



*Kiss  
on a  
bridge*

Mark Stewart

# Kiss on the Bridge

Mark Stewart

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## CHAPTER ONE

11:59pm 31st December 1973.

Three hundred and fifty-nine days prior to cyclone Tracy destroying Darwin.

“MELBOURNE’S WEATHER is nice tonight,” commented the tall smartly dressed man. He’d strolled along the bridge overlooking the Yarra River, stopping at arm’s length to a young lady.

“Is it?” questioned the brunette.

“Yes. I have to add the stars are complimented by your beauty.”

The woman he spoke to seemed to have misunderstood the meaning. She remained staring out across Port Phillip Bay. After several moments, she turned her head so she could look directly into the man’s eyes.

“My name is Wade, you are?”

“I’m Anneli,” she replied.

“Nice name. It suits you,” said Wade. A warm lazy smile escalated his handsome features.

“Thank you for the admiring comment.”

“May I request your last name? Before you answer, let me guess, you never disclose the name to a stranger standing in the middle of a bridge on new-year’s-eve.”

“It’s a tradition,” teased Anneli.

“I again ask my first question.”

“Are you always this insistent on hearing answers to your questions?”

Wade let a friendly chuckle slip. “I have to apologize. I never meant to sound rude or invasive.”

“To comment on your opening line, it could be a nice night. I’m actually hiding from my father and brothers so I can watch the fireworks, alone.”

The young lady focused her attention back on the bay to a point on the horizon. Wade had seen the look too many times before. He could easily slip into the faraway daydream too. The tone

of the young lady's voice signaled she definitely wanted to be left alone. Wade started to weigh up the pros and cons of walking back the way he came when she spoke.

"I'm waiting for my hero to save me from my life," whispered Anneli, shifting her attention to where she stood.

Wade's quick sidestep closed the gap between them by half. "Good luck. Before I leave you to your thoughts, this is new-years-eve. It's an Australian tradition everyone must have a kiss to see in the New Year. May I?"

Anneli lifted her gaze. She gave him a warm attractive smile. "I wouldn't want to break tradition."

Wade squared himself to Anneli. His blue eyes were inviting. His handsome looks melted the heart of every woman he came into contact.

Anneli shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Her shorts flared out at the sides revealing slender olive coloured thighs. Her white button up shirt crinkled slightly at her shoulders when she raised her hand to halt Wade's advances.

"I never kiss a man I don't know the last name of."

"What if the couple happened to be standing alone on a bridge overlooking a river at midnight?"

Anneli let a whispered giggle leave her throat. She bit her top lip to disguise the noise. "There are always exceptions to any rule."

Wade slipped his hands onto her hips. His gaze met the young woman's stare. Although her amazing shiny brown eyes were full of life, glistening in the light of the fireworks exploding over Melbourne to welcome in 1974 her spirit revealed a deeply troubled girl.

'The young lady standing before me is indeed an interesting woman,' thought Wade. 'He wondered if their meeting might be no more than accidental, just a moment in time; a kiss on the bridge and nothing more. Could it ever be anything other than a coincidence?'

When Anneli brought her lips in close, Wade leaned forward. He could feel her heels lift off the ground so their lips could be welded.

Wade stood an even six foot. Anneli, wearing her black two-inch heels almost matched his height. She lifted her hands to hold onto Wade's shoulders, signaling she didn't want the moment to end. He felt it in her strength. He patted himself on the back knowing how to summarize people by the way they looked, talked, sat, stared or gripped their fingers. He'd succeeded in being a good lawyer. His bank balance proved it.

Wade and Anneli's lips lightly touched. He felt her breath quicken when she exhaled and inhaled rapidly. He so wanted time to stand still. Slipping his arm further across Anneli's back, he started to dip the woman. She didn't resist. The light touching of their lips teased him. Their lips touched and retouched. Every muscle in his back flexed, anchoring the woman safely in his arms.

The young lady reeled him in closer, welding their lips.

Not only did Wade kiss her long, gentle, using maximum passion, she kissed him back. Emotions flowed unrestricted between them. The intensity of the kiss didn't fade. It grew stronger. The kiss had meaning, a magnetism of its own. Wade felt positive he'd never been kissed so passionately before. He wondered if the young woman in his arms felt the same. He'd ponder the

thought later. He didn't want to skip a single second. He opened his eyes to stare at her closed eyelids. For the first time in his successful career, he could only guess what she might be thinking.

Anneli slowly opened her eyes. She too devoured the moment.

Time stopped for the kiss on the bridge.

The fireworks continued to rage behind them in the night sky. The bright lights seemed to heighten the kiss. Maneuvering her arms for a firmer grip, Anneli wanted to portray to this tall handsome stranger the kiss happened to be the most enjoyable moment she'd ever felt in twenty years of being alive. She didn't want anything to interrupt the kiss on the bridge.

As if she were a delicate red rose in full bloom, Wade's arms never flinched while holding the woman. The kiss lasted longer than he planned. How could he attempt to end it? He secretly hoped Anneli might be the one to break the moment. Slowly he brought the woman back to vertical, yet the kiss remained. Their lips were glued for eternity. They sent a silent signal to each other to remain locked.

Time restarted.

The only part of the fireworks remaining was the smoke hovering over the bay in a large cloud.

Anneli and Wade slowly pulled away at the same time.

The moment ended.

Both took a backward step. Wade nodded politely. Anneli mirrored his move. Both simultaneously walked off the bridge in opposite directions.

Wade hesitated before stepping off the east side of the bridge. He turned to have a last look at the woman. He saw her stop under a streetlight, looking over her shoulder at him. Her long black hair cascading over her shoulders trapped the light causing each strand to glisten. Her incredible luring brown eyes made his heart skip inside his chest. The way she looked burned the image in his mind. Heat rose up from his feet to his head. He broke out into a sweat. Water trickled down the valley to his lower back.

Again the moment seemed to last for hours.

Wade wondered if the look Anneli threw his way could have been deliberate or completely accidental. The corners of his mouth curled upwards. He felt a stirring in his soul, compelling him to taste her one more time. He took a step towards her.

Anneli did the same.

Both blocked out the ruckus developing behind her, too intent on reliving their kiss.

"There you are."

An older man of average height, wearing a three-piece electric blue suit used his baritone voice to get Anneli's attention. When she faced the older man he reached out, grabbing her on the shoulder. His facial expression quickly changed from relief to stone murderous cold.

Wade set himself to run when another four men surrounded her. He hesitated only just long enough to view the scene in its entirety.

"Daughter, get back to my ship. I have been told of your drunken behavior. We will have words after we have set sail to Darwin. Now go." The man wearing the three-piece electric blue suit faced the other four men of various ages, snarling. "Sons, see to it your sister gets back onboard my

ship.”

“Yes father,” echoed each one in turn.

In seconds they started to escort Anneli off the bridge, slipping away into the night.

Wade felt as though his heart had been ripped out of his chest and thrown into the bay.

## CHAPTER TWO

“CAN I have the music stopped? I need everyone’s attention for only a few minutes.”

The voice behind the man wearing the three-piece electric blue suit sounded authoritative, booming through the microphone over the dying last note of the music. The man ran a hand over his immaculate jet black hair. He looked to be slightly taller than Wade, only not as fit. Two scantily dressed women, one on each side of the man, were hanging off an arm. He guided both women to vacant chairs before stepping in front of the band. A hush descended over the crowd. Two hundred party goers stopped moving to the dance beat to focus their attention on where he stood.

“I do apologize for being late. Now I’m back onboard, I want to say; happy new year to everyone here tonight. I trust you’re enjoying the festivities on my brand new twenty million dollar ship. In case you don’t know me, I’m Darryl Vandenberg. I own Vanden enterprises. Shifting goods throughout the world is a growing business. Each year I’m doubling my profits. I alone have built my successful corporation from the ground up. In only ten short years I have gone from an idea to a multi-million dollar accomplishment.”

Darryl swept his gaze over the heads of his guests soaking in the applause exploding from the dance floor. He loved every minute of the attention. What excited him most were the stares he received from the men who were dressed in expensive black dinner suits. To gain acceptance onto his ship the invitation strictly stated the men must escort a lovely lady onboard. The long ballroom dresses the women wore sparkled in the light of the mirror ball suspended from the ceiling. Each young lady held the hand of their male partner. In the other they clutched a full glass of champagne. Every male guest held a glass of the expensive bubbly handed to them by the many waitresses scooting about the deck carrying silver trays.

“I’d like to propose a toast to the coming year,” announced Darryl through the microphone. “I feel it in my bones 1974 will be a great one.”

“Here, here,” chorused the guests.

“Enough about me, I have an important announcement to make. Anneli and Meredith, please join me on the stage.”

A tall attractive young lady wearing a long red dress, a fascinator buried in her hair made her way forward. Someone sprayed glitter into her long dark hair which draped over her shoulders.

A second young woman wearing a cream coloured evening gown quickly made her way to the front.

“In case, some of you don’t recognize my stepdaughters, this young woman on my left is Meredith. On my right is my second daughter, Anneli. Dirk, please come forward. I want you to stand next to Meredith.”

A medium framed young man cat leapt onto the stage and stood next to Meredith.

“This young man has a great future in my company. Not only has he worked tirelessly to prove he’s a suitable candidate, in his spare time, Dirk is involved in real estate, shares, and the buying and selling of companies. Only last week he purchased a million dollar yacht similar to this one, just a lot smaller. Not bad for a twenty-five-year-old.”

Darryl waited for the whispered laughs to subside before continuing.

“The exciting news is; Dirk and Meredith will soon be tying the knot.”

Applause from the onlookers reverberated throughout the entire ship.

“I want everyone to raise their glasses for the second time to toast the young engaged couple,” ordered Darryl through the microphone.

Another cheer filled the air. A constant clang of wine glasses swamped the area. Darryl faced the band signaling for the music to be restarted immediately.

When Anneli left the stage a waitress on her way to the upper deck thrust a glass of champagne into her hand.

“Meredith, sweetheart, I want you to wait for me in the study. I don’t want you to be enticed away from me by a handsome stranger,” taunted Dirk. “I have business to conduct. I’m sure it won’t take more than twenty minutes.”

Meredith scrunched her nose, glaring at her fiancé.

“Good girl. After you’ve done what I’ve ordered, we’ll go mingle.”

Anneli, standing at the side, beckoned her sister to follow. They walked to the other end of the deck, climbed the stairs, pushing their way through over forty guests who decided to move from the lower to the upper deck so they could enjoy the warm summer evening.

The large ship rolled lazily on the small swells three hundred metres from the channel in Port Phillip Bay. A cargo ship slipped through the heads on its way to the port of Melbourne. A couple of the crewmen waved at several women party goers standing at the nose of the ship. Unseen by their male partners they blew back kisses.

At the stern of the ship, both girls gazed at the dark water flowing lazily past the hull. Not more than twenty feet from the ship a dolphin surfaced. The girls stared at the exact place long after it had disappeared.

“Are you okay?”

Meredith focused on her sister. Staring into her brown eyes she started to sob. “Anneli, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I’m your younger sister. I’m concerned.”

“I know you are.”

“Talk to me. Tell me what’s on your mind?”

“The subject I think you’re referring to can never be brought up.”

“I want you to call off the charade of a wedding,” blurted Anneli, thrusting her hands onto her hips.

“What a blunt statement. You know it’s not possible.”

“Do it before it’s too late.”

“Father will definitely disapprove,” whispered Meredith on a sigh. She quickly glanced about the deck hoping no one decided to listen in on their conversation.

“He’ll get over it,” hissed Anneli. “Besides, the sooner you let him know how you feel the more time he’ll have to understand why we are correct.”

“I don’t want to lose any inheritance coming my way.”

“Meredith, if you accept what’s been planned, no offence Sis, you’re out of your mind. Personally, I’d never want to end up married to a man who orders me around. Dirk is not the right one for you. Somewhere out there is the man you dream of. Forget the money. Go find him.”

“You’re drunk,” shrieked Meredith.

“Yep, I know I am. Take my advice; break it up before it’s too late.”

“I’m looking forward to my wedded life and all of Dirk’s money.”

“What about love?” Anneli questioned.

“What about it?” Meredith snorted.

“You should love the man you’re going to spend the remainder of your life waking up next to. Not have father dictate to you who you should marry.”

“I think in time I’ll learn to love Dirk. Besides, all the money he has will more than compensate for the diminutive lack in other areas.”

“Don’t short change yourself on what could be a great future for a man who wants to love you. A pre-birth agreement should never have been allowed,” yelled Anneli.

“Five million dollars in Dirk’s bank account will see me having an extremely happy life.”

“I’d rather marry a poor man than have a man who is so far up himself sleeping next to me every night.”

“Anneli, enjoy your last single year. You know father has set your wedding date. Before you celebrate the coming in of 1975 you’ll be married.

Anneli glared at her sister. “Don’t remind me.”

“Keep focused on the money coming your way. I promise you’ll be happier than me,” whispered Meredith.

“If you won’t listen to my warning, help me finish off this champagne, and please, help me find a pen and paper.”

“Why?”

“I want to write a letter, place it in the bottle, kiss the cork to seal it then I’m going to throw it overboard into the sea,” replied Anneli starting to slur her words after the wine she drank quickly took effect. “I’m going to order the bottle to find my hero.”

“Fairytale, sis, you have to stop believing in fantasies, it won’t happen.”

“The only thing you have to do is believe.”

“I believe in the money. It’s going to keep me happy,” hinted Meredith, confidently.

“Will the millions of dollars keep you warm at night when your husband, instead of being home making love to you, he’ll be somewhere else in the arms of another woman?”

Meredith glared at her sister through water filled eyes before setting herself to walk off.

Anneli grabbed her sister's arm. "Please help me," she confirmed.

Both girls swayed where they stood. Meredith reluctantly nodded. Arm in arm, they walked off snaking their way through the sea of strangers who were bobbing to the rhythm of the music. They walked down a long narrow corridor and entered the kitchen. They stood watching the closest cook. The man looked up from decorating trays of small desserts.

"I don't suppose you have a pen and paper?" asked Anneli.

The man wore an expression of a cyclone etched on his forehead. He viciously shook his head, marched across the room, rudely shoving the girls out through the open door. Slamming the door shut he went back to work.

"That cook is a strange man," chuckled Meredith.

Anneli choked on her half drunken snigger.

The girls ventured into the room adjacent to the kitchen. The room resembled an office. The small portable TV sat inside a narrow wood grain unit. Books were crammed into what space remained. A mahogany coloured antique desk filled a third of the room. The large chair covered in dull red leather sat neatly under the desk. The only other piece of furniture was a flimsy white plastic chair in one corner.

Anneli sat on the large leather chair, opened the top draw, lifting out a gold plated pen and a pad of yellow paper. Glancing at Meredith pushing her ear against the door she slapped the pad on the desktop and commenced to write her letter.

"Sis, hurry up, I hear footsteps."

Anneli replaced the pen, folded the note five times before hiding it in the palm of her hand. The girls were almost at the door when it opened.

The man who took up the entire doorway looked down his nose. "What are you two up to?" he growled in his baritone voice.

"Father, we wanted five minutes of peace. We both have a headache," whispered Anneli.

"Meredith, when you've found your fiancé I want you to escort him back to the deck. On your way grab something from the medicine cabinet in the kitchen. Anneli, I want to have a word."

Anneli waited for Meredith to leave before shutting the door. Turning to face her father, she said innocently. "Yes."

"Pull up the chair," he barked.

Anneli dragged the small white plastic chair across the room and sat opposite.

The man looked over the top of his glasses. "There's been a slight delay in your marriage. At next year's new-years-eve party your-husband-to-be will be introduced to you. Three weeks after your introduction there will be an engagement party. Four weeks further on you'll be standing at the altar saying I do."

Folding her arms, Anneli glared angrily at her father. "Your idea is way off the mark on what I'm thinking."

"I don't care what you think," he growled hammering the desktop using a tight fist. "From the moment, I married your mother the deal regarding the man you will marry was set in concrete."

Anneli stood, throwing her hands onto her hips. "You are not my real father."

"Sit down."

"I prefer to stand."

"Hearing you feel so strongly about your idea I'll do the same." Darryl stood, folding his arms across his chest. "Let me start by saying a lot of water has flowed under the bridge since your real father died at sea in a storm. If I remember correctly a cyclone took his life; Tragic tale. Two years I waited in the wings for your mother to put the loss behind her. When she finally married me I could tell she never felt happier."

"My mother married you for your money, nothing more."

"I beg to differ."

"My mother whispered to me on her death bed whatever happens never marry someone for his money. Above everything, love must come first. On her last breath, she made it clear to me I should always follow my heart."

"She didn't mention it to me," admitted Darryl.

"In case you've forgotten, my mother's name was Evelyn. She died of cancer three days after my seventh birthday." Anneli walked to the door. Instead of rushing outside she turned to face her stepfather. "Has this idea of yours ever been written down on paper?"

"My word is my bond. I expect others to mirror my example," Darryl yelled.

"What if they don't?"

"You mock me. I don't expect any resistance to my ideas."

"Has it ever dawned on you I might want to find my own husband?" questioned Anneli.

"What do you know about finding the perfect man? The one who will keep you well fed and warm on cold nights."

Anneli shrugged. "Not a thing. Has it ever occurred to you it is part of the love process?"

"Why, say such a preposterous thing?"

"I believe everyone on the face of the earth should have a choice on which person they want for a lifetime partner."

Darryl marched across the grey carpet to the door. "You are too young to know when the right choice is staring at you in the face. For a carefree future, you have to be guided along the correct path."

"Whatever happened to free choice?"

"I forbid it."

"For once, why don't you trust me to make the right decision? I won't make a bad choice."

"Financially you have to be looked after. I'll judge myself worse than a failure if you didn't marry a rich man."

"Is it such a bad thing?"

"Yes. I will not have you go through life in poverty."

"Is this marriage contract the only reason why you entertain the radical idea?"

"Yes."

"You expect to match me to someone of your choosing, providing he's rich?" Anneli folded her arms in a defying gesture.

"You make it sound worse than it actually is."

"If this farce actually germinates it'll be the start of my nightmare. I should love the man

before I give him something I can never take back. Once I have given myself the first time there is no going back or changing my mind. I have always wanted my first time to be precious. The moment will be of my choosing, not yours or anybody else's. It's my choice. God forbid the choice I deserve should ever be taken away," yelled Anneli.

"You're grandparents chose my first wife. After she died they insisted I marry her sister; your mother."

Tears started to fall down Anneli's cheeks. "You make out you were buying a prized head of cattle."

"Your mother and her sister were both beautiful women. Granted, it took me time to realize I loved them both equally. Once I did I could not have been happier."

"Tell me, when you were twenty, did you or did you not want to decide for yourself the girl who you considered could be the perfect wife, someone who might grow to love you and not be ordered to love you?"

"Stop talking rubbish," yelled Darryl.

"This is the start of 1974. Can't you understand why your youngest stepdaughter wants to be married to someone of her choosing," asked Anneli.

"You will marry the man I have entered into a contract. The agreement is unbreakable. If you insist on going against my wishes you will not receive a single Australian dollar from the family. You will be on your own. When you choose to see things my way all will be reinstated to you. Be warned, financially you will be ruined for the remainder of your life if you go it alone. Take hold of what your eldest sister has done. The relationship between her and Dirk is going great."

Anneli stared at her father. "Is it? Be honest. Have you actually sat her down to ask Meredith?"

Anneli and her father stood for a long time glaring at each other. The tension in the room continued to thicken.

"This discussion is over," yelled Anneli, yanking the office door open.

Darryl snorted before looking away. "The subject is indeed closed."

"Father, this subject is far from closed."

Anneli pulled the door shut behind her. She marched back along the corridor to the deck of the ship. Spying a bottle of expensive bubbly on the counter at the bar, she sprinted over, swiped it and a corkscrew then searched for a quiet corner. She intended to get completely drunk the moment she popped the cork.

Meredith stood loitering next to the bar. Her gaze remained fixed on the antics of her sister. For a brief moment, Anneli hesitated. As if signaling a secret code, Meredith followed. They pushed their way through the partygoers on the way to the stern.

At the rear of the small ship, they discovered a square platform which sat half an inch below the surface of the water. Anneli grabbed two wooden chairs from the closest table, placing them on the platform. She took hold of her sister's hand to help her over the railing. They sat dangling their feet in the water, drinking the bottle of bubbly and staring out across the bay. The low swells died away leaving Port Phillip Bay glass flat. There were no clouds to hide the stars. In the background, the lights of Melbourne shone brighter than a million torches.

“Nice night to drown one’s sorrows,” whispered Meredith, eventually.

“It sure is,” growled Anneli, staring at a fictitious object on the horizon. “There’s no way I’m going to consent to our father’s stupid plans.”

“Sis, I heard the argument. Hell, the whole ship heard.”

“Good. I meant every word.” Anneli lifted the bottle to her mouth, swallowing a third of the contents. Lifting the corkscrew to shoulder height, she threw it into the sea.

“You know you’ve opened a can of worms,” mentioned Meredith.

“I don’t care. The man who calls himself our father has to realize these are modern times. It’s my choice whom I intend to marry, not his.”

“Good for you.” Meredith grabbed the bottle out of Anneli’s hand, swallowing a mouthful of champagne.

“You should’ve done the same,” blurted Anneli, looking directly at her sister.

“For a few days, I did contemplate the idea. The bottomless bucket of money I have been given permission to spend is too tempting an offer. Besides, my fiancé treats me well.”

“It’s not too late to pull the plug,” barked Anneli.

Meredith leaned towards her sister, whispering. “Do yourself a favour. Obey what father says. It’ll save everyone a lot of bother.”

Anneli stood, hovering over her sister. “I thought you’d back me up on this.”

“Trust me, it’s easier to surrender.”

“I’ll never agree to an arranged marriage. If I die of starvation, so be it.”

Meredith pursed her lips. Reaching up she grabbed Anneli on the arm. “It’s too late for me. Whatever you decide, I’ll back you one hundred percent.”

Anneli patted her on the shoulder. Flopping back onto the seat she announced. “I’m happy knowing I have at least one person on my side. You do realize, out there, your Mr. Right is waiting.”

“He’ll be waiting for a long time,” replied Meredith on a forced sigh. “I have no plans to leave my fiancé. Besides, if I did, I think I’d be turned into fish food. Running out on a contracted marriage or future marriage has never happened in our ancestry line.”

“Exactly why I’m going to marry who I please,” snarled Anneli.

“You’re hooked on the bloke you kissed on the bridge.”

Anneli nodded. “The kiss felt wonderful.”

“Get over it.”

“There’s no way I could ever get over something so enjoyable. There’s more to it than just a passing kiss.”

“Your emotions were ignited by the idea you’d never see him again.”

“Maybe you’re right. What are the odds our paths will cross again?”

“Take it from me they’re definitely not in your favour,” Meredith slurred. She raised the bottle of bubbly to her lips, swallowing the remaining liquid in one long continuous gulp.

Anneli pulled the small sheet of folded paper from her cleavage, handing it over.

Meredith unfolded the note and read the words out loud.

“To my hero, when will you save me from my stinking horrible life? Please hurry, signed

Anneli.”

“Meredith, follow my lead. Place both hands on the bottle and repeat after me. God, if you think I need to be saved from my life you’ll see to it that my soul mate will find this bottle. If you think Wade is the one for me, you have my permission to send him my way. The kiss we shared happened to be out of this world.”

Meredith stared at her sister. In a blunt monotone voice, she replied. “I agree.”

Anneli tipped the few remaining drops of champagne into the water, pushed the note into the bottle and managed to replace a third of the cork. She kissed the bottle and gently placed it into the sea. Both girls watched the bottle bobbing in the water till the darkness swallowed it.

“What now?” Meredith asked.

“I’m going ashore.”

“You can’t, father won’t allow it.”

“Have you forgotten already where he actually found me? Escort me to the bridge. I want to see my hero coming.”

“He’ll be long gone by now,” stated Meredith.

Anneli fell silent. She stared out across the surface of the water, lost in a daydream of her and Wade cuddling on the bridge, re-living their kiss.

### CHAPTER THREE

Four weeks prior to Cyclone Tracy hitting landfall in Darwin.

WADE MACKENZIE ran his fingers through his sandy coloured hair before placing the control knob into neutral. The engine revs fell to idle. The forty foot yacht’s speed dropped to zero. He walked across the deck to the side of the hull. Leaning over the side to look at the water a lazy smile highlighted his cheek bones. Tapping a button on the side of the boat he felt the vibration of a motor roar to life under his feet. The aluminum dive ladder slid silently into the water up to the second rung.

Wade threw his white button up shirt over the back of a deck chair, dropping a brown towel over his shirt. The sweat on his deep chest glistened in the hot sun. The few clouds in the sky were bleached white. Only a hint of a sea breeze brushed his face as he prepared to dive into the cool glass flat ocean.

Wade dived away from the sparkling new yacht, surfacing twenty-five feet off to port. He heard the screeching of his CB radio. To help ignore the noise he dived for the second time. He loved being underwater in the quiet; away from the noise of the anti-room of the supreme-court. There seemed to be a ruckus brewing every few minutes. He swam straight down to a depth of

twenty feet. He took in the view by staring through the crystal clear water.

A large school of small tuna swimming towards him split into two, darting around him. A large stingray glided effortlessly above his head. It didn't stop or try to avoid the two-metre shape ascending slowly to the surface.

At a depth of four feet, Wade spied what he dived into the water for. It bobbed lazily on the surface. His lungs were starting to ache when saw a shark swimming directly at him. He watched the young grey nurse swim closer. Wade avoided confrontation by changing direction. In a heartbeat, he decided it might be time to retrieve what he found and climb back on board his yacht before the mother came looking for her young.

In one swift motion, Wade's fingers wrapped about the object. In seconds, he started climbing the aluminum dive ladder. The moment he stepped onto the white deck of the sailboat he pressed a button. Almost instantly the ladder started to close. He snatched up the brown towel he'd slung over the back of the deck chair, throwing it over his left shoulder. Holding the newly discovered booty in his hand he walked towards the bridge.

The CB radio screeched for the tenth time.

Wade dived onto the bridge, swiping the receiver from its cradle. "Speak," he said.

"Wade, I'm Grant Mustard's secretary, the jury has reached a decision. Do you want to be in court to listen to the verdict?"

"I've already quit. Didn't you find my official letter of resignation?"

"I filed it hoping you might change your mind."

"No."

"Mr. Mustard has personally asked me to plead for you to reconsider."

"You can inform Grant my answer is still no."

"You are the best lawyer in Australia he will not accept your resignation."

"Sheryl, please, tell him no."

"You have to understand he will not take no for an answer."

"I've other plans," Wade advised.

"Let me guess, you are planning to chase the young lady you kissed on the bridge."

"My plans are private."

"So the rumours being spread throughout the building over you and the mystery woman are correct."

"I refuse to discuss it."

"Wade, think about it, what if you cannot find her?"

"What if I do?"

"It is a lot of ifs."

Using the towel Wade started to rub the water from his legs. He suddenly stopped to look across the sea at the Melbourne skyline. "Sheryl, tell me what you'd do?" he asked confidently into the CB radio.

"It's none of my concern."

"Exactly," snorted Wade.

"Why are you chasing a pipe dream?"

“Explain this. What are the chances of being by yourself at midnight on a bridge when out of the blue someone asks to kiss you?”

“I’d have to say the odds are enormous.”

“If what you say is true, clarify this. I’ve been on that particular bridge at midnight several times over the years, not once has there ever been anyone else on it. Sheryl, she kissed me back.”

“You sound obsessed.”

“Call it what you will, I don’t care.”

“Wade, you are making too much of the whole kiss on the bridge thing.”

“Call it fate. I can’t change the fact it happened.”

“Wade, see the logic behind the event.”

“Sheryl, I thought being a woman you’d understand where I’m coming from.”

“I do understand. I just do not see the point or the effort it takes to accomplish something which is not possible.”

“Inform Grant what I’ve decided.”

“Explain it to him yourself.”

“Tell me, has he been listening in to our conversation the whole time?” questioned Wade.

“No.”

“Sheryl, you were never a good liar. Put him on.”

After a short pause, the CB radio crackled back to life. The gruff voice belonged to a man who didn’t sound happy.

“Wade, you were correct. I heard the entire conversation. You have to reconsider.”

“Why? I don’t have to do anything. On top of my decision, I loathe the well-to-do lingo everyone puts on. I also hate the way the firm runs the affairs of every one of her clients.”

“You have a bright future in our company, do not blow it.”

“I had a future in the law sector. I’ll do what I want.”

“What will you do? Your mind is too sharp for anything other than full steam ahead.”

“My personal life is my business,” replied Wade.

“This whole year I have held my tongue. I believe the young lady you’ve been chasing has made you drag your feet. What if I promise to find the woman?”

The tone in Grant Mustard’s voice told Wade he could easily be swept off the path sometime in the near future.

“You work for me. You have to choose, me or nothing.”

“I’ve already chosen to quit.”

“Wade, you celebrated your twenty-fourth birthday three months ago. Already you have earned more money than all of us put together. Your reputation has surpassed my wildest expectations. Name your price; ten, twenty million a year?”

Wade pressed the end button, placed the CB radio back in its cradle before stepping through the narrow doorway. Walking down the two steps to the second level, he glanced at the barometer. Sidestepping into the galley, he placed the empty bottle of champagne he plucked from the ocean onto the bench. Looking through the bottle’s glass wall he spied a piece of yellow paper which seemed to have been tightly folded five times. Wade pulled the cork, upending the bottle. The note

fell into the palm of his hand.

Quickly pouring a strong mug of coffee and a white wine, Wade held the note and the mug in his left hand, the glass of white wine in his right. He walked to a comfortable black leather chair at the small table. Sitting, he carefully unraveled the note. Leaning back in the chair he read the handwritten words. His eyes bulged at the name on the bottom of the note. The author signed it, 'Anneli.'

Wade sat staring at the wall, lost in a fantasy of the night on the bridge when he kissed Anneli.

"Could this note have been written from the very girl I am looking for?" he mumbled. "Anything is possible, besides, how many young ladies live in Melbourne with the same name?"

Wade climbed the stairs to the bridge. Feeling like his emotions were rejuvenated he pushed the throttle to its stop, navigating the yacht back to the Port of Melbourne more determined to find the young woman he kissed on the bridge. Through endless hours of questions over the phone, he came to one single possible conclusion. Beyond reasonable doubt, Anneli is heading for Darwin.

"Come sunrise tomorrow, I'm sailing for Darwin," Wade confessed to one of the workers at the marina.

"You'll be a wantin' extra diesel in the tank."

Wade slapped the old unshaven man on the shoulder. "Add the cost to my account. I'll pay you when I return."

Inside three hours Wade's shopping list appeared complete. His thoughts zeroed in on a woman who seemed to be shadowing his every move. To confirm his suspicions he spied a security guard standing on the courthouse steps. He stopped, striking up a short conversation. In a couple of minutes, he said goodbye, deliberately marching across the road. He stood at the doorway to a small café, watching reflections in the glass window waiting to see if his suspicions were confirmed. The figure belonged to a tall woman. Dark sunglasses and a large latte coloured hat pulled down over her face helped to mask her facial features. Her black shiny two-inch stilettos were the only things protruding from the mystery woman's ankle-length coat.

The moment Wade entered the café he ordered two cappuccinos. He gave the waitress instructions the second coffee belonged to the woman in the long coat watching him from across the street. He paid for the hot brew, left the café and joined the stream of shoppers. The woman recommenced her quest to follow. Wade noted she'd dropped back slightly to avoid possible detection.

Wade entered the park across the road. To make it easier for the woman to approach him he sat on the nearest seat. The forty foot Elm trees lining the pea stone path still smelt damp from the rain the previous night. A woman pushing her young eighteen-month-old daughter in a stroller walked past. Raising her eyebrows she looked Wade up and down before marching off wearing a grin.

A school-boy riding a pushbike entered the park. Wade watched him ride directly at him.

"This is for you," announced the lad, handing over a scrap piece of paper.

"Who gave you the message?" asked Wade, noting the paper had been neatly folded five times.

“A woman standing at the entrance to the park,” he replied.

“Can you give me a description of what she looks like?”

The lad shrugged. Before riding off the boy looked over his shoulder. “She must be rich; she gave me one hundred dollars to give you the note.” The young teenager gestured a wave before pedaling his pushbike towards the entrance to the park.

Wade sprinted through the park’s wrought iron gate to the street. He made it in time to see the mystery woman step onto a tram. Before she sat the tram took off towards Melbourne CBD.

Five men dressed in black suits squatted behind three large trees waiting for Wade’s return. They watched him stroll slowly back towards the park seat, too intent on reading the note to see what was happening around him.

The five men marched up behind Wade. One tall athletic built man growled in a low baritone voice.

“Only a fool will turn around.”

Wade froze in his tracks. Scrunching the note he slipped it deep into his pants’ pocket. “I’m no fool.”

“Good. The five of us don’t want to see you in an accident.”

“What is it you want?”

“We don’t want anything except a few minutes of your time.”

Every cell in Wade’s lawyer trained body screamed for him to turn around. Recommencing his walk, he pushed the warning out of his mind. “I’m listening.”

“The five of us want you to walk towards the small lake at the bottom of the slope.”

Walking towards water sounded warning bells. Wade’s mind slipped back to a conversation between him and his gangster friend. Wade quickly quoted his number one rule. ‘To stay alive never be anywhere near water.’

“Why can’t we talk here, face to face?” Wade questioned.

“My boys and I have the power over you. We expect you’ll do exactly what I order. I alone decide your fate.”

“Do you have a name?” asked Wade, making a two-bit conversation sound important.

“My little inquisitive friend, you will never know. Turn down the next narrow dirt track. It leads straight to the lake.”

A ten-foot wire fence separated the traffic and the other side of the stagnant water which looked no larger than a normal house block. Wade knew the moment he stood at the shallow lake there were no other exits except via the path.

At the halfway point Wade decided the men needed to know their next alleged victim won’t be taking what they were about to dish out lying down. In his mind, he went through his attack scenario. He’d punch the biggest first then so on till only the smallest remained standing. The move happened to be the number two rule his gangster friend taught him. They became familiar acquaintances after proving to the court of his innocence. Six months of walking the streets, talking to men nobody wanted to know, saw the real culprit in court. After a two-month trial, the real murderer was in jail for life.

At the same time, Wade curled his fingers into white-knuckled fists he spun on the balls of

his feet to view the scene. He lunged at the two men left of center. Using a right hook to their jaws he dropped them both. The two bringing up the rear were next. They crumbled to the ground nursing their cracked ribs. Wade spun around eyeballing the one remaining person.

The man stood tall, acting ice cool. Pulling a small handgun from his coat pocket, he pointed it directly at Wade's heart. The third rule he learnt; if the attacker is holding a gun; never argue.

"Don't move," growled the man. "We only wanted to have a talk."

"Tell me the reason why you're here?" growled Wade, keeping one eye focused on the gun, the other on the antagonist.

"Did you know there's been a woman following you?"

"No."

"You must have known. We've been watching her every move for at least three hours."

The man's voice came across more like a growl than of someone who actually cared.

"If she were following me, I surmise the woman didn't want to be seen or I'd have talked to her."

"Have a good think," barked the man. "Your future depends on it."

Wade enjoyed rule number four the most. He never waited for the finale when the end might be too late to react. He didn't give the man holding the gun a moment to decide whether to pull the trigger or not. Surprise always resided on the side of the JUST. Wade quickly side stepped. Using a tight fist he jabbed the aggressor in the ribs. He heard a crack. The man yelled in excruciating pain. He crumbled to the ground spilling the gun from his hand. Wade hovered over the man at the same time the other four staggered to their feet.

"For future reference, you don't have to use a fist or a gun to ask me a question. If you do you might be nursing another cracked rib." Wade glared at the other men. "Take him and leave."

The men took hold of the injured man and hobbled back up the dirt path towards the city traffic.

After Wade pocketed the gun the return trip to his yacht took him past the courthouse. A slight shuffling noise being emitted from the lane next to the courthouse steps forced him to stare down the lane. A second scraping noise came from behind the large four foot cubed industrial garbage bin.

"Why have you been following me?" called Wade, trying to ignore the stench of rotting rubbish in the lane.

Eventually, a muffled voice spoke.

"Listen closely to what I'm about to tell you. I will say it only once."

"Okay, you have my undivided attention."

"The woman you seek, what is her name?"

"I'm not sure if it's any of your concern," called Wade, stepping into the lane.

"Trust me, it is."

"Anneli," confessed Wade.

"Do you know her last name?"

"Yes, I do."

"Tell me what you know?"

Wade stepped closer to the bin. "I'm not in the habit of talking to a person hiding behind objects."

"Stay where you are," urged the voice.

Wade replayed his number four rule by sprinting for the bin. He needed to stop the messenger before the person escaped into the mainstream of shoppers. In a panic, the foe sprinted down the lane away from the courthouse.

The person behind the voice seemed more agile than a cat. Wade slowly narrowed the gap to his escaping foe. He lunged for the latte coloured hat the stranger wore. It fell off in his hand. The figure stopped, brushed her long blonde hair from her face before staring wide eyed at the man standing at arm's length.

"You're definitely a woman," muttered Wade.

"I'm happy you can tell the difference."

The woman started to back step. Wade grabbed her forearm.

"Let me go," she yelled, struggling to break free.

"No way, not until you explain the note?"

The woman's long blonde hair glistened in the sunlight. Wade felt sorry for the messenger. He loosened his grip, giving her a friendly lazy smile.

"Thank you."

The woman held out her hand for the hat. Wade willingly handed it over. He watched her place her hair in a bun before tucking it under her hat.

"What are you scared of?"

"If I'm caught, I'll be wearing cement shoes and thrown into Port Phillip Bay."

"Who'd do such a horrendous act?"

"The identity of the person is not important," hissed the woman.

"Do you have a name?" asked Wade.

"At this moment in time, it's safer if I refuse to disclose my name."

"Why?"

"Cement shoes."

Wade could tell the woman felt petrified of being discovered. The cement shoe story she spun to hide her identity could be a real prospect. "Can I buy you a coffee?"

The woman darted a frightened stare at the end of the lane. "I have to cut our chat short. We weren't supposed to meet."

"The coffee shop is close by. You'll be safe there."

"I don't have the time. You've also forgotten what I've just told you," insisted the woman.

"I didn't forget. The cement shoe idea has you frightened."

"You won't stop me from leaving?"

Wade shook his head. "No. Before you go tell me something; did you write the note?"

"Yes. I'm here to make sure you understood it."

"I have yet to read it," hinted Wade stretching the truth. "Five blokes insisted we have a chat down by the lake."

"What men?"

“I have a feeling you know the answer. I’m going out on a limb here. Could you be related to Anneli?”

“Be careful of your accusations, the limb you’re standing on might break.”

Hearing heavy footsteps near the entrance to the lane, Wade took hold of the woman’s arm, forcing her to step into a doorway further along. “Tell me what you wrote on the yellow paper?” he whispered.

“The note handed to you by the lad on the bike has her last name on it. She will be in Darwin on Christmas eve 1974. If you want to make 1975 extraordinary, take my advice, find her before new-years-day. Her father’s plans have been sped up. She will be married at 5pm 1st January 1975.”

“Why have you told me this? Who are you?”

“Who I am is not important. There’s a rumour buzzing around in certain circles there’s a man searching for Anneli. There’s also a report her fiancé, the one she has never met, is not happy.”

“Not met yet?” Wade’s voice sounded vague.

“He’s put a price on your head,” whispered the woman. She spied a group of men entering the lane. “I’ve outstayed my time. To sum up our chat, Anneli will meet the man she has been ordered to marry the day after Christmas day. The wedding will take place on the date I’ve told you.”

“Is there anything else you need to tell me?” asked Wade.

The woman lifted her head to look him in the eyes. “Don’t be late.”

The mysterious woman’s last words were still clear in Wade’s ears when she stepped away from the doorway. He stood watching her run off in the opposite direction to the Courthouse.

Wade decided he didn’t want a rematch to his fight. He sprinted up the lane to a side entrance to the courthouse to strike up a conversation with the first cop he saw. The men ambled past, glaring. At the far end of the lane, they got into a dark blue sedan and drove off. Wade handed the gun he took from one of his attackers to the cop. He gave a watered down summary of what happened before saying goodbye.

## CHAPTER FOUR

December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1974. A tad less than eleven hours before cyclone Tracy’s arrival time. The barometer needle started dropping towards nine-hundred and thirty hectopascals. When the black needle arrived at the destructive point Cyclone Tracy would strike.

WADE JUMPED onto the wharf, tied the bow and stern line of his one million dollar forty foot white coloured yacht to the posts before bounding back down the steps into the belly of the yacht. For a few moments, he stood on the bottom step appreciating the inner workings. Off to one

side was the galley which included a small bar. The small lounge on his right consisted of a mini TV which he personally screwed to the wall. Two comfortable bean bags sat neatly on the dull red carpet. The small table and two chairs were in one corner. A leather chair looked at home in the other. At the front of the yacht, the door led into the bedroom. A king size bed filled half the room while a door next to the bed led to the shower.

Wade looked out of the porthole window, enjoying the orange coloured sunset. Darwin's temperature hit the monthly average again, failing to drop a degree the entire day. He shaved, showered and dressed in comfortable smart casual attire. Walking past the mirror glued to the inside of the wardrobe door he stopped to check his appearance.

He hoped for the perfect night.

Wade arrived in Darwin for only one reason; find Anneli, the young lady he kissed on the bridge.

Before closing the door on the mirror he nodded at his reflection. Included in the eleven months of hard digging and endless phone calls to unearth her last name, the mystery woman's timely message helped him to be in Darwin to stop the so called farce of a wedding. Meeting the mystery woman plagued heavy on Wade's mind. Switching his thoughts to the identical message left for him in Sydney and again in Queensland when he stopped to restock his provisions, both handwritten messages contained a photo. Wade felt convinced the messages were from the same woman. She'd taken more than a casual interest in his voyage to Darwin.

Wade walked up the steps to the deck. "I wonder if the mystery woman is Anneli's sister?" he said louder than he should have.

"What did you say, young fella?"

Wade looked up at the old fisherman. His clothes reeked of fish. He swung a red bucket while shuffling along the wharf to the end.

"Good luck in your fishing tonight."

The man stopped to stare at Wade. "She'll be right. Me and me Mrs will be having fish for breakfast. If I don't catch anything there's always room at the café. While I have your attention is your name Wade?"

"Yes."

The old man shuffled over. He gave Wade a toothless grin before handing over a note.

"Who gave you this?"

"Some dame back at the start of the wharf; she must be loaded; gave me a hundred bucks to deliver a piece of paper."

"Anneli will be at a disco," said Wade reading the note out loud. Glancing towards the beach he saw no one loitering around.

"Have a good night sonny."

"You too," echoed Wade. He waved casually at the man before slipping the note deep inside his pants pocket.

Marching off the wharf towards the main street, Wade heard music coming from the closest disco nightclub, noting a small group of late teenagers who were picked up either by boys or girls for the night emerging from the doorway. Before walking off the girls scoffed at the throng of

people queuing at the entrance to the night club.

Wade slipped behind the last person, tapping two young ladies standing in front of him on the shoulder. Both wore a skimpy sequined mini skirt which sparkled from the light of the streetlight behind him. Long thin legs, feet sitting snugly into stilettos were twirled as the young ladies, no older than seventeen, turned to face him. One leaned closer battering her eyelids.

"I apologize in advance," Wade started. "Have you seen the young lady in this picture? Her name is Anneli." He thrust the photo under their noses, waiting for a response.

The two girls shook their heads.

One of the girls leaned closer, whispering seductively. "You don't need her. You and I can dance all night. After plenty of Tango, we can watch the sunrise in the morning."

Wade raised his hand at the young lady. "Thanks for the offer. I respectfully refuse your request."

Focusing on the bouncer, Wade watched the stocky man usher the next six couples into the nightclub which made the queue rapidly dissolve. The girls gave Wade a cold shoulder and went back to gossiping. Feeling happy they didn't insist on chatting him up, he turned his attention to a few others now standing in the queue behind him. After shaking their heads at the photo they quickly brushed him aside.

Eventually, the bouncer tapped Wade on the shoulder. "You have four seconds to enter before I send you to the rear of the line."

Wade faked a grin, paid the entrance fee and stepped into the building. Moving about the carpeted area close to the dance floor searching for Anneli, he could feel the reverberating thump of the upbeat through the floor. Wade stopped numerous times to flash Anneli's photo. Everyone he talked to shook their heads.

Disappointed, Wade moved onto the next disco directly across the street then onwards to the next. By midnight, he stood loitering near the ladies powder room searching the sea of faces on the dance floor in a disco situated up a side lane.

Two young ladies walked past in a rush to get back to the dance floor. They didn't notice Wade's gaze glued on them. One of the young ladies started to giggle at what the other said. The tone in the voice of one of the girls forced Wade to zero in on her walk. She wore a white blouse, a black mini skirt which clung to her tiny waist and black stilettos on her feet. Her left hand clutched a small shiny black bag. Wade watched them step onto the dance floor. Both girls looked stunning. Wade focused on the dark brunette more than her blonde haired friend. Two burly security guards grabbed him by the shoulders. Wade jumped, instantly losing sight of the girls.

"You not here to cause trouble?" spat the first bloke.

Obviously, the guard used his broken English to make his voice sound more threatening. Using the push-pull method the guard spun Wade in a half circle. The two men glared at each other almost nose to nose.

The security guards were the shape of gorillas. They looked to have the strength to match. Wade glanced over the shoulder of the first man. He saw the second guard brandishing a two-foot long metal rod.

"I'm here only to have a good time," advised Wade, confidently, hoping decorum might

help defuse the scene.

"I've been watching you closely from the moment you stepped into this homely establishment," spat the first bouncer.

"I wholeheartedly agree," replied Wade. "This place does make you feel at home."

"So far I'm not impressed by what I've seen."

"I mean no disrespect," said Wade quickly. "This is my first time in here. So far the scenery is amazing." He held his breath in an attempt to block out the smell of raw fish the man reeked of.

"I think it might be wise if you exit this place. At the other end of the main street, there's a building. Take my advice, enter it. I'm sure you'll find someone real nice to talk to."

"I'm only here for a good time," advised Wade repeating himself. He took a punt, gambling the two gorilla-sized men won't remember he said the same sentence twice.

"Have a good time somewhere else."

Wade certainly didn't want to be tossed out into the street. He continued his elucidation. "Please, I'm looking for a woman to pick up. If you'd be kind enough to give me thirty minutes and I don't have any luck, I'll leave." Wade checked his watch. "It's now exactly 11:35pm."

"We'll give you fifteen minutes," growled the second guard, stepping forward. Using his left hand, he squeezed Wade's right shoulder.

The vice like grip wasn't a flippant gesture. The act signaled, 'if the receiver caused trouble of any sort he'll be taken through a side exit. A few broken bones may accompany the receiver's body into the closest dump bin.' Wade's inmate friend tried to tell him to be extra careful if it ever happened.

The bouncer let go of Wade's shoulder. He sent him a snappy grin before stepping back.

"To make life easy for the three of us, what do you say to a trade-off?" quizzed Wade. "Can we agree on midnight as the kick out time; it's a nice even number. It'll help to overcome any confusion on my part."

Both guards snorted at each other before giving a sharp nod. They walked off to stand at the door, watching the clock.

Wade stood observing their military stance before refocusing his attention on the dance floor. He scoured the faces and the variety of coloured heads of the multitude of young ladies bopping to the rhythm of the newest song being played. In the middle of the floor he spied two ladies. Both were dressed to impress. He knew any man at the disco will be more than happy to escort either of them home.

Wade stepped onto the polished wooden floor. The young woman he walked towards appeared to have long slender legs which were partially covered by a black mini skirt. Her long black hair glistened under the mirror ball. He boldly started to march over. The closer he got the weaker his knees felt. His nerves were trying to get the better of him. Sweat broke out between his shoulder blades. A trickle of water worked its way down to the nook of his back.

The young lady he'd focused on glanced his way. Almost instantly she stopped swaying to the beat of the music; a smile not only swept her cheeks, her widening grin never waned. She tapped her female dance partner on the shoulder, raising her eyebrows to signal; 'I'll see you later.'

"Bonjour Anneli Vandenberg," announced Wade stepping up. "At long last I've tracked you

down.”

“You’re here.” Anneli stared up into his blue eyes, shaking her head in disbelief. “You don’t strike me as a person who can speak French.”

“It’s the only word I can actually say,” confessed Wade, giving her his usual friendly luring expression.

The young lady dancing next to Anneli slipped away to the other side of the dance floor. She found a seat at the bar to watch.

Anneli grabbed Wade by the hand and led the way off the dance floor to a dark corner. She never once looked back to where her dance partner went.

The DJ cranked the music up at the start of the next song. Wade yelled to be heard. He raised his hand to signal a halt to the attempted conversation. Ushering Anneli towards the main entrance, Wade gave the two security guards who were gathering their jaws up off the floor a casual wave. They waited for Anneli to retrieve a pair of black runners and a light jacket from the cloakroom before politely escorting the two outside. Both guards wished Wade and Anneli a good night. They winked at each other before stepping back inside the disco.

“I finally found you,” Wade started, praying Anneli still wanted to know him.

“You picked a strange time to show yourself. It’s been almost a year.”

Wade could feel tension building between them. His high emotions were plummeting fast. If he didn’t change the direction of the meeting he knew the night will end in a disaster. He’d wiped the word failed out of his vocabulary years ago. He needed to work harder if he ever wanted to win Anneli’s heart.

Making sure his voice flowed like a seductive Rumba dance, Wade continued where he left off. “I’ve been working hard to find you. I only knew your first name.”

Anneli wore a sheepish expression. “I happened to be drunk up to my eyeballs the night we met on the bridge. I couldn’t remember if I told you my full name or not. For nearly a year I’ve lived in hope I actually did. I apologize. I’m deeply sorry.”

“It’s okay. The only thing I’m concentrating on right now is you. Please accept my invitation for a walk?”

“Yes, the idea sounds nice.”

Anneli slipped her feet into her runners and placed her dance shoes into a small bag. Grabbing hold of Wade’s hand, her eyes sparkled at thinking what the remainder of the night might bring.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Ten hours before cyclone Tracy hits.

WADE AND ANNELI walked past few people on their lazy stroll along the main street of Darwin CBD.

“Everyone must be at a disco,” murmured Wade, breaking the ice.

Anneli looked sideways at the man walking next to her. She knew it to be an awkward moment. The first few minutes of any new relationship were always the hardest. Only the right questions should to be asked and answered. The chemistry between the couple must be brewing. Both needed to be open to the other. Being too open could be dangerous. If one revealed too many personal secrets, the other might be scared off which in turn could make the night end in a, ‘thank you for the evening and a goodbye forever handshake.’

Although they hadn’t seen each other for almost a year to Anneli the chemistry she felt when Wade kissed her on the bridge seemed to be more intense. In fact, her feelings for the man seemed to be growing stronger. Could he be the one to save her from the pathetic miserable future life? The last of her questions before any relationship could even begin needed to include facts on finance. She made up her mind at the time of writing the note and sealing it in the bottle with a kiss no matter what, poor or rich, it didn’t matter. Now the man she dreamt about nearly every night since they met was walking next to her. She certainly saw holes in her ideas of financial security.

“A dollar for your thoughts?” whispered Wade.

Anneli looked up into his eyes. “I don’t mean to be rude, where do you live?”

“You’ve asked an off the cuff question. I thought you might be thinking how much money I earned.”

Anneli’s face went bright red. “If you must know I’ve been enthralled in the evening walk.”

Wade looked ahead, whispering gently. “I did expect our reunion to progress a lot smoother than it has.”

“Meeting each other after such a long time is awkward,” hinted Anneli.

“I’d have to agree,” replied Wade. “I live in Melbourne.”

“If I were to guess I’d say Melbourne is at least two thousand miles from here.”

“It’s well over four thousand miles.”

“I’m impressed at the dedication you used to find me,” blurted Anneli, stopping outside a general goods store.

“Every second I spent on the search was worth it. Tell me, what’s the Goss on the wedding plans?”

Anneli looked shocked at hearing the words of her plight spoken out loud.

“How did you know about the plans?” she asked.

“I have friends in high places.”

“You have been misinformed. It’s supposed to be an engagement.”

A lazy smile presented itself on Wade’s face. “I’ll have to reprimand my informant.”

“For the record, I detest the idea. My father has organized for me to meet my future husband.”

“Sounds barbaric,” said Wade.

The pair heard footsteps approaching and quickly restarted their walk.

An old man wearing dark blue coveralls, a tattered wide brimmed hat pushed firmly on his head, stopped running when he came close enough for Wade and Anneli to hear his shouts. Pointing at the sky, his long grey beard twitched. “You two love birds should take shelter. There’s a cyclone forming. Where ever you’re headin’ get there sooner than later. There’s not much time. Not much time at all.”

He hurried off into the darkness. Wade and Anneli could hear his voice some distance away warning others of the imminent danger.

Wade’s mind flashed back to the falling barometer needle. The only hint of a cyclone came from the slight cooling of the temperature.

“I feel uncomfortable at what the old man implied,” confessed Anneli. “Maybe we should be looking for safer ground just in case.”

“I know a place where we can go,” hinted Wade. “If he’s wrong we’ll see a beautiful sunrise.”

“What if he’s right?”

“There’s no need to worry, we’ll be safer than a church full of people. My home isn’t far. I’m positive you’re going to love meeting Charlotte. Now tell me your story?”

“Who’s Charlotte?”

“Surely you’re not jealous?” blurted Wade. Skipping ahead a few steps he swiveled on his toes, waiting for Anneli to walk into his arms.

“What a slick move,” she giggled.

Wade swept Anneli off her feet. Looking up into her eyes, he gradually lowered her feet to the ground. Placing one hand behind her head he pulled her towards him.

“I’ve waited almost an entire year for this. I can’t wait any longer.”

“You have yet to divulge who Charlotte is?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

Wade and Anneli stood in the middle of the street outside a pharmacy window locked in a loving kiss; both wanting to re-ignite the kiss on the bridge.

Wade eventually pulled back.

Anneli felt totally devastated at the interruption. Her emotions were falling fast. She wanted to shrink away so she could be swallowed up by the night. Convinced beyond doubt prematurely ending the kiss meant the night was over she started to think Wade’s story of trying to find her had been an illusion. How could he have dashed her hope? He might as well have opened her chest and yanked out her heart.

Wade quickly smoothed over the scene. “Believe me, I didn’t want to interrupt the kiss. If you look skywards it’s a gorgeous evening. The beauty in the sky is dull compared to the radiant features of your face.”

Still aching inside, Anneli reluctantly viewed the stars. Her breathing momentarily stopped.

“Even the breeze has dropped,” she managed to whisper.

“Though the moment has been interrupted, the sky has enriched our reunion.”

Anneli wrapped her arms tighter around Wade. The words he spoke were starting to melt her anguish. She wanted desperately for her heart to dominate what she thought.

“My ideas of late have been way off.”

Wade copied her move, cementing their cuddle. “Where have you been hiding my entire life?”

“Nowhere,” replied Anneli boasting a school girl’s grin. “I’ve been waiting for my hero to sweep me off my feet.”

“You’re looking for a romantic lifestyle?”

“Yes, I am.”

Anneli took hold of Wade’s hand. Walking along the street, they watched their reflection in the glass shop windows. Once the shops were gone they both looked at nothing in particular.

Anneli started to wonder how Wade might react to the news of her appointed contract deed her father made. Even though they touched on the subject earlier they didn’t discuss it at length. If she were to listen to what her heart suggested, she needed to be certain. Anneli looked sideways at Wade. ‘Is he the type of man to click his tongue and walk?’ She knew of only one way to find out.

“You’ve gone quiet,” commented Wade.

“I’ve been thinking.”

“I hope it’s nothing I’ve done?”

“Far from it,” confessed Anneli.

“I know you’ll tell me what’s on your mind when the time is right.”

“You’re a hard man to predict.”

“I blame it on my career.”

“Are you in the army?”

Wade let a chuckle slip. “No, I’m a lawyer, or at least I used to be.” He heard Anneli sigh before looking away. “Please, tell me what’s on your mind.”

“I suppose I do owe you an explanation.” For several moments, Anneli studied the ground at her feet. “When I was born my father received a photo of a baby in the mail. A contract has been drawn up. The man and I have been promised to each other.”

The truth behind the story the messenger spun took Wade totally by surprise. He didn’t know how to react. One thing he knew he needed to keep his emotions in check.

“Stand up against the contract.”

“I’m expected to accept it. No exceptions. I’ve been informed his family is rich.”

“Money’s not everything.”

“Exactly what I told my sister.”

“Simply tell your father no.”

“I’ve tried. The closer the meeting gets, the more I feel it’s easier just to give in.”

Wade lifted Anneli’s head so they were looking at each other square in the face.

“Even though I don’t know you yet, you strike me to be an extremely strong, courageous young woman. I feel it in my spirit you can say no. You should stick to your ideas come what may.

I'm positive when you relay how you feel your father will change his mind."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"What about if I talk to your father explaining how much this idea is stressing you?"

"No. I have to solve this problem on my own. My father and I have discussed the stupid idea a few times. I also told him how I felt about the whole mess."

"What did he say?"

Anneli squeezed Wade's hand. Tears rolled unhindered down over her cheeks. "He threatened to drop my name from his will. Adding to the list he said he'll never see me again. I don't want to back down on the idea I have the right to choose my own husband. The trouble is it's getting harder every day."

"You should never back off from what you want," blurted Wade.

"Again, I thank you for being on my side. It's nice to know someone agrees."

"What your father has proposed is illegal."

"I know. Believe me, it's easy to say."

"Yes, it is. In an Australian court, you'd win hands down."

"It's good to know the law is also on my side."

Wade restarted walking along the street; gently tugging Anneli's arm so she'd follow.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

Wade winked. "I'm positive the place I'm thinking of will cheer you up. I promise every one of your ideas will turn out."

"You've said a big commitment."

"I sure did," replied Wade.

Anneli fell silent allowing the man holding her hand to take her on a journey. Deep down she felt excited by not knowing where they might end up. She decided to entertain the feeling of suspense.

The two walked down the road which ended at the sea. Before they rounded the last bend, tall masts from the many yachts could be seen towering over the trees.

Anneli didn't know what to make of it. She hadn't known Wade for a great length of time. She started to count the hours since they met in her head before thinking he lived next to the marina in a little one room seaside shack. It could even have a small wooden table amongst a miniature garden and a small window in which to view the sunset. Anneli loved her idea so much she posted it from her daydream to her consciousness. She started to relax, deciding she discovered the secret of Wade's little shanty.

Stepping onto the wharf Wade firmly held Anneli's hand. He noticed her expression slowly change from confident to complete bewilderment the further they walked along the wooden slats towards the end. At the halfway point they heard the water gently lapping the pylons. Wade started to doubt if the young lady would approve of Charlotte.

"Wade, where are you taking me?" Anneli started to tug at his arm in an attempt to signal she wanted to return to the road.

"We're almost there. Soon you'll meet Charlotte. I know when you meet her you'll understand."

Glaring at Wade, Anneli stopped walking. "Tell me who Charlotte is? If you don't I refuse to take another step."

Wade smiled his warm luring expression again.

Anneli didn't fall for it. She looked determined to have her say. "I'm not into guessing games. Tell me or I'll turn my back on you."

Wade gently took her hand. "We're here. Take a look."

Anneli looked sideways, staring at a brand new yacht.

Wade stepped behind Anneli, slipping his arms around her waist. He swiveled her slightly. "You're looking directly at Charlotte."

"You named a yacht, Charlotte?"

"Yes and no."

"Which is it?"

"The bloke who built the yacht christened her Charlotte after his wife. He said before I bought her it is bad luck to change names. I'm the first one to agree on what you're thinking; what a strange name for a yacht. I reckon the name suits her."

Anneli confessed slowly. "I thought Charlotte might be your girlfriend or your wife or a daughter."

Wade looked horrified.

Anneli smiled first. A few seconds ticked off before they began laughing at the misunderstanding.

"You're right, after the initial shock the name does grow on you," giggled Anneli.

"Care to come onboard for the five-cent tour?"

"Yes, I'd love to."

Wearing a widening grin, Wade helped Anneli onboard. Almost immediately she ran her hand along the main boom before looking up at the pulley bolted to the top of the mast.

"The mainsail has been rolled perfectly," she remarked.

"Of course," replied Wade.

Anneli stepped onto the bridge. Slipping behind the wheel she rubbed her hands around the outside of the highly polished wood.

"You seem quite at home on a yacht," stated Wade.

"I've been on a few," replied Anneli.

"Come, I'll show you downstairs."

The young lady followed Wade into the belly of the yacht. Standing on the bottom step he faced Anneli. "You're the first visitor."

"This is indeed a momentous occasion."

Wade palmed an open hand allowing Anneli to step into the small lounge. She nodded her approval at the inner sanctum.

Wade showed off the galley, the dining room, and the bedroom.

"I wondered when this room might come into the equation."

Red-faced, Wade quickly closed the door. "Care for a drink?"

"What are you offering?"

“You can have either a white wine or a red.”

“White sounds nice,” hinted Anneli.

She sat at the small round table pondering over the man as he pulled a bottle of white from under the bench. She watched him fan out water crackers on a plate and coat the surface in a salmon topping.

Before finishing the last biscuit Wade suddenly looked up. “You do enjoy eating fish?”

Anneli deduced he looked a little nervous. Maybe after the trouble he’d gone through to find her he unexpectedly thought she mightn’t eat seafood.

“Salmon is palatable,” she whispered on a sigh.

Wade walked to the table carrying a plate of biscuits and two glasses of wine.

“Do you live permanently onboard?”

“No, this place is only temporary,” admitted Wade sitting opposite Anneli.

“Where in Melbourne do you live? Do you have a house or do you share it?”

“I live on the coast overlooking the water.”

Wade felt a little uncomfortable at the personal questions. To hide the fact he gulped half a glass of wine.

“You don’t answer my questions too easily do you?” mentioned Anneli.

“I’m a private person. I take a while to warm up.”

‘It’s not a good trait,’ thought Anneli, looking at the floor. “I thought we were trying to get to know one another.”

“I apologize. I’ve worked so hard trying to find you I don’t want to lose you by coming on too strong.”

“Honesty doesn’t seem to be your weakest point. I like it. You say you’re a lawyer?”

“Was a lawyer,” replied Wade. “I’ve recently changed directions.”

“Is this yacht one of the perks of the job?”

Wade shook his head, giving her a blank stare.

“I don’t mean to sound rude. You certainly don’t look old enough to have earned enough money to buy the small boat attached to the stern of this yacht.”

“I’d prefer it if we changed the subject.”

“I think our date if you could label it a date is over.” Anneli walked towards the stairs. Before climbing she faced Wade. “I believed we discovered something special on the bridge. A stranger walking alone at midnight insisting on giving me a kiss sounded and felt exciting.”

“I assumed we discovered something special too.”

“We were both wrong.”

Anneli climbed the stairs, marched across the deck and started walking along the pier back to the beach.

Wade sat alone at the table contemplating should he run after Anneli. He’d worked so hard to find her only to have her slip through his fingers. Staring at the bottle of wine on the bench determination slowly wrinkled his brow. She wasn’t going to slip away uncontested. If he only managed to convince Anneli she shouldn’t be enslaved in a loveless marriage, then so be it.

## CHAPTER SIX

WADE SPRINTED up the stairs holding the empty wine bottle in his hand. He stood on the deck searching the entire area. Beyond two young boys fishing, he found the silhouette of a woman leaning on the second pylon in from the start of the wharf. He stopped running when he closed to talking distance.

For a long time, both stared at each other. The only sound came from the water lapping under the wooden boards.

“Before you go out of my life I have something to show you.”

Anneli felt surprised at Wade’s determination to keep searching for her. “I’m not really interested.”

“I’m going way out on a limb here. I have to insist you look at what I’m holding in my hand.”

“Why take the chance? It won’t get you anywhere.”

“I hope you’re wrong.”

“Okay, show me what you have so we can call it a night.”

Wade squared himself to Anneli and produced the wine bottle.

“I’ve seen a wine bottle before,” she jeered looking totally uninterested.

“I believe what is inside the bottle will tantalize your thoughts.”

Wade upended the bottle. The handwritten note fell into the palm of his hand. He watched Anneli’s expression alter dramatically from a non-caring attitude to eye-popping interest in a micro-second.

“Where did you find it?” she managed to whisper.

“I’d been trying to familiarize myself sailing Charlotte. We were ten nautical miles from the entrance to Port Phillip Bay when I spied the bottle in the sea. Do you know anything about it? The note has been signed by a person going by the name of Anneli. At a guess, I’m thinking there aren’t too many other ladies who have the exact same name as you.”

“I wrote on the paper I wanted a handsome prince to sweep me off my feet to rescue me. I sealed the note inside the bottle and threw it overboard from my father’s yacht twelve months ago.”

“Can we have a good friendly talk?” asked Wade.

Anneli sat pulling Wade down to a sitting position. Their feet were inches away from the surface of the water.

Wade reached out to wipe the tears from her face. “I’m definitely no prince. I’d love a chance to live up to your expectations. To be the hero you’re longing for.”

“I’d love to give you the chance.”

Wade placed his arm around Anneli’s waist.

She leaned in. Slowly her heart started to warm towards Wade. She’d give him his chance to be her hero. She didn’t have anything to lose by waiting. Wrapping her arms around him she closed her eyes to the warm feeling surging through her veins.

The couple sat in the dark cuddling, looking out across the ocean. The breeze started to

strengthen causing the waves to increase in size. The temperature quickly dropped at least three degrees. The sliver of moonlight shining across the calm sea vanished.

"I know of a great place," hinted Wade. "Please say you want to see it."

"It's the middle of the night."

"It's actually two in the morning. The place I'm thinking of has a great view at sunrise. If we leave now we'll be in time to see the first rays."

"It sounds like a wonderful way to see in Christmas day."

Dragging Anneli to a standing position Wade led the way back to his yacht.

"Charlotte looks more appealing every time I see her," confessed Anneli, stopping momentarily to absorb the yacht's appearance. "She still smells new."

"I told you there's something unique about this boat. It seems to draw you in. I need you to stand exactly where you are, I'll be one minute."

Wade opened a hatch cover on the deck near the stern of the boat. He clasped a strap around each of his wrists so he could heave a motorbike onto the deck. A minute later he wheeled the craft off the yacht. He winked at Anneli before scurrying back into Charlotte. In seconds, he came back carrying a small blue plastic container. Wade dived back down the stairs. When he returned he brought a fifteen-foot long green canvas bag. He jumped onto the wharf, placing it next to the bike.

"Do you want to tell me what's in the bag?"

"Five aluminum poles," confessed Wade. "I'd like to keep what they're used for a secret till later."

Scrunching her nose, Anneli decided to hide the fact she felt a little awkward over not hearing the answer to her query.

Wade quickly tried to smooth things over by changing the subject.

"I think I should motor Charlotte out to deeper water. I'm not sure if the old timer is correct or not. At any rate, I think there's heavy rain on the way. If I leave her tied up she might be damaged. What do you say to a two-minute cruise before we start our short trip?"

"I love the idea," shrieked Anneli.

She helped untie the ropes tethering Charlotte to the pylons and scrambled onboard. Wade turned the ignition key. Under their feet, they felt a vibration. Wade revved the engine and turned the wheel, easing Charlotte away from the wharf.

Two hundred feet from the shoreline Wade cut the engine, dropping the anchor overboard. He stood looking at Anneli, showering his memory in her radiant beauty. She seemed to have enjoyed the freedom of being the only other person around. She broke into a smile at the same time the sea breeze teased the tips of her hair. She looked picture perfect. It was as though the artist fussed over the exact colours to capture every minuscule detail.

Anneli looked his way which heightened the electricity flowing through his body.

Wade walked over. "You are indeed a beautiful woman," he declared. "Your eyes outshine the brightest diamond."

Anneli's cheeks flushed red at the compliment. She'd never heard someone say anything so nice before. She decided to shelve the words in her mind. If she wanted to she could recall the words whenever she felt the need.

Wade took one last tour of the lower deck before walking back up the stairs. For the first time since he bought the yacht, he forgot to glance at the barometer. If he did alarm bells would've rung in his mind to alert him of the danger forming further out at sea.

The two motored back to shore in the small dingy. Wade tied the tiny craft to the wharf. In less than a minute he brought the motorbike to life.

While Anneli wrapped her arms tight around Wade's waist, he navigated the bike towards the only mountain which overlooked Darwin. Almost the entire length of the long poles strapped to the side of the motorbike trailed behind them.

The two riders failed to see the storm clouds ahead of cyclone Tracy blinking out the stars a few dozen at a time.

Eight hours remained before Tracy hit land.

Wade expertly followed the double line in the middle of the road as he navigated the thirteen dry bends to the top of the mountain. He parked next to a miner's hut in the middle of the plateau. The area of flat ground looked no larger than an average house block. He unstrapped the long rigid canvas bag from the side of the motorbike, placed it on the ground and helped Anneli off the bike. Immediately she turned in slow circles, admiring the view.

"Darwin looks magnificent from this height," she said. "The view of the street lights takes your breath away."

"Six hundred feet above Darwin certainly has a grand view. Where you're standing is almost the perfect place to watch the sunrise."

"Almost," echoed Anneli, sounding puzzled.

"There's a plateau the size of a car on the small rise directly behind you. To me, it's the perfect view. The grass is a mirror image of the seventeenth green at the Flinders private golf club. Before you see the view, please allow me to give you a free guided tour of the hut."

Wade didn't wait for a reply. He walked over, opening the door.

Anneli stepped to the threshold, looking inside.

"You can go in, I won't bite."

"I know you won't. I'm concerned whoever owns this place will find us inside. He might even call the police."

Wade chuckled mischievously. "I promise I won't prosecute."

"You?" questioned Anneli turning her head to look at him.

"Not many people know I own this mansion. The land around here belongs to me too. Once you step inside the hut, I'll be able to prove it."

Wade sidestepped to the corner of the hut. He stooped under a 'lean-to' made of tin, hovered over a small generator and clicked the start button. The machine coughed a few times before sinking into a noisy rhythm. In the center of the hut, a single light globe slowly brightened.

Wade coaxed Anneli to enter. He walked her to the adjacent wall where she stood gob-smacked. Hanging off the wall she saw a photo of Wade standing in front of Charlotte. She turned to face Wade who held her hand firmly. She stared at him through protruding eyes.

"So it is true, what you said about owning this hut?" she whispered.

Wade puffed out his chest, his lazy luring smile enveloping his face.

“Yes. I want everyone to believe I’m a humble man so I don’t spread it around I actually bought this place.”

Anneli giggled. “I’m sorry to announce you resemble a proud man in the photo.”

“It happened to be a happy occasion. I took possession of Charlotte and this place on the same day. The local constable volunteered to take the photo.”

The guided tour of the single room miner’s hut lasted no more than five minutes. In one corner Anneli saw a small brick fireplace. Cobwebs hung from every corner nook and cranny of the hut. In their hey-day, the exposed wooden beams could have been a talking piece. Anneli felt saddened at seeing deep fissures on the dry surface. In the center of the hut, the two main posts were almost vertical. Both held up the cross beams which supported the rusting sheets of corrugated iron which covered the roof cavity. The metal sheets had been taken off several times over the decades so the rafters could be renewed and the original tin put back. Compacted dirt made up the floor. A horizontal crack ran through the middle of the only window. Dirt smothered the surface making the glass semi-transparent.

Wade saw Anneli’s expression of jubilation slowly vanish.

“A little elbow grease and lots of money will see the hut fit to live in. I believe it could be a great place to get away from everything.”

Anneli gave a nervous laugh.

“Come on, time marches fast. It stops for nothing. If you want to see the first rays of the sunrise we’ll have to climb onto the plateau,” coaxed Wade. Taking hold of Anneli’s hand they walked towards the door.

Wade swiped a cast iron plate the size of a concrete stepping stone from a closed draw under the only bench. He walked over to the motorbike and took out the small plastic container from a bag which he tied to the side of the bike back at the wharf. He led Anneli around to the rear of the miner’s hut and helped her climb the twenty-seven steps to wonderland.

Wade helped Anneli to hurdle a low rock wall before walking about gathering twigs. He quickly constructed a pyramid style fire between four bricks and struck a match.

The fire started easily. He placed the cast iron plate on top of the four bricks; two at each end of the plate. Using cooking oil from a small bottle he had placed in the plastic container, four pieces of chicken were soon sizzling. Wade poured a small amount of marinate over the chicken. The aroma wafting into the air made them feel hungry.

“All we need is the champagne,” taunted Anneli.

Her short giggles were contagious. Wade was still chuckling when he pulled a small bottle from his pocket. Two-shot glasses were in the other pocket.

“You’ve thought of everything,” stated Anneli, settling onto the green grass.

“I hope so. The only thing missing is a perfect sunrise,” whispered Wade squatting.

“We don’t have to wait long. The horizon has started to lighten.”

Wade stood staring at the sky. The red billowing clouds looked to be on fire. The birds chirping frantically in the nearby trees suddenly took flight, vanishing over the other side of the mountain.

“What’s the worried look for?”

“Have you ever heard of the old saying; red sky in the morning sailor’s warning?”

“No, I never have,” confessed Anneli.

Wade again studied the clouds. “The red sky can’t be any angrier. The fact the birds have flown away means there’s a storm building.”

“Any idea how many hours will fly by before the storm hits?”

“If I were to make a guess, I’d say three or four hours.” Wade made a half-hearted shrug of a shoulder before sitting. Using a magical swipe of his hand two paper napkins and two forks appeared. Acting all professional he served up the chicken.

“This is my best Christmas day ever,” announced Anneli.

“Merry Christmas,” said Wade. He lifted his small glass full to the brim of champagne to eye level. Anneli mirrored his move, letting a giggle seep between her lips when the glasses clinked together.

“Merry Christmas,” replied Anneli.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Three hours and twenty-five minutes before cyclone Tracy hits landfall.

OVER THE next ninety minutes Anneli and Wade grew accustomed to each other, cementing the fact they were meant to be together. They laughed talked and stared at the sky to view the approaching storm. Their conversation changed to serious when their love for each other not only mushroomed, it grew rapidly. They explored each other’s histories in detail. They easily eradicated any potential problem. Discovering Anneli just graduated from her law studies took Wade completely by surprise.

Lying on her stomach, Anneli arched her back. Leaning on her elbows she quoted.

“I don’t care if it rains or a storm hits, right now is perfect. I can’t believe anything could bring a halt to the magnificent start of Christmas.”

“It sure has been a wonderful morning,” declared Wade, running his fingers through Anneli’s long hair. “Are you up for another surprise?”

“What, there is more?”

Using her wrists, Wade pulled Anneli to her feet. He slipped his fingers through hers, walking back to the miner’s hut. After swiping a length of nylon rope from off the ground near the door they followed a track for a few minutes. Veering off onto a narrow sandy trail they came to the base of a radio tower on the other side of the hill.

The structure mirrored a high voltage electrical tower. Its large square base at ground level tapered to a point some seventy feet in the air. Large transmitter dishes dotted the outside of the structure near the top.

“Are you up for a climb?” asked Wade.

Adrenaline started flowing through Anneli’s veins. “Yes,” she answered confidently. In secret, she could feel her knees trembling at the thought of climbing the tower in a mini skirt.

Wade unwound the rope, tying one end around Anneli’s waist, the other around his black leather belt.

“Only in case,” he insisted, starting to lead the ascent.

Anneli’s mind raced. Instead of saying she really didn’t want to climb the tower she clamped her jaw shut, biting at the inside of her cheek to hide her nervousness. Besides, the man she started to have strong feelings for seemed confident enough to see to her safety.

Anneli held the thin rope in her left hand. She waited for Wade’s feet to clear a half a body length from the crown of her head before starting to climb.

The first twenty feet didn’t look easy. They needed to reach up for the cross bar of the metal structure before sliding along the thin railing to the other end of the frame. The rusty metal edges turned their hands orange. On the outside of the main tower legs, there were two rods about the thickness of Wade’s middle finger. They jutted out of the frame slightly less than ten inches.

‘Obviously used for the purpose of foot and handholds,’ thought Anneli studying the rods.

After completing the climbing sequence several times the duo made it to the first metal platform. The area looked to be about the same size of a standard car.

Anneli pointed to the ladder welded to the side. “The next few levels seem easy.”

They climbed to the fourth level before deciding they were high enough. The pair sat on the painted metal floor overlooking Darwin the sea and the surrounds.

“What a picture perfect view,” Anneli described.

“It sure is,” agreed Wade.

Anneli lay prone to view the sky. Wade lay next to her on one elbow staring into her eyes. He felt content nothing and no one will interrupt their time.

“Wade this is a beautiful spot.”

“It’s only beautiful due to the fact you’re here.”

Anneli sat bolt upright looking at his warm friendly lazy smile. She needed to bury the idea of throwing herself at him. If he wanted her it’ll have to be long division. Marriage the whole works. Never again will anybody try to order her to do something she didn’t agree to. The man she will give her virginity to will be of her choosing.

“Wade, thank you for the compliment, you make this place special too.”

The couple embraced at the same time a low rumble rolled across the sky. The first raindrop fell onto the bridge of Anneli’s nose. The second drop hit on the top of her head. A strong gust of wind buffeted Wade’s shirt. The first lightning bolt split the sky above Darwin. The billowing black clouds quickly swallowed the picturesque sunrise. The temperature dropped several more degrees. Another thunder clap rumbled in the heavens causing the radio tower to vibrate. A few more drops of rain fell onto the metal platform causing the water to splatter into the air.

“A little rain never hurt anyone,” blurted Anneli, brushing the water from her legs.

In only thirty minutes the sky changed from a bright red sunrise to a solid charcoal coloured cold front. The ink coloured clouds were billowing faster.

From their vantage point, Wade pointed to Charlotte bobbing on the sea of white caps. “The wind is strengthening.”

“Maybe we should get back to the Darwin CBD,” suggested Anneli.

Wade glanced at his watch. “I don’t think we have enough time. It’s now 9:03am. It’ll take at least fifty minutes in this wind to get back down the mountain. In my opinion, the two of us on a motorbike is far too dangerous if the rain saturates the road. I vote we climb down from here to wait for the storm to blow itself out. The warning the old man gave might have been correct.”

“No offence, your quaint hut has a lot of holes. I’m not convinced it’s the safest place to wait out a storm.”

“You’re right we can’t stay in the hut. I’ve just thought of a backup plan.”

By the time Wade finished talking the rain started to land close to their feet. In seconds, the myriad of small dents in the metal floor was pooling.

Hailstones larger than a five cent coin soon followed.

Wade looked down to study the tops of the trees growing close to the base of the tower. The canopy of leaves started to thrash about in the gale force wind. The ageing radio tower felt to be in a state of constant vibration.

The structure suddenly swayed slightly to the left.

“Wade, I’m scared. This tower doesn’t seem too stable,” screamed Anneli.

The tower groaned as it swayed to the right. Lightning pierced the blackened overhead sky time and again. The wind ruffled Anneli’s long hair blowing it into a mane as it streamed away from her scalp. Wade’s clothes were buffeted. They took on the appearance of a flag in a storm.

Wade took hold of Anneli’s hand to help keep her upright. “I have to agree. The way this tower is vibrating she might topple at any moment. Come on, we’ll have to hurry. We need to get to the safe place I’m thinking of.”

By the time Wade and Anneli walked over to the ladder the wind seemed to have doubled in strength. The sky looked to be a massive disco ball from the endless flashes of blue. The deep rumbles were catching up on the lightning strikes.

The first part of the descent was incident free. By the time they reached the next metal floor the rain easily soaked the two climbers to the skin. Their clothes clung to their backs causing robotic movements.

Wade and Anneli didn’t know cyclone Tracy would hit landfall in only thirty-five minutes.

“We have to hurry,” yelled Wade over the wind. He grabbed hold of the first rung and started down.

The tower vibrated. Again it swayed slightly to the left. Wade clung to the main frame. Anneli dropped to all fours then lay prone. She gave a sharp scream. Any piece of dry fabric on her mini skirt instantly soaked up the large pool of water on the metal plate.

When the tower stopped swaying, Wade looked up at Anneli, giving her a quick nod.

She started down. Three feet above the next platform Anneli jumped onto the plate.

They both wore a smug expression as they cuddled in a loving embrace to protect the other from being buffeted by the gale force wind.

“Before we start our final stage of the descent we’ll rest here for a few minutes,” declared

Wade.

“Good idea,” replied Anneli, staggering a little.

The wind started to push the rain sideways. The tower vibrated yet again. The rivets and the bolts holding the metal plate Wade and Anneli were standing on snapped. Shrapnel flew in every direction. One side of the plate kicked up before settling back on a horizontal plane. Anneli lost her footing and was wrenched out of Wade’s arms, throwing her across the plate towards the edge. She screamed in fear. The sudden weight on the rope saw Wade hydroplaning across the metal surface after her. A surge of water raised by his slide followed Anneli over the edge, cascading to the ground in one long waterfall.

The rope between the two tightened to piano wire tension.

Wade managed to grab hold of a cross beam. He dug his heels into the metal floor to stop the slide.

“Are you hurt?” called Wade, grimacing from the effort at stopping the fall.

“No I’m fine,” yelled Anneli over the wind. “I’ve received a cold shower, but I’ll be okay.”

Wade exhaled a massive sigh and repositioned his handhold by pulling himself back an inch or two. Slightly to his left Wade spied a long bolt sticking out of the floor. If he could only reach the bolt he’d use it for a perfect foothold and easily haul Anneli up. “Hold onto something,” he called.

“Wade, if you give me a little slack, I’ll be able to reach the beam in front of me. It’s just out of reach.”

“The only way to do what you’ve asked is for me to let go.”

“Trust me. When I have hold of the cross beam the strain will be off the rope. You’ll be able to haul me up easily.”

“I’m not going to let go.”

“You have to,” urged Anneli.

“I’ve stumbled on a solution. I just need you to hold onto something and I’ll be able to pull you up.”

Anneli viewed the ground twenty feet directly below her. She could only imagine the scene from Wade’s position.

“I’ve another idea,” she called.

“Whatever it is, I’m not buying.”

“I knew you’d never agree to my request. Let me explain. There’s a bolt wedged precariously on the edge of the plate. I’ll swing towards the plate above my head, reach up and grab it.”

“Okay, I agree. Make sure you hold on tight. The moment the rope slackens I’ll reposition myself to pull you up.”

Anneli moved her legs back and forth to start a swinging motion. On a forward, swing she grabbed hold of the bolt. Using the sharp thread she started cutting the rope.

Wade’s shoulder started to ache. Soon it’ll start to pull away from its socket. If he didn’t let go soon he’d have a dislocated shoulder.

“Anneli, have you gripped the bolt?” His call sounded weak.

“Hold on, I’m almost through.”

The pitch in her voice, the words she spoke and the way she delivered them gave away her secret. Wade’s eyes bulged.

“Stop cutting the rope,” he yelled.

Anneli doubled her efforts. “How did you know?”

“I made a calculated guess. Please, the only thing you have to do is reach out, take the strain from off the rope so I can pull you up.”

“I can’t reach the cross beam due to the plate’s overhang. If I time my stunt perfectly when I cut through the rope my return swing will see me hurtle towards the beam.”

“What if your timing is off?”

“Let’s put it this way. You’re determined never to let go. On your stubbornness alone, you’ll either slip, the rope will break, or we’ll be struck by lightning. After all, this structure is a radio tower and a fragile one at that. My plan is the only way to save us both.”

Wade knew he couldn’t hold on forever. If he waited too long his strength will be gone. Whatever they did it needed to happen now. If Anneli’s plan mistimed in any way she’d slip from the beam in front of her and plummet to her death.

“Okay,” he called. “If you stop cutting the rope, I’ll let go.”

Anneli quickly decided he might be stalling for time. Instead of stopping she kept up her sawing technique. When the rope slid over the bolt’s thread for the umpteenth time the ageing bolt head sheared clean off. She leaned sideways in a desperate attempt to catch it. Her fingertip tapped the bolt head, making it ricochet against the tower frame. She watched it plummet to the ground, blinking her welling tears into submission.

Anneli hung suspended in midair. Staring at the rope through fearful eyes she saw one nylon fibre after the next stretch, fray and snap. She cleared her throat, trying to sound confident. “Wade, I’ll start swinging. When I say, just let go.”

Wade slowly shook his head. His mind slipped into overdrive, desperately searching for a solution, well aware he’d been in tighter situations.

“If you want to pray to the man upstairs now might be a good time,” called Anneli.

“Okay, I’m ready,” called Wade.

“You sound a little perplexed. Don’t worry, it’ll work out, trust me.”

Wade picked up on the terror in Anneli’s voice. Something sounded wrong, of what, he didn’t know. Before he could think of what it might be, Anneli started swinging.

The half cut rope quickly frayed more from the extra strain. The wind intensified further, howling through the metal structure. The tops of the trees were being bent halfway to the ground. The lightning flashes came every few seconds. The thunder could be felt through the tower.

The ache in Wade’s arm rapidly developed into excruciating pain. He estimated in moments his shoulder could be wrenched from its socket. In desperation, he glanced around the area for something else to help save them. His gaze zeroed in on the jutting out bolt Anneli spoke of. The rope must be hooked when he dived over the side. If Anneli mistimed her swing the bolt could be used for the perfect backup plan. He didn’t have time to go through the entire scenario so he prayed the rope will stay strong enough. “Wait a few extra seconds,” he called.

“No, it’s now or never.”

Even though Anneli didn’t weigh much, the strain on Wade’s shoulder from the swinging motion seemed to be taking its toll. He needed to let go.

Wade dug his heels in, setting himself to dive. He vaguely remembered hearing Anneli’s voice yelling, ‘now.’

Everything happened at once. Wade let go of the only hand hold which helped to keep them alive. His body lurched forward at the same time Anneli swung back for the beam in front of her.

The rope tightened, pulling Wade towards the edge and perhaps certain death.

In the seconds leading up to this maneuver being played out, Wade ironed out his backup plan. Deep down he hoped he didn’t have to risk the highly dangerous stunt. If there was more time to prepare he’d have thought of something else. He wanted to kick himself for placing Anneli in such a disastrous predicament.

Anneli swung too hard. Reaching out for the beam her hands slipped off the cold wet surface of the metal frame. She started to plummet towards the ground. Realizing Wade might soon follow, her eyes widened in fear.

‘If I’m about to die I’m unusually calm,’ Anneli thought. Goosebumps erupted on her arms. Her long black hair hung heavy. Water dripped from off the tips. The only thing she could focus on was the ground rushing up to meet her.

Using his toes for a springboard, Wade dived for the edge of the structure. He concentrated on the foothold sticking out. He gritted his teeth, focusing on the rope as it went from slightly slack to over tight. He dived over the side of the structure. A torrent of water followed him towards the ground. If he timed his backup plan to perfection the rope will be snagged on the foothold allowing him to open his arms and collect Anneli when they collided. Doubt over his plan made his stomach turn into knots.

‘What if for some unforeseen circumstance the rope missed the foothold?’ The thought struck Wade hard. Either way, in seconds he’d know the outcome.

Wade felt a huge tug. He opened his arms to collect Anneli. She crashed hard into his chest, locking them into a swinging embrace.

“Nice catch!” exclaimed Anneli.

“You missed the handhold you were aiming for.”

“It was wet.”

Lightning pierced the sky over their heads again. Another deep rumble came louder. The wind speed seemed to be doubling every few minutes.

When the duo caught their breath, Wade pushed Anneli towards the metal structure. She clung to the main beam and slowly descended, taking extra care.

Finally they made it to terra firma. Wade untied the rope around their waists, coiling it in his hand. When he came to the cut he looked at Anneli. He snorted, trying to sound angry.

“You almost cut the rope in two. The rope couldn’t take much more. Only a few strands remain undamaged. Saying that, I’m sure your plan would’ve worked.”

“I’m happy you thought up a second plan,” confessed Anneli.

Wade slipped the rope through his belt. Reaching out he gently took hold of Anneli’s hand

to begin leading the way back to the hut.

“What now?” Anneli yelled over the roar of the wind.

Wade looked through the window to view the condition of the hut. Already water covered the dirt floor making it look like mud. “You’re right about waiting out the storm in the hut.”

“We can’t stay outside,” screamed Anneli. “To me, this storm might be forming into a massive cyclone.”

Wade almost pulled Anneli off her feet, sprinting towards the motorbike. She straddled the black seat, ready for a fast ride. Wade picked up the long rigid canvas bag he brought from the yacht and quickly tied it to the side of the bike. “Hold on tight. I know a safe place.”

“Of course,” she whispered.

A loud clap of thunder directly overhead drowned her words.

Wade glanced over his shoulder. “I missed what you said.”

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“You’ll see. Hang on tight.”

Anneli didn’t need to be told twice. She pushed her hands around Wade’s waist, locking her fingers together. Through his soaking wet shirt, she could feel his taught stomach muscles tighten.

Wade roared the motorbike over the top of the hill, slipping and sliding on the soft waterlogged ground. Another round of forked lightning lit the sky, highlighting the area. Almost immediately thunder vibrated the ground.

The narrow path they were travelling along quickly formed into a creek from the monsoonal downpour. In minutes, the track will be useless to trace. The gale force wind and the rain forced Anneli to close her eyes. Instead of asking again where they were going she decided to trust the man steering the motorbike.

Fifty feet directly in front, the two riders came to a small narrow opening in the side of the hill. At speed, Wade burst through the entrance. Twenty feet from the cave’s mouth they stopped in the middle of a thirty-foot wide cavity. Wade killed the bike’s engine before looking over his shoulder at Anneli. He knew from the moment they kissed on the bridge he’d fallen in love. Looking at her now, it was a foregone conclusion.”

“I hope you’re not thinking I look a mess?” questioned Anneli.

“Never,” replied Wade. “If it’s your worst look, you’re the most beautiful girl I’ve ever had the privilege to meet.”

Anneli’s face flushed red at the compliment.

Wade climbed off the bike. His wet clothes were almost transparent. Anneli’s eyebrows shot skywards at what she saw.

‘You look and feel great yourself,’ she thought. “You didn’t mention there’s a bunker close to the hut,” quizzed Anneli, masking her erotic thoughts.

“This place really isn’t a bunker,” explained Wade. “It’s a disused mine. Back in the early nineteen hundreds a man known only as Sea Dog, started to dig. Legend has been recorded he actually found gold. His biggest mistake happened to be bragging about it to the wrong people. They robbed him of his life.”

“What happened to the gold?”

“No idea. I couldn’t unearth any more details.”

Anneli started to turn in slow circles. Comparing it to the few caves she had previously visited over the years, the mine appeared to be exactly the same.

“I placed a few provisions in here just in case I happened to be caught unawares by the rain.”

“Planning ahead for the unexpected is a good thing,” advised Anneli, refocusing on the man standing directly in front of her.

Wade walked over to a knee high, Tasmanian oak cabinet. He squatted. Using his fingers, he dug at the hardened dirt directly underneath the lock, unearthing a small silver key. He unlocked the door, pulling the contents off the only shelf. He pushed a small matchbox into his back pocket before handing a towel to Anneli. She grabbed it and immediately started to dry her hair. Next, he unraveled a blanket on the ground. A black tracksuit sat in the middle. Wade looked doubtful. “The clothes are too big for you. Sorry, it’s the best I can do.”

Anneli bent to pick up the tracksuit. “Thank you. The only thing missing is a change room.”

“I’ll take a look outside to see if the rain has eased. I’ll come back in five minutes.”

Wade walked to the entrance of the mine. To try to block out the urge to view Anneli’s half naked body he concentrated on the storm which seemed to be getting worse by the minute. Behind him, Wade heard a groan. He subconsciously turned his head in time to see Anneli standing naked. She stood side on to him totally oblivious to the pair of eyes staring at her. Wade’s mind soaked up the image of her perfect flawless olive skin. Her long black hair, still damp from the rain, cascaded over her shoulders and draped towards her feet. He felt the twinges of love pull at his heartstrings. He wanted to walk over to hold her in his arms for eternity. Wade sighed, forcing his eyes to look back at the rain. He watched the strengthening wind push the hail sideways. Each lightning strike and thunderclap rolled together in a continuous light show and one infinite baritone of noise.

Soft quiet footsteps approached from behind him, jerking Wade back into reality.

Anneli pushed her arms around his waist. Instead of looking out at the storm she closed her eyes. Her mind started to bathe in his strength. His masculine smell wafted into her nostrils; exciting her. She wanted him to hold her in his arms, take her to a private location so they could make passionate love.

Wade could feel Anneli’s warm body against his. He instantly slipped hopelessly back to the previous erotic scene when he turned from viewing the storm. He knew he should only shelve her beauty in his memory. Sweeping Anneli off her feet so he could make love to her engulfed his thoughts.

Anneli’s voice broke the spell. “I found a dry shirt inside the tracksuit. It’s too big for me. I’m warm enough in the tracksuit.” She secretly hoped Wade will take off his wet shirt. Her pupils danced at the thought of seeing his deep chest and broad shoulders.

Standing square to Anneli, Wade stripped off the wet shirt. Before dressing, he reeled her in close. He felt her warm breath sweep across his cheeks. Their lips were close and parallel to each other. The embrace tightened. Their lips were hovering apart by only the width of a hair. Anneli moved her arms further across Wade’s shoulders. The move pulled them in even closer. For the next few minutes, there’d be no communication between them. There didn’t have to be. Each knew

what the other wanted. Their lips lightly touched. For several heartbeats neither seemed to dare to take the final step. Both were pondering the same question. Will the kiss feel the same as it did on the bridge or will they be disappointed?

Which one will be brave enough to make the final move?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Thirty minutes prior to cyclone Tracy hitting landfall.

ANNELI'S STEPFATHER stood staring out of the hotel window at the Cyclone. He had insisted on paying for the presidential suite and the whole sixth floor for several nights. His plans of having a flawless first impression between Anneli and her future husband seemed to be failing. Hearing the warning on the radio of the imminent cyclone he frantically sprinted from room to room to wake his family. Darryl found each of his sons asleep lying next to a young lady.

"Where's Meredith?" cursed Darryl, glaring at his middle son lying in the bed.

The young blonde haired woman next to him pulled the blanket over her head.

"Dad, what's the meaning of barging into my private room?"

"I don't care to answer your question. Have you any idea where your sister is, let alone her husband?"

The young man sighed. "She's in the room at the end of the hall. Number six twenty-two."

Darryl marched across the room to the door. Reaching for the handle he looked over his shoulder. "Get dressed. Be downstairs in one minute."

"I'm tired after my extra late night. Why should I even want to agree to get out of bed?"

The young lady under the blanket curled into a tight ball.

"There's a cyclone on the way. You have thirty seconds to get yourself downstairs. Bring the young woman."

Darryl sprinted down the corridor, found room six twenty-two and started pounding on the door. He counted to three before kicking it in.

Meredith's bags were packed and she was waiting for her husband to hang up the phone.

"Quick, downstairs, there's a cyclone on her way."

Dirk slammed the phone back on the hook, staring at his father-in-law. "When I woke early I heard the weather report. They named the storm cyclone, Tracy. I've put an order in for two cabs to deliver everyone to the airport. Inside an hour, we'll be on our way back to Melbourne."

"There's no time," growled Darryl. "The cyclone's too close. Everybody get downstairs. Congregate in the main reception area. The concierge has insisted everyone stays indoors."

"Merry Christmas," blurted Meredith facing her husband.

Dirk gave her a reassuring kiss on the forehead then led the party down the stairs.

In the main dining room, a long table had been set for breakfast. When the hot food, consisting of bacon, eggs, toast, jam, pancakes, muffins, and caviar came out from the kitchen the two waitresses were singing a Christmas carol. Evidently they were ordered to cheer up the patrons.

Darryl marched over to the dining room window to view the cyclone. The wind started rattling the taped glass. The trees were bending, almost touching the ground. Metal signs, bricks, roofing tiles even whole caravans were being tossed through the air.

Meredith walked across the pale grey carpet. Standing next to her stepfather she said. "This looks bad."

"A half hour ago the radio reported the experts have labeled this a freak cyclone. They've upgraded the category to number four. If the report is accurate there won't be much of Darwin left standing when she's gone."

Meredith glued her gaze on a small car tumbling end over end down the road. Before she could react to what she witnessed the car crashed into the building opposite. The building's brick wall cracked before tumbling to the ground. Brick fragments were scooped up by the wind and hurled further down the road.

"That was too close," squealed Meredith, rubbing the goose bumps on her bare arms.

"I think we should move away from the window and retire to the banquet table to join in on the festivities. We might be here for a while," barked Darryl.

"How can you think of food?"

"Easy, I'm hungry for the free breakfast we've been invited to."

Meredith's jaw dropped open. An expression of sheer panic forced her to pull on her stepfather's shoulder. "Where's Anneli?"

"I did try to find her. When your brothers came home I even asked them. They weren't much help."

"You sound like you don't really care."

"Our heated discussion over my ideas for her planned marriage has left a sour taste in my mouth. I know I should care; however at this moment I'm happy she's not here. Christmas has been ruined enough."

Meredith gave him a fiery look. "The argument happened nearly twelve months ago."

"Time flies."

"Have you even spoken to Anneli since the heated meeting last new-years-eve?"

Hearing footsteps Darryl looked away. "Your husband is coming for you. Be a good girl, keep him happy."

## CHAPTER NINE

ANNELI TOOK the initiative to go the one step further and kissed her hero. The kiss on the bridge felt amateurish compared to the kiss they shared in the cave in the middle of a cyclone. The wind seemed to heighten the sensation.

Finally, she moved to pull back. Wade trapped her to prolong the kiss. Anneli surrendered, allowing him to kiss her even longer. She felt weak in his strong arms. She needed her hero to look after her. She craved the thought but wanted it known she wasn't a weak female.

Anneli gently broke the kiss.

Wade released his hold. For a few moments, they stood gazing into each other's eyes.

"There's something I need to say."

"I'm listening," whispered Wade, giving her his undivided attention.

Anneli broke free of his grip only to lean her back seductively against the wall of the mine.

"Whatever it is you're thinking about just say it."

"I'm not sure how," she confessed on a sigh, kicking at a clump of dirt.

"It's okay. If this helps in any way; you have an inner strength which enables you to be strong when the need arises."

"How did you sum me up so easily?"

"I'm a lawyer. I've taught myself to find out how innocent the person is by the slightest inkling of a twitch which might be out of place."

Anneli pouted. "The instinct will be priceless to learn. What am I thinking?"

"I have decided to put my ability aside only for you. I feel it's my duty."

Anneli fell quiet. She looked outside at the wind, a distant look in her eyes. Slowly she peeled her gaze from the storm to focus on Wade.

"You're right, what I've been thinking has to be told."

Wade stood his ground waiting to listen to every word.

"I want to reveal you've pegged me correctly. I'll also tell you I'm no weakling. I will not tolerate you or any man taking advantage or ordering me to do anything against what I believe. I walk a narrow path. I will not wander away from it either in thought or actions. I'd love to take our relationship further. If you can't accept who or what I am, the moment this storm's over we'll part and never see each other again."

"I'm happy you made your thoughts perfectly clear," advised Wade. "Seeing how I know your ideas on the future I think it's only fair I should lay out mine."

Anneli looked sheepish at what he might say. An idea entered her mind she came on too strong and actually scared the man away. Did she say her thoughts in a too harsh a tone? She wanted to kick herself for being so blunt. Could Meredith have been right all along; 'give in and let the current take you on a ride.'

"I also want to take our relationship to the next level. I will never order you around. I love the fact you are a strong individual. I expect it to stay exactly the same. Your strength attracted me to you in the first place," confessed Wade.

“How, I didn’t do anything?”

“It’s not what you said it was the way you looked at me the night we met on the bridge. Your body language spoke directly to me.”

“Interesting theory,” hinted Anneli.

Four lightning flashes, four thunder claps in the space of a few seconds interrupted the conversation. Another round of rumbles soon followed. Water poured over the mouth of the cave. The hill above them trembled violently. Wade and Anneli ran towards the back of the cave. A dirt avalanche slid down the hill. Mud covered rocks covered the mouth of the cave. Wade forced Anneli onto the ground, grabbed hold of the cabinet pulling it over on top of them.

When the trembling above their heads eventually subsided, Wade slid out from under the cabinet. Squatting in the dark he righted the frame.

“I can’t see a thing,” stammered Anneli. “The cave mouth must be completely blocked.”

“Don’t move. I’ll have a light on in a minute.”

Wade opened the cabinet door. His hands swept the inside cavity. When his fingers touched what he started to search for, Wade swiped up the narrow tube and moved the switch on the torch to the on position.

The area remained the colour of ink after they heard a click.

“Let me guess what’s happened. The batteries are flat,” stated Anneli.

“Hold your thoughts. The last time I came here I placed one of the batteries in the slot the wrong way around. I didn’t want them to go flat. Hopefully, they’ll still be good to use.”

Wade fumbled in the dark turning the first battery so they were connected in series. They heard a click. The beam of light highlighted Anneli’s torso.

“Are you okay? No broken bones?”

“I’m fine on both questions. What about you?”

“I’m okay,” reported Wade.

Anneli glanced towards the mouth of the cave. “I reckon this storm might form into a destructive cyclone. The only thing we can do now is start digging our way out.” She looked at Wade’s smiling face. “Don’t tell me there’s a back door to this place.”

“To tell you the truth, there is. Let’s make a move. It’ll take a while to get to the there.”

After picking up the long rigid bag, Wade led the way.

“What about the motorbike,” Anneli quizzed.

“It’ll be fine. When the area has dried we can return to dig it out.”

A wave of warm emotion swept through Anneli. The epicenter of the feeling came from her heart. She loved the term, ‘WE’. For the first time in her life, she felt like she belonged to something important.

The rear of the cave abruptly stopped at the entrance to a long narrow tunnel. The air smelt stale.

Several steps along the tunnel Wade stopped to look over his shoulder.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. I’ve been this way a couple of times.”

Anneli hesitantly entered the tunnel. She caught him up, grabbing hold of his arm.

“The dark tunnel looks extremely inhospitable,” she groaned choking on her words.

“Trust me, it’ll be okay.”

Anneli nodded when Wade took hold of her hand.

They walked along the tunnel at a tediously slow pace. Anneli studied the walls closing in on them. In a few extra narrow sections, they needed to sidestep their way through. Not once did Wade let go of Anneli’s hand. She felt reassured by his touch. In the future years when she looked back on, this moment in time, holding Wade’s hand and realizing she never wanted to let it go, she felt positive it will always place an unshakable smile on her face.

“Wade, are we nearly there?” whispered Anneli.

“Yes, it isn’t too far now.”

“If you didn’t insist on bringing the long canvas bag we might have been at the back door sooner. Why did you bring it anyway?”

“We’ll need it.”

“At the moment, the only thing I can tell is it’s hindering our progress.”

“You’ll see soon enough.” Using the fading torch beam, Wade checked his watch. “It’s 9:45am,” he reported.

“Almost mid-morning,” answered Anneli, sucking her breath in to squeeze past yet another extra narrow section. “It’s getting harder to breathe.”

“Yes it is and I don’t know why,” replied Wade. “I’m sure the back door isn’t more than thirty steps ahead.” He stopped, reached for the box of matches in his back pocket and struck one of the magnesium covered match heads against the side of the box. A yellow flame flickered to life. Wade held the match perfectly still to see if the flame moved sideways in the direction they were going.

“The flame is supposed to move in the direction of the airflow,” explained Anneli, recalling the exact trick she learnt in the science lesson at primary school.

“Yes, it is. I have no idea why it’s not,” stated Wade. “The only thing we can do is press on.”

The narrow tunnel broke into a small cave no wider than a single lane road. Wade walked to the wall directly in front of him.

“This has to be a fresh wall, probably from a collapse due to the storm.”

“Breaking free should be an easy thing to do,” announced Anneli. She stepped up to the wall and started digging.

“Hold it, before you injure yourself let’s take a look in my pockets for anything useful.”

In the fading torch light, Anneli called out the items Wade placed onto the ground. “There’s a wallet and a box of matches.”

“One torch,” added Wade. He stepped over to the wall and dug the butt end of the torch into the soft mud. A small quantity of dirt fell away.

“It’s too blunt,” Anneli advised. Glancing at the long canvas bag containing the five poles she wondered why Wade had been so careful in handling them. “What if you used one of the poles in the bag for a battering ram? If the wall isn’t too deep the tip of the pole might make a hole.”

A wave of hurt moved across Wade’s face.

Anneli easily picked up on the emotion. “Surely a pole isn’t too delicate or a priceless

artifact which should be overlooked in our quest to find something to help in our escape.”

Wade lifted his hand to gently cup Anneli’s face. “I love the idea.”

He handed Anneli the torch and picked out a long pole from the bag. Wade gently pushed the pole into the dirt, swiveling his end around in circles. Almost immediately the wall started to crumble away.

The more times Wade pushed the pole into the soft mud and pulled it back the louder the wind sounded.

In a few minutes, a hole formed in the wall. It appeared to be the same size as a lady’s hat she wore to the Melbourne cup.

The rain started pouring through the hole. Wade kept up his hacking. The mudslide measured four feet at its thickest part. Once the hole looked wide enough to scramble through, Wade stepped back to view the outside. Both he and Anneli watched the sky in amazement.

“This is one massive storm,” grumbled Anneli.

“I’d say she’s definitely a cyclone. I heard a few weeks back the bureau of meteorology decided the next cyclone was going to be named; Tracy.”

“The way the wind’s picking up, Tracy might have enough strength to destroy Darwin.”

“You could be right on the money. I have a feeling when Tracy has blown herself out there won’t be much left standing,” quoted Wade.

“This is just a random thought. When the experts name a cyclone they never use a man’s name.”

Wade placed his arm around Anneli’s waist so he could give her a quick reassuring kiss. For fifteen minutes he cradled her in his arms waiting for cyclone Tracy to move off.

The moment the wind dropped to zero knots the sun came out.

The two crawled out of the tunnel. Standing at the entrance they took in the view. The warm sun shone on the sides of the hill. The trees were again standing straight. There wasn’t a tell-tale sign the storm might have been any stronger than a heavy band of rain.

“This must be the eye of the storm,” Anneli reported.

Wade slowly nodded. He certainly didn’t want to be close to the man-made entrance to the cave when the wind restarted. He looked into the distance at the turbulent sea and where Darwin should have been. He could plainly see the central business district. He could also see numerous small fires erupting. Where complete buildings and houses were built he couldn’t count how many were missing walls or roofs. Rubble littered every street. Cars looked like they’d been parked haphazardly. Some were even sitting precariously on house roofs. The image the whole of Darwin looked graveyard quiet burned in his mind.

Turning his back on the outside world Wade heard the wind returning. Grabbing Anneli by the hand he pulled her towards the tunnel. They dived through the hole in the nick of time. In seconds, the wind returned. The noise started howling through the entrance, threatening to suck them out and upwards towards the heavens. Anneli gripped onto Wade’s shoulders to stop from being airborne.

Wade spied a metal ring embedded into the wall. He untied his belt, threading it through the ring. He just managed to re-clip it before the wind returned to gale force, sweeping Anneli and

Wade off their feet. He clutched Anneli around the waist helping her to hang on.

"The wind must be moving close to one hundred and fifty miles an hour," stammered Anneli planting her feet into the mud.

"It might even be two hundred," replied Wade, forcing his feet back onto the ground. He dropped to his knees, pulling Anneli down under his arm.

Wade and Anneli heard the noise before they felt it.

The whole side of the hill started sliding, collapsing the small entrance to the cave. Their safe haven quickly disappeared due to the fact the entrance kept collapsing. As it did so the mouth of the cave closed in on Wade and Anneli. Halfway through the second part of the storm Wade estimated the cave mouth to be wider than a single lane road. In minutes, the length of the cave shortened considerably. At first, Wade didn't concern himself. In less than a minute the walls where they were standing started to crack, making him change his mind. Deep fissures soon followed. The avalanche quickly picked up speed turning the dirt into mud; soft, suffocating mud.

The hill directly in front of the cave dwellers started to be torn away. One minute they were ten feet from the entrance, the next, they were down to a few feet. There didn't seem to be any letup. Wade unclipped his belt from the ring to move Anneli further into the cave. He wanted to be ready for a hasty retreat. He unearthed the cloth covered poles, clutching them in his left hand.

"Wade, we can't go any further," Anneli screamed. The tone of her voice sounded full of despair.

He turned to face the entrance they stepped out of. "The tunnel has collapsed. We're trapped in this cave till the storm's gone."

"If the edge of the avalanche comes too much closer we'll be surfing back to Darwin," hinted Anneli nervously.

Wade pushed her back to the rear of the tunnel. He watched the cracks in the walls spread towards the metal ring. They were less than two feet away when he decided they needed a backup plan. He turned to Anneli, talking over the sound of the wind.

"I'm fresh out of ideas of what to do. Any input will be gratefully accepted."

Anneli stood shaking her head. "The only thing I can think of is to pray."

Wade gave an agreeing nod.

"God, if you can hear me over this wind I ask you save us from this storm. Thank you."

Wade estimated the crack in the wall closed the gap between them by a further two feet in as many minutes. He tested his theory by pulling on the metal ring. It felt loose. The brightening sky evaporated his worried look. Wade noticed the wind abating, dropping to a stiff breeze.

"The storm's gone," he reported confidently. "Stay where you are, I'll take a look." He took a few tentative steps towards the edge of the cliff. "The ground feels firm almost to the edge before the mud starts to give way," he reported. Standing at the entrance of the short cave he looked over his shoulder. "Anneli, come over here you need to have a look at this."

Anneli carefully walked over. She stood next to Wade, staring gob-smacked at the scene.

"Nothing has been left intact. Not one house or building made it through the storm unscathed. The whole area is a war zone. Where Darwin once stood in all her splendor has been blown away. Devastation is the only thing remaining."

Wade squinted in the sunlight and the dying wind. He pointed to his left towards the sea where the light industrial area once stood.

"I can see a few fires raging, probably from broken gas pipes. Anneli, you're right, there's nothing left. I have no doubt this cyclone will go down in history. I can only imagine what the media will say in tomorrow's newspaper."

"The year cyclone Tracy destroyed Christmas," Anneli reported.

Wade didn't respond to her one line statement, he appeared to be enthralled in the humus clouds. The sky looked to be an inviting blue.

Anneli didn't realize Wade was focusing all his attention elsewhere; she busied herself studying the hill. Shaking her head, she spoke in a whisper.

"Wade, do you have any ideas on how we might be able to get down?"

"I'm happy you mentioned it. I have the perfect solution," he boasted, looking at her. His grin widened by the second.

"Let me guess; the long pole you brought along is part of a flying fox?"

"Not quite. Come on, I'll show you the contents of the bag."

Wade picked up the long rigid canvas bag, took hold of Anneli's hand and carefully led the way over the soft mud to the only patch of grass left on the hillside. Placing the bag on the ground he set to work.

The long poles were first out of the bag.

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Anneli, her jaw falling open at his secret.

Wade built an aluminum triangular shaped frame and tightened the joints using wing nuts. He rolled out the material, clipping the whole sheet across the back of the structure. Wade unraveled the straps from around the poles. Next, he tied off the harness.

"You've been carrying a hang-glider!" Anneli shrieked.

"It's our ticket out of here," answered Wade. "I'd planned to ask if you were interested in seeing the sights of Darwin after climbing down from the radio tower. I didn't plan on a cyclone or the hang-glider to be used to rescue us."

"I'd love to go for a scenic flight. Will it hold both of us?"

"Sure, it's not a problem."

Wade lifted the hang-glider into the correct position then helped Anneli into her harness. "The only thing we have to do is run down the hill as one. When you feel the front of the glider rise, I'll signal for you to jump. Once we're in the air, push one leg at a time through the strap behind you. Lying prone will stop the drag on the glider. I'll steer for the thermals. If we need the glider to circle to the left or right the only thing you have to do is move your hands. Don't panic over anything, relax and enjoy the flight."

"This sounds so exciting," remarked Anneli, almost breathless. "I have to confess I've never done this before." She looked sideways at Wade hoping he couldn't tell she might vomit at any moment. She felt scared and excited at the same time. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she tried to dam her adrenaline rush. Keeping her voice in check she said. "How soon can we start?"

Wade again searched the sky for an updraft. He pointed to an eagle gliding close to the hill searching for food. It slowly circled several times before flying off.

“Now seems to be a perfect time. After we’re airborne we’ll make our way towards Darwin. The bird’s eye view will give us a great insight into the damage. Once we’ve lost some height we’ll make our way to the beach so we can land on the sand.”

They hoisted the glider onto their shoulders. In unison, they started walking downhill. Even though the warm breeze seemed to be steadily dropping it was still strong enough to make the material of the hang glider thrash about. Anneli tried to analyze how fast the wind might be blowing when she heard Wade’s voice.

“Start running.”

Anneli’s legs felt like steel. She needed to use her entire strength to keep her feet moving. The soft squelching mud underneath her runners acted as a resistance hindering their velocity. The ground quickly steepened. The hang-glider seemed to be growing heavier. In a few more seconds the mud from the avalanche looked too thick to step into. Panic gripped Anneli’s mind. Her lungs ached from breathing too rapidly. If she didn’t force herself to relax she’d start to hyperventilate.

Alarming thoughts gripped her mind. ‘What if they fell into the mud before the hang-glider lifted them off the ground? What if they were running too slow? What if she did everything wrong? What will happen if she failed to complete the few basic instructions Wade had said?’ She bit her bottom lip to mask her feelings of exhilaration and extreme nervousness. Horror wrinkled her brow. At this critical point why couldn’t she remember what to do? For the first time in her life nerves got the better of her. She looked sideways at Wade. His face seemed relaxed. Didn’t he understand the danger?

The glider’s nose lurched upwards. Anneli felt the wind move the ends of her hair.

“Now, jump,” called Wade.

The tone of voice he used sounded totally calm. He acted like he’d done this hang-glider thing every day for years.

Anneli felt too nervous to know whether she completed the command or not and Wade seemed too busy studying the air to notice her wild gaze glued on him.

The glider’s nose rose steadily.

Anneli pushed both her feet into the loop made out of the same strapping material which gripped her around her waist. Watching the mud slip away, she quickly estimated they were ten feet above the ground and climbing. Starting to relax she ordered her brain to enjoy the ride, determining next time she’d insist on her own glider.

“You can breathe now,” advised Wade.

His one line statement shocked Anneli into breathing again.

“We’re now at a height of twenty feet,” reported Wade, confidently.

“The breeze feels warm,” whispered Anneli.

“We’re right in the middle of a thermal.”

The hang-glider rose steadily before leveling off at one hundred feet. Wade steered out of the thermal, navigating the glider towards Darwin.

Anneli felt she was looking through the eyes of an eagle. Staring at the destruction below them her heart fell deeply troubled. The enormity of the situation made her feel helpless.

When the glider approached suburbia they were close enough to see the grief on the face of

a young pregnant woman who started to venture outside. The longer they floated towards Darwin CBD the more of Cyclone Tracy's destructive power became evident.

Anneli shed a private tear.

Cyclone Tracy had successfully wiped Darwin from off the map. Christmas 1974 will go down in Australian history as the storm which stopped Darwin from having Christmas.

Small fires were popping up everywhere. People of all ages were leaving their hideouts and starting to move about searching the rubble for missing neighbours. In the fifteen minutes since they left the ground Anneli didn't see a house still intact.

"I want to check on Charlotte," Wade advised.

Anneli helped change course by shifting her hands towards the right side of the crossbar. The glider gently banked. The craft quickly rose to two hundred feet when it entered another thermal before breaking free and changing direction towards the sea.

Looking at Anneli, Wade said seriously. "Are you sure you've never flown a hang-glider before?"

She gave a cheerful shake of her head. "No. Why?"

"The way you handle the craft I thought you were an expert."

"Thank you for the compliment. Your words mean a lot."

Crossing over the sand Anneli saw at least two dozen boats of various sizes strewn around the sea. Most were beached; damaged beyond repair. Tears formed in her eyes when Charlotte came into view. Her white broadside glistened in the warming sun. The tip of the mast looked to be buried in the sand. The Cyclone had left the yacht high and dry. Their cursory study of the hull revealed she seemed intact.

"Charlotte must be at least forty feet from the water," Anneli reported.

"She must have broken free of her mooring, ending up near the restaurant on the beach. Nice place to eat. They did have a superb wine list. Margarita's used to be their specialty. It's a shame the building's gone."

Anneli smacked her lips together. "My taste buds are craving for a nice wine. I'm sure the liquid will go a long way to quench my thirst. I'm drier than the Simpson Desert."

Wade chuckled. "The idea sounds good to me too. We'll land and grab a drink. If Charlotte's fridge door is still shut, we'll have a cold one for sure."

Anneli's pupils danced at the thought. Already she could feel the cool liquid sliding down the back of her throat.

The sea breeze quickly dropped away forcing the glider to slowly come back to the earth.

Wade expertly navigated the glider parallel to the water's edge. He waited for a clear stretch of flat sand before slowly dipping the nose.

Anneli felt slightly disappointed their flight ended so abruptly. She'd certainly treasure the journey in her heart till the day she died.

Wade brought the hang-glider in for a graceful smooth landing. They came to a stop thirty feet from Charlotte.

## CHAPTER TEN

ANNELI'S STEPFATHER cautiously crept out from under a food preparation bench. He'd successfully argued they should take refuge in the kitchen, not the dining room.

Thirty of the group strongly disagreed.

Several strangers who appeared to be on Darryl's side were ushered by the hotel staff into the kitchen. If nothing else the fighting will be over.

At the height of the storm the morning chef ran for the knives, throwing them into the dishwashers for safety.

In his haste, he'd missed seeing the steak knife. When the window shattered the wind picked it up, tossing it through the air. The sharp point embedded into one of the patron's forearms. The elderly man crumbled to the floor clutching his arm. A brave young lady reached out pulling the knife from his flesh, jamming it into a cupboard door. Seconds later the hotel's roof was torn away. In one devastating attack, the wind picked up the building and dropped it. Every window in the place blew out. A small fire erupted from a severed gas pipe under the kitchen bench. The chef ran to the gas metre, turning it off. He dived for a fire extinguisher to douse the flames.

At the conclusion of the first half of the cyclone, the small group ventured outside to view the damage. Three sides of the hotel were cracked from top to bottom. The fourth wall facing north looked ready to collapse.

Meredith's voice sounded no louder than a mere gargle. "The dining room has only one remaining wall."

Darryl hid her eyes from the massacre. He turned, herding his daughter back inside the kitchen.

The eye of the storm gave the survivors only a few minutes to check on how secure their new hiding place might hold up before the wind restarted.

It gave no warning when it returned to finish off what it began. It seemed hell bent on showing off its power by destroying whatever still remained standing by devouring everything in its path.

One minute Darryl stood staring, out of the glass free window in the kitchen, the next second, he was being sucked out of the window, feet first.

"Help, can any of you grab hold of me. Dirk, anyone, I need help," Darryl yelled.

He looked up at the cellar door. The gap between his hand and the handle couldn't be any more than a few inches. He loosened his grip to get ready to reach for the handle. Instantly he started to be sucked backwards, his feet slipping through the open window.

"Hey, anyone in the cellar, I'm almost at the limit of my strength. I'll be sucked outside if nobody comes to my rescue." Closing his eyes from the wind, Darryl gritted his teeth.

Concentrating his entire strength Darryl managed to pull one foot through the window. Again he stretched out his hand towards the handle of the cellar door. Two strong hands grabbed Darryl by the wrists, pulling him to safety. He heard the door being slammed shut then locked from the inside.

“Thanks for saving me,” puffed Darryl between breaths. “I thought I was a goner.”

The chef slapped him on the shoulder. “Not problem. In my youth, I had been wrestle champ of college.”

The man’s broken English helped Darryl to relax. He shook the man’s hand to cement the fact he felt grateful for being saved.

For the next twenty minutes, the group sat in the dark listening to the wind.

Finally, the wind fell silent.

The chef unlocked the door and allowed the group to follow him out into the warming sunshine.

“The cyclone has gone,” he announced.

The sun slowly seeped out from behind the clouds. Darryl noted the wind quickly abating into no stronger than a stiff breeze. He looked over his shoulder at the once beautiful hotel. He knew the smoldering wreck couldn’t be saved.

“So much for elegance,” he mumbled.

About seventy feet above the ground a shadow slowly circled the area for several minutes. It resembled a prehistoric predator stalking its prey.

For a long time, Darryl stared at the shape. “What a large bird!” he joked.

The concierge stepped up behind him, straightening his tie.

“If you take a closer look, the large bird is actually a hang-glider. You can plainly see there are two people hanging from underneath. One is a young woman, the other, is a young man.”

Darryl focused his gaze on the descending craft. “My daughter is up there. What on blue blazers is she up to?”

The hang-glider slowly rose in an updraft before disappearing out of sight.

Darryl pointed in the direction of the beach. “The oversized kite is heading for the water; sons, let’s go retrieve your sister.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

AFTER A perfect landing on the beach Anneli and Wade climbed out from under the hang-glider. Boats had been dumped on top of other boats. All were expensive toys for the rich millionaires who came to Darwin for a warm Christmas. Cars were thrown through the air by the strength of the wind. Some were parked haphazardly, either on their roofs or stacked three high against building walls. Glass fragments, bricks, and the odd half-a-house littered the sand. Wooden pylons were the only thing remaining of the jetty. Debris littered the surface of the water. The buildings butting up against the sand were nothing more than rubble. Wherever Wade and Anneli looked the scene appeared to be the same.

Wade and Anneli walked around Charlotte studying every square inch of the hull.

“The yacht seems to have come through the cyclone healthier than most of the other seagoing vessels,” stated Anneli.

“Yes, Charlotte seems fine,” replied Wade. “From this angle, she doesn’t appear to have any holes.”

“We won’t know how the port side is till she’s upright in the water. The whole side is buried under the sand,” blurted Anneli, pointing. “It might have been ripped away when the cyclone dumped her high out of the water.”

“I’ll go take a look inside,” said Wade.

Walking along the deck proved difficult. Charlotte lay on her side at a sixty-degree angle. He leaned against the deck and walked along the cross beam to get to the storm shutter. Reaching down Wade easily opened the trap door. He scurried down the stairwell by sliding down the edge of the steps on his stomach. Wade commando crawled along the entire wall looking for any cracks in the hull. He detected none. On the way out he spied the fridge door. By some miracle, it remained closed. He slid over, swiping four small bottles off the middle shelf. Two were water and two were pink champagne. He grabbed a few bananas from out of the small cupboard. Dropping the lot into a small plastic bag, he slid back out the way he came.

After unscrewing the lid of a water bottle Anneli drank the entire contents in one breath. “Now this is a memorable Christmas lunch.” She hurriedly peeled a banana, biting it in half. Pink champagne helped to wash it down.

Wade chuckled at her comical look.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“You don’t strike me to be a rich man’s daughter.”

“I am and don’t you forget it,” she warned, wagging her finger under his nose. “Mind you the exact second my father hears about all this he’ll be hopping mad. At the very least he’ll know I’m serious about wanting to choose my own destiny. At a guess, he’ll never want to talk to me again.”

“I never argue with a woman,” blurted Wade seriously.

“You’re off to a good start for a lasting relationship.”

Wade and Anneli sat on the sand laughing at the thought. They chuckled at nothing when there wasn’t anything left to laugh about. Staring lustfully into each other’s eyes they sensed love starting to mushroom. Neither Wade nor Anneli wanted to hinder the prospect.

Wade eventually slapped Anneli gently on the knee. “If we want to set sail for Melbourne, we have plenty of work to do.”

“How can we even start to think about getting Charlotte back in the water she’s stuck high and dry? We’ll need a crane to lift her.”

“For everything, there is a solution.”

“Now there’s philosophical jargon at its best. Tell me Wade Mackenzie have you ever found yourself in a problem you don’t know the answer to?”

“Once or twice,” he confessed. “I want to believe there’s always a way out of any mess.”

“I hope I’m not around to see the day when you are stuck for a solution.”

Wade climbed back onto the deck of the yacht. He returned holding a shovel. Jumping onto

the sand, he walked to the center of the yacht and commenced to dig the sand out from around the keel.

Anneli joined in. They dug fast. Wade used his hands, Anneli used the shovel. Soon the yacht looked ready to be tilted straight.

Wade called a halt to the process.

“Before we go any further we have to turn Charlotte around. When she faces the water it’ll be a simple matter of getting her deep enough to float.”

“How can we accomplish such a feat?” questioned Anneli. After downing the shovel by driving the metal blade into the sand she pushed her hands onto her hips. “I don’t think our combined strength will be able to get the yacht to the water let alone move her.”

“Trust me,” teased Wade, brushing the sand from her shoulders.

Anneli wore a puzzled expression. “This will be interesting.”

“There is a small detail I believe needs to be addressed,” advised Wade. “You have two options. One, you can go in search of a car tyre. The larger and heavier the better, or two, you can dig a trench all the way to the water.”

Anneli rolled her eyes. “I’ll go look for a tyre.”

“If you discover an extra long length of rope during your search my shopping list will be complete,” hinted Wade.

Easily remembering the shopping list, Anneli waltzed off wagging her behind at Wade. She knew he had stopped digging to watch her walk off. She hammed it up by increasing her waddle.

The love game appeared to be picking up speed.

Anneli carefully walked about the debris in her search for the tyre. She didn’t have any idea how the item might help float Charlotte, however, she decided to trust Wade’s judgment.

The air felt stifling due to the rising humidity. Pulling up the tracksuit sleeves Anneli’s face and arms were glistening from sweat. She came across what remained of a small metal structure. It resembled an oversized shed. Half a sign hung vertically over the crushed front door. Strong winds had pushed a half cabin run-a-bout boat into the roller door, smashing it. Anneli looked inside the boat. Soaking wet clothes of various styles and colours littered the floor.

“Hello, is anyone onboard?”

Pulling herself up and over the side, Anneli shimmied along the bottom of the boat to the half cabin. The small closed door guarding the room behind it hung by a single hinge. Stepping up to the door, she squatted.

“Hello, is anyone in need of assistance?”

Hearing no reply she stepped through the gap.

A low cupboard boasted a neat pile of dry clothes sitting on the only shelf. Anneli lifted a pair of denim shorts to eye-level. Deciding she needed to change her clothes, Anneli discarded the oversized tracksuit, slipping into the shorts. The air inside the half cabin felt like a sauna room, making the transition into the shorts a slow tedious job. Her long thin legs seemed to stick to the garments. The moment she finished squeezing into the shorts she pulled the end of the black leather belt to the inside hole and clipped the oversized buckle closed. The hem of a pink button up shirt caught her eye when she started to walk back out of the boat. She decided in a heartbeat she needed

it.

Anneli slipped out of the boat the same way she entered then walked towards the oversized tin shed. A closer inspection of the vertical sign made it clear the shed used to be the local garage. Skipping up to the narrow twisted door, Anneli yanked the metal away. She stepped through the gap and entered the mechanic's workshop.

Sunlight streaming in from the broken skylight showed dust hovered in the air over the entire area, making breathing difficult.

Along the entire length of the tin wall, there were seven cars in various stages of repair. Using her hand to cover her mouth, Anneli walked about the workshop. In the far corner near an old Mercedes sedan, she found what Wade asked her to find. Old tyres on rims filled a long rack. Various lengths of rope expertly wound hung from hooks on one end of the rack. Anneli swiped up what appeared to be a brand new extra long white rope from a hook, slinging it over her shoulder. She dragged the largest old tyre on a rim from the rack. She deduced it probably came from the truck at the far side of the shed. A long boat had smashed through the window and landed on the bonnet. Walking back to the door, movement caught her eye. She stopped the tyre from rolling. For over thirty seconds she stared at the place where she thought the movement came from.

"This garage is giving me the creeps," she whispered. "I must have seen a mouse or a cat." Before being fully convinced, the object moved again. "It's definitely not a mouse," she screamed.

"Is someone there? Please, I won't hurt you. I need you to help me. I'm pinned under the front of the truck."

Anneli fought the fear rising up inside her. "Who are you?"

"I'm Eric the local mechanic. Please, I don't care what you take, I only need help."

"I'm not sure how I can help you."

"I need you to come over here to lift the truck up. My leg is pinned."

"How do I know you're telling me the truth?"

"Please, you have to believe me. I've been stuck in this position for over an hour."

"You do sound sincere," called Anneli, not sure of what to make of the whole, 'please help me, I'm trapped scenario.'"

"I am sincere."

"You might be a good actor?"

"At the moment I wish I were. I promise you I'm only the local mechanic. What's your name? Are you alone?"

"Yes, I'm alone. My name is Anneli. I also think coming over is not a good idea."

"I can understand your plight. At the very least, please go find someone who can help."

Anneli quickly weighed her options, deciding Eric, the so-called local mechanic sounded genuine. She placed the length of rope on the floor, leaned the wheel against the wall of the shed and ventured over to the truck, swiping a metal bar the same length as a baseball bat from the floor.

"Where exactly are you?" she called.

Eric started to cough from the dust. He raised his hand.

"I'm at the front of the truck."

Anneli skirted around to the back of the truck, looking underneath. Breathing became more

difficult the closer her head got to the floor. She could feel dust starting to clog her throat. Anneli inhaled through her cupped hand. She'd been in training for at least twelve months to extend the amount of time she could hold her breath. The diving instructor who taught the class of four suggested it. Anneli vividly remembered the man's ice cold baritone voice. His words were well cemented into her memory. 'You never know when it might come in handy. If practicing the art only saves you once in your life it is well worth it.' Every day she forced her lungs to be fully inflated. Six months of training saw her being able to hold her breath for at least fifty-five seconds. A slow exhale gave her ten more. Anneli gave a school girl grin at being told she was the best in the class.

"Are you nearly at the front of the truck?" coughed Eric.

"Yes, I am." Anneli dropped the metal bar, sprinting over. She knelt in the dust smiling warmly at the trapped man. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," answered the man. "Don't you worry I've no broken bones. My pants are the only part pinned."

"How can I help?"

"I need you to find another car jack so you can lift the front of the truck. I don't need much room to free myself. Please hurry."

Anneli began searching the immediate area. "Why were you working on Christmas day?" she called, lifting the trunk of the closest car.

"I wasn't. I left my wife's present in the office. I dived under the truck when the cyclone hit. My wife will be so worried. Don't get me wrong, I love her dearly for the emotion. We were going to be in Sydney for Christmas dinner. We were scheduled to fly out at 1:45pm. My daughter, who hasn't talked to me or my wife in over ten years, invited us to stay for a few days. I think any reconciliation between us might have been lost."

Anneli momentarily stopped searching. She walked over, placing her hand on Eric's shoulder.

"I'll do what I can to get you to Sydney. I promise I'll come back carrying a car Jack."

Walking off towards the office, her eyes scoured every piece of debris in the workshop. Spying a large car not far from the truck, Anneli sprinted over. Disappointment surged through her body. The Jack she found had been used to prop up the old Mercedes. The cyclone saw to it the car moved, bringing it down hard on the jack. Anneli needed something to use as a fulcrum and a pivot point. The iron bar she dropped needed to be longer; much longer.

Anneli resumed her search. Finding a crowbar at least six feet long lying on the floor close to the office door put a smile on her face. Swiping the crowbar off the floor, she sprinted back towards the Mercedes. Close to the car she found a diff covered in dirt.

'Obviously, it must have been the next job,' she thought.

Anneli pushed the diff towards the car and jammed the crowbar under the side of the Mercedes. The old Merc lifted when she used her weight to push down on her end of the bar, freeing the car jack. The only problem, to reach the hydraulic jack, she needed help.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

WADE FINALLY finished digging the trench from Charlotte to the waterline. He stopped when the sea covered his knees. Searching the shoreline, he hoped to see Anneli sitting back watching him. Failing to see her, he walked out of the water, leaned the shovel against Charlotte and started to search the rubble.

Five minutes ticked off before Wade came across the mechanic's shed. Still marching up to the door he spied a tanned leg and the torso of a woman starting to slip through the narrow splinter of a gap. Leaning on the boat which crushed the roller door, Wade waited patiently for Anneli to emerge into the sunshine.

"I wondered where you got to," he quizzed, bursting into a grin. "I see you've changed your clothes."

"Wade, you're just the person I need."

"Nice outfit," he continued.

"Be serious."

"I am. I love the shorts. I especially love the legs which are in the shorts."

"If you're thinking along the lines of: did I go shopping or not, I didn't."

"The thought never entered my mind."

"I came across the clothes when I investigated the inside of the boat you're leaning against."

"Did you happen to find a rope or an old tyre?"

"They're both in the shed. I also found a trapped man. He asked for my help. I need you to help me so Eric can get to his daughter's place; at least for new years."

"Lead on," insisted Wade, quickly.

The tone of voice put Anneli at ease. For a few moments, she pondered the question; what it might actually take for him to lose his cool.

The two stepped into the interior of the large, hot, dust-filled shed.

"I can feel why you changed your clothes," commented Wade. "It's a sauna in here."

"It sure is," replied Anneli, pointing at the tyre and the rope.

"Excellent find," stated Wade stopping to view the shopping list.

"Thank you."

"What do you need me to do?" he asked trotting over to where Anneli stood.

"I can lift the side of the Mercedes I just can't pull the hydraulic jack out at the same time."

Wade pushed down on the long crowbar. The car lifted slightly. Anneli quickly pulled the car jack out.

"This way," Anneli announced, dragging the jack across the floor in the direction of the truck. "Eric, I found some help. We'll have you out in a flash," she called.

"Thank you missy; a thousand times I thank you," he croaked.

Wade placed the car jack under the side of the truck, pumping the handle. The truck lifted. Eric slipped his leg from under the truck and jumped to his feet.

"There's no way I could get my leg free. The weight of the truck had a good grip on my

overalls. I'm too old to rip my clothes. I tried at least a dozen times. I couldn't even make a start."

"Sir, I'm Wade Mackenzie," he said pushing his hand out. "It wasn't a hassle coming to help. I'm sure your daughter and wife will understand the long delay. Do you require any further assistance?"

"None thanks." Eric shook Anneli's hand then Wade's. "Your wife is in need of the tyre and the rope. Take them as a thank you. Beyond everything, have a nice long life together."

"Anneli's not my wife," mumbled Wade.

Eric pouted. "She should be. Brave and strong she is." He slapped Wade on the shoulder. "Come on, let's get out of here. It's getting hard to breathe."

Eric led the way to the door. After shaking Anneli's and Wade's hand for the second time, he walked off in the opposite direction.

"Nice man," said Anneli.

"Yes, he is. Come on, we have work to do."

Wade carried the tyre to the yacht. Anneli carried the rope. Holding onto her end of the rope Wade took hold of the other. Snatching the shovel up, he rolled the tyre towards the shoreline at ninety degrees from Charlotte's bow. Anneli watched Wade start to dig a deep hole in the sand.

Dropping her end of the rope Anneli marched over. "I can't follow what you're attempting."

"You're about to see." Wade tied his end of the rope to the tyre and buried it in the sand. "If this works we'll be home free." He walked back to Charlotte, clambering aboard. He tied the other end of the rope to the twenty feet of anchor chain. Flicking on a toggle switch the anchor winch started to rotate. Not only did the yacht right herself the buried tyre started to drag Charlotte slowly towards the sea.

When Anneli saw the tyre being pulled out of the sand she sprinted over, standing on the exposed rubber.

Eventually, Wade stopped the winch by hitting the neutral button. When water lapped at Charlotte's keel he pulled the entire length of rope, including the original chain out to its stop and repeated the performance after digging a hole in waist deep water.

"It won't be long now before Charlotte is free of the sand. When she's floating we'll be able to hoist her sails," instructed Wade.

Anneli grinned at the news. After helping her onto the yacht, Wade marched ahead to stand on the tyre. Anneli flicked the switch to start the winch. The machine whirred. Charlotte began to move. Soon water licked the side of the hull. In less than a minute, she started floating sideways.

Wade started waving his arms in the air. "Victory," he yelled.

Anneli nodded. Her long black hair glistened in the warm sunshine. The dying wind from the cyclone sent a shiver down her back. Finally, she felt like she belonged to something extra special. Anneli lived in hope the feeling will last her entire life. She studied her hero. How she longed to believe he wanted her in his life for the remainder of his days. Her future looked perfect. There'd be no more influence from her stepfather.

Wade dived under the surface of the water, pulling the half-buried tyre from under the sand. Anneli pushed the button which extended the dive ladder to the waterline allowing Wade to climb aboard. Anneli flicked the winch switch to neutral, bounded over the deck to look Wade in the eyes.

He wrapped his arms around Anneli, lifting her into the air.

Another monstrous kiss helped them celebrate the victorious moment.

The tyre and rope were quickly gathered. Wade slung the rope over his shoulder and carried the tyre back towards Eric's garage.

On the return trip, five men stepped over the rubble. They jumped down onto the sand watching Wade walk back towards the yacht. Anneli saw the men approaching. Her young feminine facial features were instantly swept away, replaced by a cold murderous expression.

"Hey," yelled one of the men. "Stay right where you are."

Standing in ankle deep water, Wade froze in mid-step. He turned to face the voice. He didn't think much of the hostile tone. He knew the meeting might actually end in disaster.

Anneli jumped into the water, sprinting over to stand next to Wade.

The group marched in unison down to the water's edge. Each man looked ready for a fight.

"Anneli, I've been concerned for your safety," snarled the eldest male. He stood two steps in front of the other four.

Quickly summing up the five men, Wade decided they were the same ones who ambushed him in the park.

"Father, I'm not injured," yelled Anneli.

"Good to hear. I trust this young man has looked after you well?"

"Maybe too well," snarled one of the four men.

"Quiet in the back stalls," cursed Anneli's stepfather.

"I take it you forgot your gun."

Eyeballing Wade, the man stepped closer. The water started lapping the soles of his shiny black shoes.

"I don't need a gun to get what I want."

Wade came across the same type of men too many times before to be nervous by his attitude. In regards to the men standing behind him, he knew Anneli's stepfather had the power over them. They'd do exactly what they were told. Wade held out his hand to taunt the man into action. He wanted to find out exactly what made the man tick.

"I'm Wade Mackenzie."

"I don't care for your name. I don't care to shake your hand."

Retracting his hand, Wade frowned at the man.

"What's the look for?"

"We met in the park. You were carrying a gun. The men at the back wanted to ruffle my clothes."

Anneli switched her gaze between Wade and her stepfather, wincing slightly at the stand-off.

Wade glanced at the four men standing at the rear through squinted eyes before focusing on Anneli's stepfather. "How are your ribs?"

The four men stood their ground, snarling.

The man in the foreground didn't look at all pleased. He raised his hand, slipping it inside his jacket.

“Don’t,” Wade growled. “If you’re hiding a gun, be advised it should remain hidden.”  
Curling his fists he stepped closer, staring the man down.

“I will have it known my name is Darryl.”

“I know exactly who you are,” barked Wade.

“Before you rudely interrupted me, I’m Anneli’s father. I loathe your defiant nature. I also detest you.”

“You’re my stepfather,” Anneli yelled.

“Yes, you’re right, I stand corrected. Needless to say, your brothers will escort you safely aboard my ship.”

“The young lady isn’t going anywhere.”

Darryl pointed his index finger at Wade. “You have no choice at the crux of this gathering.”

“This so-called gathering is over. Anneli has decided to stay,” advised Wade, folding his arms across his chest.

“We’ll see. Anneli, it is time to go.”

“The only place I’m going is where Wade wants to take me.”

“You’ll do what you are told.”

“No.”

The four young men standing behind Darryl stepped forward.

“Sons, stay where you are,” he growled.

Wade stepped slightly in front of Anneli. He wanted to make it known he definitely didn’t fear the man.

“I’m sure Anneli is old enough to make up her own mind in such matters.”

“You’re either a cop or a lawyer. Which one is correct?” snorted Darryl.

In a heartbeat, Wade decided on an answer. “It’s for me to know. You will never hear the answer from me.” He stepped closer, looking directly into the man’s eyes. “I despise the way you’re stating your business. Put your fangs back into your mouth. I’m sure we can discuss this rationally, perhaps even calmly.”

“You are no gentleman,” spat Darryl.

“I believe our conversation has come to a close,” Wade informed keeping his voice calm. The way he glared at the man he looked far worse than cyclone Tracy. “If you don’t leave the beach immediately I will take further action.”

“Meaning?” jeered Darryl.

“Take some advice don’t stick around to find out.”

“I don’t take threats lightly. Boys, show Mr. Wade Mackenzie some good old-fashioned manners.”

Darryl’s sons clenched their fists. They quickly marched closer. Anneli yelled at the top of her voice.

“Don’t bother to fight. No matter the outcome I’m leaving Darwin onboard Charlotte.”

Darryl pointed directly at his daughter. “I don’t care what you think. You will do what I say.”

Wade raised his fists. He’d entertained the worse characters imaginable. Murderers topped

the endless list. Anneli's four brothers reminded him of the last murderer he interviewed. The man stayed calm, friendly; even well mannered. Reassuring the guard he'd be okay, Wade insisted the man step outside the room. The moment they were alone the big man launched himself straight at Wade. His hands were around his neck squeezing his spirit out of him before he knew what happened. Wade managed to jab him hard in the ribs. He heard a crack before the big man retreated. The scuffle lasted no longer than five seconds.

The four young men standing behind Darryl didn't look professional. If they insisted on the fight Wade felt more than confident of another quick win. He set himself in an attack stance, eyeballing the men one at a time. In five seconds he decided in which order the men will eat sand. The one on the left will be first followed by the one on the right. He felt positive the two in the middle were the weakest and the most nervous. They'd be third and fourth on the list. Darryl will be the last one standing. He'd receive the all his attention.

The fight lasted three seconds.

The young men were trying to stand on the soft sand when Wade turned his attention to Anneli's stepfather. He was reaching out to grab hold of Anneli's collar. Wade clipped him behind the ear. When the man turned around Wade's fist hit the bridge of his nose. The man went down. Wade didn't stick around long enough for a second round. Besides, Wade had accomplished what he set out to do by stating his intentions.

Grabbing Anneli by the hand, they sprinted into the water towards Charlotte. They hurriedly climbed the aluminum dive ladder. Wade pushed the switch, retracting the ladder. Running towards the bridge the moment he stepped through the doorway Wade started the engine. He eased the yacht towards deeper water while the five men pounded their fists into the air.

"Thanks for rescuing me," puffed Anneli throwing her arm over her hero's shoulder.

"Not a problem," replied Wade.

Anneli watched the distance to Darryl widen, shrinking him and her brothers by the second. The open water looked relatively calm. Wade cut the engine, walked over to the main sail and started unclipping the canvas.

"Is there something I can do?" asked Anneli walking over.

Wade pointed to the handle at the base of the mast. "You can start winding."

Anneli began to turn the handle in a clockwise direction. The main sail started to lift. Immediately the breeze filled the canvas. The boat slowly picked up speed, easily slicing through the small waves.

Wade tied off the sail after it reached the top pulley. Returning to the bridge he gripped the navigational wheel, lost in his thoughts. He didn't hear Anneli step up behind him nor did he feel her place a hand on his shoulder. She stood on her toes, leaned slightly forward to whisper in his ear.

"There's no need to apologize. Darryl deserved it. My brothers are just as bad."

"How did you know what I was thinking?"

"A while ago you confessed how you know what people are thinking by any slight movements they make. I don't need the talent. I know due to the fact I am a woman."

Wade grinned at her confident expression. "Your father strikes me to be a man who doesn't

give up too easily.”

“He doesn’t. I’m sure by now he’ll be working on a way to follow us. Wade, I don’t care for his ideas. I’m my own person. It’s the way I’m determined to stay. There’s one vitally important piece of information you must always remember about my family. Darryl is only my stepfather.”

“I’ll remember the fact. What happened to your biological father?”

“He’d been a soldier; deployed to Vietnam. He died. Please, don’t say another word on the subject.”

Wade returned a silent signal stating. ‘I respect your wishes.’ He tethered the wheel in place using two short pieces of rope to hooks screwed into the dash. He took Anneli by the hand and led her outside.

“Why are we going outside?” she asked.

“We need to check the weather.”

The sunshine felt warm. The sea looked crystal clear and inviting. Wade walked to the amidships. Reaching out he pushed the button to activate the aluminum dive ladder. He watched it slide into the water up to the bottom rung. Sidestepping, he lowered the main sail. Glancing around the deck Wade expected Anneli to be standing by his side. Feeling slightly puzzled over her vanishing act he got ready to call out when she appeared on deck dressed in a towel.

Wade swallowed the lump in his throat. The whole time the pair looked at each other he wondered what she wore underneath the towel.

“The moment you lowered the dive ladder I thought you might have been thinking of a swim?” confessed Anneli, a mischievous expression plastered on her face.

“Yes,” he stammered. “Care to accompany me in a swim?”

“I’d love to. There’s only one problem I didn’t bring a bathing costume. I thought this big old towel might suffice.”

Wade’s Adam’s apple bobbed violently for the second time when he tried to swallow another lump in his throat.

“Wade boy, you look slightly embarrassed,” taunted Anneli. “I’m not an expert on what people are thinking. At a guess, I believe you’re wondering what I might be wearing under this towel.”

“The thought has stuck in my consciousness.”

Anneli waltzed over to the dive ladder. Looking over her shoulder a seductive expression swept her face.

She winked at the man staring at her.

“Come on, the last one in gets to cook dinner.”

She dropped her towel on the deck and dived overboard.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DARRYL COLLECTED his sons before running back up the beach. At the edge of the rubble, he turned to face the ocean. He spat at the disappearing yacht. Her mainsail looked to be already full of wind. Soon she'd be picking up speed. Shortly after, the yacht will be out of sight.

"Any guesses where the ship might be going?"

Darryl glared at his eldest son through murderous eyes. "How could I know the destination?"

The man shrugged. "What are you going to say to Drake Campbell when he asks where Anneli is? They're supposed to meet in four hours."

Darryl glanced back at the ocean. The yacht now appeared only as a white speck on the horizon. He slowly nodded.

"We won't be here."

Dirk side stepped so he could join in on the conversation. "If we're not here, where will we be?"

"We will be out there on the ocean, hunting a yacht. At a guess, the vessel in question is heading for Melbourne."

The five sprinted over the rubble. They circled around to the rear of the mechanic's shed before running down the road. They jogged past upturned cars and skirted around many ruptured gas lines and closed in on what remained of the hotel. They spied Meredith sitting at a table sunning her tanned body in the warm sun sipping a Margarita. Two empty wine glasses were on her left.

"Meredith, follow us," called Darryl.

Instead of standing, Meredith remained seated. She waited for their shadows to cover her face before talking.

"What's wrong?" she asked, slurring her words.

"What's wrong?" puffed Dirk. "I'll tell you what's wrong. Your sister and the bloke, what's his name have done a runner and are ocean bound."

None of the men noticed Meredith's fox like smirk. She swallowed the remainder of her Margarita she insisted the chef make her before bringing up the rear of the group as they marched for the wayward side of the lagoon.

Darryl waved at the man in charge of the small craft coming in from his ship.

"I want to be taken out to my ship right now," he barked.

"Yes Sir," replied the young man. "Mr. Vandenberg in case you were wondering where your ship went, I did wait until the last second hoping you'd show before ordering the vessel to be moved out to deeper water. I'm glad you made it through the cyclone."

Darryl slapped the man on the shoulder. "Thanks for caring." He beckoned the others to climb into the run-a-bout. Shaking his head at Meredith, he spat. "If you don't hurry we'll leave you behind."

Dirk only just managed to pull her into the boat when the motor revved.

The small craft motored away from the sand at speed. The sea rapidly calmed helping the

craft to make quick progress. In a shade under nine minutes Darryl could be seen climbing up the ladder of his ship. The moment his feet touched the deck he bailed up the Captain giving him instructions to head back to Melbourne.

The Captain stood at attention shaking his head at the orders.

Darryl marched towards the bridge. "Weigh anchor. I want my ship moving."

"If I may take a minute to explain our dilemma," began the Captain, stepping onto the bridge.

"I don't want to hear a word against my proposal. I want my ship moving right now." Darryl spat his words through a locked jaw.

"There are a couple of small matters which supersedes what you want," answered the Captain provocatively.

Pacing the floor Darryl wore a look of thunder. He suddenly stopped and grabbed hold of the Captain's starched white shirt.

"I don't pay you to go up against what I want. I think I need to remind you of your job description. Drive my ship. Now, weigh anchor. Every second we delay my daughter who is on the yacht I want to chase is slipping further away."

The captain brushed the fingerprints off his collar, staring at Darryl.

"This ship will be stationary for a further five hours. The cyclone has damaged one engine. The maintenance crew you assigned to this vessel is working frantically to fix the problem. The only other remaining problem is--"

Darryl raised his fist, shoving it at the man's face, interrupting his report.

"I don't care for excuses. There are two engines on my ship; start the other. My daughter is leaving us behind. God only knows what the bloke is capable of doing to her if we don't catch the yacht."

The Captain glanced over his shoulder at the first officer. "Stow the anchor. Start the remaining engine."

"Sir, what should be done about the one remaining problem?"

"You heard my orders. Start the engine."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WADE GLUED his gaze on Anneli. She dropped the towel and dived into the ocean. If she hesitated, he couldn't tell. Smiling, he threw his shirt to the wind. Diving overboard the water felt cool against his hot skin. He swam underwater to Anneli, surfacing in front of her face.

The kiss they shared lasted only a moment.

Slipping his arm around her waist, Wade completed a strong lifesaving backstroke. In seconds, they were touching the side of Charlotte.

Wade didn't wait for Anneli to step onto the deck before climbing the ladder. When he stood next to Anneli he pushed the button to retract the ladder.

"I didn't plan on a quick swim," she blurted, sounding disappointed.

Wade pointed to a five-foot grey nurse shark swimming their way. "He must have picked up on your dive and came over to investigate."

White-faced, Anneli sat on a deck chair looking up at Wade. Goosebumps were surfacing on her arms.

"I didn't think of checking the water."

Wade knelt, rubbing her bare arms. "It's okay. I have a bad habit of checking before I dive into the sea. By the way, you look magnificent in my khaki shorts and an oversized faded green shirt. The black belt adds perfection to your attire."

Anneli slowly leaned forward to see if he'd kiss her. He easily took the bait. Wade didn't know Anneli sat frozen in fear. The tone of her voice quickly rose to fever pitch.

"Wade, behind you, it's too big."

Looking over his shoulder, Wade stared at a giant wave. He'd read about the occurrence in books back in high school. He never dreamt he'd see a wave anywhere so large. The almost vertical wall of water appeared to be dark blue. It seemed to stretch towards the sky forever. The monstrous wave was tearing through the water towards them. They didn't have the time to do anything except dive for cover, praying for the best outcome.

In no time, the wave will hit Charlotte side on. Wade knew the yacht will roll over. Diving overboard to escape the giant rogue wave would be impossible. In a heartbeat he grabbed hold of Anneli's hand, pulling her down the stairs. They were half way down when Charlotte started to roll.

Wade and Anneli dived for the small table. Everything unsecured around them became airborne.

"Hang onto one of the table legs," yelled Wade. "Whatever you do; no matter what happens don't let go. There will be an air pocket after the wave has gone."

Charlotte rolled over three and a half times. Sea water poured into the cabin through the open storm shutter, easily smashing the glass in the port hole closest to the table.

In the time it takes to strike a match the wave hit and rolled away. Charlotte settled heavily upside down in the mill pond calm water. An air pocket no larger than the boot of a car formed exactly as Wade described.

The two prisoners broke surface in the air pocket, inhaling the life-saving oxygen.

"Are you okay?" asked Wade. Stress from the wave hitting Charlotte looked painted on his face.

"I'm fine. You do realize we can't stay in here forever. Once the air has been depleted the air pocket will be replaced by water. How long Charlotte will stay afloat is anyone's guess."

"You're right. We don't have long. Stay here, I'll make sure the way is clear to the outside."

Anneli stood on the underside of the deck. She slowed her breathing to prolong the air bubble. To help pass the time she started to feel for cracks in the hull where they might have to dig their way out. She nearly finished her search when Wade reappeared, his chest heaving from the lack of oxygen.

"I almost didn't make it back," he puffed. "The door to the storm shutter is blocked from the outside. It must be the mast."

"We can't get out?" questioned Anneli, keeping her voice in check.

"Not up the stairs. I apologize for taking too long. I stopped to study the porthole. Seeing how the glass is gone I think you'll be able to squeeze out once I've unscrewed the cover. The only thing you have to do is clear the obstruction and we'll be home free."

Anneli's face fell serious. "What if I can't? You'll be trapped."

Wade put his finger to her lips. "Let's not think about the 'IFS.' Let's focus on the positive side."

Wade beckoned Anneli over to the other side of the yacht. They dived under the water to have another look at the porthole. Wade swam off towards the kitchen. He yanked open the cupboard. In the small tool box on the middle shelf he found what he needed; two Phillip head screwdrivers. Wade and Anneli surfaced. They took a huge breath before diving back under the water. They worked furiously on the screws holding the cover in place. Anneli finished first and immediately started on the second. There were five screws in total. Wade signaled a halt. They surfaced in the middle of the air bubble.

"We were almost finished. Why did you stop?" questioned Anneli.

"For a breather," replied Wade.

"I've been practicing to hold my breath for a lot longer."

"I'm impressed. You might need to put the skill to good use when you're trying to squeeze out of the porthole. Wait here relaxing while I finish the job. When I'm back it'll be your turn." Frowning he took the screwdriver from her hand, pushing it deep into his back pocket. "I want to make sure you relax."

Anneli waited for Wade to finish the job. Slowing her breathing, she saw him pull the cover away, drop it onto the floor before breaking surface next to her.

"Your turn," he said. "You're right about the air. It's starting to turn musty. The pocket has diminished by at least fifty percent."

Anneli gave Wade a nervous kiss. "If for some reason, I don't make it."

Using his index finger, Wade again touched her lips. "What did I say before? I don't want to hear the remainder of the sentence. I'll see you at the top of the stairs."

Anneli dived under the water. In a strange way, she loved the serenity of being submerged. It seemed to have a calming influence. The quiet took her away from the turmoil of her stepfather.

Anneli poked her hand through the porthole to the open ocean. Dread swept her mind. Looking out into the void, she froze. Fear closed in, wrapping her mind in a strong bind.

'Where's the shark?' she thought.

Anneli knew if she didn't somehow conquer the thought she'd drown before even attempting to squeeze through the porthole. The vision of Wade drowning forced her to free her mind of the shark and quickly gripped the side of the porthole.

'You can do this,' she confidently yelled in her mind. 'Swim through the hole; make your way to the stairs and open the trap door. It's an easy thing to do.'

Anneli pushed her arms through the hole. She started to wriggle her shoulders through one

at a time. Both her hips, though narrow, couldn't fit through the hole at the same time. Realizing she couldn't go forward or back, panic again gripped her mind. Drowning or the return of the shark unnerved her. She could hear the sound of her heart beating inside her ears. She stopped wriggling, trying to force herself to relax. Searching the open ocean for a handhold so she could stretch out and help her to wriggle free, Anneli again needed to force the idea of the shark from her mind. Her lungs were now starting to ache. Wade was right she should've relaxed a while longer before attempting to play the hero. She closed her eyes at the realization drowning seemed inevitable.

Anneli's heartbeat started to slow. Even underwater she could feel tears welling up in her eyes. Soon her lungs will need oxygen, signaling the end. In her final moments, her mind churned her thoughts.

'Wade, I'm sorry for letting you down. I'd been too cocky to listen. Our fate is sealed. The sensation of dying is strange. In the seconds leading up to my death, I feel at peace. There's no panic, no bright light, no angel to escort me home; not even the return of the shark to bring the moment of departure from this world into the next, quicker. The only thing I can do is to wait.'

Wade watched from the air bubble. He took a deep breath and dived to see what had stopped Anneli from squeezing through the porthole. A quick study of the water revealed no blood. What he did notice, Anneli's legs looked limp. Panic started to set in. He needed to ignore the feeling if he wanted to save Anneli. He floated just above her hips. Due to the panic trying to take control of his mind he nearly missed the problem. If he didn't work fast Anneli will certainly drown. Already she'd been underwater for at least forty-five seconds. He tried to remember how many seconds she bragged at being able to hold her breath. He couldn't recall the answer. To stop the panic onslaught again he gave himself a massive goal. Fix the problem in two seconds.

Three seconds ticked off before Wade decided what course of action to take. Saving Anneli's life took precedence over any embarrassment he might cause her. He reached out to unbuckle the large belt from around her waist. Quickly pulling the oversized shorts down to her ankles he threw them over his shoulder. Besides her top, the only article of clothing Anneli wore was a pink frilled G string.

He grabbed her ankles, positioned his feet against the table leg and pushed hard.

Anneli's thighs and legs were propelled through the port hole. Wade stuck his head through the hole, watching her rocketing to the surface. He threw his fists up in a victorious salute.

The moment Anneli felt the breeze on her face she opened her mouth to breathe in the fresh air. For over a minute she bobbed on the surface treading water waiting for her lungs to stop aching.

In the warm sunshine, Anneli slowly recollected the final moments.

"At the verge of blackout, I can vaguely remember something gripping my ankles. The next thing I knew my head broke the surface." She chuckled at her raspy whispers.

A stinging sensation on her hip bone forced her to look. Red water hovered around her torso in a growing slick. "Where are my shorts," she managed to rasp. "Oh no, my thigh has been skinned from being pushed through the porthole. The shark; my blood in the water is the ringing of the dinner bell."

The moment her senses were rejuvenated Anneli started back down. She was determined to save Wade. In a heartbeat, she decided he did the right thing to save both their lives. He'd seen

almost all of her. Embarrassment will have to be ignored.

Wade waited for Anneli at the stairs hoping it mightn't be long before the storm shutter opened. The air bubble looked to be no larger than a medium-sized bucket. To save Charlotte the manual pump needed to be started. Soon it will be too late.

Anneli saw the problem before she reached the storm shutter. The plate connecting the boom to the mast looked bent, which in turn pushed the boom against the storm shutter. Volleying her gaze between looking for the shark and the boom she successfully unscrewed the four wing nuts. Bracing her feet on the deck Anneli used her entire strength to try to lift the boom out of the way.

The boom only slightly moved.

Banging on the ocean side of the door forced a grin on Wade's face. Sitting in the submerged cabin waiting for rescue felt un-nerving. For the first time in his life, he felt more than useless. He swam back to the tiny air pocket to inhale what remained of the air.

A dark shape the size of a small car closed in on Charlotte. Wrapping two hands around the boom Anneli froze. Her gaze riveted on the monster. Of all the facts she read about sharks only one stood out; 'if confronted by a shark, don't move. They were attracted to blood and vibration.' She watched the shark's cold emotionless eyes staring at her. The monster opened its mouth showing off rows of razor sharp teeth. Each swish of its tail brought it closer. Anneli quickly thought up a plan of escape. She almost decided to implement the plan when the monster of the deep seemed to lose interest, deciding to swim away. Anneli stood frozen long after it disappeared. She knew if the shark changed its mind it'll be back. She needed to lift the boom well before the dinner bell could be rung a second time.

Anneli's lungs were starting to ache so she decided to ascend towards the surface to take a few moments to plan her next wave of attack. She inhaled, filling her lungs to capacity before heading back to the blocked storm shutter. Using two hands she gripped the boom and planted her feet firmly on Charlotte's deck. Standing upside down she pulled on the boom, willing it to move. Using all her strength a small amount of air escaped her lungs.

The boom lifted off the door.

Wade's head, torso, and legs squeezed through the gap. Before he could dart for the surface he spied the shark's return. Wade pulled the screwdriver from his back pocket to ready himself for the attack. The shark came in for a bite. Wade lashed out, stabbing it in the gills. The grey monster swam away leaving a trail of red in its wake.

Anneli and Wade bolted for the surface.

"Great timing," he puffed. "I'd used all the air in the bubble."

Anneli's cheeks turned red. Wade quickly reacted to the reason for her embarrassment.

"Here, I have a present. I believe these are your shorts. I'll set to work righting Charlotte." He gave Anneli a long loving kiss before diving back under the water towards the wheelhouse.

Wade located the manual ballast pump. He quickly set to work untying the handle. Next, he selected one of two small wheels the size of a doorknob. He wound one wheel anti-clockwise, the other he turned clockwise. One ballast tank would be pumped dry while the other will remain full. Pumping the water out of only one of the ballast tanks will force Charlotte to rotate. In time, she'd

be sitting right way up. Wade knew it will be a slow tedious process. The activity could take up to an hour to complete. Somehow he needed to convince Anneli to help. He swam out of the bridge and back to the surface. By the time he took a breath his lungs were at bursting point.

“Wade, you were gone too long. You have to agree with me helping you. I won’t take no for an answer.”

“I didn’t know how to ask.”

“Wade, you know I’m up to it. Show me what to do. Don’t forget I can hold my breath longer than you.”

“I apologize. I forgot. During the last dive, I’ve closed off one ballast tank. The only thing we have to do is pump the water out of the second ballast tank. In theory, Charlotte will right herself.”

“In theory?” echoed Anneli, looking somewhat doubtful.

Wade made a half-hearted shrug. “When I bought Charlotte, the bloke told me in the event the yacht turned upside down the only thing I have to do is what I’m proposing.”

“Let’s hope he wasn’t pulling your chain.”

Wade raised his eyebrows before diving straight down. Leading the way back to the manual pump situated on the wall of the cabin, he showed Anneli what needed to be done.

She first needed to anchor herself to the wheel of the yacht before commencing to pump the metal arm up and down. No mean feat upside down in ten feet of water. Wade completed five pumps before shooting back to the surface. He floated on the calm sea about seventy-five miles off the Australian coast. His lungs were constantly aching from holding his breath too often. He felt positive Anneli will be feeling the same.

Opening his eyes to the sunlight, a look of terror gripped his soul. Anneli had been down far too long. Could she be trapped and on the verge of drowning again, or could there be another shark blocking her ascent? Wade dived. He tore through the water and into the bridge, nearly bowling Anneli over. He reached out, grabbing her arm. In his panic, he pointed to the surface. She resisted by giving him a look which read.

‘I’m fine, so do not interrupt.’

The corners of Anneli’s mouth curled slightly upwards when she re-commenced her pumping of the manual ballast arm. She completed several more pumps before ascending to the surface. Wade followed her up. He held out his hand to support her back while she floated in the warming sun.

“Wade, I’m fine.”

“How can you stay down so long?”

“I’ve explained it already; practice.”

“I should follow your lead.”

Anneli chuckled between breaths. She didn’t want to let on she was on the verge of blackout. Counting inside her head she passed her personal best of sixty-five seconds when she broke surface. The way things were looking she doubted whether either of them would have enough strength to keep going for an indefinite period of time.

On his fourth dive, Wade noticed Charlotte starting to list. The main mast sat at a forty-five-

degree angle. The discovery gave him a renewed zest. He surfaced as Anneli dived. Wade estimated in thirty minutes Charlotte might be sitting right-way-up. Even though the yacht would be sitting at sea level they could rest before he opened the second ballast tank. A short time later he'd raise the sail then they'd be on their way.

Anneli surfaced. A gleam shot from her eyes. "Charlotte's on her way up."

"She sure is," replied Wade.

Seven more dives each saw the mast vertical. The two swam to the side of the boat and sat on the deck in waist deep water.

"It feels good to take a break," confessed Wade.

"It sure does," replied Anneli, sitting next to him staring up at the sky.

Wade slowly walked over to the bridge, opened the second ballast tank and commenced to pump the handle.

In minutes, Charlotte's deck appeared out of the water. Four feet of air now separated the deck to the surface of the sea.

"Let's go below to view the damage," insisted Anneli. She took hold of Wade's hand to lead the way down. Stepping off the bottom stair, she stood in a pool of water. Immediately she started to sob quietly.

"It's okay," whispered Wade, cuddling her. "It won't be long before Charlotte will look new again. The only thing she needs is a small amount of elbow grease."

"I know she will. This yacht kind of tugs at your heart strings. I don't want to see anything bad happen to her."

After opening two portholes, Wade started to search for two empty plastic buckets. He found them under the kitchen bench in a cupboard.

"The former owner of the yacht happened to be one hundred percent correct about how to right the yacht," remarked Anneli, sitting in the water. She leaned against the side of the yacht pretending Charlotte was a large bath.

"Almost correct," hinted Wade. "The bloke who told me the tale built this fine yacht."

Anneli's eyebrows shot up. Wade started searching her face for something. He found it in her eyes. They worked well as a team. The near drowning experience couldn't extinguish the spark of love between them. A new warm wave of emotion swept over him from the top of his head to his feet.

Anneli leaned forward tapping him on the leg. "We have plenty of work to do."

She scooped up a bucket of water. Instead of heaving the sea water out of the porthole she decided Wade needed a shower. She tipped every last drop over his head. Wade closed his eyes, laughing till his jaw ached. He tackled the young woman rugby style. They both came up splattering sea water. They were laughing and coughing at the same time. The spark of love had started to develop into a raging fire.

Anneli enjoyed the moment. Her newly discovered hero turned out to be more than she had ever hoped or dreamed.

A wave of sadness extinguished her thoughts of having Wade by her side for the remainder of her life. She masked it well. The question of how he felt about her started to plague her mind.

Could Wade ever feel the same way she did?

The two started the bailing process. Inside fifteen minutes the carpet fibers poked above the water.

Wade dropped his bucket on the carpet before walking off. He returned carrying a mop to soak up the remaining quarter of an inch of water.

“When we arrive back in Melbourne I’ll organize to have the carpet replaced.”

Anneli sat on the floor thoroughly exhausted. A rogue tear fell from her eye, cascading over her cheek.

Wade knelt. “What’s this?”

“Nothing,” she blurted. Using the back of her hand Anneli wiped the tear away.

“When tears fall from your eyes it means something.”

Anneli glared at Wade before sprinting up the stairs to the deck. She marched to the bow of the yacht to look down through the water, lost in her thoughts. Wade stopped working to climb the stairs. Standing on the deck he hesitated. He wanted nothing more than to walk over. Instead, he decided to wait. At the end of the day, they had nothing except time on their hands. He knew whatever was upsetting Anneli she’d admit it sooner or later.

Anneli slowly squatted, her gaze cemented on the surface of the ocean. Every few seconds she lifted her hand to wipe her eyes. Her quiet sobs helped Wade to decide he should be by her side.

“If I have done anything to upset you please let me know?” he questioned, his voice sounding calm.

Anneli stood, looking solemnly into his eyes. Her tears had given her away. “How I feel has nothing to do with you.”

Wade stepped back. His puzzled look betrayed his sincerity.

“I said everything wrong!”

“It’s okay. I have thick skin.”

Anneli chuckled nervously, crying at the same time. Her sobs grew to be uncontrollable. Wade reached out to cradle her in his arms, showing all the patience which helped to make part of his character.

Anneli lifted her arms to hug him back. She felt ashamed at sobbing. She lifted her head again, looking Wade in the eyes.

“You don’t have to say a word. I think I can have a good guess at what brought forward the emotion.” Using his left hand, Wade gently caressed her cheek. For a long suspenseful moment, he looked lovingly into her red-rimmed eyes. Sweeping her closer he held her tighter in his arms so he could kiss her.

Anneli kissed the man back, rekindling the kiss on the bridge. This time, it felt more intimate; more loving.

Caught up in the heat of the moment, enthralled by each other’s company, they were totally oblivious to the cargo ship heading their way.

Wade kissed Anneli’s cheek before moving his lips so they were hovering over her ear. Lovingly he whispered the three words she so desperately wanted to hear.

“I love you.”

For his three word sentence, Wade received a massive hug around the neck.

“Up to this point, I’ve been waiting to hear those words. It’s the reason why I was crying. I love you too. I doubted whether you felt the same way. Please understand I wanted to be sure.”

“I understand completely,” Wade advised. “I want you to know I’d love to spend the remainder of our lives together.”

A blast from a fog horn directly ahead of Charlotte turned Wade’s head to the left. He stared gob-smacked at the cargo ship bearing down on them. Running to the middle of the bridge, he grabbed hold of the wheel, yanking it down. The wheel partly turned before locking into position.

“We’re not changing course quick enough, what’s wrong?” screamed Anneli.

“The wheel won’t budge. The rudder must be broken. I have to fix it,” blurted Wade starting to panic.

“We don’t have time,” yelled Anneli, staring at the approaching ship.

“There has to be time. When I give you the signal, turn the wheel.”

“What about the engine, will it start?”

“No, there’s too much sea water in the fuel.”

Wade ran to the stern of the yacht and prepared to dive overboard. Anneli watched in horror as he stood staring into the water.

“What’s wrong?”

“The long drag line has snagged the rudder. If I can’t loosen the rope I’ll have to cut it away. Its sole purpose is used in case someone falls overboard. It’s the last line of defense to get back into the boat.”

“Wade, whatever it is you need to do you’ll have to hurry. The ship’s not stopping.”

He gave Anneli an unsettling look. “Under no circumstances come into the water. If you do, there’s no way back. The batteries are dead from being submerged in water. There’s no way of lowering the dive ladder.”

“I fully comprehend what you’re saying.”

Wade dived over the side. Three quick strokes saw him reach for the frame of the rudder. Already he could feel the current trying to prize his fingers away from his only hand-hold. He’d been correct about the rudder being jammed by the safety rope. Wade pushed his head above the waterline.

“Anneli, I need a knife.”

“Okay.” She ran downstairs to the galley. Opening the cutlery drawer she found a steak knife. Sprinting back on deck she spied a short length of rope hanging from the wall of the bridge. She grabbed it before running back to Wade. She looped one end of the rope over a cleat, the other end of the rope she wrapped about the knife then lowered it over the side.

Wade immediately tried to pry the rope free; to no avail. A sudden strong surge of cool water brushed past him making him lose his substantial grip on the rudder. Reaching out in desperation Wade snatched hold of the rope slithering through the water. A moment of panic swept his mind. His knuckles turned white clutching the rope when it started to drag him along at a body’s length from the stern of the yacht. Charlotte was being sucked into the current. Each second he delayed the current will grow stronger making the relatively easy task of freeing the jammed rudder

much harder. If at anytime he lost his grip on the rope, he'd be swept away from Charlotte.

Wade could feel the vibration of the cargo ship tearing through the water towards them. He must be back on deck long before the water around Charlotte turned into washing machine turbulence by the ship's giant propellers. If he wasn't, death might come knocking. Hand over hand he gripped the rope.

Finally, Wade made it back.

Anneli leant further over the side. "Wade, you've been down too long." In a desperate move she banged the side of the yacht.

Wade heard the noise. He couldn't spare the time to look up. He didn't know exactly how many minutes remained before the cargo ship's giant propellers started to churn the water near the yacht. All he knew when it did it'll be impossible to re-tie the rope back together.

Another blast from the cargo ship's giant fog horn sent a shiver down his back. He set to work gathering the rope in one hand only to release it in his other hand while clutching the line still connected to Charlotte. The loop at the end of the fifty-foot length of rope eventually came into view. Grabbing the loop, he cut the rope free of the rudder. He planned to grab hold of the shortened end above the rudder, slip the rope through the loop and tie it off. He'd hang on while Anneli turned Charlotte away from the cargo ship.

Wade could easily accomplish the task on dry land. Underwater in the ever strengthening current, a cargo ship closing fast, the job seemed to be a monumental task.

Using the knife, Wade hacked the snag out of the rudder, finished the job and watched the rope uncoil.

Surfacing, he waved to Anneli. Before she could move a wave created by the turning cargo ship knocked against Charlotte. Anneli overbalanced. Managing to face the wheel house, a second wave larger than the first, slammed against the hull. The third wave to hit Charlotte sent her back-flipping into the water.

Wade watched in horror as Anneli floated away from the yacht. He took little comfort at knowing the cargo ship seemed to be changing direction. If he didn't let go of the drag rope he couldn't catch Anneli. If he let go of the rope they'd be adrift. To get back onto the deck he'd need a miracle. Without the engine working and a broken boom he couldn't turn Charlotte, let alone navigate back through the current to rescue Anneli. A few hours alone in the middle of the ocean might see Anneli eaten by a shark.

Wade acted quickly. His decision must work. Anneli's life depended on him being right.

He let go.

Plowing through the water in a desperate freestyle swim to the exact place he saw Anneli, Wade forced his arms to move faster than he thought possible. Fortunately freestyle just happened to be his favourite swimming stroke back in school. He won every short course event, however it had been a long time. In seconds his shoulders were starting to scream for rest. He pushed the thought behind him. The debate about leaving Anneli in the water to die never eventuated.

Seeing splashing at little closer than what he anticipated helped Wade to move even faster. He'd accept any luck coming his way, no matter how trivial. He didn't have time to waste on idle chatter. He needed to get Anneli back to the rope before he ran out of length.

Through Wade's water swamped eyes, Anneli's form looked a blur. His fingers felt flesh. Wrapping his arms around her shoulders he immediately changed swimming style to lifesaving backstroke, forcing his feet to pound the water. In the distance he thought he saw a black fin surface. A shark must have picked up the frantic vibration.

"Kick, hard, Anneli," he coughed.

Wade felt two feet starting to beat the water. Glancing over his shoulder he saw Charlotte entering the dark water. She seemed to be picking up speed. Wade roughly calculated the distance. Catching sight of the end of the drag rope he realized he must go faster. If they missed their ride the shark would feel their frantic swimming style and decide to investigate further. Wade surmised they wouldn't be in the water long enough to drown.

Wade pressed on. His shoulder cramped so he changed arms.

In a race changing anything usually saw the person losing. Wade never gambled. Above all else he needed to win the race.

Wade closed in on the disappearing rope. The shark closed in on the swimmers. His timing needed to be perfect. Wade decided in a heartbeat how to win. It might be his only chance to pick up speed.

He let go of Anneli, yelling.

"Catch me."

Wade grabbed hold of the rope. He allowed it to slip through his fingers. He watched wide-eyed as the knot he tied at the end came closer. He marveled at how fast it approached his hand. He didn't want to think about the inevitable if his fingers slipped over the knot. He couldn't accept floating in the middle of the ocean, no hope of a rescue, waiting to die from a hungry shark.

"Anneli, stretch out your hand," he called.

She did exactly what Wade told her to do.

He grabbed hold of her wrist. His fingers on his free hand felt the knot at the end of the rope. Using a boxer's fist he clenched the knot.

Wade and Anneli were immediately pulled through the water at speed.

Wade grimaced at the pain of being dragged apart. "After climbing over me, grip the rope. You'll have to hurry, I can't hold on much longer."

Anneli completed the stunt in seconds. Wade waited for her to grip the rope using two hands before twisting the end of the rope around his wrist. He now took the time to search for the shark. Satisfied it decided to swim away to look for an easier dinner, Wade turned his attention to the cargo ship. The massive vessel didn't even bother to send a rescue party.

The gap between them looked to be quickly widening. Soon the ship will be gone.

"Nice swim," whispered Anneli.

"Thanks for the compliment. Let's congratulate each other, after we get back onboard."

"I agree," said Anneli. Looking ahead she added. "Charlotte's stern looks so far away."

"It sure does."

The two started to make their way towards Charlotte. Wade wound the rope around his arm, urging Anneli to keep going. The distance between the stern and the two castaways slowly narrowed. At the halfway point Anneli's speed started slowing. Wade too could feel his strength

being eroded.

“We have to move faster,” croaked Anneli. “The water is getting colder.”

“I can feel it too,” replied Wade.

Determination willed Anneli’s hands to grip the lifesaving rope. Hand over hand she pulled her body ever closer to the yacht, closer and closer, ever closer.

They made slow agonizing progress.

Anneli felt tired beyond belief. Her eyes were closed. Her hands only moved in a robotic action. Out of the blue Anneli’s left hand knocked the frame covering the rudder. Startled at feeling something hard, she opened her eyes. She quickly reached out for a strong hand-hold. They’d finally won the battle to get back to the yacht. Now they needed a miracle to get back on deck.

Although the current felt worse, her miracle came from Wade. He untwisted the entire length of rope before winding a section closest to Charlotte around Anneli’s wrist. For a while she could relax to regain her strength.

“Wade, how are we going to get back onboard? The short piece of rope I attached to the knife doesn’t look strong enough to hold you or me.”

“I’ll climb aboard.” He wrapped the end of the main rope about his wrist and proceeded to tie a knot in the rope two feet above Anneli’s wrist.

“Hang on for a little longer, I’ll pull you up.” Wade winked at her before using the knot for a good foothold in which his feet could push against.

Anneli watched Wade’s entire body hover above the water line. He groped for the top edge of the wall. In one massive push off he dived over the side.

Anneli didn’t have time to feel isolated before Wade’s head appeared over the side. He yanked on the rope, hauling in the catch of the day; one gorgeous mermaid.

“Welcome aboard,” boasted Wade triumphantly.

“Thank you.” Anneli flopped onto the deck, staring at Wade through slits.

Both lay on the deck hugging each other in a loving embrace. For a long time they stared at each other too tired to move.

Eventually Anneli whispered. “About now is the time the hero is supposed to kiss the woman.”

She barely finished the last letter of the sentence before Wade started to kiss her.

Finally, they were safe.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“DARRYL I have spotted a vessel on the edge of the radar.”

The man speaking wore a white sailor’s uniform. His eyes were glued to the round glass indicator he sat in front of.

Darryl sprinted across the large bridge of his ship, sweeping one of his sons from his path. He leaned closer to the radar, slapping the man on the shoulder. "Good work. Change course ten degrees to intercept. It must be Anneli."

"The blip could be any number of ships," reported the young man. "If you study the radar there are two blips on the same wave. If they didn't collide, they were close enough to hand each other the daily mail."

"You could be right. I'm a betting man. The odds are in my favour one of those blips holds my daughter. The quicker we intercept the sooner I will know."

Watching the blip for three hours took a strain on Darryl's nerves. He retired to the lounge area deep inside the belly of the super yacht.

One of his crew came looking for him. He found Darryl staring out of the porthole scanning the calm ocean. A pod of dolphins was the only thing he'd seen in over an hour.

"Excuse me, Sir I have an urgent message from the Captain."

Darryl faced the man. "Don't stand before me like a statue, spit out the message."

"The Captain has asked me to escort you to the bridge."

"Why, have we intercepted the yacht where my daughter is being held a prisoner?"

"Not yet."

"Go away. Call me when we arrive." He faced the window before swallowing the red liquid in the wine glass he'd been holding.

"Sir, the Captain insists on talking to you."

Darryl clicked his tongue at the young man before climbing the stairs to the bridge. The moment he spied the Captain he blurted. "This needs to be good news."

"We have to cut the engine or call into port for more fuel."

Darryl slammed the wine glass onto the chart table spilling the red liquid.

"We're not stopping. How close are we to the yacht?"

"If the blip on the radar is the yacht your daughter is on she's about one hour from our present location."

"Order my ship to move faster," spat Darryl.

"We don't have enough fuel. If we're lucky we might just make it to the blip we're chasing. Once the tanks are dry we'll be adrift and at the full mercy of the wind not to mention the currents."

Darryl threw his wine glass at the wall before pacing the bridge.

"Why didn't you inform me of this predicament before we got underway?"

"I did try to tell you."

The four-man-crew looked up from their assigned duties. Each man stared straight at Darryl wearing a questionable expression.

"What do you propose?"

"Cut the engine to preserve what little fuel we have left; Raise the sails. By doing so, the maintenance men might have the second engine fully operational by the time we arrive at the yacht. If we sail into rough weather we might have to make a dash for land. At any rate we can buy diesel in Sydney. Two engines running at one-hundred percent will help us to easily catch the yacht."

Darryl rubbed the stubble on his chin. "The sails have never been raised on this ship."

“There’s always a first time.”

Darryl eventually lifted his head, staring the Captain in the eyes. “Raise the sails. I want to arrive at the yacht before nightfall.”

The Captain started barking orders. In minutes the speed of the luxurious yacht fell dramatically. The moment the massive sails were hoisted their speed gradually increased. Eventually their speed plateaued at a fraction less than fifteen knots.

“If our speed remains constant we’ll be at the blip this afternoon,” reported the Captain.

“Good, call me when we have arrived,” grumbled Darryl. Marching towards the door he looked over his shoulder at the Captain sitting on a high-backed chair staring out over the calm sea. Darryl snorted before disappearing down the stairs.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WADE AND Anneli picked themselves up to start taking stock of what needed to be done before they could get underway.

Wade stepped away from the handle which helped to lift the main sail. Looking skywards he said.

“I have to fix the broken boom before I climb the mast to replace the pulley at the top.”

“Do you have to climb to the top of the mast?” questioned Anneli.

“Yes. The pulley is jammed. If it’s not replaced we can’t hoist the mainsail. It must have been damaged when Charlotte rolled.” Wade shifted his attention to Anneli. “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. There’s a cleat up there. I’ll don the harness before I start the climb. When I get to the top I’ll clip myself in. The only thing you have to do is help drag the new pulley up the mast.”

Wade marched over to a locked cupboard, slid the large bolt back and opened the door. Sitting neatly on the top shelf he found a brand new stainless steel pulley. He carried it and a long length of rope to the mast. Tying one end of the rope around the pulley and after winking at Anneli, Wade started to climb the mast using the hand and footholds.

Anneli saw Wade reach the highest foothold three feet below the top of the mast. He clipped himself to the cleat before setting to work.

The operation usually didn’t take long however he’d only ever practiced the change over on dry land. Being in the middle of the ocean might be another story. Although the sea remained relatively calm the mast still moved side to side. Wade knew if he looked too long at the water he’d throw up.

In a couple of minutes the four bolts were off. Wade attached the rope to the old pulley before lowering it to the deck. He signaled for Anneli to yank on her end of the rope so the pulley could be hoisted up the mast. Inside ten minutes Wade stood on the deck.

After a long kiss Wade whispered in Anneli’s ear. “While at the top of the mast I managed

to look around the ocean.”

“I thought you were trying to stop yourself from throwing up.”

“I wondered why you quickly moved away from the mast to the side.”

Anneli grinned at his smile.

“On the horizon I spied a large ship. Her sails were up.”

“Strange,” Anneli said slowly, deep in thought. “If I were made to guess, I’d say the ship might belong to my stepfather. He’s doing everything he can to get me back. I can’t understand the reason why he’d want to raise the giant sails. It’s never been done before.”

“Maybe the ship’s low on diesel.”

“It’s possible. Do you think we can outrun her?”

“I believe Charlotte can easily outrun your father’s small ship. If it’s a race he wants, he’s in for the ride of his life.”

“The boom has to be repaired before we can raise the sail,” blurted Anneli.

Wade glanced up at the very top of the mast. He nodded before marching across the deck to the locked cupboard. Opening the door he found what he needed. “This hammer, the pliers and four new bolts should do the trick. What I need you to do is locate the ship following us to see if you can estimate how far away she might be. After I’ve completed a rough panel beating job on the boom, I’ll re-attach it to the mast then we’ll be good to go.”

Anneli found a pair of binoculars hanging from the wheel on the bridge. She walked to the nose of the yacht, lifted them to eye level and scanned the horizon. She spied the ship Wade saw, confirming the vessel belonged to her stepfather. For several minutes she studied the craft. Slowly the vessel changed direction. The new course put her on a heading directly for Charlotte.

“Wade, how many minutes left before the repairs are completed?”

“I’m almost done,” he called back.

Wade slipped the last bolt through the boom plate, pushing the four bolts home. It looked to be an almost perfect alignment between the boom plate and the mast. Snatching the smaller shifter from his pocket Wade started to tighten the four bolts.

Anneli walked over to view the repairs. “I don’t want to place undue pressure on you, my stepfather’s yacht has changed course. It’s bearing down on us.”

Wade knew by the hysterical pitch in Anneli’s voice they needed to set sail immediately. He jammed the tools back into the cupboard, placed the old pulley on the top shelf and slammed the bolt home which locked the small door.

Anneli started to unleash the sail from the holding straps. Working as a team they wound the sail up to its stop. The wind immediately filled the sails making Charlotte lurch forward. Anneli led Wade to the bridge, pointing to the large yacht following them.

The race appeared to have started.

Staring at the clouds, Wade searched for warm thermals. He zig-zaged Charlotte on the ocean surface trying to obtain maximum speed in the light breeze. Slowly the yacht increased her speed, hovering just shy of fifteen knots.

The ship behind them seemed relentless. She neither gained nor lost ground. Hour after hour, she remained shadowing Charlotte. The sun rose in the East and set in the West five times.

Still the large ship remained in view.

Wade placed the binoculars down on the fiberglass desk. He turned to face Anneli. "You look tired, go have a sleep."

"I'm staying," she insisted firmly.

"I thought you might."

"I've been thinking about the chase. My stepfather's yacht has two large engines. I'm sure he could easily catch us. If he's low on diesel why didn't he stop in Sydney?"

Wade shrugged. "He might have studied the weather, gambling on making it to Melbourne under sail. Or he doesn't want to lose sight of us."

"I guess I'd do the same thing too. Where exactly are we?"

"We're sixty-four nautical miles from the entrance to Port Phillip Bay," reported Wade.

"What happens when we arrive in Melbourne? My stepfather will catch us at port."

"We're not going to Melbourne. I live off Flinders, right on the point. If there's enough distance between us and the ship we'll be able to hide at my place. We'll be sipping champagne on the balcony watching him plow through the heads into Port Phillip Bay. We can even give him a wave."

"How long before we arrive at your place?" Anneli commenced a daydream of what might transpire at Wade's home. The fantasy plastered a sexy expression on her face.

"It depends on the wind. Present speed, about four hours."

"How's the engine?"

"Fine," Wade answered. "It's the fuel. Sea water has contaminated the tank."

Anneli walked over to the barometer. She stood staring at the numbers.

"We've come so far, so quickly. I can't believe there's nothing we can do except hope the ship doesn't overtake us."

"We can keep scanning the air for stronger winds," hinted Wade. "Everything will turn out. Before we start searching the sky, I need to say something. I hope you realize I'm going out on a limb here."

Anneli faced Wade square on. "This sounds serious."

"It is."

"You have my undivided attention."

Wade reached out, placing his hands on her hips.

Anneli searched his face as if his statement might be written in his eyes. She felt a little nervous at what he'd been thinking about for the past few days. After such a horrid start to their trip the remainder of the voyage back to Melbourne remained uneventful. Having a lot of time to think about the future definitely seemed to plague his thoughts.

"I have a couple of questions I've been chewing over since our first meeting on the bridge a year ago. They're really statements not questions; though one idea is a question." Wade looked over Anneli's shoulder to focus on the land coming into view.

"For the first time since we have known each other, you sound nervous. I bet you don't get nervous in a courtroom full of highly paid lawyers or the Judge. Spit it out." Anneli rolled her eyes, grinning seductively at knowing what he wanted to say.

“Okay,” said Wade. Straightening his back he stood to full height. Sweat broke out near his temples. He raised his hand to wipe the annoyance away. “The kiss on the bridge felt unique,” he stated.

The sparkle in Anneli’s eyes couldn’t overshadow her enthusiastic expression. She resorted to biting her lip to mask her excitement.

“So far I have to agree.”

Wade’s shoulders slumped. “I’m having a tough time of this, please, you can’t interrupt.”

Anneli looked lovingly into Wade’s dancing pupils. They easily showed his nervousness. She inadvertently gave him a hard time. For a few moments she thought she could feel his knees tremble. She sensed the man standing before her looked more nervous than a groom on his wedding day.

“Okay, I won’t interrupt again.”

“I’ve forgotten where I got up to; I have to start over.” Wade exhaled in an attempt to relax. “The kiss on the bridge felt unique. I loved it so much I wanted to get to know the person who not only allowed me to kiss her, she wanted to kiss me back.”

“You’re stalling.”

“I know I am.” Wade cleared his throat. “Anneli, whatever you say in the next thirty seconds I want you to know I respect every cell in your body.”

“Thank you, that means a lot to me.”

“Anneli, what I really want to say is; I have fallen deeply in love with the woman behind our first kiss. I want to love you forever. If you feel the same way as I do, I’d love you to consider saying yes to my next question.”

Anneli started to fidget. She wanted to say her answer before he could recite the question.

The sun and the backdrop behind Wade looked so romantic Anneli felt sure nobody could describe the perfect scene. The sky looked to be a picture of beauty. If God exists he’d have to be the master artist. His work looked perfect, his timing exact.

Wade pulled a small dull red felt covered box out of his pocket before downing his left knee. He looked up into Anneli’s gleaming eyes. After a short pause, he asked his question.

“Anneli, please consider marrying me.”

Anneli’s smile grew wide.

Wade viewed the signal as a possible yes. He stood before her an excited man.

Anneli nodded, answering in a positively excited voice.

“Yes, a thousand times yes. I will marry you. Wade, I want to spend all of my life by your side.”

Wade pulled the ring from the box, pushing it gently onto Anneli’s finger. Using a new found passion, the couple kissed. Their loving embrace looked strong, tender.

Anneli broke the hold first. She stepped back, looking into Wade’s blue eyes.

“You have to do something for me.”

“Sure,” he replied.

“I need you to walk to the front of Charlotte. I need you to watch the mountains. Whatever you do you can’t look back to see where I am.”

“I’ll agree to your strange request,” complained Wade.

“You have to promise me.”

“I won’t break my word. I’ll do what you’ve asked.”

Walking towards the stairs Anneli looked over her shoulder. “I will only be a minute.”

Wade watched her disappear down the stairs, concern wrinkling his brow. He faced the mountains. The sun quickly cleared the ocean. The golden-edged clouds were breaking up, replaced by a light blue sky. Wade couldn’t comprehend the magnificence of ‘Morning Glory.’ His heart pounded inside his chest. He’d searched for the young woman from the moment he lost sight of her on the bridge. Now he not only found her, she agreed to his marriage proposal. His gamble had paid high dividends. His nest egg contained plenty of cash and businesses so he never again needed to step foot into the courtroom.

Wade stood so absorbed in his thoughts over what their future might hold together he failed to hear the soft footsteps approaching from behind him. He barely felt the tender brown arms moving across his chest. The gleam from the large diamond and sapphire studded engagement ring glistened in the morning sunlight as Anneli slipped her naked body around his torso and stood in front of him.

“I want to reaffirm my answer to the question you asked before.” Her soft sweet voice wafted up to the man standing proudly before her. “I want to be your wife forever more.”

Wade’s smile said it all.

Anneli led Wade back into the depths of the yacht. She had turned the bed down. Two long glasses were full of Champagne. In one smooth movement Wade’s shirt floated to the floor. His broad shoulders, deep chest and tight abs dominated Anneli’s stare. Wade swept the young woman up into his arms. He gave her a long passionate kiss before carrying her to the bed.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DARRYL STEPPED onto the bridge, glaring at the Captain. “Why haven’t we caught the yacht?”

“She’s more slippery than a sea serpent.”

“I don’t want to hear stupid excuses. I want results. The dawn is breaking. I wanted to be boarding her by now. What’s the holdup?” The tone in his voice sounded worse than a thunderstorm.

“There’s a slight delay due to the fact one of the fuel tanks has a small amount of sea water in it. After you ordered the engine to be started last night the engine has been misfiring for the past hour. I ordered the mechanic to put it back to idle.”

“We have slipped too far back. My daughter and the monster are alone. I want the engine back at full revs. If you won’t see to it, I’ll replace you.”

The Captain stood military style in front of Darryl. "The problem has been corrected. We are now gaining."

"Good. How far away is the yacht?"

The Captain swiveled an ocean map around, placing it under his nose.

"We're one hundred nautical miles behind. Our instruments are showing we are gaining fast. We will have her soon."

"What time?"

"Provided there are no more hiccups and the yacht we are chasing stays at her constant slow speed I estimate about three or four hours."

"Which is it, three or four?"

The Captain shrugged a shoulder.

Darryl glared at the man, snorted and marched off the bridge.

The Captain shook his head, watching the man disappear down the ladder. He stepped over to the duty officer. "Is the engine giving us some grief again?"

"None I'm aware of."

"Are you sure?" questioned the Captain.

The duty officer fell silent, listening to the reverberating noise of the engine. "I can't hear anything amiss, Sir," he reported.

"You should have your ears checked."

"Yes Sir. Your statement is duly noted. The moment we dock in Melbourne I'll make an appointment to see the doctor."

"Good. I distinctly heard the revs falter on number two engine." The Captain leaned over the controls of both engines. He touched the idle button. The revs dropped.

"I heard the noise this time, Sir," reported the duty officer. "What do you recommend we do?"

"Cut the engine. Go check out the fuel. I'm positive Darryl won't want to be stuck out here one hundred nautical miles from Melbourne. I'll go break the news to him. I'll say due to unforeseen circumstances we are running slightly behind in our scheduled rendezvous. Whoever his daughter has teamed up with I'm sure they won't want a surprise visit too early in the morning."

The duty officer nodded. He reached out, pushing the off button which cut the fuel to the number two engine. "I'll go check out the problem."

"Thank you."

The man looked the Captain in the eyes. "Sir, off the record, doesn't Wade Mackenzie own the yacht we are chasing?"

"Correct."

"Isn't he your cousin?"

"Your information is incorrect. He's my brother."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

AT A third past 8:00 in the morning Anneli and Wade stepped out onto the deck, pulling the large blanket tighter around them. The breeze felt cool. The tips of Anneli's long hair were moving in front of her face. Charlotte had stayed on the prescribed course at a constant speed of seventeen knots.

"It's a beautiful morning," declared Wade, wrapping the blanket tighter.

"Magnificent," replied Anneli. She craned her neck so she could kiss her fiancé. "I love you."

Wade cradled Anneli tighter in his arms. "I love you too."

"Don't we have work to do?"

"Yes we do. I didn't want to interrupt the tail end of a beautiful moment." Wade glanced out over the sea towards the ship still shadowing them. "Strange how they haven't made any headway. The gap between us looks the same as last night."

"Good," snarled Anneli.

Wade led his fiancé back down below decks. They dressed, ate a light breakfast before making their way to the bridge.

The sea remained calm. The trees growing up the side of the mountains quickly came into focus. The colours in the rock of the cliff face could be easily seen through the naked eye. Charlotte slipped past a fishing charter. The twelve men waved. One proud fisherman lifted the large snapper he'd caught to show off what the two man crew of the yacht missed out on.

Anneli waved back, wearing a widening grin. She hoped the man realized what he actually missed out on by being on the ocean instead of home enjoying his wife's company.

Wade and Anneli quickly set to work. They took turns at watching the surrounds and making the coffees. Wade constantly changed the direction of the sail, even rigging a smaller one in an attempt to gain more speed.

"Twenty knots," called Anneli.

"Excellent," said Wade stepping next to her.

Finally the heads at Port Phillip Bay were a stone's throw away directly in front. Wade steered Charlotte ninety degrees to port. The yacht rounded the point, entering the entrance to Western Port Bay. Again Wade changed course to line up the cliff face.

"My house is up there on the plateau," advised Wade pointing. "I don't have neighbours so there's no obstruction to the magnificent scenery. Two hundred and seventy degrees makes for the perfect ocean view."

Anneli's gaze travelled from the ocean to the top of the cliff. Her jaw dropped open. "Your house is a mansion," she whispered. "The white house looks absolutely gorgeous. There's only one minor flaw I can see in the design."

Wade pouted.

"I can't see any steps leading from the water's edge to the top of the vertical cliff."

"Trust me; we'll take the easy way."

Anneli peeled her gaze off the cliff face to look sideways at the man.

“Your statement sounds easier to believe than to do.”

Wade chuckled. He clipped the wheel using his short rope so the vessel wouldn’t stray from the prescribed course then sprinted to the mast.

Wearing a bewildered expression, Anneli volleyed her gaze between the cliff face and Wade. She saw him lower the mainsail. The small sail at the front of the yacht struggled to keep Charlotte moving in the dying breeze.

“We’re travelling at five knots,” reported Anneli. “Do you want to steer away from the cliff face?” she added nervously.

“No,” replied Wade.

Anneli didn’t know what to make of the whole scene. One minute she thought Wade might be crazy, the next, she didn’t know what to think.

“Trust me,” said Wade, confidently.

The tone in his voice broke through Anneli’s puzzled thoughts.

One hundred feet from the cliff face the thimble sized swells fizzled out making the sea glass flat. Wade lifted a small black round object from a draw under the chart table. He pressed the button and unclipped the steering wheel. Charlotte’s speed dropped to a third of a knot. The small sail looked barely moving in the almost non-existent breeze.

Wade pointed to a narrow stretch of sand not much larger than a small house off to their right. Anneli spied a long flight of stairs to the top moments before Wade redirected her attention to the rock wall not more than fifty feet in front of the yacht. The glint in her eyes couldn’t mask Anneli’s excitement. The cliff face started to move up.

“It’s a massive swinging garage door covered in fake rock!” she shrieked.

Wade saw Anneli’s jaw drop as they floated under the large door. Puffing out his chest, he couldn’t care less about Anneli’s stepfather’s threat to rub her out of his will. In fact, he welcomed it.

Moving her gaze from the opening, Anneli faced Wade.

“On a scale of ten what do you think?”

“So far this place is the crown jewels of Melbourne.” Anneli placed her finger in the slight dimple in her cheek. She paused, trying to contemplate a number. “I’d have to say eleven out of ten.”

Wade sidestepped to place his arm over her shoulder. He bent his head to kiss her earlobe.

The sea water lazily licked Charlotte’s fiberglass hull. Moving lazily along the dark tunnel Charlotte made no noise. Wade walked to the side, leaned forward, grasping hold of a nylon rope wrapped around a large metal hook. He swiped two gloves from a second hook. After slipping on the gloves Wade started pulling Charlotte towards the other end of the tunnel.

Behind them the massive door began to close.

The air in the tunnel smelt of stagnant salt.

In the fading light Anneli got busy studying the roof of the tunnel, amazed at what appeared to be a natural structure. In what little light remained she focused on what might be ahead. Surely by now they were directly under the white mansion.

Charlotte moved along the tunnel at a snail's pace. A long thin board covered in rubber was bolted to the rock tunnel wall to protect the yacht from the occasional scrape.

The tunnel seemed endless. No sooner did the thought enter Anneli's mind, Wade stopped pulling on the rope. He stepped onto a narrow wooden platform and walked over to the wall. He reached out so his fingers could brush a switch. Overhead fluorescent lights flickered to life. The area seemed to be the size of a standard small car. A series of pulleys bolted into the wall helped Wade pull Charlotte effortlessly from the outside to where he tied her up.

Anneli studied the area. Wade grinned at her astounded expression.

"Not many people have seen what you're looking at," he stated. "In fact, you're the first. It's not a secret. I believe what's down here is our private business."

Anneli looked sideways at Wade. "What do you mean?"

"We're engaged now. What I have is yours."

A warm loving feeling flowed through Anneli at hearing the news Wade wanted to share everything. Through sparkling eyes her gaze moved from Wade, to the cave ceiling, to what had been tied up.

"I see you have a collection of toys; three jet-skis and two small yachts. Adding to the list there's Charlotte, three motor boats, three kayaks, not to forget to mention the three five-metre fishing boats."

Wade wore a proud new father's expression.

Anneli felt positive if he didn't show her the cave he could have easily kept the secret from her. She'd never want to marry a man who acted exactly the same way as Meredith's husband. He kept too many secrets from her. She even showed Meredith photos of at least three women he had loved to prove to her of his unfaithfulness. Meredith waved her hand in the air, dismissing the fact. She married for money believing it made the world go around. Anneli shuddered at the thought.

"Now I'm over the shock of the toys. The tunnel and the cave are absolutely amazing. Its natural beauty takes your breath away. How is all this possible? Surely whoever built the house didn't dig this cave?"

"The tunnel is actually the remains of a blow hole. The former owner of the house paid to have the cave dug out. I'm led to believe in my research of the area, where the lift well is located it acted as an escape route for the sea water to the surface. I discovered through research tens of decades ago the sea pounded through the tunnel and was forced upwards to form a blow hole. The former owner installed the outer door and the lift."

Wade helped Anneli step onto the rocky outcrop. He pointed to the ceiling at a clump of grey. Wade stood watching incomprehension break out on Anneli's face.

"What on earth is it?"

"The clump contains about fifty mouse bats. I decided to leave them alone instead of eradicating them. We've grown quite fond of each other."

"They're so cute!" exclaimed Anneli, looking vertical at the bats.

"Come on, I'll show you around our house."

Taking hold of her hand, Wade led Anneli along the narrow boardwalk. When they scooted past the seaworthy vessels she examined them more closely.

“Each one looks almost brand new.”

“They are. They were delivered six months ago.”

“The salesman must have thought Christmas came early.”

“I did make him a happy man,” chuckled Wade. “I didn’t know which one you might prefer the most so I bought the lot.”

“You bought them all for me?”

“Yes.”

“What if you didn’t find me?”

“I’d never give up on looking for you.”

“What if we didn’t fall in love?”

Wade fell silent, dropping his gaze to his feet. “The thought never entered my mind.”

“Thank you for your dedication in finding me.”

“The many hours I spent were worth every second. Is there a hint on which vessel might be your favorite?”

Anneli focused on the boats. Eventually she replied. “I’d have to say, Charlotte. She already holds wonderful memories.”

They abruptly stopped at a stainless steel door. Wade pushed a button on the rock wall. The single door slid open.

“There really is a lift!” exclaimed Anneli. Excitement rose in the back of her throat causing her voice to lift several decibels. “I thought you were having a joke at my expense.”

“I’m not in the habit of making fun of you,” stated Wade, seriously.

They stepped into the lift. Wade pushed a green button on the wall. The doors closed. They felt a slight vibration under their feet. The lift ascended slowly. Eventually the door reopened onto an anti room. Wade immediately pushed a series of buttons on the side wall. A gas fire instantly roared to life. Down-lights lit over the entire house. The curtains blocking out the magnificent view started to open. Sunlight shone on the white glossy marble floor tiles.

Wade led Anneli over to a double glass door. She slid it open, revealing a balcony. Stepping outside to admire the view, she gulped to clear her throat just so she could talk.

“The view is more magnificent than the view from the radio tower.”

Wade moved to cuddle the young woman. “You think this is amazing, wait for the five cent tour.”

“Are you trying to tell me this magnificent view is trumped?”

“Yes; quite easily.”

Wade gave a ship closing in on the bay his full attention. Anneli stood on tip toes, attempting to kiss his cheek to regain his attention.

“It’s my stepfather’s ship. Do you think he’ll find us?”

“Eventually, he’ll probably guess where you are. Don’t worry this house has a lot of inbuilt secrets.”

“Is there a chance you’ll show me?”

“Yes of course. I’m a man of my word. After the quick tour we’ll return to the balcony in time to watch the ship slide by. First, I need you to agree on something.”

Anneli wore a sudden doubtful expression. 'This is it,' she thought. 'He'd been buttering me up for the clincher which will put a permanent rift between Wade and her. How could I be so gullible? I put it down to his luring blue eyes. I could kick myself for being too naive over what Wade had promised, downing his knee to ask for my hand in marriage, raising my hopes and dreams. What a joke. I swallowed the bait he'd been using. Now I'm about to pay for it.'

Wade squared himself to Anneli. "I need you to promise me something."

She stared back at him through glazed eyes.

"I need you to promise me you will make yourself at home in our house. I want to make things perfectly clear, nowhere is off limits to you. I want you to act like you've been living here for years. You must never think you can't go into any room. No exceptions."

A rogue tear slid down over Anneli's cheek. Wade lifted his hand to wipe it away.

"I thought you were going to say something horrible."

"I know what you were thinking." He open palmed his hand around the large room.

"Anywhere at any time you want to see something, just go. I tell you what; you lead me through the house."

Anneli looked up into his eyes. "Thank you. It means so much to me I can't start to say."

A warm lazy smile creased Wade's face. "Shall we start the tour?"

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE SHIP shadowing Charlotte slowed its approach to Port Phillip Bay. The surface of the sea looked almost glass flat. The Captain of the ship called for Darryl to come to the bridge.

"Sir, we have arrived at the entrance to Port Phillip Bay. My radar has shown the yacht we have been following disappeared before she entered the bay."

"Find it," yelled Darryl. "It can't have gone too far."

"Our radar expert has reported the yacht headed straight for the cliff face near Western Port Bay. It has done exactly what we discussed earlier." The Captain lifted the binoculars he held in his hand, shoving them at Darryl. "If you train your eyes on the cliff face you should be able to make out a flight of stairs stretching from the small beach to the plateau. The house on the point is where my brother lives. Anneli will be there too, if we were actually following the correct ship."

Darryl mumbled incoherent words, studying the cliff. "If you're right, and you very well might be, where's the yacht?"

"No idea," reported the Captain, in a rough annoyed voice.

"Change course. We'll check out the beach. Dirk, call for Meredith to meet us at the small boat. I want her in the landing party."

"She's a bit of a handful at the moment."

"She's your wife. Get her under control."

Dirk ran off to find his wife. By the time he'd returned the group had been sitting in the boat for over five minutes. The Captain signaled to lower them over the side after Dirk and Meredith scrambled onboard.

The moment the small craft scraped the sand Darryl jumped out. He didn't wait for the others. He started marching towards the stairs. Dirk walked at the rear of the landing party half carrying, half dragging Meredith.

"What's the rush," slurred Meredith. "Dirk, put me down I'm quite capable of walking."

Dirk slowly shook his head, placing her feet first on the sand.

"I don't feel well. It must be the transition from the sea to the land."

"I reckon it's the alcohol you've been drowning in," growled Dirk. "Which reminds me; have you looked in the mirror today, or even brushed your hair at any time in the past week. It resembles a bird's nest."

"You don't have to be so insensitive." Meredith crumpled to the sand, vomiting up the expensive red wine she'd consumed.

Darryl pointed to Dirk. "You are not what I'd call the perfect contracted person I have been led to believe." He swapped his stare to the Captain. "Our little chat is starting to make a lot of sense."

To remain in the good books Dirk quickly replied.

"Father, there's nothing on this beach except sand. If Anneli and the man landed here there should be a sign. If they set the yacht adrift we'd have seen it. Maybe they anchored somewhere else."

"They might have," Darryl replied. "We'll drop in on the house to see who is actually home. Let's hope my daughter answers the door."

"What if she doesn't?"

Darryl growled inaudible words on his way to the stairs.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

ANNELI ESCORTED Wade from room to room. Behind her back his grin widened. He loved every minute of the five cent tour.

At the threshold to yet another seemingly endless number of rooms Anneli looked directly at Wade.

"How many rooms make up this mansion?"

Wade scratched his head. "Twenty I think."

Anneli felt stunned at hearing the number. She turned the door knob they were standing in front of and pushed on the heavy solid door.

The room looked relatively small, about half the size of the others they had walked into. The

slate tiles appeared to have an entrapping glow. The painted walls seemed to beckon her inside.

"This is the sun room," explained Wade. "The former owners used to sit in here after dinner. The last time I came in here someone set up a small table at the balcony doors."

"What do you mean the last time?"

"Before buying the house the owner showed me this room. He informed me he and his wife used to enjoy watching the ocean on winter mornings and in the cool of the evenings in the summer."

Anneli marched across the room to the large double glass doors. She opened the curtains on another splendid view of the ocean. She stood watching the large cargo ship entering Port Phillip Bay.

"I'm flabbergasted," she whispered. "It seems every room has a view of the ocean."

"Almost every room does," announced Wade. He opened the doors to let the sea air waft into the room. He stepped up to Anneli, slipping his arm around her waist.

Both enjoyed the intimate embrace as they stared out across the sea, soaking up the sunshine.

"What about your bedroom?" Her voice sounded cheeky, full of mischievous schoolgirl innocence.

"Our room is at the far end of the house. I call it the 'masterpiece of the home.'"

"You'll have to show me. Seeing how we'll be spending a great deal of time there after we're married."

Wade led the way back along the hall, past the large kitchen. They walked past ten doorways before coming to a spiral staircase. Off to the right Anneli saw a study room. The deep patterned dull red carpet looked new. An open fire, stocked full of logs looked ready to light, while one wall boasted a floor to ceiling bookcase full of books. Two black leather recliner rockers were neatly placed in front of the fire. Again the double glass doors opened out to the view of the ocean.

"It's up to you whether we climb the stairs or take the lift," commented Wade.

"There's a lift into our bedroom?" Anneli looked totally surprised at the comment.

"Yes. The previous owners completed the renovations before they placed the mansion on the market."

"What an awesome inspiring find. How long were you looking before you discovered this place?"

"To cut a short story shorter, I happened to be driving past the front fence about two years ago when I saw the for sale sign. I knocked on the door. The gentleman offered me a guided tour. He also told me his wife had fallen ill. They made the decision to move to Perth for a warmer climate. I asked him how high my offer will have to be to secure the sale. The owner insisted he couldn't ask for anything less than one million eight hundred thousand dollars. I offered him two million. He signed the dotted line right where we stood."

"You offered above what he asked for?"

"I loved the mansion before the tour finished. The only thing missing was someone to help me enjoy her. You're the special someone."

Anneli looked slightly perplexed. "How could I have been, we hadn't met."

“I knew one day I’d meet someone special and I did, in you.”

“This place is truly magnificent,” chirped Anneli squeezing Wade’s hand.

“Wait till you feast your beautiful eyes on the main bedroom,” boasted Wade, leaning forward to press the lift button.

When the single door opened, Anneli stepped into the lift car, followed by Wade. Floor to ceiling mirrors lined the walls.

The ride to the third level felt effortless. The lift door opened on an area larger than four bedrooms combined. Off to one side Anneli saw a mahogany coloured doorway. Wade escorted her across the room to show off the inner room. The walk in robe looked relatively narrow. On both sides suits of varying colours were hanging neatly from the horizontal metal pole. Beyond the walk in wardrobe was the bathroom. The floor tiles were cream coloured while the wall tiles were of a dull plum colour. A free standing bath and shower boasted gold fittings.

Anneli whistled at the splendor.

Wade slipped his hand over Anneli’s so he could escort her back towards the lift. A king sized four post bed sat directly under the chandelier in the middle of the room. Glass windows surrounded the entire area.

“This room is round,” Anneli managed to whisper.

“The hired architect had been given explicit instructions the design must be built to scale.”

“Extraordinary. I don’t know of any house which has a round room in the floor plan.”

Wade patted her on the shoulder. His eyes glistened at the next surprise.

“Now I want you to hold onto the bed post.”

Anneli watched Wade step back to the lift door. He pushed a button on the wall. One by one the shutters over the windows were automatically wound up. In slow motion she followed the opening shutters. Eventually Anneli completed a full lap of the room. Sunlight streamed through the windows. The ocean sparkled.

“This room is a magical fairytale.” She knew her voice sounded worse than a weak whispered croak.

“I told you something trumped the view from downstairs.”

Anneli stared out of one window, slowly nodding. “I didn’t think it could be possible. I can see why you wanted to buy this place.”

“Two hundred and seventy degrees of ocean viewing at your fingertips,” stated Wade.

“I can only imagine how it will feel to wake each morning to this amazing view.”

“You won’t have to wonder for too long. Tonight you’ll be able to view your first sunset in your new home. In the morning you’ll view your first sunrise; the first one of decades to come.”

Anneli darted her gaze to Wade. Her smile couldn’t be any wider. “Thank you for rescuing me from my future pathetic life.”

Wade side-stepped, placing the champagne bottle with the note Anneli wrote on the shelf next to a photo of Charlotte.

“I think this is the perfect place for the bottle. The hand written note inside will remain sealed. I want whichever one of our great-grandchildren who opens the bottle and reads the note to know ‘Anything is possible when you believe.’”

Anneli walked over to kiss her hero. She cuddled into him. Inwardly she couldn't feel any happier.

"There's one more button," mentioned Wade.

"Another surprise?" asked Anneli.

"I think you'll find this next surprise might even trump what you've seen so far. I'll let you decide which one is greater."

"What about you, which one did you pick?"

"The jury is still out on trying to decide. I want you to press the top button."

Anneli pushed it. For a few seconds nothing happened. She heard a clang. She looked up to see the metal shutters covering the roof were retracting upwards.

"This whole room resembles the dome on top of a lighthouse. The original owner happened to be a lighthouse keeper. He constructed the room for his wife. After saying she hated it, he sold it to an amateur astronomer who in turn needed to sell the mansion to pay for his nursing home and a twenty-four-hour nurse. The man I bought the house from loved this room too. He converted it into what you see today. This room helped me make up my mind to pay more than the asking price. I didn't want to hear the words 'no sale.' Almost every night I lie in bed watching the sunset. In the morning I watch the sunrise. Come on let's step outside onto the balcony. It encompasses the whole dome."

Wade led Anneli over to the glass door. They stepped onto the balcony together. Slowly they circled the room from the outside.

"This is a magical place," Anneli sighed almost breathless, viewing the sea and the plateau the house was built on. She looked up into Wade's eyes. The words he spoke, his actions towards her since they met relayed the message; 'she didn't have anything to fear.' She felt positive he'd see her right. Above all else she wanted to hear the three words he spoke earlier one more time. Her heart needed to hear them.

Wade took her in his arms, gazing lovingly into her eyes. Anneli lapped up every moment.

"Anneli, I love you more than life. If you aren't living in this house it will never be a home."

Anneli hugged his chest. Tears fell unhindered down her cheeks. "I love you too."

As the sun rose steadily in the sky, Wade and Anneli rekindled the kiss they shared on the bridge twelve months earlier, only this time it seemed to be more real, more love, lacing the very essence of the moment.

Anneli felt determined nothing will ever break the chain.

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

DIRECTLY BELOW Wade and Anneli's feet the small group coming from the ship made slow agonizing progress up the stairs. At the halfway point Darryl looked up at the mansion.

“Boys keep moving. It won’t be long now.”

“Are you positive this is the right place?” asked one of Darryl’s sons. “If Anneli came this way I’m sure we’d have seen her. This is a nightmare of a climb.”

“Stop whining. Keep moving. It’s imperative I talk to Anneli sooner than later.”

“If there is another way of getting to the top, I didn’t discover it,” moaned Dirk.

“All of you keep moving,” snarled Darryl. “I want to be knocking on the mansion door in the sunlight.”

Meredith leaned against the metal side rail. A dull red colour slowly replaced her original green look. “Can’t we stop for a longer rest? I can never see Anneli ever agreeing to such a horrid climb.”

Darryl shook his head before marching onwards to the mansion. “When you have decided to follow I will see you at the top.”

Dirk placed his arm around Meredith’s waist to help her climb the remaining steps. By the time the group emerged from the top stair they crumpled onto the dark green grass. Each person felt exhausted after completing the long climb.

“We must be at least one hundred feet above the sand,” complained Dirk trying unsuccessfully to stand.

Darryl hobbled towards the closest door. “All of you stay where you are. Anneli and I will be having words.” He pounded on the door using a tight fist. “Anneli, if you are in this house. I want to talk to you,” he yelled.

“My stepfather has brought the cavalry for protection,” laughed Anneli.

“There’s no way I’d climb those stairs,” admitted Wade, chuckling. “I walk down them. I always take the lift on the return trip.”

Wade heard more pounding on the door. He leaned over the railing. “Hey down there, we saw you arrive.”

Darryl back stepped away from the door, looking up. Anneli’s brothers joined their father, each one pointing at Wade.

“I want to talk to my daughter,” yelled Darryl.

Anneli looked down over the railing. “I don’t want to talk to you.”

“Anneli, come down,” yelled Meredith, squinting.

“Hi Sis,” Anneli replied.

“Please come down. Bring the bloke.”

“Anneli doesn’t want to talk to any of you,” called Wade.

“If she doesn’t agree on a talk in ten seconds we’ll break in,” called Dirk, raising his fist.

“It won’t be necessary to smash the door,” called Wade. “We’re on our way.”

Anneli grabbed him by the shoulder. “I don’t even want to see them.”

“I know. I’m stalling for time. I’ll show you an exit I built the moment I moved in. I have to confess I’ve never used it. I got to thinking if there ever happened to be a fire while I’m up here, there’s no escape. Come on, I’m sure you’ll love it.”

Wade walked Anneli to the other side of the dome. He pulled a small two man metal bucket from off the wall. Reaching into the bucket he pulled out a metal clip, fastening the whole thing to a

steel cable above their heads.

“Your chariot,” said Wade palming his hand at the vessel.

“You built a flying fox?” questioned Anneli. Her voice gave away her excitement. Stepping into the oversized bucket her knees were knocking from the exhilaration of the forthcoming ride. “I’m nervous and excited at the same time.”

“Hold on tight,” insisted Wade. “We’re in for the ride of our lives.”

“Will it work? You did mention you’ve never tested it.”

“Do you trust me?”

Anneli hesitantly nodded.

Wade climbed in, took the black disc out of his pocket and pushed the button. He gave the ledge a shove. The oversized bucket moved away from the balcony. Anneli looked back at the glass dome. She watched the long louvers starting to close.

The wind rushed past them as they plummeted towards the ground at a forty-five degree angle. Anneli’s long hair trailed behind her. Wade swiped the strands from his face several times. His grin never waned even when the ground rushed towards them. The canopy created by the trees grew thick. Just when Anneli thought they’d crash into the branches, she spied a gap. The bucket rushed through.

The metal bucket slowed. It came to a complete stop between two large trees. Wade jumped out, lifting Anneli up and over the side of the bucket by her waist.

“This way,” he whispered, stooping under a low branch.

“Where are we going?” asked Anneli.

“You’ll see.”

Weaving their way through the trees Wade led the way along a narrow track covered in leaves. In a small clearing no larger than the miner’s hut in Darwin, five dark figures were waiting. The welcoming committee stood military style in anticipation of the two arrivals.

Wade came to an abrupt halt, glaring at the men.

“In case you’re wondering how we got here so quick, I discovered your little secret the moment I saw the overhead wire. When I spotted the clearing I easily figured out you’d come here. We took a short cut,” snarled the stockiest figure of the group. He stood slightly in front of the others. “Boys help the man to feel we are one big happy family.”

Raising their fists, the four men at the rear marched towards Wade who gently swept Anneli behind him. She screamed at her stepfather to stop the inevitable fight. Wade looked more than ready to step up to the plate to defend his fiancé. The third round would be a replay of their first and second encounter.

“Please, Wade let’s run,” shrieked Anneli tugging on his arm. “I’m not concerned for your safety. I don’t want to see my brother’s hurt.”

“There’s no ambulance for at least an hour,” spat Wade forcefully.

The five men burst out laughing.

Wade’s plan to get them off guard worked perfectly. He grabbed hold of Anneli’s wrist before plowing onwards through the group. Using a strong push of his hand, he swept the men from his path. Wade and Anneli dived through the doorway of the miner’s hut. Wade slammed the door

shut, ramming the metal bar home, locking the door. He walked to the adjacent wall, opened a trap door as pounding on the door commenced. Wade flicked a switch on the wall. A line of globes lit the way down a flight of stairs.

Anneli pulled the trap door shut, sliding the large bolt into the wall. She followed Wade down the steep decent. The smell of sea water quickly grew stronger. The narrow tunnel leveled out at an iron door. Wade turned the rusty handle, tugging on the door.

They stepped across the threshold.

Standing on a twelve-foot wide concrete platform, Anneli spied Charlotte.

"I think I should have fought your brothers," snarled Wade. "The last time we met I won easily."

"You did the right thing. Even though my family and I don't see eye to eye I don't want them to make you their enemy."

Wade shrugged. "You're right diplomatic relations sometimes works more effectively than violence."

"When my stepfather calms down, we can have a good talk," blurted Anneli. She craned her neck to kiss the lips of her hero. She knew beyond doubt Wade will be the only man in her life. He was the special someone she could lean on and trust.

Wade led Anneli towards a fifteen-foot motor boat. He helped her onboard. In seconds he'd unclipped the mooring rope.

"I have a feeling your stepfather will be furious over you slipping through his fingers yet again," hinted Wade.

"He'll have to suck it up," yelled Anneli. "Sometimes he has to listen to what others think even if they oppose his ideas."

Wade started the outboard motor and navigated the boat out of the tunnel towards the open ocean.

Anneli looked over her shoulder at the shrinking mansion. "Wade, where are we going?"

"Where does a hero take his beloved after a furious battle?"

## EPILOGUE

THE MOTOR boat idled to a stop at the stairs. Meredith escorted Anneli, dressed in a long white lace wedding gown up the stairs to the start of the bridge where she met Wade fifteen months earlier. Her grin couldn't be any wider.

Meredith gave her sister the once over before kissing her on the cheek. "Sis, you make a beautiful bride."

"I don't know how to start to say thank you," whispered Anneli.

"You don't have to. What I need you to do is have a long and happy life. Above all don't

keep your knight waiting any longer.”

Anneli focused on the figure standing in the middle of the bridge. His tuxedo shone in the late afternoon sun. Four men stood on his left. Each one in turn stepped forward, slapping him on the shoulder. Anneli’s stepfather looked to be a proud man as he raised his elbow for Anneli to hold on to.

“Before we start the bridal walk I need to say something,” he whispered.

Anneli looked sideways at her stepfather, not sure what to expect.

“I should never have tried to interfere in your future. Not only have you met a great man I believe he’s going to be an exceptional husband.”

Anneli looked him in the eyes. “Thank you for the kind words. From now on I think you have earned the right to be called dad.”

Darryl puffed out his chest, escorting his daughter along the bridge. After they walked to the middle Darryl held out his hand to Wade.

“I’m happy the three of us got a chance to have a little chat,” hinted Darryl.

Both men grinned at each other and shook hands, not in a business type manner, as a family member.”

“Who gives this young lady away?” asked the minister.

“I do,” announced Darryl. He winked at Wade, kissed his daughter on the cheek before stepping back to enjoy the marriage ceremony. Only once did he glance at Meredith. Her eyes were red-rimmed. When a tear from her eyes threatened to fall she’d use the tissue she hid in the palm of her hand to wipe the tear away.

For over half an hour the minister preached outstanding words. He glanced at the people who were invited before settling his attention on Wade and Anneli. He closed the bible. Smiling, he looked at Anneli and Wade.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

The minister gave Wade and Anneli the go ahead. They leaned forward to kiss for the first time since being married.

A cheer rang out. Wade and Anneli were swamped by well-wishers. The group numbered seventy-five, consisting of close family and friends.

After the photos were completed of the happy married couple, Darryl announced.

“Food is waiting for us back on my ship. Everyone come. Three launches I have paid for are idling under the bridge.”

The group walked as one down the stairs to the water’s edge. Clambering onboard the group was whisked away from the bridge.

Darryl’s ship had been decked to the waterline in wedding decorations. Music greeted each one of the group as they climbed the gang rail. They were helped onto the deck by the Captain. Helping Anneli onboard Wade felt someone grabbing him on the shoulder.

“Wade, congratulations,” barked the Captain.

“Thanks brother. I’d like to add, thanks for stalling Darryl and this fine ship.”

“You owe me.”

Wade chuckled, slapping him on the shoulder. “Indeed I do. Anytime you want help, call

me.”

“You can start by watching the uniform. I don’t want it creased.”

The Captain slapped Wade on the shoulder again before handing him and Anneli a glass of champagne.

“Between the three of us I want to propose a private toast. Anneli and Wade have a great life.”

Anneli kissed Wade’s brother on the cheek. “Thank you for everything you’ve done.”

“Brother, if at any time you steer this lovely young woman in the wrong direction or you see her wrong, I’ll be at your door.”

“There’s no possible way it will ever happen,” insisted Wade, placing his arm around Anneli’s waist.

Darryl walked onto the elevated platform overlooking the dance floor. Off to one side a large wedding cake sat in the middle of a long narrow table.

“Before we continue the festivities of the celebration between my daughter and Wade, my new son, I have something important to say,” announced Darryl through the microphone.

Wade, Anneli, her four brothers and the guests looked at the man.

“First thing I want to say is; Wade, welcome to my family. This ship is as much yours as it is everybody who is here tonight. I also wish to announce publicly I have an apology to make. Our first three meetings didn’t go well. I have learnt a thing or two since then. The first thing I’ve learnt is to watch out for your right hook, it’s a definite winner.”

The guests roared laughing then cheered Wade.

“The most important thing is; I’m pleased Anneli didn’t listen to me when she insisted on going against my wishes and struck out on her own to find a husband. If I’m the only one here who feels this way; as Anneli says; ‘suck it up.’ Wade, in my books you’re a good bloke.”

Wade stood, raising his glass. “I want to make a short speech. On behalf of Anneli, I accept your apology. After our long talk I want it known, you Darryl, are a good bloke too. Your sons are also okay. Thanks guys for being in the wedding party.”

The guests raised their glasses. After each of Anneli’s brothers welcomed Wade into the family, the married couple walked to the dance floor to waltz a slow song. Halfway through the song they were joined by the guests. After the dance Wade escorted Anneli from the floor. Spying Meredith at the bar Wade strolled over.

“Meredith, I have a question I need you to answer.”

She placed her empty whisky glass on the bar, signaling for the barman to fill it.

“I’m sure you already know the answer,” she taunted, looking directly at Wade. “If you insist on an answer to your question, ask away.”

“First I want to say thank you for helping me to find your sister.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Now for my question, why did you help?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Curiosity,” replied Wade.

“Is that the only reason?” Meredith downed another shot of whisky. Slamming the glass

onto the bar next to the other four she ordered another to be filled. She sat watching the barman pour liquid into a fresh glass.

“What else should there be?” asked Wade.

Meredith squared herself to Wade. “What do you see when you look at me?” She lifted a finger and pointed it at him. Before he could answer she answered her own question. “There’s no way I want my sister to end up a drunken broken woman. We discussed my future life before I married. Anneli disagreed on my ideas. I should have listened. Don’t feel sorry for me. I chose the money over love.”

“It’s never too late.”

“Save your breath.” Meredith downed yet another shot and ordered two more. “Tell me something, Romeo. Now the marriage between you and my sister is done. I have a question I want you to answer.”

“What if I don’t, what will you do?”

Meredith slapped the empty shot glass on the bar. “Okay, you win. I know when I’ve been told to leave well enough alone.”

Before Wade could tap Meredith on the shoulder she’d walked away. He felt sorry for the woman. Maybe he and Anneli could one day help her change her outlook on life, show her the right road to travel along.

Meredith stopped abruptly. Staggering back to the bar, she stood swaying in front of Wade.

“Can I ask you my question?” asked Meredith.

“It all depends.”

“If you decide to answer I need you to be honest.”

Wade gave her a warm luring smile.

“Okay Romeo, tell me how you wooed my sister into marriage. Don’t tell me it was the note in the bottle thing. It’s too much of a coincidence.”

“You’re right; however, the note did play a minor part in the fate of us coming together. Don’t forget, you helped.”

Meredith rolled her eyes. “Please continue. This ought to be good.”

Anneli walked up behind her husband, placing her arm around his waist. “What’s all this? Meredith you’re not trying to steal my husband?”

“The thought never entered my mind.”

Wade gave his bride a lightning kiss. “Meredith wanted to know my secret of wooing you into marriage?”

Anneli grinned. “Sis, let me tell it this way.”

“I’m listening.”

“On second thoughts, Wade, the story might sound more authentic if you say it. I haven’t the luring eyes.”

Wade looked seriously at Meredith. She instantly looked uncomfortable over the whole scene.

Anneli tightened her grip on her husband, waiting for a response from her sister.

Wade’s voice didn’t falter when he spoke the sentence which flooded an emotion-charged

feeling that swept Anneli's spirit.

"How would you react if a tall handsome stranger came up to you on new-years-eve and asked for a kiss?"

End.

If you enjoyed reading Kiss on the bridge, please leave feedback on the author's obooko.com [download page](#).

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Thank you for reading my novel 'Kiss on the bridge.' I do hope you enjoyed it. Any feedback is gratefully accepted. The information you, the reader give, helps me to become a more professional author.

My novels are based on the Australian culture. Some of the spelling is Australian. Thanks for your understanding.

Again thank you for your support, for without you, the reader, I wouldn't have anyone to read my work.

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**Other novels I have written** in the way of romance are:

The perfect gift:

Legendary blue diamond.

Legendary blue diamond two

Legendary blue diamond three

The blood red rose.

Blood red rose two.

Blood red rose three.

Crime novels: Fire Games.

Heart of a spider.

I know your secret.

The copy cat murders.

Children: A Troglan knows and Luke's cubby house. Malcolm's cubby house.

Smashwords has various short stories.

Below is the synopsis of my novels in order I have listed them:

**Synopsis:** [The Perfect Gift](#). Adventure romance. Available free from OBOOKO.

Naomi is twenty-six and doesn't like the way men mistreat her. She decides a change is needed and applies to be a jillaroo on a cattle station named the Oasis. Its location is in outback Australia. She meets a cowboy, Trent, who is a rodeo champion. They agree on a bet. Eventually both want out, but neither wants to be first.

Through a series of adventures stretching from the city, to a fast flowing river in the outback where Trent must save Naomi from drowning, love germinates in the middle of a storm.

In her heart, Naomi is a woman who adores the city's nightlife, but as the sun sets on each day, the Australian outback is enticing and the excitement of the city fades. Then she inadvertently saves the Oasis.

Love is growing, then Brandt; Naomi's obsessive ex-boyfriend tracks her down. Can Trent save her one last time?

**Synopsis: Legendary Blue Diamond.** Adventure romance. Available Smashwords.

HISTORIANS AND researchers say the birth of the legendary blue diamond originated when the earth was being born. Some say the legend commenced at the union between a man who had skin, the colour of the night sky and a woman who had skin the colour of the sun. Rumour has it the diamond was no larger than a single carrot. Lately there have been whispers the deep blue

coloured diamond was reported to be in excess of nine carats possibly even ten or higher. What I believe isn't important, though I assume it lays somewhere in between. There's been bush talk from the Australian Kimberley's to Melbourne; whosoever touches the blue stone will die, for it is cursed by God. I believe it is due to man's greed and the blood that drips from his hands is the truth behind the cursed stone.

I have extensively researched a great number of books on the subject looking for a start date to the authenticity of the legend. I think I may have uncovered the actual events, but I have no way of proving if the facts are correct. I have been able to ascertain the legend was born around the mid 1800's AD when the State bank of Victoria was in its infancy. A gold prospector unearthed the diamond. In days he had sold it. The buyer was a man in charge of the bank. The diamond was indeed dark blue in colour, but definitely a one off, stroke of luck find. One cold dark night a bushranger, his brother and a third man came into a small town searching for the blue diamond. They never found it. The banker was tortured for the information of the stone's where-a-bouts. He took the knowledge of its existence to his grave. Of late a possible theory has been circulating the man's wife has it in her possession. How she escaped from being murdered was any one's guess.

If you ask me, do I believe in the story, I'll answer you truthfully. I know it only to be a legend.

**Synopsis:** [Blood Red Rose](#). Vampire adventure romance. Available free from OBOOKO.

"You can't force me to drink that, I'm innocent," yelled Haleton. "Rose-a-lee what have you done?"

There was no reply.

William Haleton is a normal man looking for love and the good life then the council of four modifies his DNA and uses him as a guinea pig. They transform him into a vampire. Pleading his innocence falls on deaf ears.

Haleton is hungry for the next evil soul, but deep down he has a burning desire for the love of a girl. Her blood is sweet and hypnotic. Her genetic makeup is his perfect match.

Being transported again through time is not an option.

The clock is ticking.

Haleton will do anything to stay by Amber's side, but is it possible for her to love him? Can Craig Benyon, Amber's close friend, be trusted? After all he loves her as much as William Haleton.

If an antidote to the vampire's curse is found in time, will it be successful, or is everything Haleton going through part of the vampire curse?

**Synopsis:** **Fire Games**. Crime. First book in the series. Available only from publish

America.

Detective Alan Kendal puts his life on the line to outplay the psychotic arsonist known as Patrick.

Detective Kendal is ordered to team up with Detective Claire Ambroso, whom he's known since school, but she carries a secret and he has a grey past. Which one will come forward to haunt first? Kendal grows suspicious of his new partner when she aims her gun directly at him and pulls the trigger. What's her motive? Is she Patrick's accomplice? If not, who is?

How can Patrick always be one step ahead? Does Kendal have enough time to rescue his kidnapped twelve-year-old daughter, Tegan, before Patrick's fiery finale?

**Synopsis:** [Heart of a spider](#). Crime. Second book in the series. Available free from OBOOKO.

Detective Kendal is on the trail of a patient who has escaped the mental institution and wants to sever Kendal's life line. The chase is complicated by the visitation of a ghost and the appearance of a supposed vigilante.

Kendal doesn't believe in ghosts, but finds himself having a conversation as he stares at one. His partner, Claire Ambroso has to fight for her life when Kendal is told to meet GP at the wharf when the moon is at the highest point in the night sky.

Confusion sets in at a local supermarket when a robbery goes wrong and someone in Kendal's family is shot.

The trap is set for the person who masterminded the escape and a final shoot out at the hospital reveals amazing results that astounds even Kendal.

**Synopsis:** [I know your secret](#). Crime. Third book in the series. Free from OBOOKO.

Everyone has a secret. Some people take theirs to the grave. Some hold their desires inside for a lifetime. Some stew on their secret all their life, and then they get revenge.

I know your secret is a suspenseful crime novel. Melbourne homicide detective Alan James Kendal and his partner Detective Claire Ambroso have to locate a missing teenage girl. The case hots up when he is introduced to a medium. She seems to hold all the knowledge of the case except a few minor details, like, why did Kendal find an empty bullet shell with a note inside that read, 'I was paid to miss.'



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