

JENNIE  
ADAMS



TO LOVE  
AND TO  
CHERISH

*Cherish*

# **Jennie Adams**

## **To Love and To Cherish**

### **Аннотация**

All that I am I give to you...When Jack left Australia a year ago, Tiffany thought she'd lost him for good. But in truth, Jack loved Tiffany too much to share the painful secret of his illness. He went away to cope the only way he knew how—alone. Now seeing Tiffany again makes Jack long for the love he believes he neither deserves nor could ever return. Tiffany has different ideas, and sets out to prove she can love and cherish him—for better or for worse.

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Heart *to*  
Heart



For my friend June Monks, with thanks for the chats about life, the universe and family. You are proof that life can indeed “Begin with C.” One day I may follow your example and take up line dancing too (but I’ll have to get fit first)!

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# CHAPTER ONE

‘AND stay there while I get the rest of your friends under control!’ Tiffany Campbell left two goats on the correct side of her family’s goat farm fence and headed off further into council-owned creek land to grab the remaining two strays.

Some of the farm’s fencing could do with improving, but until her adoptive parents returned from France Tiffany would have to make do with shoring this section up. She wanted things to run smoothly while Colin and Sylvia were away. Wanted them to see they’d been right to trust her with the responsibility of running the farm in their absence. She could do this.

Not that she was trying to earn their approval or anything. She just liked to do a good job of whatever she tackled. For now, that meant keeping Campbell goats away from Reid land, whether the creek appealed to the goats this warm summer’s day or not.

Arms pumping, bushman’s hat rammed down hard over her corkscrew brown curls, Tiffany stomped on booted feet towards the animals.

She did her best to make her five-foot-and-one-quarter-of-an-inch frame appear large and intimidating. ‘Hie, hie. Shoo. Towards the gate now, and I’ll open it and let you both back through.’

One of the goats obligingly trotted forward.

‘Good goat.’ Tiffany opened the gate, and shut it again quickly

once the goat had entered the paddock.

That left one goat, and Tiffany recognised this goat very well. She should, since she owned it. A personal acquisition bought in a fit of lonely insanity as it turned out.

‘Right, Amalthea. I want you back in the paddock with the others.’ Tiffany stepped forward.

With a loud maaaa and a look that seemed distrustful, disbelieving and decidedly goddess-like all at once, the goat bolted. Tiffany gave chase, but lost the nimble-footed creature when the goat disappeared around a bend in the creek.

Just beyond that bend stood the footbridge Jack Reid had always used to get from his place to hers. At least until her misguided actions had sent him clear out of Australia and to the other side of the world months ago.

Footsteps sounded on the bridge. Loud, stomping steps in a gait she would recognise anywhere. Tiffany froze to the spot in a mixture of hope and uncertainty. She had wanted a better resolution to her situation with Jack—a chance to truly deal with it rather than continuing to pretend everything was all right from opposite sides of the world. But was she ready to broach that resolution right now?

You’ll just have to be ready, won’t you?

‘I didn’t even know he was back from Switzerland.’ Her muttered words indicated how far she and Jack had moved from their old, close and comfortable friendship. Would this sudden meeting make any difference to that? Maybe Jack hadn’t even

planned to see her during his visit here. Would he be sorry to have stumbled into her?

From somewhere nearby, the goat goddess let out a loud and annoyed bleat. A second later Amalthea trotted past Tiffany and disappeared into the brush.

Those swift human footsteps rounded the bend in the creek. And the time for questions ended—because there was Jack.

Solid, in the flesh, as wonderful and as gorgeous as ever. Tiffany wanted to see him only as best friend material—as he wanted to see her. Instead, her heart-rate picked up, her palms heated, and the skin on her arms and at the back of her neck began to prickle.

The reaction was embarrassing and unwelcome and infuriating. Hadn't she gained any ground since he'd left? She focused her efforts to ensure she revealed none of that unacceptable reaction when she spoke. 'Hello, Jack. This is a surprise.'

'Tiffany!' His head snapped up. Deep blue eyes churned with surprise, anger, and other emotions she couldn't define.

Fists clenched at his sides, Jack stopped in front of her. Muscles bunched in the tanned lean jaw, but something in his face softened, too. He clearly wasn't angry with her, as his stomping steps before he'd seen her had indicated. That left surprise, and that softening of his features. A warm feeling spread through her in response, despite all that had gone before.

'I thought I'd find you on the farm.' He spoke the words in that

deep, delicious voice of his. 'I didn't expect to see you here.'

'But you did expect to see me?' At least that was a little hopeful...

'Yes. Maybe I should have let you know I was coming back into the country and...back here.' He hesitated and his mouth tightened. 'I phoned Mum from Sydney and arranged to visit her. Samuel was to be away on business for the next week, and I thought there'd be time to make plans with you once I'd settled into the house with Mum. Instead Samuel came back, and my visit ended half an hour after I got there.'

His tone was flat, but strong emotion lurked beneath the carefully composed words.

'I'm sorry, Jack.'

Samuel Reid was an often unpleasant man who appeared to share no warmth with his wife and was openly aggressive towards his son. Jack's mother was as bad, in her own way. She simply ignored life as much as she possibly could.

Tiffany kept her tone neutral as she went on. 'Samuel must have caught you by surprise. You don't usually give him a chance to try and launch into an altercation with you.'

'It was more than a war of words this time.' Jack's jaw worked before he shook his head. 'None of the Reids are fit for family relations. I proved that today.'

Just as she began to gape at this pronouncement, he seemed to forcibly dismiss the topic.

'I came to the creek for a breather. I intended to seek you out

at the farm after that. I want our old friendship back, Tiff. We're completely safe with that, and...I've missed you.'

It was an odd way for him to put things—as though he lumped himself in with his parents in terms of dysfunctionality in relationships. But Jack just wasn't like that. What had Samuel Reid said or done this time to upset him so?

Before she could think of a way to subtly pursue the topic, Jack spoke again.

'Tell me what you're up to here at the creek.' Dried twigs snapped beneath his booted feet as he stepped closer to her. 'I thought I saw a goat as I came over the bridge.'

'You probably did see a goat. I've had to retrieve several from this creek land, and there's still one to collect.' She inhaled the scents of dry grass and gum leaves, but mostly she was caught in the deep blue of Jack's eyes.

'I'll help you catch the goat,' he offered, 'and maybe then we can visit.'

It was brilliant that he wanted their friendship back. She should be on her knees and grateful for it, not disappointed in any way.

'That would be nice. I'd like to hear about your trip.' She would like a chance to resolve their issues, but she didn't say that. Instead, she tried to inject a teasing note into her voice. 'I was terribly jealous about all those fabulous places you'd get to visit across Europe while you consulted for your law firm. The photography opportunities alone would have been mind-

blowing.'

'Actually, I got fairly busy once I reached Switzerland.' The smile he returned faded too quickly. 'I sort of dug in there and didn't move around as much as I might have. You'd have enjoyed taking photos, though. You're right about that.'

'It's great that Hobbs & Judd agreed to let you consult over there. You probably handled some big corporate law matters for them and raised their international profile exponentially.'

When he didn't say anything, she nodded her head. 'I won't ask you to confirm it. I know you wouldn't be able to give me information about what you worked on, but I imagine it would have presented a challenge to consult overseas that way.'

'It was something like that.' Again there appeared to be dark shadows in the blue of his eyes, but he forced words out in a hearty, determined voice. 'It was a great opportunity to spread my wings, too—to look at the law from a different perspective for a while.'

Yes, and he had developed that yen for a different perspective right when she had revealed a personal interest in him. Oh, call it what it was: a romantic interest.

Clearly he still wanted her to believe his decision to go had had nothing to do with the fact she'd thrown herself at him. Maybe he thought if they didn't speak of it openly they could pretend it never happened.

Unfortunately, she couldn't forget that easily. But he was back, and he wanted to be friends again, and that was good. She nibbled

on her lower lip. She would figure out how to deal with the rest.

Jack's sharp gaze followed the movement of her mouth before he abruptly looked away.

It was just as before. Something inside her warmed to that expression, decided it had a meaning quite opposite to what it really had. Well, this time she would take care not to be fooled by such thoughts. She pasted a bland, cheerful look on her face.

He gave her an odd look in return, but at least she had overcome her musings.

'It is good to see you, Tiff.' He reached out with one arm and hugged her against his side.

It was a friendly hug, if guarded. It didn't matter that her head fitted against his shoulder perfectly, or that it felt like a kind of promise to be close to him like this.

That's all in your imagination, Tiffany Campbell, and you cannot afford to be hurt again, nor to take a wrong step and lose the return of friendship he's offered. So pull yourself together.

She wrapped her arm around his waist and briefly returned the hug, then forced herself to step away. There. See? She could do this. It just needed to be one step at a time. That was all.

Jack let go, too. Eyes narrowed, sooty black lashes concealing his expression, he searched the area around them. His voice was deep, husky, but the words were prosaic. 'Where do you think the goat might be hiding?'

While Jack looked away from her she took the chance to study him. The jeans and lace-up boots were his usual fare for when

he wasn't at work in the city. The brown loose-fitting cotton shirt was not. He usually favoured fitted T-shirts. His hair was cropped shorter than she had ever seen it, too.

She hadn't taken it in until this moment, but now she did, and noted something that was more than a change in appearance alone. Jack had altered somehow on the inside. Because of what had happened between them, or because his life had moved on in ways she hadn't seen? She didn't know, but she sensed it. 'You seem different.'

'No. I haven't changed at all.' His head whipped round and his gaze latched onto hers, demanding she believe him. One hand rose to touch a spot beneath his arm, and dropped away as quickly.

Then he forced a smile, let his eyes crinkle at the corners and gestured towards her attire. 'I like that ensemble, though. It's got a nice "bush walker with cork hat" feel to it.'

What was that all about? Not his joke, but what had preceded it?

Slowly, she pushed her hat back. 'There are no corks hanging from this millinery masterpiece, and my shorts and hiking boots are sensible for this work.'

Both were boring as heck. But at least the T-shirt was pretty—bright pink and clingy, with little cap sleeves. Silly thoughts. She could be dressed in a wheat bag and it would make no difference, because Jack didn't see her that way. And he didn't really care how she looked right now, either. She would swear he wanted

to distract her attention away from his own appearance—except that made no sense.

His gaze lifted to her face and lingered there before he spoke in a deliberately teasing tone. ‘You look like the same friend I missed all these months. Same knobbly knees and pointy chin and wild curly brown hair. Same freckles on your nose—’

‘You can’t see the hair. It’s hidden under my corkless hat.’ Had he truly missed her? His sporadic e-mails hadn’t given that impression. ‘And my knees aren’t knobbly. They have character.’

‘Knees with character. Yep, I can see that.’ He nodded, let his gaze glint with a teasing light that was so familiar and dear.

Her breath caught in her throat.

When she didn’t speak, Jack raised an eyebrow. ‘Did you work at Fred’s Fotos this morning? It’s one of your usual mornings, isn’t it?’ He watched her with a steady gaze. If any shadow lurked there now, he kept it well hidden.

‘I’m on holiday from Fred’s to look after the farm while Mum and Dad visit France and other parts of Europe. They went over to pick up a cheese award, and they’re having a bit of a break, as well.’

His brows rose. ‘You’re in charge of the farm while they’re gone? It’s a three-person operation with you helping out, as well, whenever you can. Have you got extra help? One of your brothers?’

‘I can handle it. I won’t disappoint Mum and Dad, and I don’t need Jed, Cain or Alex to help me.’ She never wanted to

disappoint Colin and Sylvia. It wasn't the same as striving to please a birth mother for whom she would never be enough.

Besides, she was over all that old stuff—the worry of trying to be good enough. It had only been on her mind a little in past months because of the upset with Jack. Everything had gone off-kilter for a while after that.

And there was nothing wrong with wanting to ensure that Colin and Sylvia would be proud of her. Any well-balanced offspring would want that.

Yeah? What about parents loving their children simply because they were their children?

Well, naturally Tiffany believed that, too. But this topic wasn't even important right now. She forced her thoughts back to her discussion with Jack. 'Anyway, Ron's at the farm full time.'

The middle-aged worker provided all the help she required. 'We made sure things were up to date before Mum and Dad left, and I can still make time to visit with you today. I'll just catch up later.'

'Let's deal with this goat problem, then.' He turned away, gave her a view of the back of his head, his strong neck and broad shoulders, and the way his ears sat close to his skull.

Jack was beautiful. She'd always known that, but over time she had come to feel it with her senses, too. Just staring into his eyes gave her shivers sometimes. Or if she looked at the way his mouth softened in kindness, or watched him interact with her brothers, her parents.

Tiffany had loved him since she was eight years old, and far more recently had started to fall maybe a little in love with him. Now she had to go back—to put those newer feelings behind her once and for all.

‘Um, yes, let’s get my goat rounded up. She’s over there, watching us from behind that clump of bushes.’ Tiffany pointed to Amalthea’s hiding place. ‘See the beady eye and the bit of white? That’s her.’

‘Your goat?’ He glanced towards the goat’s hiding place.

‘Yes. I bought her to be my personal pet. Her name is Amalthea.’ Tiffany watched the goat watch them, and thought about the many un-pet-like things Amalthea had done so far. ‘To date it’s been a rocky relationship.’

‘Amalthea?’ After a moment, he gave an almost reluctant smile. ‘Ah, yes. That’s the goat goddess who purportedly sustained Zeus with milk. I take it she acts like a goddess, too?’

Tiffany grimaced. ‘She has come across as somewhat goddessy at times. Yes.’

A sulphur-crested cockatoo flew out of the branches of a eucalypt tree. It would have made a good ‘In Flight’ picture, but Tiffany had no time to think about photography right now. She turned back to face Jack.

He began to inch quietly to the right. ‘You go left. We’ll encourage the goat towards the gate. The first one of us near enough can open it to let her through.’

It took a bit of running. Tiffany uttered more than one stifled

curse, while Jack seemed to welcome the physical activity. Eventually they got Amalthea back where she should be.

They stood there then, Tiffany and Jack, in front of the gate, facing each other. His body formed a half-cradle for hers, blocked her in against the gate, and she wanted to close the distance between them and have more than a friendly hug.

Did he realise how close they were? What if he knew his closeness still affected her in a way he didn't welcome?

'You could stay for dinner. It's nearly that time now.' Only after she'd issued the invitation did her thoughts go back to the last time she had invited him to her cottage for a meal.

Heat climbed into her cheeks and she hurried on. 'I've got Mexican rice left over in the fridge, or I could meet you somewhere else if you'd rather. You could invite your mother along, or we could just visit for a while now.'

'Tiff.' His hand closed over hers. Regret seemed to fill his eyes for a moment, before he let go and looked away. Then he straightened away from her completely, and she let out her breath in slow increments so he wouldn't notice she'd been holding it.

Jack's head tilted to the side. 'There's someone coming up the road towards your place.'

Tiffany heard only the pounding of her heart and the cacophony of regret and uncertainty. The sudden wail of a siren, when it came, made her jump. 'That's—it's turned in at the farm gate. They must have run the siren to warn us they were here. It sounded like an ambulance.'

‘We need to see what’s wrong.’ Jack started to stride back towards the footbridge. ‘My Jeep’s parked behind the peppercorn trees. Let’s go.’

When she didn’t immediately follow, instead stood rooted to the spot as she tried to make it add up—ambulance, farm, someone hurt—Jack turned back. ‘You said it’s you and Ron. Would he still be here this late?’

‘It’s possible. He stayed to finish the hoof trimming so I could check the water troughs. We had some delays today that put us behind, and then I had to retrieve goats. I haven’t heard him drive away.’ She murmured the words, and as she did so injury scenarios began to play through her mind.

Quickly, she gathered the tools she’d used to try to fix the fence where the goats had got through, and hurried after Jack.

Once they were in his Jeep he swung the wheel and covered the distance to the farm gateway as quickly as possible. The Jeep barrelled up the lane.

Her breath came in sharp puffs, from a combination of concern and the effect of being near him. Nerves and confusion added to the mix.

The ambulance idled outside her parents’ empty house. The home was being painted, but with the painter gone there was no one to give directions. When Jack pulled alongside, the officers were about to get out of the vehicle.

Tiffany leaned her head out of the Jeep. ‘It has to be Ron. He must have called from the phone in the shed.’ She pointed. ‘We’ll

follow you there.'

It took seconds only to arrive at the shed. Tiffany scrambled out of the Jeep. 'Ron? Ron! Where are you? What's happened?'

She hurried inside. Ron lay on the floor of the shed, his face ashen, one leg bent at an odd angle.

'We're here, Ron. It'll be all right.' Jack's reassurance came from right behind her, and his hand came to rest on her shoulder.

Tiffany registered the warm feeling of his touch and tried not to press back into it. 'What happened, Ron? I'm so sorry I wasn't with you.'

'I'd finished with the last of the goats and let them out of the holding pen. I was about to go home for the day.' Ron gritted the words out as the ambulance officers crouched to attend to him.

He cast one puzzled glance towards Jack. 'I knocked a hoof pick down and slipped on the dratted thing. Came down hard and sort of twisted as I landed. I think I've broken my leg.'

After a swift examination, the ambulance officers concurred. Tiffany stood still as they questioned Ron, checked vitals, and quickly prepared him for the short journey to the ambulance. With a part of her mind she registered Jack still behind her, his touch a warm feeling of reassurance at her back as the ambulance officers loaded Ron so they could stretcher him to the ambulance.

She should focus on the friendly experience of Jack's touch, not the shimmery other feeling that coursed through her.

'Will you ring Denise for me, Tiff?' Ron gritted the question

through clenched teeth.

His wife would need to know. Tiffany hurried forward to answer him, touched his arm with careful fingers. If it also offered an excuse for her to shift away from the temptation of Jack's touch, she refused to think about that fact.

Nor would she dwell on the bereft feeling she had now they were separated. 'I'll ring Denise straight away, Ron. Then I'll follow the ambulance in and make sure everything is okay for you.'

'No need. You should finish your visit with Jack. Didn't know he was back here...' Ron's voice wavered as the ambulance officers took him outside and loaded him into the back of the vehicle. His eyelids fluttered down.

'We need to get him into town.' One of the officers climbed in with Ron. The other closed them in and moved towards the front of the vehicle.

'Yes, of course.' Tiffany nodded and stepped back, and the ambulance drove off.

'They'll look after him.' Jack offered the assurance from beside her. 'And Denise will be there for him. But if you want to go in, we can.'

'No. That's okay. I think he'd rather not make too much of a fuss of this, but I'd better phone Denise and tell her the ambulance is on its way to town.' She hurried into the shed and picked the phone up off the floor. 'Ron must have knocked the phone down to use it.'

When she would have dialled the number, Jack laid his hand over hers. ‘Tell Denise I’ll be here to help you until your parents get back. Once Ron’s well enough to think about it, he’ll need to know that.’

‘What? Mum and Dad aren’t due back for ten days.’ She started to shake her head. ‘I can’t possibly ask—’

‘Then don’t.’ He squeezed her hand and let go. ‘Don’t ask, because I’ve already made up my mind. Let me help you—spend the time with you. It will solve your staffing problem and give me what I want at the same time—a chance to spend enough time with you to really renew our friendship.’

‘It’s not that simple, Jack. You know—’

‘I know my friend needs some help. Why wouldn’t I give it to her?’ His jaw jutted out, signalled his determination. ‘I’m not due back to work for weeks yet. I’m free to help you. Let me.’

‘You couldn’t come here every day from the nearest motel, and I gather you won’t be staying with your parents.’ Clearly he and Samuel had locked horns enough that Jack would avoid the place now.

Milking started early on the dairy farm. Jack would have to be on the road before five a.m.—not to mention how she would cope with all that time in his presence after so long, with her thoughts and feelings all in a whirl.

‘Your motel is in Ruffy’s Crossing. It’s an hour’s drive away. And you can’t stay at Mum and Dad’s place because it’s being painted.’

That only left one other choice—one which she felt certain he would reject.

‘The only other option would be for you to stay at the cottage with me for the duration. Obviously you won’t want to do that.’

‘Why not?’ He narrowed his eyes at her. ‘I’ve stayed there in the past. It will be just like old times.’

Just like old times? They would pretend the bit in between had never happened?

‘Don’t prevaricate, Tiff. You need help. If not me, it would have to be one of your brothers.’ Jack touched the small of her back, a tiny guiding contact as he led her towards his Jeep. ‘Let’s go. I’ve got my travel bag on the back seat, with plenty of clothes that’ll do to work in while I’m here.’

What other choice did she have? Call one of her brothers and let her whole family know she hadn’t lasted more than a couple of days while she tried to run the farm alone? How would that look for living up to their faith in her?

‘All right.’ She tried to ignore the sensation of warmth that spread at the base of her spine from his touch. ‘I accept your offer of help—as one friend to another.’

She just hoped she wasn’t making a huge mistake. Because the next ten days could be a slice of that old, wonderful friendship, or be charged with the same unease she felt now.

Tiffany wasn’t sure which it would be!

## CHAPTER TWO

‘WE’RE almost done. There are only about fifty goats still out there in the waiting room.’

It was early morning. Jack made his observation as he rounded the corner of one row of the milking parlour and told himself things were working out just as he wanted. Better, in fact. Ron’s accident was unfortunate, and he really felt for Tiffany’s worker, but Jack hadn’t expected to have a chance to spend so much quality time with Tiffany—and that, in and of itself, was a good thing.

Once they both began to relax into that time it would be really beneficial to their friendship.

He was here for that reason and nothing else. Last night had been uneasy, but that was to be expected. He’d kept the conversation on simple, uncomplicated topics—friendly topics. And if Tiff hadn’t seemed entirely happy with that state of affairs—well, she would come to realise it was best.

Jack would make sure of that. Because he wanted his visit here to work out. He wanted her back in his life the way she had been before. Jack wanted that much of Tiffany more than he could let himself acknowledge, and he would have it.

There was no need to delve into aspects of the past that had no bearing now. The wrong path he’d started on with Tiffany before he went away. The Samuel factor. The other challenges Jack had

faced in recent months. Jack had all of that stuff sorted.

He had missed Tiffany a lot. But as a friend, nothing more. Right.

A snarl formed on his face, and he forced it away. The travelling yesterday must have frustrated him, or something. That was all.

‘One more milking cycle will take care of it, then.’ Tiffany rounded the corner from the opposite direction, and pulled up a millimetre short of stepping right into his arms.

Jack sucked in his breath and stepped abruptly backwards to avoid that direct contact. He resisted the urge to check that his thick shirt was correctly in place, and ran his fingers over his hair instead. ‘I guess you didn’t realise I was so close.’

‘No. Sound distorts in here sometimes. I thought you were further away—in the next row.’ Her pointy chin rose to a defensive angle. She stepped away and checked the flow of milk through the tubing that ran along the row. ‘Actually, we won’t be entirely finished with the milking when we’re done here.’

She paused to tuck her overalls more firmly into her gumboots. Her T-shirt today was lemon, with tiny flowers designed onto it, her overalls a soft, mellow green. She wore no hat, and her hair looked soft and inviting where it sprang out from its loose ponytail. He had teased her yesterday, but in truth Tiffany was way too attractive—no matter what she dressed in.

Tiffany pulled a wry face. ‘Amalthea avoided the milk shed again today, so it looks like I get to hand-milk her again.’

Jack drew his gaze away from the soft curvature of her arms, the halo of her hair. It shouldn't have been difficult to do so. 'You should have told me that goat was missing. I would have searched her out for you.'

The words were harsh, almost a growl. He clamped his mouth shut before anything else could come out, turned away, and tried to soften his tone to something a bit more normal. 'I'll help you find her later, if you like.'

'That's okay. I saw her hidden behind some hay bales in the south paddock. I doubt she will have moved.' Tiffany gave him a puzzled look and turned away. 'I'll get a bucket and take care of business later.'

They worked in silence for a few moments. The routine never changed. Check, regulate, ensure all the goats took the supplement, that they all appeared bright and in good health. This was good. Relaxed, normal.

Jack tried for some chitchat to cement that effect. 'How are your wildlife photos coming along? I noticed you've added quite a bit of material to your website.'

'Did you visit it while you were away? You e-mailed so irregularly I didn't think...' She trailed off and looked away.

Yes, Tiff. I visited the website almost every day. It gave me a connection, and I needed it. Even when I remained out of contact with you.

'I dropped by now and then. I liked the one of the goanna up on its hind legs, running up the middle of a dirt road.'

‘Thanks. It was one of those lucky shots. I was toying with colour contrasts and a new zoom lens, caught movement, and realised the goanna was running towards me from a distance.’

Dust motes danced in beams of sunshine above her and his body tightened with an unwelcome interest.

Regret shifted inside him, and Jack batted it down. He had to look forward, not back. It was the only way to salvage anything. He pushed a smile to his face. ‘It’s my guess you got out of the goanna’s way before it got too close?’

‘Oh, yes.’ She laughed. ‘There’s no shame in the judicious use of long-range photographic equipment.’ Tiffany’s laughter faded, but her expression remained warm, vulnerable. ‘I got that shot on one of the treks Jan and I made last month.’

‘Your watercolour friend from Sydney?’ His heart soaked up the sound of her laughter.

‘Yes. Jan got into her art about the same time I took up photography. She’s fun to be around.’

As they finished up in the shed, Tiffany told him a little more about her most recent photography expeditions.

As she talked, they both began to relax. Jack didn’t realise how much until they stepped outside into the morning light and stood side by side at the sink to wash up.

Then Tiffany’s chatter died away. She glanced at him from the corner of her eye and her shoulders drew up into a tight line. All the ease left her. ‘Jack—about that last night before you went away. And the days that led up to it. I need to tell you I truly

thought—’

‘You don’t need to say anything. It was just a mistake, and it’s finished with now.’ He didn’t look at her as he scrubbed up. The mistake was that he had allowed things to get so far in the first place, but he couldn’t say that.

It wasn’t a case of avoiding the issue, either. Jack understood all his issues perfectly well. He didn’t have to burden Tiffany with the knowledge of them, though.

‘Where did you and Jan go camping? Anywhere special?’ Talk about those things, Tiffany. Tell me how you spent your time while I was away. He wanted to hear of positive things, upbeat things, to counterbalance his memories of struggle and difficulty.

She glared at him for a moment as she scrubbed up. Then she dried her hands and started towards the dairy building. ‘What is special if it’s not Australian bush land?’

In the paddocks around them goats bleated, drank water from the troughs and climbed anything not at ground level.

It was a natural scene, restful and calm, yet the air between them crackled with tension.

‘My favourite trip recently was to Warrabah National Park.’ She bit the words out as she stomped along. ‘I got some good river-life shots there.’

‘Great. That’s great.’ He realised he had moved too close to her side, and stepped sideways a bit.

The look she cast his way held frustration, but he just gestured towards the dairy.

‘I’m no use to you in there.’ The dairy was the one part of the farm Jack knew little about. ‘How about if I load the truck for the next hay feed out?’ He wasn’t choosing to avoid her company. That would be pointless when he had come here expressly to seek it out.

He had irritated her, but maybe with some breathing space he would figure out how to keep her away from the topic of the past. He wanted to forget the last months, and that wasn’t denial!

Tiffany blew a curl off her forehead, sighed, and turned away. ‘That would be fine. Thank you for your help. I’ll be busy here for two hours or more. You could also check the water troughs. And when you hear the truck arrive to collect the cheeses, would you come back to help load them? Mum prefers to have someone supervise each pick-up. That way I won’t have to stop work.’

‘No problem. I’ll see to it when they arrive.’ Jack strode away and attacked the hay bales. Throwing them onto the truck felt good, but only because it exercised his muscles in a satisfying way. He wasn’t fed up. Nor did he feel in any way out of control or uptight or concerned that his plan to simply ease back into his friendship with Tiffany was perhaps not going to be as easy as he had hoped.

Jack attended to a half-dozen chores that included the cheese collection. When he and Tiffany joined up again it was almost lunchtime.

Tiff walked ahead of him to her cottage. Her bottom swayed beneath the green overalls. His gaze followed that gentle motion

before his brain could catch up and remind him of the folly of doing so.

But it didn't have to mean anything. It could be just a typical male response. She looked highly attractive, that was all.

In baggy overalls that barely reveal her shape? Admit it—your memory and imagination are filling in the blanks. You're fantasising about her bottom.

Those thoughts were not welcome, either!

'What would you like?' Tiffany pushed the kitchen door open and paused to look over her shoulder at him.

Jack stopped his movement and whipped his gaze to her face. Heat stung the back of his neck and he couldn't look her in the eyes. 'Nothing. Pardon me? I wasn't thinking—'

'For lunch.' Small, capable fingers splayed over the doorframe. Hazel eyes bored into his. 'Would you like sandwiches? Eggs on toast? Soup?'

'Right. Lunch.' He forced himself forward again. 'Any of those would be fine. Let me wash up, and I'll help you get the meal ready.' He would do that whilst ignoring any memories or thoughts or anything else. She needed his help. He wanted her friendship back. That was the sum total of where the next ten days needed to take them.

They took turns to clean up in the laundry room. When he stepped into the kitchen to join her, the walls seemed to close around him. Memories he had managed to hold at bay last night hit him with full force now. Of Tiffany in a shimmery, clingy

dress, the room backlit by candles, her hair a soft halo around her head.

Tiff had opened herself to him that night, revealed her hopes and dreams, and he had turned away. But he hadn't wanted to hurt her.

Jack thought about Samuel, about the furious interchange yesterday, and the one prior to it, the same night Jack had come here to join Tiffany for dinner.

If he had realised sooner, he would never have allowed...

Well, it was too late now—in more ways than even just that. He rubbed at the numb spot beneath his arm and forced the memories away. All of the memories.

As Tiffany made sandwiches, Jack talked about some of the legal work he'd done while overseas. Nothing specific, just generalities to fill the silence, but her eyes shone with interest anyway. He soaked that interest up and hoarded it close—because at least he could have some things.

'Did you meet anyone really exciting overseas, Jack?' She set the plate of sandwiches in the middle of the table, sat, and took the glass of juice he'd poured for her.

They ate in silence for a few moments before she spoke again. 'Were there lots of business lunches and invitations to people's homes? Did you go to parties? How did you cope with the language differences?'

Mostly, he had just survived. But he wasn't about to say such a thing. He recalled something else instead, and smiled. 'One thing

happened. I saw Campbell Cheeses in a delicatessen, and maybe I had a deep patriotic moment or something—I don't know—but I went totally ape and bought one of everything they had. It took me weeks to eat my way through just the varieties of feta with sun-dried tomato, and that was only the beginning.'

'I'm glad to know you helped improve our international profile.' She smiled, and even if it was a little bit forced her hazel eyes shone with warmth and affection for him.

He smiled back, and promised her silently that he would make this work.

All they needed was to focus on the truly important stuff and steer clear of the rest.

'What on earth?'

It was evening. Tiffany and Jack had done the last of the chores for the day. They were on their way to the cottage when they discovered a geyser shooting into the sky, near the tank that supplied water to her parents' house.

Tiffany gaped at the sight. This was the last thing she needed. 'We only started to top that tank up half an hour ago. It shouldn't have even needed to be checked until after dinnertime.'

'We have to get this contained before any more water gets wasted.'

Jack made the observation, and they both stepped forward in unison.

The water spurted straight up from a point in the pipe not

far from its connection to the tank. Water levels in all the tanks were monitored, and the tanks filled from pipeline water as appropriate. Today, Tiffany had decided they should top this tank up.

‘We’ll have to stop the flow, then try to work out what’s wrong.’ Jack strode to the control source, and swore when he tried to turn it off. ‘I can’t shut it off.’

Tiffany turned for the machinery shed. ‘I’ll get a wrench.’

‘It won’t be any use.’ Muscles flexed in Jack’s back where the shirt stretched tight across his shoulders. He straightened. ‘Something’s given way inside. The mechanism’s wrecked. I can feel it when I try to turn it.’

Tiffany forced her gaze away from Jack’s back and her thoughts to the problem at hand. ‘That’s probably why the pipe burst open. Which means the flow isn’t being regulated as it should be, either.’

Jack nodded. ‘We’ll have to do what we can to block the pipe, and then drive to the main and shut the water off there.’

‘At least it’s only this one pipeline.’ She hurried back towards the spurt of water. ‘It won’t affect the water supply to the milking shed or the water troughs, and the cottage tank is already full.’

But the main was several kilometres away, further into the property, beyond all the groupings of work sheds, which meant they needed to do something about this right now.

A puddle already covered a large area of ground in every direction. Tiffany waded into the muck, gave thanks for her

sensible boots even if the gumboots of this morning would have been better, and positioned herself on the non-geysering side of the water flow. Jack quickly joined her, and they examined the pipe more closely.

‘We should be able to close it—or near to.’ His blue eyes locked on hers. ‘Have you got stockings at the cottage? Or anything else stretchy and long enough to tie around?’

‘Um, I have some stockings, and a pair of black stretch leggings from when I went through my yoga phase two years ago.’

‘Great.’ He gave a sharp nod.

‘I’ll get them.’ She hurried to the cottage, helped herself to the required goods, and ran all the way back.

Slightly out of breath, she handed the items to Jack. ‘How will we do this?’

He ran the pairs of stockings through his hands, seemed to realise what he had just done, and stopped abruptly. ‘These are single legs. I thought they’d be put together already. I mean—’

‘You mean pantyhose? I prefer thigh-highs.’ And she had to muzzle herself right now, before she started to explain the pros and cons of ladies’ personal undergarments. That really wouldn’t be a good idea. ‘What do you want me to do?’

He returned the Lycra leggings to her. ‘Tie these around your waist for the moment. If we need them, we’ll use them, but we’ll try the stockings first.’

He positioned himself close to the pipe. ‘We’ll try to get the pipe mostly closed with the stockings. If that doesn’t work, or

if it's not enough, we'll go for the leggings, as well. I'll wind the first couple of layers around and then we'll take an end each and pull as hard as we can.'

It took a few futile attempts before they got the right angle and the right amount of pressure and managed to almost close the split in the pipe. By then Tiffany was soaked from crown to feet. Jack had fared a little better, but water dripped down his face and plastered one side of his shirt against him.

The moment he noticed her gaze on him there, he tugged the shirt away from his body in a movement that was almost protective. He turned away to gather up the couple of stockings they'd dropped in the mud in their haste as they tried to get the leak sealed. 'Hopefully what we've done will hold until we can reach the main and shut it off. We could have driven straight there, but a lot more water would have been lost that way.'

'I know. It was the right choice.' She turned towards the machinery shed where the farm vehicles were stored. 'We can go in the utility truck.'

Jack shook his head. 'I've got a full tool kit in the back of the Jeep. Let's get back to the cottage and take it. That way we'll have tools on hand if we run into any further troubles at the main.'

A fair enough idea. It would probably take just as long to assemble the right tools at the shed. But it struck her as odd when he told her to change her clothes at the cottage before they got in the Jeep.

Since an argument would waste more time, she did as he

asked, but once they were in the Jeep and driving past all the sheds towards the main, she in a dry T-shirt and jeans and Jack in his existing jeans and a dry button-down shirt with yet more of the large front pockets that he seemed to favour these days, she pointed out the facts. ‘We could have changed later. It’s a warm day, no risk of getting a chill. Surely the water is more important?’

What was it with him and his shirt pockets, anyway? Had he suddenly taken to carrying around a barrage of goods with him or something? Not that she had seen any evidence of that since he arrived.

‘It only took a minute, and I—I mean, you were very wet.’ He didn’t look at her, didn’t change his tone of voice, didn’t do anything but continue to drive ahead with his jaw clenched tight.

‘There’s the main.’ Jack brought the Jeep to a stop and they climbed out.

They were able to shut it off without any difficulty. She wished she could shut off her concerns about them renewing their relationship as easily, but she couldn’t. They drove back, cleaned up around the storage tank, and went on finally to the cottage.

Tension wrapped around them as they stepped inside. It showed in the way he masked his gaze as he looked at her. In the elevated beat of her heart as she tried not to look too closely back.

To cover her discomfort, she said the first thing that came into her head. ‘It really did surprise me to see you’d cut your hair so short. I never expected to find you with a military-style cut.’

‘Everyone changes hairstyles from time to time. I told you—I haven’t changed.’ He almost growled the words, and shutters slapped down over his expression. ‘Is there anything else you want done outside before we call it quits for the day?’

His attitude definitely was protective, guarded. She would even say perhaps secretive. Why? Did he think if he relaxed with her she would throw herself at him? Tiffany’s eyes narrowed. Again, this was proof they needed a frank and open discussion to make things clear between them.

‘There’s always more to be done, but it can all wait until tomorrow.’ It might not be what he wanted to hear, but she wouldn’t make a workhorse out of him. There were limits, even when a person had volunteered to assist.

Jack dipped his head. ‘I’ll phone Denise, then. Ask how Ron got along today.’

Tiffany had wanted to broach an entirely different topic, but she nodded and turned away. It was important to hear how Ron was getting along. Things weren’t exactly running smoothly around here so far, but despite the farm-related hiccups she still had hope that she could present her parents with a good overall result when they got back.

Try, try and try again. It was what she had done as a child with her birth mother, although nothing had ever been enough.

That was then. This is a completely different situation, and the only reason you care about it is because you naturally want to do a good job of things.

Right. And the situation with Jack was different again. She would figure out how to deal with that, too.

She set about preparing the meal.

Jack stepped back into the kitchen and declared that Ron was fine. 'Denise kept me talking with gossip for a few minutes.'

'She does like a bit of a chat. I'm glad to hear Ron is doing okay.'

After the strained silence interspersed with uneasy small talk that had comprised their dinner break Jack took first shower. Tiffany hurried through hers next, to get away from the too-enticing scent of his shampoo and soap. She stepped back into the house in her summer pyjamas with a satin robe tied over. Her hair hung in damp tendrils down her back.

In that first moment as she moved into the kitchen Jack paused from sipping his tea at the bench and looked at her as a man who was utterly aware of her.

She didn't mistake it or misread it. She was certain of that. As a result, shock coursed through her—shock, and a burst of unwelcome hope. Why did he look at her that way? She didn't understand.

Then Jack blinked, and there was nothing at all, and she doubted herself all over again. Maybe she'd made the whole thing up. It had happened before—much to her embarrassment.

Jack took a sip of his tea. He wore similar jeans and shirt to those he'd had on when they'd turned off the water main. A fitted shirt showed beneath. He obviously planned to sleep in that, and

perhaps he had shorts or boxers on under the jeans.

Maybe she should have covered up in ten layers, too, but the thought hadn't occurred to her. She certainly wasn't trying to entice him, and her robe was perfectly acceptable, anyway. At least she had thought so until she'd surprised that look in his eyes.

Or imagined she'd surprised it.

His fingers tightened around the mug of tea, and then he set it down and straightened away from the bench. 'It's getting late. I think I'll turn in. Goodnight.'

He started to walk away, past her, towards the enclosed veranda room that held her spare bed and opened onto the cottage's rear garden—an area comprised of mostly weeds and overgrown grass.

Tiffany almost let him go. But then it would just go on and on, wouldn't it? He had been here little over twenty-four hours, and in that time they had generated a great deal of tension between them.

If they wanted to rebuild a relaxed relationship, something had to be done about that—whether it made him uncomfortable or not. 'There's something I need to say before you go, and I don't want you to stop me.'

'Tiff—' His face a forbidding mask, he swung back towards her.

She went on quickly. 'Before you left I embarrassed you when I developed an interest you didn't return. To make matters worse I pursued the situation to a point where you chose to escape

overseas to get away from me.’

Jack muttered an expletive beneath his breath. ‘There’s nothing to be gained—’

‘Actually, there is,’ she corrected him gently. She wouldn’t be swayed. They could put this off for ever, or sort it out now. In the interests of trying to get past all the rest of it, she chose now. ‘I misread you, and I apologise, and I want you to know I won’t ever project those kinds of feelings onto you again. I’ve realised they were a mistake and, like you, all I want now is for us to be able to move ahead as friends again.’

It was all she could want. And she would get her thoughts in line with it as quickly as possible.

Tension poured from Jack. He seemed to fight some inner battle before he finally gave a sharp nod. For the moment he seemed incapable of speech, but that was all right. At least the matter was out in the open, where they’d have half a chance to move beyond it.

Tiffany turned away, stepped towards her bedroom door and tugged it open. ‘Goodnight, Jack. I really am happy you’re here. I’ve missed our friendship more than I can say.’

‘Goodnight.’ His voice was harsh.

He strode through the lounge room. A moment later the door to the veranda room slapped closed after him.

Tiffany stepped into her room and shut the door, then slumped against it. ‘There—see? That wasn’t so hard.’

If she didn’t count her embarrassment at having to address the

issue, and the fact that those feelings she had just denied still simmered beneath the surface inside her.

Well, surely they would die away now that she had declared their futility so openly?

She climbed into bed and hoped that would turn out to be true. Some sleep would be good, too.

And then she tossed, and turned, and tossed some more.

## CHAPTER THREE

‘EEK!’ The sound escaped Tiffany as a sudden scrabbling noise erupted in the lounge room chimney. With a shaking hand she put down her cup of herbal tea and froze into position, where she sat on the sofa.

A second later, something large and furry and agitated landed in a spray of soot in the empty fireplace, just steps away from her bare feet.

The room was almost completely dark. Tiffany could see only a shape—large, with eyes that glowed. She sort of—well, shrieked, and leapt onto the back of the lounge, where she proceeded to dance from foot to foot.

It was a totally understandable reaction. As though to confirm this fact, the animal ran right towards her, then scrabbled sideways into a corner of the room. When her heart started to beat again, Tiffany heard the slap as the veranda room door was shoved open.

A light flared from there. Jack stood silhouetted in the aperture for a split second before he rushed into the room.

‘What’s wrong? What’s going on?’ Questions flew from his lips as he strode across the room to her. ‘Why are you up there? Why did you scream?’

‘Jack—oh, Jack. I couldn’t get to sleep, so I made herbal tea, and then that thing came down the chimney and it’s as big as an

elephant.’

Jack was another human being, a welcome sight, and instinctively she reached out her arms to him.

When Jack got close enough, she did the only sensible thing. She removed herself from the precarious safety of the sofa to something that was, in her opinion, far safer.

‘Oomph.’ Jack absorbed the sudden impact of her launch from sofa to his hold with just that one sound. His arms tightened around her and she clung on, her legs around his waist—which was as far away from the floor as she could get.

‘I think it’s a p-possum. You know I don’t like rodents, Jack. Not without a lens and some distance between me and them. Not this close.’ Her arms wrapped around his neck. She had to force herself not to squeeze tightly.

It was such a nice neck, too. Strong and firm, the skin smooth and warm.

Don’t think about his neck or his skin or anything else like that. You have other problems right now. Possum problems.

‘I’m sorry I jumped on you, but the possum startled me.’ It had scared her silly, actually, and she still felt that way, but maybe she could brazen this out. ‘Um, maybe if you could help me get to the kitchen? Then you could get rid of it?’

‘All right. And possums are marsupials, actually.’ He growled his response in a husky tone that inexplicably sent shivers down her spine.

‘Well, yes. I know that.’ For some reason his tone made her

suddenly aware of the close press of their bodies, of the scant layers of clothing that separated them, of the warmth of Jack beneath his T-shirt and boxer shorts.

Drat it. She couldn't let herself do this again. It humiliated her to react to him when he didn't even notice she existed that way. She steeled herself for the short trip to the kitchen, at which point she would immediately step away from him and become utterly businesslike thereafter.

But Jack tilted his head, as though listening. 'Ah. I think I hear it now. Over there.'

He turned his head towards the scrabbling sound in the opposite corner of the room, and as he did so his whisker-roughened face brushed her upper chest.

Oh, wow. She sucked in her breath at that unexpected tactile experience.

Jack stilled completely. He wasn't even breathing.

That knowledge made her stop breathing, too, and somehow the tension shifted in a completely different way. What was happening here?

'You have to get down.' As he spoke the words, his arms tightened even more around her.

Well, yes. She knew that. She'd even suggested it. But first he had to get her to the kitchen. Preferably without the need to put her feet on any part of the same floor the possum occupied.

'In the kitchen...'

'Right.' He started in that direction. Almost reluctantly he

looked into her eyes as he held her steady.

That was when she saw it. His eyes were dark pools filled with masculine awareness and interest. Even as she absorbed that fact—and it was fact, not fiction—his gaze dropped to her lips and lingered there.

‘Jack?’ A flurry of movement in her peripheral vision revealed the possum as it attempted to run up the wall beside the chimney.

Tiffany stiffened, but the possum scrambled down again, and headed back into the corner.

Jack walked them into the kitchen and shut the door behind them. She could get down now, but he made no attempt to release her, and she couldn’t take her focus from his gaze.

He wanted to kiss her. The truth shone in his eyes, showed in the droop of heavy lids as he focused on her mouth.

With all thought suspended Tiffany could only feel. And what she felt was Jack. Her hand drifted from his shoulder, down over his collarbone, towards his chest. She wanted his heartbeat beneath her fingertips, wanted to know if it pounded as hers did right now. She wanted his kiss, even if she didn’t understand it, and it didn’t fit with what Jack had said he wanted.

‘Don’t.’ The word passed between his suddenly compressed lips. Jack’s fingers closed around her wrist to arrest the movement of her hand.

A second later she stood alone. Jack stood on the opposite side of the kitchen and continued to back away from her even as he spoke.

‘Stay there. I’ll get rid of the possum.’ He shut her into the room, shut himself out, and she stood there and tried to come to terms with what had just happened.

Chilled suddenly, she took a few dazed steps to her bedroom and drew her robe on, tied it. With a part of her mind she heard doors open and close, then Jack’s low voice as he encouraged the possum to leave. Further scrabbling sounds, the outer veranda door being closed, then silence.

When she cracked the kitchen door open and looked around it she found...nothing. No possum. No Jack.

‘Is the possum gone?’

She asked the question into the yawning silence. Only then did Jack step from the veranda room back into the lounge room. Jeans and the overshirt pulled on top of his sleep-shirt covered him from neck to ankle once again.

‘Yes, the possum is gone.’ He remained close to the veranda room doorway, as though concerned that if he came closer she would somehow contaminate him or something. ‘It went willingly once I opened the outer veranda door, and it caught a glimpse of its normal environment out there.’

‘Thank you for getting it to leave. I realise it’s silly for me to be afraid, but I do prefer to enjoy my wild animals from a certain distance, and where they are happy in their own environment. I had the distinct feeling that possum was quite unhappy and might run up my leg.’

She used a deliberately calm tone, but her feelings on the

inside didn't match it. Unwilling to prevaricate, she spoke of the thing she needed to understand the most. 'You almost kissed me just then. I didn't imagine it.'

His gaze became remote, forbidding. Utter denial hovered on his lips. She could see it there.

But eventually he pushed harsh words through his teeth. 'It was the middle of the night. I'd only just got to sleep. I heard you scream. You jumped into my arms wearing nothing more than a couple of scraps of satin. Any man would have been tempted. It was just a blip.'

'Oh, so it happened because of proximity and circumstance?' She narrowed her gaze as she searched his face for truth. 'Sort of like if you walked into a bakery and smelt a chocolate éclair, and you headed for it before you remembered you don't truly like chocolate éclairs?'

'You're not a chocolate éclair.' One hand raised above his head to grip the door lintel. Strain showed in every line of his body, in the carefully blank face. 'The reaction wasn't intentional, that's all. Now, it's late. We should get back to bed. I'll get up on the roof tomorrow and put some wire netting over the chimney hole so nothing else can come down it. I'll help you clean up in the morning, too. Goodnight.'

Ooh, the man made her want to scream. In genuine frustration, not possum-induced shock. But Jack had already turned away. Unless she decided to pursue him into the veranda room, Tiffany could only do the same.

But she wasn't happy. Jack was avoiding her all over the place, and he had reacted with awareness of her—which raised questions, drat him!

Tiffany spun on her heel and marched the few steps to her bedroom door. Once there, she shut herself into the room with more of a bang of the door than was probably strictly necessary.

Oh, she was grateful for the rescue from the possum, and for Jack's willingness to make sure the thing couldn't get into the house again. But as for the rest?

For someone so set on renewing a very platonic friendship, Jack had allowed himself to become quite distracted just now. And he'd been well and truly awake before that had happened, no matter what he said to the contrary.

It made her wonder if those other moments she had believed were all on her side hadn't been at all.

She now had more questions than before, and she wanted some answers—darn the man's attractive, confusing, irritating hide.

He should have stuck around long enough for her to get those answers.

Morning came before Tiffany was ready. She hadn't slept well for the rest of the night, but the farm work had to go on.

A protein start to the day seemed like a smart idea. At least then she would have something in her stomach other than aggravation and confusion and butterflies. Since when had Jack

turned into Mr Secretive and Contradictory Man, anyway?

Because she was a good hostess, despite everything else, she headed for the veranda room to get Jack's opinion about the breakfast choices. Maybe he would be willing to discuss that, if nothing else.

Truly, Tiffany couldn't stop thinking about what had happened last night. It had just seemed very real to her—more than a simple case of some sort of random and unanticipated hormonal reaction on Jack's part. She still wanted those answers. She intended to get them. She just wasn't certain how.

Jack was up and dressed. She'd caught sight of him as he'd moved through the kitchen when she had first got up herself. She stuck her head around the open door to the veranda room now, and spoke. 'I thought I might make bacon and eggs for breakfast—a bit of a treat to start the day right.'

He'd had his back to her. Now he swung around. Blue eyes glared, and his fingers clenched around something small that he held in his hand. The other hand reached for the travel bag on his bed and whipped the zipper shut, as though the secrets of the government, the FBI and world peace all depended on her not seeing the contents.

His gaze narrowed and words snapped out. 'I didn't know you were up.'

Oh, he was in a great mood. Not.

Well, guess what? She didn't feel particularly placatory right now, either. She wasn't a blasted spy, and what did he have to hide

that was so all-fired important, anyway? Another stupid two-pocketed shirt?

Did he truly want their friendship back? Because friends didn't jump through the roof any time the other person came near them. And, yes, okay, fine, she still found him attractive, but she would get that under control and it had nothing to do with this.

'I saw you pass through the kitchen earlier, so I thought I'd check what you wanted to eat.' I didn't barge in, Jack. I knew you were dressed, and your door was wide-open, so think that one over.

A glass of water sat on the bedside table, and he glanced at it before he turned a closed look towards her. 'No problem. And bacon and eggs would be fine. I'll be there in a minute.'

The subtext couldn't have been plainer.

He didn't want to acknowledge that he had overreacted to her presence, and he wanted her to leave the room.

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