

From Waif to His Wife

*Lindsay
Armstrong*

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Lindsay Armstrong
From Waif To His Wife
Серия «Mills & Boon Modern»

Аннотация

A mousy music teacher, Maisie's hardly a seductive siren. But her lack of worldliness turns her life upside down, and, abandoned and alone, she knows she has to confront the man who deceived her. . . . Rafael Sanderson is rich, successful and a master of marriage avoidance. He's never seen Maisie before, but she seems to think she knows him. And even though it's his rule never to get involved, this time he's compelled to make this waif his wife!

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CHAPTER ONE

MAISIE WALLIS seldom admitted defeat but on a late winter's day, not long after her twenty-second birthday, she came close to it.

She was a petite redhead with green eyes, but she presented to the world two rather different personae. Her real name was Mairead, although she'd been Maisie for as long as she could remember.

It was as the unexceptional Maisie Wallis that she taught music at a strict private school. She wasn't greatly experienced as a teacher yet, but she was passionate about music and she loved children.

It was as Mairead Wallis, with her cloud of red curls released and teased out, in stage make-up and a glitzy dress, that she pursued her second job, back-up pianist on weekends for a band that performed at upmarket receptions.

Of course, within, she was the same person. The only child of doting parents, she was a little strait-laced, she was a little unworldly, she had to acknowledge with the painful help of hindsight, although as Mairead Wallis she mightn't look it.

Then she'd lost those doting parents in a freak accident six months ago, and now she was on her own.

Well, almost, she thought as she flagged down a taxi because her car had developed a mysterious knock overnight and was in

for a service; because the thought of taking a bus was nauseating and her feet were killing her, anyway.

But, as he drove her home, the taxi driver must have caught her air of despair and, as he dropped her off, he said, 'Cheer up, love! Things can't be that bad.'

She handed over the fare and was about to say that they couldn't, actually, be worse. But she stopped as she noticed a blind man walking along the pavement with a white stick and a seeing-eye dog, and she grimaced. Of course they could.

And maybe it was time to get mad, maybe the time for tears and recriminations and despair was past. She wasn't, after all, a redhead for nothing.

Moreover, Rafael Sanderson might be a high-flying, multimillionaire with the means to keep outsiders at bay, she might have pounded the pavements in search of him today to no avail, but she refused to be treated like this.

Home was an old wooden Queenslander in Manly, a bay-side suburb of Brisbane. But it had only become home fairly recently. Her father had been in the army, so a lot of Maisie's life had been lived on the move on a variety of bases, including some overseas postings.

She'd done her music degree in Melbourne while her father had been based at Puckapunyal. Then he'd retired and her parents had fulfilled a dream; they'd moved to Queensland, the Sunshine State, they'd bought a house and a boat.

Maisie had come north as well, quite happy to move back home and be able to help her mother, who had suffered from arthritis.

The one downside, though, to being the only child of only-children parents and having moved around so much was the lack of really good friends. Not that she didn't have friends but they were scattered far and wide and when her parents died she hadn't been in Brisbane long enough to make the kind of friends one could really confide in.

The house itself was comfortable although her father had had great plans to renovate it. It also had lovely views down to the foreshore and out over Moreton Bay to its twin guardians of Moreton and North Stradbroke Islands. And it had a garden Maisie loved pottering about in—she'd inherited her mother's green fingers plus a cooking gene from her father.

She made herself a snack and a cup of tea. She took them to the veranda, determined to hammer out her new resolution, but the view captured her for a few minutes as she watched the forest of masts in Manly Harbour, one of which belonged to her parents' yacht, the *Amelie*, still moored in the Royal Queensland Yacht Squadron marina.

Then she looked out over the bay and the setting sun was laying a living carnation pink with misty violet shadows on the steely-still waters, and it was all so lovely it brought tears to her eyes.

She dashed them away impatiently and remembered her

resolve in the taxi. No more tears and, somehow, she would track Rafael Sanderson down.

Starting work on her computer again recalled her extreme surprise when she'd first started her searches, and discovered that he was one of the richest men in Australia as CEO of Sanderson Minerals and had inherited the Dixon pastoralist empire.

It can't be the same one, had been her immediate reaction. Yes, the man she was looking for had had an aura of background and substance, and the Dixon pastoralist side could match that, but Sanderson Minerals was a giant corporation, she discovered. Then she'd come up with a birth date that made him roughly the same age as the man she was looking for, plus some information in his curriculum vitae had made her sure he was the one...

But she couldn't help wondering why she'd never heard of him until she checked further and discovered that he was extremely reclusive. She could find business reports and articles on Sanderson Minerals and Dixon Pastoral Inc, but apart from that very potted life history, even although it had yielded gold, there was very little of a personal nature.

And images of Rafe Sanderson, she found, were as rare as hen's teeth, as her father had used to say, as well as frustratingly inconclusive. They certainly rang a bell, but there were differences that made her ponder again whether it was the same man...

Perhaps, she'd reasoned, the images she'd found were slightly

misleading because they looked like press releases; they were very formal. Whereas the Rafe Sanderson she'd met had been more casual.

She'd shaken her head and decided there was just one way to find out...

It had only been by resorting to the electoral roll that she'd found a residential address. He wasn't listed in the phone book.

Sanderson Minerals did have their head office in Brisbane, but after she'd phoned, then called in person, she'd come away in no doubt whatsoever that without stating her business she had no hope of an appointment with Mr Sanderson; anyway, he was away.

She'd buzzed the address she'd gleaned from the electoral roll, a luxurious apartment block on the Brisbane River, only to receive the same disembodied message via the intercom.

That was when she'd thought to use the Dixon connection, he was a Dixon on his mother's side and the Dixons were a very old, wealthy family. One of the reasons she was so footsore today was that she'd visited several residences she'd found in the phone book in expensive suburbs like Ascot, Clayfield and Hamilton that might be the home of the very exclusive Dixon family.

One of them had, indeed, but she'd had the door shut in her face when she'd requested help in getting in touch with Rafe Sanderson.

She gritted her teeth at the memory and stiffened her spine. She would continue trawling the web until she found something

that led her to him.

Fortunately the school holidays had just started, so it didn't matter if she burnt the candle at both ends. All the same, she nearly missed it. An article in an online yachting magazine that just happened to mention Rafe Sanderson's Mary-Lue taking line honours in an ocean race.

She blinked as the words on the screen danced before her eyes. That was all there was, although she scrolled through the article several times, noting that it was about six months old, but her mind was jumping and her fingers were suddenly shaky.

Right here under her nose all this time, she marvelled, because she knew the Mary-Lue. It was moored on the same finger as her parents' boat in the marina. Or, at least, she'd seen it there once and stopped to admire its sleek, green-hulled beauty. But was it still there, and was it the same Mary-Lue?

It was too late to do anything about it that night but the next day, after she'd picked up her car, she went down to the marina, ostensibly to check out the Amelie; start the motor and run the bilges.

As usual—she did it regularly—it broke her heart to be reminded of the happy days she and her parents had spent on the yacht, sailing the bay. She knew the time was approaching when she'd have to make a decision about the Amelie—keep it or sell it. Along with a whole lot of other decisions...

But she steeled herself and after doing her checks, she strolled

down the finger in the wintry sunshine.

The Mary-Lue was still there in all her fifty-foot glory. Not only that, but there was also a gas bottle bearing a paper label beside it on the finger.

She glanced down to read the writing and saw that it said ‘Deliver to R. Sanderson, Mary-Lue, RQ H29.’

Bingo, she thought with her heart suddenly beating heavily. RQ was the affectionate acronym of the Royal Queensland Yacht Squadron and H29 was stencilled on the pier pole indicating the berth number.

Then she had a further stroke of luck. The young lad who helped the marina manager in the school holidays stepped off the Mary-Lue and greeted her cheerfully.

‘Hi, Maisie. Going sailing?’

‘No, Travis, I’ve just done my usual checks and balances,’ she replied. ‘I thought I’d wander down the finger and see what’s new.’

‘Well, this gorgeous girl is going out.’ He patted the Mary-Lue’s hull. ‘First light tomorrow morning, which is beaut because he hasn’t had the time to take her out for months. Such a shame.’ Travis, Maisie well knew, was mad about boats and sailing.

And as he hefted the gas bottle on his shoulder and climbed up to stow it on board, she called up, ‘Maybe you’d like to come sailing with me one day, Travis?’

‘You just name the day, Maisie,’ he called back. ‘See you.’

Maisie walked back to her car with a very strange sensation in the pit of her stomach.

Now that it was almost upon her—and she would do it, she knew—how was she going to feel about confronting Rafe Sanderson?

It was four o'clock the next morning when she let herself onto H finger again. She wore a navy tracksuit, deck shoes and a beanie—it was overcast, no moon or stars, and colder than she'd thought it would be. Sunrise wouldn't be for another two hours.

She made her way down the jetty finger between the boats and she sighed with relief to see the Mary-Lue still there, but with no sign of lights or life.

Then she almost immediately saw difficulties. What was she going to do with herself until he arrived?

There was no one about in the dark chill of a very early morning and it was tempting to climb aboard the Mary-Lue and make herself comfortable in the cockpit until he arrived, but that was hardly ethical.

On the other hand, how ethical was the Mary-Lue's owner?

She stuck out her chin and swiftly climbed aboard.

The cockpit was comfortably lined with padded seats with waterproof covers, but it was also freezing.

Perhaps you needed to think this out a little better, Maisie, she told herself, and tried, quite sure it would be locked, the door that led down to the yacht's main cabin.

It wasn't locked. She hesitated. This could definitely be putting her outside the law, but what was the worst law she was breaking—trespass? And she could always explain.

A patter of raindrops decided the matter for her. She eased open the door, slipped down the companionway and found herself in a dimly lit cabin of sumptuous comfort, from what she could see. It was also warm.

She sat down on a built-in couch. She ran through everything she planned to say to Rafe Sanderson and how she planned to say it. She heard the eutectic refrigeration click in from shore power a couple of times. She yawned.

She hadn't been able to sleep at all because of the mixture of dread and uncertainty that was building within her, but she did everything to keep herself awake bar prop her eyelids open with matchsticks. She wasn't even aware of gradually toppling over, pulling a scatter cushion beneath her cheek and falling asleep.

She was to think later that it was being used to boats and the noises they made, on top of a wakeful night, that saw her sleep like a baby through what followed.

It had never occurred to her that Rafe Sanderson would sling a bag on board, that he would loosen his lines and the electricity cable and toss them on board then climb aboard himself. That he would start the motor and, when it fired, expertly un-loop the last rope holding the boat to the jetty and reverse out of the berth without coming down to the cabin first.

In fact, she only woke when he'd steered the Mary-Lue out of the harbour and into the channel, and what woke her then she could never afterwards recall.

She sat up with a suddenly pounding heart and a dry mouth to see patchy sunlight coming through the portholes, and to feel the unmistakable motion of a boat underway, to hear the purr of a motor.

She closed her eyes in horror. Then she jumped up and climbed the companionway and catapulted out of the door at the head of the stairs that she'd closed so carefully to keep the cold out.

The next few minutes were chaotic. Rafe Sanderson had abandoned the wheel, put the steering on autopilot and, it appeared, had climbed up to set his mainsail.

Her unexpected arrival in the cockpit took him completely by surprise; the boom, which he'd just released, responded to the fluke breeze and hit him in the midriff and with a yell he slipped sideways, and toppled overboard.

Maisie stared in round-eyed horror this time. Then she came to life. She scrambled up and secured the boom to avoid decapitation. She hopped back down into the cockpit, studied the controls for a moment then put the motor into Neutral.

Finally she looked around wildly, spotted an orange lifesaver buoy, untied it and threw it with all her might at Rafe Sanderson's bobbing head as he swam towards the boat.

It hit him on the head—fortunately the buoy was the soft

variety—but, although he grabbed it and hauled himself in, it seemed to be the final insult added to injury for him. There was no doubting it was a murderously angry, dripping man who hauled himself over the transom.

A couple of strides brought him up to her, where he took her by the shoulders and proceeded to demonstrate that he'd like to shake the life out of her.

Maybe that was what he would have done if they both hadn't frozen at the sight of a channel marker passing by on their port side, uncomfortably close.

He swore, released her and grabbed the wheel at the same time as he flicked the autopilot off.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?' he demanded furiously as he put the power on and steered the boat into the middle of the channel. 'Who the hell are you and how did you get on board?'

'I—I,' she stammered, 'I needed to talk to you, but it was freezing so I went down into the cabin to wait for you, that's all. I must have fallen asleep.'

'You mean you broke into the cabin!' he fired back at her.

'I didn't! It wasn't locked, so—'

'Oh, yes, it was!'

'No, it wasn't,' she insisted. 'Do I look like the kind of girl who goes around breaking locks?'

'You look like,' he paused and scanned her, 'heaven knows what! How on earth could I tell...' He stopped impatiently then

frowned. 'Maybe not. You look about sixteen but I suppose you could have taken to a life of crime early!'

But Maisie was now looking at him in something like horror. 'Who—who are you?' she stammered.

'What's that got to do with anything?' he rasped. 'How did you get in?'

'Well,' she swallowed convulsively, as her mind did cartwheels, 'um—the door wasn't locked. Maybe you had a delivery and someone from the marina office brought it on board and forgot to lock the door behind them?'

She stopped and flinched inwardly as she thought belatedly of Travis, the last person she wanted to blame, especially as she might have distracted him herself.

'I...' He paused. 'I did have a catering package delivered and a new gas bottle,' he said almost to himself, then shrugged. 'That still gives you no right to be on my boat. Here, take the bloody wheel,' he added roughly. 'You may have all but drowned me, you may have tried to knock me out, but you're not going to finish me off with pneumonia. Red to starboard, green to port,' he said, indicating the channel markers.

'I kn-know that,' Maisie said a little shakily as she stepped up to the wheel, 'but shouldn't we be turning back?'

'Like f...Like hell we should,' he amended, still blazingly angry as he started to pull off his sodden sweater.

'You don't have to not swear on my account, if it makes you feel better,' she said nervously as she took over the steering. 'I've

probably heard it all before.’

‘I doubt it. But just in case you haven’t seen it all before you might like to keep your eyes ahead.’

Of course, she turned to look a question at him automatically, only to see that he’d stripped and was pulling a towel out of his bag.

‘Oh,’ she said, and felt her cheeks start to burn as she switched her gaze to dead straight ahead. For, whoever this was, he was superb. Streamlined, finely muscled with compact hips, a washboard stomach, long legs—he’d be an artist’s dream model, not to mention the answer to most girls’ prayers.

Nor did it escape her attention that his naked body had caused a fluttery sensation in the pit of her stomach, which caused her serious consternation and disbelief...

‘Oh?’ he echoed.

‘I didn’t realise that’s what you meant, that’s all. Sorry.’

He growled something unintelligible and presently came back into sight, dressed in dry clothes, to take the wheel from her.

‘Now, ma’am, miss, boat burglar or whatever you are, we need some hot coffee.’

Maisie hesitated. ‘I really do think we should turn around—’

‘Then you shouldn’t have sneaked aboard,’ he said drily, ‘because I planned to sail to Horseshoe Bay on Peel Island this morning, I’ve invited two couples from other boats aboard for lunch and that is still my intention. Off you go!’

Maisie went. She had no idea what else she could do at that

moment.

Under normal circumstances, unless your mind was going round in circles, it would have been a pleasure to make coffee aboard the Mary-Lue.

The sumptuousness of the main cabin was revealed in all its glory in daylight. The mellow rich gleam of New Guinea rosewood was polished to perfection. The navy cut-velvet upholstery was lifted with turquoise scatter cushions and turquoise carpeting, and a brass lamp with a gold foil shade stood on the bar.

There was a built-in chart table and a duplicate set of controls, a radar, GPS and plotter, plus a variety of marine radios. You could go anywhere on the Mary-Lue, she thought.

The galley was spotless and had every mod con including an ice-maker. No plastic glasses and mugs—instead she found crystal glasses and a set of fine china coffee mugs that echoed the décor in their pattern of navy, turquoise and gold.

She could only find instant coffee, however, but when she opened the fridge for milk it was to see it was stocked with pâtés and exotic cheeses, smoked salmon and oysters, a lobster salad, strawberries, six bottles of champagne and much more. She assembled the coffee on a tray and bore it carefully up the stairs.

The man at the wheel bent down to take it from her, and she emerged into the cockpit to see he'd taken the waterproof covers

off the seats.

His short, thick hair had also started to dry, so she could see it was dark blond; ditto, she thought. Height? About six feet four—ditto, she thought again—and grey eyes, but it was definitely not the same man, with a very different aura.

She closed her eyes in confusion then opened them to notice the sky hadn't cleared completely, so there was patchy sunlight, and it was still cool. What breeze there was was errant so that the surface of the water was glassy and reflecting the sky, then lightly ruffled.

Peel Island, coming up on their port bow, was low and green compared to the bulk of North Stradbroke behind it. There was not much activity on this part of Moreton Bay on this chilly Saturday morning.

'Sit down,' he ordered, 'and start talking.'

Maisie did everything she knew to compose herself in what was not only a mystifying but also a dreadfully embarrassing situation.

She took some deep breaths then remembered she was still wearing her beanie. She took it off and ran her fingers through her hair and the breeze lifted her curls, causing her companion to narrow his eyes as he studied her.

Finally, she wrapped her hands around her mug. 'W-would you please tell me who you are first? I do—really—need to know.'

'Rafe Sanderson,' he said curtly. 'More to the point, who are

you?’

‘No, you’re not.’ The words slipped out before she could help herself but she meant them.

He looked at her ironically. ‘I can assure you I am.’

‘But I happen to know you’re not!’

‘Now look here—how?’ He changed tack slightly. ‘I can guarantee we don’t know each other from a—the proverbial bar of soap.’

‘That’s just it,’ she cried and lost all caution to the wind. ‘I—I had an affair with Rafe Sanderson, if you could call it that. I’m pregnant with his baby, but it would appear he’s—he doesn’t want anything more to do with me.’

He was stunned into silence for a good minute. Then he put the motor into Neutral, then Reverse, and as the boat stopped moving he let out the anchor chain with a touch of a button on the console.

And Maisie continued a little desperately, ‘At first I thought you were him, and now I see you’re not, but it’s the same name so I—I’m terribly confused.’

‘Some girls are easy to confuse,’ he said then with a hard little glint in his grey eyes. ‘Go on.’

‘You don’t believe me,’ Maisie said and gestured. ‘To be honest, neither do I. Not that it didn’t happen but I don’t believe I could have let it—’

‘Were you coerced?’ he asked abruptly.

‘No.’ And suddenly the fact that she’d had no one to confide in

claimed her and it all spilt out. ‘I was lonely and bereft. I’d lost my parents—we were very close—a couple of months beforehand. Then one day I was doing my Mairéad Wallis act—’

‘What the hell is that?’

She told him about her name and the band. ‘And when we’d finished playing—it was an afternoon wedding—this man came up and introduced himself as Rafael Sanderson and asked if he could buy me a drink. I said no, thanks, but a cup of coffee would be nice. It all started there.’

‘Did you climb into bed with him that night?’

‘No,’ she said coldly and felt some of her redheadedness seep into her veins.

Then she paused to take charge of her emotions, which also included being unable to deny that she’d been incredibly naïve.

‘But I really enjoyed his company, he was charming, funny and—gorgeous. And life just didn’t seem to be so bleak any more.’ She stopped and sighed. ‘So we had a few dates...for some reason I really dressed up for him, then he told me he’d fallen in love with me on sight and he wanted to marry me.’

She closed her eyes. ‘I believed him. So, then, it did happen. I’ll never know if it was the wine we had—I don’t usually drink—but,’ she looked down at her hands, ‘I also believed him when he said he’d take charge of things.’

‘Contraception?’

She nodded.

‘He didn’t,’ he said flatly, ‘and if all this is to be believed, he

skedaddled. So it only happened once? Although I presume it rang bells and blew trumpets for you?

‘It didn’t, actually.’ She looked self-conscious. ‘I mean, it was fine, but...’ She trailed off, looking embarrassed.

‘The earth didn’t move for you?’ he suggested.

‘Well, no, but I was a virgin and I thought it was just going to take time. And he was—well, he was nice about it and reassuring and I felt wanted, I felt loved...’ She trailed off and gestured.

Bastard, Rafe caught himself thinking. If any of this is to be believed. ‘So—only once?’ he queried sceptically.

She nodded again, but if he’d known her better he would have intercepted the little glint in her green eyes, and interpreted it correctly.

‘And that’s when you started to search for Rafael Sanderson?’

‘That’s when it occurred to me I had no means of getting in touch with him; he’d always been the one to make contact. That’s when I started to worry, not only on my account. I wondered if he’d had an accident—I was terribly concerned and confused, so—’ she shrugged ‘—but the only Rafael Sanderson, in Australia anyway, that I came up with turned out to be the CEO of Sanderson Minerals and heir to the Dixon fortune! Then I found out I was pregnant.’

He scanned her figure. ‘You don’t look it. Listen, this is all very touching—’

But Maisie slammed her fists on the table and shot up from her seat.

‘Don’t think,’ she spat at him, ‘I haven’t reflected on my stupidity, at great and bitter length, in fact. Don’t think that the real irony is I was the last girl I thought this could happen to, and it’s shocked me to my boots to discover I was as vulnerable as many other girls who find themselves in this position. But don’t think I intend to take it lying down, either.’

She paused and flinched at her choice of words as he raised an eyebrow drily, then she soldiered on. ‘So you may look at me as cynically as you like, whoever you are, but I intend to find this man and give him a piece of my mind if nothing else!’

‘Sit down, Mairead—’

‘Maisie,’ she shot back.

‘I thought you said—’

‘I did, but I’m mostly called Maisie and, if you must know, I’ve become a bit allergic to Mairead because I suspect she led Rafe into believing I’m more—worldly than I am. Make that was!’

‘He wasn’t Rafe, I am,’ he pointed out with a sudden look of amusement. ‘I’m afraid you’ve got your men well and truly mixed up and I’m not sure it’s quite unintentionally, Mair—pardon me, Maisie, so—’

‘Well, I’m afraid to say I can’t stand your superior, mocking company a moment longer,’ she interrupted vigorously, with unconscious hauteur stamped into every line of her body.

And she climbed onto the gunnel and dived neatly overboard.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WASN'T quite as unplanned or as insane as it looked.

In the moments before she did it, it flashed through her mind that the tide was going out, it wasn't any great swim to the shallows and reefs around Peel, which were starting to be exposed anyway, and she was a good swimmer.

And once she got to the island she could walk to Lazaret's Gutter, where she could see boats anchored, and get some help.

Two things worked against her. The shock of the cold water and the fact that the tide was running more swiftly than she'd anticipated.

Nor did she anticipate the speed with which Rafe Sanderson would get the Mary-Lue's inflatable dinghy down into the water off its davits.

As she struggled against the tide, though, it was with a sense of gratitude that she saw the dinghy streaking towards her.

But once again it was a murderously angry man who man-handled her into the dinghy then onto the Mary-Lue.

'Don't you ever do that again, you idiot!' he stormed at her, gripping the lapels of her tracksuit top in his fists as they stood in the cockpit, lifting her on to her tiptoes.

It was only natural that some of Maisie's fire would be quenched. She was dripping, she was freezing, she was feeling slightly foolish.

But enough of a spark remained, fanned by her feeling of extreme ill-use, for her to retort, albeit through chattering teeth, 'I'd have m-made it if it hadn't b-been for the tide.' She paused then yelled at the top of her voice, 'And you have done nothing but insult me!'

Furious grey eyes looked into furious green ones, then Rafe Sanderson relaxed suddenly, and drawled, 'So. A real firebrand? My apologies, Maisie.' He released her lapels and she sank back onto her heels. 'Anyway, perhaps this will make amends.'

He pulled her into his arms.

How it should affect her so drastically considering she was half drowned, not to mention furious with him, Maisie had no idea. But she had the strangest feeling that anything was possible between her and Rafe Sanderson at that moment.

It was as if such a level of tension in her had to expose her to the other side of the coin, or as if you could only be that angry with a man over how he viewed you because you wanted to be viewed differently...

But these jumbled thoughts were no protection against the way she felt as his arms closed round her.

Her confusion, tension and anger seemed to evaporate slowly. She found herself feeling safe and not so much like a piece of flotsam tossed without warning on the stormy seas of life. Not to mention the swift-running, freezing water she'd cast herself into.

Then he bent his head to kiss her and his lips were warm and dry and new sensations stirred in her. Sensations that shocked her

to her core. How could she enjoy a man's hands on her, his mouth on hers, how could she feel all stirred up in that particularly delicious way when it had led her into such a terrible trap only months ago?

He kissed her briefly, not even parting her lips, then lifted his head and stared into her green eyes, so wide and so shocked but at variance with the unresisting way she stood in the circle of his arms.

And something she couldn't read flickered in his expression before he let her go. Then he immediately started to undress her.

Maisie came back to earth with a thud.

'No,' she gasped, 'no!' And attempted to stop him.

'Listen,' he commanded, 'the only reason I'm doing this is because there's no point in you dripping all over the saloon carpet—I have no designs on you!'

'But you've just k-kissed me,' she objected.

'That was something else.'

'How could it be? I mean—I mean, how do I know I won't end up discarded and pregnant again?'

He paused and looked into her eyes, very green but supremely confused and wary, and a faint smile touched his lips. 'I don't think you can be pregnant twice at the same time.'

She bit her lip in frustration. 'You know what I mean.'

He shrugged. 'It was to make up for insulting you and being all superior and cynical. It was a salute for being told to go to hell in a rather foolhardy, but nevertheless decisive manner I couldn't

help admiring. That's all.'

Maisie stared at him, uncharacteristically speechless, and he took the opportunity to strip off her top and push her trousers down then he sat her down so he could take off her shoes.

'Besides which,' he added, 'I have seen it all before.'

'But—but...'

He scanned her delicate figure beneath an emerald-green bra patterned with pink frangipanis and matching bikini briefs, and raised an eyebrow. 'Very fetching, Maisie, but believe me, you're not my type so you're quite safe. Up you get!'

He pulled her to her feet as a wave of telltale colour mounted in her cheeks, and picked her up to carry her downstairs.

'Right, into the shower, we've got plenty of hot water, so don't stint until you feel warm right through,' he ordered and set her on her feet as he opened the bathroom door.

'But I've got no clothes!'

'I'll find you some. Just do as you're told.'

The hot water was wonderful but she finally stepped out and wrapped her slim body in a towel and wrapped another, smaller one round her head. Then she realised that the boat was underway again and wondered in which direction he was going—Manly or Peel?

There was a rap on the door.

'Yes?' she called.

'Go through the other door,' Rafe Sanderson instructed. 'It

leads into the aft berth and you'll find some clothes on the bed. Don't take too long—once I've got the anchor down I'll be making a warm drink for you.'

'Yes, sir; no, sir; three bags full,' Maisie murmured beneath her breath, but she did as she was told.

The aft berth had a walk-around double bed with a toffee and peppermint quilted silk coverlet. Her feet sank into deep toffee-coloured carpet, and the fittings were again New Guinea rosewood with brass handles.

She dropped the towel and looked down at herself. She was about three and a half months pregnant but if anything she'd lost a bit of weight. She put that down to stress and the fact that she'd gone through a period of morning sickness—only at night, thankfully, so it hadn't affected her job—but it had quite put her off food.

Fortunately, that phase had mostly gone quite recently, although she still got the odd twinge. It was also fortunate it had passed because feeling physically dreadful a lot of the time, on top of feeling mentally traumatised, had seen her dither around unable to do anything or make any decisions.

But the only difference so far she could see in her body, apart from the bit of weight she'd lost, was her breasts. Her nipples were darker and more sensitive.

She turned her attention to the pile of clothes on the bed. They were a shade too big for her but she couldn't quibble about their quality.

She pulled on coffee silk and lace knickers that looked to be brand-new. There was a matching bra but it was too big for her, so she chose a cream singlet with a prim satin bow. Then she put on a pair of green track pants and finally a gloriously snug cream-coloured cable-knit sweater.

It definitely wasn't new, although it was perfectly clean, but a subtle perfume lingered on the wool.

Whose clothes were these she wondered.

There were no shoes but a pair of socks.

Finally, she looked at herself in the fitted dressing-table mirror. Her irrepressible hair was already starting to curl riotously but since she had nothing to tie it back with she could only comb her fingers through it. But it was the expression in her eyes that really startled her.

She looked somewhat shell-shocked, she decided. But who wouldn't after diving overboard and having to be rescued? Or was it something to do with being kissed then being dismissed into a "not my type" category?

Of course I'm not his type, she thought immediately. Apart from anything else I'm pregnant by another man. But how did he make me feel so safe and...?

He did save me, she reminded herself as her cheeks started to warm.

Then she heard the different pitch of the motor, indicating slower revs then neutral, and the anchor chain rattled out. She looked out of the porthole to recognise the curved white beach

of Horseshoe Bay on Peel Island, and bit her lip.

A few minutes later, as she was trying to work out how to deal with this development, he called out that coffee was ready.

‘How do you feel?’ he enquired as they sat opposite each other in the dining section.

This time there was proper, steaming coffee poured from a stainless-steel pot, and there was a dash of brandy in it.

‘I...Fine,’ she answered. ‘A lot warmer. Uh—thanks for the clothes.’

‘They belong to my sister, Sonia, who comes sailing with me from time to time—in case you’re wondering,’ he said with a dry little look.

‘I...’ Maisie glanced away awkwardly then decided not to pursue the matter.

‘Hmm...Well, you’ve got a bit of colour back in your cheeks. Are you really pregnant?’ he said then.

She blinked. ‘Why?’

‘Because if you are you should curb your apparently natural instincts towards outrageous deeds—like diving off boats and battling the tide,’ he added laconically.

Maisie’s hands flew protectively to her stomach. ‘I didn’t stop to think,’ she breathed. ‘But the doctor did tell me there was no need to cosset myself.’

He raised an eyebrow. ‘His version of cosset could differ from yours. However, that seems to answer both my questions.’

‘Both?’

‘Yes. Not only are you pregnant, but you also don’t like the thought of losing the baby.’ His eyes searched hers.

‘No, I don’t.’ Maisie sipped her coffee and tried to find the words to explain.

Because out of the blue, amidst the shock and growing horror of finding herself pregnant and abandoned, the thought had dropped into her mind that she would not be alone in the world now.

She’d examined it carefully from all angles, but none of the obstacles, and her life was going to be strewn with them because of this baby, could douse that thought and it had grown stronger...

‘I—I—would have someone, you see,’ she said at last.

He said nothing but she felt as if that steady grey gaze was probing right through to her soul. Then, ‘How old are you?’

‘Twenty-two.’

He grimaced. ‘So are you hoping for some kind of a settlement from this—this man?’

‘No.’ She tilted her chin. ‘If he doesn’t want anything more to do with me, I certainly don’t want his charity. But if he has no good reason other than he’s a—a cad and a bounder,’ sudden tears shone in her eyes, ‘who goes around preying on girls, I want to be able to tell him he’s a—he’s a—’

‘An utter bastard?’ he supplied.

She nodded then moved her hands expressively. ‘Not only that.

I need, even if he doesn't want anything to do with us, him to agree to having his name on the baby's birth certificate. I feel I owe the baby nothing less—to at least know who its father is—wouldn't you?'

He didn't comment on that directly. He said instead, 'You've obviously given it a lot of thought.'

'I've had several increasingly miserable months to think of nothing else.' She wiped her eyes impatiently at the same time as she added an admonition to herself in an undertone, 'No more tears, Maisie!'

Then she was struck by another thought. 'But now I haven't even got a name—unless there is another man with the same name out there!'

Rafe Sanderson watched her and thought his own thoughts. Was she a superb actress he wondered.

Had she hit on an original twist for an old and sorry story? Such as finding herself pregnant and abandoned and deciding to make the best of it? Such as picking his name at random, well, from amongst the suitably well heeled, and concocting a likely tale along the lines of—he said he was you and I really believed him.

His eyes narrowed as he followed the thought. It would have taken a bit of planning. First of all, she'd have had to come up with an uncommon name—she'd probably have had to check that out in Queensland at least—and his did fit the bill. But if so, and the rest of it was a pack of lies, what had she been hoping for?

That he'd be so touched by her plight and her pluck, he'd hand over some cash to help her out?

He smiled a grim, austere little smile then looked across at her to find her studying him intently.

'You're not believing me again,' she said huskily.

'Maisie,' he gestured, 'whatever, and I'm sorry for anyone in this position, but it's not my affair.'

'Did you ever live at a place called Karoo Downs?' she queried. 'A sheep station out west somewhere?'

He frowned. 'How did you know that?'

'As a matter of fact, it's common knowledge if you'd like to look it up on the internet. Apparently there was a South African connection in the Dixon family in the early days and Karoo comes from the Great Karoo in South Africa, also sheep country.'

'You've done your research well,' he said flatly.

'Oh, I knew about Karoo Downs before I started searching,' she said. 'R...he told me about it. He also told me about his two favourite dogs, Graaff and Reinet.'

Rafe Sanderson suddenly drummed his fingers on the table.

'I asked about the names,' Maisie continued. 'He said Graaff-Reinet is the main town in the Karoo and these two dogs were ridgebacks, a South African breed originally, and that's why he chose the names.'

This time Rafe Sanderson swore. 'Who the bloody hell have you been talking to, Maisie?'

'No one. No one else. Oh, a Dixon who shut the door in my

face, only two days ago as it happens.’

‘You must have been. Family, staff.’ He narrowed his eyes on her. ‘Listen, Maisie, I want the truth and now,’ he said through his teeth.

‘The truth?’ She stared at him with her lips parted and her eyes widening. ‘There must be some man out there going around impersonating you...’

He banged his fist on the table and made the coffee mugs jump. ‘Now I’ve heard it all.’

‘But for a few minutes I thought you were him,’ she protested. ‘I mean, now I’m quite sure you’re not and if you hadn’t been dripping wet and so angry I might have realised sooner...’ She stopped bewilderedly. ‘But I did think so at first.’

He opened his mouth to retort but the VHF radio above the charting desk came alive and intervened. ‘Mary-Lue, Mary-Lue—Lotus Lady, six seven,’ a deep, disembodied voice said.

Rafe shut his mouth with a click then got up to answer the call. ‘Lotus Lady—Mary-Lue, six nine.’ And he changed channels.

‘Rafe—Dan here; we’ll be over in about twenty minutes. Melissa wants to know if there’s anything you need—and we’ll pick up Eddie and Martha on the way.’

Rafe Sanderson hesitated and glanced darkly at Maisie. Then he depressed his PTT button and said into the mike, ‘Don’t need anything, thanks, mate. See you soon.’ He hung up the mike and came back to the table.

Maisie swallowed and suddenly looked desperately tired and

uneasy. 'How are you going to explain me to your friends?'

He took in her wan complexion. 'I'm not. Are you sure you're feeling all right?'

'I'm fine but tired, that's all. I—I didn't sleep last night and I probably only had an hour here before you came on board. I also—sometimes I just feel like a cat who needs to curl up and go to sleep.'

'Then go to bed, kid,' he said, not unkindly. 'Use the aft berth. With a bit of luck no one will even know you're here. We can get down to brass tacks again,' he looked impatient for a moment, 'later.'

'Oh, thank you,' Maisie said with real gratitude.

'Just one thing.'

She looked a query at him.

'I need you to promise me you won't try to drown yourself again, you won't try to drown me or do anything else outrageous.'

Maisie had to laugh. 'I promise,' she said, 'unless, that is, your behaviour is outrageous, Mr Sanderson.'

He studied her with a faint frown in his eyes, as if he didn't quite know what to make of her. Then he shrugged and got up.

Maisie fell asleep with no difficulty.

She tried not to. She told herself there was too much to think about, too much to attempt to clarify, not least her reaction to a man she'd only just met, but nothing could keep at bay the tide of weariness that overcame her.

She didn't hear the lunch party come aboard, she didn't hear anything until she woke a couple of hours later.

She stretched, yawned and looked around with no idea where she was until the toffee and peppermint décor struck a chord.

She sat up abruptly in time to hear a female voice above deck, saying,

'Why, Rafe, you've got a girl in your cabin!'

Maisie froze, and realised that it must have been the opening, or more likely the closing, of the cabin door that had woken her.

'Melissa,' Rafe's voice sounding irritable, 'hasn't anyone told you to wait for an invitation before you nose about?'

A tinkle of laughter, then, 'Darling, life's too short to wait for invitations. And, unless I'm very much mistaken, she's a redhead.'

Maisie waited with bated breath.

'She's also a stowaway I'd never laid eyes on until she made her presence known and nearly drowned me,' Rafe replied coolly. 'What's more she's going back from whence she came, wherever the hell that is, pronto, which is why I'm about to throw you lot off. I need to get underway.'

'Well, darling,' Melissa said, 'however you want to call it is fine by us. And thanks for a lovely lunch. We might toddle off and spend the night at Blakesley's anchorage. Oh. Will we see you at Tricia's party on Wednesday?'

Rafe Sanderson replied in the negative.

Maisie waited, as she heard the sound of an outboard motor revving then receding, before she got up and made her way to the main saloon, not at all sure of her reception in light of Rafe's blunt and truthful explanation of her presence, and how he planned to handle her dismissal.

He surprised her. He came down the steps at the same time, raised an eyebrow at her and asked her if she was hungry.

Maisie closed her eyes. 'I—I'm starving! No breakfast, no lunch.'

'That's what I thought, so I kept you some food.' He withdrew some foil-wrapped plates from the fridge and set them on the table.

A minor feast greeted her eyes as he unwrapped the foil. Smoked salmon and melon; cold lobster in a salad studded with black olives and feta cheese, accompanied by a crispy chicken leg and a slice of quiche which he removed and warmed in the microwave. He also warmed two rolls.

'Thank you so much,' she murmured as she gazed hungrily at his offerings. She hesitated. 'I rather thought you were going to make me walk the plank.'

'You heard?'

'I heard. She must have woken me when she closed the door.'

'She can be the most infuriating woman, but Dan is a good friend,' he said. 'As for making you walk the plank, I'm feeding you and making you a cup of tea instead because cruelty to pregnant ladies is not amongst my vices. However,' he paused

to fill the kettle, ‘as soon as you’ve eaten, we are going straight back to Manly.’

Maisie ate the salmon and melon. ‘Where you intend to wash your hands of me?’

He looked at her expressionlessly over his shoulder then lit the gas and put the kettle on the hob. ‘As a matter of fact, I intend to leave no stone unturned until I get to the bottom of this.’

Maisie demolished the lobster and the quiche then she picked up the chicken leg and sank her teeth into it. When she finished, she wiped her fingers fastidiously on the paper napkin he’d supplied.

‘You were hungry,’ he commented.

She smiled ruefully. ‘For weeks I was as sick as a dog and could hardly look food in the face; now I’m ravenous most of the time.’ She hesitated. ‘Does that mean you believe me?’

He poured two cups of tea and came to sit down. ‘No, but neither do I disbelieve you. You could say I’m reserving judgement, but if there is some bastard going around out there impersonating me, I intend to nail him.’

Maisie shivered involuntarily.

He noted it and pressed home his advantage. ‘But if there isn’t, this is the time to come clean, Maisie Wallis,’ he added quietly, but in a way that left her in no doubt he meant it.

‘That’s exactly how it happened.’ She lifted her shoulders. ‘Why would I make up such a story?’

‘Do you really need me to answer that?’

‘Yes, I do!’ Her green eyes were indignant.

‘OK, then, women have been throwing themselves in my path for years,’ he said deliberately. ‘Don’t think I enjoy it or flatter myself that my money isn’t the draw, I don’t. And this could be an original way of doing it.’

‘No,’ he added as Maisie drew a deep breath, ‘the time for furious displays of anger is past, straight-talking is what we need now, Maisie. For example, when you said the only Rafael Sanderson you could come up with was me, does that mean the name meant nothing to you when this man introduced himself as me?’

‘No—yes! I’d never heard of you.’

‘So why would anyone masquerade as me to a girl it meant nothing to?’

Maisie’s eyes widened. ‘I have no idea,’ she whispered.

‘But you assumed there was a bit of substance in his background all the same?’

‘I honestly didn’t give it much thought but I suppose so. He was well-spoken, he’d travelled, he was,’ she grimaced, ‘a lot more sophisticated than anyone else I’d ever dated.’

He smiled a lethal little smile. ‘Well, that’s the kind of thing I’ll be digging into, as well as your background and so on. Do you really want me to go on with it?’

For a moment, Maisie was in two minds as it struck her that this Rafael Sanderson had an aura his impersonator—and it had to be that—had lacked.

Yes, there were physical similarities, colouring, height and so on.

This Rafe had changed again, after rescuing her and kissing her, during which a fair bit of her drenched condition had transferred itself to him, into jeans and a grey, fine-wool round-necked sweater.

With his thick, ruffled dark-blond hair, those unusual eyes, his lean, strong lines beneath his jeans and sweater, and with his beautiful hands, she noticed suddenly, he was just as attractive.

Similar build—glorious physiques in other words, similar good looks, but—two very different characters, she reflected.

The first Rafe had been charming, he'd been easy-going, he'd really made her laugh at the same time as he'd made her feel desirable and able to view the world a little less darkly in his company.

Yet, despite allusions to a wealthy background, she would never have taken him for the CEO of a minerals corporation, whereas the man sitting opposite her struck her as exactly that.

He definitely had the aura of a clever, powerful businessman who knew what he wanted and got it. It was there in the way he spoke, in his gestures and the way he handled people. It had been there in the few images she'd brought up on her computer that had puzzled her and made her wonder if they were one and the same man.

In other words, beneath those good looks, and wonderfully honed, tall body, there was a lot more substance to this man, there

was even a faintly dangerous edge to him that made you stop and think twice about tangling with him.

But she was telling the truth, she reminded herself, so what did she have to lose?

‘You may do your darnedest, Mr Sanderson,’ she told him quietly. ‘I have nothing to hide.’

‘I see.’ He said it quite neutrally, but his gaze was extremely penetrating and acute.

So penetrating, Maisie found herself thinking some bizarre thoughts.

How was he seeing her?

Simply as a troublesome thorn in his side? A girl who’d got herself into trouble and was therefore beyond the pale?

Or, had any of the deliciously feminine sensations he’d aroused in her got through to him? Something had prompted him to kiss her, after all, so he’d been the one to make the first move, but...

‘Good,’ he said, breaking into her thoughts. ‘Well, now that we’ve got that settled, let’s make a move.’ He got up and picked up her plate.

‘Oh, I’ll do that—unless you need me up top?’

‘Thanks, but I can manage.’ He turned away and ascended the steps to the deck two at a time.

Maisie watched him go and she drew a sudden, startled little breath to discover that it was far from settled for her.

His athleticism stripped away his sweater and jeans in her

mind and presented her with an image of him unclothed, and her imagination ran riot.

She pictured herself on the aft berth with him laughing down at her with tender, wicked amusement as if at an intimate joke only they could share.

Her thoughts roamed on and she realised that if that amusement changed to Rafe Sanderson looking at her with heavy-lidded desire, it would send her to the moon...

Even just the thought of it, and the images that accompanied it, raised her pulses to fever pitch and left her awash with sensation all through her body.

Maisie, Maisie, she thought in some desperation, don't let this happen to you! Think of your fatherless baby if nothing else.

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