



MARION LENNOX

English
Lord

on Her Doorstep

MILLS & BOON

True Love

Marion Lennox

English Lord On Her Doorstep

«HarperCollins»

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English Lord On Her Doorstep / M. Lennox — «HarperCollins»,

A storm. A stranger. A secret. After a storm leaves handsome stranger Bryn Morgan stranded at Charlie's farmhouse she plans to keep her distance! But the night forges a bond between —until Bryn reveals is in fact Lord Carlisle! Can he show Charlie that their differences can bring them closer?

A storm, a stranger, a secret
The start of something special?

After a storm leaves handsome stranger Bryn Morgan stranded at Charlie's Outback farmhouse she plans to keep her distance! But as the weather intensifies Charlie seeks comfort in Bryn's reassuring arms. The night forges a bond between them that looks unbreakable, until day brings the revelation that Bryn is in fact Lord Carlisle! Can Bryn show Charlie that their differences can bring them closer?

MARION LENNOX has written more than one hundred romances, and is published in over a hundred countries and thirty languages. Her multiple awards include the prestigious RITA® Award (twice), and the *RT Book Reviews* Career Achievement Award for 'a body of work which makes us laugh and teaches us about love'. Marion adores her family, her kayak, her dog—and lying on the beach with a book someone else has written. Heaven!

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Marion Lennox

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ISBN: 978-1-474-07806-1

ENGLISH LORD ON HER DOORSTEP

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Published in Great Britain 2018

by Mills & Boon, an imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers* 1 London Bridge Street, London, SE1 9GF

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To Olga and Olga.

With thanks for your friendship and your kindness,
and for your generosity in finding my books so far away.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

BRYN THOMAS MORGAN, Twelfth Baron Carlisle, Peer of the Realm, thought his week couldn't get worse. It could.

It said a lot for his state of mind—weary, horrified and disgusted—that while he searched in the rain and the dark to find the dog he'd just hit, his head was already rescheduling.

If the dog was dead, he'd take it to the local police station, explain how he'd hit it on a blind curve and let the locals look after their own.

His plane back to London was leaving in three hours and he had a two-hour drive in front of him. He had time to scrape a dead dog from the road and catch his flight.

But when he finally found the soggy heap of fur that had been thrown into the undergrowth, the dog was alive.

Despite being hit by an Italian supercar?

Twenty years ago, when he was a boy learning to drive the estate's four-by-four across the vast estates of Ballystone Hall, his father had told him never to swerve for an animal. 'You'll lose control,' he'd told him. 'Animals can usually judge distance and speed. If you swerve, they're more likely to be hit, not less, and there's a possibility you'll kill yourself, too.'

But this hadn't been a farm-vehicle-savvy calf, darting back to the herd, or a startled but nimble deer. This dog was a trudger: a dirty white, mid-sized mutt. It had been square in the centre of the country road, head down, looking almost as if a car coming around the bend would be doing it a favour by hitting it.

So of course Bryn had swerved, but the road was rain-washed and narrow. There hadn't been time or space to avoid it. Now it lay on the grass at the roadside, its hind leg bloody, its brown eyes a pool of pain and misery.

Bryn stooped over it and those eyes were saying, 'Kill me now.'

'You didn't think of taking pills,' Bryn said, but he said it gently. He liked dogs. He missed them.

But the dogs at home were currently being cared for by his mother and by the farm staff who valued them as they deserved. Not like this one. This dog looked as if it had been doing it tough for a while.

What to do?

He was trying to beat a storm that threatened to close the country down for a couple of days. A line-up of lawyers was waiting to meet him in London. He needed to get away from this mess and get back to Ballystone Hall, to the farm, to the cattle, to the work that filled his life. He also needed to finally accept the title he hated, and he still wasn't sure how to do that. The dreariness of the last months had hauled him close to the blackness he'd fought ever since...

No. Don't go there. Focus on getting on that flight.

But there was a dog. A bitch. Lying on the road. Bleeding.

It was a twenty-minute drive back to the last town. It was twenty-five minutes to the next.

It was eight o'clock at night.

The dog was looking at him as if she was expecting him to wield an axe.

'It's okay,' he told her, fondling the bedraggled ears. Forcing himself to think.

This was farming country, west of Melbourne. Where there were farms, there'd be a vet. He could ring ahead to warn he was coming, and pay whatever was needed to pass over the responsibility of taking care of her wounds and finding her owner.

But first he had to get her off the road. It was raining already and the distant rumbling of thunder threatened more.

The dog was bleeding. Blood was oozing rather than spurting, but it was enough to be worrying. He needed towels.

He was travelling light and a towel wasn't included in the sparse gear he carried. He was in Australia to try and distance his name from his uncle's financial mess. The debt collection agency was due to collect this car from the airport's valet parking tomorrow. It'd be a great look if they found it smeared with blood, he thought. That'd add even more drama to the mess that was his uncle's life.

'A pill would definitely have been easier,' he muttered to the dog, but he was already shrugging off his jacket, figuring how to edge it underneath so he could carry her. Then he headed back to the car to find a spare shirt to wrap the leg.

'Okay, dog, hopefully it's only your leg that's damaged,' he told her as he worked. 'I'll ring ahead to the next town and have the vet meet me. Let's get you safe and warm before the eye of this storm hits. I might need to break the odd speed limit but I can still catch my plane.'

* * *

Charlotte Foster—Charlie except when she was with clients—didn't like storms, though maybe that was putting it too lightly. In her neat little interior-design studio back in Melbourne, with solid town houses on either side, she could pull the blinds, put something loud on the sound system and pretend storms didn't happen. Here, though, she was in a dilapidated farmhouse with a rusty tin roof, she had no neighbours for miles and she was surrounded by dogs who were already edgy.

If Grandma were here she'd sneak into bed with her. How many times had she done that as a little girl? This place had been her refuge, her time out. Grandma had scooped her up every school holidays and brought her back here, surrounding her with dogs, chaos, love.

She sniffed.

Charlie wasn't a sniffer but she'd been sniffing for weeks now, and sometimes even more than sniffing.

Grandma...

There was a hole in her heart a mile wide.

The dogs, too, were acting as if the bottom had dropped from their world, as indeed it had. In the weeks she'd been here Charlie still hadn't figured what to do with them. They were rejects, collected over the years by Betty who hadn't been able to say no to anyone. To anything.

Charlie still didn't know what would happen to them. There was no way she could take six dogs back to her studio-cum-bedsit—seven if you counted Flossie, although she'd almost given up on Flossie.

Betty's note was still haunting her. That last night...she must have felt it coming. Pain in her chest? Breathlessness? Who knew? Whatever, instead of doing the sensible thing and calling an ambulance straight away, she'd sat down and written instructions for Charlie.

You know most of this but just to remind you of details.

Possum is a sort of fox terrier. Nine years old. Loves his black and white sock more than anything. There are spares in my bottom drawer in case of disaster.

Fred's a part-basset, part-vacuum-cleaner. He'll eat anything on the basis he can bring it up later if it's not edible.

Don't let him near Possum's sock!

And so on.

But then, at the end...

Flossie's a sweetheart, but needy. You met her last time you came. She's only been with me for two months, dumped on the road near here. I need to keep her secure because any chance she gets she's off down the road, trying to find the low life who abandoned her.

Charlie had spent the last weeks caring for the dogs and other animals. Trying to figure a solution to the financial mess. Wanting to kill the scumbag who'd fleeced her grandma. Trying to block out the memory of her own stupidity, which meant she had no resources to help now. Her grief for the gentle Betty had been a constant ache throughout, but adding to it was the fact that when Betty had finally called the ambulance, the paramedics had left the gate open.

Somewhere out there was a lost dog called Flossie.

Charlie had enough on her plate with six dogs she needed to rehome. Flossie surely must be someone else's problem by now, but, still, she'd searched. She'd hoped. Betty would expect her to. Now, as the storm closed in, the thought of a lost Flossie was breaking her heart.

'You guys can all come into bed with me until it's over,' she told the dogs, who were getting more nervous as the sound of thunder increased.

Flossie... She'd be out there somewhere...

'I've looked,' she said out loud, defiantly, to a grandma who could no longer hear. To Betty, who she'd buried with grief and with love ten days ago. 'I've done all I can, Grandma. Now it's time for me to bury my head under my pillows and get through this storm without you.'

* * *

Yallinghup was the town ahead. It had a vet who was currently somewhere in a paddock with a cow in labour. He could hear the sound of wind in the background when she answered the phone. 'I can meet you in an hour or so,' she'd said brusquely. 'Probably. Depends when this lady delivers. I'll ring you back when we're done.'

Carlsbrook was the town behind. 'Dr Sanders is on leave,' the not so helpful message bank told him. 'In case of emergency please ring the veterinarian at Yallinghup.'

The dog was now lying on his passenger seat, looking up at him with huge, scared eyes.

Okay, next step...or maybe it should have been the first step. Find the owner. However, this wasn't exactly suburbia, with lots of houses to door-knock. This was farming country, with houses set back behind towering gum trees. He couldn't remember passing a house for the last couple of miles.

‘But you must have come from somewhere,’ he told the dog and fondled her ears again while he located her collar.

Flossie.

No more information. Great.

‘Okay, next farmhouse,’ he muttered and hit the ignition. ‘Please let it be your owner, or at least someone who’ll understand that I need to be gone.’

* * *

She really, really didn’t like storms. She didn’t like the dark.

She didn’t like anything about this.

She should feel at home. She’d been coming here since she was a little girl, every school holidays, and she’d loved being here, helping Betty with the dogs, the chooks, the myriad animals Betty had housed and cared for.

She loved this place, but it was love of Betty that made her keep visiting, and it was that love that was making her stay now.

Three weeks ago Charlie had been finally starting to get over the mess her own life had become. She’d been scraping a living as an interior designer. That living had depended on her being at her studio to receive clients, but she couldn’t be there now—because of Betty.

And Betty would never be here again. That was enough to make her feel desolate, even without thunderstorms. Now... There’d been five huge claps of thunder already and the rain was turning to a torrent, smashing against the tin roof so loudly it made her shudder. She needed to bolt for the bedroom and hunker down with the dogs.

But then...

Someone was knocking at the front door.

What the...?

Normally a knock at the front door would have meant an explosion of canine excitement but there was no excitement now. Charlie was in the farmhouse kitchen, and the dogs were lined up behind her, as if Charlie were all that stood between them and the end of the world.

Or the stranger at the door?

For there was someone there. What she’d assumed was lightning must have been car lights sweeping up the drive.

Who? Every local knew that Betty was dead. The funeral had seen almost the entire district turn out, but since then she’d been left alone. It was assumed she was here to put the place on the market and move back to the city.

She wasn’t one of them.

So now... It was dark. It was scary.

Someone was knocking.

Weren’t dogs supposed to protect?

‘You guys come with me,’ she muttered and grabbed Caesar and Dottie by the collars. Caesar was mostly wolfhound. Dottie was mostly Dalmatian. They were both cowards but at least they were big, and surely that had to count for something?

She hauled them into the hall. The knocker sounded again over the rumble of more thunder.

She had a dog in each hand. Four more dogs were supposed to be lined up behind her. Or not. Three had retreated to the living room. She could see three tails sticking out from under the ancient settee. Only Mothball remained. Mothball was a Maltese-shih-tzu-something, a ball of white fluff, not much bigger than Charlie’s hand, but what she lacked in size she made up for in heroics. She was bouncing around Caesar and Dottie as if to say, I’m here, too, guys. But Caesar and Dottie were straining back, wanting to add their tails to the settee pack.

Nothing doing.

‘Who’s there?’ Charlie managed, thinking as she said it, Is an axe murderer going to identify himself?

‘My name’s Bryn Morgan.’ The voice was deep, imperative, sure. ‘I’m hoping you might be able to help me. I have an injured dog here and I hope you can tell me where I might find the owner. The name tag says Flossie.’

Flossie? She let her breath out in one long rush. Flossie!

‘Please,’ she said out loud, a prayer to herself, to Grandma, to anyone who might listen, and she opened the door to hope.

* * *

The house was two storeys of ramshackle. The veranda was wide and wobbly. Floorboards had creaked and sagged as he’d crossed it, and the line-up of saggy, baggy settees along its length added to its impression of something straight out of Ma and Pa Kettle. Or maybe the Addams family, Bryn thought ruefully, as a sheet of lightning seared the sky before he was plunged into darkness again.

And then the door opened.

Light flooded from the hallway within. Dogs surged forward, though not lunging, simply heading for a sniff and welcome—though there was a warning yip by an ankle-sized fluffball.

And behind them was a woman. Youngish. Late twenties? She was short, five feet four or so, with bright copper curls tumbling around a face devoid of make-up. She looked a bit pale. Her eyes were wide...frightened? She was wearing faded jeans and a huge crimson sweater. Bare feet.

She was looking straight past him.

‘Flossie,’ she said and her voice held all the hope in the world.

Thank you, he breathed to whoever it was who was looking after stranded and stressed gentry in this back-of-beyond place. To have lucked on the owner... He could hand her over and leave.

‘You have Flossie?’ she demanded, her voice choking. ‘Where?’

‘She’s in my car,’ he said, apologetically. ‘I’m so sorry but I’ve hit her.’

‘You’ve hit...’ He heard the catch of dread. ‘She’s not dead?’

‘She’s not dead.’ He said it strongly, needing to wipe that look of fear from her face. ‘She’s hurt her leg but I can’t see any other injuries and her breathing seems okay. I’m hoping the wheel skimmed her leg and nothing else was injured. But the vet—’

‘That’s Hannah Tindall. Yallinghup. I have her number.’ She was already reaching for the phone in her back pocket. ‘I’ll take her straight—’

‘Hannah’s delivering a calf,’ he told her. ‘She should be through in about an hour. The vet at Carlsbrook’s on leave.’

‘You’ve already rung?’ She took a breath and then another. ‘Thank you. I...is she in your car?’ She stepped towards him, past him, heading into the rain.

He was wet. She wasn’t, and Flossie had already shown she was amenable to him carrying her. There was no reason for both of them to get soaked. He moved to block her.

‘Find some towels,’ he told her, gently now as if he was treating two shocked creatures instead of one. As maybe he was. ‘Do you have a fire? She’s wet and I think she needs to be warm.’

‘I...yes. The kitchen... I have the range on...’

‘Go grab towels and I’ll bring her in,’ he said and then hesitated. ‘That is, if it’s okay?’ He looked past her into the hall. ‘Do you have anyone to help?’

‘I...’ She took another deep breath and visibly regrouped. ‘No, but it’s okay. Of course it is. Please bring her in. Thank you so much.’ Her voice broke a little. ‘Oh, Flossie...’

She disappeared, almost running, into the back of the house, leaving the door wide and Bryn thought...what had he just asked her to do?

He wasn’t thinking. The chaos of the last weeks had pretty much robbed him of logical thought.

He shouldn’t have asked for access to the home of a solitary woman late at night. She’d run for towels and left him in the doorway, with total trust.

Trust. There was a word that had been lacking in his life for the last weeks. The days of interrogation, the sick sensation in his gut as he'd realised the extent of his uncle's dishonesty, the appalling feeling as he'd checked the local media...they'd made him feel as if he were smeared with the same smutty tar brush as his uncle. Yet here he was, in this woman's home, totally trusted. He should go give her a talk on trust and where it could lead—but she was trusting for a reason and he needed to honour it.

He headed back into the rain, which seemed to be increasing in intensity by the moment, gathered one injured pooch carefully in his arms and carried her inside.

The dog seemed limp, listless. Her bones were sticking out of her ribcage. If the woman hadn't been surrounded by visibly well-cared-for dogs he'd have suspected neglect but there was no neglect here. As he walked back into the hall she reappeared with her arms full of towels. She dropped them as she saw the dog in his arms—and burst into tears.

'Oh, Flossie...' She was sensible though, he thought. She didn't rush to hug. She came close and touched the dog behind her ear, a feather-touch. 'We thought we'd lost you. Oh, Grandma...' And then she hauled herself together, stooped and gathered the towels again and led the way into the kitchen.

It was a great kitchen. A farmhouse kitchen in the very best sense of the words. It was cosy and faded, with worn linoleum, an ancient wooden table and random wooden chairs with cheerful, non-matching cushions tied to each with frayed gingham bows. An ancient dresser took up almost the length of one wall and the opposite wall held the range and an extra electric oven—presumably for days when it was too hot to light the fire. The range was lit now, its gentle heat a welcome all on its own. A tatty, faded rug stood before the range and an ancient settee stood to one side. There were photographs stuck randomly to the remaining wall space, dogs, dogs and more dogs, plus the odd faded family shot. A guy in khaki took pride of place in the photograph display but the dog pictures were edging in, overlapping, as if the soldier's memory was being gradually overlaid by woofers.

Something was simmering on the stove. Something meaty and herby.

The whole effect was so comforting, so far from the bleakness of the last few days—so reminiscent of home?—he stopped dead in the doorway and had to take a moment to take it in. Which was used to good effect as the woman darted forward and hauled the settee closer to the fire.

'Put her down here. Oh, Flossie...'

And Flossie gave an almost imperceptible wiggle of her tail, as if she too recognised the kitchen for what it was. A sanctuary, a place almost out of this world. A time capsule where everything in it seemed safe.

He caught himself. Dog. Settee. He walked forward and settled her with care on the towels the woman laid out. Flossie's tail wagged again as her body felt the comfort of the settee and she looked adoringly up at the woman hovering beside her.

'Oh, Flossie...' the woman murmured again. 'What have you done to yourself?'

'I can't see anything obvious apart from the leg,' Bryn told her. 'I'm not sure if it's broken or not.' It was badly grazed, still sluggishly bleeding. 'I can't feel anything else but she hasn't moved.'

'It could be shock,' the girl said. 'And hunger. She's been missing for three weeks.'

'Three weeks!'

'I know.' She shook her head. Her fingers were running lightly over the dog's sides, watching for reaction. 'She's a stray, dumped here a couple of months back. People do that—'toe-rags'. They don't want an animal so they think, I know, we'll dump it outside a farm. And of course everyone knows Grandma takes strays in. So Flossie was dumped but she must still remember being thrown from the car. So off she went and I've looked so hard...'

The emotion he heard in her voice was for a stray dog she'd only known for weeks?

'That's your jacket underneath her,' she said, seeming to notice the soft leather for the first time. 'Oh, heavens, it'll be ruined. I'll get it out for you... I don't know... Can I give you something towards cleaning?' She paused and seemed to regroup. 'Sorry. I'm not thinking clearly.' She took a

deep breath. 'I'm Charlie Foster, by the way. Charlotte. You're... Bryn Morgan, did you say? I'm very pleased to meet you and I'm deeply thankful for your help, but I can manage now. I'll ring the vet as soon as she's available. Once Flossie's cleaned and fed, though, I'm hoping I might not need her. You've done...great. Thank you so much.'

She moved to edge the jacket out but he stopped her. 'Leave it.'

'You don't want your jacket?'

Um...not. Carrying a blood-soaked jacket back to the UK...it was a good one but not that good. 'It's fine,' he told her. 'Are you sure you're all right here? Your grandmother...'

'I'm fine.' She straightened and reached out and took his hand, shaking it with a firmness that told him this was a woman of decision. 'You've been fabulous, Mr Morgan, but there's nothing more you can do. I won't keep you any more.'

Great. He could step away, head back to the car. He could even make it to the airport in time.

'You're sure you'll be okay?'

'I don't think there's anything more you can do.' Which wasn't quite answering the question, but he agreed with her. The dog's tail was wagging, feebly but with every indication that warmth and food and medical care to her leg would see her recover. There was nothing more he could do, and he had a plane to catch.

'I'll see myself out, then.'

'Thank you so much.'

The hand clasping his... It was a clasp of friendship and gratitude and it made him feel...

Like he hadn't felt for a very long time. Not since he'd left home.

Maybe not even then.

He looked down at her, at her tumbled curls, at her face, devoid of make-up, flushed now with the warmth of the fire, her brown eyes direct and clear. She was smiling at him. She was half a head shorter than he was.

She made him feel...

He didn't have time to feel. He had a plane to catch.

'Good luck,' he told her, and on impulse he grabbed a pen lying on the table and wrote his name and email address on a pad that was clearly used for shopping lists. 'Will you let me know how things go? And if there are any veterinarian bills... I hit her. I'm more than happy to cover them.'

Something flashed over her face that might have been relief but was quickly squashed. 'It's okay. It wasn't your fault.'

'But you will let me know.' He took her hand again. It seemed strangely imperative that he didn't release it until he had her agreement. To head off and not hear anything seemed the pits.

'I will let you know,' she said and tugged her hand away and that was that.

He turned and headed back out into the night.

* * *

Why had it been so hard to tug her hand back?

It was the dark, she told herself. Plus the storm. Plus the fact that she had an injured dog on her hands and she wasn't as sure of treating her as she'd told the guy... Bryn.

Anyone would want company on such a night, she told herself, but there was a blatant, very female part of her that told her that what she was feeling was more than that.

The guy was gorgeous. More than gorgeous. He was tall, clean-shaven, dark hair, a ripped and tanned body, wearing good chinos and a quality shirt open at the throat. His voice had been lovely, deep, gravelly, English, with just a hint of an accent that might have been...something? Welsh, maybe. That'd fit with his name. Bryn. Nice name.

He'd been carrying her beloved Flossie with tenderness. There was enough in all those things to make her think...hormonal stuff, and he'd looked at her with such concern... He'd smiled, a lopsided smile that said it was sensible to leave but he didn't like leaving her alone.

The smile behind those dark, deep-set eyes was enough to make a girl's toes curl.

But men who made Charlie's toes curl had no place in her life. She'd been down that road, and never again. Besides, a woman had other things to do than stand here and feel her toes curl. Bryn was heading out of her life, and she had an injured dog to attend to.

But life had other plans.

She turned back and stooped over Flossie just as a vast sheet of lightning made the windows flash with almost supernatural light. There was a fearful crash, thunder and lightning hitting almost simultaneously. And then...extending into the night...something more. A splintering crash of timber.

There was a moment's pause, and then something crashed down, so hard the house shook, and her feet trembled under her. Every light went out. The dogs came flying from wherever they'd been and huddled in a terrified mass around her legs. She knelt and gathered as many of them into her arms as she could.

It must be a tree, she told herself. One of the giant red gums in the driveway must have come down. And then she thought... Bryn. Dear God, Bryn... He was out in that. Almost before the thought hit, she was on her feet, shoving the dogs aside, heading through the darkness to the outside door...

And just as she reached it, it swung open.

'Charlie?'

Light was flickering through the doorway, lighting his silhouette. A tree on fire? She couldn't see enough to make out his features, but she could see his form and she could hear.

'Bryn...' She backed away, almost in fright, and the dogs gathered again around her legs. She stooped to hug them again, more to give herself time to recover than to comfort them. For what she really wanted was to hug the man in the doorway. For an awful moment she'd had visions of him...

Don't go there. The vision had been so appalling it still had her shaking.

'I'm very sorry,' he said and he sounded it. 'But there's now a tree across the driveway.'

'Are you okay?' Her voice wasn't working right. 'You're not hurt?'

'Not a scratch.' He said it surely, strongly, as if he realised how scared she must have been. 'But I appear to be stuck. Unless there's another road out? I'm so sorry.'

For heaven's sake... He'd brought her dog home. He'd almost been killed by one of the trees she'd told her grandmother over and over were too close to the house. And *he* was apologising?

'There's no way out while it's pouring,' she told him. 'I...the paddocks will be flooding. And those trees...red gums...they're sometimes called widow makers.'

She caught a decent sight of him as the next flash of lightning lit the sky. He was wet, she noticed. He must have been wet before this. She'd been too caught up with Flossie to notice anything except how...

Um...she wasn't going there.

In fact she was having trouble going anywhere. She was having trouble getting her thoughts to line up in any sort of order.

'Widow makers?' he queried, helpfully, and she struggled to pull herself together. She rose and faced him, or she faced the shadow of him. Every light was gone but the lightning was so continuous she could make him out.

'That's what they're called. The trees. River red gums. They're notorious. They drop branches, often on hot, windless days, when it's least expected. They look beautiful and shady and people camp under them.'

'Or park under them?'

'Yeah, and bang...'

'It's not exactly a hot, windless day.'

'No, but they're so tall they're the first thing that lightning strikes and Grandma won't...wouldn't...clear the ones near the house. Even the dead ones. She says they made nesting sites for parrots and possums. She says... She said...'

And then she stopped.

‘Said,’ Bryn said at last, very gently, and she flinched.

‘I...yes. A heart attack, three weeks ago. That’s why...that’s why I’m here. These are Grandma’s dogs.’

‘So you are here alone.’

She shouldn’t say it. It was really dark. He was nothing but a shadow in the doorway.

She should tell him she had a bevy of brawny men sleeping off a night at the pub upstairs.

She didn’t.

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘And I’m not very good with storms.’

‘Neither am I,’ he told her. ‘Do you have a lamp? Torches?’

‘I...yes.’ Of course she did. Or Grandma did. This was a solitary country house, with trees all around. Power outages were common, happening often when Charlie was visiting.

Not as scary as this one though.

She fumbled her way back into the kitchen, to the sideboard, and produced a kerosene lamp. It was older even than Grandma, she thought. Lit, though, it produced a satisfactory light.

Bryn hadn’t followed her into the kitchen. He’d stopped at the door, a darkened, watchful shadow.

Her fingers trembled as she lit the wick and re-laced the glass, and he saw.

‘Charlie, I’m safe as houses,’ he said gently. He thought about that for a moment and then he smiled, finally coming further into the room to inspect her handiwork. His voice gentled still further. ‘I am safe,’ he repeated. ‘In fact, I’m even safer than houses that have red gums all around them. You think anything’s likely to crash down on our heads? You think we should evacuate?’

She adjusted the wick until it stopped smoking, then turned back to the sideboard to find more. Grandma had half a dozen of these beauties, filled and ready to go.

The good thing about that was that she didn’t have to look up. She could play with the lamps on the sideboard. She could speak without looking at him, which seemed...important. ‘It seems...more dangerous to leave,’ she managed. ‘Even if there was a way out. And they say lightning doesn’t strike twice in the same place.’

‘There seem to be a lot of trees,’ he said doubtfully. ‘Do you think *same place* includes every tree less than twenty feet from the house?’

Oh, for heaven’s sake... She swung around and glared. ‘Mr Morgan, it seems...it seems you’re stuck here for the night. I’m very grateful, and I’m not scared of you. But I am scared of storms. So while I’m happy to give you a bed for the night, supper, a place by the fire, it’s predicated on you manning up and saying things like, “She’ll be right,” and, “What’s a little lightning?” and, I don’t know, “Singing in the rain” kind of stuff. So if you dare tell me there’s a snowball’s chance in a bushfire that another tree will come down and squash me, then you can step right out in the rain and take your chances. So what’s it to be?’ And she put her hands on her hips, jutted her chin and fixed him with such a look...

It was a look that even made him chuckle.

And imperceptibly his mood lightened. His night was messed up. More than his night. All he wanted was to be back at Ballystone, home with his dogs and his cattle, with this disaster behind him. He should be glowering himself.

Instead he found himself grinning at the red-headed firebrand in front of him, and searching for words to make him...what had she demanded? Man up?

‘Don’t take no notice of me, ma’am,’ he drawled, still grinning, searching for a voice that might match the description. ‘Yep, one of those tiddly little trees might fall but if it do, I’ll be out there catching it with one hand and using it as kindling for your stove. You need more kindling? Maybe I could go out and haul in that tiddler that just fell.’

Their eyes locked. Her defiance gave way. A dimple appeared, right by the corner of her mouth, and the laughter he'd tried for was reflected in her eyes.

'What if I say yes?' she ventured, a tiny chuckle preceding her words.

'Your wish is my command,' he said nobly and then looked out to where he could see the ruins of the vast tree smouldering and sparking across the driveway. 'I might need a pair of heatproof gloves, though. That tree looks hot.'

And gloriously, she gave a full-on chuckle. It was a good laugh, an excellent laugh, and it produced a flash of insight. Looking at her, at the signs of strain around her eyes, at her pale face, he thought it'd been a while since this woman laughed.

It felt good...no, it felt excellent that he'd been able to make it happen.

'You want help with Flossie?' he asked, bringing reality back into the room, but the smile stayed behind her eyes as she answered.

'Yes, please. I would. Do you know much about dogs?'

'I've had dogs all my life.' He hesitated, still trying to keep that smile on her face. 'But is it manly to confess I faint at the sight of blood?'

'You carried her in. There's blood on your shirt.' It was an accusation.

'So I did,' he said, sounding astounded. 'And so there is, and I haven't fainted at all. Let's try this new world order out, then, shall we? Let's get your Flossie bandaged before my manliness fades before my very eyes. Okay, Nurse, I require more light, hot water, soap, um...'

'Bandages?'

'Of course, bandages,' he said and grinned and then looked down at Flossie, waiting patiently before the stove. 'And do you have a little dog food? A water bowl? I don't know how long it is since she's eaten but I'm guessing that may be the first priority.'

It was the first priority. She headed for the fridge to find some meat but her head wasn't entirely focussed on the first priority.

This man behind her was...beautiful.

CHAPTER TWO

ON CLOSE EXAMINATION Bryn decided Flossie's leg was probably not broken. She'd lost a lot of fur. An abrasion ran the full length from hip to paw but she was passive as Bryn cleaned, and when he tentatively tested the joint she barely whimpered.

She did, though, react with extraordinary speed when Charlie produced a little chopped chicken. And then a little more. She wolfed it down and lay back, limp again, but with her eyes fixed adoringly on Charlie. Her one true love.

'That's hardly fair,' Bryn objected. 'I get the messy part and you get the kudos.' He snipped off the bandage he'd been winding and looked at dog and girl. Charlie's nose was almost touching Flossie's. Her curls were tumbling over the dog's head. Flossie looked as if she hadn't seen a bath for months but Charlie seemed oblivious. Germs obviously weren't worthy of a mention.

'She could do with a wash,' he said and Charlie looked at him with the scorn he obviously deserved.

'You're suggesting we undo that nice white bandage, take her away from the fire and dump her in a tub.'

Flossie was looking at him, too, and the reproach in both their eyes...

Once again he had that urge to chuckle. Which felt good. Bryn Morgan hadn't chuckled in a long time.

He rubbed Flossie behind the ears. With the thunderstorm receding to a distant rumble, the complete doggy tribe was in the kitchen, nosing around with interest. A couple edged in for an ear-rub as well and suddenly he had a line-up.

'You can't pat one without patting all of them,' Charlie said serenely and once again he heard that chuckle.

It was a gorgeous chuckle. It made him...

Um, not. He had enough complications on his plate without going there. What was in front of him now?

He was sitting on faded kitchen linoleum before an ancient range, vintage kerosene lamps throwing out inefficient light but enough to show the raggle-taggle line-up of misbegotten mutts waiting to have their ears rubbed. While a woman watched on and smiled. While outside...

Um...outside. You could buy a house for the price of the car he'd been driving. How was he going to explain that one?

'I have a good, thick soup on the stove,' Charlie said, interrupting thoughts of irate bankruptcy trustees and debt collectors and car salesmen who still hardly believed in his innocence.

He focussed on the dogs instead. Would there be jealousy if he spent say one and a half minutes on Dog One and then two on Dog Two? He decided not to risk it and checked his watch. Charlie noticed and smiled.

'Do you have overnight gear in the car?' she asked. 'I could lend you an umbrella.'

That hauled him back to the practical. Overnight. Of course. He was genuinely stuck here. There were all sorts of problems he should be facing rather than how many seconds he'd been rubbing Dog One.

One of those was where his overnight gear was right now.

'You have a spare bed?' he asked, cautiously.

'I do. I'll put you at the back of the house to give you a little peace because the dogs sleep with me. Except Possum. She usually sleeps by the back door. She's my guard dog but if there's any more lightning she'll be in with me. And Flossie will definitely be with me.'

'You'll sleep with Flossie?' She really was filthy.

'I'm sure it's good, clean dirt,' she said cheerfully. 'And I can't tell you how much I've worried about her. If I had half a kingdom I'd hand it to you right now.'

'Do you have a spare toothbrush instead?'

She blinked. 'Pardon?'

'I'm a bit averse to lightning,' he confessed. 'I'm happy for my overnight gear to stay where it is.' Wherever that was. Under one enormous tree.

He should tell her, he thought, but she was pale enough already and the knowledge that he'd been two seconds from climbing into the car and being pancaked was something she didn't need to hear about tonight.

He didn't want to think about it tonight.

'I do have a spare toothbrush,' she told him. 'I was at a conference in a gorgeous hotel...some time ago...' In another life. Moving on... 'The free toothbrush was so beautifully packaged I stuck it in my toilet bag. If you don't mind pink sparkle, it's yours.'

'You'd give up pink sparkle for me?'

'I said you deserve half my kingdom,' she said and she was suddenly solemn. 'I mean it.'

'Then let's go with one toothbrush, one bowl of soup and a bed for the night,' he told her. 'I'll ask for nothing more.'

'Excellent,' she said and shifted across to help with the ear scratching. 'Soup and toothbrush and I don't know about you but I'm thinking bed's next on the agenda.'

Her arm brushed his and with the touch... Things changed.

The tension was suddenly almost palpable. Were both of them thinking the same?

'In your dreams,' she said, sounding breathless.

Of all the stupid... Were the tensions between them so obvious? And she caught it. 'I didn't mean...you know I didn't mean...' she stammered.

'I wasn't thinking,' he said, blankly, but he was lying.

'Yes, you were.'

‘If I was, I shouldn’t have.’

‘I know nothing about you,’ she said and then caught herself. ‘But even if I did...’

‘I’m a farmer from the UK,’ he told her, feeling a sudden urge to explain himself. Get things on a solid basis. ‘Thirty-five years old, here on family business. I’m heading back to London tomorrow.’

‘It still doesn’t mean I’m going to bed with you.’

‘Of course it doesn’t.’ He managed a lopsided smile. What was it about the night that was making things so off kilter? ‘Maybe electrical storms act like oysters,’ he tried. ‘But we’re grown-ups now. We can handle it.’

‘Yeah,’ she said but sounded doubtful.

‘So let’s do introductions only,’ he said, trying to sound firm. ‘We’ll get this on a solid basis. Not as a preamble to anything else. Just to clear the air.’ More, he didn’t want to make it complicated. Keep it simple, he told himself, and did. ‘I’ve said I’m a farmer. I live a couple of miles from the Welsh border and I’ve been out here because my uncle’s...’

That brought him up. How to explain Thomas? He couldn’t. Not tonight. Hopefully not ever. He didn’t even want to think of Thomas. ‘My uncle’s been living locally for a while,’ he said at last. ‘He’s moved on, but I needed to deal with things he left behind. But it’s done now. What about you?’

She looked at him doubtfully, as if she wasn’t sure who he was and what on earth was happening. Which was pretty much how he was feeling. Tensions were zinging back and forth that had nothing to do with the lightning outside. Or maybe they did. Electricity did all sorts of weird things.

Like make him want...

Or not.

‘I’m an interior designer,’ she said at last. ‘I had... I have my own business in Melbourne. But right now I’m babysitting seven dogs, two cows and fifteen chooks, trying to find them homes. Waiting for a miracle, which is not going to happen. Meanwhile, Mr Morgan, I have things to do, and not a single one of them involves thinking inappropriate thoughts about anyone, much less you. So you get these ears scratched and I’ll get the soup on and we’ll go from there.’

‘And I’ll be gone in the morning.’

‘Of course you will,’ she said briskly. ‘Just as soon as I...’ And then she faltered. ‘I’m sorry. The tree...it’ll take money to get that cleared.’ But then her face cleared. ‘It’s okay though. As long as your car has decent clearance and the paddocks don’t flood too badly, we can cut through a few strands of fencing and get you out across the paddocks.’

Decent clearance...right.

‘We’ll worry about it in the morning,’ he said and she sighed.

‘That’s my mantra.’ She rose stiffly to her feet and looked down at him in the dim light. ‘That’s what I tell myself every night...worry about it in the morning. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if I didn’t have to?’

* * *

The first storm front passed. The wind and thunder and lightning eased. Bryn slept solidly, in a decent bed, a hundred times better than the hard-as-nails motel bed he’d stayed in for the last few days. Carlsbrook was a one-pub, one-general-store town and why his uncle had set up base there...

But he knew why. Carlsbrook was a far cry from the resort-style lifestyle his uncle favoured but it was a district of smallholdings, of farmers proud of their cattle. It also had an aging population and sparse and difficult Internet connection, a district often cut off from the outside world.

It was a population ripe for his uncle’s scumbag activities.

But tonight he hardly thought about his uncle. He slept deeply, in an ancient four-poster bed on the second floor, while the wind whirled around the ancient weatherboards and trees creaked and groaned. There was something about this house, this home... The dogs.

This woman...

It felt like home. It was a strange sensation. Home was a long way away, Ballystone Hall, hard on the Welsh border. It was a magnificent place to live, but he never slept well there. But here, in this bed with its tatty furnishings, he fell into a sleep that was almost dreamless.

He woke as the second storm front hit.

It hit with such force he felt the whole house shudder. The thunderclap was so loud, so long, that the shuddering was more than momentary, and the lightning that flashed across the sky made a mockery of the window drapes. It lit the whole house with an eerie light.

The second clap of thunder followed the first, even louder, even stronger.

And two seconds later a dog landed on his bed.

A second after that, five dogs followed.

He'd assumed they were sleeping with Charlie. They'd definitely abandoned ship though, or abandoned their mistress. The first one in, Stretch, was a sort of dachshund with a whiskery beard that said something had happened to impede an ancient pedigree lineage. He launched himself up onto the bed, and before Bryn could stop him he had his nose under the sheets, wriggling under the covers and heading down to Bryn's toes.

The next five dogs were all for following suit, but by then Bryn was prepared and had the sheet up to his neck.

And then the next lightning sheet lit the room and he looked at the door and Charlie was standing in the doorway holding a lamp. She was wearing a faded lacy nightgown and bare feet. Her hair was tousled as if she'd had a restless sleep. Her eyes were huge in her face and in her arms she carried Flossie. Whose eyes were also huge.

'I... I've been deserted,' she whispered. 'The dogs are scared.'

'And so are you?' He was trying not to smile. Dogs, woman, the whole situation... And a woman in a wispy nightgown with a lamp. But she did look truly scared.

'If it hits the house...'

'Have you seen the size of those trees outside? It'll hit those first.'

Maybe that was the wrong thing to say. Her face bleached even whiter. 'And the trees will hit the house.'

'Not on this side,' he said, struggling to think of the layout of the yard outside. His room backed onto the service yard out the back. The red gums were mostly at the front and the house was big. 'But it's really unlikely. I think the biggest has already been hit.'

'My bedroom's at the front.'

She stood there, her arms full of dog, and her face...

'Tell you what,' he said nobly. 'How about you sleep in here and I go sleep in your room?'

'N...no.'

'Charlie...'

'I don't like thunderstorms,' she whispered and there was an understatement. It was a big enough call that it had him throwing back the covers—shoving dogs aside in the process—and heading for the doorway. Heading for Charlie.

And when he got there, as soon as she was close, he realised the fear wasn't just on her face. She was trembling all over. The dog in her arms was trembling, too, and he realised why the dogs had abandoned Charlie en masse. They wanted a leader who wasn't terrified, and Charlie's face said she wanted exactly the same.

A pack leader. He could do this. It was kind of compulsory—that he moved to reassure. That he took the final steps and took her firmly into his arms.

And held.

Flossie was in there somewhere, sandwich squeezed, totally limp, totally passive. Bryn was wearing boxers and boxers only because his pjs were somewhere under a burning red gum. As he felt Flossie's rough coat against his bare skin he felt the dog trembling.

As Charlie was trembling.

He had Charlie around the waist. Her head was tucked into the crook of his neck as if she wanted to be close, closer.

He held her tight. His fingers splayed the width of her waist and his chin rested on her hair and he just...held.

And the feeling of home deepened, strengthened and something was happening...

Her hair was so thick, so soft, and it smelled of something citrusy, something gorgeous...

No, gorgeous was the adjective for the whole woman. For all of Charlie. That he be allowed to hold her...

She was totally still in his hold, yet not passive. She wanted to be held by him. There was a dog between them but he knew she wanted to be as close to him as she possibly could be.

Because she was scared. For no other reason. This was a frightened woman and he was comforting her.

But she was gorgeous.

There was that word again. It was as if the word itself had seeped into his head and was changing something inside him.

Gorgeous.

Another clap of thunder shook the house and he felt her flinch. If it was possible, dog and woman clung tighter.

From back in the bed there were six terrified whimpers.

What was a man to do?

‘Come to bed, sweetheart,’ he murmured into her hair. ‘You and me and seven dogs. We’ll ride out this mother of a storm together.’

‘Together...’ He felt the war within, the fear of the storm, the fear of the stranger.

‘We can do this,’ he said. ‘One bed, one man and one woman might be a problem. One bed, one man and one woman and seven dogs... I doubt there’s a problem at all.’

* * *

She slept and there were seven dogs between her body and his. There was one clap of thunder too much, though, and at some time in the night, even in her sleep, her primeval fears must have overridden every other consideration. She woke and she was spooned in a stranger’s arms. Totally spooned. She had her back to him, his arms were around her and her body was curved into his chest. His face was against her hair. She could feel his breathing.

She could feel everything else.

He was wearing boxers.

He wasn’t totally naked.

He might as well be.

Her nightgown was ancient lawn and flimsy, and she could feel his body against her. His chest was bare. His arms, muscled, strong, were holding her tight. Bare arms against bare arms. Skin against skin.

She could see chinks of sunlight through the drapes. Flossie was lying at the end of the bed—she could feel her warm, welcome heaviness across her feet—but the rest of the pack had obviously taken off to check out the day. The storm was over.

She should tug away, out of this man’s arms.

She’d wake him and he’d been so good...

It was more than that, though.

She really, really wanted to stay right where she was. For the moment the world had stopped. Here was peace. Here was sanctuary.

Here was... Bryn?

A man she'd known for what, twelve hours? Most of that had been spent sleeping. Oh, for heaven's sake... Get up, she told herself. Check on Flossie's leg. Go face the damage of the day.

But she didn't. She lay and let the insidious sweetness of the moment envelop her. She could lie here and imagine there were no problems. That Grandma wasn't dead. That she didn't have debts to her ears. That she didn't have to worry that she had no clue how to rehouse misfit dogs that she couldn't keep.

That she hadn't been betrayed by a low life herself, and that there seemed no one in the world who she could trust?

'Nice,' he murmured into her ear. 'You think if we stay here for long enough the rest of the world will disappear?'

So he was awake. And he had problems in his life, too? Well, didn't everyone? That made him...more human still.

Nice? No. Nice didn't begin to cut it. His body...if she didn't move soon...

And he got it almost the moment she did. 'Charlie, if we don't part I may well not be responsible for my actions,' he said and there was all the regret in the world in his voice. But she felt his body stir—where she most definitely didn't want his body to stir—and the fantasy had to end. As if in agreement, Flossie wriggled at the end of the bed and the day had to begin.

His arms released her. He shifted back. She struggled to sit up and it felt like the greatest grief...

Which was ridiculous. Her body was responding to the heightened emotions of the last weeks, she told herself. It had nothing to do with the body of the man pushing back the covers and rising to his feet...

Dear heaven, he was breath-taking.

Last night he'd said he was a farmer and his body confirmed it. He looked weathered, tanned, ripped, as if he spent his life heaving hay bales or shearing sheep or hauling cattle out of bogs or...whatever farmers did.

Which reminded her...

'There's probably stuff to do,' he said as if he'd read her thoughts. 'Dogs to let out? To feed? Other animals?'

'Cows to attend,' she told him. 'And chooks to feed. That is, if they've survived the night. But there's no need for you to stay. If the ground isn't too wet you can run your car over the back paddock. I can cut the wire and let you out to the road.'

'And leave you on your own to cope with the mess?'

'It's my mess. I've kept you long enough. Where were you headed last night? Melbourne?'

'I was,' he said, ruefully, reaching for his trousers. It was such a domestic thing to do. She was lying in bed while the man beside the bed was dressing. It was discombobulating. Weird. 'I was heading for the airport.'

'Then you've missed your plane?' She sat bolt upright and stared at him in horror. 'Because of Flossie? Oh, no.'

'There'll be other planes.'

'Will you forfeit your ticket? I can... I'll...' Yeah, right, pay for another airline ticket? With what?'

'Charlie...' He must have heard the panic in her voice because he leaned over and put his hands on her shoulders. It was a gesture that was meant to steady her, ground her, and in some ways it did. In other ways she felt not the least bit grounded. What the feel of this man did to her... 'I hit your dog,' he said, softly but firmly. 'This is my responsibility.'

'Flossie should never have been out on the road.'

'How did she get out?' He flicked a glance down at Flossie, who was curled against Charlie's legs as if she never wanted to leave. Maybe he could see her point.

'When Grandma had the heart attack the paramedics left the gate open and Flossie disappeared. That was three weeks ago. I have no idea where she's been since then. I've hunted everywhere.'

‘You weren’t here when your grandmother died?’

‘I was in Melbourne. I did make it to the hospital before she died. She wanted to know about all the animals. I told her they were fine. I told her... I’d look after them.’

‘So what’s happening to them now?’

‘I’m finding homes for them,’ she said, with more certainty than she felt. ‘I’m trying to fix the farm up so I can put it on the market...’ Her voice faltered at that. It wouldn’t be her putting it on the market, she thought. It’d be the bank, trying to scrape back anything it could. ‘But now...your plane...’

‘It doesn’t matter. For now it seems we need to feed animals, feed us and then take a look at the damage outside.’

‘You don’t need to stay.’ The thought of him missing the plane because of her... How could she ever make it up to him?

‘You mean you’re not offering me breakfast?’

‘Don’t you want to...just leave?’

‘Without breakfast? That was great soup last night but it didn’t cling to the sides. I saw your fridge last night. You have eggs. Bread. Mushrooms...’

‘But your plane...’

‘There’ll be another plane tonight.’ If there was a seat available.

‘To London. You’re English?’

‘Part English, part Welsh.’ He’d sat on the bed and was pulling his boots on, and once more that impression of domesticity intensified. ‘Where I live is border country.’

‘Your farm...’

‘My farm’s in England. Just. Right, what’s first? Will the dogs be downstairs waiting to be let out?’

‘Grandma has a doggie door. She closed it when she had Flossie but since Flossie left...’

‘I doubt if Flossie’s thinking of leaving,’ he said gently and leaned over Charlie to pat her.

And as if to deny his words Flossie struggled to her feet—well, three of her feet—and staggered across the bed towards him.

He scooped her into his arms and held her, smiling down at her.

‘I’m thinking this girl’s great,’ he told Charlie. ‘I suspect we don’t even need the vet. But I also suspect there’ll be a need for a nature call.’

‘The yard outside the kitchen’s enclosed,’ Charlie told him. ‘I’ll be down in a moment. You won’t let her out, will you?’

‘I’ll stay with her the whole time,’ he said and then his smile turned to Charlie, a smile that almost had her heart doing back flips. Where did a man ever learn to smile like that?

‘Take your time getting dressed, Charlie,’ he said gently. ‘I suspect you could do with a morning’s break from responsibility. I’ll check your charges and the damage outside.’ He stooped and touched her face, a mere brush of finger against cheek. Why did that make her feel...as if she didn’t know how she was feeling? ‘You need help,’ he told her. ‘A morning might be all I can give, then I’ll give it willingly.’

* * *

She took him at his word. She stood under the shower and tried to allow the hot water to calm her.

It sort of did. For some reason the appalling mess of the last weeks had receded. Someone was helping. What was more, she was trusting him. He was presently feeding the cows, collecting eggs and letting the hens out for the day, doing everything a farmer would know how to do.

But why was she trusting? How did she know who he was? Had the mess her grandmother had got herself into taught her nothing?

Oh, for heaven’s sake, what was he going to do? Steal her eggs and run? There was little else left in the place to steal.

Everything was sold. All that was left was the valueless. A sad little cow and her bag-of-bones calf. Chooks that were almost past laying. Seven assorted dogs.

Her grandmother's jewellery box was empty. The shelves had long been stripped of anything saleable. Even the gorgeous old lounge suite, faded but beautiful, had been carted off to the auction rooms.

For the last few weeks Charlie had been consumed by an anger so deep, so vast it had threatened to overwhelm her. She hadn't been able to put it aside for a moment.

But now, with the hot water streaming over her naked body, her anger had been overlaid. She was suddenly thinking of a guy called Bryn with a lazy smile and gentle hands.

A man who'd held her in sleep.

A man who was getting on a plane tonight and she'd never see again.

Which was why she was getting out of the shower right now because standing under the hot water fantasising about the man was dangerous indeed—and besides, she was missing out on being...with him.

Or not. It was only because she needed to cook breakfast, she told herself as she tried to rub sense into herself with the threadbare towel. She had things to do. Sensible things.

She wasn't hurrying because Bryn was downstairs.

Liar.

* * *

Breakfast seemed top of the agenda but there was a problem. She came downstairs just as Bryn came through the kitchen door from outside, and she could read *problem* on his face.

'What?' she said with trepidation. 'Flossie...'

'Flossie's fine,' he said hurriedly. 'She's hopping on three legs but she lined up for her kibble with the rest of them. She even put a bit of pressure on her pad when she thought she was being beaten to the feed bowls.'

'You've fed them.'

'Yes, ma'am.' There was that smile again. 'I hope that's okay with you. I assumed that industrial drum of kibble by the back door was for them.'

'I'm not reduced to eating kibble myself,' she joked but it didn't come out as she'd meant it to. It came out sounding needy. But Bryn's smile had faded. He looked preoccupied. 'There's something else?'

'You have a cow in a bog,' he told her. 'The creek's a quagmire but she's obviously tried to reach it. I have no idea how she's worked herself into such a mess. Luckily her calf had the sense not to join her. The calf was standing on the bank making her displeasure at her mother's idiocy known to the world, but that's made things worse. The cow's desperate to reach her and has dug herself deeper. I've put the calf in the shed, so now we have one stuck cow to deal with. Do you have a tractor?'

'Um...no.'

'A neighbour with a tractor?'

She gazed out of the window at the debris scattered across the paddocks. Last night's storm had been appalling. Every local farmer would be out assessing damage to their own properties. Besides, Jock next door had been scathing of Grandma's cow and calf.

'Not even the knacker's 'll want them,' he'd told her when she'd tentatively asked if he could take them on. 'You can't take 'em back to your city apartment? The best thing to do is take 'em down to the back of the gully and shoot 'em. Tell you what,' he'd said in a spirit of neighbourliness because this was at Grandma's funeral and he was trying to be helpful. 'I'll do it for you if you like.'

She didn't like, and now...to ask if he'd abandon assessing damage on his place and spend the morning saving a cow...

Bryn was waiting for an answer. Did she have neighbours who'd help?

'No,' she said a bit too abruptly and got a sharp look in return.

‘They’re not helpful?’

‘They’ll be busy. And they don’t think much of Cordelia.’

‘Cordelia?’

‘Cordelia,’ she repeated. ‘Her calf’s Violet. And don’t ask. I have no idea how Grandma chose names.’

‘Then I guess Cordelia needs to be dug out,’ he said as if it was no big deal. He sounded almost cheerful. ‘I might need some help. Can you show me where your spades are kept? And I’ll need rope and planking...’

I might need some help...

See her gobsmacked.

Did he know how sweet those words sounded? For the last three weeks they’d been thrashing themselves around her head. *I might need some help...* She did need help. And now this man was assuming a bogged cow—*her* bogged cow—was his responsibility and he was asking for her help.

Did he know how close she was to bursting into tears on his chest?

Oh, my.

‘But coffee first and toast,’ he told her. ‘She’s in trouble but she’s not going anywhere. If she was dumb enough to try and get to the creek to drink when all she had to do overnight was open her mouth and swallow, then she can wait until we fuel up. Toast and coffee and let’s go.’

* * *

Charlie wasn’t a farmer. Actually, neither was her grandmother. This place represented the remnants of the family farm, but Grandma had never been interested in farming. After her husband had died she’d sold off most of the land and committed herself to caring for injured wildlife. As she’d grown older she’d confined herself to dogs and chooks. Every now and then she’d let the neighbour bring his cows in to keep the grass down, but she’d spent the rest of her life collecting strays.

Six months ago she’d found a cow wandering along the road at dusk, a hazard to traffic, obviously neglected. Three weeks later it had given birth, much to Grandma’s delight. Cow and calf were rangy, weird-looking bovines with no proven ancestry. No one had wanted them—except Grandma.

Charlie should have locked them in the sheds for the night. The truth was she didn’t know how. How to make a cow go where it didn’t want?

Bryn had, though. He’d driven the calf into the shed and Charlie was impressed.

Now they just had to deal with Cordelia.

Uh oh. Charlie walked down to the creek with Bryn and her heart sank.

Cordelia was obviously a cow accustomed to hard times. She’d sunk to her haunches in mud and was gazing down at the mire in deep despondency, as if thinking: If this is the way to go, then so be it.

‘Grandma has troughs near the shed,’ Charlie said as they gazed at the cow together. She was wearing jeans and wellingtons and carting a couple of spades. Bryn was wearing his gorgeous city shoes and the trousers and shirt he’d had on last night. He was carrying four lengths of planking and rope. She was trying not to be...aware of him. Very aware.

It wasn’t working.

‘I even left the shed door open,’ Charlie told him indignantly, pushing aside inappropriate thoughts with difficulty. ‘I went out in the rain especially but did she want to go in? No! And how do you get a cow to go where she doesn’t want to go?’

‘With a decent dog?’ Bryn said and grinned down at the pack following them. They’d left Flossie sleeping by the stove, but the rest were bounding around them, joyous in the sunshine and the sense of doing. Cattle dogs? Not a one of them.

‘You show me how and I’ll train them,’ Charlie told him.

He checked them for a moment, grin still in place. Possum, a sort of fox terrier. Fred, part basset, part...lots of things. Caesar, a wolfhound who trembled behind the back of the pack as if

to say, Protect me, guys. Dottie, a Dalmatian so old her dots were faded to grey. Then there was Mothball, the fluffball, and Stretch, a sort of sausage dog whose tummy actually touched the ground when he ran. And Flossie back at the house.

‘I can’t imagine,’ he said faintly.

‘Don’t you laugh at my dogs.’

‘I wouldn’t dare.’ But still he grinned and she managed a smile back.

It really was a great morning. The sun was on her face. Her stomach was full of toast and coffee. She was still warmed with the memory of being held in this man’s arms...

Whoa.

‘Tell me where to dig,’ she managed, a bit too fast, a bit...breathlessly.

‘I’ll do the digging.’

‘You have to be kidding. In those clothes?’

‘I already asked... You don’t appear to have wellingtons in my size. Besides, that’s what water’s for. Washing.’

‘Bryn...’

‘What’s the choice?’ he asked.

And there wasn’t one. Unless she went next door and borrowed a rifle.

No, there wasn’t one.

‘Right then,’ Bryn said and laid down his planking and took the two spades from her shoulder. He laid one down on the ground. ‘It’s up to me.’

She picked it back up and glowered. ‘It’s up to us.’

‘Right, ma’am,’ he said and grinned again, looking ruefully down at his city shoes. ‘You know, I should be bored out of my mind in a plane right now. How can I possibly regret my change of plan?’

* * *

It took skill, strength and patience to dig a cow out of a bog. Firstly there was the imperative of keeping the cow calm. Struggling would make her sink deeper and that was where Charlie came in.

‘You’ve been feeding her for the last weeks?’ Bryn asked and when she agreed he set her task.

‘Right. You’re the cow whisperer. You squat by her head, block as much of me as you can and tell her all about the hay bales back in the shed.’

‘I want to dig.’

‘We can’t always get what we want,’ Bryn said, unperturbed.

Charlie thought, Yeah, tell me about it.

So she stooped as ordered and tried to do the cow-whispering thing but the cow wasn’t having a bar of it.

‘It’s as if she thinks we’re trying to dig her out to turn her into sausages,’ she said indignantly as Cordelia did a bit more thrashing and Bryn nodded.

‘Some cows are bred for intelligence. Obviously not this one. Okay,’ he conceded. ‘Let’s go for fast. Grab a spade and help.’

Excellent. She dug, ankle deep in mud, shovelling the squishy mud from in front of the cow.

‘We need to get deep enough to lay planking so she can haul herself up,’ Bryn told her. ‘But if you’re getting blisters...’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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