite time of the day—watching the sun go down.'

'Never fear, Juliette. It will go down again tomorrow.'

'Not for me. Beau wants the cabin back.'

'What for?'

'As it belongs to him, he doesn't need a reason.' Thomasina hides a strand of lights in red and orange cellophane, and Lacey places pine cones

on the top. When I blow kisses, they blow kisses back. ‘When he said I was trespassing like Goldilocks, he had a point.’

‘I presume there’s nothing of value up there.’

‘A table, a chair and a crate full of children’s books—potentially his. Does he have children?’

‘Notwithstanding his popularity with the fairer sex, no. Mind you, he gives work to the most difficult of the teens on his farm, and he’s brilliant with my little rascals, finding them ponies and teaching them to ride.’

‘The ponies belong to him?’

‘He has quite the menagerie at the farmhouse, which is always a challenge when he travels. Dubai and Saudi Arabia one week, Thailand and Malaysia the next. Perhaps he’s taking a break over Christmas. Maybe that’s why he wants the place to himself.’

‘I shouldn’t have argued with him. Like I said, it’s his cabin. He can do what he likes with it.’

‘Mate!’ someone calls from behind me. ‘Get a drink and come join us!’

Jock’s eyes light up. ‘Beau!’ He waves a tea towel above his head. ‘Speak of the devil! Over here, young man!’

Please don’t come over. *Please* don’t imagine ...

Wearing denim jeans and worn brown boots, Beau appears as rugged and fit as he did in the cabin. He’s cleanly shaven, he smells nice, he ...

‘Juliette,’ he says stiffly. ‘Jock.’

‘What’s this I hear?’ Jock feigns outrage. ‘You should be welcoming our saviour with open arms, not throwing her out of your cabin!’

Last time I saw Beau, his eyes were cool. Now they’re Arctic cold. ‘What did she tell you?’

‘Goldilocks be damned.’ Jock smiles broadly. ‘I’d suggest *The Princess and the Pea*. Juliette is a sensitive soul, hence her enjoyment of the views from the cabin.’

Beau already thinks I’m entitled and argumentative. Now he can add manipulative to the list. I could stick up for myself, but why should I have to?

‘She’s been up there all week,’ Beau says.

‘Christmas is only weeks away.’ Jock leans over the bar. ‘Won’t you reconsider?’

‘Jock! You don’t have to ...’

‘How are you Ballimore’s saviour?’ Beau asks me.

‘A two-pronged advance!’ Jock flicks his tea towel. ‘Juliette believes it might be possible for us to save the rotunda *and* get our basketball courts.’

‘The rotunda is a money pit.’

‘Properly repaired, it won’t be. And as we’ve added to Juliette’s workload, the least we can do is make her comfortable.’

‘Take the pea from under her mattress?’

I force words. ‘I never said—’

‘Why can’t Juliette work in the cabin?’ Jock says. ‘It makes no sense.’

A short silence. Then, ‘Get me a beer, Jock.’

Jock grins as he backs away. ‘Schooner coming up.’

I take a sideways step. Another one. ‘I’m going.’

Beau’s gaze is hard on the side of my face. ‘Why tell Jock I kicked you out?’

‘I didn’t.’

‘Bullshit.’

I glance at my watch. ‘I have work to do.’

‘At the cabin.’

‘Don’t I have until midnight?’

‘Are you Cinderella now?’

Jock has been friendly and welcoming. I liked sitting at the table with Thomasina and Lacey. People walked past, nodded and smiled. I’ve enjoyed myself. But now ...

I clear my throat, point the toe of an expensive city boot. ‘My footwear is my own.’

‘According to Jock, you can be useful to Ballimore. How useful?’

‘I won’t cost anything, I’m diligent and I have contacts. My ability to assist the town will be enhanced by reliable phone and internet connections.’

‘What about enjoying the view?’

‘Is my happiness your problem? How do I get around that?’

‘I didn’t—’

‘You said you can’t be bought, but I could pay for the cabin in kind. I spent every childhood holiday at my parents’ thorough-bred stud in Denman. I could ...’ When my voice peters out, I strengthen it. ‘I could help on your farm.’

‘Doing what?’

My mind goes blank. Then ... ‘Office work!’

He blinks.

‘You run a business. I know about corporate governance, tax, trusts and structures. I have good word and spreadsheet skills. Sit me in an office, give me direction and I’ll get things done.’

‘I have an accountant, a communications specialist and an EA.’ His eyes narrow. ‘I also have a lawyer.’

‘There must be something I can do.’

‘You want to take over my cabin?’

‘Just like Goldilocks. If you don’t want to commit until Christmas, we could reassess at the end of every week. What should I do first?’

Deadly serious, he searches my face. ‘Do you have honey on your porridge?’

‘What?’

‘You can help with my bees.’



Chapter 4

I would have been five or six years old when, spreading out a picnic blanket for my dolls, I was stung by a bee. Screaming at the top of my lungs, I ran clear of the lavender bushes before collapsing on the grass. My eldest brother, Jasper, scooped me up and held my ankle while Jackson, two years younger than Jasper, pulled out the stinger.

‘It hurts!’

‘It’s the bee, not you, that’s going to die,’ Jasper said. ‘Why didn’t you put shoes on like I told you?’

‘We get that it hurts, brat,’ Jackson added. ‘But no joke, you’re bursting our eardrums with your crying.’

My brothers insisted the slight redness and swelling on my foot was nothing to worry about, so I can’t be allergic to a bee sting. But Beau must have a lot of bees. What if a bee (or a hive or colony or swarm or whatever the collective noun is) flew into my mouth, stung my tongue and throat and

When my alarm goes off, it’s a relief to get out of bed. I clean my teeth, splash my face, throw on jeans and a blue and white striped T-shirt and walk through the early morning mist to the cabin. I check my emails, responding to five and forwarding two more. One of the cows has just given

birth. The calf isn't yet up but wriggles and puts its hooves on the ground when the cow nudges him with her nose. Will she mind that I walk past? I hope not.

Flies buzz around me as I follow the track to the farmhouse, and I wave them away. Can bees be waved away too?

Stopping dead on the track, I call my breathing to order. I search for other things, sensible things, to think about. The calf is up now but, afraid of spooking the cow, I keep to the far side of the track.

'Good cow. I come in peace.'

Beau doesn't want me in his cabin. I want to stay. To achieve that, I need to pay in kind. Anyway, much as I admire the profile of the farmhouse from my vantage point in the cabin, I'm curious to see the rest of the house as well. Both those things *arguably* justify taking on killer bees.

My steps falter again but I push on. Helping with his bees could be Beau's revenge, but I doubt he'd hurt me deliberately. Jock and his girls admire Beau and, going by the calls he was getting to join others in the pub for a drink, the town approves of him too. He doesn't have my number or email, so I wasn't sure how he'd contact me, but when I arrived in the cabin yesterday morning I found a folded piece of paper, like a page from a scrapbook only much thicker paper, on the desk. Numerals were scrawled at the top:

24.11

06:00

The 'when' for helping with his bees is *presumably* six o'clock in the morning on the twenty-fourth of November. As to the 'where' ... Beau has done a sketch. The cabin, with its pitched roof, shutters, single door and window, is unmistakable. A broad curving track, the river to the west, paddocks either side, narrows at a sturdy timber gate. An arrowed route around the farmhouse leads to a path, a wide slatted timber shed and beyond that a box, raised on stilts, that looks like a tiny house. A beehive? It must be, because sitting on the roof, Beau has drawn a large bee and a lot of smaller bees. In one corner of the sheet of paper is a separate drawing, a detailed depiction of the inside of the shed. Jars of different shapes and sizes are lined up on the shelves.

I take the piece of paper from the back pocket of my jeans, carefully unfold it and admire it again. I *think* it might mean ...

I'll be putting honey into jars.

Parakeets, a family of four, flit in and out of the shrubs that line a path through the hectares of gardens encircling the farmhouse. Exotic trees like birches, maples, pines and oaks, and native species of gums and eucalypts, have grown here for decades. The smaller plants— grasses and groundcovers, boronia, bottlebrush and banksia—are far less mature.

Sandstone blocks, the same creamy colour as the tall double-chimney, comprise the foundations of the two-storey house. Mottled brown bricks are laid in herringbone patterns and weathered timber shutters like the ones at the cabin abut multi-paned windows. The guttering and downpipes, like the grey slate roof, appear to be new.

'Hello, boy.' A kelpie, one ear up and one down, with a coat which would once have been black but is now steely grey, sits on the verandah outside double timber doors. When I crouch, he walks stiffly across the timber boards and down the steps. He lowers his head and I rub around his ears. He licks my hand. 'You're not much of a guard dog, are you? Where's your human?'

Even before Beau walks around the corner, the kelpie's tail wags steadily. Beau's head is down. Worn jeans, faded blue plaid shirt with unfastened cuffs hanging loosely at his wrists. He has a white netted hood in his hand. Gravel crunches under his feet when he jerks to a stop.

'What are you doing here?'

As I stand, I calmly check my watch. 'You told me to come.'

'Not this early.'

'Your note said six.'

His mouth slams shut. Arms crossed, he looks away. I told Jock we'd rubbed each other up the wrong way. It's more than that. There's something in his expression that ...

'Follow me.'

'Wait!' I crouch again, stroke the dog. 'What's his name? How old is he?'

'Otto. He's twelve.'

'Who looks after him when you travel?'

'Jock and the girls, or a neighbour.' When he directs Otto to stay, with one last wag of his tail, the dog goes back to his bed on the verandah. 'Can we go?'

Beau's sketches of the shed were not only beautiful, but accurate. Slats of timber, like a sunrise of beams, rise above double hardwood doors. There are three long workbenches and multiple rows of shelves. How many jars? I count in sixes to sixty-six. Is that how many Beau outlined and shaded in the sketch? When I get back to the cabin, I'll check.

'Was the shed built at the same time as the house?'

'Yes.' He points through a window to a line of pines. 'I had a new machinery shed built behind the trees.'

'How long have you lived here?'

He opens a timber chest and takes out a white drawstring bag. 'Five years.'

'It's lovely.'

He glances at me, then away. 'After we get the honey, you put it into jars and label them.'

We get the honey. I grip the bench behind me. 'Where does it go after that?'

'The Country Women's Association sell it at the markets.' He's halfway to the door when he turns. 'Are you coming?'

When I join him at the door, it's hard to get words out. 'The Christmas markets? They're held in the park near the rotunda, aren't they?'

'Yes.' He frowns. 'How are you going with saving it?'

It's such a relief not to have a sentence along the lines of 'Can we go?', 'Follow me', or 'Are you coming?' it loosens my tongue.

'Jock is putting together the heritage information I'll need for the application, while I look at correspondence on the basketball courts. To have any chance of arguing promissory estoppel, it will be essential to demonstrate the Progress Association relied on the council's promises to its detriment.'

He opens his mouth, shuts it. 'We paid upfront for the court surface, equipment and other supplies. Is that what you're talking about?'

'The association also entered into an agreement with the basketball league and the coach. Showing the losses it will suffer if the council goes back on its word strengthens our arguments.'

He turns abruptly on his heel. A glance over his shoulder. 'Now can we go?'



I do my best to channel the courageous Juliette I might have become if fear hadn't grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, thrown me to the ground, trampled me underfoot and left me for dead too many times to recall, but when the hive comes into view, I freeze.

'This is enough!'

My words don't make sense, so it's hardly surprising Beau is confused. But then, as I turn cold and hot and cold again, as my hands shake and my knees wobble, he grasps the tops of my arms. What would he do if I fainted right here on his path?

He could terminate my lease of the cabin. I don't have a lease.

He could revoke my licence. I don't have a licence.

Could I make a claim for adverse possession? As I've been in the cabin for barely two weeks and not twenty years, that's really grasping at straws.

'Juliette? What's going on?'

'I feel sick.'

'Your face is white.'

'I have to sit down.'

His hands open and close on my arms but then he lets me go and—

When I hit the ground, he hits it with me. *He breaks my fall.* My elbow is in his sternum and my knee is between his—

'Fuck!'

'Oh!'

Still cursing under his breath, he shifts me so I'm sitting. 'Open your mouth, Juliette. Breathe.' He speaks quietly, rubs across my shoulders.

'I don't want to throw up on you.'

'I don't want that either.'

'What if a bee stings my throat?'

He shifts position again, crouches in front of me. He raises a hand and taps under my chin.

'Shut your mouth and it won't.'

Our eyes lock. Basic grey on denim. But not for long because a grapefruit-sized lump forms in my throat and my eyes start to sting and

everything blurs. If I were trapped underwater or trampled by an elephant or fell off a cliff or—

‘Juliette?’

Putting my hands on his chest, I frantically push, rolling away from him onto the grass before scrabbling like a crab to get clear. Sitting on my bottom, I bend my knees and wrap my arms tightly around them.

Beau leans over me, blocking the sun, and then he sits too. Slowly. Cautiously. Because just like I didn’t want to spook the cow this morning, he doesn’t want to spook me. It’s six thirty in the morning. How can I wish this day was already done?

‘I shouldn’t have made a joke of it,’ he says quietly. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I’ll stay here while you get the honey.’ I press my forehead against my knees. ‘Then I’ll do what you want.’

‘Go back to the shed. Wait for me there.’

When I shake my head, he mutters something under his breath before opening the drawstring bag and pulling out overalls, gloves and a hood. He drops them in my lap.

‘If you want to stay, you have to put these on.’



Chapter 5

Beau checks the gloves and hood are firmly attached to the overalls I've pulled on before, after one more long glance, he pulls on gloves and a hood and walks to the bees. I've read about flow hives, where a series of frames made in a factory as partially formed honeycombs, slot into a hive like pieces of toast in a toaster. The bees complete the combs by covering them with wax, then filling them with nectar. Beau explains what's going on as he opens the hive.

'I'll cap off and harvest six of the frames. The bees usually stay in the hive.'

'Bees pollinate crops and other plants, don't they?'

'It's a symbiotic relationship.'

'Did you plant flowering natives for the bees?'

'Hundreds of them. As they pollinate a third of the world's food sources, it's the least I could do.'

'You're being nice to make me feel better.'

His laugh is short and crisp. 'You got it.'

When Beau turns a key at the base of each frame, it changes the shapes of the combs and allows honey to flow into the large glass containers he holds under the tap. From where I'm sitting, most of the bees are dots on

the hives, but some fly around. I'm wound like a spring. For the hundredth time, I check the fastenings connecting my gloves and hood to the overalls. What if—

'If they head your way,' he shouts, 'I'll get there first.' *Can he read my mind?*

I clear my throat. Clear it again. 'What happens after you've taken the honey?'

'I reset the frame; the bees rebuild the comb. Flow hives are less disruptive than conventional hives, where the honey is scraped out.'

'Winnie the Pooh didn't care about upsetting the bees. Do you have that book?'

A brief silence. 'No.'

'Did the Goldilocks bears eat honey with their porridge?'

He looks up briefly, then goes back to work. Thirty minutes later, he's filled ten containers. After taking off the hood and gloves, he hands the garments to me. I strip off too, before folding everything neatly and packing it away.

'What do I do now?'



Within two hours, I've decanted the containers into sixty-six jars and wiped them clean. There's a template for the white parchment labels, printed with a sketch of the farmhouse, and I copy the details methodically, noting the species of trees and bushes, like Yellow Box and bottlebrush, where the bees are most likely to have sourced the nectar. After recording the date, I punch honeycomb-shaped holes through the labels and thread them through with gold and white striped string.

I hear Beau's footsteps but don't turn around.

'How's it going?'

'I've almost finished.' My gloves are sticky and even after I take them off, my skin is sticky beneath them. Silvery bands like trails from an army of snails crisscross my shirt and jeans. I push hair from my face with the top of my arm. 'This is messy work.'

He glances at me then quickly away. 'You did all the labels?'

‘Sixty-six.’ I open a cardboard box, selecting one of the labels. ‘I haven’t tied them onto the jars yet.’

‘I can do that.’

I point to the bee he sketched on my map. ‘This is organic honey from a specified place. A hand-drawn illustration would personalise it even more—people are prepared to pay more for something like that. Instead of the dot on the word “Briars” you could draw a bee.’

He frowns. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘The dot on the letter *i*.’ I smile as I point. ‘You’d draw the bee here.’

A flash of pain. A slice. A gash. He turns away. Neck, arms, shoulders, back. Every muscle tense. ‘I don’t have time.’

‘It was just an idea.’

His back still to me, I imagine him counting, schooling his face to neutral again. As he turns, he runs a hand through his hair. ‘Thanks.’

‘What did I say wrong?’

I don’t think he’ll answer. But then, ‘The cabin and you. It’s complicated.’

‘You want me to leave.’

‘You’ve earned another week.’ He picks up a jar, holds it out. ‘Take this.’

I reach for the honey, but then I pull back. ‘The CWA would lose a sale.’

‘I’ll pay them.’

‘I’ll pay you.’

‘I don’t want your money.’ He states a fact. But there’s more to it than that.

‘Why don’t you want my money?’

Once again, the shutters crash down. ‘The honey is a gift.’

‘I don’t need a gift.’

He puts the jar of honey on the bench. No thud. Or clunk. He rubs around the back of his neck. He opens his mouth and closes it like he’s searching for words.

‘Do you like honey?’

I scoop up a container, shove it between us. And when he takes it, I wipe my finger around the inside of the rim. Honey coats my fingertip and

drips down to my knuckle. I put my finger in my mouth, suck and pull it out.

‘Juliette ...’ His eyes are on my mouth. ‘You can’t ...’

I put my finger in the container again, take a swipe. ‘I can’t what?’

He puts his thumb in the container; like me he swipes and tastes. ‘Yellow Box.’

A sweet fuzzy feeling sets off a warmth in the pit of my stomach and radiates north. Then it radiates south. He said the cabin and me were complex. *He’s* complex.

‘The honey is different colours.’

‘Depending on the source.’ He’s openly staring at my mouth.

My breaths shorten. My skin flushes. I search desperately for something to say. ‘I wrote that on the labels.’

‘I didn’t want to frighten you.’

‘It wasn’t your fault.’

‘The bees only sting when they’re threatened.’

‘I have a low threat threshold.’

He sighs before taking my hand. ‘Me too.’ He traces the line that crosses my thumb. He looks up at the labels. ‘Your writing is neat like a typewriter.’

‘I won a prize in kindergarten.’

Notwithstanding the shadows in his eyes, he smiles. ‘I bet you won a lot of prizes.’

‘Not lately.’

‘Why didn’t you warn me you were scared of bees?’

Should I list all the things I’m afraid of? How long has he got? ‘I hoped I’d be okay.’

My fingertip is damp. Is that why, eyes still on mine, he rubs his thumb against it? A zillion nerve endings shoot through my arm as he lowers his head and presses his thumb against the inside of my wrist.

‘Beau ...’

His thumb warms my skin. *Beneath* my skin. I turn my hand, press my palm against his. My mouth was shut against the bees. Now? My breaths escape through open lips. The breeze whispers too. Birds chirrup.

‘I don’t want you scared.’

When was the last time *he* was frightened? Would he ever rate someone who tiptoes around life like I do? Could he respect someone like that?

I yank my hand away, wipe it down my jeans. 'I'm not scared now.'

He lifts a hand, drops it back to his side. He shoves his hands deep in the pockets of his jeans.

'There's nothing wrong with fear.'

'What about argumentative and entitled? Which is kind of ironic, isn't it? When you're the one with the attitude. Not to mention ...' I wave an arm around. 'A fairytale farmhouse, botanical gardens, well-behaved bees, cows with long eyelashes and ... and ...' When tears threaten, I furiously blink them back. 'You have a gingerbread cabin!'

He takes his hands out of his pockets. 'I also said you were beautiful.'

'That doesn't count!'

Wheels on gravel. The slam of a car door. 'Bad!' A woman's shout. 'Why don't you answer your phone? Bad!'



Chapter 6

I drag my eyes from Beau, standing barely a heartbeat away, and focus on the woman. She'd be younger than me, slightly built with dead-straight red-gold hair, a scatter of freckles and bright-green eyes. Her stance is confident, feet slightly apart, hands on hips.

'Sorry to interrupt.' A generous smile, a speculative gaze. 'I'm Flick.'
'Juliette.'

The woman points an accusing finger at Beau. 'You were supposed to come to me.'

'I got held up.'

Her gaze takes in both of us. 'I would never have guessed.'

'Why did you call him *Bad*?' The words spill out.

The woman looks from me to Beau. 'You don't know about his misspent youth?'

'Flick. Don't—'

'His initials.' Flick smiles brightly. 'Beau Andrew D'Arcy.'

Beau frowns as he crosses his arms. 'Give us two minutes.'

'Do you want the ducklings or not?' Flick puts her hands under her arms and flaps. 'I've got to get back to work.'

Beau holds the jar of honey in his hand. 'This is yours, Juliette.'

I shake my head as I back away. 'Keep it.'

'You're the lawyer, right?' Flick smiles. 'Jock is super grateful for your help.'

I half-walk half-run down the path to the beautiful farmhouse with the sandstone chimney and the shutters and the herringbone bricks. Beau is judgemental and abrupt, but I'm attracted to him. I'm also attracted to his competence and random acts of kindness. He doesn't want me to get close and I shouldn't want that either but there's something about him that ...

Beau Andrew D'Arcy.

Bad.

I'm wrapping the chain around the gatepost when I finally make the connection. Beau knew I was Laurence McAdams's daughter. He knew I went to the golf course with Dad.

I've remembered why.



I had no interest in golf, but I was always up early and accompanying Dad to his weekly round of golf at an exclusive Denman resort gave me something to do. The roads were quiet at six in the morning, and for the first few hours, so was the course. The fairways were long and wide with hillocks and glens, forests and grasslands, wetlands, ponds and lakes. I was thirteen and had given up on ponies, but when I drove the cart, with the sun on my face and the wind in my hair, I imagined I was riding again.

Dad was stuck in a bunker on the fourteenth hole, and I was riding the cart on a stretch of rough adjacent to the lake. The boy was taller than the other teens. He was dressed in a button-up shirt and had a cap pulled low over his face. He seemed to be in charge, directing the others to wade into the shallows to collect balls. When the other boys raced into the water, he yelled at them to stop, telling them kicking up mud and splashing would make it harder to see. He held out a bucket for the balls, keeping a verbal tally of how many balls each boy collected.

'Hey, Bad! Catch!'

'How many more do you want?'

'Bad! I'm going in again!'

The other boys seemed to respect him.

I'm not sure how long I'd been watching when the boy called Bad walked through reeds and stepped onto the rough. He would have been fifty metres away when he called out.

'How old are you?'

'None of your business!'

'You have to be sixteen to drive a cart.'

'I am!'

'You're a liar! Get off the cart!'

'Bad!' one of the other boys shouted. 'Where's the bucket?'

Bad gave me a long hard look when I reversed, and then he walked back to the lake. I'd only just turned the cart around when Dad, a club over his shoulder, stepped off the green and walked towards me.

'Juliette! What was that about?'

I was worried that Dad might stop me riding the cart. 'He was yelling at me, and I told him to mind his own business.'

'Well done, child.'

We were on the eighteenth hole when Dad cornered one of the course officials. 'The boys at the lake on the fourteenth hole. What are they up to?'

'Collecting balls, sir. One of our lads offered to recruit friends to give him a hand. Pocket money is always useful, isn't it? Were the boys in your way? I do apologise.'

'One of them abused my daughter.'

'I'm terribly sorry, Mr McAdams. Which boy was it?'

'The tall one—the other boys called him Bad. Appropriate, as it turned out.'

'That surprises me, sir. What did he say to your daughter?'

'Does it matter? He told her to get off the cart.'

'Employees are encouraged to remind members about club rules.' The official turned a deep shade of pink. 'Was that the problem?'

'If it was, the boy should have approached me and not my daughter. He shouted at the top of his lungs. He called her a liar.'

'He hasn't worked here for long.'

'He's not fit to work here at all.'

'Leave this with me, sir. I'll deal with it.'



Chapter 7

The cow's markings are remarkably symmetrical: white shoulders, a black rump, and a meeting of shades in the middle. Her mostly white calf is three days old now, steady on his feet as he searches for a teat.

When my phone buzzes, I jump. Mitchell Simpson doesn't belong in my cabin. But, as I'm technically still at work, I turn the page of my notebook, pick up a pen and put the phone on speaker. 'Mitchell.'

'Are you dying of boredom?'

'My only distraction in Ballimore is the beautiful view. I like it here. What's up?'

'Just checking in. How's the nightlife?'

'Good for native animals. I have cattle and birds to keep me company during the day.'

'I'm picturing you in a cowboy hat and dungarees. T-shirt optional.'

Mitchell and I attended different Sydney schools, but we dated as teenagers. We went out again, briefly, when we were recruited to work at the same law firm.

'Did you want something? I've got work to do.'

He whistles a breath. 'I've ended it with Ruby.'

‘I hope you haven’t broken her heart.’

‘She’s in the angry phase.’

‘You can’t blame her for that. She was so much nicer than you.’

‘Entirely true, but ...’ He sighs dramatically. ‘I’m not over my first true love. Or my second, come to think of it.’

‘She’s on repeat?’

‘It’s you, you idiot.’

When we dated as teenagers, I chose ballet over Mitchell and he dumped me. When we dated as adults, we laughed a lot, but we never made long-term plans. I was relieved when, regretful tears brimming in his eyes, Mitchell told me he’d hooked up with somebody else. I told him we could still be friends.

‘You’re interrupting my work to tell me something ridiculous like that?’

‘Are you angry I didn’t do more when work gave you the ultimatum?’

‘You were one of the few that stuck up for me. I’m grateful for that, really, but ...’

‘Nothing else?’

The cow looks up from the grass. She turns abruptly, putting herself between her calf and—

When I saw Beau at the golf course, the peak of his cap was so low over his forehead that I couldn’t see his face. His hair was hidden; he must have worn it short. I knew about teenaged boys because of my brothers. Jasper was brilliant and ambitious. Jackson was hard-working and popular. My brothers walked with their heads held high.

Beau didn’t.

Shoulders back, a long and purposeful stride. *Now* his walk is confident.

‘Juliette?’ Mitchell whistles a tune. ‘I’m still waiting.’

‘Maybe you should go on a holiday to take your mind off Ruby.’

‘Is that a no?’

‘It’s a thanks, but I’d better get back to work.’

‘Let’s go out before Christmas. You might like me better in person.’

‘If I’m back in Sydney early, I’ll call.’

Beau grabs a tree branch, hoists himself up, pauses on top of the barbed-wire fence then leaps into the paddock. He stands motionless until, calf peeking around her, the cow puts her head down to eat. A few minutes later,

when Beau walks towards the gate at the top of the paddock, the cow barely looks up. After securing the latch, Beau faces the cabin.

Sixteen years ago, he wore ill-fitting clothes. Today he's a mix of country and city. Is he meeting a client at a golf course, or in a garden or park? Navy pants, pale blue shirt, R.M. Williams boots. I think he's had a haircut.

He gave me a week in the cabin. Three days down and four to go. Why is he back here already?



Will Beau knock? Does he have to? It's only as he walks past the window that I take the initiative, jump to my feet and open the door.

'Juliette.' He doesn't look me up and down but if he did ...

My white lawn shirt with elaborate sleeves would usually be paired with loose linen pants and strappy heels, but it's well over thirty degrees. Shorts are appropriate, but the shirt goes beyond the frayed white hems so it might look like all I have on is—

I tuck the side of my shirt into the waistband of my shorts as I stand back. 'Why did you go into the paddock?'

His denim eyes blink. 'What?'

'With the cow and calf.'

He searches my face, as if he's missing something. But then, 'The calf will be dehorned, vaccinated, drenched, castrated. Early interaction makes that less stressful.'

'Right. Good. Does the mother cow have a name?'

Another hesitation. 'No.'

My phone buzzes on the table and Mitchell's name comes up again. He *particularly* doesn't belong here with Beau in the room. After shoving the phone under a wad of documents, I turn back to Beau.

'Did you want me for something?'

He reaches into the bag and pulls out a jar of honey. 'Is this what you meant?' When he hands the jar over, we appear to have the same concern. *Do not touch*. So, it's only when the label, attached with the gold and cream ribbon I threaded through the honeycomb-shaped hole, flops onto my hand,

that I see it. Above the *i* in *The Briars*, Beau has sketched a bee. His little legs are fuzzy, his gossamer wings are delicate, the stripes on his body are shaded in yellow and his two long antennae are—

‘Is that enough detail?’

‘It’s perfect.’ I hold the jar closely. ‘Will you print out new labels for future batches of honey?’

‘Yeah.’

‘With the current batch, it would take too long to do them by hand.’

‘I did them last night.’

All sixty-six? After he snapped that he didn’t have time? Does he *always* have to be complicated? I glance at the mess on my desk. ‘Are you going to Friday’s meeting about the rotunda and basketball courts?’

‘I fly to Brisbane tonight. I might not be back.’

‘Can I show you what I’ve done so far? You might have something to add.’

I indicate he take the chair before racing to the crate to take out the books. *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. *The Little Engine That Could*. *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

‘What are you doing?’

I reach for *Rumpelstiltskin* and *The Three Little Pigs*. ‘I’ll turn the crate upside down and sit on that.’

‘Leave them.’

When I spin around, he’s closer than I expect. ‘I don’t—’

‘I’ll stand.’ He takes the books out of my arms and drops them back into the crate. ‘I don’t have long.’

Complicated.

He stands back as I shove my work papers to the back of the table, open my laptop and bring up files. I maximise the tables and schedule I’ve prepared. He’s too far away to see clearly, but I go through them anyway.

‘I’ve been told that younger children play in the primary school grounds, at the council playground and in the gardens around the rotunda, but the older kids have different needs.’

‘They need sport, competition, recreation. The courts are a priority.’

‘There’s no high school in Ballimore. Is that an issue?’

‘High school students commute—twenty, thirty, forty minutes on a bus. When they get home, there’s nothing to do. They get bored.’

‘Abuse of alcohol and drugs, fighting, getting into trouble with the police.’ I bring up another screen. ‘Jock gave me some stats on that.’ Instead of looking at the screen, Beau looks over my shoulder. I turn the chair to face him. ‘Are you interested, or not?’

His mouth firms. ‘I’m listening.’

‘I want to demonstrate that the council should support teenagers in the same way the town does. Do you have examples?’

‘Some of us auction our facilities and services to fund youth programs. Jock donates accommodation at the pub. Meredith offers driving lessons. I donate landscape plans. We package goods into gift boxes and auction them off at corporate functions. The CWA donates a proportion of funds raised at the markets—my honey and other produce.’

After standing, I pick up the jar and reluctantly hold it out. ‘I should give this back.’

‘You don’t want it?’

‘Yes, but ...’

‘Take it.’

When I put the honey on the table, it teeters, half on the surface, half on a document. The stripes on the bee match the yellow of the honey. The cow lets out a long low bellow.

‘I gave her a name.’

‘What?’

‘Daisy. The calf is Milky-white.’

He closes his eyes for a moment. ‘Don’t name the calf.’

‘Milky-white was the cow’s name in *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Don’t you like it?’

Frowning a little, he takes a step closer. ‘Once the calf is fattened up, he’ll—’

‘No!’ I put my hand over his mouth.

He wraps his fingers round my wrist.

We stare at each other.

‘You don’t have to decide yet, do you?’ His breath is warm on my hand. ‘Maybe Milky-white will be the best calf you’ve ever had, and you’ll want to keep him forever.’

Lowering his hand, he takes my hand with it. Our palms connect, our fingers thread. His eyes are on my mouth, mine are on his. Warmth seeps

through my body. My heart thumps.

‘You’re not really mean, are you?’ My voice is raspy. ‘You just pretend.’

He lifts my hand, lowers his head, kisses the base of my thumb. A thousand million nerve endings. Does he feel it too?

‘You work long hours.’ His voice is gruff.

‘I’m used to it.’

His hands move up my arms, opening and closing at my shoulders. I rest my hands on his chest. He smells fresh like eucalyptus. Our chests, hips, abdomens are centimetres apart. Darts of lust shoot through me. He rests his forehead on mine.

‘I don’t know what to do with you.’

I grasp his shirt then smooth the creases. I lean against him. We both exhale breaths. His arms slide down my back. I focus on the tanned skin of his throat. I press my mouth against it.

‘Juliette?’ His voice is strangled.

‘Mmmm.’

Last time he lifted my chin, he joked that I should keep my mouth shut. This time is different. Everything is different, even his eye colour. A darker shade of denim, like brand-new jeans. He puts a hand on the side of my face.

‘How did you get so beautiful?’

I stand on my toes, breathe into his mouth. ‘I like the bee on the label.’

He smiles. *Almost* smiles. His hands skim my sides and sit on my hips. He looks past them to my legs and bare feet.

‘You wear shoes to get here, right?’

‘I know about snakes.’

‘You use a torch to get home?’

‘I use my phone.’

‘You’re here until midnight every night.’

‘How do you—’

‘The light.’

‘I have to get value from my cabin.’

‘Now you have other work too.’ With a feather-like touch, his mouth brushes mine. ‘You could have said no to Jock.’

The pulse at his throat is beating double time. I press my thumb lightly against it. 'I want to help.'

When he growls, I put a hand against his throat. I touch his earlobe, his neck, the kink of the hair at his nape. He presses feather-light kisses against my eyes and my cheeks and finally my mouth. We kiss carefully, learning the contours of each other's lips. Every sigh and breath ramps up the tension. I'm on my toes with my arms around his neck. His erection is long and hard against my stomach. What I want, what I crave, is more of this. Of him. But I need to know him in other ways too and that means ...

'I should probably tell you something.' I push back his hair, trace the rim of his ear. 'I remembered.'

When he touches the corner of my mouth with the tip of his tongue, I lose my thoughts. I copy what he did. Nudge, sweep, go deeper.

'Juliette?' He groans my name on my mouth. 'What did you remember?'

It's an effort, but ... 'My father. The golf cart.' For a heartbeat, he freezes. Then he drops his arms. 'Beau? I didn't mean—'

He takes a giant step back. His shutters crash down. Locked. Bolted. Padlocked.

My head spins. 'Beau?'

'How did you remember?'

'Flick called you Bad.' I force more words. 'So did the kids at the Denman golf course.'

Mouth tight, he nods abruptly.

'You had a weekend job. Did you get into trouble when my father complained? Is that why you thought I was entitled?'

'You can't change what happened.'

'I can be sorry that it did. I ...' It's tempting to take his hand, to pull him back to where he was, but he clearly doesn't want that. 'Why didn't you tell me? Why do you never communicate?'

'Did you kiss me because you were sorry?' He wipes a hand across his mouth. 'Did you want to make up for what you did?'

When I grasp the desk, the documents shift. The honey tips onto its side with a clunk.

A lump is wedged in my throat. My chest aches. I take jerky steps back towards the crate. Like the jar of honey, the books are lying at odd angles.

Little Red Riding Hood has slipped down the side of the crate. She was foolish to walk through the woods to her grand-mother's house. She should have stayed safely at home.

‘That was offensive.’

‘Forget it.’

In the same way he did, I wipe a hand across my mouth. ‘Done.’



Chapter 8

‘Juliette!’ Flick, smile open and sunny, veers off the footpath and picks her way through the gardens surrounding the rotunda. ‘I saw your name on the agenda. Are you ready to head over?’

I haven’t seen Flick since I put honey into jars in Beau’s shed. It wouldn’t be fair to hold her friendship with him against her, but I have to take care. It was only a kiss. Why does my heart feel so battered?

He said I can’t change what happened in the past.

I wiped my hand across my mouth and told him I’d forget.

I had no idea a kiss could be like that.

Stop thinking about the kiss.

‘I lost track of time.’ I push folders into a bag. ‘Do you live in Ballimore?’

‘I live all over the place.’ Her plaid green shirt matches her eyes. ‘This week it’s Ballimore and The Briars.’

‘Looking after the animals?’

‘The ducks have to be locked up at night.’ She puts a boot on the step and reties a lace. ‘Otto likes a tummy rub, and those ponies of his are little escape artists.’

‘What’s the big horse’s name?’

‘Strider.’

‘I’m watching out for Beau’s cattle. They’re curious animals, aren’t they? Now when I say hello, they come to the fence.’

‘Daisy and Milky-white, right?’

‘He didn’t approve of me naming them.’

‘Something happened between you and Beau last week, didn’t it?’ She puffs out a breath. ‘Tuesday.’

‘You and Beau seem to be good friends. Maybe that’s a question for him.’

‘Like he’d tell me what was going on in his personal life?’

When a sheaf of papers slips through my fingers, I crouch to pick them up. ‘We argued about something. That’s all.’

She grimaces. ‘Going to the cabin never makes him happy, but this was worse than usual.’

‘Why does he go up there if he doesn’t like it?’

‘That’s *definitely* a question for Beau.’ She moves aside so I can join her on the path. ‘You’re only here until Christmas, aren’t you?’

‘I’ve leased Lorraine’s cottage until January. I have the cabin until Monday.’

‘Is Beau kicking you out again? He’s lobbied for the basketball courts for years. He should be grateful for your support.’

‘You’ve known him a long time, haven’t you?’ When a hot gust of wind shoots up the hill, I grab the full skirt of my dress and hold it down. ‘That’s why you called him Bad.’

‘That was something else he wasn’t happy about.’

‘My father played golf at a course where Beau worked.’

‘The fancy course in Denman? I think my brother got him that job. Matt was older than Beau, but our mothers were hairdressing apprentices together. They were good friends.’

‘Like Matt and Beau were friends?’

‘My brother was twenty-one when he died.’ Her eyes brighten with tears. ‘I went off the rails afterwards, and some of the friends Matt used to hang out with treated me badly, but Beau was always different. He looked out for me.’

‘I have two older brothers. I couldn’t imagine ...’ I tear up too. ‘I’m sorry, Flick.’

‘You’re a real softie, aren’t you?’ Her smile is back. ‘That’s why you named the cattle.’

‘How come you had the ducklings?’

‘I’m an ornithologist. It’s why Beau and I sometimes work together.’

‘Birds and landscape design?’

‘Existing golf courses preserve and expand wetlands; new or remodelled courses can create them. I get as many wildlife habitats into Beau’s designs as his clients will tolerate. Birds are why I’m presenting tonight.’

‘I didn’t see your name.’

‘Felicity Atherton.’ She grins. ‘I prefer Flick.’

‘Beau is well known, and a supporter of the basketball courts. Why isn’t he presenting?’

A flock of cockatoos, squawking and screeching, fly over the telegraph wires and into a grey gum. Flick, shading her eyes with a hand, watches them closely before her gaze comes back to me. She considers her words.

‘Me and Beau do better as a team.’

‘But not tonight.’

She looks at her watch. ‘If he gets here in time, he’ll contribute.’



The meeting is to be held in a low-ceilinged annex, a beer garden, at the rear of the pub. Flick points out the council’s general manager, a tall middle-aged man with a thick moustache, and several councillors, seated in a line in the front row. Jock, setting out additional folding chairs at the back of the room, waves me over.

‘Join the others in the front row.’ He winks. ‘You know the drill.’

The Ballimore Progress Association still has a glimmer of hope that the council, after hearing the town’s arguments firsthand, will be more receptive to repairing the rotunda, refreshing the gardens and building the courts elsewhere in the park. If the council is onside, there’ll be no need to alienate it by asking me to speak.

‘I just wanted to say, dear ...’ An elderly woman taps me on the arm. ‘You look like an angel. I’d love to have a miniature version of you at the

top of my tree.'

After smiling politely, I look around. In response to Jock's request to show off Ballimore's Christmas spirit, some in the crowd are wearing shirts and skirts in festive colours. A few have accessories like reindeer headbands and candy cane earrings.

'Flick?' I touch her arm. 'Am I overdressed? Tell the truth.'

'You look like a snowflake.' She grins. 'Nothing wrong in that.'

My white broderie anglaise dress has a tightly fitting bodice with shoestring straps and deep triangular cut-outs at the sides. Long floaty panels drop in folds from my hips.

'A woman wanted to put me on her tree.'

Flick puts her head to the side. 'I like the sparkles in your hair. The stars match your earrings.'

'My mother is a Christmas lunatic. I blame her.'

'You're not overdressed, but even if you were ...' She looks me up and down. 'You wouldn't get any complaints.'



The first speaker called to the podium is an enthusiastic social worker who volunteers with Ballimore's youth program. He's followed by the leader of Ballimore's community garden and the president of the historical society. A life member of Ballimore's Progress Association, an elderly farmer in his eighties, reminisces about the Christmas markets he attended as a boy, but also talks proudly of his great-grandson, fourteen-year-old Jeffery, who never misses a Sydney Kings basketball game on television and enrolled in the Ballimore squad over a year ago. The farmer has only just sat down when Beau, navy jacket slung over one shoulder, walks through the door. Business shirt. Suit pants. Leather lace-up shoes. Has he come from the airport? Or perhaps a modelling shoot? I'm not sure who stares first, but our eyes lock. What does he see before I wrench my gaze away?

Entitled. Argumentative. Snowflake.

'Ba—' Flick cuts his nickname short. 'Beau!' she hisses. 'We're next!'

Beau, after walking between the rows of chairs, follows Flick to the podium and stands next to her with his hands behind his back. Flick lists the

species of native birds and wildlife that live in the park and argues that the best possible way to preserve the existing environment is to keep the rotunda and gardens in their current positions. As the applause dies down, she stands on her toes and whispers to Beau. She pulls him towards the podium encouragingly as if ...

His grasp on the podium. The tension in his stance. His focus on the back of the room. Beau is nervous.

As I'm getting my head around that, Beau speaks as if he's reading a script, even though there's nothing in front of him. He says, in terms of functionality and design, the courts and clubhouse should be constructed in the north of the park and close to the road.

'Beau has prepared a plant schedule,' Flick pipes up, 'for garden beds above and below the retaining walls.'

'I ...' Beau has clearly lost his train of thought. Why doesn't he use notes?

Flick squeezes Beau's arm again, whispers in his ear. I sit forward in my chair, willing him to find his words.

'I've drawn up plans for a new park entrance,' he finally says. 'It'll allow for an expansion of the gardens and additional space for markets and other community activities around the rotunda, while screening the courts and clubhouse ...'

Immediately Beau has finished, he walks back to his chair, leaving Flick alone at the podium to graciously thank the audience for their attention. Jock introduces the next person to speak—the council's general manager. He strokes his moustache as he thanks the eminent landscape architect, Beau D'Arcy, for his interest.

Beau, who's just sat down, stands again. 'I'm a landscape designer.'

'Designer or architect ...' the general manager winks and smiles, 'the council can't afford you.'

'If the council agrees to relocate the courts, it'll get my plans.'

'Unfortunately ...' For the next ten minutes, the general manager lists reasons—resources, the council's other commitments, expediency—why the council will build the courts on land currently occupied by a dilapidated rotunda and high-maintenance gardens. 'It's a workable compromise,' he finishes. 'Our decision is final.'

As the audience calls out in dismay, Jock rushes down the aisle and stands behind the podium, telling everyone that in view of the council's stance, there's an additional item to be added to the agenda.

'Corporate lawyer Juliette McAdams,' he continues, 'has investigated this issue on Ballimore's behalf and is of the opinion that we can take this matter to court. Her comments will be addressed primarily to our councillors, but I'm confident all of you will be interested in what she has to say ...'

Going by the disgruntled expressions on the faces of the general manager and councillors, they take my points about heritage listing and promissory estoppel seriously. When I reference how the council went back on its word, the general manager jumps to his feet and jabs a finger in my direction. A female councillor hisses that he should sit down.

'The Ballimore Progress Association,' I say, 'and many private sponsors and donors, acknowledge the council has other priorities. But Ballimore has been waiting for years for the construction of the basketball courts and clubhouse. When the town was assured the courts would be built, they acted on that promise.'

'They will be built!' the general manager says.

'Not at the expense of the rotunda.'

'This is a matter for our lawyers,' the mayor says.

'Give me their details and I'll outline our claims.' I flick my pony-tail over my shoulder. 'I imagine this will take time to sort out.'

'The legal costs will be significant.'

'Undoubtedly.'

'It's a terrible waste of council funds.'

'The additional excavation costs to site the courts in the preferred location would be a preferable way to spend the council's money, I agree.'

Jock jumps to his feet. 'On that note, I call this meeting closed.'

Ballimore residents queue politely as I sort through my papers. Some want to discuss the council's proposal; others ask questions about wills and conveyancing. Beau folds and stacks chairs as Jock herds the last of the stragglers out of the room.

'See you at the bar!' Jock lifts a hand in salute.

'Juliette?' Beau stands at a respectful distance. 'Can we talk?'

‘One more thing, dear ...’ The woman who called me an angel doubles back. ‘How did you do your hair like that?’

I unravel the string of stars from my ponytail and wrap it around my wrist. When I turn my arm, the stars catch the light.

‘My mother found this at a gift shop in London.’

Beau, leaning against the wall adjacent to the podium, pointedly crosses his arms.



Chapter 9

I know Beau is still behind me. He knows I know he's still there. But I don't turn and face him until every tooth has met its match in every zip of my soft leather document folder.

Every time I look at him, I notice something different. An hour ago, he was nervous. *That* was different. What about now? Not nervous. Not confident. Something in the middle. My body warms. My heart flips.

No, I remind myself, I've learned my lesson.

'Why did you want to talk?' My voice is brisk and efficient.

'The cabin. Flick said I should let you use it.'

'I didn't complain about leaving it.'

'You didn't complain to Jock either. Why let me think that you did?'

'Why jump to wrong conclusions?'

He lifts a hand, drops it back to his side. 'We appreciate what you did tonight.'

'Having to pay for lawyers will put pressure on the council. I'm stretching the principles, but the council might back down.'

'You were convincing.'

'As were you and Flick.'

'She was good.'

‘Why do you memorise what you want to say? Why not use notes?’

His shutters crash. He takes a step back. ‘Back at the cabin, you said I don’t communicate.’

Don’t think about the kiss in the cabin. *Do not* think about the kiss. *Don’t you dare* think about the kiss. Think about ...

‘I don’t want to talk about what happened.’ I raise my chin. ‘That’s in the past.’

He frowns as he searches my face. ‘Is it?’

I walk two fingers across my star bracelet. ‘Have you really done plans for the park?’

‘I wouldn’t lie about it.’

‘What’s the difference between a landscape architect and a landscape designer?’

‘Landscape architects have a university degree.’

Laughter filters through the open doors of the bar and dining rooms. Children call out in the courtyard. ‘You did a landscape apprenticeship?’

‘I didn’t finish school. I haven’t studied since.’

‘How did you learn about landscaping?’

‘I started out as a labourer, got better jobs.’

‘The job at the golf course in Denman. Had you already left school? Was it a full-time position?’

‘It was a long time ago.’

‘My father was arrogant. I behaved badly. You lost the job, didn’t you?’

‘I got a different one.’

‘I don’t care whether you want to hear it or not. I’m sorry.’

‘I didn’t—’

‘You accused me of kissing you because I was sorry. I presume you thought a sorry kiss was like a thank-you fuck. That was offensive.’

‘Juliette. I—’

‘You snarled like ... like ...’

‘A bear?’

‘This isn’t funny!’

Without touching my skin, he brushes the stars at my wrist with his thumb. ‘If you didn’t kiss me to say sorry, why did you?’

His hands are large and callused, but he has nicely shaped fingers. Talented fingers that draw picture-perfect bees and little log cabins on the

edge of a forest and ...

I snatch my hand away.

‘Juliette?’

‘No.’ My voice is a squeak.

‘No, what?’

‘I don’t understand you. I don’t trust you.’

The top button of his shirt is undone, but he runs a finger inside his collar as if it’s too tight.

‘You don’t want me, but you want the cabin.’

Have I hurt him? Why do I feel like something has been lost? Do I search for it or not?

‘Do you have another job for me? I’ll do it.’

‘You don’t want to owe me.’

‘It’s an inconvenience having me at the cabin, even though you won’t tell me why. In light of that, I want to pay. What do you want me to do?’

He crosses his arms in an *I’m not going to answer any more of your questions* kind of way.

‘Meet me at the dam on Tuesday morning.’

I’m suddenly uneasy. ‘What dam?’

He frowns. ‘Are you scared of dams too?’

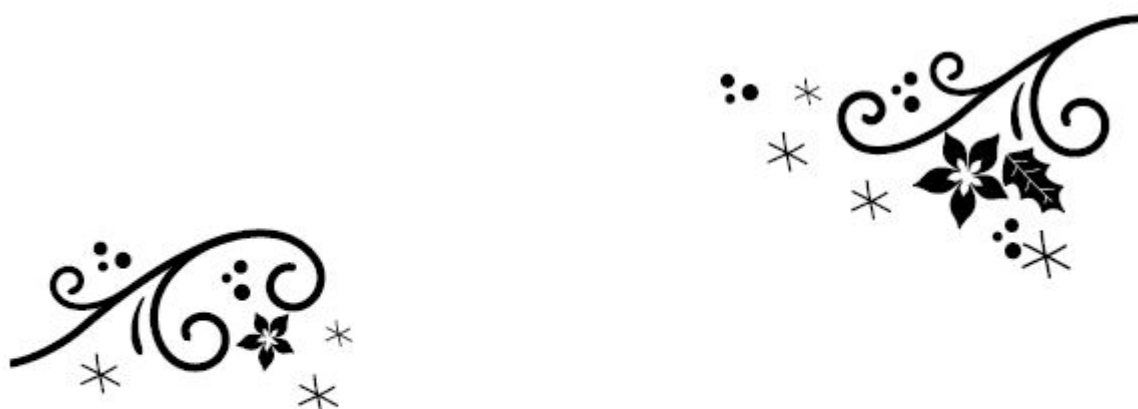
‘Of course not.’ When I hold out my hand, it’s reasonably steady. ‘See?’

He takes my hand. And even though I should be warned by my racing heart, tingling thighs and aching breasts, I let him. He turns my hand over, holds it palm up in his.

‘I don’t want you scared.’

I search my muddled brain. ‘Where is the dam?’

After a long and questioning look, he traces a line between my little finger and thumb. ‘I’ll leave a map in the cabin.’



Chapter 10

It hasn't rained in the three weeks I've been in Ballimore, but it was overcast when I pulled back the curtains in the cottage this morning and, as I walked to the cabin, storm clouds skipped across the sky. Sitting at the table, my work papers pushed to one side, I reach for *Little Bo Peep*, a picture book based on the nursery rhyme, and consider the nameplate on the inside front cover. Beau has traced over some of the letters, which must have been penned by somebody else. Letters he's done himself are upside down and incompletely formed. I search for his name in the overlapping jumble. *b E A u A n d r e W d A r c Y*.

He's always complicated, but last night he was *particularly* complicated. I smooth out the creases in the map I found wedged in the door this morning. What if it had rained before I'd arrived? It would have been ruined. My route for Tuesday is clearly marked, this time in stars. Because I wore stars in my ears and hair last night? He's sketched Daisy and Milky-white (small but unmistakable) and the top of the farmhouse chimney. The map indicates I turn left at an oak tree (there's a magnified image with a leaf and two acorns), pass through two more gates, and turn right at a yellow tractor. Between three rounded hills dotted with fairytale

sheep is a dam and a queue of ducks. Twenty ducks. All in size order. Beyond the dam is a winding lane and another hill. Tiny stars point to a more detailed sketch of ...

A vineyard? I peer more closely. Rows of vines—sturdy trunks and *Jack and the Beanstalk* curling shoots—march up the hill in stripes. What are the ducks doing in the vineyard? Why are there shells—miniature spheres with intricate swirls? What will Beau want me to do?

There's nothing about swimming in the dam. The thought lightens my mood as I stand, stretch and reunite *Little Bo Peep* with her friends in the crate.

I jump at the thump on the door. 'Juliette!' Another thump. 'Juliette!' Jackson?

My second-eldest brother is a Chris Hemsworth doppelganger— six feet two with a lumberjack physique and brown-gold hair. After dropping brightly patterned bags to the ground, he takes me in a bear hug.

'You weren't easy to track down, brat.'

'Is everyone okay? How did you find me? Why didn't you call?'

'All good with the family.' He holds up his phone. 'When I went to the address Mum gave me, there was no reception, so I went into town. The publican told me I'd find you up here. He said you had a Goldilocks deal with the owner. What's that all about?'

'Long story.' I glance at Beau's map, and the ducks. 'What are you doing here?'

He points to the bags. 'Special delivery from Mum.'

When I told Flick that Mum was a Christmas lunatic, I wasn't exaggerating. Yes, she's a whip-smart accountant and chairman of a bank, but there isn't a Christmas tradition she doesn't embrace. In addition to packaged food, the bags contain Michael Bublé and Tchaikovsky CDs, and decorations.

'I told her I'd be in Denman on Christmas Eve.'

'You know what she's like.' He grins. 'You gotta have the Christmas build-up.'

Helping Beau with his ducks, whatever that entails, should give me another week in the cabin. So, as Milky-white bounces through the long grass near the fence, I string tinsel around the window frame.

'Nice pastures.'

I hang a star from the light fitting. 'How are Ariella and my nephews?'

'Looking forward to seeing everyone at Christmas.' Jackson leans against the wall. 'Jasper and Amber are coming early, so Mum and Dad can help out with Jade.'

'Twelve hours of labour and then a caesarean. No wonder Amber's worn out.'

'Amber is worn out because Jasper insists on doing everything for her and the baby. She's hoping me, Mum and Dad can distract him and give her a break. Jasper?' He whistles through his teeth. 'Who'd have ever thought it?'

'After all they've been through, Amber and Jade are particularly special.' I pull a strand of holly leaves, adorned with glossy red berries, out of the bag and wave it at Jackson. 'I like the decorations, Jackson, but tell me the truth. Why did you come all this way?'

'You're not going to like this.'

When I was a child, Jasper would rip a sticky plaster off my knee to get the pain over and done with. Jackson would think up ways, invariably unsuccessful, to loosen the plaster first. He's a talented farrier, in demand at racing stables all around the country, and the kindest man I know.

I muffle a groan as I sink to my chair. 'Tell me what you know.'

'You're not up here for fresh air. What's been going on at work?'

'It was Dad who found out, wasn't it? How?'

'According to a friend at one of his clubs, an up-and-coming hot-shot lawyer lost her firm's highest-paying client. The firm sent her to purgatory while deciding whether to sack her or not. Dad was enjoying the gossip until he worked out it was you.'

'Why haven't I heard from him yet?'

'Mum convinced him it was better to wait until Christmas. She'll ask for the facts. Dad will rant and rave about how unjustly you've been treated.'

'He's always taken my side, including over you and Jasper. No wonder you call me brat.'

'As it's you he defends, we tolerate it.'

Three horses, one large, the other two small, appear on the track between the cabin and the farmhouse. 'Dad was opposed to you becoming a farrier. That was unfair.'

‘I did a trade. It wasn’t what he knew.’

‘Maybe I became a lawyer to please him.’

‘Nah.’ He leans over me to secure the holly around the door-frame.
‘You’ve always been nuts about books and words.’

I brave a smile. ‘I stuffed up big-time at work.’

‘Everyone makes mistakes. Don’t let it get to you.’

‘They accused me of being incapable of doing the work, and of inefficient time management.’ I put my hands in the pockets of my shorts, take them out again. ‘But it was more complex than that.’

He pulls out the chair, crosses his arms and stretches out his legs. ‘Talk.’

It was Mum who named it my superpower, the fear I have that a minor thing going wrong in my life will turn out to be catastrophic. *A bee becomes a swarm*. It was a positive way of looking at it, according to Mum and the various psychologists she took me to. Fear of failure means I avoid things, but it also means I’m organised, I don’t leave things to chance, and I work hard. I’m careful to employ strategies that prevent fear from ruling my life.

Mostly they work.

‘There was a directions hearing,’ I tell Jackson. ‘That’s when counsel for the plaintiff and defendant summarise their respective clients’ cases to the judge, so she or he can work out how long to set aside to hear the case. I was only given the matter the day before the hearing, but I wasn’t concerned because I had all night to work on it.’

‘It can’t be good for you, brat, working all night.’

‘Before I could even start the work, I was roped into a client event, an early Christmas party on the top floor of a fifty-storey tower.’

Jackson whistles. ‘I don’t like where this is going.’

‘There were high glass walls around the rooftop gardens, and I was careful to keep to the centre of the space near the lifts. But someone made a speech, and I was herded into a corner. The wind picked up and all I could think of was kites. Remember how you and Jasper would toss them into the air and they’d take off and ...’ When nausea kicks in, I lean forward and lower my head. ‘I thought we were going to be picked up by a gust and flung over the edge. It was stupid, I knew that ...’ I swallow and swallow again. ‘It was like a nightmare, but real.’

‘How’d you get out of there?’

‘A waiter thought I’d drunk too much and took pity on me. He helped me get the lift down to the foyer and then he hailed a taxi. I thought if I slept for a couple of hours, I’d be okay. But I slept and slept and—’

‘You missed your deadline.’

‘I grabbed the documents and went to court, but my only option was to request an adjournment. After the judge tore strips off me, we got it, but the client insinuated I’d partied all night and slept in. They withdrew their business. *All* of it.’

‘It wouldn’t have been just that.’

‘It’s the part everyone focused on—I slept in and lost a client.’

‘You couldn’t tell them you had a panic attack?’

‘A career-limiting move if ever I’ve heard one. Anyway ...’ I aim for a shrug. ‘I’d left the matter for the last minute. I should have done it earlier.’

‘Which you would have done if you hadn’t been dragged to a party, and your workload wasn’t crazy.’ He gets to his feet and pulls me to mine. ‘I was there in your childhood. I get it.’

‘Jasper has never got over it.’

‘He deals with it. So do you. Stop beating yourself up for being afraid.’

‘What did Mum say?’

‘She said you’d be worried about your job. She knows how much it means to you, and how hard you worked to get it.’

‘Juliette! Juliette!’ Thomasina and Lacey’s ponies trot briskly up the grassy track between the paddocks. When Beau and his thoroughbred appear on their heels I glance at the map.

I liked your picture of Daisy and Milky-white. Can I confirm you’d like me to come at six on Tuesday? I just want to clarify that, because you were surprised to see me so early last time.

Jackson straightens. ‘Who is he?’

‘Beau D’Arcy.’ I clear my throat. ‘This is his cabin.’

‘The guy you had the Goldilocks deal with? Good-looking horse. Has he raced?’

‘No idea. His name is Strider.’

Jackson shuffles through the books in the crate. ‘These are Beau’s, right?’

‘Leave them alone.’ I lower my voice. ‘Please, Jackson.’

Shrugging, he does as I ask. ‘What’s going on?’

So now I'm defensive of Beau? What *is* going on? 'It's complicated.'

A jangle of bits and stirrups. Thomasina calls out again. 'Come and see Bon Bon and Lollipop!'

'Are you coming?' Jackson is already at the door.

'Why are you going?'

He grins. 'I want to meet his horse.'

A low picket fence separates the leafy groundcover at the front of the cabin from the path that runs past it. Even if Beau's frowning gaze didn't pointedly slip from my shorts to my bare feet, I would have stayed behind the fence. How stupid does he think I am?

'Who are you?' Thomasina asks Jackson.

'Jackson. Who are you?'

'Thomasina and Lacey!'

As the girls happily slap Jackson's raised hand, Beau jumps from Strider's back and holds out a hand. 'Beau D'Arcy.'

The men are a similar height, but Jackson is scruffier, more solidly built. Beau's gaze shifts back to me. Critical? Admiring? It's impossible to tell.

Lacey smiles when Jackson wraps an arm around Lollipop's neck and scratches under his mane.

'Have you got a horse?' she asks shyly.

'I do, but mostly I look after other people's horses.'

'What kind of horses?'

'Thoroughbreds.' He turns to Beau. 'Did Strider race?'

'Class One.'

Jackson traces the brand on Strider's shoulder. 'Same sire as Peppercorn Black, right?'

'His dam was Bolero.'

Jackson stands back and considers the horse's legs. 'Do the splints worry him?'

'He tolerates light work. Are you a vet?'

'A farrier.'

Thomasina puts up her hand. 'I have a question.'

'For me?' Jackson smiles. 'Shoot.'

'Juliette is pretty, isn't she? We think she's *very* pretty.'

'What I notice most is her brain.' He taps his head. 'It's massive.'

Thomasina giggles. 'Are you Juliette's boyfriend?'

Jackson must be aware that Beau is staring, but he ignores it. 'I'm *way* more important than a boyfriend.'

'How come?' Lacey sits forward on her pony.

'I'm Juliette's big brother.'

Jackson and Beau stare at each other for three long seconds. Finally, Beau turns to me. 'Did you get the directions?'

I clear my throat. 'Six o'clock on Tuesday morning.'

'Goldilocks.' Jackson crosses his arms. 'What's that all about?'

It could be a joke, a funny story for Beau and me to laugh about. So why are we so serious? Going by Beau's stiff jaw, he's not going to answer, so I step up.

'A few weeks ago, Beau found me in his cabin. I didn't have permission.'

'Now she does.' Beau speaks quietly. 'She pays her way.'

When Lollipop skitters, I skitter too, tripping over my own feet as I take hurried backward steps. As Beau grabs Lollipop's bridle, Jackson leaps over the fence and stands between me and the pony. After sending me a long assessing look, Beau turns the girls' ponies around, puts a foot in the stirrup and mounts Strider.

'We'd better get back to Jock.'

'I have something for him.'

Jackson is standing at Strider's head and talking to Beau when I return with the tin of shortbread. As if caught out, they both turn towards me. I look suspiciously from one to the other while holding out the tin.

'Jock will appreciate this more than me.'

When Jackson passes the gift to Beau, the men speak again. I can't hear Beau's words, but Jackson rocks back on his heels.

'Prove it,' he says.



Chapter 11

Beau's elderly kelpie Otto rises stiffly to his feet as I approach the oak tree. When I crouch between two thick roots to stroke his head and rub under his chin, he wags his tail. I don't have anything to eat in my bag but pour water into my hand and offer him that.

'Does Beau know you're here? You weren't on his map.'

Even though I know the map by heart, I can't resist taking it out and mentally ticking off items—black-legged sheep, cattle yards, water troughs, a grey gum with a twisted silver trunk—as I see them. The sun, blurry through the clouds, appears between the hills where Beau said it should be.

Would he have cared if Jackson were my boyfriend and not my brother? As if I would have let him take my hand (sticky with honey, ringed with stars) if I were with somebody else? As if I would have kissed him?

Cows, fifty or more, are safely corralled behind barbed-wire fences, but only a few look up as I pass. A single bull, much larger than the cows, is also in the paddock.

'You have a lot of girlfriends.'

The path, pockmarked with cattle hooves, leads directly to the dam. It's exactly six o'clock when I see Beau, down on his haunches by the sleepy

brown water. If he fell in, there's no way I could see through the water to pull him out. What would—

My feet crunch on the path. *Change your trajectory.* I look around, searching. 'Where are they?' I call out. 'The ducks.'

After he straightens, Beau tips his head to the side as if considering my clothes. A broad-brimmed hat, long-sleeved pale-pink cheesecloth shirt, jeans, short boots. 'Morning.'

My heart thumps. 'Sorry I'm late.'

He shades his eyes as he considers the sun. 'Me getting here first doesn't make you late.'

We walk single file around the dam and through a gate, but then the track widens and we walk side by side up the hill. Beau explains why the ducks are locked up at night.

'Foxes. Eagles.'

When I stop at the top of the hill, I feel Beau's gaze on the side of my face. 'It's beautiful.'

Just as he sketched them, the vines form long neat rows across the slope. It's not a large vineyard, only a hectare, neatly fenced around the edges. 'How long have the vines been there?'

'Three years.'

Aren't bees, sheep, cattle, and a landscaping business enough? 'You didn't grow up on a farm, did you?'

'My mother worked in the town.'

'She was a hairdresser. Flick told me. Where does she live now?'

'Brisbane. She prefers the city, the climate, the social life.'

'Will you see her for Christmas? Does she come here?'

'Sometimes, but a friend of hers had her fiftieth this year, and Mum was forty-seven. They booked a cruise.'

'You're thirty-two?'

'A couple of months ago.'

Ten mature ducks and six ducklings sit and stand in a large pen shaded by gum trees. When Beau lets them out, they waddle, quacking and honking, purposefully towards the vines. Holding his arms out wide, Beau herds the stragglers in the same direction before shutting the gate behind them.

'They're in a hurry.'

‘Breakfast.’

‘There aren’t any grapes yet.’

He *almost* smiles. ‘They’re here to eat the snails, not the produce. This is an organic way to manage them.’

‘Was that what the shells in your drawing were about?’

‘You got it.’

I run after an errant duckling and herd it towards the others. ‘The snails damage the vines?’

‘They eat the new growth. This strategy can lower, even eliminate, the use of pesticides. It’s better for the soil and the environment. It’s also inexpensive.’

‘So long as you don’t factor in your labour.’

He stops, looks around. ‘I like it out here.’

I like it out here too. I think he must see that. Has he smiled like this before? I can’t take my eyes from his mouth. My heart flips. Will he take my hand again? Do I want him to? I promised myself I wouldn’t let him—

‘Juliette?’ He points to another duckling. ‘You going to get him or not?’

Beau checks the vines, redirecting shoots and threading them through supporting posts and wires, as I monitor the ducks and ducklings. When the sun breaks through the clouds, I take off the shirt I have over my T-shirt and tie it around my waist. To get my hair off the back of my neck, I tie it into plaits.

Beau’s face is shadowed by his hat as he walks towards me. ‘We’ll take them to the dam for the rest of the day.’

‘Isn’t it my job to stay here with them?’

‘There’s another job too.’ He hesitates. Then, ‘I have a monthly blog on my website. Landscaping projects, organic farming, sustainability. My EA organises it, but she’s on a break. Can you draft something about the ducks?’ He takes a card from his pocket and hands it to me. ‘Email it to Max. He does my socials.’

I pocket the card. ‘What do you want me to say?’

‘The theory behind it, the practice, whatever you like. Use the other posts as a guide. Max will edit it.’

‘You don’t write the posts yourself?’

He picks up two ducklings, walks away. ‘I don’t have time.’

The clouds come back. A drop of rain. Another. I pull up ten metres from the dam, but the birds charge ahead and jump in. They skim across the water, dive and surface again. Beau stops short of the water's edge and points out a narrow creek. He crouches, takes off his hat, scoops up water and throws it on his face before brushing through his hair with a hand. When he shakes his head, droplets of water fly all around him. The ducks swim in a V formation as he swipes a hand around the back of his neck. He looks up, catches me staring.

‘Want a drink?’

‘I’m okay.’

‘The creek water comes from a spring. It’s clean.’

I shower. I take a bath. I swim freestyle laps at hotel pools, and in the pool at Mum and Dad’s property. I don’t like to watch my nephews and nieces in the pool, but it’s natural to worry about infants, right? I don’t have a problem with water.

‘Juliette?’

I hold up my water bottle. ‘All good.’

‘I swim Strider down here.’

‘It’s that deep?’

Beau picks up a stone, skims it across the surface. ‘Over my head.’

My legs don’t wobble *too* obviously. Or maybe they do, because when I blindly hold out my hands and sit down, Beau walks purposefully towards me. He crouches, just like he was crouching at the edge of the dam.

‘What’s the matter?’

I take off my hat, wipe my clammy face, push words through the lump in my throat. ‘I’m okay.’

‘Bullshit.’ He takes my wrists, studies the tiny scratches on the heels of my hands. He watches closely as he rotates my wrists, presses gently on my palms. ‘Does anything hurt?’

Weren’t the bees enough? Do I have to humiliate myself all over again? I pull my hands free. ‘No.’

‘You gotta breathe, Juliette.’

‘I am.’ My voice is raspy.

‘Deep breaths. Count three seconds, then three more.’

‘Six seconds is too many. I’ll hyperventilate.’

He sits next to me, takes back my hands. ‘How are you so smart?’

‘You said that about beautiful.’

‘Smart and beautiful.’

‘Do you really think that?’ The words rush out.

‘I don’t lie.’ He rubs his thumb across the base of my fingers and my heart rate picks up. ‘When I said we should meet at the dam, you didn’t like it but wouldn’t say why.’

‘I’d prefer not to think about it.’

‘Did you see Otto on your way here?’

‘Is this a distraction?’

‘I have no idea what from, but yes.’

‘He was sitting by the oak tree.’

‘I told him to stay at home.’

‘Daisy and Milky-white were on your map and the gates and the tractor and lots of other things. That’s why I wondered why Otto wasn’t there.’

He threads our fingers. ‘You looked at it so closely?’

‘It’s perfect.’

‘What scared you today?’ He’s not laughing at me. He’s deadly serious.

‘I catastrophise. I worry.’

‘Bees. What else?’

‘Water.’

‘All water?’

I take a shaky breath. ‘It was when you said you’d be out of your depth.’

He loops a leg around me, pulls me so close that my hands are on his chest. I can count his heartbeats. One two three. One two three.

‘I can swim, Juliette.’

‘Bad things can happen anyway.’

‘Did something bad happen to you?’

The swimming pool was twenty-five metres long and two metres deep at one end. It had a diving board. Pin dives. Backward somersaults. Bombs. Flips. Pikes. In and out, in and out, via the long-arched ladder at the deep end. My brothers and their friends were much older than I was. Seventeen, eighteen and nineteen to my twelve. They hogged the board, bouncing on the end instead of taking turns and diving in. I had to do *something* to keep myself occupied, so I swam through the steps of the ladder.

There were four rungs beneath the surface, the lowest around a metre underwater. I'd duck dive, touch the bottom of the pool, and on the way up I'd swim between the third and fourth rungs (angling my hips to get through), then come to the surface. I wasn't as tall or heavy as my brothers: my dives weren't as deep, my splashes as high. But I could hold my breath for as long as they could. And I could go to places they were too big to fit into.

I must've had an inkling that what I was doing carried risks, because when my father came to the pool and told the boys he hadn't seen me on the board for a while, I didn't tell him what I'd been up to. I also didn't tell him about the new challenge I'd set myself—swimming in and out of all the rungs before coming to the surface. 'I'm having fun too, Dad!' I watched him go back to the table with the other parents. The fourth rung. Success. The third rung. Success. The second rung ...

'I got stuck.'

Beau rests his forehead on mine. 'What?'

I hadn't noticed that the ladder was set at an angle—that the distance between the second rung and the wall was less than it had been on the lower rungs.

'Between the rungs of a ladder. Under the water. In a swimming pool. I was twelve.'

He rubs my back. 'Fuck.'

'I know what to look out for, so thinking about other people going underwater is worse than me doing it. Say there are roots and things? Say you got caught up in them? You'd be all by yourself. And even if you weren't, no one could see you. They'd have to drag the dam to find you and ...'

He pushes back my hair. 'Someone found you.'

'I was swimming through the ladder, and I didn't have room to get through. I couldn't go forwards or backwards, my chest was exploding and ...'

'Fuck.'

'I'd blacked out by the time Jackson saw me.'

Beau tips up my chin. 'Do you swim now?'

'So long as I can see the bottom of the pool.'

'The ocean?'

‘Not out of my depth.’

He considers my plaits, twists them together behind my head. ‘Thank you for telling me.’

‘I’ve had two challenges, and both times ...’ I take a breath. ‘You must think I’m—’

‘Beautiful.’ He kisses my nose. ‘And smart.’

‘Finishing school doesn’t make you smart.’

‘You also went to university. As did your parents.’

I brush back his hair, damp from the creek and warm from the sunshine. His eyes are sad, uncertain. I kiss his cheek.

‘You, Beau D’Arcy, have a chip on your shoulder twice the size of your head. That’s why you kicked me out of your cabin.’

‘Write that blog post and ...’ He smiles. ‘I’ll give you another week.’

‘I’m not only facing my fears but sharing them. My psychologist will be delighted.’

‘I don’t want to scare you again.’

‘It’s not so difficult.’

‘You’re afraid of horses, aren’t you?’

When I link my hands in my lap, he pulls them apart, threads our fingers again. ‘Your parents have a thoroughbred stud. Jackson works with horses. It didn’t make sense for him to stay between you and the pony.’

‘Everything is fine at a distance.’

‘Juliette ...’

‘I might’ve been okay if it were Strider.’

‘What? He’s twice the size of Lollipop.’

‘I had an accident on my pony on Christmas Day. I was leading him to the stables when I took off my hard hat and put on reindeer ears. He used to shove me in the back like he was telling me to hurry up, and his bit got caught in my hair.’ I run a finger along the scar at my jaw. ‘He bolted and I got dragged along.’

Beau’s growl is deep in his throat. ‘Fuck.’

‘You’ve said that a lot today.’

‘Finish your story.’

‘Jasper, he’s my other brother, stopped the pony, but has never got over what happened. Until he met Amber, he hated Christmas.’

Beau takes one of my plaits, wraps it around his wrist. 'Has anyone else saved your life?'

'Dad. When I fell off the water tank, broke five ribs and pierced my lung.'

'What the ...'

'After the pony and the pool, it didn't affect me day to day, but after I fell, it did. I kept worrying about what might happen and thinking the worst.'

He cups my face. His thumbs skim over my cheeks. 'I don't want you hurt or scared.'

I cross his legs with mine. 'I'm not scared now.'

He dips his head. Our mouths touch. For an instant we freeze. Then, 'Juliette?'

I wrap my arms around his neck, wind my fingers through the hair at his nape. 'I'll try to do better, but you have to do better too.'

'Communicate?'

'I talk to you about things I don't want to think about.'

He pulls me close and kisses my mouth. Mind-numbing. Possessive. Toe-curling. When he finally lifts his head, his lips are damp. I touch them with my fingertips; he draws in a breath. A desperate aching need works its way from my thighs to my belly to my breasts as he kisses me again. Demanding, soothing. Light, teasing. Hard then soft. He traces the seam of my lips with his tongue. Nudges to check it's okay to go in.

'Please.' My voice is high and needy.

This time when we kiss, his tongue goes *everywhere* in my mouth as if he has to map it right from the start. We're both breathing hard when he pulls back a little, talks against my lips. 'I'll do anything you want.'

I undo the top few buttons of his shirt, splay my hands on his skin. Feel the hardness, trace the contours. He runs his hands up and down my sides, cups my breasts, groans low in his throat, kisses a trail down my cleavage.

'Oh, fuck.' He closes his eyes, straightens, tips back his head. 'Fuck.'

'Beau?'

When he gets to his feet and pulls me to mine, I have to plant my feet to get my balance. He makes sure I'm steady but then he steps back. 'I want you, Juliette.'

I talk through the lump in my throat. 'Are you sure about that?'

‘Yes.’

‘Then why ...’ I wave an arm around. ‘Why stop like that?’

‘What happened before ...’ He runs a hand through his hair. ‘You were upset.’

‘And then I wasn’t. Don’t patronise me.’

‘As if I could.’

I spin around, walk five furious steps and then come back again. ‘According to Jock, you have women falling at your feet. Which is hardly surprising when you do everything well. Not because you’re privileged or entitled with supportive parents and an extended family. Not because you went to expensive schools and universities, but—’

‘I don’t want to fight.’

‘I’m battling to save my job. I don’t like bees and water freaks me out. Do you think it’s easy to talk to you about those things? It isn’t!’

‘Next Saturday night. The farmhouse. Come to dinner.’

‘That’s over a week away. Why not earlier?’

‘I’m away.’

‘You’re coming to the meeting on Wednesday. We could go to the pub afterwards.’

He firmly shakes his head. ‘No.’

‘You don’t want to be seen with me in public?’

‘I don’t want interruptions.’

‘While you hear more about my childhood?’

‘The water tank. You can tell me what happened.’

‘And what do I get out of that?’ My nails dig into my palms. ‘Will you tell me about your childhood?’

He looks behind us to the sun, shades his eyes. ‘We’d better get back.’



Chapter 12

‘Juliette!’ Jock smiles from behind the bar. ‘Admit it. My Sunday lunch is irresistible.’

‘I had a sandwich in the cabin, but a mango smoothie would be great.’

‘Are you ready for the meeting with the council on Wednesday?’

‘I’d hoped they wouldn’t call in their lawyers. Our case for keeping the rotunda is strong, but if the council won’t spend the extra money needed to build the courts and clubhouse in a different location, we might not get them.’

‘You’ve done a tremendous amount of work.’ Jock smiles encouragingly. ‘It can’t all be for nothing.’

‘Jock!’ The man who calls out has unruly black hair. ‘How about a beer, mate?’

‘As a law officer is present, Max, you’d best show your ID.’

Max smiles as he takes out his licence and mocks a bow. ‘Max Raymond, twenty-two, Warrandale.’

I hold out a hand. ‘Juliette McAdams, twenty-eight, Ballimore.’

‘It’s good to have a lawyer in town.’

‘You work for Beau D’Arcy, don’t you?’ I smooth the creases in my bright yellow sundress. ‘He said I should look at your blog posts, so I’d

know what to do with mine. You write really well.'

He smiles. 'Have you taken my job?'

I hold up a finger. 'I'm only doing one.'

'Flick has a table by the window,' Jock says. 'If you two make your way over there, I'll bring the drinks.'

Max and I have only just sat down when a wheat farmer, Jodie, and a nurse who works at the medical centre, Ally, join us.

'I love your earrings,' Ally says.

'One of my brothers is a blacksmith.' I flick a silver sphere. 'He made them.'

'Jackson McAdams?' Jodie sits back in her chair. 'I used to work in racing. No joke, a generation of strappers went into mourning the day he got married.'

Ally laughs. 'Just like they will when Beau gets hitched. That guy is ...' she fans her face with her hands, 'hotter than hot.'

'Too hot for you,' Max says. 'How many dates did you manage? One or two?'

'Six, thank you very much, and I don't regret any of them. The sex was unbelievable.'

Beau and I haven't even come close to sex, but a flush moves up my neck. I feel sick. Regret? Jealousy? How can I feel jealous when—

'How do you know Beau?' Max asks.

I clear my throat. 'I've taken over his cabin.'

'Ahhh. Better reception.'

Flick smiles. 'And the view.'

'He's got a great little property,' Jodie says. 'Not as chatty as some, our Beau, but he's a good bloke to have around.'

When Jock brings the drinks, I wrap my hands around the glass. 'You've set me a high bar with your blog posts, Max. How long have you been doing them?'

'A couple of years. I felt bad taking his money at first, but it's not like he can write the posts himself.'

Jodie smiles. 'He gets me to write invoices *and* receipts for the hay I sell him.'

'He's the king of delegation,' Ally says. 'Then again, he's got more work than he knows what to do with.'

‘My brother helped him out at school,’ Flick says. ‘Essays, exams, the works.’

‘Didn’t the teachers work it out?’ Max asks. ‘How did he get away with it?’

‘From what I remember, he was suspended most days of the term. He never did homework, but he was good at art, graphic design, sport. It was enough to scrape through the first few years of high school.’

Words jump around in my head. ‘Beau struggled with literacy?’

‘Struggled ...’ Jodie shrugs. ‘More than that, I’d say.’

‘You were writing labels in the shed, and you’re blogging for him.’ Flick is suddenly agitated. ‘Didn’t you know? I assumed you did.’

The jumbled writing in the children’s books. The absence of notes at the council meeting. The tasks he assigned. Doesn’t he trust me at all?

‘I won’t say anything.’ I put shaky hands in my lap, lean over my drink and sip through the straw.

‘We might’ve made it sound worse than it is.’ Flick’s smile is strained. ‘He manages it.’

I look around the table, smile my brightest smile. ‘It was great to meet you all. Thanks for—’

‘Speak of the devil.’ Ally waves a hand above her head. ‘Beau! Over here!’

Does he come to the pub every Sunday? Did I secretly hope that I’d see him today? *Not anymore.*



A tall attractive woman has a hand on Beau’s arm as I approach the door. I feel his eyes but look away, smiling politely when an elderly man opens the door and ushers me and his wife outside. Two steps onto the footpath then

—

‘Juliette!’

I school my face to neutral. ‘Beau.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘Back to the cabin.’

The touch of his hand is fleeting, but nerve endings sparkle and fizz. His hair is wet. He smells nice. His shirt is blue like his eyes.

‘I looked for you there.’

I’m in his cabin. He feels a sense of responsibility. But if he doesn’t trust me then ... ‘Max and I had a drink.’

‘Right ...’

‘He told me it would be hard for you to write the blog posts.’

Beau stills. ‘Be more specific.’

‘Literacy. We’re all different.’

His shutters crash down. ‘Max should keep his trap shut.’

‘It’s none of my business. I have no right to ask questions. But if you don’t communicate ...’

‘I’ll walk you to your car.’

My nails dig into my palms. ‘The woman you were talking to. Was she an ex-girlfriend?’

He thinks about that. ‘Claire is a friend.’

‘A good friend?’

‘We hooked up a couple of times.’

‘Do you always stay friendly with the women you date?’

‘I only date women I like.’

‘Max was sitting with Ally. You hooked up with her too.’

‘Juliette ...’

My heart hurts. My eyes sting. Where are my shutters? Why can’t I hide anything?



Chapter 13

The red brick Ballimore community centre is in keeping with 1960s architecture and a modest council budget. Jock, sitting at the head of a long trestle table in the featureless meeting room, rubs his hands together.

‘Ready, Juliette?’

For the meeting at the pub, I wore a white snowflake dress and sparkling earrings. Today I’m dressed conservatively in medium black heels, a knee-length black skirt and a cream silk shirt. I raise my thumb. ‘Ready as I’ll ever be.’

‘Beau has been stuck at a golf course in Orange all day,’ Jock says. ‘Unfortunately, he’ll be late.’

Was Beau stuck on a golf course yesterday? And the day before that and the day before that? I haven’t heard from him or seen him since Sunday, though I’ve read every one of his books. *Pinocchio*. *The Emperor’s New Clothes*. *The Little Mermaid*. He has a collection of Dr. Suess paperbacks, one with an inscription: *Dear Beau. I’m proud of you. Love and kisses always, Mum xxx*. Beau was regularly suspended from school, Flick’s brother helped him with his schoolwork, he left school early. Somewhere, somehow, he must have made up lost ground. Can’t he take pride in that?

The council's general manager, three councillors and a barrister, Mr Williams, arrive together and sit at the far end of the table. Committee members of the Ballimore Progress Association sit at the back of the room. Max, who in addition to working for Beau volunteers in the youth development program, gives me a cheery wave. Flick, mud on her face and on her gumboots, sits next to an elderly farmer with an Akubra on his lap. Primrose Cartwright, a local vet with a dimple and glossy brown hair, kisses her handsome husband goodbye and sits at the end of a row. She shifts in her chair and puts a hand on her rounded belly.

'Good luck,' she mouths to me and Jock. 'We love your work.'

A middle-aged woman wearing a smart three-piece suit arrives two minutes before the start time. After sitting in the front row, she taps her thick buff file.

'I represent the Ballimore Markets,' she announces to everyone.

'That's Lorraine,' Jock says in an undertone. 'Your fearless landlady.'

'She told me she was holidaying in Hobart.'

Jock waggles his brows. 'She has a house on the other side of town.'

'Has she ever lived in the cottage?'

'As it has wood rot, an antiquated hot-water system and zero internet, certainly not.'

I've already provided the lawyer with written submissions, but when Jock asks me to speak, I summarise them.

'We have a strong case,' I conclude.

'If the rotunda is listed as a heritage item, your client won't get the basketball courts.'

'I disagree.'

'There was no contract.'

'The council promised something of value, my client acted on that promise to their detriment, and the council has gone back on its word. We'll apply for a court order to compel the council to act in accordance with its promise to build the courts.'

'Promissory estoppel has never been applied in this context.'

'Our case will create a new precedent.' It's only as I look around the room that I see Beau, hands in his pockets as he leans against the doorframe. Ruffled hair, one sleeve up and one down. I drag my eyes away when the lawyer huffs.

‘I understand, Miss McAdams, that you’re a senior associate at one of Sydney’s top legal firms.’

‘That’s correct.’

‘Your firm wouldn’t touch this matter, not without a hefty retainer. Are they aware you’re doing this work?’

‘I do it in my own time.’

‘With no backup.’

‘With the assistance of Po Mei, a well-regarded barrister.’

‘And school friend.’

‘Can we move on?’

He feigns a smile. ‘Your firm recently lost a valuable client, isn’t that so? As that failure was attributed to you, it might go to your competency in other matters.’

‘What you’re alleging is totally irrelevant.’

‘As are your arguments on promissory estoppel.’

‘Why haven’t you addressed the specifics? Why launch a personal attack?’

‘Your history speaks not only to your credibility, but to your competence to run this case.’

I turn to the general manager. ‘What is Mr Wilson’s charge-out rate? Five or six hundred dollars an hour? The council is paying a lot to undermine me.’

The general manager’s eyes widen as if he’s been caught out.

Mr Wilson clears his throat. ‘Without you, Miss McAdams, there is no case to fight.’

Lorraine raises her hand. ‘Restoration of the rotunda is essential. The basketball courts could be delayed.’

‘The courts and clubhouse are non-negotiable,’ Beau says firmly.

I speak firmly too. ‘If my client acts on my advice, Ballimore could get the rotunda and the courts.’

Lorraine’s gaze shifts from me to the lawyer and back again. ‘Can we rely on your advice?’

Jock blusters. ‘We certainly can!’

The lawyer gathers his papers. ‘That’s all I had to say.’

‘Did you quote a set fee to attend, Mr Wilson?’ I rest my hands on the table. ‘Is your time up? You failed to address the specifics of my client’s

claim.'

'I'll save my arguments for court.'

'Subject to a hefty retainer. That's what the council is trying to avoid, isn't it?'

He nods stiffly. 'Good evening, Miss McAdams.'

When I hold out my hand, he takes it reluctantly. 'Goodbye, Mr Williams.'



I stack my files. 'That barrister is like the emperor in *The Emperor's New Clothes*.'

Jock laughs. 'Indeed.'

Flick, after grabbing Beau's arm, drags him towards us. 'You did great,' she says. 'That guy was a prick.'

'Juliette had another way of expressing that,' Jock says.

Please don't pursue this. Not with Beau barely a metre away. Please don't let him think—

'What way?' Flick asks.

'*The Emperor's New Clothes*,' Jock says. 'When the emperor was told fools couldn't see his clothes, no one would challenge him.'

Beau's gaze is fixed firmly on the side of my face. 'Juliette did.'

'We still have hope.' Jock rubs his hands together. 'Let's debrief over a drink.'

The committee files out as I sort my papers. Beau, hands in his pockets, stands on the other side of the table. I tap the papers, tap again, before storing them neatly in my bag. When I look up, our eyes meet.

He frowns. 'Can we talk?'

Talking to you hurts. I put my bag at my feet. 'Go ahead.'

'Ally, Claire. They were casual relationships, that's all I've ever had.'

'It doesn't matter.'

'I want it to.'

'I wasn't surprised that Flick and Jock knew you had challenges with literacy. But you just said it yourself, your relationship with Ally was

casual. There was someone else at our table too, a neighbour, and she knew about it. Does the other woman, Claire, know too?’

His hand scrapes through his hair. ‘You’re different.’

‘I asked if Claire knows.’

He closes his eyes for a moment. ‘Yeah.’

‘Even though it upset me, I did my best to answer your questions about my fears. When I asked why you didn’t write the blog posts yourself, you said nothing. Why not communicate then? What about the books in the cabin? Why are they there?’

‘We can talk on Saturday.’

‘Under sufferance? So that you can accuse me of forcing you to do it?’ I push words past the lump in my throat. ‘I won’t see you on Saturday.’

‘Juliette!’

‘I said no!’

Jock bustles across the floor towards us. ‘Hurry up, you two!’

The pulse in Beau’s throat beats erratically. ‘Leave us, Jock.’

Jock’s gaze goes from Beau to me. ‘Juliette?’

I swallow hard, force out words. ‘Instead of countering our arguments, Jock, the council’s lawyer went after me. My advice is, don’t back down.’

Jock’s eyes open wide. ‘With you on our side, I wouldn’t dream of it.’

‘I’d better get back and sort a few things out.’ When I kiss Jock’s cheek, tears spill out. He raises a hand, touches his face.

‘What’s this, then?’

‘Juliette.’ Beau’s mouth is set. His jaw is tight. ‘When can we talk?’

At the dam, I asked him if he’d tell me about his childhood and he walked away.

That’s what I do too.



Chapter 14

Rivulets of rain crisscross the track and bounce on the puddles as I walk to the cabin on Saturday morning. I shove the door open with a hip, shake out my coat and umbrella and hang them on the hook. Soggy dawn light creeps up the hill as I turn on the overhead light and—

No books. No crate.

I've become accustomed to the tightness in my chest, but this pain, deeper and sharper, is worse. They were never my books, so why feel their loss so acutely? Blinking hard, I walk backwards to the table. When it hits my thighs, I turn.

'Oh!'

A map, even larger and more detailed than the others, is spread out over my papers. I impatiently swipe at my eyes. At the top of the page is a sunset—reds, pinks, russets, blues, greys, lilacs—the sunset I see every evening as the sun disappears behind the farmhouse roof. There's a number to the left of the sunset: 15.

Today is the fifteenth of December.

Beneath the sunset, there's a tiny sketch of me in profile, standing outside the cabin in my snowflake dress with stars in my hair. The route from the cabin to the farmhouse is framed by a colourful border of wattle,

banksia, boronia, bottlebrush and waratah. The gate to the left of the track leads to the dam, the gate to the right leads to the shed and hive. An arrow from the hive leads to another illustration—a family of bees celebrating Christmas in a grand formal dining room. It reminds me of a Beatrix Potter drawing—ornaments, crackers, a fireplace, a tree and a table laden with cakes. Is this a message? The bee family is busy tonight, so I don't have to worry about them?

Beau has drawn a leafy green wreath with bright red berries and shimmering baubles hanging from one of the farmhouse's double doors. The second door is wide open. To the left is a hallstand—a sturdy pair of boots and an Akubra hat. To the right is ...

The crate is full of books and Beau, tall and oh-so-serious, has drawn himself standing next to it. I turn on my torch to capture every detail. The book at the top of the crate is *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. How many times have I looked closely at the cover? A hundred times at least. Papa and Mumma Bear peer through the window and Baby Bear stands at the foot of the bed. Goldilocks, fast asleep, lies on her back on the covers, long fair hair spread out on the pillow.

Heart pounding, hands shaking, I stand back. Beau doesn't call my phone or pop into the cabin for a chat. He doesn't write letters. This is how he communicates.

If I go to the farmhouse at sunset, he'll tell me about the books.



It's no longer raining, but moisture clings to the hydrangea puffballs that line the path to Beau's front door. A weathered timber sign, *The Briars*, is partially hidden by an ivy's heart-shaped leaves. I'm inspecting the berries on the wreath that hangs above the knocker when the door swings wide.

Beau is wearing a khaki linen shirt and navy pants. His blue eyes are solemn. 'You came.'

'I followed the map.' When I hand over the flowers, tiny white crocus blooms with spiky dark green stems, he takes them politely. 'Lorraine doesn't have many flowers.'

'Come in.'

‘I worked all day so only had time to jump into and out of the shower and it was raining and ...’ I flick drops off my T-shirt, smooth my frilled skirt over my bottom, kick off my runners and wiggle my toes in my socks. ‘I didn’t bring many clothes to Ballimore.’

‘They all think you’re beautiful.’

‘Who?’

‘Everyone.’ His smile is cautious. ‘You have curls in your hair.’

I brush through the ends with my fingers. ‘It got wet on the way.’

The crate is sitting in the wide panelled entry, just as he drew it. He glances at it, then away. ‘What do you want to know?’

If I ask him questions, he’ll do his best to answer them. But what will happen afterwards? He could shut down. I could storm out.

‘The bees were eating dinner in your drawing. Is that what we’re going to do too?’ I look past him down the hallway. ‘What smells so good?’

‘Chicken with a truffle honey glaze.’

If I stand on my toes in the kitchen of my rental in Sydney, I see a sliver of ocean between high-rise city buildings. Rows of cupboards, granite benchtops, an induction stove and two deep sinks. My kitchen is barely ever used. It’s sleek and contemporary and ...

Nothing like Beau’s.

Wide timber floorboards, bright painted ceilings, a long timber workbench and enamelled white sinks. A battered redwood table—set for two but large enough for twelve—sits in front of a window overlooking paddocks and a circular dam. The rain, tumbling again, bounces on the surface of the water. A fox bursts from the reeds and disappears through the trees.

‘Do you think he’s chasing the gingerbread man?’

Beau’s smile is fleeting. ‘Could be.’

Pots and pans of all different sizes hang from hooks on suspended timber beams. The stove has eight gas hobs and two Aga ovens sit side by side. The shelves of a whitewashed cabinet hold platters, bowls, pitchers, teapots and mugs. The crockery is vibrant like the colours of autumn and spring.

‘Did you use an interior decorator?’

He laughs. ‘No.’

‘This reminds me of my parents’ kitchen in Denman.’

When a timer buzzes, Beau lifts a lid on the pot and stirs. ‘How?’

‘Mum doesn’t have much time to cook and she’s not very good at it, but she has a large kitchen with a lot of things in it.’

‘Does your father cook?’

‘He supports local businesses and markets by buying homemade goods.’

Beau points to a dresser, whitewashed like the cabinet. ‘The matches are in the top drawer.’

As I light the candles, he carries plates—chicken tenderloins, caramelised carrots and pumpkin and a mountain of greens—to the table. He pulls out a chair and I do the same.

‘Do you entertain here often?’

‘Feed people?’ He shrugs. ‘Besides neighbours and my mother and her friends, no.’

‘How old were you when you bought the farm? Twenty-six, twenty-seven?’

‘Do you want to know where I got the money?’

‘It would be discourteous to ask that.’ I pile carrots on my plate. ‘But yes.’

‘I got lucky.’

I lick my fingers and his eyes go to my mouth. ‘How?’

It’s clearly an effort, but Beau’s shutters stay all the way up as he talks. He tells me he was seventeen and had already worked for two years as a gardening labourer when the lead landscape architect on a prestigious Sydney golf course found him scribbling over a copy of the architect’s carefully considered plans. When he asked what Beau was up to, and Beau refused to tell him, the architect bundled up the plans and stormed out. Beau was certain he’d lose his job, but the next day he got a phone call.

‘Charles had looked at my drawings and seen what I’d done with the lake and reed beds. I’d factored in water management, recycling, repurposing. He mentored me and got me positions with high-end landscapers. Afterwards, he recommended me to clients. The business grew organically.’

‘They saw how talented you were.’

Beau stills. ‘I’ll get dessert.’

I glance over his shoulder, towards the hallway and the books. ‘Should we talk first?’



When Beau places the crate of books on the polished timber floor-boards of the softly lit living room and sits on the brown leather sofa, I sit next to him. The fireplace is enormous, with a solid marble surround.

‘Why don’t you decorate it with logs, pine cones and cellophane? I saw Thomasina and Lacey do that at the pub. They even put Christmas lights in.’

He searches my face. ‘Are you distracting me?’

I shuffle closer on the sofa. ‘I’m trying to set you at ease.’

He sits forward so I see him in profile. ‘You said I struggled at school. That’s what everyone thinks.’

I’d like to take his hand, but he might not want that. ‘Flick said you’d missed a lot of school.’

‘My mother was pregnant at fifteen. She had to work and look after me. A teenage single mother wasn’t a good rental prospect, so we moved from place to place, school to school, therapist to therapist. The teachers saw I had a problem, but Mum got sick of the tests. She didn’t want me categorised or forced to see people I didn’t want to see. When I went to high school, Mum was only twenty-seven. Teachers assumed I hadn’t had the opportunities I should have had. In some ways ...’ he shrugs, ‘we preferred that because it stopped them wanting more tests. I was okay verbally, my memory was good, I did well in art and sport. With reading and writing, I figured being labelled lazy or disruptive was preferable to being labelled stupid. My behaviour masked my difficulties. I wasn’t expected to achieve, and I lived up to that.’

‘You couldn’t tell anyone?’

‘Some teachers worked it out. A graphic design teacher taught me that what I could see in my head could be represented in ways other than words. An art teacher taught me about colour and composition, but eventually art theory, essays, analyses, all that stuff, caught up with me. Matt, Flick’s

brother, helped me cheat for as long as we could get away with it. Halfway through year ten, I'd had enough. I wanted to earn a living, help Mum out.'

'You would have left school at a similar age.'

'Mum was twenty-one when she finished her apprenticeship.' He looks at me, then away. 'We went to a pizza restaurant to celebrate. Matt and his mum were there. Flick was a baby. It's hard work, hairdressing. Long days, low pay, she'd miss shifts if I got sick.'

'She didn't have family support?'

'Her parents were religious and scheduled an abortion—Mum walked out and never went back.'

'Your father?'

'He wanted what my grandparents did. I've never met him.'

'Was your mother always on her own?'

'She had boyfriends, but I made it hard. When I was a kid, I couldn't understand it. Later?' He faces me, runs a finger down my nose. 'Drugs, alcohol, fights. I had juvenile delinquent written all over me.'

'Flick told me you were good to her after her brother died.'

He closes his eyes for an instant. 'She didn't have the support she should have had. She got hurt.'

'Your history, Beau, and Flick's, it's why you're supportive of the basketball courts. To help keep kids out of trouble.'

'I guess.'

'You might have struggled at school, but now you're—'

'I haven't finished.' He reaches into the crate, pulls out a book. *Peter Pan*. There are illustrations on every page, but this book has more words than others in the crate. Face grim, he turns to the first page and lays it on my lap. Then, eyes closed, he recites, word for word, every single line. 'I'm a fake.'

'What do you—'

'I can't read. I can't write. I'm illiterate.' He rubs around the back of his neck. 'Mum would get home from work and read to me, trying to help. When she worked out I could memorise short books, she bought books with more words. We lied to ourselves and each other, me sitting next to her while she turned the pages.'

When the words in *Peter Pan* blur on the page, he nudges me with an elbow. 'You're not going to cry, are you?'

I bite down hard on my lip. ‘Not if you don’t want me to.’

‘Charles talked me into getting tested again. There are different types of dyslexia, and I have the worst of all of them.’ He lifts another book out of the crate. *The Little Engine That Could*. He opens it up before turning it upside down. ‘I can see the train is on its roof. The writing is incomprehensible whichever way I look. Sometimes it spins around, sometimes it mashes together. Occasionally, I can identify letters and copy them out. Single-digit numbers are easier than multiples, but I can’t trust what I see.’

‘Sixes are like nines?’

‘At best. But it’s easier than it was. Voice to text. Dictation. Technology helps.’

‘You draw so beautifully.’

‘I see 3D objects.’

‘How do you do your plans?’

‘Now I’m established in my career ...’ He smiles without humour. ‘I can afford to be diverse—people don’t hold it against me like they did. I sketch a design, then I record what I’m thinking. Council applications, quotes, reports, others put my ideas into digital form and do the writing for me.’

‘Why couldn’t you tell me?’ I shuffle closer on the sofa. ‘Were you afraid of how I’d react?’

‘The first time I saw you ...’ He shakes his head. ‘You were so fucking beautiful sitting at that table with those books all around you.’

‘I asked if Goldilocks would mind me being in the cabin.’

‘As a kid, and later, I needed to pretend I could read. That’s why I go to the cabin. I sit at the table to make sure I remember the words.’

‘No wonder you didn’t want me in there.’ When I take his hand, he threads our fingers.

‘You were argumentative.’

‘Entitled.’

‘I don’t think—’

‘I’ve read all your books.’ I kiss the base of his thumb before reaching for a book. *The Ugly Duckling*. I open the first page. ‘This was one of my favourites. Can you say the words?’

There aren't as many words in *The Ugly Duckling* as in *Peter Pan*. As I turn the pages, he recites to the end.

'How many people know you can do this?'

'Mum.' He takes the book from my lap, drops it in the crate. 'You.'

I take a deep breath. 'I'm not going to say that you couldn't have the gifts you have without dyslexia, because that would be like you telling me that being fearful of everyday things like bees and horses and water and heights is some kind of gift, and if that wasn't said in the right way and with the right intentions, I might find it upsetting.'

He groans a laugh. 'You have so many words.'

'My brothers encouraged me to read to give their ears a rest.' I press my thumb against his pulse. 'Do you find my talking annoying?'

When he squeezes my hand, I look up. 'I like every fucking one of your words.'

A warm fuzzy feeling flows through my veins. 'Even when we argue?'

'I like those words less.' He dips his head, rests his forehead on mine. 'You can't fix me, Juliette.'

I cup his face, gently kiss his mouth. 'You're not broken.'

He stills for a moment. Then, 'I should have told you before.'

'I'm not Goldilocks. You're not a big bad bear. We had to get to know each other.'

He growls against my mouth. 'I should take you home.'

The more I know, the more I care. But I need to know him in other ways too. I need to know him in *every* way there is and that means ...

I rest a fingertip against his mouth. 'You promised me dessert.'



Chapter 15

As I stack the dishwasher, Beau arranges peaches on a platter. The tops of our arms connect. Our elbows bump. He passes me a plate and our hands brush. He's handsome and capable and proud and honest. I'm exquisitely aware of him. *Excruciatingly* aware. When he opens a jar and tips it to the side, honey dribbles down the glass to the rim.

'The bees on the map reminded me of Beatrix Potter illustrations.' Honey hovers over the peaches. 'Do your bees have honey on their dessert?'

'They can have whatever you want them to have.'

A drop of honey lands on a peach. Another drop. Another. Trickly sticky trails. I interrupt the stream, lick sweetness from a fingertip.

His gaze slips to my mouth. He holds out the jar. 'More?'

Yes, I want more. More of him. More of—

As if he reads my mind, he puts the honey on the bench with a clunk. He picks up my finger, opens his mouth and rests it on his lip.

'Can I kiss you, Juliette?'

When I grasp his shirt, he wraps his arms around me. Is it me or him who groans as our mouths meet? He kisses me carefully, taking it slow, but

his erection is hard against my hip. When he lifts his head, his breaths are short like mine.

‘You taste of honey.’ His voice is gruff.

‘Have you heard about professional honey tasters? They’re like a wine sommelier, but for honey.’

He kisses me again, talks against my mouth. ‘Bullshit.’

I want to keep kissing him, but I can’t stop talking. ‘They put honey in a wineglass and talk about its qualities. Complex. Broody. Light. Floral and leatherwood.’

He reaches behind me, dips a spoon in the honey, licks it, then kisses me again. My legs are so tingly they can barely support me. My breasts ache. But still the words spill out.

‘You get to the core, the essence of the honey. And it’s not just the taste, it’s the colour and the scent.’

He strokes my mouth with this thumb. ‘What about texture?’

‘The homogenised honey you buy in the supermarket doesn’t crystallise like pure honey does.’ I undo his top button, splay my hands on his chest. ‘I have your honey on my toast.’

He presses the tip of his tongue on my lip before kissing me again. The sweetness, the rush of blood to my head, my tingling thighs and breasts. His bristles are rough on my throat. I bring his head closer, thread my fingers through his hair.

‘I’ve done a lot of research on honey.’

He smiles as his hands slide slowly from my waist to my hips to my thighs. The skirt hitches up; he moans as he lowers it back over my bottom. He nuzzles my neck.

‘A honey sommelier cleans their palate with apples. Which is interesting, as apple trees rely on bees for pollination.’

‘Juliette?’ With a not-quite-steady hand, he pushes hair behind my ear. ‘Do you want me to take you back to the cottage?’

His chest is warm, hard and muscled. I open his buttons. Slide my hands lower, press against his abdomen. Then I put fingertips— one, two, three— on his mouth.

‘I want to stay here.’ I kiss where my fingertips were. ‘We can stop talking now.’

His lip lifts. ‘We?’

‘I’m a bit nervous.’

He searches my face. ‘Me too.’

‘I think you’ve had more experience than me.’

‘You’re smart and you’re beautiful. You work like a dog. You’re funny, modest, generous.’ When I put a hand on the side of his face, he kisses my wrist. ‘Are you sure you want this?’

‘Sleeping Beauty didn’t have much of a role in her fairytale, sleeping the whole way through. She and the prince couldn’t have known each other at all, really. Maybe they were only attracted to each other? It would have been rushing things if they’d had sex as soon as she woke up.’

‘Was that an answer to my question?’

I’ve never been close to being in love. I thought it might not be for me. I was wrong.

‘You’re good at drawing and I’m good at reading.’ I wrap my arms around his neck. ‘It’s good that we know each other.’

He talks against my mouth. ‘I can read your body.’



Like he’s reading a beautiful sentence over and over and over again, his lips return to the places where I need him most. My breath catches, I moan, I writhe on the bed beside him, beneath him, astride him. He mirrors my sounds as if he feels what I feel, the delicate touch of his mouth to my cheek, my neck, the sides of my breasts, my hips and my thighs. He’s tender and careful, feather-light touches. Then he’s frantic and wild like a tempest.

Scent and sight and touch and sound and taste. He unravels my senses before putting them all back together again. And afterwards, when I’m sleepy and soft and lying on his chest, he tips up my chin and touches my face like I’m the most precious thing in the world. ‘Okay?’

‘Mmmm.’

‘Not too much?’

I take a shaky breath. ‘It was a lot.’

‘Next time ...’ He kisses my shoulder. ‘I’ll know you better.’

‘You’ll read me again?’

‘I’ll learn you off by heart.’



Chapter 16

As kookaburras cackle and the sun sneaks through the gaps in the curtains, I thread a leg through both of Beau's and listen to his heartbeat. Imagine eating dinner with him every single night. Watching TV on the sofa in his living room. Going to bed together and—

I don't want to leave him. I want to live in Ballimore.

'Hey.' He rubs across my shoulders, kisses the top of my head.

'Good morning.' My voice is high and squeaky.

He strokes my hair, runs his fingers through it. He lifts my chin with his thumb. 'Will you stay again tonight?'

One more night? Or a lifetime of nights? The buzzing of words that want to come out keep me tongue-tied. Another night doesn't mean marriage and babies. I've barely considered those things before but now ...

'Juliette?'

I wriggle out of his arms, jump out of the bed and scoop up my clothes. 'Bathroom.'

Why are the eyes that stare back in the mirror so bright? I'm in love with him. Can't I just tell him that? By the time I'm dressed and back in the bedroom, he's sitting up in bed. He frowns as he holds out his hand.

'Come here.'

I shove hair behind my ears, perch on the end of the bed, wave an arm in the direction of the cabin. 'I'd better get going.'

He doesn't cover up as he rolls off the bed, opens the wardrobe and reaches for clothes. His body is strong and perfect and ...

'You don't have to get up for me.'

He pulls on jeans, buttons the fly, shrugs into a shirt. 'What would you like for breakfast?'

'I don't have time.'

His eyes narrow. 'It's still dark.'

When a branch scratches against the window, I jump.

'Juliette? What the fuck are you thinking?'

'I always start work early.'

'That's more important than last night?'

'My report is due the day after tomorrow. On Wednesday, I'm driving to Sydney for a meeting at my firm. The hearing for the Ballimore case is on Friday and I have to prepare.'

His smile is stiff. 'You don't have time to see me before you go?'

'I have a lot to think about and ...' I link my hands in my lap. 'I'm sorry.'

He yanks the covers up the bed, folds them over, tucks them in. 'My mother's cruise ship leaves from Sydney on Friday. I've said I'd take her out on Thursday night. Can you come?'

His mother worked all day, came home to her son and read him the same books over and over and over until he could recite them by heart. She raised a talented complicated man I've fallen in love with but ...

'That's the night before we go to court, and I have a lunch after the hearing. Jock has called another meeting in the pub next week. We could meet then.'

'You, me, the rest of the town.' He scrapes a hand through his hair. 'What happens after that?'

'I promised Mum I'd be home by Christmas Eve.' Every word hurts.

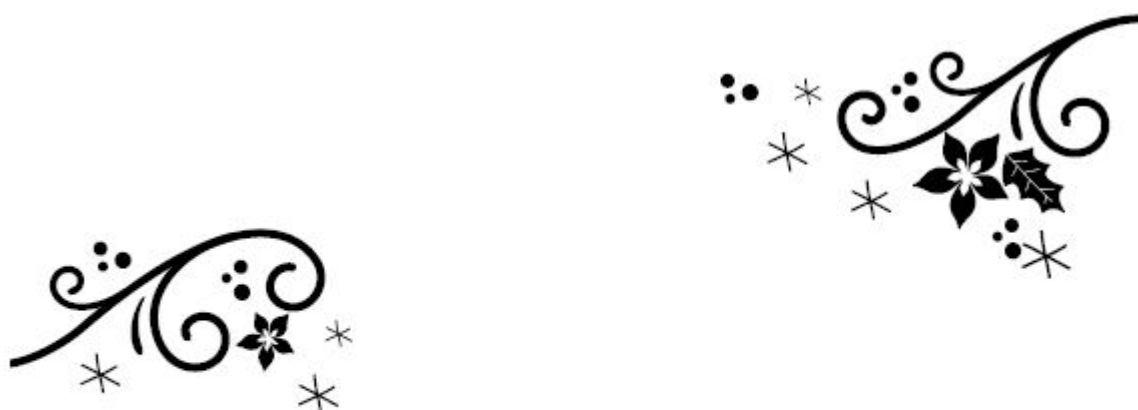
His eyes are shadowed. 'You have work and friends in the city. You have family. I get that.'

Do you get that I'm in love with you? 'Mum often has visitors at Christmas. You could join us in Denman.'

'I'm not available.' His mouth is tight.

‘What plans do you have?’

He’s at the door when he turns. ‘I’ll work something out.’



Chapter 17

Clouds hang low and dark in the sky as I walk up the track to the cabin. The ground is damp, muffling my footsteps. Daisy, Milky-white by her side, is grazing near the fence. A wedge-tailed eagle flies over the hill and glides towards the river. When I reach the cabin, I stand on my toes to find the light from the farmhouse. I haven't spoken to Beau since I left the farmhouse on Saturday, but I know he'll be up early too.

Doing a final read-through and fact check of the 212-page document I've spent the past five weeks labouring over takes six and a half hours. At midday, I attach it to an email and send it to the managing partner of my firm and the partner in charge of the corporate practice group. I have my arms above my head, stretching out my shoulders, when a message comes through. *Acknowledged. See you on Wednesday.*



My law firm's lobby—spotless granite floors and towering walls—is scattered with other early risers, but I'm alone in the lift as it shoots to the forty-seventh floor. Brushed steel panels. Square buttons set out in a grid. A

red digital phone symbol. The back wall of the lift is mirrored. I smooth the chignon tied neatly at the back of my head and adjust the collar of my shirt. I fasten the button of my jacket. Unfasten it again.

The Queen in *Snow White* asks the mirror what it sees. What do I see? My jacket is a soft sky blue, like mid-morning skies at The Briars. Has Beau been thinking about me in the way I've been thinking about him? Is he still cranky that, after he'd driven me back to the cottage, I opened the car door before he'd turned off the engine? I said, 'Thank you very much,' like a kid getting a lift from her grandfather.

And then I bolted.

There's no doubt I'm in love. Even *thinking* the words gets my heart rate up. A knot of tension is lodged permanently in my chest. But how could we talk about commitment when we only shared one meal? And one night together? What does that mean to him anyway? He's had sex with quite a few locals. Am I just another one?

I could call and ask how he feels. But what if he's not ready to talk about that yet? What if he wants to have fun and nothing else? Why do I want more? *Because I'm in love with him.* Cue heightened heart rate.

I'll call him after Christmas. No pressure, Beau, but would you like to go out to lunch? Also, while I have you here, would you mind telling me whether there's any chance your world has turned upside down like mine has?

Am I the hare, running ahead of the tortoise? If I collapse in a heap, will Beau amble past me and leave me behind?



I spin around in my chair at the tap on my office door. Gerald Springer, the managing partner, is in his late fifties. He does Pilates six times a week, dyes his hair and keeps wrinkles at bay with Botox.

'Welcome back.'

'Thanks.'

After sitting on the other side of my desk, he plonks my report, marked with twenty or more sticky notes, on the desk between us.

'This is exactly what we wanted.'

‘I hoped it would be.’

‘We’ll invoice whatever time you spent on it.’ A stiff smile. ‘Not that your billable hours are ever a concern.’ He takes a slender file, marked with my name, from his bag. ‘You always exceed your budget.’

‘Going away has given me the chance to reflect. It was unfair to threaten me with dismissal.’

‘Let’s put that behind us.’

‘It was difficult to explain what had happened.’

‘You said you slept in.’

‘I was at a work function. We were on the rooftop of a high-rise building and I had an anxiety attack. It took time to get over it. That’s why I overslept.’

He purses his lips. ‘Our clients don’t want to know about anxiety.’

‘I don’t want to work for clients like that.’

He blusters. ‘Your role is to represent their interests.’

‘The client’s deadline for the work was unreasonable. That’s why I got the brief. I work all hours. I’d get it done.’

‘You’re paid exceptionally well.’

‘That’s not enough.’

‘As I said, this report is exactly what we wanted. What happened last month is water under the bridge.’

‘Even though I lost your most valuable client?’

‘You haven’t heard?’ His smile is like the Cheshire Cat’s. ‘They’re back in the fold.’

‘I won’t work for them again.’

‘Let’s not be hasty.’ Gerald holds up his hands. ‘They want you.’

‘After they shafted me for my only mistake in the past five years?’

I’m not sure whether the deep breath and lowered hands he offers are for my benefit or his. ‘Be reasonable.’

‘Find them another lawyer.’

‘A condition of their return was that you continue to work for them.’

‘To soften the blow, tell them I’m not working for any of your clients.’ My hands are reasonably steady as I pull out an envelope and push it across the desk. ‘This is my resignation.’

He frowns. ‘I won’t accept it.’

‘I don’t want to work in the way I’ve been working.’

‘If you’re overworked, you can say no.’

‘I’m a people pleaser. I don’t like to say no.’

‘In the future, we can—’

‘I’m leaving the firm.’

‘You have a bright future here, Juliette. I can’t believe what I’m hearing.’

‘When did you know the client was coming back to us?’

Pursing his lips, he places both hands on the table. ‘Two weeks ago.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘You were working to a deadline and—’

‘You were concerned I wouldn’t have finished the report in time if I didn’t have a threat of termination hanging over me.’

‘Our work is professionally and financially rewarding.’

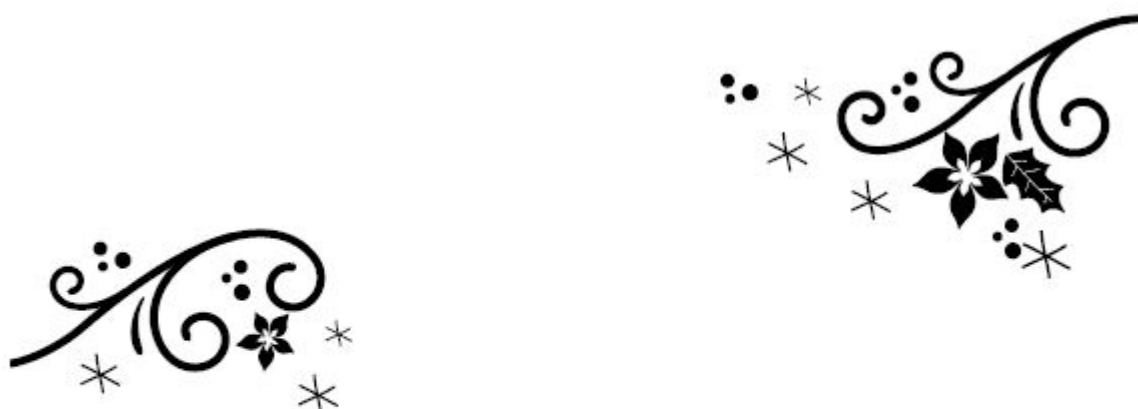
‘I like to speak up for people when they can’t do that for themselves.’

‘Have you received another job offer?’ A tight smile. ‘I’ll match it and add ten percent.’

‘I’ve made up my mind. I’m leaving.’

It’s only when I’m back in the lobby that reality sinks in. Leaving was the right decision, but what happens next? I’m jobless and soon I’ll be homeless and ...

Where is my home?



Chapter 18

Po Mei Chen, the barrister I asked to help with the Ballimore case, is a hundred and eighty centimetres tall and likes to wear high heels. She hugs me when we meet on the steps in front of her chambers. Then she stands back, takes me by the shoulders and, with laughing dark-brown eyes, looks me up and down.

‘Country life suits you.’

‘I love living there.’

‘Present tense?’ She scoops up her drawstring bag before tossing it over her shoulder. ‘Are you still working on the restructure?’

‘Two days ago, I emailed my report. Yesterday, I resigned.’

She blinks. ‘To live in the country?’

‘I’d like to live in Ballimore, but I’m not sure that’d work out.’

‘Not enough clients?’

I puff out my cheeks, release a breath. ‘I like someone who lives there, and I think he likes me, but I handled something badly.’

She tosses her head. ‘He’d be an idiot to let you go.’

‘I’m not so sure about that.’

‘Can he dance?’

Po Mei and I went to different schools but met at an interschool debating camp. At first, we skirted around each other (being third speakers on opposing teams didn't help) but late one night she found me reading and listening to music. At midnight, a headmistress caught us dancing on tables. Fearing we'd be expelled for underage drinking (I'd found a hipflask of whiskey at the bottom of Dad's backpack) and malicious damage to property (Po Mei's new stilettos had carved divots in the tabletops), we pleaded guilty to innocent schoolgirl shenanigans.

A beautiful friendship was born.

The building housing Po Mei's chambers is over a hundred years old and sandwiched between two far larger buildings. I walk quickly through the foyer as Po Mei clip-clops behind me.

'Well?' she says. 'Can he dance?'

The ground floor vestibule is panelled with deep mahogany timber. 'We haven't got to that yet.'

'If you want to live where he lives, it must be serious.'

In the past five weeks I've been confronted with many things I've been fearful of. Beau was supportive. He didn't judge. He didn't dismiss my anxiety like it was nothing.

'I've enjoyed working on this case, seeing what a difference it could make to people who're passionate about their community.'

'You won't miss parties, given that you never show up.'

'I could never keep up with my brothers, so when we had holidays in the country, I mostly stayed inside and read. I enjoyed the peace and quiet, the solitude. Since I've been in Ballimore, I've gained a new appreciation for landscape and all that goes with it. Rolling hills, picturesque valleys, birdsong—'

'I presume you stayed clear of horses and water.'

'Also bees.'

'That too?'

When my hand goes to my throat, she squeezes my arm. 'Sorry, mate.' We shuffle aside when a junior barrister pushing a trolley laden with documents rumbles past.

'Even though I didn't like Beau at first, I—'

'Whoa!' She holds up a hand. 'Beau D'Arcy? I saw his name on one of the Ballimore Progress Association submissions and looked him up. Going

by his LinkedIn profile shot ...’ She fans her face. ‘He’s hot.’

I’m rescued by my buzzing phone. ‘Hey, Mitchell. Sorry I haven’t got back to you.’

‘I only found out this morning that you’d resigned. What’s going on? When can I see you?’

‘If you can meet me and Dad for lunch tomorrow, you can be my buffer when I give him the news.’



I follow Po Mei’s lead and paste a confident smile on my face as the council’s general manager and legal team file past us out of the courtroom.

‘What’s with our happy expressions?’ I ask Po Mei in an undertone.

‘We want them to know that however long this takes, we’re up for it. We won’t back down.’

‘The judge accepted most of your arguments.’

‘I was briefed by a brilliant solicitor and ...’ When she holds up a hand, I slap it. ‘He was impressed by our ingenuity.’

‘The council will be paying ten thousand dollars a day, minimum, for their senior counsel.’

‘We passed the first hurdle—the judge thinks the case has merit and he’ll set it down for hearing.’

‘It’s only you and me. That doesn’t concern you?’

Po Mei adjusts her wig. ‘If we go to a hearing, you’ll be doing most of the work.’

‘If that’s what Ballimore wants, I’d be happy to do it.’

‘Even unemployed, you volunteer.’ Po Mei sighs dramatically. ‘Idiot.’

When my father, standing near the lifts in the towering lobby of the Supreme Court building, lifts a hand, Po Mei hugs me goodbye.

‘Come to my chambers after lunch. We’ll debrief and brainstorm.’

I shrug out of my suit jacket and roll up the sleeves of my shirt before walking to Dad, who’s waiting in an alcove near the door. Something catches my eye and—

Beau, city casual with neat hair, navy pants and a dusky-blue creased shirt, is leaning against a wall twenty metres away. Our eyes lock. I freeze.

‘Juliette.’ Dad kisses my cheek. ‘I’m looking forward to lunch.’

Dad was a middle-aged and wealthy weekend golfer. Beau was a scruffy teenaged boy who’d taken a job to support his mother. My eyes prickle as I look from one man to the other.

Dad follows my gaze.

‘Who is that?’

‘Someone from Ballimore.’ My voice is stilted. ‘I didn’t expect to see him here.’

Sun streams through the windows and makes patterns on the floor as Beau walks towards us. His stride is long and determined. Too determined? Is he wound-up like I am and doing his best to hide it? Even before he reaches us, Dad extends his hand.

‘Laurence McAdams.’

‘Beau.’ He turns to me, searches my face. ‘How did it go?’

I want to wrap my arms around him, kiss his mouth, tell him that I’m sorry. But as it is ... ‘The judge was open to our arguments, which was the best we could have hoped for. We’ll know more next week.’

‘It’s no wonder the judge was onside,’ Dad says proudly, ‘when your intellect is second to none.’

‘We can talk over lunch, Dad. Do you mind if I have a private word to Beau first?’

Dad considers Beau with renewed interest. ‘I didn’t catch your full name.’

‘Beau D’Arcy.’

‘*The* Beau D’Arcy?’ Dad is genuinely surprised. ‘The golf course designer?’

‘I do other work too.’

‘You remodelled the fifth hole at The Lakes course, didn’t you?’ Dad barks a laugh. ‘Those bunkers nearly killed me! And you were behind the twelfth hole on The Three Capes course in Tasmania. I’ve played at the best golf courses in the world, young man. The work you’ve done is on a par with all of them.’

‘I work with a team.’

‘I’m club captain at The Oaks course in Denman. Good Lord, our board has been trying to line up a meeting for months, but you haven’t had time to accommodate us. We have a marsh area, you see, that needs a makeover.

Anyone who's anyone in golf has told us Beau D'Arcy is the man for the job.'

Beau nods stiffly before turning to me. 'I can't make the meeting in Ballimore next week. I'll arrange with Flick to dial in.'

I don't want to have lunch with my father. I want to slip into Beau's arms and kiss his cranky mouth and—

'You won't remember me,' Dad says, 'but a few years ago, we were on the same Zoom call. I was there as a financier—a course up in Brisbane needed a makeover. The other tenderers went through hundreds of slides. From memory, you had half-a-dozen bullet points on a single slide that you never referred to. As you were the last to present, we asked all the questions the others had struggled with, and you had an answer for all of them. No bringing in engineering or environmental consultants to do the work for you, you answered our questions from the top of your head. Impressive. Bloody impressive.'

'Beau has a great memory.' The words are out before I can pull them back. *Peter Pan. The Little Engine That Could.* The pulse in Beau's throat thumps double time. Does he think I was having a go at him? How could he, when—

'I imagine you're a man who gets his hands dirty, takes a few risks,' Dad says. 'I encouraged all my children to do that.' Dad puts a hand to the side of his mouth like he's sharing a confidence. 'Not that it worked with Juliette, who always had her nose in a book. Nothing has changed, but I couldn't be prouder of her, working for one of the nation's top law firms.'

My fingernails dig into my palms. 'If you don't get to the restaurant soon, Dad, you might lose your booking.'

He laughs. 'They wouldn't dare.'

'I'll meet you there.'

'I have a better plan.' He turns to Beau. 'Join us for lunch. We'd love to have you. And what a wine list! Six or seven pages. Red or white, take your pick.'

Beau's shutters are down. Firmly down. Locked and padlocked. Sixteen years ago, my father hurt him. How many times, notwithstanding his success, has he been hurt since?

Beau tries to smile but fails dismally. 'I'm driving home to Ballimore.'

‘I might have to track you down. Small world, isn’t it? Meeting in person like this.’

‘You’ve met in person before.’

Beau touches my arm in warning. ‘No.’

Dad looks from Beau to me. ‘Spill the beans, Juliette.’

Beau extends a hand. ‘I’ll take a look at The Oaks course. One of my team will email.’

‘Splendid! I look forward to working with you.’

As I glance towards the doors, Mitchell, dressed in a dark grey suit and tie, walks in. ‘Mitchell is over there, Dad. I’ll meet you both at the restaurant.’



As I lead Beau outside to the long wide steps and liquidambar trees, a white delivery truck with two tall antlers attached to the roof pulls out from the kerb. A taxi driver puts his hand on the horn.

Beau stops at the bottom of the steps and turns to face me. ‘You shouldn’t have told your father we’d met.’

‘What happened to you was unfair.’

‘Forget it.’

‘He shouldn’t—’

‘Your father is proud of you, the people you mix with, your career. I don’t need you to defend me.’

‘Like I don’t need you to worry about me.’

He searches my face. ‘You want to do what’s right, I get that, but you and me, Juliette, it’s personal.’ When he looks over my shoulder, I follow his gaze. Dad and Mitchell are standing side by side, facing us, at the top of the steps. Mitchell lifts a hand.

‘Who is he?’ Beau asks.

‘A lawyer. We work together.’

‘He hasn’t taken his eyes off you. That suggests more.’

‘We used to go out. He wanted that again. I said no.’

‘You can see who you want.’ His mouth is tight. ‘I shouldn’t have asked.’

The lump in my throat doubles in size. 'Why did you come?'

'I wish I hadn't.'

'I'm sorry I walked out.'

'You ran.'

'It wasn't about anything that happened between us. Well, it was, but ...' I take a deep breath. 'It's hard to explain.'

'Did you meet your Christmas deadline?'

'Yes, but I have a lot to do on the Ballimore case.'

'Your friends and colleagues are here. You want to spend Christmas in Denman. What happens after that? Do I see you in Sydney?'

I resigned because there's a much better way for me to be happy. But would telling him I quit my job force him to say things he doesn't feel?

'Sydney wouldn't work.'

His mouth tightens. 'Right.'

'Beau ...' When I touch his hand, my legs go weak. Attraction. An ache in my heart that won't go away. I care about him. I think he cares about me. How can it all have got so messy? And where are my words when I need them? 'I'll get in touch after Christmas.'

When he takes a step back, my hand drops to my side. 'You know where I live.'



Chapter 19

Ballimore residents and members of the Progress Association, many with a beer or soft drink in hand, stand at the back of the pub's beer garden. Other locals, including Lorraine, sit on the chairs Jock has set out at the front. Beau, according to Jock, is working on a golf course in Port Douglas. I wish he were here.

Flick bursts through the doors of the pub. 'Made it!' she shouts to Jock. 'Sorry I'm late.'

'We're still waiting for our councillors,' Jock says.

When my phone rings, Po Mei's name comes up. The call only lasts two minutes, but immediately it's over I take the microphone out of Jock's hand. 'The councillors won't be coming. We should start.'

Flick, standing only a few metres away from my spot at the front, lifts her phone.

'I've got Beau on speaker. He'll chip in if needed.'

The audience listens with increased excitement as I tell them we've received an offer from the council to settle the case, and Po Mei is nutting out the documentation with the council's lawyers.

Jock rubs his hands together. 'Give us the details.'

‘The council has agreed to construct the basketball courts and a clubhouse, in our preferred location away from the rotunda, but—’

After a cheer goes up from the crowd, Jock settles everyone down. ‘Let Juliette finish.’

‘Due to the additional costs of building the courts, the council won’t agree to repair the rotunda, so this would be something the town would have to take on. We could refuse to accept the offer and see if they’d back down, but then we’d run the risk of court costs, and if we lost, we might have to pay the council’s lawyer’s costs too.’

‘A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush!’ someone shouts out.

‘The town will raise the funds to repair the rotunda.’ Another shout from the crowd.

Flick holds up her phone. ‘We can use Beau’s plans to improve the gardens and access.’

Jock smiles broadly. ‘I think you have your instructions, Juliette. Please tell your barrister friend that the settlement offer is acceptable. We’re grateful to both of you for everything you’ve done.’

‘I’ll get the documentation in order so we can all rest easy for Christmas.’

‘I insist you eat lunch first.’

A large crowd of locals—business owners, a social worker from the retirement home, residents, the high school headmaster—line up to ask questions and thank me, so it’s only when I’m leaving the room that I see Flick standing just inside the door with her phone to her ear. She grins and hugs me.

‘What a brilliant result.’ Standing back, she holds out the phone. ‘Beau wants a word.’

I hold the phone tightly, press it to my ear. ‘Hello.’

‘You did great.’

Are you in love with me? *That* would be great. ‘Thank you.’

‘Does your firm know about this?’

‘I haven’t told anyone.’

‘You deserve to be happy and successful. Sydney is lucky to have you.’

I didn’t think my heart could hurt any more than it does. Then again, my heart has never been broken. ‘Thanks.’

‘When do you go back?’

‘I’ll leave for Denman at the end of the week.’

After that, I have to move out of my apartment. Find a country town.
Set up a practice. Piece my life back together again.



‘Look, Juliette!’ When Thomasina hops off her chair by the fireplace and turns on a switch, the lights under the cellophane glisten red and orange. She kneels to rearrange pine cones in the grate. ‘It’s like a real fire!’

Lacey perches on the chair next to me. ‘It’s not real, is it?’ she whispers. ‘Just like Santa isn’t real.’

Like Lacey, I lower my voice. ‘Don’t tell Thomasina.’

‘Thomasina doesn’t want to believe it, but she knows there’s no Santa.’

‘The spirit of Christmas means lots of things, not just a man in a suit.’

‘Dad said it’s important if you’re a Christian,’ Lacey says very seriously.

‘Caring for each other, welcoming people into your home, that’s a tradition in all the religions. Mostly Christmas is a chance to get together with family and friends.’

‘Beau’s mum is on a cruise.’

‘Yes.’ My voice catches.

‘He said it was good Ally was a nurse because she almost squashed him flat with her hug when he went to Queensland.’

I have no right to be jealous about his ex-partners—or anything else. ‘Do you know when Beau comes back?’

‘We’re going to his farmhouse for Christmas dinner.’

‘That will be lovely.’

‘He said no presents, but Dad is getting him something. Are you getting him something too?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Beau told Thomasina you can’t have some things, even though you really really *really* want them. That’s why Peter Rabbit didn’t always get carrots and Winnie the Pooh didn’t always get honey.’

‘It’s most important to be happy at Christmas.’

‘Beau’s mum isn’t here, and he can’t have what he really really *really* wants. That’s why we’re going to his house.’

I *want* to ask. But I can’t.

Jock places a tuna salad in front of me and sits down opposite. ‘It’s remarkable what Beau has achieved with The Briars in five short years.’

‘The farmhouse and barn were old, weren’t they? What about the cabin?’

‘He had it built while construction went on at the farmhouse. He insisted all he needed was a table, a chair and a swag.’

And a crate of books. ‘Yes.’

‘I offered to put him up at the hotel, but he likes his peace and quiet.’ Jock’s brows lift. ‘He has quite a few staff. You’ve met Max, haven’t you?’

‘He and the others do things that Beau can’t.’

Jock looks relieved that I know the truth. ‘No one around here gives two hoots.’

Beau trusted me. Because he thought I might stay? That even though I might work in Sydney, I might come back again?

‘His home is beautiful.’

‘You’ve been inside?’

‘Only once.’

‘Not many cross the threshold.’ Jock considers his words. ‘It might be telling that you were invited to do so.’

The Famous Five. Seven Little Australians. Beau didn’t have those books in his collection. He didn’t have siblings like I did. I was only thirteen when I saw him on the golf course, but I picked him as different from the other boys his age. He was scruffy and defensive. I spotted that too.

Argumentative. Entitled. Thoughtless.

Hansel and Gretel’s gingerbread house wasn’t real. Beau’s cabin is different. He stores his memories there, his strengths and his weaknesses. It’s a safe place for him. Or it was.

He sees me as a wordy city girl with lawyer priorities, competencies, ambitions. Have I left it too late to show him that I’m more?



Chapter 20

Platters of ham, salmon and prawns are laid out on the giant timber table in my parents' dining room. And, as both Jackson and Amber are vegetarians, there are seven different salads. As my eldest brother Jasper and I set the table, the rest of the family, laughing and talking over each other, gather in the kitchen. Great Uncle Henry shuffles past, an empty red wineglass in one hand and a packet of corn chips in the other. Jasper, his newborn daughter Jade strapped to his chest, strokes the baby's cheek with a fingertip as Jackson's little boys, screeching and giggling, run around the table and scamper out again. Mum shouts out, directing Jackson to light the candles.

'Juliette?' Jasper waits for me to look up. 'What's the matter?'

'Why didn't you call me brat?'

Cupping Jade's head, he leans over the table and puts spoons in the potato salad. 'You're miserable.'

When Jackson walks in, he looks from me to Jasper and smiles uncertainly. 'What's going on?'

'Our brat is unhappy.'

'Juliette might've left something behind in Ballimore.' Jackson strikes a match. 'What was that horse's name? Strider?'

'Since when does the brat have a horse?'

‘It might not be the horse she’s thinking about.’

‘Stop it!’ My eyes sting and I turn my back, facing the tapestry that hangs behind the table. Life-sized deer graze in the trees behind King Arthur’s round table. The silence behind me is deafening.

‘It’s Beau D’Arcy, isn’t it?’ Jackson puts an arm around my shoulders and turns me around. ‘Didn’t the Goldilocks story turn out how you wanted?’

‘When I was in the cabin and you were outside, what did you and Beau talk about?’

‘I thought he was straight. I liked him.’

I swallow. Swallow again. ‘I should have been brave and told him how I felt. I shouldn’t have walked out on him.’

‘You should ask him how he feels about you.’

‘I don’t know if he wants what I want.’

‘If I hadn’t proposed to Ariella, you would’ve done it for me,’ Jackson says. ‘You knew Amber was right for Jasper before he did. You’re good at this stuff.’

‘Where is Beau now?’ Jasper asks.

‘Ballimore.’

‘So what are you doing here?’



Reassuring nods from my brothers reassure Mum that leaving Denman for Ballimore early tomorrow morning is the right thing to do.

‘If you’re not back by the end of the week, we’ll come and get you,’ Jackson warns.

‘I want to spend time with my niece and nephews. I’ll be back.’

When the babies and toddlers are asleep and we’re all seated at the table, Mum cranks up a Michael Bublé European Christmas DVD and reassures us that, as Christmas is celebrated on Christmas Eve all around the world, it’s about time we tried it too. Dad is dousing the pudding with brandy when Mum makes another announcement. ‘Your father and I will bring turkey and all the trimmings to Ballimore on Boxing Day.’

Dad huffs. ‘I’m playing golf.’

‘Nine holes will be perfectly adequate, Laurence.’

I send a wobbly smile to Jackson and Ariella, Jasper and Amber, Mum, Dad and even Great Uncle Henry. ‘Thank you for being so understanding.’

Jasper winks. ‘No brat is preferable to a miserable brat.’



The sun is high in the sky as I drive down the farmhouse’s tree-lined driveway. I pass the paddock with the cattle, and the track that leads up the hill to the cabin. After parking to the side of the farmhouse next to Beau’s ute, I pick up his present and put it down again.

Otto dozes on the doormat, only lifting his head when I tap on the screen door. No answer.

‘Beau!’

Still no answer. I walk past the old timber shed where I potted the honey and follow the path to the much more modern machinery shed. Rows of tools hang from hooks, and cabinets with drawers line a wall. Thrown over the seat of a ride-on mower is Beau’s hoodie. The double doors are wide open, the tractor is missing. Deep breath. Plan B.

On the way back to my car, I pass the shed again. Sunshine streams in through the doors, casting ribbons of light on the cobblestoned floor. A row of jars with sparkling yellow lids are lined up on a shelf. Below the shelf, on the workbench, is a scrapbook with thick textured paper. I sneak a look inside, but all the pages are blank. What did I expect? *A map made especially for me.* When Otto appears at the doors and lies at my feet, I stroke his greying fur.

‘Do you think he’d mind?’

When Otto grunts, I take that as support. Even so, my heart thumps hard as I search the shed. Finally, I find a metal box, like a biscuit box, full of coloured pencils, and take it back to the workbench.

I draw a map.



Chapter 21

When Beau finds my picture, will he understand the message? The question is on repeat in my head as, after parking at Lorraine's house, I gather up my Red Riding Hood basket and walk to the cabin. Rough-hewn logs, lopsided shutters and a steeply pitched roof. Purple and white agapanthus peek over the low picket fence. Daisy is standing under the tree and Milky-white, his little tail wagging, is nudging under her belly. Beau's house is golden; the chimney reaches up to a streaky blue sky.

I don't dare look right as I enter the cabin, focusing on the tinsel-draped door and the silvery star tied to the light instead. Ornaments—reindeers, pine trees, an angel with sparkles in her hair—march along the windowsill. I cleared most of my documents away but my notebook, sticky notes and pens are in a basket at the back of the desk. I cross my fingers as I turn.

Beau's books are neatly stacked in the crate. *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* is on the top. Beneath that, *The Little Engine That Could*. Next is *Cinderella*. *The Three Little Pigs*, with its ragged spine and worn front cover, must have been one of Beau's favourites. The first and second little pigs sheltered in the third pig's house. Is that what I'm doing now?



Beau's footsteps are firm on the path. He knocks on the door. 'Juliette?'

I pull the door wide. 'Happy Christmas.'

He glances at my map in his hand. 'I found you.'

'I'm not very good at drawing.'

He points to the picture of me, dressed as I am in blue jeans, a pink shirt and brown boots. 'You're beautiful.'

I point to the picture of him wearing the clothes he wore the night he invited me to dinner. The boots and jeans are right, but today his shirt is blue.

'You're handsome.'

He looks over my shoulder to the picnic basket on the table. 'Lunch?'

'Do you have time?'

His smile is slow. 'Always.'

'We only have one chair. Do you think we could go to the farmhouse?'

'Why did you come?'

They're the same words I used when I saw him outside the court. I pick up the basket and then I take his hand. For a moment he stills, but then he smiles. Eyes on mine, he brings my hand to his mouth and talks against my skin.

'I missed you.'

'I missed you too.'

'When Jackson was here, he responded "prove it" to something you said. Last night, he refused to tell me what that was.'

'You were afraid of the horses, and he asked me what I thought about that. I told him I wouldn't see you hurt. I told him I cared about you.'

'That was so many weeks ago.'

'I knew it much earlier.'

I have so many words, but they're all in such a jumble that none of them come out. Beau doesn't seem to care, keeping a tight hold of my hand as he closes the door behind us.

'Did you see Daisy and Milky-white on my map?'

He smiles. 'Daisy doesn't have horns.'

'I couldn't remember.'

‘Did you keep the maps I made?’

‘You can’t have them back. Ever.’

We stop on the track. He searches my face. ‘That’s a long time.’

‘I’m sorry, Beau.’ My eyes sting. ‘I’m sorry I walked out.’

He releases my hand to refer to the map again, and points to the little red hearts that lead from his barn to the cabin and back to the farmhouse. I’ve done a second drawing in a panel to the side. The hatstand inside his door has two hats and two pairs of boots.

‘What does this mean?’

‘I want to stay with you.’

‘Country and city. We’ll make it work wherever you’re based.’

‘I quit my job.’

He blinks. ‘What?’

‘I want to live in the country, and I know what kind of work I want to do. Conveyances and wills and disputes over fences and crops and Lorraine’s disgraceful false advertising for her cottage and all those other things.’

‘You don’t have to—’

‘Every time I go to town, people have questions. They need legal representation. Living here has made me see what kind of lawyer I want to be.’

A shadow crosses his face. ‘Your life is words, Juliette. I’ve spent mine escaping them. You must see that.’

‘All I see is you.’ I kiss his worried mouth. ‘Talented, creative, respected. You make me feel safe, and that will make me courageous. With me, you can feel safe too.’

‘You really don’t care, do you?’

‘You see things differently.’ I stand on my toes, press my mouth against his. ‘We complement each other.’

He puts his hands on my shoulders, searches my face. ‘I love you, Juliette McAdams.’

A hard, desperate, bone-meltingly passionate kiss, then a slow, careful, relieved kiss. How long do we kiss? Five minutes? An hour? I’m yanking at the buttons of his shirt and we’re panting with lust when he takes a step back.

‘Beau?’ A plea.

He picks up the picnic basket, takes my hand and we run down the track to the farmhouse, only stopping for breath when we get to the door. Otto lifts his head, grunts and rolls onto his side. When Beau puts the basket in the hallway, I open a flap.

‘I have a present for you.’

He hauls me upright, puts my face in his hands, kisses me again. ‘Later.’



Chapter 22

As Beau prepares the turkey and puts it in the oven, I fasten the lower buttons of the blue checked shirt I took from his wardrobe. When I perch on a stool, he glances at my legs.

‘Don’t distract me.’

‘I’ve been reading about bees and pollination. Apples, blueberries, pears, avocados, they all rely on bees.’

‘Vegetables too.’

I count on my fingers. ‘Broccoli, cabbage, canola, carrot, celery.’

‘And stock feed.’

‘Clover and lucerne crops do better with bees around.’

When he moves behind me, pushes his shirt to one side and presses his mouth against my neck, the traitorous tingling starts up again. ‘Can we please go back to bed?’

He laughs. ‘Where did you learn to be so polite?’

‘Boarding school.’ When I turn in his arms and slide off the stool, his erection nudges my hip. ‘When will Jock get here?’

‘Soon.’ He razes my collarbone with his teeth. ‘Too soon.’

‘I got a warning text from Jackson. My parents will be in Ballimore early tomorrow morning.’

He lifts his head, takes my shoulders. 'They love and support you. That's good for both of us.'

'I won't say anything to my father if that's not what you want.'

'He's well known, he has contacts.' A half smile. 'The Ballimore youth program needs funding. I'll put my pitch to your father in context, tell him things could have turned out differently for me if I didn't have my mother's support.'

'When can I meet her?'

He puts a lock of hair behind my ear, runs his thumb across my mouth. 'She'll be crazy for you.'

'Brisbane is a long way away.'

'Like Mum, I wanted to leave the life that we'd had. But when I found this farm, I worked out I belong in the country. The people in Ballimore know me, they help with my business. I trust them.'

'You contribute to town life. You give people work. Until my practice is established, I might need work too.'

'You got it.' He takes my hand and pulls me towards the living room. 'Presents.'

Beau's tree, taller than he is, smells like a forest of pines. 'Where are the decorations?'

'I did it for Jock and the girls. I don't have decorations.'

'Mum has thousands. She'll give us some.'

When he sits on the floor and holds out a hand, I join him. Thighs and arms pressed together, we lean against the back of the sofa with our legs bent at the knees. He takes my hand in both of his.

'You won't run away again, will you?'

'I did it because ...' The words tumble out. 'I realised how I felt about you, but I didn't know how you felt about me and I thought I'd better work out where I belonged. I didn't want to make things even more complicated than they already were.'

'That night we had together.' He opens my fingers, strokes across my palm. 'I thought I'd shown you how I felt.'

'How was I supposed to know it was different with me? Ally said—'

He kisses me short and sharp. 'I've never brought anyone here. You're different, Juliette. More. More precious than anything I could ever have imagined.'

A warm fuzzy feeling sits snugly in my chest. 'I don't like being afraid of horses and thinking the worst if something scares me, but that doesn't mean I'm frightened of the country. I love the solitude out here, the landscape, the community. I love your farmhouse.'

'Our farmhouse.'

I wrap my arms around him, stroke the place where his hair meets the nape of his neck. 'Have I told you how I feel about you yet?'

'No, Goldilocks.' He growls against my mouth. 'You haven't.'

'First, I'll give you your present.' I curl my legs under me, sit on my heels. 'As I only decided to come here last night, I selected your gift from my bedroom in Denman. I've had it since I was little. I hope you like it.'

After taking off the wrapping, he opens the makeshift box and holds the porcelain house in the palm of his hand. The chimney is tall and the shutters have heart-shaped cut-outs. I lift the steeply pitched roof and show him the tea light candle inside. 'When you light the wick and put the roof back on, you see the flicker from the candle through the window. It reminded me of your cabin.'

'Our cabin.' He's very serious. 'Thank you.'

'I loved looking down at the farmhouse.'

'I never went to bed till you'd turned off the light.'

My face aches from smiling as he puts the little house on the mantelpiece, forages for matches in a basket of firewood, lights the candle and repositions the roof. As light shines through the window, he crouches next to me, forearms on his thighs.

'When I still thought I had a chance, I bought a present for you.'

'I don't know that I deserve it.'

'You had to work out what you wanted. You were right about that.'

The wrapping of the heavy and rectangular parcel Beau puts on my lap is white, with hand-drawn ladybirds, *hundreds* of lady-birds, sprinkled over the surface. Four spotted ladybirds, cups and saucers between them, sit at a table beneath a sprig of mistletoe. A queue of ladybirds forms a squiggly line outside a church. Ladybirds walk towards a playground holding even smaller ladybirds' hands. A crowd of ladybirds gather outside a pub lit up by fairy lights. I rub my eyes with the palms of my hands.

'I love it.'

'Don't cry.'

I force words through the tightness in my throat. 'Do you know the collective noun for ladybirds?'

'No idea.'

'A loveliness.'

He's frowning as he leans over me and peels back the tape. 'Open it, Juliette.'

I rub the creases between his brows. 'Whatever it is, I'll love it.'

'Stop throwing that word around.'

Careful not to crease the paper, I pull the book free. *The Lord of the Rings*. I trace the gold cursive letters embossed on the hardback burgundy cover. I open the book in the middle, feel the weight of the words in my hands. When I look up, it's into his eyes.

'I love it.'

He takes the book and points out the intricately drawn maps. Middle-earth. Beleriand and the Lands to the North. The Misty Mountains, the Great River, Mirkwood. Moria. Eregion ...

'I read it years ago,' I tell him.

'I liked the movies.'

'Bilbo Baggins and Frodo loved their homes. So did Aragorn, Galadriel, Legolas, Gimli and all the others. Is that why you bought the book?'

'It was the maps,' he whispers.

My heart swells. 'I love you, Beau D'Arcy.'

He kisses my wrist, looks up through smoky blue eyes. 'Can you read me the book?'

I nod and swallow. Nod again. 'It's two thousand pages.'

'You might have to read it more than once.'

'This is our fairytale.' I kiss his eyes and taste salt. 'We have forever.'



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