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NIKKI AND THE
LONE WOLF

&

MARDIE AND THE
CITY SURGEON

MARION LENNOX

Cherish



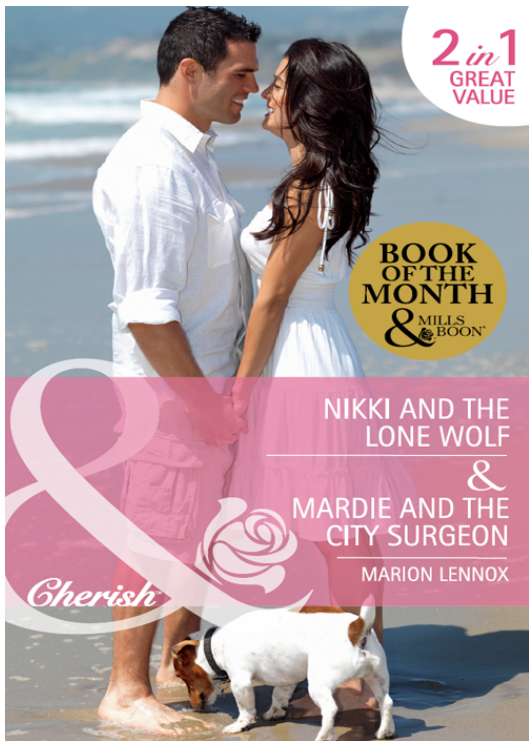
Marion Lennox
Nikki and the Lone Wolf /
Mardie and the City Surgeon:
Nikki and the Lone Wolf /
Mardie and the City Surgeon

Аннотация

Nikki and the Lone Wolf Nikki is in Banksia Bay for a fresh start. And she refuses to let renting half a cottage from enigmatic Gabe distract her from her new life! Gorgeous Gabe is also intent on keeping to himself. Until a scared and lonely dog needs both their care! Suddenly their plans to avoid new responsibilities – and relationships – are crumbling around them...Mardie and the City Surgeon During a raging thunderstorm, the last person Mardie expects to see on her doorstep is Blake! Fifteen years ago he walked away, leaving her shattered. But she can't turn him away tonight – not with an injured border collie in his arms. Yet, having walked away once, can Blake convince Mardie that now he's looking for a reason to stay?

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Nikki and The
Lone Wolf
Mardie and The
City Surgeon
Marion Lennox



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Nikki and The Lone Wolf

Marion Lennox

Dear Reader,

Every night around five o'clock my dog, Mitzi, starts pacing. She starts with a mournful sigh, then trudges to the door where her lead hangs, then back to me. Over and over. Finally, I relent. Snow, sleet or baking sun, off we go to our local lake, where I let her off the lead and she can run.

And she does run—a black and silver mini-schnauzer, the runt of the litter, a little dog in a huge dog's body, mixing with all the other dogs who've had similar success getting their lead-holders out of their houses. We love it.

Mitzi's best mates are wolfhounds—two vast mutts who play with her as if she's an equal. She does doughnuts through their legs while I chat to their owner, Wolfhound Man, their equal in the large department—though a lot better-looking. *A lot!*

So for this story, when I needed a dog and a hero, there they were in my head—my wolfhound, Horse, and the man who loves him. Wolfhound Man has become Gabe, a sea captain and all-round hero, and of course there's Nikki, a heroine deserving of both man and dog. I'm imagining you, my reader, as my heroine,

and I hope you do, too. And you don't even have to feed a wolfhound to do it.

I love the dogs in my life. I love the dogs in my books. But what I love most is when they come together with passion and laughter, and write themselves into love stories for you to enjoy with me.

Happy reading!

Marion

About the Author

MARION LENNOX is a country girl, born on an Australian dairy farm. She moved on—mostly because the cows just weren't interested in her stories! Married to a “very special doctor”, Marion writes Medical Romances as well as Mills & Boon[®] Cherish[™]. She's now had over seventy-five romance novels accepted for publication.

In her non-writing life Marion cares for kids, cats, dogs, chooks and goldfish. She travels, she fights her rampant garden (she's losing) and her house dust (she's lost).

Having spun in circles for the first part of her life, she's now stepped back from her “other” career, which was teaching statistics at her local university. Finally she's reprioritised her life, figured what's important, and discovered the joys of deep baths, romance and chocolate. Preferably all at the same time!

To Gail and to Charles, for Bob, a gentle giant with a heart as big as he was.

CHAPTER ONE

A WOLF was at her door.

Okay, maybe it wasn't quite at her door, Nikki conceded, as she came back to earth. Or back to the sofa. The howl was close, though. Her hair felt as if it was spiking straight up, and for good reason.

It was the most appalling, desolate sound she could imagine—and she wasn't imagining it.

She set her china teacup onto the coffee table with care, absurdly pleased she hadn't spilled it. She was a country girl now. Country girls didn't get spooked by wolves.

Yes, they did.

She fought for logic. Wolves didn't exist in Banksia Bay. This was the north coast of New South Wales.

Was it a dingo?

Her landlord hadn't mentioned dingoes.

He wouldn't, she thought bitterly. Gabe Carver was one of the most taciturn men she'd ever met. He spoke in monosyllabic grunts. 'Sign here. Rent first Tuesday of the month. Any problems, talk to Joe down at the wharf. He's the handyman. Welcome to Banksia Bay.'

Even his welcome had seemed grudging.

Was he at home?

She peered nervously out into the night and was absurdly

comforted to see lights on next door. Actually, it wasn't even next door. This was a huge old house on the headland at the edge of town. Three rooms had been split from the rest of the house and a kitchen installed to make her lovely apartment.

Her landlord was thus right through the wall. They shared the entrance porch. Taciturn or not, the thought that he was at home was reassuring. The burly seaman seemed tough, capable, powerful—even vaguely scary. If the wolf came in ...

This was crazy. Nothing was coming in. Her door was locked. And it couldn't be a wolf. It was ...

The howl came again, long, low and filling the night with despair.

Despair?

What would she know?

It was just a dog, howling at the moon.

It didn't sound like ... just a howl.

She peered out again, then tugged the curtains closed. Logical or not, this was scary. Barricade the door and go to bed. It was the only logical thing to do.

Another howl.

Pain.

Desolation.

Did pain and desolation make any kind of sense?

Step away from the window, Nikkita, she told herself. This is nothing to do with you. This is weird country stuff.

'I'm a country girl.' She said it out loud.

‘Um, no,’ she corrected herself. ‘You’re not. You’re a city girl who’s lived in Banksia Bay for all of three weeks. You ran here because your low-life boss broke your heart. It was a dumb, irrational move. You know nothing about country living.’

But her landlord was right next door. Dogs? Wolves? Whatever it was, he’d be hearing it. He could deal with it himself or he could call Joe.

She was going to bed.

* * *

The howl filled the night, echoing round and round the big old house.

There was a dog out there, in trouble.

It was not Gabe’s problem. Not.

The howl came again, mournful as death, filling his head with its misery. If Jem had been here she’d be off to investigate.

He missed Jem so much it was as if he’d lost a part of him.

He was settled in his armchair by the fire. Things were as they’d always been, but the place at his feet was empty.

He’d found Jem sixteen years ago, a scrappy, half grown collie, skin and bones. She was attacking a rotting fish on the beach.

He’d lifted her away, half expecting the starved pup to growl or snap, but she’d turned and licked his face with her disgusting tongue—and sealed a friendship for life.

She passed away in her sleep, three months back. He still put his hand down, expecting the warmth of her rough coat.

Expecting her to be ... there.

The howl cut across his thoughts. Impossible to ignore.

He swore.

Okay, he didn't want to get involved—when had he ever?—but he couldn't bear this. The howl was coming from the beach. If a dog was trapped down there ... The tide was on its way in.

Why would a dog be trapped on the beach?

Why would a dog be on the beach?

The howl ... again.

He sighed. Abandoned his book. Hauled on the battered sou'wester that, as a professional fisherman, was his second skin. Tugged on his boots and headed for the door.

There wasn't a lot of use staring at the fire anyway. He'd made a conscious decision when his wife walked away to never live with anyone again. Emotional connection spelled disaster.

That didn't mean he had to like his solitary life. With Jem it had been just okay. Not any more.

Her silk pyjamas were laid out on her pretty pink quilt, waiting for her to climb into her brand new single bed. But the howling went on.

She couldn't bear it.

She might not be a country girl but she'd figured whatever was out there was distressed, not threatening. The howl contained all the misery in the world.

Her landlord lived next door. He should fix it, but would he?

The first day she'd been here she'd worried about pipes

gurgling in her antiquated bathroom. The bathroom was vast, the bathtub was huge, and the plumbing looked as if it had come from a medieval castle. The gurgling had her thinking there was no way she was using the bath.

Gabe had been outside, chopping wood. She'd hesitated to approach, intimidated by his gruffness—and also the size, the sense of innate power, the sheer masculinity of the man. Chopping wood ... he'd looked quite something.

Actually ... he'd been stripped to the waist and he'd looked *really* something.

She was being stupid. Hormonal. Dumb. She'd plucked up courage and approached, feeling like Oliver Twist asking for more gruel. 'Please sir, could you fix my pipes?'

'See Joe,' he'd muttered and promptly disappeared.

She'd been disconcerted for days.

She'd seethed for a bit, tried to ignore the gurgling for a few days, had showers, and finally gone to find Joe.

Joe was an ancient ex-fisherman living on a dilapidated schooner that looked as if it hadn't been to sea for years. He'd promised to fix the gurgling that afternoon. He did—sort of—thumping the pipes with a spanner—but while she'd been explaining the problem, a fishing boat swept past. Huge. Freshly painted. Gleaming clean and white. The deck was stacked with cray-pots. The superstructure was strung with scores of lanterns that Joe explained were to attract squid.

Her landlord had been at the wheel.

Still disconcerting. Big, weathered, powerful.

Still capable of doing things to her hormones just by ... being.

‘Turns his hand to anything, that one,’ Joe told her as they watched Gabe go past. ‘Some of the guys here just fish for squid. Or crays. Or tuna. Then there’s a drop in numbers, or sales go off and they’re in trouble. I’ve been a fisherman all my life and I’ve seen so many go to the wall. Gabe just buys ‘em out and keeps going. He went away for a while, but came back when things got bad. Bailed us out. Six of the boats here are his.’

At the wheel of his boat, Gabe looked an imposing figure. His sou’wester might have once been yellow, but that time was long past. He wore oversized waterproof trousers with braces, rubber boots and a faded checked shirt rolled up to reveal arms maybe four times the width of hers. His eyes were creased against the elements, and his face looked almost grim.

After days at sea, his stubble was almost a beard. His thick black hair—in need of a cut—was stiff with salt.

His boat passed within yards of Joe’s, and he gave Joe a salute. No smile, though.

He didn’t look as if he ever smiled.

He bought up other fishermen when they went broke? He made money out of other people’s misery?

Her hormones needed to find someone else to fantasise about, fast.

‘I’d guess he’s not popular,’ she’d ventured, but Joe had looked at her as if she was crazy.

‘Are you kidding? Without Gabe, the fishing industry here’d be bust. He buys out the guys who go broke, gives ‘em a fair price, then employs ‘em to keep working. He’s got thirty men and women working for him now, all making a better living than they ever did solo, and there’s not one but who’d lay down their lives for him. Not that he’d ask. Never asks anything of anyone. Never lets anyone close. If anyone’s in trouble Gabe’s first on hand, doing what needs doing, whatever the cost. But he doesn’t want thanks. Backs off a mile if you try and give it. He keeps to himself, our Gabe. Apart from that one disaster of a marriage, he always has and he always will. The town respects that. We’d be nuts not to.’

He paused, watching as Gabe expertly manoeuvred his boat into a berth that seemed way too small to take her. He did it as if he was parking a Mini Minor in a paddock, as if he had all the room in the world. ‘But now his dog’s died,’ Joe said slowly, reflectively. ‘I dunno ... We’ve never seen him without her; not since he was a lad, and how he’s handling it ...’ He broke off and shook his head. ‘Yeah, well, about those pipes ...’

That was two weeks ago.

Another howl jerked her back to the present. A dog in trouble. Desolation?

She had to do something.

There was nothing she could do. This was something her landlord had to cope with.

The howl came again, long, low and dreadful.

She'd tugged on her pyjama top. Almost defiantly.

Another howl.

She paused, torn.

What if her landlord wasn't at home? What if he'd left the light on and was gone?

There was a dog out there in trouble.

Not your problem. NYP. NYP. NYP.

She closed her eyes.

Another howl.

She hauled off her pyjamas and tugged on jeans. Designer jeans. She should do something about her clothes.

She should do something about a dog.

Where was a torch?

What if it was a dingo?

She grabbed her mobile phone. Checked reception. Checked she had the emergency services number on speed dial.

There was a heavy metal poker by the fireside. So far she hadn't lit the fire—or she had once but it had smoked and what did you do about a fire that smoked?

You bought a nice clean electric fire.

Another howl—they were now almost continuous.

Enough.

Poker in one hand, torch in the other, country-girl Nikki—or not—went to see.

The beach beneath the headland was bushland almost to the water's edge. Gabe strode down the darkened track with ease.

He'd lived here all his life—he practically knew each twig. He didn't need a torch. In moonlight, torchlight stopped you seeing the big picture.

He reached the beach and looked out to the water's edge. Following the howl.

A huge dog. Skinny. Really skinny. Standing in the shallows, howling with all the misery in the world.

Gabe walked steadily forward, not wanting to startle it, walking as if he was strolling slowly along the beach and hadn't even noticed the dog.

The dog saw him. It stopped howling and backed further into the water. Obviously terrified.

A wolfhound? A wolfhound mixed with something else. Black and shaggy and desolate.

'It's okay.' He was still twenty yards away. 'Hey, boy, it's fine. You going to tell me what's the matter?'

The dog stilled.

It was seriously big. And seriously skinny. And very, very wet. Had it come off a boat?

He thought suddenly of Jem, shivering on the beach sixteen years back. Jem, breaking his heart.

This dog was nothing to do with him. *This was not another Jem.*

He couldn't leave it, though. Could he entice it up the cliff? If he could get it into his truck he'd take it to Henrietta who ran the local Animal Welfare shelter.

That was the extent of his involvement. Dogs broke your heart almost worse than people.

‘I’m not going to hurt you.’ He should have brought some steak, something to coax him. ‘You want to come home and get a feed? Here, boy?’

The dog backed still further. For whatever reason, this dog didn’t want company. He looked a great galumphing frame of terror.

It’d have to be steak. There was no way he’d catch him without.

‘Stay here,’ he told the dog. ‘Two minutes tops and I’ll be back with supper. You like rump steak?’

The dog was almost haunch-deep in water. Was he dumb or just past acting rationally?

‘Two minutes,’ he promised. ‘Don’t go away.’

The dog was on the beach. As soon as she walked out of the front door she figured it out. The house was on the headland and the howls were echoing straight up.

Should she knock on her landlord’s side of the house?

If he was home he must be hearing this, she thought, and if he’d heard it and done nothing, then no amount of pleading would make a difference. Joe said he helped people. Ha!

He must have heard and decided to ignore it. He was like Joe said, a loner.

Knock and see?

What was worse, the Hound of the Baskervilles or her

landlord?

Don't be stupid. Knock.

She knocked.

Nothing.

She didn't know whether to be relieved or not.

Another howl.

What next? Ring the police?

What would she say? Excuse me but there's a dog on the beach. What sort of wimpy statement was that?

She needed to see what was happening.

Cautiously.

There was a narrow track from the house to the beach but she'd only been on it a couple of times. It was a private track, practically overgrown. Where did the track start?

She searched the edge of the overgrown garden with the torch but she couldn't find it.

So was she going to bush-bash her way down to the cove?

This was nuts. Dangerous nuts.

Only it wasn't dangerous. There was only about fifty yards of bush-land between the house and the beach. The bush wasn't so thick she couldn't push through.

And that howl was doing things to her insides. It sounded like she imagined the Hound of the Baskervilles would sound, howling ghostly anguish over the moors. Or over her beach.

The animal must be stuck in a trap or something.

If it was stuck, what could she do?

Go to the beach, figure what's wrong and then ring for help. You can do this. You're a big girl. A country girl. Or not.

She wanted, suddenly and desperately, to be back home in Sydney. In her lovely life she'd walked away from.

Face that tomorrow, she told herself harshly. For tonight ... go fix a howl.

He was striding up the track, moving swiftly. With a slab of meat in his hand he could approach the dog slowly, letting it smell the meat before it smelled him. He'd intended to have the steak for breakfast—he needed a decent meal before heading to sea again—but he could cope with eggs.

Don't get sucked in.

'I'm not getting sucked in,' he told himself. 'I'm hauling the thing out of the water, feeding it and handing it over to Henrietta. End of story.'

It was dark.

The bush was really thick. Her torch wasn't strong enough.

She was out of her mind.

The howls stopped.

Why?

The silence made it worse. Where had the howls been coming from? Where were the howls now?

Anything could be in here. Bunyips. Neanderthals. The odd rapist.

She was losing her mind, and she was going home now! She turned, pushed forward, and a branch slapped her forehead with a

swish of leaves. She almost screamed. She was absurdly pleased that she didn't.

But still no howl.

Where was it?

She was going back to the house. There was no way she was going one inch further.

Where was the thing behind the howl?

She shoved her way around the next bush, pushing herself against the thick foliage. Suddenly the foliage gave way and she almost tumbled out onto the track.

Hands grabbed her shoulders—and held.

She screamed and jerked back.

She raised her poker and she hit.

CHAPTER TWO

SHE'D killed him.

He went down like felled timber, crumpling from the knees, pitching sideways onto the leaf-littered track.

She had just enough courage not to run; to shine the torch at what she'd hit.

She'd hit someone—not something. She didn't believe in werewolves. Therefore ...

Sanity returned with terrifying speed. She had it figured almost before she got the torchlight on his face, and what she saw confirmed it.

She whimpered. There seemed no other option.

This was ghastly on so many levels her head felt it might explode.

She'd knocked out her landlord.

The howling started up again just through the trees, and she jumped higher than the first time she'd heard it.

A lesser woman would run.

There wasn't room for her to be a lesser woman.

She knelt, shining the torchlight closer to see the damage.

Gabe's dark face was thick with stubble, harsh and angular. A thin trickle of blood was oozing down the side of his cheek. A bruise with a split at its centre was rising above his eye.

He seemed totally unconscious.

To say her heart sank was an understatement. Her heart was below her ankles. It was threatening to abandon her body entirely.

But then ... He stirred and groaned and his fingers moved towards his head.

Conscious. That had to be good.

What to do? Deep breath. This was no time for hysterics. He looked as if he was trying to focus.

She placed the poker behind her. Out of sight.

‘Are you ... Are you okay?’ she managed.

He groaned. He closed his eyes and appeared to think about it.

‘No,’ he managed at last. ‘I’m not.’

‘I’ll find a doctor.’ Her voice wobbled to the point of ridiculous. ‘An ambulance.’

He opened his eyes again, touched his head, winced, closed his eyes again. ‘No.’

‘You need help.’ She was gabbling. ‘Someone.’ She went to touch his face and then thought better of it. She definitely needed help. Someone who knew what they were doing. She reached inside her jacket for her cellphone.

His eyes flew open, he grabbed her wrist and he held like a vice.

‘What did you hit me with?’ His voice was a slurred growl.

‘A ... a poker.’ His voice was deep. In contrast, her voice was practically a squeak.

‘A poker,’ he said, almost conversationally. ‘Of course. And now what?’

‘S ... sorry?’

‘You have a gun in your jacket? Or is only your poker loaded?’

Her breath came out in a rush. If he was making stupid jokes, maybe she hadn’t done deathly damage.

‘There’s not ... that’s not funny,’ she managed. ‘You scared the daylights out of me.’

‘You *hit* the daylights out of me.’

Reaction was making her shake. ‘You snuck up.’ Her voice was getting higher. ‘You grabbed me.’

‘Snuck up ...’ He sounded flabbergasted. ‘I believe,’ he said through gritted teeth, ‘that I was running up the track. On *my* land. Back to *my* house. And you burst out of the undergrowth. Bearing poker.’

He had a point, she conceded. She’d almost fallen as she lurched onto the cleared track. She might indeed have fallen into his path.

It might even have been reasonable for him to grab her to stop them both falling.

And he was her landlord. Hitting someone was bad enough, but to hit Gabe ...

It hadn’t been easy to find decent rental accommodation in Banksia Bay and she’d been really lucky to find this apartment. Apart from howling dogs, it had everything she needed. ‘Just be nice to your landlord and respect his privacy,’ the woman in the rental agency had advised. ‘He’s a bit of a loner. You leave Gabe in peace and you’ll get along fine.’

Leaving him in peace wouldn't include hitting him, she conceded. Mentally she was already packing.

'I need steak,' he said across her thoughts.

She blinked. 'Steak?' She groped for basic first aid; thought of something she'd once read. 'To stop the swelling?' She tried to look wise. Tried to stop gibbering. 'I don't ... I don't have steak but I'll get ice.'

'For the dog, dummy.' He'd raised his head but now he set it down again, staying flat on the leaf litter. Gingerly fingering the bruise. 'The dog needs help. There's steak in my fridge. Fetch it.'

'I can't ...'

'Just fetch it,' he snapped and closed his eyes. 'If you run round in the middle of the night with pokers, you face the consequences. Get the steak.'

'I can't leave you,' she said miserably, and he opened one eye and looked at her. Flinching.

'Turn the torch around,' he said, and she realised that just possibly she was blinding him as well as hitting him.

'Sorry.' She swivelled the light so it was shining harmlessly into the bush.

'No, onto you.'

He reached out, grabbed the flashlight and turned it onto her face. Then he surveyed her while she thought ouch, having a flashlight in her eyes hurt.

'There's no need to be scared,' he said.

'I'm not scared.' But then the dog howled again and she

jumped. Okay, maybe she was.

‘You can’t afford to be,’ he said, and she could tell by the strain in his voice that he was hurting. ‘Because the dog needs help. I don’t know what’s wrong with him. He’s standing on the beach howling. You were heading down with a poker. I, on the other hand, intend to try steak. I believe my method is more humane. It might take me a few moments to stop seeing stars, however, so you fetch it.’

‘Are you really seeing stars?’

‘Yes.’ Then he relented. ‘It’s night. There are stars. Yes, I’m dizzy, but I’ll get over it. I won’t die while you’re away, but I do need a minute to stop things spinning. My door’s open. Kitchen’s at the back. Steak’s in the paper parcel in the fridge. Chop it into bite sized pieces. I’ll lie here and count stars till you come back. Real ones.’

‘I can’t leave you. I need to call for help.’

‘I’m fine,’ he said with exaggerated patience. ‘I’ve had worse bumps than this and lived. Just do what I ask like a good girl and give me space to recover.’

‘You lost consciousness. I can’t ...’

‘If I did it was momentary and I don’t need anyone to hold my hand,’ he snapped. ‘Neither do you. You’re wasting time, woman. Go.’

* * *

She went. Feeling dreadful.

She tracked the path with her torch, trying to run. She

couldn't. The path was a mass of tree roots. If Gabe had been running he must know the path by heart.

She didn't have the right shoes for running either.

She didn't have the right shoes at all, she thought. She was wearing Gucci loafers. They worked beautifully for wandering the Botanic Gardens in Sydney after a Sunday morning latte. They didn't work so well here.

She wanted so much to be back in her lovely apartment overlooking Sydney Harbour. Back in her beautifully contained life, her wonderful job, her friends, the lovely parties, the coffee haunts, control.

Jon's fabulous apartment. A job in a lovely office right next to Jon's. A career that paid ... extraordinarily. A career with Jon. Friends she shared with Jon. Coffee haunts where people greeted Jon before they greeted her.

Jon's life. Or half of Jon's life. She'd thought she had the perfect life and it had been based on a lie.

What to do when your world crumbled?

Run. She'd run to here.

'Don't think about it.' She said it to herself as a mantra, over and over, as she headed up the track as fast as she could in her stupid shoes. There'd been enough self-pity. This was her new life. Wandering around in the dark, coshing her landlord, looking for steak for the Hound of the Baskervilles?

It was her new life until tomorrow, she thought miserably. Tomorrow Gabe would ask her to leave.

Another city might be more sensible than moving back to Sydney. But it was probably time she faced the fact that moving to the coast had been a romantic notion, a dignified way she could explain her escape to friends.

‘I can’t stand the rat race any longer. I can deal with my clients through the Internet and the occasional city visit. I see myself in a lovely little house overlooking the sea, just me and my work and time to think.’

Her friends—Jon’s friends—thought she was nuts, but then they didn’t know the truth about Jon.

Scumbag.

She’d walked away from a scumbag. Now she’d hit her landlord.

Men! Where was a nice convent when a girl needed one? A cloistered convent where no man set foot. Ever.

There seemed to be a dearth of convents on her way back to the house.

Steak.

She reached the house, and headed through the porch they shared, where two opposite doors delineated His and Hers.

She’d never been in His. She opened his door cautiously as if there might be a Hound or two in there as well.

No Hounds. The sitting room looked old and faded and comfy, warmed by a gorgeous open fire. There was one big armchair by the fire. A half-empty beer glass. Books scattered—lots of books. Masculine, unfussed, messy.

All this she saw at a glance as she headed towards the kitchen, but strangely ... here was the hormone thing again. She was distracted by the sheer masculinity of the place.

As she was ... distracted ... by the sheer masculinity of her landlord.

Stupid. Get on with it, she told herself crossly, and she did.

His fridge held more than hers. Meat, vegetables, fruit, sauces—interesting stuff that said when he was at home he cooked.

She needed to learn, she thought suddenly, as she caught the whiff of meals past and glanced at the big old firestone that was the centrepiece of the kitchen. Enough with ‘Waistline Cuisine’.

It was hardly the time to be thinking cooking classes now, though. Or hormones.

Steak.

She had it. A solid lump, enough for a team of Hounds. She sliced it into chunks in seconds, then opened the freezer and grabbed a packet of frozen peas as well.

First aid and Hound meat, coming up.

Men and dogs. She could cope.

She had no choice. Convents had to wait.

What did you do with hormones in convents?

He’d terrified her.

Gabe lay back and looked at the sky and let his head clear. She’d packed a huge punch, but any anger he felt had been wiped by the look on her face. She’d looked sicker than he felt.

What was he about, letting the place to a needy city woman?

It was the second time he'd let it. The first time he'd rented it to Mavis, a spinster with two dogs. The moment she'd moved in she decided he needed mothering. Finally, after six months of tuna bakes, her mother had 'a turn' and Mavis headed back to Sydney to take care of her. Gabe had been so relieved he'd waived the last month's rent.

And now this.

Dorothy in the letting agency had made this woman sound businesslike and sensible. Very different to Mavis.

'Nikkita Morrissy. Thirty years old. She designs air conditioning systems for big industrial projects. Her usual schedule is three weeks home, one week on site, often overseas. She's looking for a quiet place with a view, lots of natural light and nothing to disturb her.'

A woman who worked in industrial engineering. She sounded clever, efficient and non-needy.

His house was huge. He should move into town but he'd lived in this place all his life. *His mother was here.*

He'd lost his mother when he was eight years old, and this was all that was left. The garden she'd loved. The fence she'd almost finished. He walked outside sometimes and he could swear he saw her.

'I'll never leave you ...'

People lied. He'd learned that early. Depend on no one. But here ... in his mother's garden, looking out over the bay she'd loved, this was all that was left of a promise he'd desperately

wanted to believe in.

Emotional nonsense? Of course it was, he knew it, but his childhood house was a good place to crash when he wasn't at sea. He had the money to keep it. If he could get a reasonable tenant for the apartment, then there'd be someone keeping the rooms warm, used.

Go ahead, he'd told Dorothy.

And then he'd met Nikkita. Briefly, the day she'd moved in.

She didn't look like an industrial engineer. She looked like someone in one of those glossy magazines Hattie kept leaving on the boat. She was tall, five nine or so, slim and pale-skinned, with huge eyes and professionally applied make-up—yes, he was a bachelor but that didn't mean he couldn't pick decent cosmetics a mile off. Her glossy black hair was cut into some sort of sculpted bob, dead straight, all fringe and sharp edges.

And her clothes ... The day she'd arrived she'd been wearing a black tunic with a diagonal slash of crimson across the hips. She'd added loopy silver earrings, red tights and glossy black boots that were practically thigh high. Low heels though. It was her moving day. She'd obviously thought low heels were workmanlike.

Tonight she'd been wearing jeans. Skin-tight jeans and a soft pink sweater. She must be roughing it, he thought, and his thoughts were bitter.

His head was thumping. He was trying hard not to think critical thoughts about ditzy air conditioning engineers who bush-

bashed through the night with pokers.

And suddenly she was back again—practically running, though if she'd tried to run in those shoes she would have run right out of them. She was panting. Her eyes were still huge and the sculpted hair was ... well, a lot less sculpted. She had a twig stuck behind one ear. A big twig.

'Are you okay?' she demanded, breathless, as if she'd expected to find him dead.

'I'm fine,' he growled and struggled to stand. Enough of lying round feeling sorry for himself. He shook away the hand she proffered, pushed himself to his feet—and the world swayed. Not much, but enough for him to grab her hand to steady himself.

She was stronger than he thought. She grabbed his other hand and held, hard, waiting for him to steady.

'S ... sorry.' For a moment he thought he might throw up. He concentrated for a bit and decided no, he might keep his dignity.

'Let me help you to the house.'

'Dog first,' he said.

'You first.'

'The dog's standing up to his hocks in the water, howling. I'm not even whinging. I'm prioritizing.' He made to haul his hands away but she still held.

He stopped pulling and let her hold.

Two reasons. One, he was still unsteady.

Two, it felt ... not bad at all.

He worked with women. A good proportion of his fishing

crews were female. They mostly smelled of, yeah, well, of fish. After a while, no matter how much washing, you didn't get the smell out.

Nikkita smelled of something citrusy and tangy and outright heady. It didn't make the dizziness worse, though. In truth it helped. He stood still, breathing in the scent of her, while the night settled around him.

She didn't speak. She simply held.

Two minutes. Three. She wasn't a talker, then. She'd figured he needed time to make the ground solid and she was giving it to him. It was the first decent thing he'd seen of her.

Maybe there were more decent things.

Her hands felt good. They were small hands for a tall woman. Soft ...

Yeah, well, of course they'd be soft. For the last ten years any woman he'd ever gone out with was a local, one of the fishing crews, women who worked hard for a living. The only woman he'd ever gone out with who had soft hands ...

Yeah. Lisbette. He'd married her.

So much for soft hands.

'I'm right now,' he said, finally, as another howl split the night. 'Dog.'

'Please let me take you home first.'

'Are you good with dogs?'

'Um ... no.'

'Then we both do the dog,' he said. 'Sure, I'm unsteady, so you

do what I tell you. Exactly what I tell you. After the poker, it's the least you can do.'

Was she out of her mind?

She was acting under orders.

Gabe was sitting in the shadows, watching, as she approached the dog with her hands full of steak. Upwind, according to Gabe's directions, so he could smell the meat.

The dog was huge. Soaking wet, its coat was clinging to its skinny frame, so it looked almost like a small black horse.

Talk gently, Gabe had said. Soft, unthreatening.

So ... 'Hey, Horse, it's okay,' she told him. 'Come out of the water and have some steak. Gabe's gone to a lot of trouble to get it for you. The least you can do is eat it.'

Take one small step after another, Gabe had told her. Stop at the first hint of nervousness. Let the dog figure for himself that you're not a threat.

'Come on, boy. Hey, Horse, it's okay. It's fine. Come and tell me what your real name is.'

What was she doing, standing in the shallows with her hands full of raw meat? She'd tugged off her shoes but her jeans were soaked. To no avail. The dog was backing away, still twenty feet from her.

His coat was ragged, long and dripping. Fur was matted over his eyes.

He wasn't coming near.

If Gabe wasn't in the shadows watching she might have set the

meat down on the sand and retreated.

But her landlord was expecting her to do this. He'd do it himself, only, despite what he told her, the thump on the head was making him nauseous. She knew it. He wasn't letting her call for help but she knew it went against the grain to let her approach the dog. Especially when she was so bad at it.

'Here, Horse. Here ...'

A wave, bigger than the rest, came sideways instead of forward. It slapped into another wave, crested, hit her fair across the chest.

She yelped. She couldn't help herself.

The dog backed fast into the waves.

'It's okay,' she called and forgot to lower her voice.

The dog cast her a terrified glance and backed some more. The next wave knocked him sideways. He regained his footing and ran, like the horse he resembled. Along the line of the surf, away, around the bed in the headland and out of sight.

'It's okay.'

It wasn't, but she hadn't expected him to say it. She'd expected him to yell.

She'd coshed him. She'd scared the dog away.

A little voice at the back of her mind was saying, *At least the howling's stopped.*

NYP, the same little voice in the back of her head whispered. Not your problem. She could forget the dog.

Only ... He'd looked tragic. Horse ...

Gabe was sitting where the sand gave way to the grassy verge before the bush began. At least he looked okay. At least he was still conscious.

‘You did the best you could.’ *For a city girl.* It wasn’t said. It didn’t have to be said.

‘Maybe he’s gone home.’

‘Does he look to you like he has a home?’ He flicked his cellphone from his top pocket and punched in numbers. Then he glanced at her, sighed, and hit loudspeaker so she could hear who he was talking to.

A male voice. Authoritive. ‘Banksia Bay Police,’ the voice said.

‘Raff?’ Gabe’s voice still wasn’t completely steady and the policeman at the end of the line obviously heard it. Maybe he was used to people with unsteady voices calling. He also recognised the caller.

‘Gabe? What’s up?’ She heard concern.

‘No problem. Or not a major one. A stray dog.’

‘Another one.’ The policeman sighed.

‘What are you talking about?’ Gabe demanded.

‘Henrietta’s Animal Welfare van was involved in an accident a few days back,’ the policeman explained. ‘We have stray dogs all over town. Describe this one.’

‘Big, black and malnourished,’ Gabe said. He was watching Nikki as he spoke. Nikki was trying to get the sand from between her toes before she put her shoes on. It wasn’t working.

She was soaking. She sat and the sand stuck to her. Ugh. She was also unashamedly listening.

‘Like Great Dane big?’

‘Yeah, but he’s shaggy,’ Gabe said. ‘I’d guess Wolfhound with a few other breeds mixed in as well. And I don’t have him. He was down the beach below the house. We tried to catch him with a lump of steak but he’s headed round the headland to your side of town.’

‘We?’ Raff said.

‘Yeah,’ Gabe said dryly. ‘My tenant’s been helpful.’

‘But the two of you can’t catch him.’

‘No,’ Gabe said, and Nikki thought miserably that he sounded as if he could have done it if he was by himself. Maybe he could, but at least he didn’t say so.

‘I’ll check from the headland in the morning,’ Raff was saying. ‘You okay? You sound odd.’

‘Nothing I can’t handle. If he comes back ... you want me to take him to the shelter?’

‘You might as well take him straight to the vet’s,’ Raff said. ‘He was on his way there to be put down. If he’s the one I think he is, someone threw him off a boat a couple of weeks back. We found him on the beach, starving. He’s well past cute pup stage. He’s huge and shabby. Old scars and not a lot of loveliness. He looks like he’s been kicked and neglected. No one will rehouse a dog like that, so Henrietta made the decision to get him put down. But if he doesn’t come back to your beach it’s not your

worry, mate. Thanks for letting me know. ‘Night.’

“Night.”

Gabe repocketed his phone.

Nikki flicked more sand away.

A starving dog. Kicked and neglected. Thrown from a boat. She hadn’t even managed to give him a meal, and now he was lost again.

Plus a landlord who was still sounding shaken because she’d thumped him.

Was there a scale for feeling bad? Bad, terrible, appalling.

‘Leave the steak just above the high tide mark,’ Gabe said, his voice gentle. ‘It’s not your fault.’

‘Nice of you to say so.’

‘Yeah, well, the bang on the head was your fault,’ he conceded, and he even managed a wry smile. ‘But there’s nothing more we can do for the dog. He’s gone. If he smelled the steak he might come back, but he won’t come near if he smells us. We’ve done all we can. Moving on, I need an aspirin. Do you have those toes sand-free yet?’

‘I ... yes.’ No. She was crusted in sand but she stood up and prepared to move on.

She glanced along the beach, half hoping the dog would lope back.

Why would he?

‘Raff’ll find him,’ Gabe said.

‘He’s the local cop?’

‘Yes.’

‘He won’t look tonight?’

‘There’s no hope of finding him tonight. The beach around the headland is inaccessible at high tide. We’ll find him tomorrow.’

‘You’ll look, too?’

‘I’m leaving at dawn,’ he said. ‘I have fish to catch, but you’re welcome to look all you want. Now, if you want to stay here you’re also welcome, but I need my bed.’

She followed him up the track, feeling desolate. But Gabe must be feeling worse than she was. Maybe he was walking slowly to cater for her lack of sensible shoes, but she didn’t think so. Once he stumbled and she put out a hand. He steadied, looked down at her hand and shook his head. And winced again.

‘I hit you hard,’ she muttered.

‘Women aren’t what they used to be,’ he said. ‘Whatever happened to a nice, tidy slap across the cheek? That’s what they do in movies.’

‘I’ll remember it next time.’

‘There won’t be a next time,’ he said, and she thought uh-oh, was her tenancy on the line?

‘I’m not about to evict you,’ he said wearily, and she flinched. Beside being clumsy and stupid, was she also transparent?

‘I didn’t think ...’

‘That I was about to evict you for hitting me? Good.’

‘Thank you,’ she said feebly and he went on concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other.

He didn't stop until they reached the house. The lights were still on. He stood back to let her precede him into the porch. Instead of going straight into her side of the house, she paused.

Under the porch-light he looked ... ill. Yes, he still looked large, dark and dangerous, but he also looked pale under the weathering, and the thin trickle of blood was at the centre of a bruise that promised to be ugly.

He staggered a bit. She reached out instinctively but he grabbed the veranda post. Steadied.

She could have killed him. He looked so ... so ...

Male?

There was a sensible thought.

'You could have me arrested,' she managed. 'I'm so sorry.'

'But you weren't planning to hit the dog.' It wasn't a question.

'N ... no.'

'That's why I won't have you arrested. You meant well.'

'You need to see a doctor.'

'I need to go to bed.'

'But what if it's terrible?' she said before she could stop herself. 'I've read about head wounds. People get hit on the head and go to bed and never wake up. You should get your pupils looked at. If one's bigger than the other ... or is it if one doesn't move? I don't know, but I do know that you should get yourself checked. Please, can I drive you to the hospital?'

'No.' Flat. Inflexible. Non negotiable.

'Why not?'

‘I’ve spent my life on boats. Believe it or not, I’ve been thumped a lot worse than this. I’m fine.’

‘You should be checked.’

‘You want to look at my pupils?’

‘I wouldn’t know what to look for. But if you go to bed now ... It could be dangerous. Please ...’

He was too close, she thought. He was too big. He smelled of the sea. But maybe it wasn’t just the sea. He smelled of diesel oil, and fish, and salt, and other incredibly masculine smells she’d never smelled before.

The only man she’d been this close to in the last few years was Jon. Jon of the sleek business suits, of expensive aftershave, of cool, sleek, corporate style.

Compared to Jon, Gabe was another species. They both might be guys at the core, but externally Gabe had been left behind in the cave. Or at sea.

Beside Gabe she felt small and insignificant and stupid. And he made her feel ... vulnerable? Maybe, but something more. Exposed. It was a feeling she couldn’t explain and she didn’t want to explain. All she knew was that she didn’t want to be beside him one moment longer, but she was still worried about him. That worry wouldn’t be ignored.

‘You should be checked every couple of hours,’ she said, doggedly now. Once upon a time, well before Jon, she’d dated a medical student. She knew this much.

‘I’m fine.’ He was getting irritated. ‘In eight hours I’ll be out

at sea. I need to go to bed now. Goodnight.'

'At least let me check.'

'Check what?'

'Check you. All night.'

He stilled. They were far too close. The porch was far too small. Exposed? It was a dumb thought, but that was definitely how he made her feel. His face was lined, worn, craggy. He couldn't be much over thirty, she thought, but he looked as if life had been hard.

It could get harder if she didn't check him. If he was to die ...

'What are you talking about?' he demanded.

'I need to check you every two hours,' she said miserably, knowing her conscience would let her off with nothing less. 'I'll come in and make sure you're conscious.'

'I won't be conscious. I'll be asleep.'

'Then I'll wake you and you can tell me your name and what day it is and then you can go back to sleep.'

'I won't know which day it is.'

'Then tell me how much you dislike the tenant next door,' she said, starting to feel desperate. 'For worrying. But I need to do this.' Deep breath. 'It's two-hour checks or I'll phone your friend, the cop, and I tell him how badly I hit you. I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if he's the kind of guy who'll be up here with sirens blazing making you see sense.'

Silence.

Her guess was right, she thought. In that one short phone

conversation she'd sensed friendship between the two men, and maybe the unknown cop was as tough as the guy standing in front of her.

'I'm serious,' she said, jutting her jaw.

'I'll be on the boat at dawn. This is nonsense.'

'Being on the boat at dawn is nonsense. After a hit like that you should stay home.'

'Butt out of my life!' It was an explosion and she backed as far as the little porch allowed. Which wasn't far, but something must have shown in her face.

'Okay, sorry.' He raked his hand through his thatch of dark, unruly hair. He needed a haircut, Nikki thought inconsequentially. And then she thought, even more inconsequentially, what would he look like in a suit?

Like a caged tiger. This guy was not meant to be constrained.

That was what she was doing now, she thought. She was constraining him, but she wasn't backing down. There was no way she could calmly go to bed and leave him to die next door.

She met his gaze and juttied her chin some more and tried to look determined. She was determined.

'Every two hours or Raff,' she said.

'Fine.' He threw up his hands in defeat. 'Have it your way. You can sleep tomorrow; I can't. I'm going to bed. If you shine your torch in my eyes every two hours I might well tell you what I think of you.'

'Fine by me,' she said evenly. 'As long as you're alive.'

‘Goodnight,’ he snapped and turned away. But as he did she saw him wince again.

She really had hurt him.

She showered and tried not to think about dead landlords and starving dogs. What else?

Live landlords. Two-hourly checks. Pupil dilation?

Maybe not. Questions would have to do.

Her pipes gurgled.

She thought briefly about discussing antiquated pipes every two hours but decided, on balance, maybe not. Name and date. Keep it formal and brief.

She set her alarm for two hours on but she didn’t sleep. Two hours later she tiptoed in next door.

She’d forgotten to ask which was his bedroom. It was a huge house.

There was a note on the floor in the passage, with an arrow pointing to the left.

‘Florence Nightingale, this way.’

She managed a smile. Her first smile of the night. Okay, he’d accepted her help.

She tiptoed in.

He was sprawled on a big bed, the covers only to his waist. Face down, arms akimbo.

Bare back. Very bare back.

She was using her torch. She should quickly focus on his head, wake him, make sure he was coherent, then slip away.

Instead, she took just a moment to check out that body.

Wow.

Double wow.

His shoulders were twice the size of Jon's, but there was no hint of fat. This was pure muscle. A lifetime of pulling in nets, of hauling cray-pots, of hard manual labour, had tuned his body to ...

Perfection.

It wasn't often that Nikki let herself look at a guy and think sheer physical perfection but she did now.

The weathering of the man ... a life on the sea ...

There was a scar on his shoulder, thin and white. She wanted, quite suddenly, to reach out and trace ...

'I'm alive,' he snapped. 'Gabriel Carver, Tuesday the fourteenth. Go away.'

She almost yelped again. Habit-forming?

'Your ... your head's hurting?'

'Not if I close my eyes and think of England. Instead of thinking of women with pokers. Go away.'

She went.

At least he was alive.

And at least she hadn't touched him. She hadn't traced that scar.

She still wanted to.

Nonsense.

She didn't sleep for another two hours. She checked again. He

was sprawled on his back. He looked as if he'd been fighting with the bed.

He was deeply asleep this time, but he looked ... done. The bruise on his face looked awful.

She couldn't see the scar on his back. All she could see was his face, exhaustion—pain?

Something inside her twisted. A giant of a man.

Just a little bit vulnerable?

He wouldn't thank her for thinking it but, stupid or not, the thought was there.

It was two in the morning. She glanced at his bedside clock. His alarm was set for four.

She hesitated. Then, carefully, she removed the clock, flicked the alarm off and slipped it in her pocket. His phone was on the bedside table. Why not go all the way? She pocketed that, too.

Then she touched his face. The good side.

His eyes opened. He looked a bit dazed, but he did focus. This was nothing more than someone waking from deep sleep.

'I'll live,' he said, slurred.

'Say something bitter.'

'I'm removing all fireside implements from rental properties.'

'That'll do,' she said and let him go back to sleep.

At four she checked him again. Another slurred response but just as together. Excellent. One more check would get her in the clear, she thought. No more inspections of semi-naked landlords.

She wasn't sure whether to be glad or sorry.

Glad, she told herself, astounded where her thoughts were taking her. Of course, glad.

She went back to bed. Tried not to think of half naked landlords.

Didn't succeed.

At five-thirty Gabe's phone rang. She was on her side of the wall with Gabe's phone beside her bed. She answered. A woman's voice. 'Gabe? Where are you?'

'Hi,' she said cautiously. 'This is Nikki, Gabe's next door neighbour.'

'The city chick,' the woman said blankly.

'That's me.'

'Where's Gabe?'

'I'm sorry, but Gabe had a bit of an accident last night. He won't be in this morning.'

'He won't be in ...'

'He can't come to work.'

'What sort of an accident?'

'He fell. He almost knocked himself out. He's got a headache and a badly bruised face.' No need to mention he had the bruised face before he fell.

'Gabe turns up for work when he's half dead.' The woman sounded stunned. 'How bad is he?'

'Determined to come in but I've taken his alarm and his phone and he hasn't woken up.'

There was a moment's awed silence. Then ... 'Well, good for

you, love. You've got him in bed, you keep him there. When he wakes up, tell him Frank's rung in and his head cold's worse, so it would have only been me on board with him. The *Mariette's* short a crew member as well, so I'll go on the *Mariette* and the *Lady Nell* can stay in port. That'll play into your hands as well. He no longer has a crew. You keep him in bed with my blessings, for as long as you want. Go for it, girl.'

She disconnected. Laughing.

Nikki stared at the phone as if it stung.

This was a small town. This'd be all over town in minutes.

How would Gabe react?

Um ... what had she done?

Whatever. It was done now. She had an hour before the next check.

She really was incredibly tired.

She put her head on her pillow and closed her eyes.

She forgot to set the alarm.

Gabe woke and sunshine was flooding his bedroom. This on its own was a novelty. If the weather was decent he was out fishing, as simple as that.

He opened one eye and tried to figure it out. Why the sunbeams?

His head hurt a bit, not too much, just a dull ache. If he lay still and only opened the one eye it didn't hurt at all.

The sun was streaming through his window. He felt ...

Suddenly wide awake. He turned to the bedside table, looking

for his clock in disbelief.

No clock.

He groped for his phone.

No phone.

What the ...?

His watch.

It was eight o'clock. Eight! He'd slept for ten hours.

The boat. The crew. They'd be waiting.

Where were his ...?

Nikkita.

Hitting him on the head was one thing; making him miss a day's fishing was another. She was so out of here.

He threw back the covers and headed for the door, thumping the wall as he went, just to make sure she was awake.

Anger didn't begin to describe what he was feeling. Women!

The thump on her bedroom wall was loud enough to wake the dead. She sat bolt upright. Stared at the clock.

Uh-oh. Uh-oh, uh-oh, uh-oh.

Eight o'clock. She might just have slept in.

She'd missed a check.

At least he wasn't dead, she thought. He should be grateful.

By the sound of the thump on her wall, he wasn't grateful.

By the sound of the thump, he wished for her undivided attention.

Her door was locked. A lesser woman might have tugged the duvet over her head and stayed where she was.

There were a lot of things a lesser woman might do. After today she was going right back to being a lesser woman, but right now ...

There wasn't a lot of choice.

She grabbed her robe and headed next door to face Gabe.

She opened her door right as he opened his. The dog was lying right across the porch. Her Hound of the Baskervilles. Horse.

CHAPTER THREE

NIKKI almost tripped and so did Gabe. They were focused on each other. Gabe's face was dark with anger, and Nikki was just plain terrified. Gabe was still only wearing boxers and that didn't help. Neither was looking at their feet and the dog was sprawled like a great wet floor mat.

Both of them stumbled and both had to grab the door jambs to keep their balance.

Both stared down in amazement.

The dog was even bigger than Nikki had thought last night. Four feet high? It was impossible to tell. All she knew was that, prone, he practically covered the small porch.

He was almost as flat as a doormat. He lay motionless, only the faint rise of his chest wall telling her he was alive.

'It's Horse,' she said blankly.

The big dog stirred at her voice. He hauled his great head off the floor, as if making a Herculean effort. He gazed up at her and all the misery of the world was in that gaze. It was a 'kill me now' look.

She didn't know a thing about dogs. If she'd been asked, she'd confess she probably didn't like them much. But that look ...

Her heart twisted. In the face of that look, she forgot her landlord and she sank to her knees. 'Oh, my ... Oh, Horse ...'

'What do you think you're playing at?' Her landlord's voice

was like a whip above her. ‘You’ve brought him in here ...’

She wasn’t listening. The big dog was so wet he couldn’t get any wetter. While she watched, a shudder ran through his big frame and she thought ... she thought ...

She had to help. There was no way she could walk away. Not your problem? Ha.

‘Hey, it’s okay.’ She ignored Gabe. She could only focus on the dog. She could only think about the dog.

‘You caught him.’ Gabe’s voice had lost its edge as he took in Horse’s condition.

‘I didn’t catch him. Maybe he found the meat and followed our scent. Pushed into the porch. Do you think he wants more?’

‘Has he been here all night?’

‘Are you nuts? Look at him. He’s soaking. Why doesn’t he move? Should we take him to the vet? Will you help me carry him to the car?’

‘Fred will put him down,’ Gabe said bluntly.

‘Fred?’

‘The vet.’

That brought her up short. Last night’s phone conversation was suddenly replaying in her head.

This dog had been on his way to be put down when he’d escaped. If they took him to the vet, that was what would happen.

‘No,’ she said. It was all she could think of to say.

‘Do you want a dog?’

‘I ...’

She swallowed. Did she want a dog?

She didn't. She couldn't. But she wasn't thinking past now.

'I'll think about that later,' she said. 'He's not going anywhere until he's dry and warm and fed. Can you help me take him into my place?' She looked up at Gabe, and then she thought ...

Anger. Uh-oh.

Maybe there were a few unresolved issues to be addressed before he'd help her.

She was aware again of his body. That chest. Those shoulders.

Hormones.

Anger.

'I slept,' he said, carefully neutral. 'Through my alarm. That might be because it was moved from my bedside table.'

'I slept through it too,' she confessed. 'That's because I forgot to set it.'

'My crew ...'

Act efficient, she decided. Brisk. As if she knew what she was doing. 'Hattie's on the ... let me think ... on the *Mariette*,' she told him. 'Because they're short a crew member. Frank called in sick so the *Lady Nell*'s staying in port. You have the day off.'

He didn't answer. He looked speechless.

'So can you help me with the dog?' she asked.

'You took my alarm.'

'You were sick. I thought I'd killed you. It was the least I could do.'

'You took my phone.'

‘Yes, and I talked to Hattie. She agrees you need a day off.’

‘It’s not her business. It’s not your business.’

‘No,’ she snapped. ‘And neither is this dog but he’s freezing. Get over it and help me.’

Her gaze locked with his. She could feel his anger, his frustration, his shock.

His body ...

His body was almost enough to distract her from his anger, his frustration, his shock.

But she couldn’t think of it now. She had the dog to think of. And, while she was chiding herself, Gabe stooped and touched the dog’s face.

The dog tried to raise his head again. Failed.

‘Don’t think you’ve heard the last of this,’ he said grimly. ‘But this guy’s done.’

‘Done.’ Nikki cringed. ‘He’s not dying.’

‘Close to.’ He’d moved on, she thought. All his attention was now on the dog. He seemed hesitant, as if he didn’t want involvement, but the dog stirred and moaned, and something in Gabe’s face changed. ‘All right,’ he said. ‘If you’re serious, let’s get him into my place. The fire’s going. Did you stoke it?’

‘Yes. I did it for you.’ Or not exactly. In her night-time prowls she’d tossed a couple of logs on the fire at each pass. It had seemed comforting. She’d been in need of comfort, and the thought of taking the dog in there now was a good one.

‘Can you get up, big boy?’ Gabe asked. ‘Come on, mate, let’s

see you live.’

Gabe was fondling him behind the ears, speaking softly, and the dog responded. He gave Gabe another of those gut wrenching looks, another moan, then heaved. He managed to stand.

Standing up, he looked like a bag of bones with a worn rug stretched over him. Only his ears were still full fur. They hinted at a dog who’d once been handsome but that time was long past.

He swayed and Gabe stooped and held him, still fondling him, while the dog leaned heavily against him.

‘So you decided to come and find some help?’ he said softly. ‘Great decision. You’re safe here. You even seem to have found a friend. Mind, you need to beware of pokers.’ But he wasn’t glancing up to see how she took the wisecrack; he was totally focused on the dog. ‘Let’s get you warm. Miss Morrissy, could you fetch us some towels, please? A lot of towels. Put some in the tumble dryer to warm them.’

‘It’s Nikki,’ she said numbly.

‘Nikki,’ he repeated, but he still didn’t look up.

The dog took a staggering step forward and then stopped. Enough. Gabe lifted him into his arms as if he were a featherweight, and the dog made no objection. Maybe he knew he was headed for Gabe’s fireside.

Nikki headed for towels.

But, as she went, she carried the image of Gabe, a big man with his armful of dog.

He was making her heart twist.

It was the dog, she told herself fiercely. Of course it was the dog.

Only the dog. Anything else was ridiculous.

She did not need hormones.

Horse was freezing. It hadn't been raining, yet he was soaked—had he been standing in the water all night?

Nikki fetched her hairdryer. Gabe sponged the worst of the salt crust from his coat, then towelled him dry as she ran warm air over his tangled fur. The big dog lay passive, hopeless, and Nikki felt an overwhelming urge to pick him up and hug him.

He was so big ... She'd have to hug him one end at a time.

She also wanted to kill whoever had abandoned him. To do something so callous ...

'Your cop friend said he was thrown from a boat.'

'He'll still feel loyal to the low-life who did it to him,' Gabe said grimly. 'I'd guess that's why he's been standing in the shallows howling.'

She sniffed. She sniffed more than once while she wielded her hairdryer, and she had to abandon her work for a bit to fetch tissues. She couldn't help herself. The emotions of the night, the emotions of the past two months, or maybe simply the emotions of now, were enough to overwhelm her. This gentle giant being betrayed in such a way ...

She'd set towels by the fire for Gabe to lay him on. With her hairdryer and Gabe's toweling, they dried one side of him. Then Gabe lifted him. She replaced the sodden towels with warm ones

and they dried his other side.

Gabe spoke to him all the time. Slow, gentle words of comfort. While Nikki sniffed.

Gabe's words were washing over her, reassuring her almost as much as the dog. His kindness was palpable. How could she ever have thought he'd ignore a dog in trouble on the beach? His hands stroking the dog's coat ... his soft words ...

He was a gruff, weathered fisherman but he cared about this dog.

He'd been rude and cold to her the day they'd met. Where was that coldness now?

She tried to imagine Jonathan doing what Gabe was doing now, and couldn't. And then she thought ... what was she thinking? Comparing Gabe and Jon? Don't even think of going there.

Um ... she was going there. Gabe's body was just a bit too close.

Gabe's body was making her body feel ...

No. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Focus on dog.

The big dog's body had been shuddering, great waves of cold and despair. As the warmth started to permeate, the shaking grew less. Gabe was half towelling, half stroking, all caring.

'It's okay, mate. We'll get you warm on the inside as well.'

'Do you think he got the steak?'

'I'm guessing not,' he said. 'Not in the state he's in—the food

would have warmed him and he wouldn't be so hopeless. There's all sorts of predators on the beach at night—owls, rats, the odd feral cat. I'm guessing that's why he's here. He came back round the headland looking for the steak, then when we were gone he followed our scent. There was nowhere else to go.'

'Oh, Horse.'

Grown women didn't cry. Much. She concentrated fiercely on blow-drying—and realised Gabe was watching her.

'Horse?' he said.

'I've been thinking of him all night,' she said. 'In between worrying that I killed you. A dog that looks like a horse. A landlord who might have been dead.'

'Happy endings all round,' Gabe said wryly and she cast him a scared look. She knew what he was going to say. She was way in front of him.

The vet.

'Do you have any more steak?' She couldn't quite get her voice to work. She couldn't quite get her heart to work. But she wasn't going to say the vet word.

'No. You?'

'I have dinners for one. Calorie controlled.'

'Right, like Horse needs a diet.'

'I'll bring four.'

They worked on. Gabe hauled on a T-shirt and jeans and so did she, but the attention of both was on the dog. Hostilities were suspended.

The dog was so close to the edge that the sheer effort of eating seemed too much. By the look of his muzzle, he'd been sick. 'Sea water,' Gabe said grimly as he cleaned him. 'There's little fresh water round here. If he's been wandering since the van crashed he's had almost a week of nothing.'

That was a lot of speech for Gabe. They should take him to the vet, Nikki thought, but with the vet came a decision that neither of them seemed able to face. Not yet.

Save him and then decide. Dumb? Maybe, but it was what her gut was dictating, and Gabe seemed to be following the same path.

Gabe was encouraging the dog to drink, little by little. He found some sort of syringe and gently oozed water into the big dog's mouth. Once they were sure he could swallow, Nikki shredded chicken, popping tiny pieces into Horse's slack mouth and watching with satisfaction as he managed to get it down.

Slowly.

'If we feed him fast he'll be sick and we'll undo everything,' Gabe said. He sounded as if he knew what he was doing. How come he had a syringe on hand? Had he coped with injured animals before?

He was an enigma. Craggy and grim. A professional fisherman. Broad, but with muscles, there was not an inch of spare flesh on him.

He flashed from silence and anger, to caring, to tender, just like that. His hands as he cared for the big dog were gentle as

could be; rough, weathered fisherman's hands fondling the dog's ears, holding the syringe, waiting with all the patience in the world for Horse to open his mouth.

Horse.

Why name a stray dog?

Why look at her landlord's hand and think ... and think ...?

Nothing.

She should be back on her side of the house right now, enmeshed in plans for the air conditioning system for a huge metropolitan shopping centre. The centre had been the focus of an outbreak of legionnaires' disease. Their air conditioning system needed to be revamped, and the plans needed to be finalised. Now.

Her plans were urgent—even if they bored her witless.

And Gabe should be fishing. He obviously thought that was urgent.

But nothing seemed more important than sitting by the fireside with Gabe and with Horse, gradually bringing the big dog back to life.

They were succeeding. The shuddering ceased. The dog was still limp, but he was warm and dry, and there was enough food and water going in to make them think the worst was past.

So now what?

The dog was drifting into sleep. Nikki glanced briefly at Gabe and caught a flash of pain, quickly suppressed. His head? Of course it was his head, she thought. That bruise looked horrible.

What was she doing, letting him work on the dog?

‘You need to sleep, too,’ she told him.

‘We should make a decision about this guy. Take him ...’

‘Let him sleep,’ she said, cutting him off. ‘For a bit. Then ... maybe we could clean him up a bit more. If we take him back to the shelter looking lovely, then he has a better chance ...’

‘He’s never going to look lovely,’ Gabe said. ‘Not even close.’

Maybe he wouldn’t. The dog was carrying scars. Patches of fur had been torn away, wounds had healed but the fur hadn’t grown back. An ugly scar ran the length of his left front leg. And what was he? Wolfhound? Plus the rest.

‘It’s drawing it out,’ Gabe said and Nikki flinched. She looked down at the dog and felt ill—and then she looked at Gabe and felt her own pain reflected in his eyes.

‘Not yet,’ she said, suddenly fierce. ‘Not until he’s slept. And not until you’ve slept. You have the day off work. I know you’re angry, and you can be as angry as you like with me, but what’s done’s done. Your head’s hurting. Go back to bed and sleep it off, and let Horse sleep.’

‘While you play Florence Nightingale to us both?’

‘There’s no need to be sarcastic,’ she said, struggling to keep her voice even. ‘A nurse is the last thing I could ever be, but it doesn’t take Florence to see what you need. You and Horse both. I need to do some work ...’

‘You and *me* both.’

‘Get over it,’ she snapped. ‘You’re wounded, I’m not. So what

I'm suggesting is that I bring my paperwork in here and do it at your dining table so I can keep an eye on Horse. I'll keep checking the fire, I'll keep offering Horse food and drink, and you go back to bed and wake up when your body lets you.'

'You'll check on me, too?'

'Every two hours,' she said firmly. 'Like a good Florence. Though I'd prefer you to leave your door open so I can make sure you're not dead all the time.'

'This is nonsense. I need to mend cray-pots.'

'You've got the day off,' she snapped. 'I told Hattie you were ill. Don't make a liar of me.'

'You really will look after the dog?'

'I'll look after both of you, until you wake up. Then ...' She glanced down at Horse and looked away. 'Then we'll do what comes next.'

He rang Raff from the privacy of his bedroom. The Banksia Bay cop answered on the first ring. 'Why aren't you at sea?' Raff demanded. 'Hattie says you hit your head. I thought you sounded bad last night. You want some help?'

This town, Gabe thought grimly. Banksia Bay was a great place to live unless you hankered for privacy. He did hanker for privacy, but he loved the place and intrusion was the price he paid.

'And Hattie says your tenant's looking after you. Mate ...' Raff drew the word out—*maate*. It was a question all by itself.

'She hit me,' he said before he could help himself.

‘Did she now.’ Raff thought about that for a bit. ‘She had her reasons?’

Nip that one in the bud. ‘She thought I was a bunyip. She was searching for the dog. I was searching for the dog. We collided. She was carrying a poker. And that goes no further than you,’ he said sharply, as he heard a choke of laughter on the end of the line.

‘Scout’s honour,’ Raff said.

‘We never made Scouts.’ Raff had been one of the town’s bad boys. Like him.

‘That’s what I mean. You need any help?’

‘No. We found the dog. That’s why I’m ringing.’

‘We found the dog? You and Miss Morrissy?’

‘Nikki,’ he said before he could help himself and he heard the interest sharpen.

‘Curiouser and curiouser. So you and Nikki ...’

‘The dog’s here,’ he snapped. ‘Fed and watered and asleep by my fire. I’ll bring him down to Fred when I’ve had a sleep.’

‘You’re having a sleep?’

‘Nikki’s orders,’ he said and suddenly he had an urge to smile. Quickly suppressed. ‘She’s bossy.’

‘Well, well.’

‘And you can just put that right out of your head,’ he snapped. ‘I don’t want a dog, and I don’t want a woman even more. Tell Henrietta the dog’s found and we’ll take him to Fred tonight.’

‘We?’

‘Go find some villains to chase,’ he growled. ‘My head hurts. I’m going to sleep.’

‘On Nikki’s orders?’

He told Raff where to put his interest, and he hung up. Stripped to his boxers again. Climbed into bed. Following orders.

His head really did hurt.

She was going to check on him every two hours. The thought was ...

Nope. He didn’t know what the thought was.

He didn’t want her checking him every two hours.

‘I’d prefer you to leave your door open so I can make sure you’re not dead ...’

He sighed and opened his door. Glanced across at Nikki, who glanced back. Waved. He glowered and dived under the covers.

He didn’t want a woman in his living room.

Nor did he want a dog.

What was he doing, in bed in the middle of the morning?

He put his head on the pillow and the aching eased. Maybe she had a point. A man had to be sensible.

He fell asleep thinking of the dog.

Trying not to think of Nikki.

It was so domestic it was almost claustrophobic. The fire, the dog, Gabe asleep right through the door.

The work she was doing was tidying up plans she’d already drawn—nothing complex, which was just as well the way she was feeling. Her head was all over the place.

Biggest thought? Gabe.

No. Um, no, it wasn't. Or it shouldn't be. Her biggest thought had to be—could she keep a dog?

As a kid she'd thought she might like a dog. That was never going to happen, though. Her parents were high-flyers, both lawyers with an international clientele. They loved her to bits in the time they could spare for her, but that time was limited. She was an only child, taken from country to country, from boarding school to international hotel to luxury resort.

And after childhood? University, followed by a top paying job, a gorgeous apartment. Then Jonathan.

Maybe she could get a small white fluff ball, she'd thought occasionally, when she was missing Jon. When he was supposedly working elsewhere. But where would a dog fit into a lifestyle similar to her parents'?

And now ...

Her job still took her away.

Her job didn't have to take her away. Or not for long. She could glean enough information from a site visit to keep her working for months. Most queries could be sorted online—there was never a lot of use stomping round construction sites.

She quite liked stomping round construction sites. It was the part of her job she enjoyed most.

It was the only part ...

Salary? Prestige?

Both were less and less satisfying. Her parents thought her

career was wonderful. Jonathan thought it was wonderful. But now ...

Now was hardly the time to be thinking of a career change. She was good at what she did. She was paid almost embarrassingly well. She could afford to pay others to do the menial stuff.

So maybe a little white fluff ball?

Or Horse.

Horse was hardly a fluff ball. Ten times as big, and a lot more needy.

Maybe she could share parenting with Gabe, she thought. When she was needed on site, he could stay home from sea.

Shared parenting? Of a dog who looked like a mangy horse, with a grumpy landlord fisherman?

With a body to die for. And with the gentlest of hands. And a voice that said he cared.

She glanced across the passage. The deal was she wouldn't check on him every two hours as long as he kept his door open.

If he dropped dead, she was on the wrong side of the passage. There wasn't a lot she could do if he dropped dead.

At least the dog was breathing. She watched his chest rise and fall, rise and fall. He was flopped as close to the fire as he could be without being burned. Gabe had set the screen so no ember could fly out, but she suspected he wouldn't wake even if it did.

He looked like a dog used to being hurt.

Maybe he'd be vicious when he recovered.

Maybe her landlord wouldn't let her keep a dog.

Was she really thinking about keeping him?

It was just ...

The last few weeks had been desolate. It was all very well saying she wanted a sea change, but there wasn't enough work to fill the day and the night, and the nights were long and silent. She'd left Sydney in rage and in grief, and at night it came back to haunt her.

She also found the nights, the country noises ... creepy.

'Because of guys like you howling on beaches,' she said out loud, and Horse raised his head and looked at her. Then sighed and set his head down again, as if it was too heavy to hold up.

How could someone throw him off a boat?

A great wounded mutt.

Her new best friend?

She glanced across the passage again. Gabe was deeply asleep, his bedding barely covering his hips.

He was wounded too, she thought, and with a flash of insight she thought it wasn't just the hit over the head with the poker. He was living in a house built for a dozen, a mile out of town, on his own. Not even a dog.

'He needs a dog, too,' she told Horse.

Shared parenting was an excellent solution.

'Yes, but that's complicated.' She set down her pen and crossed to Gabe's bedroom door to make sure his chest was rising and falling. It was, but the sight of his chest did things to her own

chest ...

There went those hormones again. She had to figure a way of reining them in.

Return to dog. Immediately.

She knelt and fondled the big dog's ears. He stirred and moaned, a long, low doggy moan containing all the pathos in the world.

She put her head down close to his. Almost nose to nose. 'It's okay,' she said. 'I've given up on White and Fluffy. And I think I do like dogs. You're not going to the vet.'

A great shaggy paw came up and touched her shoulder.

Absurdly moved, she found herself hugging him. Her arms were full of dog. His great brown eyes were enormous.

Could she keep him?

'My parents would have kittens,' she told him.

Her mother was in Helsinki doing something important.

Her father was in New York.

'Yes, and I'm here,' she told Horse, giving in to the weirdly comforting sensation of holding a dog close, feeling the warmth of him. 'I'm here by the fire with you, and our landlord's just over the passage. He's grumpy, but underneath I reckon he's a pussycat. I reckon he might let you stay.'

The fire was magnificently warm. She hadn't had enough sleep last night.

She hesitated and then hauled some cushions down from the settee. She settled beside Horse. He sighed, but it was a different

sigh. As if things might be looking up.

‘Perfect,’ said Nikkita Morrissy, specialist air conditioning engineer, sea-changer, tenant. She snuggled on the cushions and Horse stirred a bit and heaved himself a couple of inches so she was closer. ‘Let’s settle in for the long haul. You and me—and Gabe if he wants to join us. If my hit on the head hasn’t killed him. Welcome to our new life.’

CHAPTER FOUR

GABE woke and it was still daylight. It took time to figure exactly why he was in bed, why the clock was telling him it was two in the afternoon, and why a woman and a dog were curled up on cushions on his living room floor.

Horse.

Nikki.

Nikki was asleep beside Horse?

The dog didn't fit with the image of the woman. Actually, nothing fitted. He was having trouble getting his thoughts in order.

He should be a hundred miles offshore. Every day the boat was in harbour cost money.

Um ... he had enough money. He needed to forget fishing, at least for a day.

He was incredibly, lazily comfortable. How long since he'd lain in bed and just ... lain? Not slept, just stared at the ceiling, thought how great the sheets felt on his naked skin, how great it was that the warm sea breeze wafted straight in through his bedroom window and made him feel that the sea was right here.

Lots of fishermen—lots of his crew—took themselves as far from the sea as possible when they weren't working. Not Gabe. The sea was a part of him.

He'd always been a loner. As a kid, the beach was an escape

from the unhappiness in the house. His parents' marriage was bitter and often violent. His father was passionately possessive of his much younger wife, sharing her with no one. If Gabe spent time with his mother, his father reacted with a resentment that Gabe soon learned to fear. His survival technique was loneliness.

As he got older, the boat became his escape as well.

And then there was his brief marriage. Yeah, well, that had taught him the sea was his only real constant. People hurt. Solitude was the only way to go.

Even dogs broke your heart.

Sixteen years ...

'Get another one fast.' Fred, the Banksia Bay vet, had been brusque. 'The measure of a life well lived is how many good dogs you can fit into it. I'm seventy years old and I'm up to sixteen and counting. It's torn a hole in my gut every time I've lost one, and the only way I can fill it is finding another. And you know what? Every single one of them stays with me. They're all part of who I am. The gut gets bigger.' He'd patted his ample stomach. 'Get another.'

Or not. Did Fred know just how big a hole Jem had left?

Don't think about it.

Watch Nikki instead.

He lay and watched woman and dog sleeping, just across the passage. Strangers seldom entered his house. Not even friends. And no one slept by his fire but him.

Until now.

She looked ... okay.

She'd wake soon, and she'd be gone. This moment would be past, but for now ... For now it felt strangely okay that she was here. For now he let the comfort of her presence slide into his bones, easing parts of him he didn't know were hurting. A dog and a woman asleep before his fire ...

He closed his eyes and sleep reclaimed him.

* * *

She woke and it was three o'clock and Horse was squatting on his haunches rather than sprawled on his side. His head was cocked to one side, as if he was trying to figure her out. Sitting up! That had to be good.

She hugged him. She fed him. He ate a little, drank a little. She opened the French windows and asked him if he needed to go outside but he politely declined, by putting his head back on his paws and dozing again.

She thought about going back to work.

The plans on the table were supremely uninteresting. Engineering had sounded cool when she enrolled at university. Doing stuff.

Not sitting drawing endless plans of endless air conditioning systems, no matter how complex.

Gabe's living room, however, was lined with bookshelves, and the bookshelves were crammed with books.

And photograph albums. Her secret vice.

Other people's families.

Nikki had been sent to boarding school at seven. If friends invited her home for the holidays her parents were relieved, so she'd spent much of her childhood looking at families from the outside in.

Brothers, sisters, grandmas, uncles and aunts. You didn't get a lot of those the way she was raised.

Her friends could never understand her love of photograph albums, but she hadn't grown out of it, and here were half a dozen, right within reach.

A girl had to read something. Or draw plans.

No choice.

The first four albums were those of a child, an adolescent, a young woman. School friends, beach, hiking, normal stuff. Nikki had albums like this herself, photographs taken with her first camera.

The albums must belong to Gabe's mother, she decided. The girl and then the woman looked a bit like Gabe. She was much smaller, compact, neat. But she looked nice. She had the same dark hair as Gabe, the same thoughtful eyes. She saw freckles and a shy smile in the girl, and then the woman.

After school, her albums differed markedly from Nikki's. This woman hadn't spent her adolescence at university. The first post-school pictures were of her beside stone walls, wearing dungarees, heavy boots, thick gloves. The smile became cheeky, a woman gaining confidence.

There were photos of stone walls.

Lots of stone walls.

Nikki glanced outside to the property boundary, where a stone wall ran along the road, partly built, as if it had stopped mid-construction. Wires ran along the unfinished part to make it a serviceable fence.

She turned back to the next album. Saw the beginnings of romance. A man, considerably older than the girl, thickset, a bit like Gabe as well, looking as if he was struggling to find a smile for the camera. Holding the girl possessively.

An album of a wedding. Then a baby.

Gabe.

Really cute, she thought, and glanced across the passage and thought ... you really could see the man in the baby.

Gabe before life had weathered him.

The photos were all of Gabe now—Gabe until he was about seven, sturdy, cheeky, laughing.

Then nothing. The final album had five pages of pictures and the rest lay empty.

What had happened? Divorce? Surely a young mum would keep on taking pictures. Surely she'd take these albums with her.

She set the albums back in place, and her attention was caught by a set of books just above. *The Art of Stone Walling*. *The Stone Walls of Yorkshire*. More.

She flicked through, fascinated, caught in intricacies of stone walling.

Gabe slept on.

She was learning how to build stone walls. In theory.

She'd kind of like to try.

She reached the end of the first book as Horse struggled to his feet and crossed to the French windows. Pawed.

Bathroom.

But ... Escape?

Visions of Horse standing up to his haunches in the shallows sprang to mind. She daren't risk letting him go. The faded curtains were looped back with tasseled cords, perfect for fashioning a lead.

'Okay, let's go but don't pull,' she told him. At full strength this dog could tow two of her, but he was wobbly.

She cast a backward glance at Gabe. Still sleeping. Quick check. Chest rising and falling.

She and Horse were free to do as they pleased.

When Gabe woke again the sun was sinking low behind Black Mountain. He'd slept the whole day?

His head felt great. He felt great all over. He was relaxed and warm and filled with a sense of well-being he hadn't felt since ... who knew?

He rolled lazily onto his side and gazed out of the window.

And froze.

For a moment he thought he was dreaming. There was a woman in the garden, her back to him, crouched over a pile of stones. Sorting.

A dog lay by her side, big and shaggy.

Nikki and Horse.

Nikki held up a stone, inspected it, said something to Horse, then shifted so she could place it into the unfinished stretch of stone wall.

He felt as if the oxygen was being sucked from the room.

A memory blasting back ...

His mother, crouched over the stones, the wall so close to finished. Thin, drawn, exhausted. Setting down her last stone. Weeping. Hugging him.

‘I can’t ...’

‘Mum, what’s wrong?’

‘I’m so tired. Gabe, very soon I’ll need to go to sleep.’ But using a voice that said this wasn’t a normal sleep she was talking about.

Then ... desolation.

His father afterwards, kicking stones, kicking everything. His mother’s old dog, yelping, running for the cover Gabe could never find.

‘Dad, could we finish the wall?’ It had taken a month to find the courage to ask.

‘It’s finished.’ A sharp blow across his head. ‘Don’t you understand, boy, it’s finished.’

He understood it now. Nikki had to understand it, too.

People hurt. You didn’t try and interfere. Unless there was trouble you let people be and they let you be. You didn’t try and change things.

He should have put it in the tenancy agreement.

Stone wall building was weirdly satisfying on all sorts of levels.

She'd always loved puzzles, as she'd loved building things. To transform a pile of stones into a wall as magnificent as this ...

Wide stones had been set into the earth to form the base, then irregular stones piled higher and higher, two outer levels with small stones between. Wider stones were layed crosswise over both sides every foot or so, binding both sides together. No stone was the same. Each position was carefully assessed, each stone considered from all angles. Tried. Tried again. As she was doing now.

She'd set eight stones in an hour and was feeling as if she'd achieved something amazing.

This could be a whole new hobby, she thought. She could finish the wall.

Horse lay by her side, dozy but watchful, warm in the afternoon sunshine. Every now and then he cast a doubtful glance towards the beach but she'd fashioned a tie from the curtain cords, she had him tethered and she talked to him as she worked.

'I know. You loved him but he rejected you. You and me both. Jonathan and your scum-bag owner. Broken hearts club, that's us. We need a plan to get over it. I'm not sure what our plan should be, but while we're waiting for something to occur this isn't bad.' She held up a stone. 'You think this'll fit?'

The dog cocked his head; seemed to consider.

The pain that had clenched in her chest for months eased a little. Unknotted in the sharing, and in the work.

She would have liked to be a builder.

She thought suddenly of a long ago careers exhibition. At sixteen she'd been unsure of what she wanted to do. She'd gone to the career exhibition with school and almost the first display was a carpenter, working on a delicate coffee table. While other students moved from one display to the next, she stopped, entranced.

After half an hour he'd invited her to help, and she'd stayed with him until her teachers came to find her.

'I'll need to get an apprenticeship to be a carpenter,' she'd told her father the next time she'd seen him, breathless with certainty that she'd found her calling.

But her father was due to catch the dawn flight to New York. He'd scheduled two hours' quality time with his daughter and he didn't intend wasting it on nonsense.

'Of course society needs builders, but for you, my girl, with your brains, the sky's the limit. We'll get you into Law—Oxford? Cambridge?'

Even her chosen engineering degree had met with combined parental disapproval, even though it was specialist engineering leading to a massive salary. But here, now ... She remembered that long ago urge to build things, to create.

Air conditioning systems didn't compare. Endless plans.

Another stone ... This was so difficult. It had to be perfect.

'What do you think you're doing?'

She managed to suppress a yelp, but only just. Gabe was

dressed again, in jeans and T-shirt. He'd come up behind her. His face was like thunder, his voice was dripping ice.

He was blocking her sun. Even Horse backed and whimpered.

The sheer power of the man ... the anger ...

It was as much as she could do not to back and run.

Not her style, she thought grimly. This man had her totally disconcerted but whimpering was never an option. 'I thought I'd try and do some ...' she faltered.

'Don't.'

'Don't you want it finished? I thought ... I've been reading the books from your living room.'

'You've been reading my mother's books?'

Uh-oh. She'd desecrated a shrine?

'I'm sorry. I ...'

'You had no right.'

'No.' She lifted the book she'd been referring to. Caught her breath. Decided she'd hardly committed murder. 'I'll put this back,' she said placatingly. 'No damage done. I don't think I've done anything appalling.'

But then ... he'd scared her. Again.

Shock was turning to indignation.

He was angry?

She met his gaze full on. Tilted her chin.

Horse nosed her ankle. She let her hand drop to his rough coat and the feel of him was absurdly comforting.

What was with this guy? Why did he make her feel—how he

made her feel? She couldn't describe it. She only knew that she was totally confused.

'I've only fitted eight stones,' she said, forcing her tone down a notch. Even attempting a smile. 'You want me to take them out again?'

'Leave it.' His voice was still rough, but the edges of anger were blunted. He took the book from her. Glanced at it. Glanced away. 'How's the dog?'

'He's fine.' She was still indignant. He sounded ... cold.

The normal Gabe?

A man she should back away from.

'We need to make a decision,' he said.

'I have,' she said and tilted her chin still further.

'Hi!'

The new voice made them both swivel. A woman was at the gate. She was middle-aged and sensibly dressed, in moleskin trousers and a battered fleecy jacket. She swung the gate open and Horse whined and backed away.

Even from twenty yards away Nikki saw the woman flinch.

'It's okay,' the woman said, gentling her voice as she approached. 'I hate it that I lock these guys up and they react accordingly. I can't help that I'm associated with their life's low point.'

Horse whined again. Nikki felt him tug against the cord. She wasn't all that sure of it holding.

Gabe was suddenly helping. His hand was on the big dog's

neck, helping her hold on to her curtain-fashioned collar. Touching hers. His hand was large and firm—and once more caring?

Where had that thought come from? But she felt Horse relax and she knew the dog felt the same. Even if this guy did get inexplicably angry, there was something at his core ...

‘Raff told me you’d found him,’ the woman was saying. ‘Hi, Gabe.’ She came forward, her hand extended to Nikki, a blunt gesture of greeting. ‘We haven’t met. I’m Henrietta. I run the local dog shelter. This guy’s one of mine.’

Horse whimpered and tried to go behind Nikki’s legs. Nikki’s hand tightened on his collar—and so did Gabe’s.

Hands touching. Warmth. Strength. Nikki didn’t pull away, even though Henrietta’s hand was still extended, even though she knew Gabe could hold him.

‘You want me to take him?’ Henrietta asked.

No.

Her decision had already been made but she needed Gabe’s consent. He was, after all, her landlord.

‘I’d like to keep him,’ she said, more loudly than she intended, and there was a moment’s silence.

Henrietta’s grim expression relaxed, then did more than relax. It curved into a wide grin that practically spilt her face. But then she caught herself, her smile was firmly repressed and her expression became businesslike.

‘Are you in a position to offer him a good home?’

‘Am I?’ she asked Gabe. ‘I think I am,’ she said diffidently. ‘But Gabe’s my landlord. I’ll need his permission.’

‘You’re asking me to keep him?’ Gabe’s demand was incredulous.

‘No,’ she said flatly. Some time during this afternoon her world had shifted. She wasn’t exactly sure where it had shifted; she only knew that things were changing and Horse was an important part of that change. ‘I want to keep him myself. Just me.’ Her life was her own, she thought, suddenly resolute. No men need apply.

No man—not even her landlord—was needed to share her dog.

‘I need to do a bit of reorganisation,’ she said, speaking now to Henrietta. ‘At the moment I’m working away ...’

‘I can’t look after him,’ Gabe said bluntly. ‘Not when I’m at sea.’

‘I’m not asking you to,’ she flashed back at him. There were things going on with Gabe she didn’t understand. He had her disconcerted, but for now she needed to focus only on Horse. And her future. Gabe had to be put third.

‘I’m reorganising my career,’ she told Henrietta. ‘At the end of this month and maybe next, I’ll need to go away for a few days. After that I won’t need to.’ That was simple enough. She’d hand her international clients over to her colleagues.

Her colleagues would think she was nuts.

Her colleagues as in Jonathan?

Don't go there.

Could she keep working for him?

'I might even be rethinking my career altogether,' she said, a bit more brusquely than she intended. She glanced down at the stones and then glanced away again, astounded where her thoughts were taking her. How absurd to think she could ever do something so ... so wonderful.

Was she crazy? This surely could only ever be a hobby.

Concentrate on Horse. The rest was nonsense. Fanciful thinking after an upset night. 'Whatever I do, I've decided I can keep Horse,' she managed. 'If I can get some help for the first two months.'

But Gabe was looking at her as if she was something that had just crawled out of the cheese.

'You've decided this all since last night?' he demanded. 'Do you know how much of a commitment a dog is? He's not a handbag, picked up and discarded on a whim. Sixteen years ...'

'We're not talking Jem here,' Henrietta said sharply.

'Jem?'

'Gabe's dog,' Henrietta told her. 'Gabe found Jem on the beach sixteen years ago. She died three months back.'

'I'm sorry,' Nikki said, disconcerted, but her apologies weren't required or wanted. Gabe's face was rigid with anger.

'We're not talking Jem. We're talking you. What do you know about dogs?'

'I'll learn.'

'You mean you know nothing.'

'You're trying to talk me out of keeping him?'

'I'm talking sense.'

'I can keep him for the days you're away,' Henrietta interjected, but she was watching Gabe. 'I run a boarding kennel alongside the shelter, so if you really are going to reorganise ...'

'You'd let her keep him?' Gabe's voice was incredulous.

'It's that or put him down,' Henrietta snapped. 'Nikki's offering.'

'And if I say no?'

There was a general intake of breath. If he said no ...

What would she do?

Take Horse and live elsewhere? Somewhere that wasn't here?

There were so few rental options.

Go back to Sydney.

No! Here was scary, but Sydney was scarier.

Move on. Who knew where? With dog?

This was dumb. To move towns because of a dog ...

But this afternoon she'd felt his heartbeat as he slept. The thought of ending that heartbeat ...

Horse was as lost as she was, she thought, and she glanced at Gabe and thought there were three of them. She could see pain behind Gabe's anger; behind his blank refusal to help.

She couldn't think of Gabe's pain now. She'd do this alone.

No. She'd do it with Horse.

'He's my dog,' she said, making her voice firm.

Henrietta turned to Gabe. ‘So. Let’s get this straight. Are you planning on evicting Nikki because she has a dog?’

‘She doesn’t know what she’s letting herself in for.’

‘You work at home, right?’ Henrietta asked her, obviously deciding to abandon Gabe’s arguments as superfluous.

‘Yes.’

‘Fantastic. When do you need to go away again?’

She did a frantic mental reshuffle. ‘I can put it off for a while. Three weeks ...’

‘Then you have three weeks to learn all about dogs,’ Henrietta decreed. ‘If at the end of that time you decide you can’t keep him then we’ll rethink things. So Gabe ... I have a happy ending in view. What about you? You’ll seriously evict her if she keeps him?’

They were all looking at him. Nikki and Henrietta ... Even Horse seemed to understand his future hung on what Gabe said right now.

‘Fine,’ he said explosively.

‘That’s not what I want to hear,’ Henrietta said. ‘How about a bit of enthusiasm?’

‘You expect me to be enthusiastic that there’s a dog about to live here? With a totally untrained owner?’

‘You’re trained,’ Henrietta said. ‘I’d feel happier if you were offering, but I have a feeling this guy will settle for what he can get. If the heart’s in the right place, the rest can follow, eh, Nikki?’

‘I ... yes,’ she said weakly, wondering where exactly her heart was.

‘That’s great,’ Henrietta said and patted Horse. who was still looking nervous. ‘What will you call him?’

‘Horse,’ Nikki said. ‘I’ll need stuff. I don’t know what. Can you tell me?’

‘Gabe might give you a ...’ Henrietta started and then glanced again at Gabe. Winced. ‘Okay, maybe not. Let’s take your new dog inside and I’ll make you a list myself. Unless you want to evict her first, Gabe?’

‘I’m going to the boat,’ he snapped. ‘Be it on your head.’

He headed for the boat, away from women, away from dog. Away from stuff he didn’t want to deal with.

He needed to sort cray-pots, mend some. He started but it didn’t keep his head from wandering. He kept seeing Nikki, sorting through her pile of rocks. *His mother’s pile of rocks.*

He kept seeing Nikki curled in front of the fire, sleeping beside Horse.

Horse. It was a stupid name for a dog.

What was also stupid was his reaction, he told himself. What was the big deal? His tenant had found herself a dog. It was nothing to do with him. As for the stone walling ...

She wouldn’t touch it again.

Why not let her finish it?

Stupid or not, he felt as if he was right on the edge of a whirlpool, and he was being pulled inexorably inside.

He'd been there before.

There was nothing inside but pain.

The cray-pots weren't hard enough.

He'd check the *Lady Nell's* propeller, he decided. It had fouled last time out. They'd got it clear but maybe it'd be wise to give it a thorough check.

Ten minutes later he had a scuba tank on, lowering himself over the side.

He should do this with someone on board keeping watch. If there was an accident ...

If there was an accident no one gave a toss; it was his business what he did with his life.

He had scores of employees, dependent on him for their livelihood.

He also had one tenant. Dependent?

If Horse decided to head for the beach again, he was bigger than she could possibly hold.

It was none of his business. She didn't need him. The dog didn't need him. No one did. Even if something happened to him, the legal stuff was set up so this town's fishing fleet would survive.

How morbid was that? He was about to check a propeller. He'd done it a hundred times.

He needed to see things in perspective.

He dived underwater. Right now underwater seemed safer than the surface—and a whole lot clearer.

* * *

Henrietta left and came back with supplies, and Nikki was set. Dog food, dog bed, dog bowls. Collar, lead, treats, ball times six ... Practically a car full.

‘You’ll need a kennel, but they don’t come prefabricated in Horse’s size,’ Henrietta told her. ‘I’ve brought you a trampoline bed instead. You’ll need to get a kennel built by winter. Oh, and there’s no need to spread it round town that I’ve brought this. Normally my new owners need to show me their preparations before I’ll agree to let them have the dog.’

‘So why the special treatment?’ Nikki had made tea. Henrietta was sipping Earl Grey from one of Nikki’s dainty cups, looking a bit uncomfortable. Maybe she ought to buy some mugs.

Maybe her life was going to change in a few other ways, she thought. Her apartment was furnished with the elegant possessions she’d acquired for the Sydney apartment. Some her parents had given her. Some she and Jon had chosen together. This teaset was antique, given to her by Jon for her last birthday.

The owner of a dog like Horse wouldn’t serve tea in cups like this. She hadn’t thought it through until now, but maybe she should shop ...

‘I hate putting dogs down,’ Henrietta was saying. ‘Sometimes, though, I don’t have a choice. I can’t keep them all. And if potential owners don’t care enough to commit to buying or scrounging dog gear, then they don’t care enough to be entrusted to a dog. These dogs have been through enough. I’d rather put

them down than sentence them to more misery.’

‘But me ...’

‘You live with Gabe,’ Henrietta said simply. ‘You mistreat Horse, you’ll have him to answer to. Even if he says it’s nothing to do with him, he’ll be watching. And that’s the second thing. This place without a dog is wrong. Gabe needs a dog. If he gets it via you, that’s fine by me.’

‘He’s not getting him via me. This is my call. My dog.’

‘Yes, but you live with Gabe,’ Henrietta repeated, and finished her tea in one noisy gulp. ‘Living so close, you’re almost family, and now you have a dog. Welcome to Banksia Bay, and welcome to your new role as dog owner. Any more questions, ask Gabe. He’s grumpy and dour and always a loner but he has reason to be. Underneath he’s a good man, and he’ll never let a dog suffer. He treated Jem like gold.’ Then she hesitated. Made to say something. Hesitated again.

Nikki watched her face. Wondered what she’d been about to say. Then asked what she’d like to know. ‘Could you tell me about him?’ she ventured. ‘What happened to his mother?’

Henrietta considered for a long moment and then shrugged.

‘I shouldn’t say, but why not? If you don’t hear it from me you’ll hear it from a hundred other people in this town. Okay, potted history. Gabe’s mother died of cancer when he was eight. His dad was an oaf and a bully. He was also a miser. He forced Gabe to leave school at fourteen, used him as an unpaid deck hand. Maybe Gabe would have left but luckily—and I

will say luckily—he died when Gabe was eighteen. He left a fortune. He left no will, so Gabe inherited. Gabe was a kid, floundering, desperately unhappy—and suddenly rich. So along came Lisbette, a selfish cow, all surface glitter, taking advantage of little more than a boy. She married him and she fleeced him, just like that.’

‘Oh, no ...’

‘I’d have horsewhipped her if I’d had my way,’ Henrietta said grimly. ‘But she was gone. And Gabe took it hard. He still had his dad’s boat and this house, but little else. So he took Jem and headed off to the West, to the oil rigs. A good seaman can make a lot if he’s prepared to take risks and, from what I can gather, Gabe took more than a few. Then the fishing here started to falter and suddenly Gabe returned. He’s good with figures, good with fishing, good with people. He almost single-handedly pulled the fleet back together. But he’s shut himself off for years and so far the only one to touch that is Jem.’ She touched the big dog’s soft ears. ‘So maybe ... maybe this guy can do the same. Or maybe even his owner can.’

‘Sorry?’ Nikki said, startled.

‘Just thinking,’ Henrietta said hastily, and rose to leave. ‘Dreaming families for my dogs is what I do. Good luck to the three of you.’

She looked at the teacup. Grinned. ‘Amazing,’ she said. ‘They say owners end up looking like their dogs. These cups fit poodles, not wolfhounds.’ She grinned down at Horse, asleep draped over

Nikki's feet, and then looked back to Nikki. 'Poodle,' she said. 'Maybe now, but not for much longer. I'm looking forward to big changes around here. For everyone.'

Gabe slipped underwater, checked the propeller and inspected the hull. Minutely. It was the best checked hull in the fleet. Then he went back to mending cray-pots. By nine he was the only person in the harbour.

The rest of his boats were out, and he was stuck on dry land. Because of Nikki.

What was she about, removing his alarm? Telling Hattie to go without him?

He'd needed to sleep, he conceded. His head still ached. Because she'd hit him.

It was an accident. She meant no harm. She meant to keep the dog. Horse.

It was a stupid name for a dog. A dog needed a bit of dignity. Dignity.

She'd have to get that fur unmatted, he thought, and getting the tangles out of that neglected coat was a huge job. Did she know what she was letting herself in for?

It was nothing to do with him. Nothing! He wasn't going near.

She was living right next door to him. With her dog who needed detangling.

He'd yelled at her. Because she'd picked up a few rocks. He'd behaved appallingly.

Why?

He knew why. And it wasn't the memory of his mother. It wasn't the dog. It was more.

It couldn't be more. He didn't want more, and more wasn't going to happen.

It was dark. Time to head home.

Maybe he could take Jem's old brushes across to her. A peace offering.

That wasn't more. It was sensible. It felt ... okay.

But when he got home there wasn't a light on, apart from the security light he kept on in the shared porch.

Were she and the dog asleep?

She'd slept this afternoon. He'd seen her, curled on the hearth with the dog.

With Horse.

They were nothing to do with him.

He glanced at the gap in the stone wall. Sensed the faint echo of Nikki. And Horse.

By his side ... Shades of Jem.

He was going nuts. The hit on his head had obviously been harder than he thought. Ghosts were everywhere, even to the feel of Jem beside him. Jem had always been with him, on the boat, under his bed, by the fire, a heartbeat by his side.

Whoa, he was maudlin. Get over it.

Disoriented, he found himself heading for the beach. A man could stare at the sea in the moonlight. Find some answers?

But the only answers he found on the beach were Nikki and

Horse.

CHAPTER FIVE

THEY were sitting just above the high water mark, right near the spot where Horse had stood and howled last night. Gabe saw them straight away, unmistakable, the silhouette of the slight woman and the huge, rangy dog framed against a rising moon.

Maybe he'd better call out. Warn her of his approach. Who knew what she was carrying tonight?

'Nikki!'

She turned. So did Horse, uttering a low threatening growl that suddenly turned into an unsure whine. Maybe the dog was as confused as he was.

'Gabe?' She couldn't see him—he was still in shadows. She sounded scared.

'It's Gabe.' He said it quickly, before she fired the poker.

'Are you still angry?'

Deep breath. Get this sorted. Stop being an oaf. 'I need to apologise,' he said, walking across the beach to them. 'I was out of line. Whether you keep Horse is none of my business. And snapping about the stones was nuts. Can we blame it on the hit on the head and move on?'

'Sure,' she said, but she sounded wary. 'I did hit you. I guess I can afford to cut you some slack.'

'Thank you,' he said gravely. 'Are you two moon watching?'

'Horse refuses to settle.' She shifted along the log she was

perched on so there was room for him as well. 'He whined and whined, so finally I figured we might as well come down here and see that no one's coming. So he can finally settle into our new life.'

'Your new life?' he said cautiously, sorting wheat from chaff. 'You really intend changing your life?'

'My life is changed anyway,' she said. 'That's what comes of falling for a king-sized rat. It's messed with my serenity no end.'

Don't ask. It was none of his business.

But she wasn't expecting him to ask. She was staring out to sea, talking almost to herself, and her self containment touched him as neediness never could.

Since when had he ever wanted to be involved?

Horse nuzzled his hand. He patted the dog and said, 'You fell for a king-sized rat?'

Had he intended to ask? Surely not.

'My boss.'

He had no choice now.

'You want to tell me about it?'

She had no intention of telling him. She hadn't told anyone. The guy she'd thought she loved was married.

Her parents knew she'd split with Jonathan but both her parents were on their third or fourth partner; splits were no big deal. And in the office, to her friends, she'd hung onto her pride. Her pride seemed like all she had left.

But here, now, sitting on the beach with Horse between them,

pride and privacy no longer seemed important.

So she told him. Bluntly. Dispassionately, as if it had happened to someone else, not to her.

‘Jonathan Ostler of Ostler Engineering,’ she said, her voice cool and hard. ‘International engineering designer. Smooth, rich, efficient. Hates mixing business with pleasure. My boss. He asked me out four years ago. Six months later we were sharing an apartment but no one in the office was to know. Jonathan thought it’d mess with company morale. So ... In the office we were so businesslike you wouldn’t believe. If we were coming to work at the same time we’d split up a block away so we’d never arrive together. He addressed me as Nikki but I addressed him as Mr Ostler. Strictly formal.’

‘Sounds weird.’

‘Yes, but I could see his point,’ she said. ‘Sleeping with the boss is hardly the way to endear yourself to the rest of the staff, and Jon was overseas so much it wasn’t an effort. A few people knew we were together but not many. So there I was, dream job, dream guy, dream apartment, four years. Dreaming weddings, if you must know. Starting to be anxious he didn’t want to settle, but too stupidly in love to push it. Then two months ago there was an explosion in a factory where we’d been overseeing changes. The call came in the middle of the night—hysterical—our firm could be sued for millions. Jon caught the dawn plane to Düsseldorf with minutes to spare, and in the rush he left his mobile phone sitting on his—on *our*—bedside table. The next day our office

was crazy. The Düsseldorf situation was frightening and the phone was going nuts. Jonathan's phone. Finally, I answered it. It was Jonathan's wife. In London. Their eight-year-old had been in a car accident. Please could I tell her where Jon was.'

'Ouch.'

'I coped,' she said, a tinge of pride warming her voice as she remembered that ghastly moment. 'I made sympathetic noises. I made sure Jonathan Junior wasn't in mortal danger, I got the details. Then I left a message with the manager of the Düsseldorf factory, asking Jon to phone his wife. I told him to say the message was from Nikki. Then I moved out of our apartment. Jonathan returned a week later, and I'd already arranged to move here, to do my work via the Internet.'

'But you still work for him?'

'Personal and business don't mix.'

'Like hell they don't,' he snapped. 'I've had relationships go sour between the crew. It messes with staff morale no end, and there's no way they can work together afterwards.'

'I'm good at my work.' But her uncertainty was growing and she couldn't put passion into her voice. 'The pay's great.'

'Can you work for yourself?'

'It's a specialist industry,' she said. 'I couldn't set up in competition to Jon. I could work for someone else, but it would have to be overseas.'

'So why not go overseas?'

'I don't want to.' But she'd been thinking. Thinking and

thinking. She'd been totally, hopelessly in love with Jonathan for years and to change her life so dramatically ...

Why not change it more?

Tomorrow. Think of it tomorrow.

'And now I have a dog,' she said, hauling herself back to the here and now with something akin to desperation. 'So here I am.' Deep breath. Tomorrow? Why not say now? 'But I have been thinking of changing jobs. Changing completely.'

'To what?'

How to say it? It was ridiculous. And to say stone walling, when she knew how he felt ...

But the germ of an idea that had started today wouldn't go away.

Putting one stone after another into a wall.

Crazy. To turn her back on specialist training ...

Oh, but how satisfying.

It was a whim, she reminded herself sharply. A whim of today. Tomorrow it'd be gone and she'd be back to sensible.

Don't talk about it. Don't push this man further than you already have.

'I don't know,' she managed. 'All I know is that I need something. Woman needs change.' She hugged Horse, who was still gazing out to sea. 'Woman needs dog.'

'No one needs a dog.'

'Says you who just lost one. I wonder if Horse's owner misses him like you miss Jem.'

‘Nikki ...’

‘Don’t stick my nose into what’s not my business? You’ve been telling me that all day. But now ... I’ve told you about my non-existent love life. You want to tell me why I can’t finish your stone wall?’

‘It’s my mother’s wall.’

‘And she disapproves of completion?’

‘She died when I was a child. She didn’t get to finish it.’

‘So the hole’s like a shrine,’ she said cautiously, like one might approach an unexploded grenade. ‘I can see that. But you know, if it was me I’d want the wall finished. Are you sure your mum’s not up there fretting? You know, I’m a neat freak. If I die with my floor half-hoovered, feel welcome to finish it. In fact I’ll haunt you if you don’t.’

‘You don’t like an unhoovered floor?’ They were veering away from his mother—which seemed fine by both of them.

‘Hoovering’s good for the soul.’

His mouth twitched. Just a little. The beginning of a smile. ‘Do you know how much hair a dog like Horse will shed?’

‘He has to grow some hair back first,’ she said warmly. ‘He grows, I’ll Hoover. We’ve made a deal.’

‘While you’ve been sitting on the beach, staring at the moon.’

‘It’s filling time. How long do you reckon it’ll take him to figure whoever he wants isn’t coming?’

‘Dogs have been faithful to absent masters for years.’

‘Years?’

‘Years.’

‘I was hoping maybe another half an hour.’

‘Years.’

‘Uh-oh.’

‘And years.’

‘I don’t know what else to do,’ she whispered.

Her problem. This was her problem, he thought, and it was only what she deserved, taking on a damaged dog ...

As he’d taken on a damaged dog sixteen years ago and not regretted it once. Until it was over.

He’d had his turn. Yes, this was Nikki’s dog, Nikki’s problem, but he could help.

‘I don’t think you’re doing anyone any favours by letting him stare at where a boat isn’t,’ he said.

‘I’m doing my best.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I know that.’

She cast him a look that was suspicious to say the least. ‘I didn’t mean to mess with your mother’s memory,’ she told him.

‘Yeah.’ He deserved that, he conceded. Like he’d deserved the hit over the head? But she had her reasons for that. Her heart was in the right place even if it was messing with ... his heart?

That was a dumb thing to think, but think it he did. Since Lisbette left ... well, maybe even before, a long time before, he’d closed down. Lisbette had whirled into his life, stunned him, ripped him off for all he was worth and whirled out again. He’d been a kid, lonely, naïve and a sitting duck.

He wasn't a sitting duck any longer. He'd closed up. Jem had wriggled her way into his life, he'd loved her and he'd lost her. She'd been the last chink in his armour, and there was no way he was opening more.

But this woman ...

She wasn't looking to rip him off as Lisbette had—he knew that. Lisbette, getting up every two hours because she was worried about him? Ha!

Nor was she trying to edge into the cracks around his heart like Jem had. She might be needy but it was a different type of needy.

It was Nikki and Horse against the world—when she didn't know a blind thing about dogs.

She was blundering. She was a walking disaster but she was a disaster who meant well.

'I overreacted with the wall,' he conceded. 'I looked out and saw you and the dog and that's what I remember most about my mother. Her sitting for hour after hour, sorting stones. She did it everywhere. She and Billy.'

'Billy?'

'She had a collie. He seemed old as long as I can remember. He pined when she died, and my dad shot him.'

'He shot him?' She sounded appalled.

'He was never going to get over Mum's death.'

'You were how old?'

'Eight.'

‘You lost your mum, and your dad shot her dog?’

How to say it? The day of the funeral, coming home, Billy whining, his father saying, ‘Get to your room, boy.’ A single shot.

He didn’t have to tell her. She touched his hand and the horror of that day was in her touch.

‘And I hit you over the head,’ she whispered. ‘And Henrietta said your wife left you. And your own dog died. If I were you I’d have crawled into a nice comfy psychiatric ward and thought up a diagnosis that’d keep me there for the rest of my life. Instead ...’

‘How did we get here?’ He had no idea. One minute this woman was irritating the heck out of him, the next she was putting together stuff he didn’t think about; didn’t want to think about. This was his place, his beach. He’d come down here for a quiet think, and here he was being psychoanalysed.

He felt exposed.

It was a weird thing to think. She hadn’t said anything that wasn’t common knowledge but it was as if she could see things differently.

She had her arm round Horse’s neck and she was tugging him close, and all of a sudden he felt a jolt, like what would it feel to be in the dog’s place?

The dog whined. Stupid dog.

‘You want dog lessons,’ he said, more roughly than he intended.

‘Horse doesn’t need lessons. He’s smart.’

‘He’s staring at an empty sea,’ he said.

'He's devoted. He'll get over it. Needs must.'

'Says you who's still pining for your creepy boss.'

'I'm trying to get over it,' she said with dignity. 'I'm not sitting on the beach wailing. I'm doing my best. Don't we all?'

She rose and brushed sand from the back of her trousers. With his collar released, Horse took a tentative step towards the sea. Nikki's hand hit the collar at the same time as his did. Their fingers touched. Flinched a little but didn't let go. Settled beside each other, a tiny touch but unnerving.

Settling.

Things were settling for him. He wasn't sure why.

Maybe it was watching her reaction to what he'd told her tonight, added to what he knew local gossip would have told her. His mother's death, his father, Lisbette, his mother's dog and Jem ... Her reaction seemed to validate stuff he tried not to think about.

Permission to feel sorry for himself?

Permission to move on.

Towards Nikki? Towards yet another disaster?

Not in a million years. He'd spent all his life being taught that solitary was safe. He wasn't about to change that now.

But he could help her. It was the least he could do.

'Horse needs a master,' he told her.

'He's only got me,' she said defensively. 'Why are we being sexist? A master?'

'I mean,' he said patiently, 'a pack leader. He's lost his. He's

looking for him; if he can't find him he needs a new one.'

'Right,' she said. 'Pack leader. Can I buy one at the Banksia Bay Co-op?'

He grinned. His hand was still touching hers. He should pull it away but he didn't. Things were changing—had changed. There was something about the night, the moonlight on the water, the big needy dog between them ...

There was something about her expression. She was sounding defiant, braving it out, but things were rotten in this woman's world as well. Nikki and Horse, both needy to the point of desperation.

That need had nothing to do with him. He should pull away—but he didn't.

'Attitude,' he said, deciding he'd be decisive, and she blinked.

'Pack leader attitude?'

'That's it. So who decided to come down the beach, you or Horse?'

'He was miserable.' She sounded defensive.

'So you followed.'

'I held onto him. He would have run.'

'But he walked in front, yes? Team leaders walk in front. The pack's at the back.'

'You're saying I need to growl at him? Make him subservient? He's already miserable.'

'He'll be miserable until you order him not to be, and he decides you're worth swapping loyalty.'

‘I shouldn’t have let him come down to the beach?’

‘There’s not a lot of point being down here, is there?’ he said, gentler as he watched her face. And Horse’s face. He could swear the dog was listening, his great eyes pools of despair. ‘He’s been dumped by a low-life. How’s it going to make him feel better to stare at an empty sea? It’s up to you to take his place.’

‘The low-life’s place?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘I haven’t had much practice at being the low-life,’ she said. ‘I’m a follower. Dumb and dumber, that’s me.’

‘We’re not talking about your love life.’

‘We’re not?’

‘That’s shrink territory, not mine.’

‘Like your stone wall.’

‘Do you mind?’

‘Butt out?’ She sighed and tried for a smile. ‘Fine. Consider me butted. What do I need to be a pack leader? A whip? Leathers?’

‘Discipline.’

She grinned. ‘Really? Don’t tell me, stockings and garters as well.’

He stared at her in the moonlight and he couldn’t believe it. She was laughing. Laughing!

The tension of the night dissipated, just like that. Except ... a sudden vision of Nikki in stockings and garters ...

He almost blushed.

‘I mean,’ he said, trying to stop the corners of his mouth

twitching, ‘you tell Horse what you expect and you follow through. He’s hungry? Use it. Call him, reward him when he comes. Teach him to sit, stay, the usual dog things. But mostly teach him no. He’s galloping towards you with a road in between; you need to hold your hand up, yell no and have him stop in his tracks. The same with coming down here. You can bring him down here on your terms, with a ball, something to do to keep him occupied. The minute he stares out to sea like he’s considering the low-life, then that’s a no. Hard, fast and mean it.’

‘You’re good at training dogs?’

‘I had a great dog. Smart as Einstein. She trained me.’

‘I’m sure Horse is smart.’

‘Prove it.’

‘I’m not sure ...’

‘Henrietta’s daughter takes personal dog coaching. I’m amazed Henrietta hasn’t introduced you already.’

‘Henrietta left a card,’ she conceded.

‘There you go.’

‘You’re not interested in helping yourself?’

‘No.’ Hard. Definite. He watched her face close and regretted it, but couldn’t pull it back.

‘I’m not scary,’ she said, almost defiantly, and he thought what a wuss—was he so obvious?

‘I’m busy,’ he said. ‘This is the first full day I haven’t worked since ...’

‘Since Jem died?’

‘Nikki ...’

‘I know.’ She tugged Horse towards her a little, which forced his hand to let go of the collar. Which meant they were no longer touching. ‘You want me to butt out. Respect your boundaries. I’ve been respecting boundaries for years. You’d think I’d be good at it.’

‘I didn’t mean ...’

‘You know, I’m very sure you did,’ she told him. ‘Tell me what to do.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘With Horse,’ she said patiently. ‘Training. What should I do first?’

‘Take his collar and say “Come”.’ This was solid ground. Dog training. He could handle this.

‘Come,’ she said and tugged and Horse didn’t move. Stared rigidly out to sea.

‘Come!’ Another tug.

Gabe sighed. ‘Okay, you’re on the head end. We’re going to roll him.’

‘What?’

‘He has to learn to submit, otherwise he’ll spend the rest of his life waiting for his low-life. Say “Down”.’

‘Down.’

‘Like you mean it!’

‘Down!’

‘You sound like a feather duster.’

'I do not.'

'Pretend the boat's sinking. The kid at the other end is standing there with a tin can and a stupid expression. He bails or you drown. Are you going to say "Bail" in that same voice?'

'He's an abandoned dog. He nearly died. He's hurt and confused. You want me to yell at him?'

'He's hurt and confused and he needs to relax. The only way he can relax is if he thinks someone else is in charge. You.'

'You do it.'

'I'm not his pack leader. Do it, Nikki, or you'll have him howling at the door for weeks, killing himself with exhaustion. You say "Down" like you mean it and we bring him down.'

'I don't ...'

'Just do it.'

'Down,' she snapped in a voice so full of authority that both Gabe and the dog started. But he had the dog's back legs and Nikki had his collar. Gabe hauled his legs from under him and rolled him before Horse knew what had hit him.

The big dog was on his back. Shocked into submission.

'Tell him he's a good dog but keep him down,' Gabe said.

'This is cruel. He's not fit ...'

'He's going to pine until we do it. Do it.'

'G ... Good dog.'

'Now let him up again.'

The dog lumbered to his feet.

'Now down again.'

‘Down!’

Once again Gabe pushed his legs from under him. The dog folded.

‘Good dog,’ Nikki said, holding him down and the dog’s tail gave a tentative, subjugated wag.

‘Once more.’

‘Down!’ And this time Gabe didn’t have to push. The dog crouched and rolled with only a slight push and pull from Nikki.

‘Good dog. Great,’ Nikki said and her voice wobbled.

The dog stood again, unsure, but this time he moved imperceptibly to Nikki’s side. He looked up at her instead of out to sea.

‘Now tell him to come and tug,’ Gabe said, and Nikki did and the big dog moved docilely up the beach by her side.

‘Good dog,’ Nikki said and sniffed.

‘Why are you crying?’

‘I’m not.’

‘You’re allergic to command?’

‘I’m not built to be a sergeant major.’

‘Horse needs a sergeant major,’ he said as he fell in beside her. ‘You are what you have to be. Like me being owner of half a dozen boats, employing crews.’

‘You don’t like that?’

They were walking up the track, Nikki with Horse beside her, Gabe with his hand hovering, just in case Horse made a break for it. But Horse was totally submissive. He was probably relieved.

He'd spent too long as it was waiting for his scumbag owner. He needed a new one.

There were parallels. Caring for Horse ...

Taking on this town's fishing fleet.

Nikki was waiting for an answer. Not pushing. Just walking steadily up the track with her dog.

She was a peaceful woman, he thought. Self contained. Maybe she'd had to be.

Why the sniff? Tears?

Ignore them.

'I never saw myself as head of a fleet,' he told her. 'But when the fishing industry round here started to falter I was single with no responsibilities. I'd been away, working on the rigs, making myself some serious money. I could afford to take a few risks. But in the end I didn't need to. Fishing's in my blood and I knew what'd work.'

'But now ... You enjoy it?'

'Fishing's my life.'

'It sounds boring.'

'So you do what in your spare time?' he demanded. 'Macramé?'

'Dog training,' she said steadily. 'I now have a career and a hobby and a pet. What more could a girl want? What do you have, Gabe Carver?'

'Everything I want.'

They reached the house in silence. Reached the porch. Nikki opened the door and ushered Horse inside. Hesitated.

‘He’ll stand at the door and howl,’ she said, and he looked at her face and saw the tracks of tears. What had he said to upset her?

‘Only if you let him.’

‘How do I not let him?’

He sighed. ‘Where’s he sleeping?’

‘In my bedroom.’

‘Not on your bed. You’re pack leader.’

‘I know that much. Besides, the bed’s not big enough.’

‘So show me.’

She swung open the bedroom door. A bed, single, small. He looked at her in surprise. He hadn’t been here when her furniture was delivered so he was seeing this for the first time. It was practically a child’s bed.

‘You don’t like stretching?’

‘Not if there’s no one to stretch to.’

Silence. There were a million things to say, but suddenly nothing.

The bedroom was chintzy. Pretty pink. Dainty. It made a man nervous just to look at it.

Horse whined and he thought *I’m with you, mate*. To sleep in a bedroom like this ...

But at least Horse had a sensible bed. Henrietta knew dogs, and she’d provided a trampoline bed that was almost as big as Nikki’s.

‘Say “Bed”,’ he told Nikki.

‘Bed.’ Horse didn’t move an inch.

Gabe sighed. ‘Bail the dratted boat.’

‘*Bed!*’ That was better. Sergeant major stuff.

Gabe shoved Horse from behind. Horse lumbered up onto the trampoline.

‘Say “Down.”’

‘Down,’ Nikki said and the dog rolled.

‘Stay,’ Nikki said and stepped back and grinned as Horse did just that.

Horse looked up at her and put a tentative paw down onto the floor.

‘Stay!’ Her best ‘bail the boat’ voice.

The paw retreated.

‘How about that?’ Nikki said, her smile widening. ‘I’m a pack leader.’

‘You’ll make a great one.’

‘I will,’ she said and turned to him. Fast.

She was suddenly a bit too close.

She was suddenly very close.

‘Make sure the dog stays there,’ he said, a bit too gruffly. They were by the dog’s bed, so close they were almost touching. They were by Nikki’s bed as well. It was just as well it wasn’t his bed, he thought, the wide, firm, king-sized bed he’d bought for himself when he’d come back here to live.

He had a sudden flash of recall. Last night. Nikki tiptoeing in to check he wasn’t dead, leaning over him ...

He could have ...

No.

But she was so close. He turned to go—a man had to make a move—but suddenly she'd taken his hands in hers, tugging him back to face her.

'Thank you,' she said. 'For coming down to the beach to find me.'

'You're welcome.' He hadn't gone down to find her, he thought, but he wasn't thinking clearly and it seemed way too much trouble to explain.

'And I can see why you don't want to get involved. I won't ask you to. I've been a nuisance. But I meant well. I mean well.'

'You do.' Big of him to concede that much.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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