

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace on a beach. The man is leaning towards the woman, and they are about to kiss. The woman has her hand on the man's head. The background is a bright, sunny beach scene with a blue sky and white sand. A purple circular badge in the top right corner contains the text '3 in 1 GREAT VALUE'.

**3** *in* **1**  
GREAT  
VALUE

# First Love, Second Chance

NIKKI  
LOGAN

CARA  
COLTER

MELISSA  
McCLONE



By Request

Nikki Logan

**First Love, Second Chance: Friends  
to Forever / Second Chance with the  
Rebel / It Started with a Crush...**

«HarperCollins»

## **Logan N.**

First Love, Second Chance: Friends to Forever / Second Chance with the Rebel / It Started with a Crush... / N. Logan — «HarperCollins»,

Friends to Forever Marc and Beth were best friends until a heated kiss exposed secrets and ruined everything. Ten years later their reunion leads to an unexpected rescue mission. Stranded on an Australian beach, can they face the sins of the past together? Second Chance with the Rebel Anyone in sleepy lakeside town Lindstrom Beach could see opposites Mac and Lucy didn't belong together. They had one beautiful summer before he left, leaving Lucy broken-hearted. But when Mac returns years later, she can't help but dream of second chances... It Started with a Crush... Lucy Martin is determined to make her soccer-mad nephew's dreams come true. She'll have to ask her old crush Ryland James, the legendary bad boy of soccer, if he'll coach her nephew's team – and try not to steal him away for herself!"

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**First Love, Second Chance**

Friends to Forever

Nikki Logan

Second Chance with the Rebel

Cara Colter

It Started with a Crush...

Melissa McClone



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Friends to Forever

Nikki Logan

**NIKKI LOGAN** lives next to a string of protected wetlands in Western Australia, with her long-suffering partner and a menagerie of furred, feathered and scaly friends. She studied film and theatre at university, and worked for years in advertising and film distribution before finally settling down in the wildlife industry. Her romance with nature goes way back, and she considers her life charmed, given she works with wildlife by day and writes fiction by night—the perfect way to combine her two loves. Nikki believes that the passion and risk of falling in love are perfectly mirrored in the danger and beauty of wild places. Every romance she writes contains an element of nature, and if readers catch a waft of rich earth or the spray of wild ocean between the pages she knows her job is done.

Visit Nikki at her website: [www.nikkilogan.com.au](http://www.nikkilogan.com.au).

For the Garvey clan (two-legged and four). Thank you for your years of friendship and your tolerance of my weird writerly ways.

To Liz for setting the bar so inspirationally high.

And to Rachel for keeping me sane and on the right path with this one.

## PROLOGUE

*Ten years ago, Perth, Western Australia*

‘MARC, have you got a minute?’

Beth Hughes caught up with her best friend between classes and steered him away from the teenage throng doing a fast book change between fourth period and fifth. The rock that had taken up residence in her gut since she’d spoken to his mother seemed to swell in size.

Marc looked at her in surprise. Understandable, given the past few weeks of slow retreat on her part. If he’d refused point-blank to go with her she would have understood. A weak part of her wished he would. That would be easier all round.

‘Three minutes, Duncannon.’ Tasmin Major swanned past, a friendly smile on her Nordic face, tapping her watch. ‘Geography waits for no one.’

‘I’ll be there,’ Marc threw after her, trailing Beth around behind the water fountains, tension rich in his deep voice. She ducked between the back wall of the library complex and some badly pruned shrubs into a rubble-filled clearing she’d never visited before. The place others came to do their smoking. Their deep-and-meaningful conversations. Their making-out.

The location got Marc’s attention completely. His steps slowed.

‘Beth?’

Her pulse beat thick and fast, high in her throat, reducing even further the space for her breath. She sucked in a few mouthfuls of air and forced them down as she turned to face him in the privacy of the little space.

‘What are we doing, Beth?’ His face was cautious. Closed. She curled her fingers into a ball behind her. ‘Does your boyfriend know you’re here?’

She stared at him, forcing air past her lips, hating how he’d taken to saying the word *boyfriend*. ‘Damien’s in fifth period.’

‘Where we should be. Or do grades mean less to you now that you hang with the beautiful people?’

Her eyes fell to the dirt he scuffed at his feet, heat invading her cheeks. ‘I needed to see you.’

‘You see me every day.’

*In passing.* ‘I needed to speak with you.’ She lifted her focus. ‘In private.’

A grey tinge came over him. His body straightened even more. Not for the first time, Beth noticed how broad he was getting. Those shoulders that had made the swim team captain seek him out a few months back. The way his jaw was squaring off. As if a switch had flipped on his sixteenth birthday and a man had started breaking out of the scrawny exoskeleton she knew as Marc. Maybe she’d left this too late ...

Her stomach tightened.

‘You have to hide out to talk to me these days?’

She could have pretended to misunderstand but Marc knew her too well. ‘I don’t want to make trouble with you and Damien.’

‘I’m pretty sure McKinley’s already aware that we’re friends, Beth. I’ve known you since fourth grade.’

‘I don’t want ... He might read into it.’

‘Then you might want to choose another location for this conversation. You do know what The Pit gets used for, right?’

Beth swallowed hard, her eyes dropping to his lips for a second. She forced them up. ‘I just wanted privacy.’

The second bell rang and urgent footsteps sprinting into classrooms petered out. Everything around them fell silent. Marc widened his feet and crossed his arms across his chest. 'You got it. Every other student at Pymont High is now in class.'

'I'm changing streams,' she blurted before she lost her nerve. 'I'm switching to B.'

Marc stared at her, his nostrils flaring. 'You're changing out of the classes we've been taking all year? Into McKinley's stream?'

'Not because of Damien—'

'Right.'

'I want less science. More arts.'

'Since when?'

'Since now.'

'B-stream is soft, Beth.'

'It has Literature and Philosophy in it. They're unentrance subjects.'

'You're switching to avoid me.'

The rock in her gut doubled in size. 'No.'

*Yes.*

'Why?'

A throbbing started up behind her eyes. 'This has nothing to do with you—'

'Bull. You've been backing off from me since term started. What's going on? No room for a mate in your busy new social schedule, Ms Popularity?'

'Marc—'

'I may not be as smart as you, Beth, but I can see which way the wind is blowing. Is McKinley threatened by me?'

She shook her head. Damien's field of vision was far too narrow for him to notice how Marc was filling out, growing up. He had way too much going on in his life, in his world, to worry about what some science geek was up to. It never occurred to him that Beth would see Marc as anything other than a buddy. An *old* buddy. The expendable buddy she'd had until *he* came along.

And now Damien just expected that she'd switch camps. Just like she switched streams. But since that fed right into what she knew she had to do ...

'So that's it, huh? That's what you wanted to tell me—that you're switching classes?'

Beth struggled to take in a breath. He made it sound so minor. But still so ugly. Her words grew tight. 'It means we're only going to have one class together.'

'I know. The best thing about B is that it means only seeing McKinley once a week.' He glared at her. 'You're that desperate to get away from me?'

She would like nothing more than to have Marc Duncannon in her life for ever. But, as it turned out, that wasn't going to work. Guilt tore at her insides and thick shields shot up into place. 'The world revolves around the sun, Marc, not you.'

His face paled and the guilt turned inward, digging into the flesh around her heart. The truth was Marc Duncannon revolved around Beth Hughes and always had. Or, more rightly, the two of them rotated in a complicated, connected orbit. Something both their parents felt was unhealthy.

For him.

If it was just his nut-job mother who thought it, Beth wouldn't have given it another thought. But her own mother agreed and so did her father. And Russell Hughes was never, ever wrong. After a long and tearful conversation, Beth gave him her word that she'd cool things down with Marc for a while. See what happened. And she'd never broken her word yet.

'If you're not doing it to be closer to McKinley and you're not doing it to be away from me then why are you doing it?'

'Why can't I just be doing it for me? Because I want to?'

'Because you don't make decisions like that, Beth. You never have. You plan stuff. You commit.'

‘So I’ve changed my mind. It happens.’

*Not to you.* It was written loud and clear all over his face. Could he tell she was lying?

‘What about uni? Biology?’

A fist squeezed deep in her chest. Damn him for not just letting her go. Why was he pushing this so hard? Forcing her to hurt him more. ‘That was your dream, not mine.’

He blinked, then stared. ‘After all this time? You’ve been on board with that for three years.’

She shrugged, faking ambivalence she absolutely did not feel. ‘Seemed like a good enough idea at the time.’

‘Until something better came along? Or should I say someone?’

‘This is not about Damien. I told you.’ He stepped closer and Beth retreated towards the library wall. When had he grown that big?

‘I know what you told me. I just don’t believe it.’ He towered over her. ‘We’ve been friends for eight years, Beth. Half our lifetimes. And you just disappear the moment a popular guy comes sniffing? Are you truly that desperate for affection?’

The library wall pressed into her back. She knew he’d be hurt, and she knew he lashed out when he was hurt. She’d seen him do it with his mother. ‘People change, Marc. We all grow up. Maybe we’ve just grown apart?’

‘I know you’re changing, Beth. I’ve watched you.’ His eyes glazed over, a deep russet brown, and skimmed her, head to toe. She’d never been more aware of the changing shape of her body. Then he sneered, ‘I just never expected you’d change into such a cliché.’

‘I’m just ... I just need some space. We’ve lived in each other’s pockets for so long we don’t even know how to be around anyone else. Or who we are if we’re not together.’

*Lies, lies ...*

His snort was ugly. ‘Don’t dress this up as self-discovery. This is about the school jock making a play for the school tomboy. And you’re falling for it hook, line and sinker.’ He slammed two hands either side of her face and leaned into her.

She flinched and her heart raced at his closeness. *No, this is about your mother asking me to cut you loose. Begging me to.* She wanted to scream it into the face that she knew as well as her own. But she couldn’t. It would kill him to discover what his only surviving parent thought he was worth.

‘You could be anything you want, Marc. You don’t need me to be it with you. There’s a whole world for us to discover.’

He leaned in further. The tightening in her body where he touched it wasn’t fear. Marc was the only person on the planet she trusted implicitly never to hurt her.

‘What’s wrong with us discovering that together?’ he ground, his chest heaving with restraint. ‘We have history. A bond. What does McKinley have that I don’t have?’

*No rock-tight bond. No complicated history.* No parents pressuring her to put some distance between them.

‘I’m only asking for space, Marc. What’s wrong with that?’

His face twisted and he swore. ‘I’ve been giving you space for two years, Beth. Maybe if I’d done *this* back then I wouldn’t be standing here now getting the brush-off from my best friend.’

And then suddenly his mouth was crushing down on hers, his body pressing her into the hard limestone of the library wall behind her. Shock stiffened her against the hardness of his chest as his hands slipped down to tangle in her hair and hold her face still for the assault of his lips. She swam in his scent, in his angry heat, in his perfect, practised kiss. The unfamiliar slide of a blazing hot mouth over her own and the furious press of his body. And then the dizzying sensation of their flesh melding into one, his enormous hands sliding around to protect her head from the lumpy wall behind her, his mouth shifting and softening on hers.

And then—somehow—she was kissing him back. Her own mouth moved tentatively against his and her body pressed forward. A choked whimper cracked deep in her throat and Marc worked

his tongue past her uncertain lips coaxing them open. His furnace-hot tongue twisted and danced around hers, intensity pooling around her, engulfing all. Her body *whoofed* to flaming life, hormones tangling and exploding like kindling around them.

Overwhelming and unfamiliar, something she'd never allowed herself to dream. To want.

*Marc.*

Suddenly Beth was free and Marc staggered back against the force of her desperate shove. She held up a shaking hand to stop him coming closer. His face darkened as he looked at her.

'Does McKinley know you kiss like that?' His chest heaved.

How could he know? They'd never kissed. She'd never kissed anyone. Until today.

She dragged her fist across her lips. 'Don't ever—' *do that again, make me feel that again* '—touch me again.' Her voice was husky and low and appallingly unfamiliar.

'Beth ...'

A world of emotions surged up and spilled over. 'Don't *speak* to me ... again.'

His frown doubled. 'You don't mean—'

She lifted tortured eyes to him. 'Why does it have to be all or nothing with you? I just wanted some space, Marc. Room for us both to discover who we are. That's all. Did you think you could keep me all to yourself for ever?'

'I know who I am. And I thought I knew who you were. But I guess not. ' He crossed the little clearing in two steps. 'You want space, Elizabeth? Fine. Take as much as you need. If you're that desperate, then have a good life with McKinley.'

And then he was gone.

Her best friend.

Like a kite in a wild wind, she'd tried to give him some rope, some height, but instead he'd ripped completely free and was gone. Her fingers trembled as they touched her swollen lips and she slid down the rough library wall until she huddled in a tearless, emotionless, empty heap.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Ten years later, south coast, Western Australia*

WHO knew silence came in so many shades?

There was the deep, black silence late at night, under the West Australian stars, miles from anywhere. The earthy green silence of Beth's shambolic warehouse studio, only broken by the splashes of colour from her latest artworks. There was the newly discovered, beige-coloured silence inside her head, where voices and thoughts used to clamour but had now all eased into a comfortable hum.

And there was this one ...

The simmering red silence of a man who was not particularly pleased to see her. Not that Beth had imagined he would be. It was why she'd put this off for so long. The awful sound of nothing echoed through the heartbeat thumping past her eardrums. She cleared her throat.

'Marc.'

He may have been half a house larger than the boy she remembered, but Marc Duncannon had two trademark giveaways and one was the way he stood when he was on guard, legs apart as if readying himself for a physical assault.

Muscular arms stole up to cross in front of a broad chest as he continued to stare wordlessly at her. Twisted humour raced in to fill the aching void inside where she wasn't letting herself feel. While he'd grown a kick-butt chest in ten years, she was no bigger in that department than when he'd last seen her. Yet another disappointment for him.

Coming here suddenly seemed like a spectacularly bad idea. 'Are you not even going to say hello?'

He nodded briskly, his lips tight, resenting opening at all. 'Beth.'

One stony word, but loaded with meaning and breath-stealing in its timbre. More than she'd had from him in over a decade. A total contrast to the way he used to say her name. Beth. Betho. Bethlehem. They'd had their short lifetimes to come up with stupid nicknames for each other. He'd only called her *Elizabeth* once. The day he'd kissed her.

The day she'd ripped out his heart.

She swallowed past the lump threatening her air supply. Past the welling excitement that she was here—with Marc—again. 'How are you?'

'On my way out.'

*Okay ...* She'd prepared herself to be unwelcome but it still felt so foreign radiating from him. 'I just needed ... I'd like a couple of minutes. Please?'

His hazel eyes darted away briefly but the miracle of any part of him moving seemed to thaw the rest of him out. His whole body twisted and he resumed loading equipment into his four-wheel drive. Beth risked closing the gap, but her breath got shorter with her distance from him, until she either stopped advancing on him or took her last living gasp.

Seeing him again would almost be worth it.

He threw words out like a shark net to entangle her before she got nearer. 'You could stand there gawping or you could help me load the Cruiser.'

Beth scrambled to help, stunned by the gift of so many words in a row. It wasn't friendly. But it wasn't silence. And, given it was possibly the only chance she was going to get, she took it.

'I went to your old house. Your neighbours told me where you were, ' she started to jabber. 'I heard about your mum. What happened? You two were so close.'

Oh-so-familiar eyes lifted below hooded lids and glared at her. Intense and intensely ... adult. 'That's what you've come all this way to ask?'

Her heart lurched. Marc didn't do sarcasm when they were kids but it seemed he'd perfected the fine art in the years since she'd seen him.

‘No. I’m sorry ...’ It was lame but what else could she say?

He turned to face her and straightened, frustrated. ‘What for, Beth? For turning up unannounced or for dropping off the face of the earth for a decade?’

How could she have forgotten what a straight shooter he was? She took a shaky breath. ‘That’s why I’ve come. I wanted to explain—’

He moved off again. ‘You’ll have to explain some other time. Like I said, I’m on my way out.’

She watched as he tossed a few final items into his dusty black Land Cruiser. A satellite phone. A first aid kit. A wetsuit. She frowned. ‘Where are you going?’

The hard glare he shot her from under the broad ridge of his brow should have had her quailing, if not for the fact that she’d developed immunity long ago, from exposure to much worse. Courtesy of her husband.

‘We’ve had a report of a stranding out at Holly’s Bay. I’m going to check it out.’

‘Stranding?’

‘A whale, Beth. It needs help. I don’t have time to entertain you.’

She fought the bristle his unkind words inspired. She was here to help her healing process, not to pass the time. Would she have put herself through this otherwise? ‘I just need a minute ...’

He ignored her and moved around to the driver’s side door and yanked it open. ‘The whale may not have a minute. You’ve already slowed me down.’

She made her decision in a blink. It had cost her too much to come here today; she couldn’t let him just walk away from her. Who knew if she’d find the courage to try again? She sprinted around to the passenger side of the four-wheel drive and leaped in as he started it. Up close and in the confines of a cabin, he was bigger even than he’d seemed at a distance.

‘Get out, Beth.’

His voice certainly fitted the new him. Deep, rough. But still essentially Marc. That part tugged at her. ‘I need to talk to you. If I have to do that on the move, I will. Whatever it takes.’

He practically growled, ‘You’re wasting time.’

Anger finally broke through her carefully constructed veneer. ‘No, *you* are, Marc. Drive!’

Marc Duncannon concentrated on keeping his hands glued to the steering wheel, cemented there harder than clams on a reef. The tighter he held them, the less likely they were to shake, to give him away. He didn’t want her getting the slightest clue about how thrown he was.

Beth Hughes.

She was still the same lean, athletic build she’d been as a kid. It still suited her, even if it made him wonder how long ago she’d had her last meal. Same high brows, straight nose. Full coral lips. He would have recognised her even if she hadn’t spoken and he hadn’t heard again the soft tones he’d given up as a memory, but there was something very worn out about the way she held herself. The way her long dark hair hung, defeated, from a dead straight parting. As if she was doing her best not to stand out. Very un-Beth. She’d always been such a show pony.

Now she looked a little too much like his mother’s tormented appearance the last time he’d seen her. He clenched his jaw and leaned on the accelerator harder, flying down the long track leading from the homestead to the coastal highway.

His vehicle now reeked of Beth’s particular scent. That skin cream that, clearly, she still used after all these years. Coconut something. Chemical free. Cruelty free. The scent he associated with summer and beaches and bikinis ... and Beth. The scent that would take weeks to fade from his upholstery.

The way it had taken months to finally force her from his mind. Or not, he realised as every bit of him tightened. Seemed it had only lain dormant. Buried deep. Two seconds in her presence and half a childhood of memories came flooding back.

So much for moving on.

He concentrated on the road ahead.

From the corner of his vision, he saw her twisted mouth, teeth chewing on her full lips. The old habit socked him in the guts. She used to do that when she was problem-solving or trying to outfox him. But back then she couldn't sustain it and they'd break apart into one of her heart-stopping smiles. Not today. Her lips opened and she took a deep breath, ready to hit him with whatever it was she wanted.

'Since when did you become a whale rescuer?'

Not what he was expecting. And why did she sound as rattled as he was? She had the upper hand here. It surprised him enough to answer. 'It's part of life on the south coast. And I'm the closest trained landholder.'

'You train for this?'

'Through experience.'

'How many times have you done it?'

'Five. Two last year. This stretch of coast is notorious for it.'

'Why here, particularly?'

Small talk killed him. Especially with the one person he'd never needed it with. This was what they were now? Maybe never seeing her again was the better option. He shrugged. 'No one knows.'

Silence fell, thick and muddy. He slowed the vehicle and yanked the steering wheel hard to the right. They bumped off the asphalt onto a badly graded limestone track and headed towards the massive expanse of ocean. The crescent bay opened out before them like an electric-blue half-moon.

'How long before we get there?' she asked, voice tight.

He could practically feel her brain turning over. Her heart thumping. It vibrated off her and slammed straight into the waves of tension coming off him. 'About one minute longer than you said you needed.'

She saw his sideways glance. Interpreted it correctly. 'I needed to see you. To explain.' She cleared her throat. 'To apologise.'

*Apologise?* 'For what?'

Her mouth thinned. 'Marc ...'

'Friendships end, Beth. It happens.' He used the casual shrug to shake free some of his tension.

Her eyes flared with confusion but then they hardened and blazed with determination he'd never seen from her. Adult Beth had some balls, then. 'Nonetheless, I've come a long way to see you. I'd like to say what I need to say ...'

The Land Cruiser bumped up off the track onto the small dunes and Marc manoeuvred them as close to the edge as he safely could. The white crescent shore stretched out before them, meeting the blue of the Southern Ocean. Next stop, Antarctica. Down on the sand, about twenty feet apart, two large, dark shapes rolled and buffeted in the shallows.

*Two* whales. Marc swore under his breath.

'Your explanations will have to wait, Beth. I have work to do.'

## CHAPTER TWO

BETH took one look at the scene unfolding on the beach and pushed herself into gear. It had been two years; her needs could wait a little longer. Those animals couldn't.

Marc grabbed his satellite phone and started dialling even as he ran to the back of his vehicle, peeling off his clothes as he went. By the time he had his T-shirt and jeans off, he'd communicated their location and the number of stranded whales to someone at the Shire and asked them to rally assistance.

Beth did her best to get busy lifting items out of the car to avoid staring at him, open-mouthed. Once-gangly Marc Duncannon had spent some time in the gym, apparently. The weights section. Her belly flipped on itself in a most unfamiliar way.

He tossed the disconnected phone into the back of the vehicle and stepped into his wetsuit, hauling it up over muscular legs and then flexing his broad back as he shrugged it up over his shoulders and arms. As soon as it was secure, he snared up the first aid kit and a small bag of supplies and thrust the phone into it. He shoved a snatch-strap, rope and every ockie-strap he could rummage up in behind it. Then he threw his T-shirt, a hooded trainer and an old towel at Beth, saying, 'You're going to need this,' and was off, down the dunes, racing towards the water.

Beth did her best to keep up. She stumbled several times in the thick sand and paused to kick off her unsuitable shoes, losing more ground on Marc. But she didn't need to be near him to know what was going on; his stiff body language was as clear as a neon sign as he ran down the shore, close to the first whale.

The sleek, marble-skinned animal was already dead.

An awful sorrow washed over her: that she might have delayed Marc for the precious minutes that counted. That this enormous creature was already gull-food because of her.

Marc paused briefly, those magnificent shoulders drooping slightly, but then he kicked on, further down the beach to where the second body rolled in time with the surf. As he got closer, he slowed and took a wide approach, lifting his hands high in the air in warning. Beth instantly slowed.

It was alive.

By the time she caught up with him, he was on his second wide pass of the beleaguered mammal. It lay partially submerged in the quicksand where earth met ocean, every second wave high enough to wash gently over its lower half. But exposed parts of its upper body were already dangerously dry. Compared to the liquid mercury-looking surface of wet whale skin, the dry parts looked like the handbag she'd left in her hire car at Marc's farm.

That couldn't be good.

'Put the sweatshirt on, Beth.' He didn't bother with a please and she didn't expect niceties right now. But it didn't mean she was prepared to be dictated to. Not any more.

'It's thirty-three degrees. I'll boil.'

'Better that than burn to a crisp. We're going to be out here for some time.' He moved to her side and relieved her of his T-shirt and the towel. Then he zipped up the wetsuit more fully over his chest, fastened the neck strap and tugged a cap down hard over his shaggy hair. 'And you're about to get wet. You'll thank me in two hours.'

'Two hours?' They'd be out in the water for a couple of hours, with an injured dinosaur? Alone? But Marc wasn't worried; he ran headlong into the water between the dead whale and the live one and soaked the towel and his shirt.

His five-times experience certainly showed.

By the time Beth had wriggled herself into Marc's sweatshirt and pulled up the hood for some shade, he was already beside the dangerous giant. A false killer whale, Marc told her. The fact it was not a true killer whale didn't fill her with any confidence. It was still big enough to send them

both flying with a toss of its wishbone tail, which bore an arrow-head-shaped scar. One enormous dark eye rolled wildly at his approach. Marc slowed and started speaking softly. Steadily. Random words that meant nothing.

The eye wasn't fooled for a minute.

But when Marc gently laid the saturated towel onto its parched skin, the eye rolled fully shut and the beast let off a mighty groan that vibrated the sand beneath Beth's feet. Her heart squeezed. It wasn't pain, it was sheer relief. She sprinted forward and met Marc in the water, hoping that he'd think the tears in her eyes were from the glare coming off the ocean.

'Around the other side,' he ordered brusquely, glancing up as she wiped a stray one away. 'Stay up-beach from that ventral fin; it's pure muscle.'

'The *what* fin ...?'

'Underneath.' He threw the sodden T-shirt her way and she just caught it. 'The fin closest to her belly.'

The whale barely moved as they took it in turns draping the wet fabric over its parched skin. Within fifteen minutes, Beth's wrists ached from wringing out the water to run down the whale's hide and she moved to a slosh-and-drag technique instead. Brutal on the back, but the most effective way of keeping the poor animal wet. A fierce concentration blazed in Marc's eyes, a flush of exertion highlighting the familiar ridge of his cheekbone. Familiar yet unfamiliar.

Her mind bubbled with memories of a younger Marc studying. Or whipping her butt at chess. Or listening to her dramas. That same focus. That same intensity. No question that some parts of him hadn't changed.

Even if the rest had.

Neither of them spoke, their focus centred on the whale. Beth's reason for coming to the south coast flitted entirely out of her head, dwarfed in significance compared to the life and death battle going on in the shallows of Holly's Bay.

'You need a break.' Marc's voice was reluctant enough and firm enough to cut through the hypnotic routine of *slosh-and-drag ... slosh-and-drag*. But it was also dictatorial enough to get Beth's hackles up.

'I'm fine.'

'You're parched. Your lips are like prunes. Stop and rehydrate. You're no use to either of us if you collapse.'

*Either of us.* Him or the whale. Beth didn't want to see the sense in that but he was right; if his focus was on rescuing her, the whale could die. She straightened and used the sleeve of his sweatshirt to wipe at the sweat streaming into her eyes.

'I could use a swig of water myself,' he said, clearly hoping she'd fall for the incredibly juvenile ploy, but she barely heard him, focusing only on four little letters.

Swig.

Her body immediately picked up and ran with the evocative image: an icy bottle straight from the cooler, the hissing sound the cap made twisting off. The clink of the cap hitting the sink. Her near favourite sound in the world. Second only to the breathy sigh of a cork coming out of a good bottle of Chenin Blanc.

A sound she hadn't heard for two years. Since she'd stopped drinking.

Her mouth would have watered if it hadn't been so dry. Like Pavlov's dog, just the thought of a particular spirit could still make her saliva flow. Despite everything she'd done to put it behind her, her body still compromised her from time to time. When she least expected it. It sure was not going to be happy with what was about to cross its lips.

She moved up the beach and hauled a two-litre bottle of still water out of one of Marc's supply bags and then cracked the cap. She suddenly realised how thirsty she was, but she was determined not to let Marc see that. She stood and jogged back to his side of the whale and passed him the bottle

first. He glared at her meaningfully, but took it and helped himself to a deep, long draw of purified water. His Adam's apple bobbed thirstily with each long swallow.

'Once this is gone we can use the bottle to help wet the whale,' she said.

Marc shook his head. 'We're going to have to make this last. I only have one more.'

Four litres of water. Between two people, on a blistering Australian day, with reflected light bouncing up off the surface of the salty, salty water.

*Oh, joy.*

He finished drinking and passed the bottle straight back to her. Beth's pride had limits and watching the way the clean water had leaked down his throat had stretched it way too far. Every fibre of her being wanted to feel liquid crossing her tongue.

If that had to be water, so be it.

She didn't guzzle, though she well could have. At least AA had taught her something about restraint. Greedily sculling their precious water supply was not something she wanted Marc to witness. And a small part of her was afraid that once she started she might not stop.

She made herself lower the bottle after a few restorative swallows and, buoyed by the wetness coursing into her body, she jogged lightly back through the beach sand and knelt to slide the bottle into the shade of Marc's supply bag. As she did, she dislodged the other occupants. The satellite phone. First aid kit. A clutch of muesli and chocolate bars, a small hand-wound torch. The second container of water. And a—

Beth leapt back as if burned.

A large seventies-era silver hip flask tumbled out onto the sand. Ornate, neatly stoppered and probably his father's before it was Marc's, one of the few remembrances he might have of the man who had died when Marc was nine. The sort you kept whisky in, or vodka, or just about any liquor you didn't care to advertise. Beth didn't need to pick it up to know it was full of something bad. He wouldn't have thrown it in the emergency pack for nothing.

She shoved it back into the bag and rose to her feet, shaking. She hadn't worked this hard for two years to blow it now. She glanced at Marc to see if he'd noticed, but he was too busy gently rubbing the wet towel over the whale's bulbous face to notice.

She'd finally hardened herself against facing her demons on every street corner in the city. Every billboard. Every radio commercial. To encounter liquor on a remote beach in the middle of nowhere. In front of Marc. What kind of a sick karmic joke was this?

She stumbled as her feet sank back into the loose shore sand and water rushed into the twin voids around her ankles. As she went down onto one knee, a wave came in and soaked her to her middle, her pale blue jeans staining instantly darker with salt water, the cold assault shocking her mind off the hip flask and what it held.

But her sunken perspective was how she noticed something else. The whale's ventral fin was partly underwater, even after the wave washed back out. The one that had been high and dry a couple of hours ago when they'd arrived.

She scrambled to her feet, nearly falling across the whale in her haste.

'Marc ...'

He looked up at her, fatigue in his face, and something else. Fierce determination. This whale was not going to die while he breathed.

'Marc ... the tide's coming in.'

He turned his eyes heavenward and closed them briefly in salute. His lips moved briefly.

'Is that good?'

Hazel eyes lowered back to hers, clear and honest, as if they'd forgotten she was an unwelcome blast from the past. 'That's very good. Maybe we can refloat her.'

'It's a her?'

‘You can tell by her short, curved dorsal fin.’ His head jerked in the direction of the other whale. ‘I think that one might have been her calf.’

The unfamiliar stab of grief slid in under her ribs and washed over her with another shove of the waves. This mum had followed her baby in to shore. Maybe she’d stranded herself trying to save her little one. Was that why her eyes kept rolling around—was she trying to find her calf? Empathy for the animal’s loss nearly overwhelmed her, stealing the breath she desperately needed to keep her muscles working. But she embraced the pain and almost celebrated it. Two years ago, she wouldn’t have felt such sorrow. Two years ago, she wouldn’t have felt much of anything.

Her eyes fell back on the suffering whale. Her ire—and her voice—lifted. ‘Where are they?’

He kept up the rhythmic sloshing. ‘Who?’

‘The rescuers. Shouldn’t they be here by now?’

The sloshing stopped. He stared. ‘We *are* the rescuers, Beth. What do you think we’ve been doing for the past three hours?’

‘I meant others. People with boats. Shovels. Whale-rescue devices.’

The sun must have been causing a mirage ... That almost looked like a smile. The one she’d never imagined she’d see today.

‘Oh, right, the whale-rescue devices.’ Then he sobered. ‘A big group of volunteers is about fifty clicks to the west, helping with another stranding. As soon as they have that situation stabilised they’ll be out to help us. Our solo whale doesn’t stack up against their entire pod, unfortunately.’

‘A whole pod stranded?’ Beth cried. ‘What is wrong with these creatures?’

If not for the tender way she ran the dripping T-shirt across the whale’s skin, taking unnecessary care to avoid its eyes, Marc would have read that as petulance. But he squinted against the lowering sun and really looked at her strained face. Much paler than when they’d started. Despite the blazing sun. Back to the colour it had been when she’d first climbed out of her rental car back at his property.

Beth was tired. Emotionally and physically spent already, and they’d only been out here a couple of hours. She looked as wretched as his mother when she was coming off a particularly bad bender. The bleached cheeks and shadowed eyes had the same impact on him that his mother’s had.

Used to. Before he shut down that part of him.

Beth had much worse to get through yet. The rescue was only just beginning. Maybe he should have shoved her out back at the homestead. Done her a favour and sent her packing. If he’d left just five minutes earlier he would have been out here alone, anyway, so what was the difference if she left now? He had enough supplies to get him through the night.

Water for life. Food for strength. Potassium for cramps. Whisky and wetsuit for warmth. Enough for a day, anyway. Hopefully by then backup would have arrived.

‘It often happens this way,’ he said, taking pity on her confusion. ‘There’s nearly forty volunteers at the other stranding, apparently.’

Beth stared at him between refreshing her whale-washer in the ocean and leaning towards him over the animal as the water ran down over it. ‘Forty! Couldn’t they spare us a couple of people?’

‘Anyone spare is already on their way to other isolated strandings that the aerial boys identify along this stretch of coast. They know we’ve got this one in hand.’

Beth laughed a little too much and waved her paltry, dripping T-shirt around. ‘This doesn’t feel very in hand.’ Marc dived forward and covered the whale’s blowhole to protect it from the cascading water. The whale feebly blew out at the same time. At least she could still do that much.

He found himself suddenly possessed of very little tolerance. ‘Hey, if you want to go, knock yourself out. I’ll do better without your negativity anyway.’

Beth lifted her head and glared, the first sign of fire in those bleak eyes since they’d got out of his Land Cruiser. ‘I’m not negative; I’m terrified. I don’t know what I’m doing.’

The raw honesty spoke to some part of him a decade old. It triggered all kinds of unwelcome protective instincts in him. This really was more than she'd bargained for when she came cruising down his drive, looking all intense.

He sighed. 'You're doing fine. Just keep her body wet and her blowhole dry. It's all we can do.'

They fell to silence and into a hypnotic rhythm in time with the wash of the ocean, the groans of the whale and the *slosh ... slosh* of their wet fabric. Marc did his best to ignore her, but his eyes kept finding their way back to her. To features drawn tight that had once shone with zest. Trying to work out why she'd come. Part of him was curious—the part that had always wondered what the heck had happened all those years ago. But the other part of him wasn't into lifting lids off unknown boxes any more. And he'd done far too good a job of driving Beth Hughes clear out of his memory. Until today.

'Do you need to contact Damien? Tell him where you are?'

Frosty eyes lifted to his. 'I'm not required to report in.'

'I didn't say that. But I figured he'd be concerned about you.' She looked as if a stiff breeze would send her tumbling. *I'd be worried if you were mine to worry about.*

*Whoa.* Thank God for inner monologue. Imagine if that little baby had slipped out. A blast well and truly from the past.

Beth dipped her head so the hood shielded her face from his view. 'He won't be.'

There was something in the way she said it. So final. So cold. He couldn't help himself, although he really didn't want to have any interest in her life 'Why not?'

*Slosh ... slosh. Silence.*

'Beth?'

Even the whale seemed to flinch at the sudden outburst of skinny arms to its right. 'We're not together any more, okay? I no longer answer to anyone.'

Her marriage was over? The King and Queen of Pymont High were no more? A nasty imp deep inside him badly wanted to smile. But there was nothing satisfying about the pain on her face.

'I'm sorry, Beth.'

'Don't be,' she mumbled from down the tail end of the whale. 'I'm not.'

She moved like a car wash up and down the three metres of the whale's body, sloshing as she went. The animal was relaxed and trusting enough now to let her do it without fussing. Her hand trailed along the marbled mercury of its skin as she went and every now and again it shuddered as though ticklish. He empathised completely. There was a time he would have given just about anything to have her hands touch him like that.

He slammed a door on that memory.

So she'd married McKinley young but now she was single again. And hot on the trail of her old pal Marc. A light bulb suddenly came on in his mind. 'I hope you're not expecting to pick up where we left off, Beth?'

She froze and looked up at him. 'Excuse me?'

*Ooh.* He hadn't forgotten that arctic look. The ice princess. There was a masochistic kind of pleasure in having it levelled on him again after so long. 'Because as far as I'm concerned we were done that day behind the library.'

Even under the hood of her oversized sweatshirt he could see her nostrils flaring. About as wildly as the whale's blowhole. 'You think I'm here to come on to you?'

'I'm still waiting to find out why you're here. You came a long way for something. Go ahead and say what you wanted to say.'

Permission seemed to paralyse her. Her mouth opened and closed wordlessly several times. Whatever she was going to say, it wasn't easy.

Her hands stilled on the whale. 'I hurt you back in school and I wanted you to know I'm very sorry,' her soft voice began.

Every part of him stretched sling-shot taut. He cast her a sideways glance. 'You didn't hurt me.'

Her pretty face folded. ‘That can’t be true. I was there, I remember.’

‘What do you remember?’

She blew air out of full lips. ‘How you looked. How we left things.’

*How badly he’d handled himself?* He shrugged. ‘Like I said. Friendships end.’

‘Not usually like that. You kissed me, Marc.’

Right on cue, he got a flash of the wide-eyed awakening on her face. The coconut taste on his tongue as her mouth had parted with surprise. As he’d sunk into the heaven of her lips. He clenched his teeth against the bittersweet memory. Forced it back down deep where it belonged. His muscles clamped up again. He calmed himself for the whale’s sake. It was stressed enough for all of them.

‘That wasn’t a kiss, Beth. I was trying to make a point.’

Confusion marred her pale skin. ‘What point?’

A lip-searing, unforgettable point. A friendship ending point. ‘That you would have kissed anyone offering at that point.’ *That you didn’t need McKinley for that.*

She disguised her sharp intake of breath behind loudly dumping her whale-washer in the drink and then she bought herself some recovery time by wringing the life out of his old T-shirt. For one second he felt like a heel for hurting her. But he pushed that away too. Best course now—like back when he was a kid—was not to let himself feel anything at all for Beth Hughes. Time had passed. They’d both moved on. In a couple of hours she’d be gone.

‘It’s been ten years. It’s not like I’ve been sitting around obsessing about it.’ *At least not for more than a few months.* ‘What else is there to say?’

*Slosh ... slosh.* Her eyes glittered as she measured what he’d said. ‘Other than “Good to see you, Beth”.’

Her tight words cracked and his stomach flipped fully over. He was still a sucker for those big brown eyes if they were awash. Either she was a master manipulator or this really was a big deal for her. But it was for him too, after years of not letting himself think about her. *Good to see her?*

‘We never lied to each other before.’

Her face grew pale beneath his hoodie and he turned his attention back to the whale, unable to stomach her expression.

They worked silently for another twenty minutes until Marc couldn’t stand the quiet. ‘If you want to take the Cruiser back to my place, that’s fine. I’ll get a lift back when reinforcements come.’

She lifted tired eyes. ‘No, thank you.’

*No?* ‘Why are you still here? You’ve said what you came for. You’re sorry for the hurt you imagine you caused.’ He made his shrug much more casual than he felt. ‘Doesn’t that mean we’re done?’

It should. If it was the real reason. He could see in her eyes it wasn’t.

They flicked away and back in a blink. ‘You haven’t accepted my apology yet.’

That stopped his hands and he slowed his bend to re-wet his towel. ‘Is that a requirement?’

Her eyes held his. ‘I’d like you to.’

*Which meant the apology was more about her than him. Why does that surprise you? Just acknowledge the woman’s apology and get her the hell off this beach!* Yet something in him couldn’t do it. ‘I don’t see you for ten years and then you turn up looking for absolution?’ Uncertainty filled her eyes. ‘Why would you expect it?’

‘Because ...’ Her pale face scrunched up, confused. As if she hadn’t thought about that until now. ‘Because you’re Marc.’

He had to take two steps back from the whale for that one. In case it felt his surging anger through his touch. ‘That might have been our dynamic as kids, Beth, but a lot has changed in the years you’ve been gone. I’m not a gutless boy any more.’

She seemed shocked. ‘You were never gutless, Marc. You always went straight for what you wanted.’

*Not always.* He struggled to get his temper under control, his hands back on the whale. ‘Bully for me.’

‘You don’t believe me?’

‘I don’t believe that’s why you thought I’d fall for your apology.’

Her colour started to rise. ‘I just want to know that you forgive me for what I did.’

*And here we go ...* ‘Ah, now we’re getting to it. So, in addition to accepting your apology, you want forgiveness? What is this, some kind of twelve-step programme?’ He’d studied up on those back when he was researching his mother’s condition. Back when he still gave a damn. ‘Make good for all the people you’ve burned in life?’

It was Beth’s turn to sway away from the whale. He crashed onwards, too worked up to give much care for her enormous eyes. ‘Where did I fall on the list, Beth? How did I fare against your other screw-ups in life? I hope I was at least in the top half.’

Her eyes blazed and it was beautiful and awful at the same time. Now that he was faced with opportunity, hurting her was not quite as satisfying as he’d imagined back when he was seventeen and holding all those feelings close to him.

She stood and stared, her head tilted, her eyes glittering magnificently. ‘Thank you, Marc. This actually makes it easier.’

He was already frowning into the sun too much to do it further. ‘What?’

‘In my head you were still the old Marc—gentle and concerned about people. I was really anxious about facing that man. But the new Marc is just a sarcastic pig and much easier not to give a stuff about.’

He snorted. ‘Story of my life.’

She shook her head, disgust all over her face. ‘Oh, boo hoo ...’

Only one person on this planet had ever spoken to him like this—cut-throat honest. Getting straight down to the bones of an issue. And here she was again.

He gave as good as he got. ‘Last time I saw you, Beth, the only thing you wanted from me was a goodbye. Well, you got it. Don’t kid yourself that I’ve been mooching over that all these years. It was a good lesson to learn so early in life. It toughened me up for the real world. It drove me to succeed at school and in life.’

She forced her tiring body to scoop up more water and sloshed it all over the whale, but never took her eyes off him. ‘Fine. Here it is, Marc. I’m sorry that I hurt you back in high school. I made the wrong decision and I’ve come to regret that in my life. I’m sorry that I bailed on our plans for uni, too, and that I might have contributed to you not going—’

Pain lanced through him. ‘Don’t flatter yourself.’

She persevered. ‘But most of all I’m really sorry that I came to find you today. Because, up until now, you were the person I held in my heart as the symbol of everything I wanted to be. Clever, loyal, generous. I’ve spent years wishing I was more like you and—finally—I see the truth. Beneath all those new muscles you’re just an angry, bitter, *small* man, Marcus Duncannon. And I’ve been wasting my energy feeling so bad about what I did.’

She stood up straighter and looked around her. This was where she should have stormed off. He could see she was dying to—making that kind of spectacular scene just wasn’t complete without a flounce-off. But she had nowhere to go and a whale to save.

He blinked at her. There was absolutely nothing he could say to an outburst like that, which was fine because he was having a hard time getting past one small part of the significant mouthful she’d just spewed. It clanged in his mind like a chime.

*You were the person I held in my heart ...* Every part of him rebelled against the impact of those words on his pulse rate. His mouth dried up and he could feel his heart beating in his throat.

Ridiculous. Unacceptable. She didn’t even know she’d said it.

But it burned like a brand into his mind.

They stood staring at each other, chests heaving equally. Then all the fight drained out of him. 'Don't dress it up, Beth. Tell me what you really think.'

She glared at him but couldn't sustain it. The tiniest of smiles crept through. 'It's taken me a decade, but I've learned to say what I think. I don't pull any punches these days.'

'You never had any trouble with confidence as far as I remember. You were always brash, always willing to go headlong into something with me. With anyone.'

*But particularly with me ...* Those days were some of the best in his life. Back when Marc Duncannon and Beth Hughes were interchangeable in people's minds. There was nothing she wasn't willing to try once.

Fearless.

Marc frowned on the realisation. No, she hadn't been fearless. There were things that had definitely scared the pants off her, but she'd done them. With him by her side.

She looked up at him earnestly. Pained. 'That is not something I count under my virtues, Marc. Being an enthusiastic follower is not the same as thinking for yourself.'

He snorted. 'You're not trying to tell me you were an innocent accomplice?' He wasn't ready for another woman in his life blaming everyone around for her problems.

'I was a completely willing accomplice. I lived to follow you into trouble. I was fully up for any crazy idea you had.'

'Then what?'

'I hadn't learned yet to ask for what I wanted. To put myself first.'

His stomach sank. *McKinley*. 'Don't tell me. You developed that sense right around the final year of school.'

She stared at him. Hard. 'On the contrary. It took me nearly a decade.'

Somewhere in there was some hidden meaning he should probably have been seeing. He felt like he always used to with Beth, as if he was operating on seven second delay. Always the last to get it. Always needing things spelled out. He'd forgotten what that felt like. He used to think that he was just not bright enough for her but now, with adult eyes, he wondered if it wasn't just that she tended to be cryptic.

He blew out a breath. 'Okay, as much as I'm enjoying our little trip down memory lane, it's not helping this whale. I want you to take over on the wetting; I'm going to try something.'

'Wait! What?'

'You'll see.'

Beth shifted nervously. 'No, I... Will it take long?'

'Probably. Why?'

'I need to ...' She looked around. 'Despite the heat ...'

Understanding hit him. 'Oh. Well, you're in the ocean. Go here.'

The look she gave him was hysterical. 'I'm not going to pee in the water while you're standing in it. And while a whale's lying in it.'

'What do you reckon the whale does, Beth?'

'I'm not a whale!'

True enough. She was slight enough to be the krill that whales liked to feast on. 'Look, the tide's running diagonally from the south, so if you go over there—' he pointed to a spot about ten metres away '—then the whale and I will be safely upstream.' He grinned. 'As it were.'

Beth turned and looked at the spot, then back at him. 'I can't.'

'Bashful bladder?'

'You're not helping, Marc.' She started to search around the shore for another alternative.

'Before you even suggest it, the dunes are not safe. Tiger snakes. Up beach might be okay but it's a lot more exposed and it's probably safer if we stay fairly close together.' *If you stay close to me.* 'Besides, a swim first will cool you off.'

‘Oh, my God ... ‘ She looked around one more time, desperately, as if a Portaloo might materialise on the beach if she willed it hard enough.

It was difficult not to find that panicked expression endearing. Despite everything. He tightened his jaw. ‘Come on, Princess. When did you get so precious? The quicker you get out there the quicker it’ll be over.’

‘Are you laughing at me?’

He forced his face into a more neutral expression. ‘I wouldn’t dream of it.’

‘I’m sure you’d have the same concern if you were in my situation.’

‘I was in your situation, Beth. About an hour ago. I just didn’t make a fuss about it.’

It took her about two seconds to realise he hadn’t left the water. Or his wetsuit. She lurched away from the whale—and him—and waded hastily away. ‘Oh, my God. Men are so disgusting!’

He just grinned at her, the years falling away. ‘It’s human,’ he cried after her as she kept striding up-beach, slowly into deeper water. He kept poking, in the painfully reasonable tone he knew she hated the most, calling after her fleeing shape. ‘We all do it.’

Her cheeks had flamed from a heap more than windburn. Watching the mighty fall should have brought him more satisfaction. But Beth’s prudishness only served to remind him of the vast gulf that lay between them. That always had. In school, she’d always had an aura about her, a subtle kind of quality that set her apart from everyone else. Definitely from him. Her brains certainly had. She was by far the brightest person he’d known, but she didn’t hang out with the brains. Or the geeks. Or the beautiful people—until the end—though it was where she and her luminescence had truly belonged.

She’d pretty much hung out with him. Rain, hail or shine. And he’d pretty much lived for that back then.

When he was younger, he hadn’t thought to wonder about it. It wasn’t until he was about fourteen and some helpful jackass had pointed out the social differences between poor Marcus Duncannon and rich girl Elizabeth Hughes that it had started to niggle. But she’d been unwavering in her friendship, uncaring about the condition of his mum’s ancient car, the shabby hems on T-shirts he’d been wearing for two years. Or the fact that she had to ride buses to hang out with him. Some deep part of him had feared she might bail on him like everyone else when his father’s life insurance money had run out. But she hadn’t.

Not for three years. On the other side of *that* day, it had all looked more sinister. Maybe slumming with the poor fatherless kid gave her some kind of weird social cachet, some intrigue. Maybe he propped up her ego daily with his sycophantic interest. Maybe she was just biding her time until someone better came along.

Or maybe she just outgrew him. She’d said as much. He just never would have picked McKinley as the sort of chump she’d grow towards.

At seventeen he’d thought about ditching school immediately. Lord knew his mother needed the extra income back then. And he certainly could have done without the daily taunts of the beautiful people that his Beth was now one of them. McKinley’s Beth, in fact, but always *his Beth* deep in his heart.

And now the Princess of Pymont High was peeing in the ocean. In public.

There was a certain satisfaction in that. No matter how belated. He hadn’t let himself go over these memories for years. Call it a self-preservation thing. He didn’t like the person he’d become in those final months of school.

Beth’s discomfort at being so debased only birthed a raw, shining affection deep in his gut—a feeling he hadn’t allowed for a long, long time. He laughed to dislodge the glow deep within, to sever the golden filaments that threatened to re-establish between them.

He laughed to save himself from himself.

Then he locked his jaw and forced his attention back onto the only female out here who deserved his sympathy.

The ocean was full of water. What were a few drops more? And Beth was incredibly overheated. The idea of taking a quick swim before. Well, it wasn't the worst idea in the world.

She waded out into the deeper water, waist height, and peeled off Marc's oversized fleecy sweatshirt before bundling it high above her head to keep it dry. Then she slowly lowered her body up to her neck in the cold Southern Ocean. The frigid kiss of liquid on parched skin made her shiver. Cool ocean water rinsed away dried sweat. She tipped her head all the way back until cold water washed around her ears.

*Bliss.*

'Turn around!' she shouted back to Marc, onshore. Yes, it was pointless but it felt very necessary. He complied, busying himself with the whale, but she was sure his whole body was lurching with laughter.

*Sure, laugh at the spectacle.* Nice. Her humiliation was probably a gift to him.

She swapped the sweater into a raised hand, carefully unfastened her jeans with the other and tugged them down single-handed, muttering the whole time. There was no way she was going to repeat Marc's wetsuit trick. She may have done some low things in her life but there were some barrel bottoms even *she* wouldn't scrape.

Getting her jeans down single-handed was one thing but getting them back on when she was finished, wet and underwater.

'Oh, no.' Beth looked urgently between Marc and the great expanse of nothing around them and realised there was no way—nowhere—she was going to be able to get out of this water with dignity.

'Come on, Beth. I'm doing all the work here,' Marc complained from his side of the whale.

*For crying out loud!* She wriggled left and then right and eventually stepped free of her adhesive jeans, trapping them on the ocean floor between her feet and standing fully up. Then she slid Marc's enormous hoodie back on over her cotton blouse. Its thickness cut out some of the sun's glare and pressed her wet blouse more tightly to her, cooling her even more. With one hand, she held the sweater high of the waterline and then she hooked her jeans up out of the water with a foot, into her free hand.

Then she started wading back to shore, barelegged. Her underwear was no worse than a bikini bottom, after all. Just because it was flouncy ...

Just because it was Marc.

Her heart fluttered wildly, imagining his reaction to her stick-thin legs. The last decade and the abuses she'd put her body through really hadn't done her any favours. She stiffened her spine and trod ashore as though this had been her plan all along, letting his sweater slip back down to mid-thigh, and then laid her wrecked jeans out to dry on the sand high above the tide mark next to their bag of supplies. Her eyes instinctively fell on it, knowing what lay within, pulsing like a dark heart. And what lay *within* what lay within.

*Walk away.*

The thickness of the sand hid the unsteadiness of her gait. Not that Marc would have noticed; he was looking everywhere *but* at her long bare legs. The whale. The horizon. The sky. The extra delay probably irritated him if he couldn't even meet her eyes.

That didn't help her mood any. 'Okay. I'm back. What was so urgent?'

He waited until she got behind the whale before letting his eyes rest back on her. Then he cleared his throat. 'I'm going to try and dig a trench around her,' he said, indicating the now dangerously still whale. 'If I can get my snatch-strap around her, maybe we can drag her out a bit further.'

'Will it hold?'

'It pulls my Land Cruiser; it should tow a small whale.'

Beth frowned. 'Is digging under her safe?'

'I'll trench in front, then we'll try and saw the strap through the sand beneath her.' His hands mimicked the action, the cords in his wrists and forearms flexing with the motion. It briefly flitted through her mind that those bulging muscles could probably tow the whale to sea all by themselves.

Beth shook her head. ‘No way. She must weigh half a ton. That sand will be too compressed.’

For a tiny moment he looked at her with a hint of admiration. Pleasing him had always pleased her. Even now. The slightest of glows leached out from somewhere deep inside her. But then he dropped heavy lids down over his eyes and the connection was lost.

‘I’ve been thinking about that. If we can time it with the suck of the wash back out to sea it might loosen the sand just enough. It’s worth a try. But we need to be ready for high tide.’

‘What happens then?’

‘We try and refloat her.’

‘By ourselves?’ Her voice sounded like a squeak, even to her.

‘If we get lucky, the cavalry will arrive with a boat to tow her back out.’

‘And if we don’t?’

Steady eyes regarded her. ‘If we don’t, I hope you’re stronger than you look.’

## CHAPTER THREE

SHE wasn't. Not nearly. But she was getting better.

It had been a long, uphill road recovering from being Mrs Damien McKinley, but she'd found the strength to try. And it appeared that strength begat more strength, because she'd found extra to come here today. To face Marc. Even though ninety per cent of her whispered not to bother. Not to risk it. The ten per cent of her that disagreed was noisy and shovey and refused to be ignored. It remembered Marc. It trusted him.

Looked as if it had just learned a powerful lesson.

Marc Duncannon was not the man she remembered. He'd grown up in so many ways and while his physical changes were an unarguable enhancement, she couldn't say the same for his personality. Then again, after the decade she'd endured, she was no prize either. Maybe losing his father so young had damaged him irreparably. So close to losing his best friend. And apparently then his mother.

She frowned. 'So, you didn't tell me what happened with your mum. You two were so close.' Each was all the other had left. Even if Beth had really struggled to like Janice by the end.

Marc's whole body straightened and turned to stone, halting his digging. His mouth set. His eyes darkened dangerously. 'Did you imagine I'd still be living at home with my mother at this age?'

Scorn like that would have hurt a lot more once, before she calloused up at Damien's hands. Still, the fact that it still managed to slice down into her gut said a lot about how she still felt about Marc. She took a controlling breath. 'Obviously I expected you to have moved out of home but I never expected you to have moved out of her life.'

The blizzard in his eyes reached out and lashed at her. 'You still like to research before you travel, obviously.'

The one trip they'd taken together, when Marc had got his driving licence at the start of their final year in school, had been an exercise in military precision, thanks to Beth's aptitude for planning. Anything to take her mind off the fact that she and Marc were going to be camping. Out in the sticks. Alone. Right about then, her awareness of him as anything other than her best mate had crashed headlong into adolescent awareness of him as *a* mate. As in biological. That had been an awkward, confusing feeling that had never quite diminished.

'I had to start somewhere to find you. Your neighbour remembered me.' The woman had been very kind and given Beth the information she needed to track Marc down. Albeit with a slight lift to one eyebrow. She tried again. 'I thought, because Janice was all you had ...'

Marc resumed his powerful digging, the chop and slide of his body adding emphasis to his curt words. 'I hope you're not trying to convince me that you had warm feelings for my mother. I remember how fast you used to like to get in and out of my house.'

Beth flushed. She hadn't realised how poorly she'd been covering her dislike of Marc's mum back then. It hadn't always been that way. It was just that as Marc grew older, Mrs Duncannon seemed to grow more hostile. Almost jealous. Until that last day.

Marc stood in his trench and eyed her. 'After school I spent some time up north on the trawlers. When I got back, I thought it was time to get my own space,' he said. 'She liked the city, I wanted the country. It's as simple as that.'

*Right.* And this whale was made of Jell-O. But if he didn't want to talk about it.

On a non-committal *uh-huh*, she let her focus drop back to where her hands continued to slosh the whale with a T-shirt that was now mostly shredded fabric. Ten years was a long time. One-third of their lives. What else could have injured him in that time? A woman? He didn't have a ring—not even a tan mark; she'd checked that out while he was choking the life out of his steering wheel earlier. But there was no doubt he was harbouring some wounds.

The thought brought her a physical pain that somehow rose above the ache in her lower back. That anyone would have hurt him like that. Bad enough what she'd done.

She dragged a deep breath in and concentrated on what her hands were doing. But silence wasn't an option either. 'Ask me a question.'

'About what?'

'Anything other than Damien or that day at school.' *Or what I've been doing for the past ten years.*

He waved his whale-washer in the air and then complied, plucking a question from nowhere. 'Favourite colour?'

'Still green. Moss-green, nothing too limey. My whole studio is painted that colour.'

'You have a studio?'

'Sounds more glamorous than it is. It's a partially restored old warehouse belonging to my father. I suspect I'm not supposed to be living in it. Council rules.'

'What do you do there?'

'I paint. Oils. My work is all around me.' For better or worse. The images from her abyss period were dark and dismal. But powerful. Lately, new brighter themes had started emerging. 'When I changed to B-stream it gave me an art double and I discovered I loved it. And I'm good at it.'

Two confused lines folded across his brow. 'That's good. I'd like to—'

... *see them?* The way he cut himself off made her wonder. They fell to silence. 'Ask me about my first car,' she eventually said.

Cars. The great equaliser. He smiled slightly and shook his head. 'What was your first car, Beth?'

'Toyota. Right after school. God, I loved that beat-up piece of junk. First thing I bought and paid for myself.' Until she'd stopped driving it because of the drinking.

'First kiss?'

She shook her head. 'Nope. Not talking about that day.'

Marc's eyes flared. 'Hold on, sidebar for just one second. That was your *first* kiss?'

She stared at him. 'You were my best friend. You don't think I would have told you the second someone kissed me?'

His eyebrows rose in apparent disbelief. 'No one ever tried?'

Beth shrugged; the hurts that had meant so much when she was younger were insignificant in the light of everything that had happened since. 'Guess I wasn't all that sought-after in school.'

He opened his mouth to say something, thought better of it and then changed tack. 'Until McKinley.'

'Right. But that topic's off-limits too.' Then something occurred to her. 'Wait—it wasn't *your* first kiss?' Marc dropped thick lashes down between them. Her mouth fell open. 'Seriously? Who was it?'

He had to know she was going to keep nagging until he told her.

'Tasmin Major.'

'*Olympic Tasmin?*' Her voice rose an octave.

'She was only state level then.'

But a twice Olympic freestyle diver since then. Tasmin was one of the classmates Beth thought of when she was counting her own many failings. Pretty. Gentle. Athletic. *Olympic*. And now she'd been Marc's first kiss, too. Maybe more? That thought bit deep down inside. Right down deep where she always considered their kiss behind the library to be special. Even if it had led to the end of their friendship.

Her throat tightened up. 'Why didn't you tell me?' More importantly, how could she have not noticed? She'd been so attuned to Marc's every breath.

He sidestepped her outrage. ‘Why would I tell you? It was just a kiss.’ Beth gave him her most penetrating stare, straight out of childhood. ‘Okay, a bunch of kisses, but it’s not like we were dating or anything.’

‘I hope not, because that would mean I really was oblivious to everything going on around me.’ Curiosity got the better of her. ‘Why were you kissing Tasmin if you weren’t dating?’

Marc dragged his eyes off to the horizon. Back to the whale. Anywhere but on hers.

‘Marc?’

He hissed and tossed his hands up. ‘She volunteered.’

Beth blinked. Several times. ‘Tasmin Major volunteered to kiss you? Did I miss some kind of recruitment process?’

Cautious eyes met hers briefly. ‘Actually, we volunteered with each other.’

Beth’s stomach compressed into a hard ball. An insane jealousy surged through her as she realised what that meant. They wouldn’t have been the first kids in school to do it. ‘You went to her for *kissing practice*? Why?’

The look he gave her took her back a decade, too.

‘Okay, other than *practice*, obviously. I can’t believe you went to Tasmin. I mean she’s nice and all, but ... What was wrong with me?’ And why on earth was this hurting so much?

That brought his head up instantly. Hazel eyes blazed sincerity. ‘Nothing was wrong with you, Beth. But we were friends.’

She thought of all the girls at school who turned their snooty noses up at Marc because of the way he lived and dressed. As if they would ever find a finer person. Her estimation of Tasmin rose a notch because she wasn’t one of them, even if it also meant that she’d spent half their childhood with Marc’s tongue down her Olympic throat.

Then something else hit her. ‘Who were you practising for?’

He tipped his face back down to the whale, slosed harder. Resolutely ignored the question. Beth waited. Silently. Her heart pounded. How far had she truly come if she was this frightened of finding out?

‘It’s old news, Beth. Hardly important now.’

Her frown threatened to leave permanent grooves between her eyes, encrusted in the salt. ‘I thought I knew everything about you back then, Marc. It’s thrown me.’

He waved his shredded towel. ‘I just wanted to get the whole first kiss thing out of the way, Beth. Can we just leave it at that?’

She looked at the tightness of his lips, the shadow in his gaze. She softened her tone. ‘That library kiss was pretty accomplished. You guys must have practised *a lot*.’

The corner of his mouth lifted. ‘Good times.’ Then he looked back up at Beth, his eyes guarded. ‘Anyway, I thought that day was off-limits. Moving on ...’

Right. Moving forward. The past was in the past. ‘Next question.’

It took Marc nearly two hours to hand-dig a deep enough trench a metre on-shore of the whale and reinforce it with driftwood to hold back the collapsing sand. In that time, the blazing afternoon sun dipped its toes into the ocean on the horizon and the most magnificent orange light coated everything around them. Her artist’s eye memorised the colour for future use. Beth sighed as much as the whale did as the scorching heat suddenly eased.

In the dying light of dusk, Marc laid the strap out and then asked Beth to take one eyeleted end. She mimicked his bent stance, her prune-skin hands pressed down to the shallow ocean floor and her back screaming its protest. Then they started sawing the strap under the sand, towards the whale.

Push. pull. Push. pull. A slow, agonising rhythm.

Beth felt the moment they got close to her because, exactly as she’d suspected, the sand compressed into a rock-hard mass under the whale’s weight. But Marc’s idea worked, though slowly. With every wave that ran in, the suck of the water rushing back out between every one of a million

grains of sand loosened it just a tiny bit and they were able to see the strap, inch by agonising inch, beneath the giant mammal. The tide had crept in so much and they bent over so far that Beth's lowered face was practically touching the rising water. Her muscles trembled with exhaustion, screamed with frustration, but she wasn't about to complain to Marc, even though every part of her felt as if she'd been hit by a truck.

Her back. Her skin. Her feet. Her arms. Even her head thumped worse than any hangover she'd ever earned.

Marc grunted as loud as she did. The whale did nothing but blow the occasional protest out of its parched blowhole. Finally, just when tears of utter exhaustion pricked, he called a halt.

Standing upright nearly crippled Beth after the abuses of the day and she cried out as her muscles went into full cramp, stumbling back onto her knees in the rising water, wetting the bottom half of Marc's fleecy sweatshirt. It galled her to go down in front of him, but how much did he expect she could take? She caught herself before she sank completely down onto her bottom but she was incapable of getting back up. She froze in an odd kind of rigor where she was. Her hands shook as if they were palsied. Her head drooped.

Marc was with her in seconds, his strong arms sliding around her middle to keep her up out of the water. 'Beth, grab on to me ...'

Tears came then. Angry. Embarrassed. Relieved. It had been so long since she'd last felt any part of Marc against her and it felt so right now. Safe and strong. Welcome and long-missed. Where she was bone and long hollow muscles, he was solid and smooth and rooted to the earth. Even in the water.

And he was her friend. At least he had been. Once.

He might have been stronger but he was just as tired as she was, it seemed. He needed her cooperation to get her back on her feet. Hours ago, he could have lifted her single-handed. 'Come on, Beth, pull yourself up,' he said, low against her ear.

If she turned her head just a bit she could breathe in his intoxicating scent. 'I'm sorry ...' Her vision blurred.

His strong fingers tucked around her waist, burned there.

'Don't be. You did well. We got the strap around her.' His voice was tight as he steadied her back onto her feet but she let herself lean into him until the last possible second. He smelled of salt and sweat; an erotic, earthy kind of scent that elicited all kinds of tingling in her. Nothing like the over-applied, cheap colognes Damien liked to mask himself with.

She turned her face more closely into Marc and breathed in deep.

He pulled her out of the water, supported her long enough that they got up on the beach to where the supplies were. She collapsed down onto the sand, knowing she might never get back up but knowing she couldn't keep standing.

Even for him.

'Take a break, Beth. We've been at this for seven hours. No wonder you're exhausted.'

He didn't join her on the sand. Instead, he snagged up the supply bag and fished around in it until he retrieved two muesli bars, a chocolate bar, a banana and an unfamiliar packet of powdered mix. He offered her a choice. As hungry and tired as she was, the thought of putting food in her stomach did not appeal. There was only one thing in that supply kit that had her name on it. And she wasn't letting herself have that, either. She pushed his hand away.

'You have to pick one, Beth.'

She shook her head.

'Fine.' He tossed the chocolate bar at her. 'This will give you immediate energy and potassium for the cramping, but in one hour I want you to have this.' He waved the pouch of powder.

'What is it?'

‘Sports mix. Endurance athletes use it. Just mix it with water. You need the fats and carbs if you’re going to last.’

Was that a comment about her weight? ‘I thought men liked women skinny?’

He looked at her, appalled.

Mortification soaked through her. *Oh, God, Beth. Don’t speak.* Clearly, she was too tired to think straight. She shook her head again, incapable of an apology that wouldn’t make things worse. Her mind’s eye slipped to what was left in the supply bag. How had she dealt with this sort of moment before? She couldn’t remember. Excruciating comments didn’t feel so bad when you were blind drunk and so was everyone around you. You sure had less to regret that way.

Had she forgotten even how to feel shame?

‘The powder’s slow release energy, Beth. It’ll get you through the next few hours.’

If she could just get through the next few minutes she’d be happy.

Marc crammed a muesli bar into his mouth on a healthy bite. Where Beth nibbled, he practically inhaled. Then he took one of the endurance pouches and filled it with water, shook and consumed it in a drawn-out swallow. Beth was too tired to drag her eyes off the long length of his tanned throat. How could even a throat be manly? But here she was, ogling it for the second time today.

She forced her eyes down to the half-melted bar in her hands. Chocolate was one of those foods she tried to avoid. Something she liked a little bit too much. Something that challenged her hard won willpower. But Marc was ordering her to eat it, and she was feeling so weak, so. what to do ...?

She took a small bite.

She forced herself to go slow, not to wolf it down, although her blood and her brain screamed at her to. It was part of her process. If she gave in on something small, then what chance did she have over something big?

This was where the downward slide began. Her eyes went to the pack of supplies.

‘Okay, come on.’ Marc stretched out his hand to her, mumbling around the last crumbs of his muesli bar. ‘If you don’t get up again, you’ll seize up and be here all night.’

The thought of rising was horrible. She groaned and stared at his extended hand. ‘I can’t ...’

‘She needs us, Beth.’ His gentle words pushed every guilt button she had. Beth looked over to the dark mass half-submerged in the even darker waters of dusk. It may be cooler now that the sun had set—significantly cooler—but the whale wasn’t in a position to wet her own skin. Or drag herself back out to sea.

And maybe *taking a break* was actually the start of the slide—insidiously disguised?

Beth forced herself over onto her side and then pushed painfully to her knees. It was the least elegant thing she could remember doing. Marc took her hand in his callused, strong one and pulled her the rest of the way to her feet. She stumbled against his neoprene hardness before steadying herself and pointlessly shaking the worst of the beach sand off her soggy sweatshirt.

His hands were high on her bare thighs, brushing more sand off before either of them realised what he was doing.

A rush of heat raged up her skin where his fingers touched and she leapt back with a speed she couldn’t have found if he’d begged her. Marc stiffened and a pink flush showed itself above the collar of his wetsuit. God, that was one hundred per cent habit from the good old days. The days before gender was an issue. Now, having his hot hands on her icy skin was *absolutely* an issue. For both of them.

It had to be.

‘Okay,’ he said, clearing his throat and straightening to his full height. ‘Back in the water.’

Beth willed her legs to follow him back down to the surf. How many hours had passed since she’d stumbled down the dunes this morning? As bad as she felt—and she couldn’t remember a time she’d felt worse, even in the depths of her withdrawal—they’d achieved a lot. The whale was still alive, its skin was in reasonable shape, and they had implemented the first part of Marc’s plan to refloat her.

Sure, tensions were high between them and, yes, maybe she'd rather be curled up by an open fire right now watching reruns of *Pride and Prejudice*, but she was hanging in there. She felt vaguely hydrated now that the scorching sun had eased off and the chocolate was doing its job and feeding energy directly into her cells. Their conditions could be much, much worse. That thought gave Beth's spine the tiniest of reinforcement.

And then the sun set.

## CHAPTER FOUR

THE moon was high in the bitter night sky by the time Beth risked further conversation. She poured the last mouthful of the fresh water into the endurance powder Marc had nagged her to have and shook the pouch thoroughly, knowing he was monitoring her from the water to make sure she drank it. She managed not to gag—just—as she chugged the chalky banana-flavoured mix. Then she turned to look at Marc, still sloshing the whale.

That little moment on the beach had been a major slip. For both of them. She'd had two hours of dark silence in which to go over—and over—the events of the day, looking for the moment when something had shifted between them. The moment when time had unwound just a tiny bit and taken them both back to a place that meant Marc could make a mistake like touching her. A woman he barely knew any more. He barely liked.

It was the peeing thing. As though seeing her so reduced in front of him had gone some way to settling old hurts. Maybe the loss of dignity had won her a measure of forgiveness?

Lord, if that were all it took, she'd be in serious credit by the time the night was out. Embarrassment over a bodily function was just a patch on the hits her dignity had taken in the years since she'd last seen him. He'd be delighted if he knew.

She chewed her lip. Maybe that was what he needed to hear—that she'd suffered? Impossible to know—he was as mysterious to her these days as the darkening ocean all around.

She stumbled back to the water. 'That was quite possibly the most disgusting thing I've ever tasted.'

Marc answered as though it hadn't been hours since she'd last spoken. His twisted smile was reluctant. 'You get used to it. It'll keep you going.'

'I can see why they call it survival food. You'd really want to be lost at sea before you cracked open supplies.' She turned her eyes to the dark, still shadow further down the beach. 'Do you really think that was her calf?'

'Yeah, probably.'

'Did it die because it was so young?'

'It's not that much smaller than Mum. It wasn't a new calf, I'd say. Some whales last days, others only hold out for hours. Just like people, some are tougher than others.'

A deep sadness snaked out and tangled around her heart. She could identify with an animal that turned out not to be as tough as it might have thought. 'Poor baby.'

*Slosh ... slosh ...*

'You never had kids? You and McKinley?'

Beth was unprepared for the bolt of pain that question brought her. She turned her face away from him and busied herself around the whale's small parched eyes. It had finally occurred to her that a marine animal wouldn't object to having salt water around its eyes.

Marc's question hung unanswered in the night silence. He patiently watched her.

'No. No kids,' she whipped out.

'You didn't want them?'

*I didn't deserve them.* And they sure as heck didn't deserve to be born into a life as wrong as hers and Damien's. 'Not particularly, no.'

Let him think whatever he liked.

'Funny.'

That was it. Just that one word. She sloshed away for a bit longer, but then curiosity got the better of her. She straightened. 'What's funny?'

'I always pictured you as a mother. Deep down, I thought that might have been the attraction with McKinley. He seemed like he was raring to get straight into the family and kids thing.'

Beth snorted softly. He was raring to get into one part of it, at least, like most teenage boys. If he struck strangers as family oriented, it could only be because he'd grown proficient at maintaining the same illusion as his own parents.

'No. Damien didn't really have any drive regarding family.' Any drive at all. Except for drinking. When things had first started going wrong in their marriage, she'd briefly considered children, something to bring them together. But, as it got worse, she'd secretly made sure that was never possible. Even when she was in the deepest reaches of the abyss, she'd somehow managed to remember to protect herself against pregnancy. Not that the issue arose very often by that point.

*Slosh ... slosh.*

'What did you end up doing?' Marc asked casually. 'For a career.'

Her shoulders tightened up immediately, which made the sloshing even more uncomfortable. Embarrassment surged through her. Not because she hadn't had a perfectly legitimate job but because it wasn't even close to the glittering career he was probably imagining her having.

'I worked in retail.' She cringed at the blush she could feel forming and struggled to make working in a dry cleaners sound more impressive. 'Customer service.'

He frowned. 'You didn't go to uni?'

Just one of the many lifetime goals she'd poured down her throat. She bit back a testy response. 'No.'

He stopped sloshing to stare at her. Was that satisfaction in his eyes—or confusion?

'Damien didn't want me to start a career.' Lord, how bad had her life become that admitting *that* was easier than admitting she'd soaked her professional future in alcohol before it began?

'But he let you work in retail?'

*Let.* She tightened her lips. 'I chose to work. I wanted something that was mine. Something that didn't come from Damien or his family.' And she'd had it. as long as she could keep a job.

He shook his head.

'What?'

'You were so gung-ho about going to uni.'

For three years it had been their shared goal, one of the things that kept them so close together, kept them in the same classes. In the same lunch timeslot. Until the conversation with his mother that had changed all of that.

*You're sucking him into your dreams, Beth,* Mrs Duncannon had whispered urgently one time she'd visited the Duncannon household, her grip hard on sixteen-year-old Beth's forearm. Her voice harsh. *He's not bright like you, he's not suited to further study. He needs to get a job and start making his way.*

That had struck Beth as an odd thing to say about the boy who was already flipping burgers after school to help out financially. Who'd done all the research on the best universities. Picked up all the pamphlets, looked into all the courses. Was making the grades. Who had a plan for where he wanted his life to go and his compass set to get there. But Mrs Duncannon hadn't bought a word of Beth's nervous reassurance.

*As long as he's with you, he'll never go for what he wants in life. He's not a pet to be trained and instructed. He'd walk through fire if you asked him to, Beth Hughes. And some days I think you really would ask, just to see if he'd do it.*

She'd never visited Marc at home after that. The ugly picture his mother painted of their friendship filled her with shame and echoed in every event, every activity that followed. It made her question their relationship. Marc. Herself. She'd tentatively asked her own mother about it and Carol Hughes's careful answer and sad expression had told Beth everything she needed to know.

*Both women* thought she was dragging Marc along with her. *Both women* wanted her to pull back from their intense friendship. For his sake. She looked at the capable grown man standing before

her and struggled to see how anyone could have worried about his ability to speak up for himself. Even as a teenager.

The irony was that Mrs Duncannon and her own mother had it all back to front. Beth would have followed Marc into the pits of hell if he'd asked her. Because she trusted him. Because he was like another part of her. A braver, more daring part. The idea of studying biology had never entered her one-track mind until he'd mentioned it, but separating after school never had either. And so she'd thrown herself willingly into Marc's dream. Adopting his had made up for having no direction of her own. Until the day she'd cut Marc loose and was forced to face her lack of ambition.

Her shoulders tightened another notch. 'Goals change.' She shrugged. 'You went up north after school, you said.'

His eyes shadowed over. 'I lost my enthusiasm for further study.'

*'Because of me?' Or did Janice get in your head, too?*

He glared at her. 'Responsibility for your own actions is fine; stop taking responsibility for mine.'

'If your goals shifted, then why are you surprised that mine did?' she asked.

'Because ...' Marc's eyes narrowed. 'Because it was *you*. You could have done anything in the world that you wanted.'

Silence fell. Sloshing dominated. When he did speak again, it was so soft he might have been one of the night sounds going on all around them. 'So, what *was* the attraction, Beth—with McKinley?'

He still thought this was about Damien. Why not—it was what she'd wanted him to believe at the time. She had to find a way to cool their friendship off and Damien had been her weapon of choice. She'd used him to put distance between herself and Marc.

Used with a capital U.

'Damien was harmless enough ...' *At the beginning*. 'We were kids.'

Okay, it was a hedge. Maybe her courage was as dried out as the rest of her. Her heart hammered hard in her chest. The anticipation of where this conversation might lead physically hurt. What he might think. What he might say. She just wasn't good at any of it. She licked dry, salty lips and wished for some tequila to complement it. Then she shuddered at where her thoughts were taking her.

After all this time.

*You wanted forgiveness*. Maybe that started with a little understanding.

He shook his head. 'You weren't like other teens, Beth. You were sharper, wiser. You were never a thoughtless person.'

The use of the past tense didn't escape her. How could a tense hold so much meaning? She sighed. 'I was overwhelmed, Marc. Damien made such a public, thorough job of pursuing me, it turned my head.' *And I was desperately trying to recreate what I'd had with you. What I'd lost.*

Marc was silent. Thinking.

She beat him to the punch that was inevitably coming. 'That day behind the library. When I told you. When you kissed me. You accused me then of selling out to the popular crowd.'

A flash of memory. Marc's hard young body pressing hers to the wall. His hot, desperate mouth crushing down on hers. Terrifying. Heaven-sent.

He assessed her squarely. 'I was an ass. I accused you of being desperate for affection.'

Surprise brought her head up. 'You were angry. I knew that.' *Eventually*.

He studied her, his mind ticking over. 'That explains why you dated McKinley. Not why you married him.'

The very thing she'd asked herself for a decade. Even before times got really tough. She frowned into the darkness. 'Damien was like two people. At school he was a champion, a prefect. His parents rushed him into growing up.' The specialised tutors, the pressure to achieve at sports, the wine with dinner. 'But he was still just a teenage boy with the emotional maturity to match. Once I agreed to date him, he seemed to expect me to cave automatically in other areas.'

And *expect* was the operative word. She'd never met another person with the same kind of sense of entitlement as her ex-husband. She swallowed past a parched tongue and remembered how desperately she'd tried to wipe the blazing memory of Marc's kiss from her mind. How she'd thrown herself headlong into things with Damien to prove that all kisses were like Marc's. Only to discover they weren't. How much leeway she'd given Damien because she knew she had used him and feared she'd done him some kind of wrong by kissing Marc. By liking Marc's kiss. How Damien had taken that and run with it.

How she'd just let him.

She shrugged. 'I married him because I slept with him.'

Marc's lips tightened and his hands scrunched harder in the wet towel that was becoming as ragged as her own whale-washer.

'And because he asked.' She let out a frayed breath. 'And because there was no reason not to, by then.'

And because she'd had no inkling about the kind of man he was about to become.

Beth held what little air she had frozen in her lungs. Marc had honoured her request that he not speak to her again after the day behind the library. His absence had ached, every day, but it made it easier for her to bury what she'd done. Both hurting him and kissing him. And to forget how that kiss had made her feel. The awareness doorway it had opened.

Knowing she'd done it for Marc had never really helped. Having the approval of both their parents had never really helped. But physical separation combined with a sixteen-year-old's natural talent for selective memory had made it possible to move on.

After a while.

The whites of Marc's eyes glowed in the moonlight. 'You didn't have to marry him just because you slept with him.'

She knew he'd see the truth in the sadness of her smile. 'I've always accepted the consequences of my actions. Regardless of what else you think of me, that hasn't changed. I chose to do something contrary to the values my parents taught me. My church.'

Marc shook his head. 'McKinley was a jerk. It always surprised me that he married you at all. That he didn't stop chasing you once he.'

His words dried up and Beth swallowed the hurt. 'Once he had what he wanted? Go ahead, say it. Everyone else did.' Marc frowned. She straightened her shoulders. 'I hadn't planned to sleep with him but once I did, turns out I was a. natural student.'

The irony wasn't lost on her. She'd spent all year trying to come to terms with the blossoming feelings that Marc was beginning to inspire in her, yet she'd barely touched him. But she'd slept with the boy she was physically immune to.

Or maybe that was why?

'And he was naive enough to make that kind of life decision based on one girl?' Marc asked.

She swallowed around the large lump in her chest. 'We both were. Except that Damien grew up a lot in the following few years,' she went on. 'Discovered that other women could be good in bed, too. Extremely good, if you knew where to look. And my one piece of power vanished.'

And hadn't he let her know it.

'So you left him?'

Beth stared. 'No. I didn't. Not until two years ago.'

He gaped. 'You cannot be serious.'

Heat chased up her icy skin. 'My *vows* were serious. I was determined to make a go of it, certain he'd grow out of his ... phase and maybe we could turn things around.' Determined not to lose any more face with her family. Her few remaining friends. Having screwed up so much in her life. 'Then, somehow, years went by. Empty, pointless—' *passionless* '—years.'

Only it wasn't *somehow*. She knew exactly how, but she wasn't about to go there. Not with Marc. Telling a room full of strangers was one thing. Telling the man who'd been your closest friend.

He growled, his eyes darkened. 'Hell, Beth.'

Her laugh was bitter. 'I thought you'd be thrilled I reaped what I sowed.'

He blew air out from between his lips in a fair imitation of their whale. 'Look, Beth. Yes, at the time I was pretty much gutted that you chose that moron over our friendship. But I never would have wished that on you. No matter how angry I was. I ...' His eyes flitted away. 'I cared for you. You deserved better.'

She straightened up, not ready to hear him defend her. Not ready to hear how short a time he'd been impacted. Not ready for all her angst to be for nothing. 'I think I got exactly what I deserved. Like I said, I always was prepared to accept the consequences of my actions.'

'For years? Wasn't that a little extreme?'

She stared at him warily. Better he thought her a martyr. 'Some lessons take longer to learn than others.'

She shrugged off the comment and the conversation. 'So ... what did you do after we went our separate ways?'

Marc made busy with the sloshing. 'Kept a low profile.'

Super-low. He might as well not have existed. Which was pretty much what she'd asked of him. *He'd walk through fire if you asked him to ...*

'The national skills shortage hit during my summer job up north, right after graduation, and suddenly I was pulling in a small fortune for an eighteen-year-old. It set me up beautifully to buy an old charter boat the next year and refurbish it during the off-season. Now I have three.'

'So it worked out okay, then—even though you didn't make it to uni?' Relief washed through her.

His smile wasn't kind. 'Trying to decide how high up the list you need to put me?'

Her make-good list. If she was going to finish the job she'd come for, she had to be thorough. Confession time. She found his eyes and held them, took a deep breath. 'Top half.'

'Sorry?'

She cleared her thick throat. 'You asked earlier which half of my list you were in. I just wanted you to know you were in the top half.' She clenched her hands. 'High in the top half.'

His next words were cautious. Almost unwillingly voiced. 'You seriously have a list?'

She nodded.

His brows dropped. 'Why?'

Panic surged through her. What a stupid question not to have anticipated. She swallowed hard. 'Self improvement.'

His frown looked like doubt. But he let it pass. 'How high was I?'

Somewhere off in the dunes, a bird of prey shrieked out across the night. Her voice, when it came, was hushed. Quiet enough that he'd have to hear her heart pounding. 'The top. Number one.'

It took a lot to shock Marc Duncannon. But she managed to pull it off. He had a few goes at answering before coherent words came out of his gaping mouth. 'I'm the first person you've come to find?'

Shaking her head made thick cords of salty dark hair, still a tiny bit damp from her dunking earlier, swing around her face. It had to suffice as a screen. 'Actually, you're the last.'

'But did you just say—'

'Top of my list, yes, but the hardest. I left you till last.'

*God.* Would he realise what that meant? It was screamingly obvious, surely? The silence was almost material. Even the whale seemed to hold her breath. Emotion surged through his eyes like the waves battering them both. Hope, hurt, anger ... Then, finally, nothing. A vacant, careful void.

'You've held onto those memories all this time?'

Her stomach sank. ‘Haven’t you?’

He looked away and when his eyes returned to hers they were kindly. Too kindly. ‘No.’

*No?* Beth blinked.

‘Give yourself a break, Beth. We were kids.’

His unconcerned words struck like a sea snake. Bad enough to have sabotaged for nothing the only relationship of her life that meant something to her. Now she’d wasted years of angst, endured a mountain of guilt, and it had barely registered on his emotional radar.

‘Losing our friendship meant nothing?’

He sighed. ‘What do you want me to say, Beth? It cut deep at the time but everything worked out. Life goes on.’

Mortification streaked through her. She stared at his carefully neutral face. Maybe Janice had been right? Cut free of her, Marc had gone on to make a success of his life—not what he’d always told her he would do but then how many of her school mates had ever actually grown up to do what they imagined they’d do for the rest of their lives? She certainly hadn’t. While she was literally drowning in her regrets, Marc had rebounded and done a fine job of getting by without her.

Everything she’d been through. For nothing?

‘Beth?’

She shot her hand up and turned away from his indifference. She tossed her tattered whale-washer ashore and turned to wade out into the deep, dark water. The only place she could go. To let her heart weep in private. She pushed her legs angrily through the water for a few steps and let the angry ache fill her focus.

‘Beth!’

She wanted to keep walking, to show him he meant as little to her as, apparently, she did to him. But she just wasn’t that good a liar. She turned when the water was thigh high.

‘Not in the water,’ he urged. ‘Not at night. Go up on the beach.’

*Screw you.* ‘Why not?’

‘Sharks will be drawn by the dead calf. They’re more active at night. We shouldn’t go in deeper than our knees.’

She practically flew back to the shallows. Survival before dignity. Marc didn’t say anything further. It took her several minutes walking down the beach to reach a place she felt was sufficiently dark and safe. Safe from the dune snakes. Safe from the whale-eating sharks. Safe from Marc Duncannon and his awful neutrality.

She sank down onto the sand and let the tremors come.

Her life had changed direction that day behind the library and it had changed again eight years later and this man was central to both. A man who was so entirely unaffected by what had happened to them back at school.

Deep breathing helped. Plunging her bare toes into sand that was still warm from the day helped. Closing her eyes and imagining she was anywhere else but here helped.

Whatever it took to fool her body into thinking it wasn’t facing an unbearable amount of pressure. Something she wasn’t really used to having to face. As a rule, a drunk body didn’t care what was going on around it. And she’d been drunk for the better part of eight years. Even when she wasn’t.

In the early months of her marriage, she’d walked a careful line with Damien and his rapidly developing fondness for the bottle, keeping him just shy of the point where he liked to express his drunken feelings with his fists. But that line quickly got too hard to predict and so it was just easier to give in. To tumble behind him into the abyss where he was happiest and she was safest. The help she might have had evaporated. Friends. Her parents. They’d all stopped trying after her repeated assurances she was fine.

Why wouldn’t they? She was Beth. Beth didn’t make mistakes. But Beth—as it turned out—was a gifted and convincing liar.

By the time they'd realised she wasn't fine, she was well and truly sunk. After a while, she didn't even hate it. The abyss was a pleasantly blur-edged place to lose your youth. And she'd learned how possible it was to function in normal society while artificially numb.

And then one day she'd woken up and looked around at the empty half of her bed, the total strangers dosed down in her living room and she'd seen, with awful clarity, the faces of all the normal people she'd thought she was cleverly keeping her drunkenness from. Their averted eyes. Worse—their pity.

For no real reason, she'd thought about Marc that morning. About the boy who'd had such faith in her. The boy she'd lived her life for as a teen. The boy she'd finally forced from her dreams—her marriage—after his memory had steadfastly refused to leave. And she'd realised she hadn't thought about him in years.

She'd sat crying in the shower long after the hot water ran icy cold.

Those convulsive shivers had been nothing on what was to come. The spasmodic wretchedness of weaning herself off the liquor, alone in her father's old warehouse, surrounded by the tormented images she'd painted in her darkest days. The destructive try-and-fail spiral that had made her feel increasingly bad about herself. Increasingly desperate for the unconditional acceptance a bottle offered. The only thing that had kept her going was painting.

Then one night she'd stumbled—drunk, to her eternal shame—into an AA meeting and found a room full of survivors who'd given her compassion and empathy and a path out of the abyss, not judgement.

Those strangers had saved her life.

Long before any make-good list, she held onto Marc's name as a ward against ever again forgetting someone who had represented such goodness in her life. She'd scrawled his name down on a scrap of paper that day she'd tumbled from the shower and she'd carried it in her wallet ever since, in lieu of the photos she'd thrown out years before in a fit of drunken heartbreak because looking at him had hurt too much.

She'd known that facing him today wouldn't be easy. But it had never—ever—occurred to her that he simply wouldn't care any more. If he ever actually had.

'Beth? Are you done?' His voice called her back from the darkness, just as it had two years ago that morning in the shower. 'I need you.'

There was urgency in his voice she couldn't ignore. And, in the face of what the whale needed, her decade-old issues could wait a few hours more. She quickly did what she'd come to do and then staggered, too sore and tired to run, back down the beach towards him.

The whale was thrashing violently in the water, the nasty arrow-head gash on its tail sawing back and forth, its whole body twisting.

'Is she having a seizure?' she cried as she neared.

'She can feel the tide,' Marc called. 'She's trying to move herself. We have to do it now.'

'You can't be serious?' He wanted to get into the water with a crazed half-ton animal? Immobile with exhaustion was one thing ...

'She's too far on-beach. She won't be able to pull herself out. We have to help her.'

He had a loop of rope laid over his forearm and he was making darting efforts in between the wild thrashes of the whale, trying to snag the eyelet of the strap they'd managed to drag beneath her hours ago. But every time he got close, the insensible sea-mammoth twisted in his direction and he had to leap away, stumbling into the water.

With one mighty lurch, Marc plunged his arm into the water on the whale's offside and jumped back, bringing the strap with him. It took only a moment to push the rope through the eyelet like a sewing needle. Then he pulled half of it through and tossed it high over the whale to splash into the water next to Beth.

She knew what he needed her to do.

The whale had slowed its frantic efforts now, perhaps realising that it wasn't going to be able to do this alone. Beth made three attempts, feeling blindly along the sand in the dark shallows for her end of the strap, squinting against the salt water that splashed up into her eyes. Her careless groping meant Marc's entire sweatshirt was soaked in cold water, but she didn't care. She wouldn't be needing it for long now that they were going to free the whale, and her own temporary discomfort wasn't a patch on what this animal was going through.

On her fourth attempt, she emerged victorious. She clutched the strap tightly in one hand and felt around for Marc's rope. When she found it, not yet soaked, still floating on the surface, she shoved it with trembling hands through the eyelet and then walked backwards away from the whale, pulling the rope taut. Marc did the same.

The strap slowly emerged and rose, flexing and dripping, above the water line as it tightened around the whale's rounded belly.

'We need to walk behind her, Beth. It'll pull the ends together and tighten around her flank.'

Behind her? But that meant. She lifted wide eyes to him.

He was silent for long seconds. 'I know. But, sharks are survivors, too. We'll have to hope they're more interested in the dead calf than in its dangerously thrashing mother.'

Was that likely? Beth's skin burst into terrified gooseflesh all over.

His loud voice carried over the sound of the whale's writhing. 'I don't see that we have much choice, Beth.'

'There's always a choice, Marc!' she yelled back. AA had taught her that. They could both walk away from this animal and leave her to nature. Maybe it was meant to be.

He knew which way her mind was going. 'Is that a choice you could make, Beth? Because I couldn't.'

No. When it came down to it, neither could she.

He called out again. 'We'll try and twist her your way so you're pulling in the shallows. I'll take the deep end.'

'Oh, great, so I'll get to watch you be eaten by sharks instead. That'll be nice!'

She gritted her teeth and plunged into the deeper water. The adrenalin did its job and fed her a steady stream of power. They didn't waste any time, pulling their ropes hard and closing in until they stood side by side—mountain by waif—up to Beth's waist in water. It was a lot by her standards but not much for a whale. Hopefully, it would be enough. The manoeuvre pulled the snatch strap tight around the whale's bulging mid-section. Marc moved them slightly to one side so that their rope wouldn't impede the thrust of her powerful tail.

'Ready, Beth?'

She wasn't. She never would be. But it seemed life was determined to plunge her back into the real world with a vengeance. She found his eyes, drew strength from them and nodded.

'Pull!'

She put her entire, insignificant weight behind her and leaned back hard on her rope. Marc immediately made more progress, his side of the rope vibrating above the waterline enough to give off a dripping, high-pitched whine. The whale groaned in harmony.

Beth's already damaged hands screamed as her end of the rope bit into them and she stumbled forward at the pain, losing purchase and crying out.

'Wait!'

Marc let his rope loosen and the whale heaved a sigh. Beth quickly stripped off Marc's drenched sweatshirt and wrapped it around her hands to protect them and then pulled her rope tight again. The salt water sluiced into open blisters, stinging badly.

'Okay ... go!'

They heaved again and the whale slid slightly sideways, adding her remaining strength to their far less significant pulling power. But it was movement. And, after thirteen hours in the sand, that was not a small achievement.

‘She’s moving!’ Beth squeezed out unnecessarily. No way would Marc not have noticed. ‘Keep going!’

Adrenalin roared now through her body, warming her and giving her a capacity she never would have believed she had. She leaned hard on the rope and pulled with all her remaining strength, twisting her body and virtually walking—inch by inch—out into deeper water, up around her armpits, towing the enormous beast.

Marc was right there beside her, his neoprene muscles bulging with the force of every pull. Neither of them was suffering quietly and their roars of effort merged with the whale’s to disturb sleeping creatures for a kilometre. The whale suddenly twisted so that she was side-on to the beach, her tail now fully submerged, her body more torpedo-shaped in the water than it had been on the sand. Still rounded where the strap held her firmly. Beth and Marc changed their positions, widened out so that they could contribute to the whale’s slow sideways thrash into deeper water. If the sharks wanted either of them they’d be easy pickings right now. The water lapped at Beth’s breasts.

The whale battered her tail violently, slamming on the water for added purchase. But the miracle of buoyancy meant it was easier to tow half a ton of whale flesh. They did—slowly, painfully. And then—

‘Beth, run!’

Marc dropped his rope and surged away from the manic animal. Beth stumbled and went under as her rope suddenly went slack and Marc hauled her up after him, her throbbing legs pushing against the pressure of the deep water.

The whale twisted and surged and turned the quiet shallows into a spa of froth and bubbles. The rope zinged out of its eyelets with an audible crack and the snatch strap dropped harmlessly away. In the time it took Beth to suck in a painful breath, the whale was free, half submerged, then fully submerged. And then—finally—it sank like an exuberant submarine, surfaced once to grab a euphoric lungful of air and then disappeared silently under the deep, dark surface.

Beth screamed her joy as she ploughed through the water, and then she lurched sideways as something harder and warmer than the whale slammed into her. Marc swung her in a full three-sixty, hoisting her up in his arms and hauling her backwards out of the waist-deep water, whooping his elation. But their momentum and fatigued legs couldn’t hold them and they stumbled down together into the shallows, Marc sinking to his knees and bringing Beth with him.

Tears of pain and exhaustion streamed freely down her face and she pushed uselessly against his body to right herself. But the natural chemicals fuelling her body drained as fast as they had come and left her shattered and shaking. The strength she’d miraculously found just moments ago fled. She sagged back against Marc’s strength, useless.

He collapsed unceremoniously onto his bottom in the ankle-high surf and he dragged an insensible Beth between his wetsuit-clad legs. His hands pulled her more tightly against him. She crawled up into his rubbery shoulder.

‘We did it,’ he repeated hypnotically, as though reassuring a child, stroking her dripping hair and pressing her hard into him. As though she belonged there. Beth squeezed her streaming eyes shut and soaked up the gorgeous feeling of being this close to him. After so many years. She nuzzled in closer. A bad idea, no doubt, but impossible not to. Every accidental touch they’d shared as kids flashed through her mind and she saw, clear as day, how she had evolved from comfortable touching to flirtatious touching and finally experimental touching. Stretching boundaries. Testing boundaries. Testing him.

Their gasping breath was the only thing now disrupting the silence. Marc’s murmurs softened further and started up a senseless whisper against her ear. Not even real words, just sounds. But they

did their job; she sagged harder against him and let the trembles come. Elation this time instead of fear or anxiety or—worse—the DTs. A much better kind of tremor.

But they transported her exhausted mind immediately back to a perfect spring day behind the library when Marc had kissed her for the first and only time. His body wasn't this hard then, or his shoulders this broad, but he'd been on the verge of filling out to the potential she'd always known he had. She'd clung to him then just like this; as if he was saving her life with the hard press of his mouth on hers. The touch of his tongue against hers. And she'd shaken afterwards exactly the same. Except that time she'd been completely alone. The kiss was the last time they'd so much as looked at each other.

The cold water soaking into her body offered a splash of reality. That was a lifetime ago. Before the alcohol. Before she'd abandoned him.

*He doesn't care*, she reminded herself. She straightened slightly and went to pull away.

He resisted her pull. 'God, I've missed you, Beth.'

The words were so simple, so brutally whispered hard up against her ear, she wondered if he'd even meant to say them aloud. But he had, and his words screamed for acknowledgement. She let her body sag back into him and wriggled up until her face rested in the crook of his neck, her arm slung around his neck.

He wrapped his arms more firmly around her and just held her, cold and shaking, against his body. Rocking in the icy surf.

It didn't matter that she'd never been with him like this before—that she'd never let herself be vulnerable like this with anyone—it felt very, very right.

'I'm so glad you were here,' she said. 'I couldn't have even begun to manage this alone.'

He chuckled but even that seemed to hurt his aching body. It morphed into an amused groan. 'If it weren't for me, you wouldn't have been here in the first place.'

She lifted her head and looked at him seriously. Eye to eye. Their faces so close. Water still dripped down her skin. 'I could say the same.'

If not for her treatment of him in that all important final year of school, would he have gone on to study at uni like they'd planned? Would he have been living somewhere other than the remote south coast of the state running a charter company?

'It is what it is, Beth. You can't control everything.'

'Why not?' she sighed against the warm skin of his throat. Too tired to move and not particularly inclined to. 'Whose great idea was that? That we have no say in our destiny?'

'I didn't say that. Just that sometimes things just happen. You can't hold yourself responsible for everything that occurs.'

She crawled in more comfortably. He took her full weight. 'That sounds an awful lot like you're accepting my apology,' she whispered.

His broad chest rose and fell beneath her torn-up hands. She held her breath.

'We were both kids,' he mumbled against her wet hair. 'We both did things we regret.'

She lifted her head to stare quizzically at him. 'What do you regret?'

His eyes darkened. Then blanked carefully over. 'I regret a lot of things.'

*Stop talking, Beth. Now!* That voice in her head seemed to know exactly where she was going next. She ignored its excellent advice. Her saturated chest heaved. 'Do you regret kissing me?'

Marc sucked in a breath, and she was too close to him to miss it. She wished she could see his eyes to gauge his reaction. 'I regret the manner in which I did it,' he said simply.

Pushing her hard up against the library wall and forcing her lips apart with his? She could see why he might regret that. If not for the fact that she'd been waiting years for him to take the initiative. She just didn't know it.

The sixteen-year-old tomboy deep inside asked the same honest questions she always had. 'How do you wish you'd done it?'

His thick voice was strained and it drew her eyes up to his. ‘That’s not a question you can ask me, Beth.’

She lifted her head. But the move cost her. She winced as her over-taxed muscles reacted sharply to the move. ‘Why not?’

‘Because of what you said afterwards. What you made me promise as you pushed me away.’  
*Don’t ever touch me again. Don’t speak to me again.*

She closed her eyes. ‘I was angry. And confused. It never occurred to me that you would actually honour that. ‘ But he had. All damned year.

‘Confused how?’ His tired eyes took on a sharper edge.

‘Because I ... ‘ Lord, how to get out of this one. ‘Because it was *us*. Kissing. It threw me.’

He straightened. ‘Because you hated it? Or because you liked it?’

For all her faults, she’d never been a liar. Not to Marc. But she was proficient at hedging. ‘Are you seriously asking me to rate your kissing prowess?’

‘Do I look like I have any doubts about that?’

Her mouth twisted. ‘No. You always were infuriatingly confident.’

His expression changed in a blink and then was gone. Maybe the moonlight was playing tricks on her, making her see vulnerability that couldn’t possibly be there. Not in that body. Not in this man.

‘It matters to me, Beth. Whether you hated it. Whether I actually damaged our friendship, too.’

*Too.* Misery came surging back in at the reminder that she’d said the words that destroyed their friendship. Even if she hadn’t set out to. She was only going to ask him to back off for a while. But he’d kissed her and she’d panicked. Those soft lips pressing against hers, forcing hers wider. The hands that had plunged into her hair to hold her captive sent electric sparks through her body and threw her into confusion. The press of his eager body into hers had made her want things she shouldn’t want. The desperate, intense pain in his eyes echoing hers. The thick smoke-like energy he’d been pumping out all around them.

Did she like it?

Enough to rip his heart out with her reflexive over-reaction. She took a breath. Held his eyes. Held her breath. ‘I didn’t hate it.’

This was where he’d kiss her in a movie. The water. The cold. The intimacy. The moonlight. And her admission practically cried out for his mouth on hers.

Instead, he nudged her head back down to his shoulder and rested his cheek against her wet hair. She felt his low words against her ear, vibrating in his throat. ‘Thank you, Beth. Deep down, I worried I’d struck the death blow.’

*No. That honour remains with me.* Snapping on the heels of that thought came another. He’d wondered about his part in that kiss? That wasn’t the admission of a man who’d never given it another thought.

Beth lifted her face to study his. A particularly full wave washed over them and buffeted Beth against him with its chilly brush. Waiting for a kiss was stupidly naive and impossibly romantic. Her heart squeezed hard. Had she been so starved for affection in her loveless marriage that she was finding it now in impossible places? Marc was just moved by their circumstance and harking back to better times. That was all.

Since there was to be no kissing, she needed, really badly, to get off him. But her body had practically seized up in the foetal position and straightening her limbs was a new kind of agony. Just when she thought she’d already met all the cousins in the Pain family.

‘Easy, Beth. You need to walk off the ache. Your muscles will be eating themselves.’

Pretty apt, really. Starting with the giant thumping one in her chest cavity. Crawling into Marc’s lap had not been part of her plan as she drove up the coastal highway this morning, but now that she had it was hard to imagine ever getting the sensation out of her mind. Her heart.

But she had to.

Her back screamed as she pushed against Marc's chest and twisted up onto her knees, between his. She gave herself a moment to adjust.

'Just one more thing ... ' he said before she could rise much further.

Those powerful abdominal muscles she'd spied back at the car did their job and pulled his torso up out of the splash and hard into hers. His lips slid warmly, firmly against her mouth and he took advantage of her shocked gasp to work them open, hot and blazing against her numb flesh. Her lips drank heat from him and came tingling back to life, startled and wary. His hands forked up into her wet hair and held her face while he teased and taunted her blissfully with his tongue, letting her breathe his air as though he were giving her the kiss of life.

Which, in a way, he was.

Relief and a decade of desire surged through her. Forgiveness tasted an awful lot like this.

He lifted his face and stared into her glassy eyes. 'This is how I would do it if I had my time over,' he said softly and then lowered his mouth again.

Whether he was making a point or making good on a ghost from his past, Beth didn't care. His mouth on hers felt as if it belonged there. Her nipples, already beaded from the icy ocean, suddenly remembered they had nerve endings and they sang out in two-part harmony from the pleasure of being crushed against solid granite. Heat soaked out from the contact even through his wetsuit.

Marc seemed to notice too, because he groaned against her mouth and let one hand slide down to where small waves lapped against her underwear, worked under her blouse and then surged back up, scorching against her frozen spine.

It was the only other place that her skin met his. Other than his amazing, soft, talented mouth. Maybe she just hadn't kissed enough men, but she couldn't imagine how a kiss could possibly be better. Or more right. It was every bit as confronting as their last one.

Only this time she was equal to it.

It was a weird kind of rush, kissing a total stranger and your oldest friend. The man who knew everything about you. And nothing at all. Exactly as that unwelcome thought shoved its way to the front of her mind, she felt Marc stiffen beneath her. He ripped his lips away and turned his head. Disbelief painted his features.

'Stop ...'

A rock lodged in Beth's chest. He tugged his hand out from under her shirt and resolutely pressed her away from him. She twisted sideways against the pain of his rejection and found herself on hands and knees in the shallows, undignified and lost. How must she look to him?

But he wasn't looking at her as he scrambled to his feet.

Beth followed the direction of his eyes up the beach, where a dark mass lurched and twisted on the shore near the calf.

'She's re-stranded, ' he said, stumbling away a few steps, his voice thick from their kissing. Or from the agony of having failed to save the whale.

When he turned and reached out his hand, she waved him off. 'I can't, Marc. I hurt too much. You go. I'm going to need a second.'

It was a measure of their past friendship that he didn't falter and worry about helping her up. If anyone had ever respected her independence, it was Marc. Just another way he used to show his belief in her.

Pain came in all shapes and sizes. As Marc found the strength to run up the beach towards the beleaguered whale, stooping to grab his whale-washer from the shore, Beth knew she'd have to too.

They were in this together. Ready or not. And she was not about to let him down for a second time. Not when he was the only man she'd ever known who had ever believed in her.

She cried out as she straightened her tortured spine, an anguished mix of pain and frustration and self-recrimination. Then she lurched up the beach after him, the golden glow of his kiss feeding her the necessary strength.

**Just.**

## CHAPTER FIVE

THEY hadn't spoken in an hour.

Not because they were angry with each other, Marc knew. Not because there was weirdness after their kiss, which had happened so naturally. And not only because their spirits were broken by the return of the whale they'd worked so hard to save. It was just that they were both putting all their energy into the endless drag-and-slosh—slower, shorter, choppier. Eternal. At least there was no blazing sun to contest with now.

The whale could see her calf from her new beach position and Marc wondered if the stillness of her body meant she knew it had died. Attributing human qualities to it was as pointless as it was hard not to. Beth's eyes followed his to the whale's small round ones.

'Why do they do it—strand themselves?'

Marc shook his head. 'No one knows for sure.'

She blinked her fatigue. 'Do they want to die?'

'I don't think so.'

'Can't they see the land?'

'Some blame our electromagnetic technologies which throw their guidance systems out of whack. Others say their inner ears are damaged by under-sea quakes which mess with their ability to navigate.'

'What do you think?'

'I don't know. I just know what it does to them.'

Beth stroked the whale's cool skin. 'I think she came back for her baby.'

Marc nodded. 'Could be. I've seen mothers and calves together in the deep water creches, the bond is definitely strong enough.'

'Maybe she just wanted closure.'

Beth's dark head tipped back, rolling gently on her shoulders to ease the ache. His eyes followed hers upwards. It seemed bizarre to notice, through the death and the pain and the blistering cold, how pretty the night was. It truly was a beautiful Australian night. More stars than he'd ever seen in his life—that was what he'd thought when he'd first moved to the deep south of the state. The Milky Way in all its blanketing glory. It was kind of nice to see someone else appreciate it.

Beth arched her head back so far she almost stumbled. He twitched to race to her—even knowing he'd never get there—but caught himself just as she did.

'We're so small,' she murmured, regaining balance, her face still turned heavenward. 'Do you think that there's a Marc and a Beth and a whale somewhere out there fighting for life, just like we are?'

Marc followed her glance up to the sky. 'I guess ... statistically. Could be.'

Her thoughts were as far away as those stars.

'It seems impossible that life could only exist on one planet out of a million twinkling lights.'

'You aren't seeing the planets. Only the suns in solar systems full of other planets.'

She turned cold-drugged eyes on him and considered what he'd said for an age. Marc frowned. Her speech was getting slurred, her lids heavy. He'd have to get her out of the icy water soon. She was turning hypothermic. And talking about space.

'We're such an insignificant part of an insignificant part of something so big,' she murmured. 'Why do we even worry about things that go wrong? Or things that go right. Our whole drama-filled lives are barely a blink of the universe's eye. We make no difference.'

Marc stopped sloshing. 'It makes a difference here and now. And life is not about how long it is. It's about how full it is.'

'Full?'

‘Full of love. Joy.’ He looked back at the whale. ‘Compassion.’

She lowered her face to look at him. ‘Even if it’s only a blink?’

‘I’d rather have a moment of utter beauty than a hundred years of blandness. Wouldn’t you?’

Her eyes blinked heavily. ‘You would have made a good astronaut,’ she mumbled.

Marc frowned.

‘Fourth grade. You wanted to be a space-man. You thought there was a space princess you were supposed to save.’ Her teeth chattered.

A numb smile dawned. ‘I haven’t thought about that for years. I can’t believe you remember it.’

She returned her focus to him. ‘I remember everything.’

She’d driven him crazy in the playground, insisting on being the astronaut and refusing to be the princess. Was that the beginning of her tomboy ways? An insane glow birthed deep inside him that she’d held on to those memories. It suggested she hadn’t stopped caring when she’d pulled the pin on their friendship. She’d just stopped being there.

His smile withered.

‘So tell me about your mum,’ she murmured.

His gut instantly tightened as she forced her eyes to focus on him.

‘What happened between the two of you?’

His heart started to thump. Hard. ‘Didn’t we already cover this?’

‘Nope. I asked, you hedged.’

‘Doesn’t that tell you anything?’

‘It tells me you don’t want to talk about it.’

‘Bingo.’ He glared at her. ‘But I’m sure that’s no deterrent to you.’

The more defensive he got, the more interested she got. It seemed to slap her out of her growing stupor. ‘Not particularly.’

He threw his shoulders back and shot her his best glare. Subtlety was wasted on Beth. ‘If you give me a few minutes I’ll see if I can find a stick for you to poke around in that open wound.’

Her face was a wreck. Grey beneath the windburn, shadows beneath her eyes. But she still found energy to fight him on this. ‘I’m more interested in why you have an open wound in the first place.’

*Because my mother is a nightmare.*

‘Family stuff happens, Beth. I’m sure your relationship with your parents isn’t perfect.’

She got that haunted look from earlier. ‘Far from it. I’ve disappointed them in a hundred different ways. But I still see them. What happened with Janice?’

‘You don’t remember? How she could be?’

She tilted her head in that hard to resist way. He’d never felt less like indulging her. He didn’t discuss his mother. Period.

So why was he?

‘I always assumed it was because she lost your father,’ she said. ‘That it kind of ruined her.’

He stared. ‘That’s actually a fairly apt description.’

Beth frowned, stopped sloshing. Her teeth chattered spasmodically between sentences. ‘I remember how hard she was on you. And on me. I remember how hard you worked at school and at the café to do well for her. But she barely noticed.’

His heart beat hard enough to feel through his wetsuit. He crossed his arms to help disguise it. ‘What do you remember about her personally? Physically?’

Beth’s frown intensified. ‘Um ...’ She was tall, slim. Too slim, actually. Kind of ...’ Her eyes widened and her words dried up momentarily. When she started again she had a tremor in her voice that seemed like a whole lot more than temperature-related. ‘Kind of hollow. I always felt she was a bit empty.’

Marc stared. She’d just nailed Janice. And those were still the early years.

'I'm sorry, ' she whispered, as if finally realising she was stomping through his most fragile feelings.

'Don't be. That's pretty astute. After we went our separate ways, she got worse. Harder. Angrier. The more I tried to please her, the less pleased she seemed. She'd swing between explosions of emotion and this empty nothing. A vacant stare.'

Beth swallowed hard enough to see from clear across the whale. She'd completely stopped sloshing. Her pale skin was tinged with green.

'She'd always been present-absent. Since my dad died. But it got worse. To the point she'd forget to eat, to lock the house up, to feed the cat. He moved in with the over-the-road neighbours.'

A tight shame curled itself into his throat.

'It took me another two years before I discovered she was hooked on her depression medication,' he said, swiping his towel in the ocean ferociously. 'And that she had been since my dad died.'

The earth shifted violently under Beth's feet and it had nothing to do with the lurching roll of the whale. A high-pitched whooshing sound started up in her ears.

'Your mum was addicted to painkillers?'

*'Is. Present tense.'*

*Oh, God.* The unveiled disgust on his face might as well have been for her. The description of Janice ten years ago might as well be her two years before. Beth's voice shook and she forced herself to resume sloshing to cover it up. 'And that's why you don't see her?'

'I have no interest in seeing her.' He dropped his stiff posture and almost sagged against the whale as he bent to soak his towel again. 'Working on the trawlers was more than a financial godsend; it gave me space to breathe. Perspective. And an education. I watched some of those blokes popping all manner of pills to stay awake. Improve the haul. I saw what it did to them over a season. When I got back and saw through educated eyes how she was, I was horrified.' Those eyes grew haunted. 'She was my mum, you know?'

Beth nodded, her fear-frozen tongue incapable of speech.

'All Dad's insurance money, all the money I'd been sending home from up north. She blew most of it on pills. She was no further ahead financially than when I left.'

Beth wanted to empathise. She wanted to comfort. But it was so hard when he might as well have been describing her. Suddenly Janice's desperate taloned grip on Beth's forearm all those years ago made a sickening sense. 'What did you do?'

His sad eyes shadowed further. 'I tried for three years. I gave her money, she swallowed it. I signed her up to support groups and she left them. I hid her Xexal and she'd tear the house up looking for it. Or magically find some more. I threatened to leave ... ' he shook his head '... and she threw my belongings into the street. One day I just didn't take them back inside.'

'You moved out.'

'It was all I had left to fight back with. She was hellbent on self-destruction and I wasn't going to watch that.' He shuddered. 'I thought losing me might have been enough.'

*But it wasn't.*

'Do you see her at all?' Beth whispered.

'Not for four years. The one useful thing I did do was buy out her mortgage. She can't sell the house without me so I know she has somewhere to sleep, at least. And I get meals delivered to her now instead of sending her cash, so I know she has food. For the rest.' His shrug was pure agony.

Compassion and misery filled Beth at once. For Marc, who loved his mother no matter how difficult she'd been. For Janice, who lost the love of her life when Bruce Duncannon had a cardiac arrest and who had never truly coped as a single parent. And for herself, whose path wouldn't have been so very different if not for the blazing memory one Sunday morning of a young boy who'd always believed in her.

A powerful love.

‘Would you ever try again?’ She felt compelled to ask. Knowing if she was in Janice’s shoes she’d want *someone* not to give up on her. Deep down inside. No matter how much she protested. The way her parents had hung in there for her. Despite everything.

Marc lifted his gaze. His brows folded. His eyes darkened. ‘Too much would have to change. I’ve accepted that the only time I’ll see my mother again is if she’s in hospital, in a psych ward or in the ground.’

The gaping void in his heart suddenly made shattering sense. She remembered what it was like living with Damien in the early days, before she’d succumbed to the bottle. She could only imagine what it must have been like for a child living with that. Then the man, watching someone he loved self-destruct.

But she herself was that hollow. An addict. Never truly recovered, always working at it. As if Marc didn’t already have enough reasons to hate her, this would be too much.

‘Go ahead and say it, Beth. I can see your mind working.’

Startled, her eyes shot up. She couldn’t say what she truly wanted to say. But she found something. ‘What about yourself—did you ever seek help for yourself?’

The frown came back. ‘I don’t need help.’

‘You’re her son. There’s—’ She caught herself just before she gave away too much. ‘I’m sure there’s assistance out there for you, too.’ She knew there was. Her parents had accessed it.

The frown grew muddled. ‘To help me do what?’

Beth lifted her shoulders and let them slump. ‘Understand her.’

His expression grew thunderous. ‘You think I lack understanding? Having lived with this situation since I was nine years old?’

Beth wanted to beg him to reconsider. To be there for his mother, since no one else was. But she burned for the little boy he must have been too. ‘If not understanding, then ... objectivity? You had it briefly when you returned from up north and look how clearly it helped you to see.’

‘Objectivity did nothing more than make me realise what a junkie my mother had become.’

Beth winced at the derogatory term. She’d had similar words ascribed to her over the years. Five years ago, they struck her shielded centre and were absorbed into a soggy mass of indifference. These days they cut.

Disappointment stained his eyes. ‘I really thought you’d have understood, Beth. I wasn’t oblivious back in school. I know you stopped coming around because of her.’

*I stopped a heck of a lot more because of her.* She’d started pulling back from their friendship because Janice had begged her to. And that withdrawal led to everything else that followed.

‘I just ... She’s your mother, Marc, and all you have left. I know it’s hard but I just don’t want to see you throw it away—’

‘Throw it away?’ he thundered. ‘I *bled* over that decision, Beth, even worse than when you—’ He stopped short and snapped his mouth shut, glaring at her through the darkness. ‘She’s an addict. You have no idea what it is like to live with someone who is controlled by their compulsion. The kind of damage it does to everyone around them. How the poison spreads.’

Tears pricked dangerously in Beth’s eyes, welling and meeting the salt that still clung to her lashes. It dissolved and filled her eyes with a stinging mix that she had to blink to displace. He was talking about her. He just didn’t know it. She turned her face away on the pretext of re-wetting her shredded rag. Behind her, pain saturated every word.

‘I have no interest in ever putting myself in that position again,’ Marc vowed.

She knew plenty about being an addict but what *did* she understand about living with one? Her response to Damien’s addiction had been to cave in and join him. Hardly a battle. Walking away from Janice must have been brutal for Marc—on all fronts—but it meant he kept his sanity. He survived. He controlled the spread of the poison.

Misery washed through her.

She lifted damp eyes back to his. Nodded. 'I understand, Marc. I do understand.' Only too well. Her eyelids dipped heavily. 'I'm sorry I wasn't there for you,' she risked after a long silence, forcing her lids open.

Marc was silent for the longest time but finally spoke. 'I'm sorry you weren't too. I could have used a friend.'

Did he not even have one to turn to? 'When did you walk out?'

'Christmas Eve four years ago.'

She'd spent most Christmas Eves trying to act straight while her over-protective parents threw anxious glances between her and Damien, who'd done his best to appear attentive. Meanwhile Marc had been carrying suitcases away from his mother's house. Lord, what a contrast. 'Who did you ... Were you alone—at the time?'

'Are you asking whether I was single?'

She was so tired she could have been asking anything. 'I'm asking whether you were alone.' Worrying he'd had no one only made it worse.

He nodded. 'I was.'

No father. No extended family in Australia. No friends. No girlfriend. Just a long-time addict mother. She closed her eyes for the pain she could hear in his voice all these years later. As a boy, Marc's defence of his mother was legendary. He held on to love for a long time.

'I went back out onto the trawlers for another couple of seasons. More than they recommend, but I felt I had nothing to hang around the city for. That decision turned my life around.'

'You're still such a glass half-full person, aren't you?' She'd clung to the concept when things were at their lowest ebb. 'I remember that about you.'

He paused the sloshing. 'We're responsible for our happiness just as much as our actions. No one else is going to do that for you.'

True enough. She was a walking example. If she hadn't dragged herself back from the abyss. An exhausted yawn split her thought.

'I have to move faster, ' she said to herself as much as him. 'If I keep slowing down, I'll stop for good.'

'You can stop any time you need to, you know that.'

If only life were that simple. That simply wasn't true sometimes. As she and his mother knew only too well. 'I'll be here as long as you are.'

'Still competitive?'

There was no way she was going to abandon him another time he needed her. But there was no way she was going to tell him that either. She forced her body to double its pace.

'You got me.'

## CHAPTER SIX

BETH had long given up trying to control the violent shaking of her frozen body, but the advancing ice-age finally showed in the loud chattering of her teeth. Not surprising, given she'd lost Marc's fleecy sweatshirt to the dark depths of the ocean during the refloating. It meant she only had her flimsy blouse to keep her top half warm. And nothing on the bottom.

Marc had eventually accepted she wasn't going to go back to the car and leave him alone with the dying whale, but he didn't like it. Exhaustion had even wiped the frown off his face. But her loudly clattering teeth seemed to break the last of his tolerance.

'Beth, you're freezing.'

Both their bodies were well into survival mode now, her own barely conscious of what was going on around it. Neither of them could do more than lean on the whale for support and drag arm-after-painful-arm from the water to slosh onto the animal to keep it wet.

'You have to get out of the water,' he said. 'You need to warm up.'

Her chill caused her voice to vibrate. It hurt even to speak, so tight was her chest. 'It's warmer in the water than out of it. And I'm not leaving you, Marc. You'd have to work twice as hard and you have nearly nothing left now.'

'I'll feel better knowing you're safe and dry.'

'I'm not leaving.'

She couldn't see his glare in the darkness but she could feel it.

'Fine,' he finally growled. 'Give me a second.'

He spread his dripping towel out on the whale's hide and splashed slowly ashore. Beth lost him in the darkness after he passed her. It seemed like a lifetime, alone in the dark with the whale, but he finally returned.

'Take this,' he said bluntly, thrusting the last muesli bar at her.

Too exhausted to eat, she tucked it into the hip of her knickers. Too exhausted to protest, he just watched her do it.

'Now this,' he said, and thrust something else at her.

Beth reeled back and almost lost her footing, catching herself at the last second against the whale's cold body. Her mind lurched out a preventative *no!* a split second before her body hummed an eager *yessss!*

'It's whisky. Dry, but it will warm you up a bit.' He raised the silver flask right in her face and it glinted in the moonlight.

Her stomach roiled. Her blood raced. Her body screamed with excitement.

'Get it away from me.' She didn't mean to shove him so roughly, didn't even know where she found the energy, but the flask fell from his hands into the salt water. He scrabbled to pick it up, frowning in the moonlight.

'Take it, Beth. You need to have something.'

'I've been drinking water.'

'That'll keep you alive but it won't stop you getting hypothermia. If you won't get out of the water, then it has to be this.'

'I don't drink.'

Her ridiculously weak protest actually made him laugh. 'Well, you're going to have to make an exception, Princess. Survival comes first.'

He shook the water off the flask and held it out to her again.

Her chest heaved and her eyes locked on it. She could just reach out and—

*I can't, Marc ... I can't break down in front of you.*

‘It won’t kill you.’ He unstopped the flask and took a healthy swallow, wiping his hand across his sticky lips when he finished to make his point. Beth had never felt more like a vampire. She wanted to hurl herself at those lips and suck and suck.

Shamed tears sprang into her eyes. ‘Please, Marc. I can’t.’

*I can’t show you what I really am ...*

His eyes narrowed but he was relentless. ‘It’s this or the car, Beth. Your choice.’

What was a bit more salt on her already crusty face? She ignored the two tears that raced each other down her cheeks. ‘Do you want to see me beg, Marc?’

His frown practically bisected his face. ‘I want you to be warm, Beth. I want you to drink.’

She forced her back straighter. ‘And I won’t.’

‘For crying out loud, woman! Why are you so difficult?’

Old Beth and new Beth struggled violently inside her. Old Beth just wanted to throw her alcoholism in his face to punish him for forcing her hand like this. For putting her in the position of having to defend herself. To expose herself. To *him*, of all people. The man she’d already let down in a hundred ways. The man whose good opinion seemed to matter to her more than anyone else did. *New* Beth understood that using it as a weapon would only hurt him horribly and, ultimately, disappoint him more.

She knew she couldn’t say nothing, either. But saying something didn’t have to mean she was beaten. She could trust him with the information. Like she’d trusted her AA sponsor with all her deepest secrets. Couldn’t she? Never mind the fact that he’d just told her his mother was an addict and made it painfully clear how much that disgusted him. This was Marc. He’d see she had her addiction under control. He’d see how hard she was working. He’d understand. He always had.

She laughed, low and pained. God, now she was lying to herself! Who was she kidding? This was *Marc*. She deserved his disgust for what she’d done and how she’d been.

She stared at the determination in his face. He meant it when he said drink or car. A numb kind of fatalism came over her. Whatever he did—however he reacted—it couldn’t be worse than the wondering. Than fearing what might happen if she was revealed to the world. To him.

But her heart still hammered and it pounded into the miserable ache that filled her chest. Why was it easier to trust a total stranger with the truth than the man who’d been her closest friend?

It was hard to tell where the cold-trembles stopped and the terror-trembles started, but she thrust out her violently shaking hand towards him and raised defiant eyes and said the words aloud she’d been saying twice a week for two years.

‘Hi. I’m Elizabeth and I’m an alcoholic.’

\* \* \*

Marc’s stomach tightened right before it dropped into a forty-storey free fall. His breath seized up and his skin prickled cold all over. He dropped his towel on the whale and turned away from Beth without so much as looking at her trembling outstretched hand. He marched off into the darkness, ignoring the shocked mortification on her face. He couldn’t trust himself not to.

*I’m Elizabeth and I’m an alcoholic.*

His heart hammered. People made those jokes all the time, but the degraded, pained tone in her voice and the bleached courage in her eyes told him she wasn’t kidding.

Beth was an alcoholic.

*His* Beth.

He kept walking, ignoring the fact he couldn’t see what was two feet in front of him in the sand and his feet were dangerously bare. A deep, savage ache drove him forwards. That Beth—*Beth*—could be afflicted like his mother. That it could happen to two people he loved. What was he—some kind of jinx? All the people he cared about ended up dead or.

The living dead.

He clutched the flask—a piece of his father—close to him. Beth's eyes had shifted back and forth on it as if it were made of excrement one moment and pure ambrosia the next. He knew that look only too well. It was the way his mother used to look when she hurried past a pharmacy all stiff and tall. Just before her body caved in on itself and she'd turn back for the entrance with a hard mouth and dark eyes, dragging him along into hell.

Beth wanted this whisky. Badly.

His fingers flexed more tightly around it. Growing up, she'd been his role model. Sensible. Smart. Courageous. Everything he valued most in a friend. Everything he'd searched for in himself. Yet sensible, smart, brave Beth had ended up addicted to alcohol. If she could succumb.

But she was fighting it. Some deep, honest part of him shouted that through the darkness. She wanted it but said no. His chest ached for the pain that had contorted her face. For the extra agony that this night must be for her. As if the cold and pain weren't bad enough.

He recognised it, even if he didn't understand it.

That thought brought him up short. Maybe she could explain. Help him understand. He owed her the chance, surely? He pivoted on his bare feet and followed the silver moonlight trail back to where he could vaguely see the shadow of a whale and a slender woman silhouetted against the rising moon.

Beth lifted bleak eyes to him. It hurt that he'd put that look there. He bent to re-drench his towel and took several deep breaths before trusting himself to speak.

'How long?'

There were probably more intelligent, sensitive questions to ask right at that moment but, more than anything, he needed to know how long she'd been struggling. Half of him hated it. The other half hated that she'd gone through it without him. She glanced away at the moon and then didn't quite find his eyes again. She was terrified. But hiding it. Something deep and painful welled up inside him, cut into the already sensitive flesh around his heart. He was hurting her.

Just like she'd hurt him. Except this didn't feel like justice.

Wide, stricken eyes returned to his. 'Eight years drunk. Two years sober. I'm recovering.'

Was there even such a state? Wasn't someone alcoholic for ever—just a sober alcoholic? Her focus kept returning to the flask. Shifty, sideways glances. He wanted to empty the contents into the sea but, the way she was looking, she might just plunge into the water and try to guzzle the salt water. A deep hunger blazed in her eyes. It elbowed its way in amongst the self-disgust. It reminded him of the look in her eyes that day behind the library.

'Did you start at school?' he asked.

She shook her dank locks. 'About a year after I got married.'

Marc winced. Did she start the moment she hit legal age? 'Why?'

Her eyes widened and tears grew in them. 'Things got. hard.'

'Life gets hard for everyone.' Not everyone turned to the bottle. Alcohol. Pills. It was all the same—a cop-out.

'I know. I'm not special. But I made that choice and now I'm living with the consequences.'

At least Beth accepted that she was at fault. He'd heard every excuse under the sun from his mother. She had headaches, she wasn't sleeping, one medication made her crave another. It was never truly *her* fault.

His mouth tightened. Beth's eyes kept flicking back to the flask he held down at his side. She lifted a hand and pressed it to her sternum as though a ball of pain resided there and crushing it helped. Something old and long-buried made him turn and hurl the flask as far out to sea as he could. Its shape and weight gave it a heap of extra flight.

'What the hell are you doing?' Beth cried out and lurched towards its airborne arc.

*Christ.* Did she want a drink that badly? 'I'm removing temptation.'

'That was your father's!'

Surprise socked him between the ribs. That she cared at all. To think of that. His mother never would have thought of him through her haze. She'd have been braving the sharks to retrieve her pills. Not like the old days when he was the centre of her world. The dual centre, shared with his father. His frown doubled. 'It's just a thing, Beth. It's not him.'

'You could have just put it back in your bag!'

'Would it have been safe there?'

Her back straightened up hard, even though it must have hurt her to do it. Raw hurt saturated her voice. 'It's been safe in there all day.'

What could he say to that? He should have known an addict would sniff out the nearest fix.

Beth's breathing returned in big heaves, punctuated by bursts of compulsive shaking that rattled her bones. 'Now *you'll* freeze,' she accused.

'I'll get by. I have more insulation than you.' He folded his arms, spread his legs. Classic Marc. 'But we aren't talking about me. We're talking about you.'

'Oh, I must have missed the point where your inquisition turned into a conversation.'

His mouth tightened. But her words had an effect. He forced himself to take a step back, to ease his body language. This was clearly hard enough for her. 'I'd like to hear about it, Beth. To understand it.' Though he had to force himself to say so calmly.

'So you can decide how disgusted you should be? Or how much like your mother I am?'

He stiffened. 'We're going to be out here a long time yet, Beth. Did you really expect to drop a bombshell like that and then just go back to talking about the weather?'

No, she didn't. Then again, she hadn't planned to mention it at all—not to him—and, as it turned out, her instincts were spot on. She stared at him warily where once she would have blazed unconditional trust up at him. 'It took me six months from the day I closed the door of Damien's house behind me until the day I could stand up in AA and announce I'd been sober for a month.' She sloshed his side of the whale because he'd frozen in position. 'Then two. Then five. Then ten.' She shuddered in a breath. 'Two years of my life trying to undo what I've done. I've judged myself enough for everyone in that time.'

*I really don't need it from you.*

He flushed, which was a miracle enough, given the temperature. Then he cleared his throat. 'Please, Beth. No judgement.'

*Uh-huh, sure.* She drowned in his steady, silent regard but finally sighed, 'What would you like to know?'

His pause was eternity. 'All of it.'

Fair enough. She'd opened this door with her dramatic declaration. She might as well fling it wide and see what rumbled out. It couldn't be any worse than the raw disgust he'd failed to hide. She took a moment gathering her thoughts. Her aching exterior merged with her interior perfectly. She couldn't tell him all of it but there was still plenty left.

'I hurt my family when I married Damien so young,' she began, mostly a whisper but close enough that he could hear. 'I hurt you. Turns out I hurt myself too. But at the time he was everything I thought I wanted—a holy grail, like some kind of hall pass of credibility. People treated me differently when I was with him and I ... liked it. I'd been a pariah for so long ...'

'Because of me?'

The monotonous sound of the ocean began to mesmerize her. 'No. Because of me. I chose you over all of them and their money.' She pushed the words out through a critically tight chest. Between the cold and the anxiety, it was amazing she could breathe at all. 'He found out pretty quickly that he didn't like much about married life. The responsibility. The expectation. And I was so young and trying so hard to be what I thought a good wife would be. When he insisted on a drink, what else could I do?' She took a deep breath. 'I'd ask him what he wanted and bring a second.'

'Misery loves company.'

So true in Damien's case. 'But then that point passed and it got so much worse.'

Marc stopped sloshing, his whole body wired. 'Worse how? Did he hurt you?'

She straightened up, took a moment working out how to answer. 'Sometimes.' Shame washed through her. 'I just blamed the drink. The more he drank the angrier he got, but the more I drank the less I cared.'

'So your drinking was Damien's fault?'

Her clumped hair screened her face as she shook her head. She'd never blamed her problems on anyone but herself and she wasn't about to start now. No matter how tempting. 'I made my own choices. It took me a long time to realise that, though.'

'So what finally made you stop?' The deepness of his voice rumbled in the night.

'I realised I was halfway through my twenties and I'd done nothing with it. I had a job but not a career. I had a marriage but not a family. I had a husband I didn't like and friends who only came over if I was buying. I had no interests.' She shook her head. 'I was a drunken bore with no achievements to my name, married to a man I didn't love. So I packed an overnight bag and I left.'

That made her sound stronger than she'd actually been, cowering in the shower, sobbing, but the last thing she wanted from Marc was more pity. Or to lose any more face.

For long minutes the only sounds were the repetitive sloshing of water on the whale's hide and the heaving of their lungs. And the *tick-tick* of Marc's brain as he got his head around her speech.

'What happened with McKinley?'

'Nothing. He didn't even try to stop me leaving. I wasn't the only one that was miserable. We both made the mistake.'

'You've cut all ties?'

'He signed the divorce papers without even getting in touch. I haven't seen him since.' Although she did hear about him from time to time. Those stories were always peppered with sadness for the man he should have been and relief for the woman she'd so nearly become.

'How hard was it—getting through the recovery?'

Was that more than just curiosity in his voice? Beth immediately thought of Janice. Sugar-coating wouldn't help him. She straightened her tortured back and met his eyes. 'You slog your guts out getting through the physical addiction and then you're left with the emotional dependence.' As hard as that was to admit. 'But you can get through it. I did. Until, one day, you've been stronger than it for longer than you were addicted.'

*Until curve-balls like today swing into your life.*

'You did it alone?'

'My parents wanted to help, of course, but I. It was something I'd done to myself. I felt like I needed to undo it myself. To prove I could.'

'So what got you through?'

*You did.* The memory of Marc. The idea of Marc. She chose her words carefully. 'A dream of what I wanted to be.' *Who I wanted to be like.* 'And a strong AA sponsor.'

Marc was silent for a long time. He shook his head. 'I feel like I should have been there for you. So you didn't have to turn to a stranger. I should have been strong for you.'

Her heart split a little more for the loyalty he *still* couldn't mask. Despite everything. 'No, I had to be strong for me. Besides, it wouldn't work if Tony was a friend. The emotional detachment is important.'

'We've been pretty detached this past decade.'

It only took a few hours in his company for that to all dissolve. She lifted her eyes back to his and held them fast. 'Do you feel detached now?'

His silence spoke volumes.

'Will you be someone's sponsor one day?'

That was a no-brainer. 'Yes. When I'm strong enough.'

‘You seem pretty strong now. The way you speak of it. Like a survivor.’

Warmth spilled out from deep inside at his praise. She was still a sucker for it. ‘I have survived. But every day presents new challenges and I’m only just beginning to realise how sheltered I’ve been.’

Confusion stained his voice. ‘As a child?’

‘My parents shielded me from unpleasantness for the first half of my life and my drinking numbed me to it for the second. I’ve never really had to make a difficult decision or face a stressful situation. They were there for me. Or you were. I’ve always followed instructions or someone else’s lead. Or avoided painful situations completely. I still have a lot to learn about life.’

He regarded her steadily. Was he remembering all those years where she’d tagged along with him, his partner in crime? Or the way she’d cut him from her life when things got too tough behind the library? *When the going gets tough, the tough go drinking.*

‘You sought me out. That can’t have been easy.’

‘No. It wasn’t.’ But she had an unspoken and barely acknowledged incentive—seeing him again. He’d come to mean as much to her as alcohol. A yin to its powerful yang. That scrap of paper in her wallet a talisman. The painful ball in her chest made its presence felt. ‘But I’d chew my leg off to have a drink right now. Do you call that coping?’

He flinched at her raw honesty. Pain washed into his eyes. But hiding who she was wasn’t sustainable. He might as well see her, warts and all. For richer or poorer. In sickness and in health. Presently, sickness. But one day.

‘It’s been a rough night ...’

The understatement of the century.

‘If the flask washed up at your feet right now, would you open it?’

Her chest started heaving at the image. As though his words magicked up the little vessel, filled to overflowing with the liquid escapism she’d relied on for years.

No pain. No shame. No past.

*No future.*

Sadness flooded through her. ‘Would you believe me if I said no?’

His deep silence brought their discussion to a natural close. She’d run out of story and courage. Her attention drifted back to how cold and how wet she was and she sagged against the whale as the after-effects of her monumental confession hit her body.

Marc frowned at her. ‘I’ll ask you one more time. Will you go back to the car?’

It hurt her to say no, but she’d promised herself she wouldn’t leave him down here alone. And if she gave in on just one thing. She shook her head. A particularly icy shock of wind chose that moment to surge across the beach. She gasped at the savage, frigid gust and her skin prickled up into sharp gooseflesh.

Marc swore and glared at her. ‘Don’t say I didn’t give you a choice ...’ He grabbed up his decrepit towel and ploughed out of the water and around to her side of the whale. Then he stepped in behind her and wrapped his whole body around her like a living, breathing wind-breaker. Her body sang at the close, hard contact, the port in this storm his strong arms represented. A moment later, the slight warmth bleeding through his wetsuit also registered.

She sighed and convulsively shivered.

Marc swore and pulled away for an icy instant. She heard the zip of his wetsuit opening, the gentle brush of his fingers pulling her wet hair to the side, and then the blissful brand of his hot chest straight against her barely covered back. Skin on skin. Fire on ice. It soaked in like a top shelf brandy.

‘Christ, Beth. You’re glacial.’

He took her hands in his and crossed his arms around her, closing her more fully against his warmth. Her numbness leached away like ice melting and exposed a shelf of complicated emotions she’d been doing her best to muffle. She stiffened immediately.

‘Don’t argue, Beth. You had your chance. Let’s get back to it.’

Their two bodies formed a hypnotic rhythm—bend, scoop, slosh ... bend, scoop, slosh—half the speed they'd been going before the sun had set. His towel dripped on Beth's arms as she bent to refill the two-litre water bottle she was now using to wet the re-stranded whale. If not for the awful truths she'd just shared, their position would have been downright sexy. A half-naked man glued to a half-naked woman. As it was, it was just plain uncomfortable. For both of them.

And it went on for an eternity.

Despite the warmth seeping in from behind, Beth's teeth started chattering again. Marc convinced her to pull her barely dry jeans on again as some protection from the wind and she took the brief on-shore break to wolf down the muesli bar she'd had tucked away. Her body immediately started converting the grain into desperately needed energy and warmed her briefly from the inside. It wasn't a patch on the blazing warmth of Marc's skin.

She was too cold to worry about pride as she slipped back into the surf and then tucked herself shamelessly back into his body. He received her with the practice of years, not hours.

As if it was her rightful place.

Skin rubbed against skin periodically as Marc's body followed hers down and back up. His breath was warm against her bare neck. The sensations she'd been numb to for several hours came roaring back—making her tingle, making her remember. Making her—for once—ache for something more than a drink. A neglected part of her longed to peel his wetsuit right down to his waist, to see in detail and up close just how much of a man Marc Duncannon had grown into.

But she'd have to settle for feeling the topography of his body against her back instead.

'Does it feel good?' Marc said, low and almost unwilling against her ear.

She gasped and half turned in his hold. 'What?'

'Addiction.' She could feel his tension against her back, she didn't need to hear it in his voice. 'I figure it must for so many people to do it.'

Beth thought long and hard about that. About the rush, about how it felt when it was gone. Or denied. About why he wanted to know. She twisted back around in his arms and continued sloshing. 'It's not a choice you make. For me, it wasn't about how good it felt when I was drinking. It was about how bad it felt when I wasn't.'

'Describe it to me. Both feelings.'

She swallowed the lump of tears that suddenly threatened. Even though she knew this was more about his mother. *There* was the Marc she remembered. He wanted to understand.

'Were you ever infatuated with someone?' She forced the words out. Between the cold and the strong arms cocooning her, it was amazing she could speak at all.

'Like love?'

'No, not love. Obsession. Did you ever have a massive crush on someone inappropriate when you were younger—someone you could never be with?'

Marc stopped sloshing. 'Maybe.'

Tasmin? Except that he'd finally prevailed with her. They'd started dating in the final months of school.

'Do you remember how it possessed you? How it took over your days, your nights, your thoughts? You can't remember it starting but then it just ... is. It's everything. It's everywhere. Like it's always existed. Like it could never not exist.' She stopped sloshing in his hold. 'Have you ever felt something like that?'

The tightness of his voice rumbled against her back and birthed goose bumps in its wake. 'Go on.'

'It's how it was with me and my addiction. I didn't recognise how it consumed me when I was deep inside it. I arranged my day around it. I made allowances for it. It became so normal. I learned to function around the compulsion. Just like the most concentrated of adolescent infatuations. And every bit as irrational.'

She felt him shake his head and she tensed. 'Is that no, you don't remember how it feels,' she asked, half turning back towards him, 'or no, you don't understand?'

His lips were enticingly close to her face. His breath was hot against her cheek. He swallowed hard. 'I remember.'

'Then you know how it can take you by stealth. The passion. The fixation. The feeling that you'll die if you don't have it in your life. And you don't even feel like it's a problem.'

Those arms tightened. 'It feels that good?'

'It feels great because you're love-sick. And all those endorphins feed your obsession. And it's hurting you but you don't notice. You don't care. Nothing matters as much as the feeling. As the subject of your passion. It's like a parasite. Built to survive. The first things it attacks are the things that threaten its survival. Judgement. Willpower. Self-awareness.'

Marc's silent breathing began to mesmerize her, his warmth sucking her in. She couldn't tell whether her words were having any impact on him. 'And being denied it physically hurts. It aches. You become irrational with the pain inside and out and you lash out at people you care about. And the more they intervene, the more you begin to imagine they're working to keep you away from the thing that sustains you. And that's when you start making choices that impact on everyone around you.'

She felt him stiffen behind her and knew he was thinking about his mother.

'But adolescents learn to deal with infatuation,' he said. 'Or they grow out of it.'

*Or they give in to it.* She wasn't surprised to hear condemnation in his voice, but it still saddened her. How many people saw addiction as a sign of moral weakness. A character flaw. 'Mostly because life forces them out of it. Classes. Structure. Discipline. Financial constraints. Exposure to new people. Cold reality has a way of making obsession hard to indulge.'

She turned back towards Marc again. The unexpected move brought her frigid jaw line perilously close to his lips as he leaned in for a slosh. The hairs on her neck woke and paid attention. 'But imagine that you're of legal age with ready cash, no particular structure to your day,' she whispered, 'no restraints on whether or not you indulge it. A husband who makes drinking a regular part of his day.' *And all the reason in the world to want to numb the pain.* 'No reason at all not to allow the great fascination to continue. Why wouldn't you?'

Steel band arms circled around her and held her still. Close. Her eyes fluttered shut. He spoke close to her ear. 'Because it's killing you?'

'By then, you are so hooked on the feeling you just ... don't care.'

He turned her in his hold and looked down on her, a pained frown marring his face. 'You didn't care about dying?'

She shook her head. Hating herself. Hating the incredulous look on his face. Not that she couldn't understand why, after everything he'd been through with Janice. She could feel it in the tension in every part of his body.

'Because you truly fear you'll die without it,' she said.

His frown trebled and he pulled her towards him. Into his warmth. The kind of moment she'd lived for back in school. It was old Marc and old Beth from a time that the two of them could have conquered the world. From inside the crush of his arms, she could feel his chest rising and falling roughly. He was struggling with everything she'd just told him. And why not? It had taken her two years to finally recognise where her addiction seeded. And when.

Emotional and physical exhaustion hovered around her. She struggled to keep her eyes open, leaning her entire upper body into his. So tired, the only thought she had about the two perfect pectoral muscles facing her was what a comfortable pillow they'd make. His hand slipped around her back to better support her.

'I don't know what to say,' he said, voice rough.

'There's nothing you can say,' she murmured thickly. 'It's enough that you know.'

'Thank you for explaining.'

‘I’m glad you understand now.’ Her words slurred. Her eyes surrendered to the weight on them and closed. She leaned more heavily into him.

His voice was only a murmur but it echoed through the chest she pressed against. ‘You want my understanding? I thought it was forgiveness you wanted?’

Nodding only rubbed her cheek against his chest. It was perfect friction. She did it twice. ‘Both. I don’t want you to hate me.’

Marc’s thumping heart beat hard against her ear. Five times. Six times. ‘I accept your apology, Beth.’

Something indefinable shifted in her world. Like the last barrel of a lock clunking into place releasing a door to fling open. And out rushed all her remaining energy like heat from a room, finally freed from her determination to win his forgiveness. Marc was the last of her list. She’d focused on those names for so long she’d never really given much thought to what lay beyond them. A dreadful unknown spread out before her. Something she had to brave without help.

Later. When she wasn’t so warm and tired.

She found her voice. ‘Thank you.’

He took her face in his hands and tipped it up to his. She forced her lids to lift. Hazel eyes blazed down onto her. ‘I think I’ve been angry at you for a really long time.’

She blinked up at him, barely able to drag her lids open after each close. Knowing these words came straight from his soul. ‘I know. I’m sorry.’ She laid her face back against the pillow of warm muscle and sighed as the heat soaked into her cold cheeks.

‘Why couldn’t I let it go?’ he murmured.

*I don’t know.* The words came out as an insensible mumble as her lips moved against his skin. His arms tightened around her, held her up.

‘Why couldn’t I let you go?’

His voice swam in and out with the lapping tide and, ultimately, washed clear through her head and out again as she slipped into sleep, quite literally, on her feet.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

A HIGH-pitched shriek dragged Beth from a deep, uncomfortable slumber. A musty smell filled her nose and she shifted around uncomfortable rocks that had somehow found their way into her bed.

Her eyes cracked open. Not a bed ... the back of a car. And the shriek was a Wedge-tailed Eagle that, even now, circled the dim skies in search of breakfast. The rocks were the detritus that littered the back of Marc's four-wheel drive, cutting into her back and thighs where she lay on them. And the mustiness was a mix of the skanky old blanket that wrapped tortilla-like around her and the salty moisture of her clothes, her hair. Dry yet damp.

*God damn it, Marc!*

Fury forced her upright and every seized muscle in her body protested violently. She should have kept moving. She should have kept helping. Not sleeping comfortably—or even uncomfortably—while Marc froze his butt off alone with the whale.

She lurched like a caterpillar towards the rear doors of the wagon and used her bare feet to activate the internal handle. Icy-cold air streamed in as she pushed the doors with her legs and her skin prickled all over with gooseflesh.

It took longer than it should have, but she eventually scrambled out of the car and tucked the dirty blanket more securely around her against the chill wind. Up here, exposed above the dunes, it was almost worse than down on the shore. The world around her was still muted but tiny fingers of light tickled at the horizon.

'How long have I been out?' She didn't waste any time with pleasantries as she got back to the shoreline. Marc was up to his knees in the rapidly retreating ocean, practically sagging on the whale for strength. 'Why did you let me sleep?'

He turned his face her way. Haggard but still beautiful. To her. 'You passed out in my arms, Beth. You were exhausted.'

'So are you.'

'I wasn't the one asleep on my feet.' Frost rose from his lips with every word.

Beth's whole face tightened on a frown. Anxiety flowed through her. 'How are you?'

'Freezing. Thanks for asking.'

'What can I do?'

'You can not give me grief for putting an unconscious woman into my car.'

She bit back her frustration. 'I'm sorry to be ungracious. I just. You were alone.'

'I've done this before, on my own, Beth.'

'You shouldn't be alone.'

*Well ...!* That was a mouthful and a half straight from her sleepy subconscious. The moment the words left her, she knew she meant more than just today. This man deserved the right woman by his side, for ever. A bit of happiness. He'd earned it.

Not that she was the right woman. Beth frowned at the instant denial her mind tossed up. It was a little too fervent.

'Why are you single?'

He lifted one eyebrow. 'Why are you asking?'

'Because you'd be a catch, I would have thought. Even in the country. 'Where men outnumbered women ten to one.

'Thanks for the confidence.'

All the time that had passed might not have existed. They fitted instantly back together. Back into the gentle jibes only friends could make.

'I've had girlfriends.'

*Olympic Tasmin for one. 'Anything special?'*

His eyes studied the lightening horizon. 'Nothing lasting, if that's what you're asking. But all nice women.'

'So what went wrong?'

He glared at her. 'I hope you're not warming up to offer relationship advice?'

Despite herself, she laughed. 'No. I may be a lot of things, but a hypocrite is not one of them. Her eyes went to the whale. She looked ominously still. 'How is she?'

'Worse than either of us. But hanging in there.' His words were full of staged optimism. As though the giant animal could understand him.

'You're not going to give up on her, are you?'

'Nope.' He turned to the whale and spoke directly to her. Beth got the feeling there had been several man-to-whale conversations while she was out like a light. 'I'm not going to let you go.'

She frowned, those words striking a chord she couldn't name deep inside. They seemed somehow important but she couldn't place why. The eagle called again, high up in the part of the sky that was still a deep, dark disguise.

'It says a lot about you.'

His look upward was a question.

'How hard you're fighting for this whale. To give her a chance. You really haven't changed that much after all.'

Marc bit down on whatever he'd been about to say and clenched his jaw shut. Hard. She practically felt the atmosphere shift. Maybe he wasn't in the mood for conversation after her revelations in the small hours of morning. She fought the heat of shame that rose on that thought and the sinking surge of self-doubt that followed. Then she braced herself against the cold, tossed back the blanket and bundled it into her arms. Before her body could convince her not to, she plunged back up to her knees in the icy wash and sank the blanket under the water; its frigid kiss shocked her into full awakening. She dragged its weighty thickness up and over the whale, shrouding its skin in dampness. The nasty arrowhead scar on its tail was exposed again.

That couldn't be good. It meant the tide was retreating. If it went much further out it would mean the whale would be high and dry.

As soon as the blanket was secured, she moved, aching, up the beach and collected the empty two-litre container and commenced the bend-fill-slosh ritual all over again. Her body didn't even bother protesting this time. It knew when it was licked.

Marc watched every move.

'How are *you* doing?' he finally asked. Tension tinged his voice, but it was concern etched in his face. And caution.

*Oh.*

She stumbled slightly when she realised he was talking about drinking. Or *not drinking* in the case of this very difficult eighteen hours. And he wasn't particularly happy to be asking.

The thought of alcohol had not even crossed her mind since she'd woken. That had to be a first. Although it shot back with a vengeance now. Hunger. Thirst. Craving. Needing. They all mixed together into an uncomfortable obsession for just about everything you could put in your mouth.

She feigned misunderstanding. 'I'm ready for a big plate of bacon and eggs, a big mug of hot tea and a Bloody Mary.'

Hazel eyes snapped to her. 'You joke about it?'

She sighed. Pushed her shoulders back. 'Keeping it bound and gagged gives it too much power. Maybe it's time I started to lighten up about it all. *Take some of the control back.* 'Get back to a normal life.'

'Fair enough. What will you do now?' he asked. 'To make a living? To have that normal life?'

It was a good question. Her dark years were behind her. Her list was done. She had the rest of her future to think about. She blew out the residual tension from their previous question. 'I have no idea ... The past two years has been all about recovery. It's been a day by day kind of thing.' She stared at him, blank. 'I suppose running a bottle shop is out of the question?'

His glare was colder than the water.

'Sorry. Bad joke.' Bleakness filled her. 'I feel like all I've done is drink and then not drink.'

'You have a decade to catch up on.' He looked hard at her. 'What about uni? It's never too late.'

Beth frowned. 'I don't think so.'

'Mature aged students are perfectly common now.'

Taverns, parties, temptation. 'I don't think I'd be a good fit on campus.'

His mouth tightened as he realised. 'Online, then?'

Something she could study in the comfort of her own cavernous warehouse. In the silence of her own lonely hours. 'What would I study?'

'What do you enjoy?'

She blinked at him.

'What about your painting?'

She shook her head. 'That's something I do for therapy. It won't earn me a living.'

'Why not? Maybe you could help others like you helped yourself. Give back.'

Her head came up. Giving back rang all kinds of karmic bells. Art therapy. She hadn't known such a thing existed until she'd needed it. But it did. And it worked.

Marc shrugged. 'There'd be no shortage of people needing assistance.'

Purpose suddenly glowed, bright and promising on her horizon. She *could* give back. Lord knew she'd had her fair share of assistance from others who gave their time. She chewed her lip. 'I could. That could work. Something simple that will help people.'

His eyes narrowed. 'You don't want to rule the country any more?'

Alcoholism had taken more from her than just years. 'If I can just rule *me* I'll be happy.'

He stared at her long and hard. Compassion filled his eyes. His voice was low and sad. 'You'll get there, Beth. I believe in you.'

A deep sorrow washed through her. 'You always did.'

Silence fell. Beth shook her head to chase off the blues she could feel settling.

'What would you change?' Marc's voice came out of the dim morning light, tossing her earlier words back at her. 'If you had the opportunity to do ten years ago over again. What would you do differently?'

Ah. This one she'd pondered plenty and she'd refined it during some of their long silences in the water. She bent to re-soak the blanket and thanked God that she had no sleeve on which to be displaying her heart. 'I wouldn't have put so much importance on what others said. I definitely wouldn't have encouraged Damien's advances.'

She kept her eyes away from his as she stretched the blanket out across the whale's back. 'I wouldn't have listened to ...' *Your mother*. But now, more than ever, she couldn't say that. There was already so much lost between them. Vindicating herself would condemn them. 'I wouldn't have shut you out of my life.'

'You didn't.'

She looked up. 'I did.'

He shook his head. 'I mean you didn't succeed. I kept a low profile but that didn't mean I wasn't aware of everything you did. Where you went. Right up until school ended and I lost you, I was watching.'

*Watching*. Beth stared. She bled for the near-man who'd been so hurt but still so very loyal. Maybe despite himself. Her voice was tiny. 'I thought you were gone.' Present-absent in the way only a teen could be.

‘No. I was still there.’

Her chest tightened. ‘Why?’

He considered her from under lashes crusted with salt. ‘We were friends. Friends don’t abandon each other.’

Beth’s cheeks flamed.

‘I wasn’t having a dig, Beth.’

She shook her head. ‘I know. But it doesn’t change what happened.’ She stared at him. ‘You deserved better.’

*You still do.* Her tight heart pushed rich pulses of blood around her body and they throbbed past her ears. Her eyes stuck fast to his. She made her decision.

‘I need to tell you something. About my last days drinking.’ She took a second to gather courage by trailing down to the whale’s exposed tail and draping the soaked blanket over it. Water cascaded over the vicious arrow-head wound.

She took a deep breath and then met his eyes again. ‘I forgot you, Marc. When I was deep in the hands of my addiction, I kind of. blocked you out. For years.’

His nostrils flared. His hands stilled.

‘After graduation I thought about you every day. Wondered how you were. What you were doing. Thought about what I had done. I thought about the connection we used to have, the stories we had in common. Every day I tried to recreate with my husband what I’d had with you, and it just wasn’t working. As I slipped further and further into numbness I think I just ...’ She swallowed and took a shuddery breath. ‘Remembering you hurt. So I just stopped.’

Those beautiful hands tightened on his towel. Just as they’d tightened in her hair while he’d kissed her. Last night. All those years ago.

‘I can understand that.’ Hurt thickened his already gravelly voice.

She shook her head. Forced herself to continue. ‘One day I woke up and there you were, blazing and persistent at the front of my mind. Like a ghost with a mission. Except I was the ghost. And I realised I’d been. non-existent for so long. I remembered how you used to believe in me no matter what but, this time, instead of that making me sad, hurting, it made me determined.’

She turned her eyes back to his. ‘You gave me strength, Marc. I stopped drinking because of the memory of the boy who had so much belief in me. More than I’d ever had in myself. And because of the goodness in you that I’d always wished was mine. The strength of character.’

His eyes dropped away, which meant she could breathe.

‘I just wanted you to understand the part you played in pulling me out of the morass. I can’t thank you because you didn’t even know it was happening. But I can acknowledge it. And I think I understand it now. What it meant.’

She clamped nervous hands together. ‘Drinking helped me forget how I’d treated someone I loved. How the choices I made snowballed into a lousy life with a lousy husband and a lousy future. That I’d done that to myself. But the memory of my feelings for you saved me when everything was lost. When I was.’

His frown folded his handsome face and his jaw twitched with tension.

She drew in a massive breath for strength. ‘You filled my heart in high school, Marc, and I think you filled it right through my marriage, except I couldn’t bear to acknowledge it. One day I just ... forced you out of my heart to protect myself.’ She laid a hand on the whale. ‘But then I crashed into the water with you yesterday and discovered you were still the same loyal, generous, brave person who I loved back then. You haven’t changed.’ She dipped her eyes, then forced them back up. Took a deep, deep breath. ‘My feelings haven’t changed.’

His silence screamed.

Mortification waited greedily in the wings but she held it back. 'I don't expect anything in return —' *much as she wished for it* —'I just wanted you to know. That you'd changed my life. That you'd *saved* my life. That our stories are connected.'

His neoprene chest heaved up and down, his eyes blazed hot and hard into hers. The hundred variations of things he might say whispered through her head. Then he finally spoke and it was laced with agony.

'I'm not a crutch, Beth.'

Her stomach plummeted. *What?* 'No, I—'

Sudden shouting from the direction of Marc's car split the quiet of the pre-morning. A dozen figures appeared at the dune tops, silhouetted against the dawning sun. They carried coils of rope slung over their shoulders and more blankets. Beth should have cried with relief that the cavalry had finally arrived but she wanted to scream at them for *just five more minutes*. It felt vitally important that she have just a bit more time alone with Marc.

She swung her eyes back to him.

His voice was hard. Hurried. 'I can't be the thing that sustains you, Beth. You can't swap one fixation for another, put that kind of responsibility on me. I lived with that for years.'

*His mother ...* She opened her mouth to try and explain again as people started streaming down the dunes towards them. Euphoria that assistance had finally arrived crashed headlong into the sudden shot of urgent adrenalin surging through her body. In that moment she felt the best she had all night.

And the absolute worst.

Marc lay his shredded, saturated towel along the whale's broad back for one last time. Then he pinned her with his gaze. 'Me accepting that you're sorry for what happened a lifetime ago. Are you expecting that it will change anything? Other than for you?'

'I ...' *Was she?* What did it really change, other than to mark the completion of her list? One more step in her road to healing.

'Because it doesn't change anything for me, Beth.' He cast her one final tired look and then dragged his exhausted legs out of the water.

The earth shifted under her feet. In all her imaginings, it had never occurred to her that Marc would accept her apology but that he might not truly forgive her. Realise the depth of her feelings but not value it. Each was meaningless without the other.

Her heart pounded. 'I thought, maybe if you understood ...'

'I understand more than you know.' His tired eyes rested on her. 'It's been ten years, Beth. Any feelings we had are nothing but a memory. We're both different people now. If I helped you to get over—'

*Could he still not say the word?*

'—everything, I'm glad.' His eyes lifted. 'But I'm not some kind of lucky charm to keep you sober. And telling me you were alcoholic doesn't go any way to restoring the lost trust between us. Did you honestly expect it would?'

An awful realisation dawned with the sun that suddenly peeked its warmth above the sand dunes. She *had* expected that, yes. That her cosmic reward for finding him and confessing her shame—her many shames—would be a beginning as blazing and new as the sun climbing over the horizon. That the man who had played such an important role in her recovery would be given back to her and they could have a fresh start.

Strange hands were suddenly all over her, pulling her gently back from the water as two wetsuit-clad bodies slid into her place and plunged fresh blankets into the water. Beth ignored them and reached out to urgently snare Marc's hand as he left the water, desperate not to become separated even for a moment. Something in her knew that if that happened she'd never find him again.

His eyes dropped to where her fingers twisted amongst his with white-knuckled urgency. When they lifted, they were tragic. 'I can see that you've done it really tough since we parted, Beth, and that

brings me no joy at all. But drunk Beth wasn't the one who tore our friendship apart that day behind the library. Dumping me for someone better was a choice that you made stone cold sober.'

The awful, sinking reality hit her. No matter what her motivation, how honourable, she *had* ripped apart their friendship in cold blood. She'd *let* his mother drive a wedge between them, and then she'd *let* Damien exploit the gap. She'd done nothing to stop any of it. Then and now. She still couldn't bring herself to tell him why she'd really let him walk away that day.

'But you accepted my apology ...'

'I believe that you're sorry.' His words grew harder. Shorter.

'But our friendship ...?'

His eyes were flat and pained. And as unmovable as granite. 'I've lived without it this long ...'

Pain ripped through her as the first shards of light speared across the sky. Why had she expected more? Every part of her wanted to shut up tighter than a clam. Protect herself. But that had got her nowhere so far in life.

'Wait!' Her desperate voice broke, drawing him back as he turned towards two approaching men in Department of Conservation uniforms. 'What happens now?'

Marc's face was haggard, tragic as he shrugged. She loved every line. 'I go home. You go home. I appreciate your help with the whale but, as far as I'm concerned, we're not connected any more. Our story's over.'

*Not connected?*

'But ... you kissed me.'

His eyes were tragic. 'Yeah.' He stared long and hard at his oldest friend. 'You'd think I'd learn, huh?'

Beth stumbled backwards in the sand as he walked away.

A gentle female voice murmured near her ear—buzzing in her throbbing head—and supported her up the beach as others draped thick blankets around her shoulders. Her eyes streamed from the sudden onset of morning light after so many hours of darkness. Dawn should have brought a bright new beginning for their friendship, not this awful gaping chasm. This was like losing him all over again. The impossibility that he could literally not want her back in his life in any form. That he could forgive her past but not her present.

She sank down into the sand as someone thrust an energy bar and Thermos of tea at her. Voices throbbed in her spinning head and she let herself be tended to like a child as they tutttuted over the open blisters on her hands and the sunburn on her tight skin. Her head cranked around to follow Marc's progress as he dragged his feet up the beach with the wildlife officials, deep in conversation.

Someone was asking her where she was staying and she felt her lips responding, identifying her motel. Then capable hands lifted her to her feet and supported her as they moved up the beach, up a different track to the one leading to Marc's car. Her head cranked around to catch sight of him as he disappeared up the far dune.

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