



The Perfect Gift

A Romance Adventure
Mark Stewart

THE PERFECT GIFT

Mark Stewart

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The Perfect Gift

ISBN 978-0-9807773-1-4

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Revised edition: Rosemary Cantala.

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I know your secret

7 murders in seven days

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CHAPTER ONE

A YOUNG man boasting a straight back, using powerful deliberate steps marched up to the open casket. For a long moment, he stared at the dead woman lying in the coffin. Eventually, he lifted his gaze to study the small group who had come together to pay their last respects. The young man's expression portrayed someone who seemed detached, totally uninterested. His actions dictated the fact he wanted to be somewhere else.

The young man slowly returned his attention back to the viewing. He leaned over staring closely at the old woman, deep in thought. Her face showed no sign of any anguish, she may have encountered throughout her lifetime; her stories gone forever.

A middle-aged woman, fresh tears cascading down over her cheeks, followed slowly in the man's footsteps. She stood next to him speaking in low whispers.

"Why did you come?"

"I needed to see for myself." His voice sounded full of scorn, bordering on hatred.

"I repeat my question."

"Don't talk to me," he growled. "In a few minutes I'll be gone, never to return." He squared himself to the woman so he could look her in the eyes. "You'll never have to see or hear of me again."

"That suits me fine."

An old man, leaning heavily on a walking stick, shuffled forward. Standing between the two, he whispered. "Not here, not now."

"Who are you to tell me what to do?" growled the young man, glaring cruel eyes at the old man.

"Jake, can't you speak nicely?"

"Shut up Bernice, I'll speak anyway I want."

"You shouldn't have come, there's nothing for you here."

"I'll be the judge."

"I hope you didn't come for money?" questioned Bernice.

"There is no need for you to know the reason why I came."

Bernice bowed her head, sobbing quietly. She hugged the book she held tighter for comfort. "I refuse to fight with my only brother."

"At last, you're starting to see things my way. I choose what I want and when to do it."

Bernice glared directly into her brother's eyes. "Your black suit matches the colour of your nature. Here, before you go, read this. You owe it to mother," she insisted, shoving the book at him.

"I owe her nothing. I warned her not to stay at the Oasis. She didn't listen."

Jake snatched the dull red leather bound book from his sister and threw it onto the floor next to the coffin. He marched past the onlookers to the outside.

Bernice picked the book up, studying the expensive cover for damage. Sighing heavily, she held it tight against her chest. Stepping into the sunlight, Bernice glared at her brother, lighting a cigarette.

"I see you're into a healthy lifestyle."

"What's it to you? Why do you even care?"

"I know you should've given mother and father a chance before turning your back on them or the Oasis."

"Poppycock! I decided, I didn't want to live in a prison."

"I've never viewed the Oasis as a prison."

"It's high time you did."

"How can I, I've always loved the place," answered Bernice, again shoving the book at him.

"What's the book?" snarled Jake.

"Every one of mother's thoughts is recorded in the book."

"In her memoirs," corrected Jake. Pulling off his tie, he gave a non-caring shrug of a shoulder.

"Why don't you read the book for five minutes," urged Bernice.

The sparkle in her eyes forced Jake to hesitate.

The old man who stood at the coffin emerged from the graveyard quiet funeral chapel. He stood on the top step, grinning. His furrowed brow depicted he'd seen too much sun over his lifetime.

"Stop smirking," yelled Jake, lifting his fist into the air. "Old man, if you want to fight, I'm ready."

"Come, sit in the privacy of the quiet room overlooking the grounds," hinted Bernice, stepping in his way.

"The only destination I'm interested in is the local hotel for a drink."

Bernice cleared her throat. "Please, we have much to discuss." A soft pleasant expression swept her face. Her tone of voice could melt any man's heart.

Jake slipped out of his pinstriped suit jacket, placing it on his arm.

"I'll give you five minutes; not a second longer."

Bernice pointed to a narrow path, leading through the manicured garden to another building not far from the chapel. She climbed the steps and waited for Jake to catch up. The moment they entered the building and walked into the small room, she closed the door.

Leather bound law books each one in mint condition filled the bookcase adjacent to the door. A Tasmanian oak table and three chairs were set up in front of the window. The grey carpet looked new.

"Sit down. I want you to read the first page," jeered Bernice, shoving the leather-bound book under his nose.

"What if I don't want to sit?"

"I insist." Her soft gentle voice, her feminine facial expressions she left on the other side of the door. The tone in her voice now sounded cold, almost hostile.

Jake pulled a second cigarette from his pocket, placing it in his mouth.

Bernice reached out, yanked it from between his lips, throwing it in the small bin next to the table. "You can't smoke in here," she scolded.

"Don't tell me what to do. I need something to settle my nerves. I don't like it here. I want this moment to be over so I can get back to the city. It's where I belong. If you stopped to analyze what I just told you for five minutes you'd know I'm right."

"Is it the reason why you smoke?"

“It is none of your business.”

“I guess it’s a fair comment.”

“I’m enthralled to the back teeth, we finally agree on a second idea.”

“Brother, even though we don’t get on, I’m happy you decided to come. Your presence means a lot to me.”

Jake answered in a flat voice. “I’m thrilled to be here.”

“Why do you have to be so cynical?”

“I’ve told you this before. It’s my business, not yours.”

Bernice’s shoulders slumped. She looked away to hide her tears.

“What did you expect?” queried Jake.

“Couldn’t you have come for a visit at least once in the last twenty years?”

“Tell me, who in their right mind would want to visit the Oasis? The place isn’t exciting. In fact, it’s an isolated, boring hole in the ground.”

Bernice stared her brother in the eyes.

“It’s a lovely place. If you’d only given it the chance it deserves you might have found it therapeutic. If you came to stay for a week you’d never want to leave.”

“Spare me the grief. It’s a boring, horrible place. I grew up there just like you.”

“We had great times waiting for the leaves to fall off the trees so we could kick them high in the air. Not to mention saying what we thought a cloud resembled or what it might change into as it floated above our heads.”

“If you say,” growled Jake interrupting. “I used to dream every night about leaving the dry, dusty forsaken land. When I left I never looked back.” Glaring at his sister he dropped the book Bernice gave him onto the desktop. “If you had followed me you’d feel the same way I do now. The city’s nightlife made me rich. The city itself is exciting beyond belief.”

Bernice gently picked up the book, thrusting it at his chest. “Read it. You owe the dead woman. If you’ve forgotten who she is, the woman is your mother. Her name is Naomi.”

“Again I tell you I owe her nothing.” Jake glanced at the waste paper bin before lobbing the book through the air. It missed the bin, landing heavily on the floor.

“Maybe missing the bin is an omen,” hinted Bernice.

Jake grunted. Retrieving the book from the carpet he grinned maliciously before successfully throwing it in the bin on his second attempt.

Bernice thrust her knuckles onto her hips. “If this is the last thing I ever say to you, so be it. The city, the money, will never replace the splendor of the Oasis which sits in the middle of the Australian outback. Nothing compares to the morning glory which fringes the white clouds every new day, the birds, the cattle, or the peace the place brings.”

“Forget the wise old words. Tell me one thing before I leave. The old man hobbling up to the coffin, who is he? He resembles the local street bum.”

“He’s no street bum. He came to say a few last words and to relive old memories.”

Bernice walked over, picking the book out of the bin. She cut into the path of her brother, marching for the door. “Sit down and read.” Again she shoved it into his ribs forcing him to hold the book.

“Tell me one good reason why I should read it?”

“I’ve already told you it contains mum’s entire memories.”

"I don't care," Jake argued.

"You should."

"Out there in the middle of Australia, she was never a mother to me. I'm happy I left home at an early age. The city helped me grow up."

The door to the room quietly opened. A man wearing a grey two-piece suit and a loud tie hanging from his neck walked in.

"Excuse me, Sir, are you Jake Stanton?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I'm the solicitor in charge of the family fortune."

"Go away, you're not needed."

"Sir, the book you are holding has been left to you in the dead woman's will."

Jake massaged his temples. "What is it about this stupid book?"

The solicitor lowered his voice, the tone changing from friendly to authoritative

"Before the reading of the will commences, you and your sister must read the diary. Failure to heed this simple command will see you both automatically cut from the inheritance."

Jake's deceitful city nature slipped into overdrive. By kicking the chair across the room he wanted the man to know he wasn't happy. He pointed directly at his sister's green eyes.

"I'll read the first and the last page."

Opening the leather bound book, Jake commenced reading.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SMALL quaint church overlooking the tranquil bay looked picture-perfect. The ten bouquets of freshly picked red roses tied neatly at the end of each pew were exquisite. The flower girl and bride's maids looked superb.

The bride glanced at the long narrow window at the side of the church altar. She watched a brown leaf fall from the large oak tree. She marveled at the way the gentle sea breeze helped it float gently to the ground. Looking away from the window she faced her childhood sweetheart. The expression on her face radiated love and devotion exactly how a new bride should. Her long white silk dress which included a lace veil hid her nervousness.

The minister's eyes sparkled. His debut wedding was drawing to a close. Using a gentle tone, he announced. "Naomi and Bill, I now pronounce you man and-."

"Hold it. Freeze the wedding service," yelled a young woman standing in the exact center of the main doors leading into the church.

Her words cut deep into Naomi's spirit. She turned away from her future husband to glare at the person who interrupted her day. The one hundred strong onlookers, the same ones who made a ruckus over her four thousand dollar wedding dress were gob-smacked.

For far too long the old church remained barren of sound.

Naomi's heart skipped a beat. She wondered did the priest hear.

A rude mix of deep and high-pitched verbal diarrhea erupted from the guests. Every eye in the weatherboard building stared at the barefoot woman in a torn sky blue dress. She stood square to Naomi just inside the main door holding a baby while sweeping a young girl closer to her left hip.

Three kids fanned out from behind her.

Naomi scanned the sullen group. Switching her attention back to her future husband she whispered. "Bill, do you know this woman?" Her voice sounded alarmingly calm.

"I've never seen her before in my life," he mumbled back.

Naomi watched the woman boldly march along the pale red carpet. Abruptly stopping at the foot of the altar, she glared at each of the bridal parties in turn. She seemed to study Naomi's wedding dress before snorting. Moving her gaze to Bill she spat at the slate tiles he stood on.

"Excuse me," growled Bill.

"Bigamy is against the law, darling," snarled the woman.

"Excuse me," scoffed Naomi, echoing Bill's remark. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'm here to stop this farce of a wedding."

The tall thin woman swept long blonde hair from her face.

Naomi's best friend and bridesmaid, Kaite, stepped forward, shoving a tight fist at the woman.

"You might want to reconsider your thought," she yelled through a locked jaw. "Leave before this scene turns ugly. You certainly haven't been invited."

The woman pointed a finger at Bill. "I can prove I'm this man's wife."

Naomi folded her arms. "Let's see the proof."

Bill started to fidget. He focused on the many faces of the congregation hoping they weren't about to lynch him. "Yes, let's see this so-called proof."

The woman snatched a photo of Bill and her on their wedding day from a young sobbing four-year-old girl. She smirked dryly, shoving it under Naomi's nose. Unraveling a copy of the marriage license she handed it to the priest.

His shocked expression said it all.

CHAPTER THREE

NAOMI LAY flat on the bed staring at a dirty smudge mark on the ceiling.

"Kaite, Bill had been an amazing man, the perfect gentleman and definitely easy on the eyes. He didn't have to work too hard to sweep me up into his fantasy world." She sighed, jumped from the bed and walked across the room to the window.

Kaite rolled her eyes. "The falling leaf must've been a bad omen. It's been two years today. Get over it."

“I can’t.”

“Tell me something, did lover boy pay you any money for ruining your day? The dress cost you an absolute fortune let alone everything else he made you buy.”

“No.”

“Do you know where he is or what he’s doing?”

“No.”

“My dear girl, stop moping about this tiny shoe box-size apartment. Let’s go out to have some fun. I can already hear the nightlife calling from the Melbourne CBD and the sun has yet to set.”

“I don’t feel like doing anything,” confessed Naomi on a sigh.

“What about the bloke you met recently. Heard from him lately?”

“Don’t even start to mention him. Sometimes I feel he’s out there still watching every move I make.”

“You never did say much about him,” grunted Kaite.

“There’s not much to tell. We met on the dance floor three months ago. By the end of the night, I figured him for a creep. I ordered him out of my life.”

Kaite looked out across the Melbourne skyline at the setting sun. “You’re right he did look like a creep. We should go to the local nightclub to meet someone new.”

Naomi lowered her gaze to the street below. The people rushing past their building reminded her of ants. She knew the streetlights were about to blink on. The city’s nightlife will soon follow. She loved the dancing, the smell of the countless coffee shops, the restaurants and the theatres. She turned from the window, walked across the room and sat on the end of the bed.

“I’ve made up my mind, no more men.”

“Don’t make me laugh,” giggled Kaite.

“This time, I’m serious. They’re big trouble. The only thing they want is a quick roll in the hay. When they get bored they dump me and go onto the next one. I’m convinced there’s not a man anywhere in Australia who cares enough about a woman to treat her like a lady. I’ve been searching for years hoping to discover a man who is honest and will stay by my side for the rest of my life.”

“You won’t get an argument from me,” replied Kaite. “There’s only one thing wrong, you’ll be lonely for the rest of your life.”

Naomi flopped prone onto the bed. “I think I’ve made myself depressed.”

She eventually dragged her feet back to the window, palming an open hand at the city skyline.

“Surely I’m wrong. There must be a man out there somewhere.”

“If you quit trying so hard, maybe he might surface. Come on my dear girl, get dressed, the two of us are going out to have a great time and find romance.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“EXCUSE ME lady, my name’s Brandt. You’re in my seat.”

He reached up to take hold of an overhead leather strap. He stood swaying slightly to the rocking motion of the train. His facial expression portrayed a little boy who’d lost the most precious thing in the world.

The woman, on the higher side of middle age, didn’t look happy. She lifted her head, staring at the man hovering over her wearing a plain dark blue suit, grey shirt, and matching tie.

“Just in case you have any doubts, I sat here first, sonny,” she spat.

“I always sit in the seat closest to the front of the carriage.”

“Do you really, since when?”

“Yesterday,” announced Brandt.

“Get a life.”

“Please, I need to sit in your particular seat.”

“Listen, fella, I can see at least twenty vacant places in this carriage alone,” mocked the woman.

“I’m asking politely,” pleaded Brandt.

“Go away fly. I don’t like it when men grovel. They sound pathetic. Deep down they’re not real men at all.”

A few people diverted their gaze from the fences flashing past the train windows to the man towering over the woman. Whisperings travelled at speed from person to person throughout the carriage. In less than a minute laughter erupted from the forty commuters.

“I know I’m making a fool of myself, but what if I paid you?”

“Can’t you tell I’m not interested?”

Brandt fished for his wallet. “Twenty. I’ll be happy if you’d accept a twenty-dollar note. The only thing you need to do is vacate your seat.”

The lady lifted her hand to hide her proud look. She winked at the young pregnant woman sitting opposite her.

“I’ll pay you two-hundred for the privilege of sitting exactly where you are.”

The woman looked up. “You must be desperate.”

“It’s imperative I sit in the seat. I’ve exactly three minutes left.”

A tall heavy-set man wearing a black bikie jacket walked the length of the carriage. The man rolled up his sleeves revealing a large ugly tattoo of a skull and crossbow on each massive arm.

“Lady, is this bloke annoying you?”

“Yes.”

The heavily tattooed man grabbed Brandt by the tie, dragging him in close. “Fella, leave the woman alone. There’s a seat with your name on it at the other end of the carriage.”

“I need that particular seat she’s sitting on,” moaned Brandt.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t knock your block off?”

“I don’t need to give you a reason.”

“I’ll punch your lights out mate if you don’t move away.”

“Please, listen to reason. I offered to pay for the seat,” explained Brandt.

“How much?” growled the man.

“This fly offered me two-hundred dollars,” reported the lady, interrupting.

The big man stared at the woman. “Lady, I’d take the money.”

The woman stood, staring Brandt in the eyes, holding out her hand.

“Thanks for vacating the seat,” shrieked Brandt, dropping the money into the palm of her hand.

He watched the woman walk to the other end of the carriage then saw her sit, scrutinizing his every move.

The moment Brandt spied the train which he hoped carried the young lady he’d seen in the nightclub a week earlier starting to draw level, the other commuters watched him staring out the window. Curiously they focused on the approaching train. Their whispers echoed the same words.

‘What’s so important?’

The two trains slowly drew level. Brandt couldn’t hide his disappointment. He faced the people staring at him.

“When I drove to work the other day I actually saw a gorgeous young woman sitting in the other train while I waited at the rail crossing. Except at the nightclub, it’s the only other place I’ve seen her. I did hope to see her close up. She’s not sitting where I thought she’d be.”

“Try a different window,” called the woman he’d given the money to. “This scene is more interesting than a TV show.”

Brandt’s pupils danced at the hope as he sprinted from window to window. He started to panic when the trains began to drift apart. Staring out of the last window he caught a glimpse of her. The young lady looked up, flashing a cursory glance his way. She gave a quick smile before the trains forked to go their separate ways.

Brandt leapt into the air yelling at the top of his lungs. “She looked at me and smiled.”

“I too saw a young good lookin’ shiela glance your way, fella,” stated the man with the skull and crossbones. “She’s a bit of alright. If I were you I’d track her down even if it took me the rest of my life. I reckon it was worth every cent of the two-hundred bucks you paid just to catch a glimpse.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“I’M OFF to the office,” yelled Brandt.

Devin, Brandt’s best mate stumbled out of his bedroom on the way to the kitchen. Focusing on the wall clock he mumbled.

“It’s only six-thirty in the morning.”

“I want an early start.”

“No you don’t, you’re obsessed with trying finding the woman you saw last Saturday night at the nightclub and again when you were on the train. You’ve been tracking her down for the past five days.”

“I can’t get her image out of my mind.”

“Heed my advice, give it up,” snarled Devon.

“After spending two-hundred hard earned bucks to buy a seat on a train, I’ll never give up the chase. She saw me looking at her and she deliberately smiled at me. The dozen or so people I’ve talked to on four different railway stations reported they’d seen the girl. I’m more determined than ever to find her.”

“Why do such a thing?”

“Do what?”

“Pay two hundred dollars for a seat on a train.”

“I’d pay a thousand dollars just to catch another glimpse of her.”

“You’re crazy,” jeered Devin. “I suppose I’ll have to help you. The sooner I do the quicker you’ll forget the woman; especially after she tells you to get lost. Maybe you might even listen to me.”

“I don’t need your help to find the love of my life. I know the train she catches,” confessed Brandt.

“Let me tell you something. I’ve heard enough about how you hound each woman you meet. Don’t forget the boss wants us in his office first thing this morning. There’s a rumour floating about he’s looking to handball an important advertising project to someone. If you’re not in the office on time I won’t be making up any excuses.”

“Don’t worry about me, I’ll be there.”

Devin stood shaking his head, watching the front door close. After making a mug of coffee he went back to bed.

Brandt arrived at the train station fifteen minutes before he expected the young lady to appear. He marched over to an old woman selling flowers from under a faded blue awning.

“How much for a bunch of red roses?” he asked.

“For you, fifteen dollars,” answered the woman in a strong Italian accent.

Brandt paid the money and got busy watching business people bustling past. Leaning against the wall of the ticket booth he spied the young lady he’d been searching for walking towards him. Completely hypnotized by her poetic movements Brandt watched her stroll to the end of the platform. She stood staring down the tracks for the next train when Brandt made his move. Walking up to her he studied the style in her long auburn hair. The clothes she wore reeked of business. She looked tall, thin and ultra gorgeous. Brandt stepped next to the woman, straightening his tie.

“These are for you,” he said, thrusting the flowers forward.

The young lady smiled at Brandt. “They’re for me?”

Brandt already felt excited. To him, the young lady’s voice sounded angelic, the perfect pitch.

“Yes, for you.”

“Have we met? You look familiar.”

“Sort of,” replied Brandt.

“Correct me if I’m wrong; didn’t I see you yesterday when our trains were travelling in the same direction? You pressed your face against the glass.”

“Yes. I’ve been searching for you everywhere since I noticed you on the dance floor last Saturday night. I’ve even been having dreams about you. Please, don’t be alarmed, I’ve never seen a woman more beautiful. Your eyes, face, clothes, are picture-perfect. May I ask your name?”

“It’s illegal to stalk someone,” she quipped.

“I know it is. I have to confess you’re the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen.”

“You’ve said that compliment before. I’m flattered, Mr.?”

“I’m Brandt Dusting. What’s your lovely name?”

“Naomi. I stand by what I said about the stalking issue.”

“Please, accept my small gift of flowers.”

Naomi eyed the man suspiciously. “I’m not sure if I should.”

Two hundred eyes watched the man grovel as one hundred commuters readied themselves to board the approaching train.

Naomi shot the man an innocent schoolgirl’s smile. “Judging by the looks we’re receiving, I’ll have to accept.”

“Thank you.”

“No, thank you.”

A loud applause erupted from the commuters who were inching closer to the edge of the train platform, waiting for the train to rumble to a stop.

Brandt asked his question over the squeal of the brakes. “May I buy you a coffee sometime?”

Naomi’s grin hid the fact she felt deeply embarrassed.

“It’s the least I can do seeing how you have made a complete jerk of yourself. Seeing how I’m always at the office an hour early, now’s a good time. If you turn out to be a weirdo, I can leave and still be at work on time.”

Brandt followed Naomi into the train carriage, inviting himself to sit next to her on the seat closest to the door.

“What career are you into?” asked Naomi, starting the conversation.

“Advertising for the television,” replied Brandt. “I’m an advertising executive. What about you?”

“I’m not sure if I want to reveal my career at this early stage.”

“I live about ten minutes from here,” blurted Brandt. “Do you live close by?”

Naomi focused on his seemingly honest eyes. “I’m close, yes.”

“I hope I’m not moving too fast; can I have your phone number?”

“Sure, why not. This is our stop.” Naomi stood, waiting for the train’s door to open before stepping onto the platform.

Brandt escorted her across the busy road to the coffee shop, opened the door, closing it in his wake. The two ordered their cappuccinos and sat in the last two seats furthest from the door waiting for their drinks to arrive.

The café was unusually quiet. Three other customers sitting at an outside table were sipping coffee. They seemed oblivious to the fact cars and trucks were cramming the road. The wind created by the vehicles buffeted the blonde haired woman's hair.

"Please inform me if you're single?" asked Brandt.

"Yes, I am. Are you?"

"Yes, I certainly am."

Naomi leaned forward across the table. "You do realize I'm not the girl of your dreams."

"I believe you are."

"You don't know anything about me."

"At the moment, I don't. There's no doubt in my mind I want to."

They swiped their coffees from the hands of a smiling late teen boy and fell silent waiting for the lad to walk off. Naomi felt uncomfortable at the overbearing man staring at her and turned her head so she could look out the window at the people walking past on their way to work.

"I'm positive the moment you discover I'm actually a nice bloke you'll want me in your life," advised Brandt, reaching out to hold Naomi's hand.

"I'll see what the weather brings. Hopefully, it won't rain."

"Can I buy you lunch?"

"Okay, you seem like a nice enough bloke. You can pick me up outside the court house at twelve noon."

"You're a lawyer?"

"Sort of, I work for the taxation department. In two hours I have to be in court to testify someone had committed fraud."

"Sounds like an exciting career. May I sit at the back of the court, we can walk out together?"

"I think it'll be nice if you were there. It's been a tough case."

Naomi could feel her heart starting to melt. Maybe there was a slim chance the man sitting opposite her is indeed the decent bloke she'd been searching for.

Brandt gave her a meaningful smile before slipping his hand around hers.

"May I walk you to the courthouse?"

Naomi grinned back. "I think I'd like you to escort me."

She stood, gathered up her bag and briefcase and followed Brandt out of the cafe.

CHAPTER SIX

"YOUR HONOR, the witness has stated he'd been drinking heavily on the night of the alleged fraud and the disappearance of Mrs. Annette Craven. I believe the witness' statement has been soiled," insisted Naomi.

“Objection your Honor, we have already established my client consumed no more than three drinks,” bellowed a tall heavy-set man wearing a black Italian suit.

“Where’s this leading to?” asked the Judge. “The court has already heard all this.”

“Your Honor, I’m trying to discredit what the witness, Mr. Burrows, is telling us,” replied Naomi.

The Judge waved an open palmed hand. “Get to the point.”

“At 1:00am on Tuesday the eighth of November 2005, Mr. Burrows’ statement reads, and I quote his exact words. ‘I saw the accused, Mr. Luke Craven deliberately and with a degree of accuracy, wearing a determined expression on his face walked across the room, sat opposite a man and commenced to write out a cheque for 5,000 thousand Australian dollars.’ Is this statement of yours correct?”

“Yes.”

“How close were you to the scene?”

“About ten metres,” replied Burrows.

“Your statement reads; ‘you followed the man who you have stated was Mr. Luke Craven to his home and hit a man over the head using a beer bottle. You then drove the victim to the hospital.’ Is this correct?”

“No.”

“It’s your statement to the police,” chirped Naomi, throwing the paper she held at his face.

“I’m confused,” mumbled Burrows, starting to drum his fingertips together.

“You’re confused due to the fact you witnessed nothing. Luke Craven paid you so he could have an airtight fraudulent alibi. There was no attacker; no beer bottle for you to use as a weapon. Your Honor, this farce has gone on long enough. This so-called witness is, in fact, nothing more than a hired man who has been paid to lie to this court. To sum up, I have proof, two airline tickets were purchased; both are a one way trip to England, one for Mr. Craven and one for Mrs. Craven.”

“Objection,” yelled the other lawyer.

“Over-ruled,” advised the Judge.

“Okay,” yelled the man. He pounded the desktop using a tight fist before standing and pointing a stubby finger directly at Naomi.

The security guard grabbed his arm, forcing him to sit.

“Craven had swindled millions of dollars from a lot of people and devised a way to protect his wealth while keeping them off his back. He asked me to help him fake his death. If I agreed he’d pay me a million dollars. He signed over everything he owned into his wife’s name. Four weeks after his funeral I was to buy an airline ticket to England. The moment I arrived, he’d hand over a further five percent of his cash. It’s a mere pittance of the amount in his Swiss bank account. He didn’t know I wanted everything. His cars, his mansions, his summer home in Hawaii and his entire Swiss bank account containing thirty million dollars. To top it off, I had planned to make Craven’s fake death real. His passing would give me the green light so Miriam, his wife and I could have a great life together. We’ve been secretly seeing each other for over ten years.”

The Judge stared at the man. “Case closed. Arrest the witness. I will also send a message to the police to arrest Luke Craven.”

The gavel came down pending the court case. The large room erupted into a loud ruckus.

“Naomi, you were awesome,” boasted Brandt. He waited patiently while she packed her black leather attaché case. “Behind your beauty is a clever mind.”

“Thanks for the compliment.”

“Lunch?” asked Brandt.

“I want to take a walk first. The walls have ears in a café.” She looked directly into Brandt’s eyes. “Please, don’t take the idea of a walk the wrong way. After the courtroom fiasco, I’m a little drained. I always have a walk after a legal battle. You’re more than welcome to join me.”

Brandt and Naomi strolled across the road, entering the Melbourne botanical gardens. The path appeared to be weed free. The smell of freshly cut grass still hovered in the air.

“If you have a problem, I’m here to listen,” hinted Brandt.

“Thank you. If I may be blunt, I’m concerned about moving into a new relationship.”

“I think you have a case of cold feet.”

“I think it’s something more.”

“Why?”

“The last man I loved turned out to be a bigamist. I found out the ugly news standing at the altar in my wedding dress the day before my twenty-fourth birthday.”

“I’d never do anything so horrible. I believe a woman should be admired. She should also be treated affectionately at all times.”

Brandt ushered Naomi along the path towards a garden seat situated under a large gum tree. A young couple walking in a loving embrace glanced their way. Brandt gave them a dirty look. Keeping up his stare he watched them scurry off towards the road. Brandt waited for Naomi to sit on the wooden seat before he mirrored her posture. Reaching out he took hold of her hand. Naomi felt uncomfortable over his unsolicited move. She waited patiently for an elderly couple to shuffle past before pulling her hand away.

“Enough about my background,” insisted Naomi. “Tell me what you’re working on?”

“I have to think up a slogan for hair shampoo.”

“How’s it coming?”

“Great. Want to hear it?”

“Okay.”

“I based the slogan on someone I know.”

“Who is the person?”

“You,” he boasted.

“We don’t know anything about each other.”

“We don’t have to. The moment I saw you on the dance floor you stirred my imagination. The slogan is still untitled, though I’m thinking along the lines of; ‘To catch your mate in seconds.’ The whole add will run something like this. ‘Two trains come together. The girl looks up when a man in the other train notices the shine in her hair. He sets out to find her. Eventually, they get married. The actors will say a punch line something like the following; using this shampoo, men will notice you even when you’re on another train.’

“Corny,” advised Naomi.

“What do you mean?”

“I think our time together is over.”

“I can’t allow it,” demanded Brandt.

“Please respect my wishes when I tell you I never want to see you again.”

“You can’t walk out of my life. You’re my soul mate.”

“I certainly am not,” grumbled Naomi, seriously.

“Please, give me a chance. It’s the only thing I ask.”

“Thanks again for the flowers.”

Naomi stood to leave. She extended her hand to attempt a businesslike handshake. She waited for Brandt to copy.

He never did.

“Do you believe in love at first sight?”

“No, I don’t. There’s no such thing.”

Naomi retracted her hand, placed her handbag on her shoulder and picked up her briefcase. Brandt watched the woman walk along the solid brick path back towards the road. Standing, he stretched before strolling after her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“KAITE, DO you think I could be mistaken for a man in this outfit?”

Naomi’s best friend stared at her with doubt written in her grey eyes.

“Comparing your figure to a man’s, no matter how hard you try you’ll never resemble a bloke. I wish I could have a figure just as good. How many times have I said you belong on the catwalk, not in the taxation office, or courtroom?”

Naomi twisted and turned in front of the full-length mirror studying her new outfit. She’d bought blue denim straight leg jeans and a pale blue western shirt in a one-hour bargain sale from a small shop not far from the courthouse.

“Are you sure I couldn’t pass for a bloke? The mirror says otherwise.”

“What gives?” asked Kaite. Rolling off the bed, she walked over to the full-length mirror.

Naomi’s eyes sparkled. “Does my shirt and long auburn hair clash?”

“We’ve known each other since pre-school. In twenty-two years have I ever lied to you?”

“There has been one time,” she giggled.

Kaite poked Naomi playfully in the ribs.

“I’m kidding,” she squealed.

“Tell me the real reason why you want to look like a bloke. I thought you wanted to marry; have a quiver full of little arrows.”

“It had been my plan.”

“What’s changed your mind? Have you and Brandt been fighting again?”

“Yes. He’s turned over a different leaf. He’s gone from a rich green colour to a rotting stinking brown.”

“Care to explain?”

“Not only did he turn into an obsessive monster, I asked him what he thought the perfect gift for a woman might be. I’m happy I found out the truth. He only wanted me for two things; a roll in the cot and his stupid advertising slogans.”

Kaite pretended to vomit. “A bloke like him, you don’t need. How did he answer your question?”

“He believes in his miniature brain a woman only wants plenty of money to spend,” replied Naomi flopping backwards onto the bed.

“You’re joking?”

“No. I kind of hoped he’d be Mr. Right. He turned out to be Mr. Wrong. Kaite, I’m fed up. All men lie and cheat. I’ve given up on thinking a man could ever understand or even contemplate the meaning of the perfect gift.”

Naomi walked to her seventh-floor apartment window. Parting the curtains using the back of her hand she stared out across Port Phillip Bay. It was the day before Halloween 2009. Twelve months to the day at their last Halloween party, Brandt finally asked for her hand in marriage. He officially announced it on an impersonal level. Everyone she knew received an invite to the party, her parents, his parents, Kaite, and of course all their friends. She actually enjoyed the party. Music sounded great. Food tasted terrific. She finally put the embarrassing announcement behind her by convincing herself it must have been his nervous nature. After the party, they sat on the beach watching the full moon slowly sink in the night sky. Sitting on the sand under the stars felt romantic. Falling asleep in each other’s arms till the sun came up happened to be a moment she wanted to cherish.

Studying the lights of the city Naomi sighed away her disappointment. She indeed felt passionate over Melbourne’s nightlife. She lowered her gaze to the street below, focusing on the cars being driven at speed past the building. The people looked the size of ants. They were hurrying along the street totally unaware they were being watched. From the moment she and Brandt broke up, she lost the desire to party. She felt lonely to the bone. She wanted to meet an honest man. Brandt came across as a good talker. He respected her at first before turning obsessive. Failing to discover the perfect gift quenched her love for him. Could it be there’s no such thing? Naomi stared sideways at Kaite.

‘If you didn’t help me I’d have never made it through,’ she thought.

Focusing on the West Gate Bridge, Naomi watched a ship slowly slip underneath its wide span. She saw the street lights start to blink on and grinned at their friendliness. Port Phillip Bay looked inviting. She imagined the long hot days to come when people flocked to the water’s edge to escape the Melbourne summer.

“Kaite, somewhere out there a man must be waiting. I wonder if he’s lying on his bed looking up at the ceiling thinking where his, ‘Miss Right’ could be. He might even be wondering what she’s doing right now. Or maybe he’s being driven in a limo to a nightclub. Maybe he’s a pilot preparing to depart for America or London or Jamaica. I want to find a man who is strong, honest and fun. I want him to give me the perfect gift.”

Kaite walked across the floor. She draped her arm across Naomi's shoulder. Her free hand scraped her long auburn hair from her face. She leaned sideways and whispered in her ear.

"You're rambling. You must know you won't find a man anywhere in Melbourne, especially at the tax office who has any idea on the perfect gift. I have a strong feeling such a man doesn't exist."

Naomi's pupils sparkled. "I need a change."

"You're scheming something, what is it?"

"Don't worry, I'm not turning funny."

Naomi walked to her bedside table, opened the top draw, wrapping her French polished nails around a newspaper article. She marched back to the window, flapping it in Kaite's face.

"What's this?" she quizzed, clutching the paper before it swung back and hit her in the nose.

"Read the situation vacant column. Let me know what you think?"

Kaite dropped the newspaper article to arm's length.

"I thought you told me the tax office is a great place to work. You love the job."

"I do. I love all those numbers. I live to work. I want to work to live."

"If you love the job so much what's the problem?"

"It's like you said Mr. Right doesn't work in Melbourne."

"You want to throw in the towel after two bad relationships?" questioned Kaite.

"I want to work where Brandt has no hope of finding me. I need to feel safe from his obsessive nature."

Kaite lifted the newspaper again, starting to read. She looked up.

"You're going to work as a waitress on a cruise ship?"

"No. My plans don't include water. You know I can't swim. Read the article underneath."

Kaite dropped her gaze back onto the paper.

"You've underlined the next job advertisement." She threw the newspaper onto the bed. "The job sounds a little too drastic a change."

"It'll be perfect," chirped Naomi.

"You won't find decent men out in the middle of nowhere."

"Out in the Australian bush there are no beaches to drown in either," stated Naomi.

"Mightn't be much water; what about the number of spiders you'll see?"

"I'll be fine, thanks for asking."

"What about the notion you love the action of the city?"

"The job's only for two weeks. Besides, it gives me an opportunity to forget Brandt. I need time to clear my head. It'll give me a much-needed rest. Two weeks of not thinking about a man who only wants me for his job or a roll in the cot is exactly what I need."

Kaite looked down her nose, shaking her head.

"You don't have to scold me," whimpered Naomi, pouting.

"How long have I told you to move on; to forget the bloke?"

"It seems forever. I felt totally in love. Brandt eventually showed his true leopard spots. I trusted him when he said he needed to work late. I even made up excuses when I rung his

mobile phone and Gina, his secretary answered. What makes me choke is the fact I discovered he took her to the place we called ours. It was where we enjoyed our first all night date and I gave him my heart. He called the place a sacred site. He knew how much I loved it. He wined and dined her in the Chinese restaurant before escorting her upstairs. Why take her to the restaurant where we first kissed? Every year on our wedding anniversary we were going to book our room. It happened to be a beautiful place overlooking the bay. A bottle of champagne sat in an ice bucket in the middle of a small round wooden coffee table. What upsets me the most, they slept together in the same room, the same bed we did. He promised to take me back to our room each year to celebrate our anniversary.”

“Don’t start the tears again,” warned Kaite.

Water started cascading down Naomi’s cheeks. Her voice began to falter.

“He broke my heart.”

“Get over it. You found out about the other women six months ago.”

Naomi dried her eyes using the back of her hand. “I intend to forget all about Brandt. I vow from this day forth I will not give my heart to another loser. I will never make the same mistake again. I’m going to search for Mr. Right. If he can’t figure out what the perfect gift is, he can go ride his bike into someone else’s life. I can guarantee she won’t stick around for long.”

“Good luck. I’ve been searching for years to discover the right bloke.”

“If I stay positive, surely the right bloke will enter my life.”

“This job mightn’t be exactly what you have interpreted,” hinted Kaite, changing the subject. “Why don’t you look for a city job? There are a lot of nightclubs we haven’t been to yet. Or you could always take me to Perth. My bags are packed.”

Naomi rolled her eyes, swiping the article off the bed.

“I’m twenty-six. I’m in need of a holiday. The interview is tomorrow morning.”

Kaite snatched the paper out of Naomi’s hand. “It says here a man going by the name of Mr. Earl Stanton is searching for a Jackaroo.”

“Read on,” urged Naomi, sounding excited.

Kaite dug her nose from the paper. “They want a bloke who has knowledge of office duties.”

“The add states not essential.”

“You’re overlooking one important fact.”

“What?”

“This Stanton character is looking for a bloke.”

Naomi shrugged, diving into the wardrobe for a small suitcase. Her voice came back muffled.

“I’ll be a Jillaroo.”

Kaite read more of the article aloud. “You have to be at Moorabbin airport by 5:00am. You don’t get out of bed before 7:00am.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

NAOMI ARRIVED at Moorabbin airport by taxi. She paid the fare and collected her luggage from the back seat.

The small airport appeared to be abandoned.

Although she spied several light planes anchored to the ground by ropes when she was driven through an open large metal gate, Naomi stood in the dark watching the tail lights of the taxi dim from view.

Then they were gone.

Feeling a cold shiver run down her back, Naomi looked around. The word 'mistake' hung heavy in her mind. Naomi wrapped her arms across her chest in an attempt to stay warm.

'Maybe Kaite's right,' she thought, shivering in the pre-dawn air. 'There's nobody here.'

Naomi glanced across the tarmac at the airport's dark control tower. It seemed abandoned. "This place is only forty-five minutes from Melbourne CBD. My enthusiasm has waned," she mumbled, trying to rub the goose bumps from the surface of her arms.

Clutching her knapsack tight in one hand, a small suitcase in the other, Naomi lifted her head, squared her shoulders under the sudden weight and walked to the closest office block.

After trying to open the locked door to the first office, Naomi looked through the window into the total darkness. She held her breath hoping to hear a noise. She felt the dying cold breeze sweeping her cheeks. The clang of something metal against the flagpole around the other side of the building caught her attention.

The clanging sounded intermittent at best. Deciding to investigate, Naomi walked towards the noise. Rounding the corner of the building she spied three flagpoles. A floodlight from the building poured light onto a narrow concrete path. A twin-engine plane sparkled in the security lighting. Naomi marveled at its near new condition. A small square box with holes in the sides had been placed near the front wheel of the plane.

'Obviously, the plane is being loaded,' she thought, standing in the shadows of the building to watch.

The idea of smugglers or just plain illegal goings on stirred her spirit. Naomi reached for her mobile phone, her index finger hovering above the number zero. Three quick jabs will have the cops listening to any illegal jargon she might uncover.

"Bad idea," she mumbled. "The light from my phone could easily give my hiding place away."

Naomi suddenly felt bold, slipped the phone back into her jeans pocket and slid along the building's wall, praying the large box on the ground belonged to Earl Stanton.

The distance between the office door and the tip of plane's wing couldn't have been any more than several large steps. Standing next to the opened office door and hearing nothing, she looked in. A single 60-watt incandescent light globe lit the deserted internal office space which looked no larger than a small shed. Naomi entered and dropped her bags onto the grey carpet. Her reflection in a small mirror hanging on the wall watched her every move. Naomi noted her face looked nervous. She'd dressed in the dark so as not to wake Kaite. Naomi pulled a hair tie

from her top pocket and quickly tied her hair into a tight ponytail. Watching her shoulders slump, she faked a grin at the mirror.

The image in the mirror did the same.

"This is a stupid idea," she mumbled. Remembering the vow she told Kaite, the image in the mirror wagged a finger at her. "I can do this. I'll run the outback farm using an iron fist. I'll show those farm boys who's the boss, even if it's only for two weeks. Look out boys Naomi Fitzgerald is on her way. Goodbye Brandt, you heart breaker you."

Naomi heard a cough. Turning on her toes, she faced the office door. The man casually leaning against the doorframe watched her every move. His six foot two-inch frame took up most of the space. He wore faded blue jeans and a white-collar shirt. His handsome tanned face seemed to grin at her. His azure coloured eyes glistened from the overhead light globe.

"Can I help you, Miss. Fitzgerald?"

"Yes, you can."

"Are you a movie star?" asked the man.

"No, I'm not. Why do you ask?"

"Movie stars talk to mirrors. I thought you were rehearsing some lines to a smash hit production."

"You watch too many movies," mocked Naomi.

"I don't watch them at all, including westerns."

Naomi saw the man's lazy smile deepen. She'd never seen a more natural or provocative grin on a man. It seemed to reach out to her, saying, come get me. Her body started to tingle at the thought of falling asleep in his arms under countless stars on a clear night. She sighed inwardly. 'What a fantasy.'

"What do you do in your spare time?"

The man's grin turned into a chuckle.

"I don't see the funny side of my question," jeered Naomi, slamming her hands onto her hips.

"Wearing your type of outfit I felt positive you'd be staring in a western movie."

"You sound like a real jerk. Believe me, I've known a few in my time."

"Is there anyone in particular?"

Naomi scoffed at his remark.

"Don't turn defensive on me I'm only making conversation."

"My personal life is none of your business."

The man stepped into the office and walked towards the filing cabinet at the wall opposite the door.

"Stay away," blurted Naomi.

"I've been given permission to be in here. Have you?"

"If you're Mr. Stanton, yes I have."

The man looked her up and down. "Did you buy a new outfit?"

"If you're so hooked on what a person wears you should take a look at yourself sometime."

The man fell silent staring at his short-sleeved white-collar shirt, faded blue jeans and dirty boots.

“Did I scratch an open wound? I must advise you a coiled length of rope clipped to your brown belt doesn’t help you to look fashionable. I must add your oversized brass buckle could use a good polish.”

“My family is in a little financial trouble.”

Naomi’s face took on a touch of crimson. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m attempting to say you’d look great in anything, even if you had to borrow my dirty belt for a while.”

“If you’re trying to apologize, I accept.” She pointed to his belt buckle. “What’s the inscription read?”

“Read?”

“What’s the word on your dirty brass buckle?” Naomi barked.

“Oasis,” replied the man starting to chuckle again.

The corners of Naomi’s mouth quivered slightly. Remember your vow, she warned inwardly. No man will try to run your life again. She successfully painted a picture of Brandt in her mind so she could give the man in the room a heartless stare. She couldn’t tell if he had actually tried to make a pass at her or soften her up for a surprise attack.

The man opened the filing cabinet and started to rummage through a drawer full of papers. He eventually found a notepad, closed the drawer, turned and brushed past her on the way to the table.

Naomi frowned at the touch of their arms. His skin felt hard from a lifetime in the sun. His shoulders were square and solid. She decided the man had seen a lot of hard work over the years. Standing in front of him she cast a shadow over the page he started writing on.

“Are you still here?” he asked, looking up.

“Yes, I’m still here. I’m waiting on information. Do you know Earl Stanton? If you do where can I find him?”

Naomi felt her knees buckle at seeing his natural lazy smile again. She groped for the table’s edge.

The man stood, reaching out his hand. “I don’t think you’re about to jump me. I’m Trent.”

“Naomi,” she replied.

They shook hands.

“Naomi Fitzgerald, yes, I heard you say your name to the mirror. What really brings a beautiful girl here at this time? I’m sure you didn’t come here to talk to yourself in a mirror.” Trent started to chuckle yet again.

“Do you think it’s funny?”

“Not on the least, sweetheart.”

“I’m not your sweetheart. Tell me, why were you laughing?”

“You being so gorgeous, I really thought you were a movie star,” he replied.

Naomi gagged on her next breath. His sentence took her by surprise. She felt angry at being flattered, frustrated and embarrassed at the same time. She couldn’t remember a time when a man didn’t throw himself at her.

“I’ve already stated why I’m here. How many different ways do I have to say I’m looking for Earl Stanton before you’ll answer my question?” Naomi pulled the neatly folded newspaper add out of her top pocket, dropping it onto Trent’s notepad.

“I don’t think you’re the right person for the job,” he argued.

Naomi leaned on the table. She easily resisted the urge to kiss the man. Whether Stanton felt happy or not he was going to give her this two-week job. “How do you know?” she hissed.

“I just know.”

“Tell me where Stanton is. I want to hear his argument myself.”

“He’s at the Oasis.”

“It doesn’t make sense. The article in the newspaper reads I have to be here at 5:00am. Now you’re telling me he’s at a place I’ve never heard of.”

“Lady, don’t waste my time. I have a lot of work to do before I get home.”

“Where is home?”

“I’m not saying.”

“Or you won’t say?”

Trent stepped over to the filing cabinet, locked it then walked towards the office door.

“I gave up sleep to be here at this lousy time of night, the least you can do is tell me where I can find Stanton?”

Trent shrugged, stepping out into the cool air. He raised his shirt collar as he walked to the plane. Naomi watched him push the large box gently into the plane and close the cargo door.

“Is Stanton in another building?” Naomi asked, marching over.

Trent looked her way. “You sure are a stubborn woman.”

“I am not. I’m a determined one.”

“He’s not anywhere around here. He’s at the Oasis.”

“Yes, you’ve said. If you’d be kind enough to point me in the direction of this, ‘Oasis place,’ you keep referring to, I’ll be on my way. We’ll never see each other again.”

Trent pointed north.

“Thank you,” jeered Naomi.

In the sudden temperature drop of the new day, Naomi rubbed her bare arms. Retrieving her bags from the office, she gave the man a sour look.

“Are you planning to walk there?” asked Trent. He let go of another slight chuckle.

“I don’t think it’s any of your business,” jeered Naomi. She turned her back, setting herself to walk off.

“Now look who’s being pig-headed?”

“How far is it to the Oasis?” Naomi growled.

“Four hours.”

“I can handle four hours of walking.”

“Four hours of flying time.” Trent trotted over. Grabbing her bags he placed them on the ground next to the plane. “I’m about to depart for the Oasis. After I make a quick phone call and provided the boss says okay, I’ll take you there; deal?”

“It’s a deal.”

Naomi watched Trent gaze longingly at the sky. She saw him shake his head before checking his watch for the fifth time.

"Is there something wrong?" Naomi tried hard to use a caring voice. It sounded the opposite.

"Maybe," he mumbled.

"The word isn't a proper answer."

Trent grabbed his faded brown leather jacket from inside the plane, handing it over. "Here, put this on, you look cold."

Naomi felt grateful for the gesture, slipping into the oversized jacket. She wondered how he could tell in the half dark she felt cold. Or in fact, why should he even care?

"The old thing looks better on you than me!" exclaimed Trent.

Naomi grinned, trying to convince herself the knocking of her knees came from the cold, not from the smell of his manly after-shave trapped in the jacket's collar.

"Miss Fitzgerald, are you okay?"

Looking at his handsome tanned face made her feel worse. "Yes. Why?"

"Your face looks a different shade. I'll go make my phone call. It won't take long."

Naomi shook her head to ward off the impulses raging through her body. She mustered every ounce of willpower to avoid jumping at Trent. 'I'm just a sucker for a pilot.' She fumed at her thoughts. Her knees caused her legs to turn to jelly. She needed to sit. Finally, Naomi gathered some decorum.

"It must be the cold," she croaked.

Taking her by the hand Trent grinned. Leading her back into the office, he gestured at a seat in the corner near the door. Before stepping over to the desk he placed her bags on the floor and helped her to sit.

Naomi sat looking into his striking deep blue eyes. 'Don't you dare lose it, girl,' she ordered inwardly. 'Control yourself. Remember your vow to Kaite. No man will ever again ruin your life. Discovering the perfect gift is the only way she'd ever change her thinking and allow a man into her life.'

"I'm concerned about the weather," announced Trent through the phone. "I'll be back on time if the fog doesn't roll in."

"Time?" Naomi echoed the word louder than she wanted. She didn't like people listening in on her private conversations. She inadvertently found herself doing the same.

Trent glared at Naomi. Raising his finger to his lips his friendly eyes looked cold. "I detest people echoing my words."

Naomi decided not saying another word might be the best course of action.

Trent nodded a few times at the phone before mumbling the word okay. When he slipped the mobile phone back into his jeans pocket, his friendly look quickly returned.

"I mentioned to Mr. Stanton we'll arrive on time if the fog doesn't ground us."

"Is it a bad thing?"

"Girl, what planet are you living on?"

Naomi clenched her fists then folded her arms across her chest.

Trent held his hands up, grinning. "We have to get back to the Oasis ASAP. Those letters mean as soon as possible."

“I know what ASAP means.”

“Good to hear. I guess I should start by saying a brief summary of the Oasis.”

Naomi began her own summary starting at Trent. Obviously, the man wasn't a beer slurping, gut aching, two-timing rat like Brandt. He looked tall, dark and handsome. He resembled someone you'd only read about in a romance novel. His friendly dark wind-swept face could easily melt any lady he came into contact with. She focused on his black hair and blue eyes. They locked gazes. He grinned. She grinned back. He chuckled. Naomi echoed the sound. She wanted Trent to take her in his arms, melting his lips into hers. She quickly started up a fantasy about how his lips might taste.

The shrill of the man's mobile phone interrupted her thoughts.

Trent moved away a few metres, pulling the phone from his pocket.

Naomi started to study the photos on the wall. There were three prints. Each depicted the same B52 bomber taken from various angles.

Trent caught Naomi's attention when he looked up. She easily picked up shreds of the conversation. He pointed to her a few times before slipping the phone back into his pocket.

“Are you going to let me in on the conversation?”

“No.” Trent strolled out of the office and into the pre-dawn mist.

“You don't have to be so blunt about it,” Naomi stated.

She followed the man to the twin-engine Piper Cherokee. Her knowledge of planes was sketchy at best. Her father owned a restricted license. On her sixteenth birthday, her father took her up for a sky tour of Melbourne. He piloted a plane similar to this one on that day. Happy birthday, she remembered him singing. Three weeks later when her father drove towards Moorabbin airport he died by the hands of a drunk driver. Naomi turned her head away when a tear rolled down her cheek.

Trent stepped to her side. “Are you okay?”

To Naomi, the tone of his voice seemed to float on air. She stared directly at him. Instead of Trent's face, she saw only her father's. She missed his gentle words, the way he laughed. Her mother kept to herself after the accident. Finally, after refusing any help, she took her own life two months after Naomi turned twenty-three. Thanks to Kaite, she has enjoyed life. They could be found at a different pub every Saturday night. At times, Naomi wanted to drink her life away. Eventually, she and Bill were drawn together which ended in disaster at the altar. Soon after that horrid day, she met Brandt. She shook her head. He happened to be sweet at the start. As she fell in love he started changing. He'd stay away from her for days on end; when he came home he smelt like a perfume bottle. He explained it away by insisting he bought her an expensive bottle of perfume which leaked over everything. His excuse only washed the first time. Kaite talked her into following him for a few days. They both took several days off work and discovered him in the arms of another woman. Naomi sighed heavily. She so desperately needed to unburden her horrible memories of Brandt.

Trent casually waved his hand in front of her face. “Earth to Naomi Fitzgerald, are you okay?”

She shook her head, glaring. “Shut up,” she whined.

“Excuse me?”

Naomi back stepped away from Trent. She felt drawn to him in a way she never expected. It wasn't his fault her life ended up in a mess.

"We have to get going," urged Trent.

"I thought you reported we'd be grounded due to the fog?"

"I did."

"You lied. I don't like liars."

"I didn't lie. Plans have changed since making the decision to wait for the fog to lift. If we leave now we'll be okay. I've been in touch with the Oasis. They gave me instructions to wait five more minutes for any stragglers to arrive before taking off."

"Stragglers?" questioned Naomi.

"Anyone who might turn up hoping to snag a two-week job," explained Trent.

Naomi looked around at the empty airport. "No one else seems to be arriving."

"You're it. You do realize the job is only for two weeks?"

"I only want to stay for two weeks."

Trent snorted, studying her clothes. "By the look of you, I'll be amazed if you make two days."

Naomi stared the man down. "Want a bet?"

"What have you to offer?"

"When you lose we have to dance together in front of two witnesses," advised Naomi.

"You're too large to know how to dance."

"If I win you have to give me a kiss before I fly you back here."

"Sounds like a fair bet," said Naomi.

They shook hands to concrete a gentleman's agreement.

"If you're employed as a pilot who runs errands for Mr. Stanton how come you know so much about this job I'm taking? Stanton seems to have a lot of faith in you."

"I know the Stanton's very well. They trust my judgment."

Trent locked the office door. Picking up Naomi's luggage he led the way to the plane's door. Placing her bags into the plane he waited patiently for Naomi to scamper on board before locking the side door. While Naomi buckled her seat belt, Trent slipped into the pilot's seat. He reached out, flicking the ignition switch to the on position. Both engines slowly whirled to life. Inside a minute, the plane was stationary at the end of the runway. The occupants of the plane sat in the dark listening to the drone of the two engines building up speed.

CHAPTER NINE

THE FOG consumed the plane, motoring down the runway. The buildings changed to a blur. The airport's control tower came and went. It resembled a tall structure straight out of a disaster movie. Naomi still couldn't see a single light anywhere or a friendly wave by someone who came to watch the plane take off.

Naomi stared into the white void hoping to be the first one to see the arrival of another plane. She glanced at Trent who looked to be concentrating. She watched him volley his gaze between the fog and the tarmac several times. The plane tilted upwards. The white void quickly turned wet. The moisture thickened the higher the plane ascended. Finally, the fog started to disperse at the three thousand foot mark.

At five thousand feet Trent leveled the plane.

Naomi craned her neck to look out the window. She saw a blanket of white below them. The sky in front of the plane looked to be an expanse of pale blue.

"I have a couple of questions?" she asked.

Trent sent her a cursory glance before re-focusing on the sky ahead. "I'm listening."

"Did you ever consider waiting for the control tower to give permission to take off?"

"No."

"Tell me, did you contemplate any danger in taking off in the fog?"

Trent didn't answer. He remained preoccupied at studying the plane's compass. He slowly moved the wheel forcing the plane to sweep gently to the left before leveling. He reached out to switch on the autopilot. Facing Naomi, he looked deep into her green eyes.

"I made a calculated accent."

"Calculated?"

"Yes."

"You were guessing, hoping we didn't crash into another plane?"

"Not exactly," Trent replied.

"Explain it to me," Naomi growled. She folded her arms to relay a message she wasn't happy. It entered her mind how this so-called expert pilot could be so blasé about their lives.

"I talked to the control tower yesterday morning after landing. They informed me of the weather. They said there might an excellent chance of fog by 5:00am. They also informed me no planes were due to arrive at the airport before 8:00 this morning. They added the tower won't be manned before 7:00am. To answer your question, my calculated risk had been extremely low."

"So why did we have to rush to get air-born?"

"It's raining where we are going."

"I'm not scared of a little rain, are you?"

"No, I'm not scared either." Trent backed up his short sentence with a sharp chuckle.

"You're a mysterious person," moaned Naomi.

"I want to keep a low profile," replied Trent.

"You don't talk much either."

"I only talk when I've something important to say."

"You love the idea that I know nothing about you."

"I sure do," blurted Trent.

"I'm asking you to let me into your world."

"Why?"

Fantasy thoughts were tumbling through Naomi's mind as if they were in a washing machine. She suddenly realized she regretted the bet they made. It could have at least waited untill tomorrow.

“What on earth are you thinking about now?” asked Trent, grinning at the woman’s faraway expression.

“My thoughts are private. They certainly don’t concern you unless you tell me about yourself.”

“I’ll pass,” replied Trent.

Naomi stared out of the window on her side of the plane flabbergasted at seeing the land underneath them. Turning away she focused on Trent.

“I’ll always be amazed at how big Australia is,” she commented. She felt surprised Trent didn’t show any interest over the surrounding view or an ounce of concern at the approaching rain. “How long before we arrive at this Oasis place?”

“Three and a half hours.”

“Do we have enough fuel?”

“Yes. We’ll make it by a good twenty minutes.”

Naomi nodded, agreeing the information sounded correct.

“Now might be a great time to get to know one another.”

“Do you think?”

“Yes.”

Trent raised an eyebrow. “Ever seen morning glory at five thousand feet?”

“I’ve never heard of the name.”

Naomi felt torn between attacking him due to his handsome looks and accusing him of deception. How could she even contemplate a relationship with the man? He certainly didn’t come across as the relationship lasting type. He never did prove Stanton lived at the Oasis or even if they were actually flying in the right direction. For all she knew he could be taking her for a ride on a one-way ticket to nowhere.

The word nowhere kept replaying over and over in her mind.

Minutes slowly ticked off. Naomi felt stupid. She knew nothing about Trent, yet here she sat, in a plane, shoulder to shoulder, totally trusting a stranger. She started to grow suspicious of the man. Could this be a trap to lure females into a place where the only way out was to jump. She looked out the small plane’s window trembling at the five thousand foot drop.

“You’re not planning to jump?” asked Trent.

Naomi wiped her stare from the window. How could he have known what she’d been thinking?

“The thought never entered my mind. Is there a reason why you asked?”

Trent shrugged his shoulder. “If you look due east you’ll see gold edged clouds. They’ve been given a name.”

“Morning glory?” guessed Naomi.

“It’s a beautiful sight,” he said.

Gluing her gaze on Trent, Naomi used her peripheral vision to look. How could she have gotten into the plane? At least sitting in a car she could jump out. She started to wonder if this man who calls himself Trent could be on the level.

Trent reached out, grabbing her knee.

Naomi screamed, jumping in her seat. This was the moment she dreaded. This is a game where she’s the prize. She’d made it too easy for him. How could she be so naive?

“Leave me alone,” she growled.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Don’t touch me.”

Naomi squirmed in the seat. She tried to lean towards the window, but her seat belt forced her to stay exactly where she sat.

“I won’t bite. I’m only after your attention.”

“I bet you were.”

Trent shook his head. “You were looking towards the North. You have to look in an easterly direction if you want to enjoy morning glory,” he whimpered.

“You’re playing a game at my expense aren’t you? I believe you’re enjoying every minute of it. The only thing you want to do is take advantage of me.”

“Pardon?” asked Trent, a puzzled expression etched on his face.

“Don’t pardon me, mister.”

“I do find you easy on the eyes.”

“You’re only buttering me up so you can win the bet.”

“Nothing could be further from the truth. If you want to see morning glory, look now.”

Trent pointed out his side of the window. Naomi looked down his finger. Her mouth fell open at the sight. Gold edged white clouds dotted the sky.

As the plane slowly climbed Naomi watched the clouds disperse before her eyes leaving a green haze in the sky.

“I don’t understand the colour,” she whispered, almost breathless.

“The green haze is evaporating water,” explained Trent. “You see it a lot out here.” He leaned close to Naomi, placing his strong hand on her knee. “Miss Fitzgerald, I’m not a bad person. You can trust me.”

‘How can I trust you?’ she thought. ‘I’ve been emotionally scarred by Bill and Brandt. He’d been the biggest liar of the two men. He only wanted me for his advertising campaigns or to be used for his puppet. Now I feel I’m pushed your way. How can I trust you when you’re not prepared to answer any of my personal questions? What are you hiding?’

Naomi’s mind and body ached for the man sitting shoulder to shoulder next to her. If nothing else she felt clear on the fact she must win the bet no matter what. To win she needed to squash any feelings she felt for the man. Somehow she must protect her heart from ever being hurt again. She couldn’t stand going down the heartache boulevard for the third time.

The plane leveled at five and a half thousand feet. Stretched out before them was a flat desert like land.

“Australia sure is a large country,” mumbled Naomi. She was looking at the ground through a clear section of sky. “How does anyone survive out here?”

“Even though the land looks barren, you can survive. Soon you’ll discover the Oasis is perfect.”

“Tell me about the Oasis.”

Trent’s face showed a distant look. “She’s beautiful, full of life. She’s such a magnificent place to live.”

“Out here where nothing seems alive. I don’t understand.”

“You will. Want to pilot the plane?”

“You love changing the subject,” stated Naomi, fidgeting in her excitement.

“I’m a shy person.”

“You’re a man who is full of mysteries,” cut in Naomi.

“Are you ready for a flying lesson?”

“Yes, I am. Before you begin to teach me, tell me something about yourself?”

“Why should I, you’re only here for two weeks, what’s the point?”

Naomi turned her head to look out of the window. Now she knew his secret. He felt lonely. Why lose your heart to anyone who came into your life for only two weeks. She turned from the window and looked at Trent in the eyes.

“I’m ready to take the controls,” she screeched abruptly.

“Use two hands.”

Naomi held the wheel on her side of the plane in a death grip.

“The plane’s yours.” Trent tapped her white knuckles. “Stay relaxed. No need to strangle the wheel.”

“You’re a bit testy.”

“Sorry.”

Naomi relaxed a little. She straightened her back by sitting deeper into the seat.

Trent relinquished control, retracting his hands. “There you go. You are now flying the plane.”

“This isn’t so hard.”

Trent pushed his seat back, lifted his feet, letting them rest on the door handle before closing his eyes.

“What are you doing?” Naomi’s words were a staggered scream.

“Going to sleep,” he yawned.

“You can’t. How can you trust me? What if something happens?”

“You’ll be fine.”

“What happens if we arrive at the Oasis while you’re asleep?”

Trent checked his watch and the fuel gauge. “We won’t need to start our decent for sixty-five minutes.” He closed his eyes, folding his arms.

Naomi reached over, tapping him on the shoulder. Trent didn’t move. ‘Surely he couldn’t fall asleep in seconds,’ she thought. Naomi tugged at his shirt sleeve. Her right hand moved forcing the plane’s wheel to rotate violently down. Her face took on a look of terror. She quickly corrected the wheel. Straightening her back Naomi gazed at the plane’s instruments. They were flying level and the plane hadn’t changed direction. It didn’t tilt to the side or done anything except stay straight. She jerked the wheel to the left then to the right. The plane remained level.

Naomi could feel her blood pressure rise. Her face turned the colour of beetroot the moment she yelled.

“What have you done?”

Keeping his eyes closed, Trent chuckled.

“I thought you told me I could fly the plane.”

“Are you always this feisty?”

“Men, I dislike the lot of you,” Naomi growled, screwing up her nose.

“All?”

She craned her neck, thrusting a fist at Trent’s friendly face. “Yes, all.”

He chuckled again, reached out his hand, kissing her white knuckles.

“Don’t,” Naomi squealed.

“Why not?” asked Trent.

“I don’t like it,” she snarled.

“Do you want to enlighten me?”

“No. Drop the subject,” she jeered.

Trent grinned at Naomi’s crimson face. “The plane is on autopilot,” he confessed.

“It’s not a laughing matter. You’re being a complete jerk.”

Trent lowered his gaze, his grin vanishing quickly.

“I’m sorry. If you smile, I’ll take the plane off auto. You can have a real fly.”

“How do I know you won’t try to trick me? I’m not into tricks.”

“What are you in for?”

“I’m not sure if I should say.”

Trent flashed a puppy dog look at Naomi.

“Okay,” she chuckled. “I’m into watching romantic movies while sitting by an open fire.”

“Don’t all women think the same?”

“Maybe,” whispered Naomi.

“What’s your favourite dream?” asked Trent.

“Dream?” echoed Naomi.

“Where do you see yourself in ten, twenty years from now?”

Naomi exhaled a huge sigh.

“My dream is to meet a man who is honest. He needs to love me for me. After making love under the stars I want to fall asleep in his arms. I hope my dream comes true before I’ve aged ten years.” Discovering her one opportunity she decided it might be time to dig Trent’s thoughts out of his mind. “What about you? What’s your biggest dream?”

Trent looked out of the plane’s window. His faraway look made Naomi squirm in her seat.

“I want to meet a lovely lady whom I can spend the rest of my life with. I also want to find a way to save the Oasis.”

“You won’t meet too many ladies out in the middle of Australia.”

“I’ve met a few. They come out from the big smoke from time to time.”

Feeling devastated, Naomi looked away. She wanted to be the lady of Trent’s dreams however she could never contemplate moving out to the bush. How could she expect Trent to move to the city? Her lungs deflated causing her shoulders to slump.

“Could you ever consent in moving to the city?” she questioned.

“I’d never leave the Oasis.”

Trent’s voice sounded adamant. For a few uncomfortable moments, the only noise in the plane came from the engines.

“If I have to go to the big smoke to find my partner, I will,” he added.

Naomi saw him looking at her. Could he be playing games again? Stringing her along, or could he be on the level? She felt a smile forming on her face. Maybe there's a flicker of hope, a small flame which if given a chance to grow could turn into a raging fire. To hide her grin she looked away.

Trent's hand brushed against Naomi's knee when he leaned sideways. This time, she didn't utter a word.

"Ready?"

"Ready for what?" asked Naomi.

"To fly the plane," Trent stated. He flicked the autopilot's toggle switch to the off position, whispering. "You have the controls."

Naomi moved the wheel slightly to the right. She squealed in delight as the plane started to bank. She quickly brought the plane back to level, glancing at Trent. "This is a wonderful feeling. I didn't know flying a plane could be so enjoyable. Thank you for the privilege."

"You're welcome."

The radio crackled to life in their headsets. Trent flicked another toggle switch enabling the voice to boom in Naomi's ears.

"Oasis to Victor Charlie Foxtrot, Four, do you copy?"

Trent raised a handheld mike to his mouth, winking at Naomi.

"Victor Charlie Foxtrot Four to Oasis, I'm hearing you crystal clear. What's the problem, over?"

"What's your ETA? Have you more than one package, over?"

"I've only the one package. I'll be landing in forty-seven minutes; over."

In the long pause, Naomi watched Trent staring at an imaginative fixed object directly ahead of the plane at the horizon. His eyebrows slowly angled to a point.

Naomi leaned slightly towards him causing the plane to change direction two degrees. "What's the problem?" she whispered, quickly bringing the plane back to level.

Trent hunched his shoulders, giving her a blank stare. Reaching out, he flicked the toggle switch back to autopilot.

Naomi hid her disappointment. Trent is not just handsome, she thought. He certainly knew his way around the cockpit of this plane. She allowed her shoulders to slouch, thankful to be able to relax. Her shoulders were starting to stiffen. Watching Trent looking out of the side window again studying the landscape Naomi noted his eyes were wide. She followed his gaze wondering what might have spooked him.

At first, she saw only white clouds dotting the sky. She definitely failed to notice the white clouds were quickly joining to form a solid front. In seconds, the white front started to change to black.

"Have to get moving," barked Trent.

He leaned forward, turning the autopilot off. He wrapped his strong stubby fingers around the plane's throttle, pushing the lever to its stop.

Naomi heard the plane's twin engines rev to an almost fever pitch.

"Oasis to Victor Charlie Foxtrot, Four," came the same male voice through both their headsets. "Move your arse. It's raining buckets over the Oasis. You've got forty minutes to bed the plane."

"The throttle is already fully open," reported Trent, through the radio.

"Son, you might have to make the package push, over and out."

Trent chuckled for the first time in five minutes.

"What does the voice mean you have to bed the plane? What's this, son statement?"

"There's nothing to worry about," advised Trent, ignoring her questions.

"Are we running out of time? Are we late for dinner or something? Is our fuel low?"

"No. Dinner might be late if we don't hurry."

"You're not making any sense. I thought you outback people weren't afraid of anything. Surely you're not scared of water falling from the sky?"

"The voice over the radio belongs to Mr. Stanton. He informed me we need to hurry."

"I take it I'm the only package?"

"Yes you are and I'm not about to make you push."

"You're a smart mouth jerk. Does the voice over the radio belong to the Stanton I'm supposed to meet?" Naomi asked, watching his grin widen. "Why didn't you tell me you're Stanton's son?"

"I don't want to draw attention to myself. Every time I meet a woman, especially a beautiful one, they start behaving like someone they're not."

"Other ladies?" questioned Naomi. She frowned at the jealous feeling starting to grow in the pit of her stomach. For all she knew Trent might only be an outback clown in a rodeo who could actually fly a plane. She hurriedly pushed the thought from her mind.

"There's the echo again," mentioned Trent.

"Sorry, I don't understand."

"My father, Earl Stanton is a well-known business man. He's into cows. He has the best breeding stock in Australia. There's also a rumour floating around there's gold under the ground the Oasis sits on. He's been visited by many well-known celebrities over the years. Every one of them said they'd buy the place. Dad has never agreed. He never will."

"Who started the rumour?"

"My great grandfather," explained Trent.

"Is there any gold under the ground?"

"No, at least I don't think so."

"What about the other ladies you spoke of?"

"I think I hear a slight case of jealousy in your voice."

"You can't have, I don't know you well enough."

Trent put his hands up. "Okay. In case there is, you deserve to know more about me."

"Finally," whispered Naomi. "I didn't want to win the bet we made by default."

The plane suddenly dived before swaying from side to side.

Naomi screamed. Her hands gripped the arms of the co-pilot's chair in a death grip. She screamed again.

"We're okay," comforted Trent, leveling the plane at the fifteen hundred foot mark. He slowly descended a further five hundred feet.

"How can you stay calm, we nearly crashed!"

"We were never in danger. We flew through some turbulence. By the look of the sky, it's already raining this side of the Oasis."

Trembling from head to feet, Naomi rolled her eyes. She squinted in the bright sunlight, studying the sky.

“There’s not a cloud in the sky out my window,” she stated.

Trent tapped her shoulder. She jumped, whirling around to face him.

“See the band of grey clouds directly ahead, near the horizon?” His voice sounded friendly, yet full of authority.

Naomi squinted against the bright sun streaming through the window. She hid her skepticism.

“If you scan the horizon to my left you’ll see a solid mass of midnight black clouds,” reported Trent.

“I saw them before. They don’t seem much of a threat seeing how they aren’t directly in front of the plane.”

The plane changed direction seven degrees to the left before starting to descend. Naomi’s eyes widened, staring at the black mass approaching, now directly in front.

“Tell me you’re only trying to scare me?”

“I’m not that cruel. They’re bad storm clouds,” advised Trent.

Naomi choked on her words. “Why did you change direction?”

“The Oasis is to our left, exactly where the clouds are the darkest.”

“Will there be lightning?”

Trent nodded just before he made the plane dive towards the ground.

“We’re almost there. The wind is picking up. In three minutes we’ll be standing on the ground.”

Naomi managed a wintry day smile, watching the clouds loom closer. The black swirling mass looked to be moving incredibly fast. The clouds resembled giant charcoal coloured cotton balls which were dipped in black ink and hung low in the sky. Lightning lit the shortened horizon. Visibility started to plummet. She felt like a tiny insect which could be squashed at any time.

Clutching her seat, Naomi swallowed the lump in her throat. She watched the ground coming up to greet them. What should have been inviting; looked desolate. Every tree appeared dead. The wind swept the ground at speed. Naomi marveled at the dust storm about to swallow the plane.

Trent flew low over a large square shaped dam before lining the plane up perfectly to the middle of a dirt road. Weeds grew right up to its edge. Large dry balls of bracken tumbled across their path in the strengthening wind.

“I hope you’re up for some hard work?” questioned Trent.

“Yes, of course,” replied Naomi, squaring her shoulders.

The plane bounced a few times on the hardened clay road before Trent steered towards a blue weatherboard house. The thought of giving up, allowing Trent to win the bet flashed into Naomi’s consciousness. She didn’t have enough time to gather her wits before Trent opened the plane’s door, yelling over the noise of the wind, encouraging her to hurry.

The plane had stopped not more than thirty feet from an old two-room cottage. Naomi scrunched her nose at the broken steps leading up to the main door. Someone tried unsuccessfully to fix a wooden board in front of the broken glass panel. Glancing at Trent,

Naomi wondered why he had let the Oasis fall apart, seeing how he confessed how much he adored the place. She didn't understand why he thought the Oasis was perfect.

Naomi decided bush folk and city people thought differently on what were sustainable lodgings.

'Oasis, home sweet home,' she thought. 'If anyone could live in this place, out here in the middle of, who knows where, she could.'

She jumped from the plane, digging her heels into a dried weed. She felt determined the adventure will be nothing more than a two-week working holiday. Glancing at Trent she wondered if he could actually live in the city, 'big smoke' as he put it, or could he be stringing her along just so he'd win the bet. The bet she would make certain she won.

Naomi clapped her hands together, walking towards the front door of the house. Overhead the black clouds billowed. The first thunderclap rumbled above the wind.

"Where are you off to?" called Trent over the wind.

"Inside, I don't want to get wet. Looking at the state of the house, it'll take hours to plug each hole," advised Naomi. She stood on the first rotten wooden step looking over her shoulder at the man staring at her.

"There's no time, we have too much work to do outside."

"I bet there's more work to be done on the inside. The house probably hasn't felt a woman's touch in fifty years."

Trent chuckled before breaking into a deep belly laugh.

Naomi fumed at being laughed at. She marched back to the plane.

"What's so funny?"

"I can tell you think this place is the Oasis."

The deep pitch of Trent's voice sounded calming. He placed his hand on her shoulder, giving a caring whispered laugh.

His hard callous hand sent electricity throughout Naomi's body. Glancing at the house she began to doubt if the dwelling could even be fit to live in.

"If this place isn't the Oasis, where are we?" she questioned.

Trent stopped laughing, looking seriously into Naomi's green eyes.

"This land is part of the Oasis. Where we live is fifty miles further on. We needed to land here to check the fences of the property, the water pump and drop off some food for the hungry gang when they arrive."

"Hungry gang out here?" Naomi craned her neck trying to see through the swirling dust. "I don't see anything or anyone?"

"Come, I'll show you around the place while we start our check."

"Shouldn't you close the plane's cargo door?" questioned Naomi. "I don't want to see you get upset when sand or rain pours in."

Trent looked back at the plane. "It'll be okay, the door's facing away from the wind."

Naomi walked next to Trent. He seemed oblivious to the wind slamming grains of dirt into their exposed arms and face. Using her hands to cover her eyes to help shield against the flying dust, Naomi struggled to keep up.

"In seven days the five acres before us will be full of cattle," explained Trent, waving a palmed hand at the windswept clay. "One hundred cows to be exact. The trucks will roll up.

The cattle will be loaded. We'll sprint for the Oasis to bring the next one hundred cows. We'll keep doing it till every cow has gone." Trent changed direction, power walking towards the dam.

"It sounds like you're getting rid of all your cows?" puffed Naomi, trotting just to keep up.

"We are."

"Why?"

"I've already mentioned my family is in a tight financial spot. It's why my father needs an extra hand for the next two weeks. He hoped to have five blokes turn up at the airport."

Naomi stopped to stare at the back of Trent's head. Tears welled up in her eyes. She bore the resemblance of a woman who'd suddenly been overtaken by grief. For the first time, she thought everything she'd gone through might have been on the level. In the sudden lull in the wind, she sprinted to catch up.

Before Trent could take another step a rogue gust of wind hit him square in his face. He lost his balance and fell into Naomi. They both wrapped their arms around the other to stop the wind from pushing them into the dirt. For a long moment, they stood there, in the wind, staring into each other's eyes. Trent leaned his face close. Naomi copied, tilting her head. His warm breath swept her cheeks, fanned by the wind. Their bear hug tightened.

"This is a strange place to start a romance," she whispered.

Trent raised his eyebrows. Their lips brushed. Naomi closed her eyes, wanting to melt into the moment.

The surging wind pushed both of them off their feet. Naomi fell backwards. She closed her eyes waiting to feel the hard ground. She felt no pain when she heard the dull thud. Opening her eyes she saw Trent's grotesque face. He'd managed to twist underneath to cushion her fall.

"Are you okay?" she questioned.

"I'll be fine if you kiss me."

Naomi lifted her torso off him only to be pulled back down. She felt a prisoner in his strong arms. He lifted his head. Naomi dropped hers. Right in the middle of a storm, in the middle of the Australian outback, miles from anywhere, she felt something amazing starting to happen.

Lightning pierced the charcoal coloured sky directly above their heads. The deep thunderclap lagged behind by only a few seconds. Naomi didn't care. Love started to germinate. She wanted time to speed up so the urges she felt might quickly grow.

"You only want to win the bet."

She had said the words to start to test his honesty. She needed to discover his secrets long before love could even begin to grow. She wanted to be fully persuaded before being committed, yet again. The missing fact must be the perfect gift. If Trent couldn't discover the meaning she knew love could never stand a chance.

"Forget the bet," whispered Trent. "I surrender."

"I'm not sure you're too convincing."

Trent pushed Naomi off and gently lowered her to the ground. He stood, holding out his hand.

“It’s urgent we start work,” he said.

Naomi exhaled away her disappointment knowing full well the moment was gone. She wondered if the way she felt could be a mistake. She reached out to allow Trent to pull her to her feet. Almost immediately the wind tried to knock her over. She lost balance, tightening her grip. Trent leaned into the wind, pulling hard. Instantly she fell back into his outstretched arms. The electricity arcing between them felt hard to resist. Surely Trent felt it too? In her mind, Naomi cursed the stupid childish bet they’d made. It seemed to be getting in the way causing a stumbling block between them.

The strengthening wind swirled around them forcing their bodies to move closer. The thin splinter width of light between them abruptly vanished.

Naomi gagged on the dust in her mouth. “Trent, about our bet,” she started.

“You want to back out? Renegotiate?”

This was an awkward time and certainly the wrong place to bring up the subject. One of them must be brave enough to be the first to say. She must be strong for the seed of love to grow. Kaite’s father used to say the same thing. Be brave she heard him say over and over. To let a shy person know how you feel you must be brave. Take the initiative. Be first. The worse thing they might say is no. Naomi cleared her dry throat by swallowing a few grains of dirt.

“I’ve been thinking.”

Trent looked at the sky, shaking his head. “The storm isn’t about to wait. We can talk later.”

“I really have something I need to say.”

“It’ll have to wait. The storm is approaching fast. We don’t have much time.”

Naomi watched him walk off into the wind. She felt how she looked, devastated. He’d conveyed the answer to her question on how he may feel about a long-term relationship. Who was she kidding? She came to the outback wanting to forget about men and how much they hurt her, and here she stood making, goo-gah eyes at a man she barely knew hoping he might be Mr. Right. Her eyes narrowed to slits. Fortunately, she discovered quickly he’s definitely Mr. Wrong.

Naomi yelled into the wind. “Trent, you can take your good looks, your masculinity and go back to your cows. In two weeks I’m out of here.”

“Did you say something?” he called from the edge of her sight.

Naomi marched up to him, raising her fist. “Men,” she bellowed.

Trent didn’t understand her comment. Grabbing her hand, he shrugged.

Together they struggled against the wind in silence. Naomi fumed on the inside. She certainly didn’t care less about anything Trent might want to say. Showing her around this God forsaken outback place concreted her thoughts into leaving in two weeks. Not once will she ever give Trent a second thought.

“Workaholic,” she whispered behind his back.

The area comprised of dirt and dried weeds. To their left on top of a small rise, a windmill whirled around in the wind, pumping water into the dam. Overhead, a circling eagle flew away.

“What are you thinking?”

“The Oasis, is it like this place?” Naomi yelled.

Trent reached out his hand, patting an escaping curl on the side of her head.

“Don’t,” she ordered, pushing his hand away. “It’s a bad hair day, and...”

“What?” he asked.

Naomi lowered her gaze to her feet so she could stare at the dirt. “I want out of the bet,” she blurted. Her shoulders sagged slightly when she heard the words she’d only been thinking. They sounded dry, almost hostile. She suddenly wanted to run away. She didn’t want to hear Trent’s remarks to her request. Besides, making a bet with a stranger is totally stupid.

Trent lifted his hand to pat the rogue curl again.

Naomi stiffened at his gentle touch. She felt torn between pushing his hand away again and smiling at his thoughtfulness.

“I love your wind-blown locks,” he whispered. “I love the way your long hair will cascade over your shoulders and glisten in the sun if it weren’t tied back.” He reached out to pull at Naomi’s hair tie, allowing her hair to fall. “See, I knew it.”

Naomi watched his eyes soaking up the look as her hair fell over her shoulders. She rudely pushed his hand away. The look he gave her betrayed how he felt. She wondered how he could be so callous if he wasn’t at least interested in her. Reaching up, she slipped her fingers through his black hair, pulling him in close. Trent squinted as she felt warm liquid ooze over her fingers.

“You’re bleeding,” she wailed, pulling her hand away.

Trent grabbed her hand. He gently closed her fingers one at a time. Bowing his head he kissed her knuckles.

“It’s okay. I’m tough.”

“You’re hurt. You have to let me take a look.”

“Later.”

Trent and Naomi cringed when lightning lit the sky. A deep rumble soon followed.

“Why are you so stubborn?”

“There’s no time. We have to be going. Besides, I think you’re trying to put me off guard about the bet.”

“Is this your plan? Get me off guard so I’ll surrender making you win the bet?”

Taking a step back, Naomi frowned. ‘Don’t you dare look hurt,’ she screamed inwardly. ‘I’m here for two weeks. The moment I win the bet I’m going back to the city, to my office, to my desk and when I get home, I’m going to forget you and this desolate place. How dare you look at me through big seductive eyes? I’ve seen the same look too many times before. I totally gave my heart to Brandt. He tore it in half.’

Turning on her toes, Naomi marched off towards the plane.

When Trent caught up he grabbed her by the arm. “I’m sorry if I’ve offended you.”

“Don’t, you have work to do?” she hinted, pulling her hand away.

“Yes, we do.” Trent stepped to the cargo plane’s door and started unloading the plane. Looking up, he said. “I need you to help.”

Naomi stood square to her employer in silence.

Together they finished unloading the plane in five or so minutes.

The wind speed seemed to be increasing towards cyclone strength. Naomi felt the first drops of rain on her bare arms. She couldn’t believe the sky could get any darker.

A lightning bolt hit the ground not far from the plane. Following close behind came the familiar deep low rumble. Naomi's eyes widened. She felt a tingle travel down her spine from the warmth of the lightning bolt. She let go of a loud scream.

"Apology accepted," she puffed, wiping the sweat from her face. "Do we have to spend a lot more time out in this storm?"

"Come on," said Trent. "If we hurry we'll be inside the house before the rain turns into a downpour."

"Hurry to do what?"

"We have to walk the fence line."

"Why, it's about to rain?"

Following Trent, Naomi believed it might be an initiation test.

The next rumble of thunder nearly deafened her.

Trent looked at the dark swirling clouds overhead. "I agree on your idea. It's about to rain. We have to move faster. The quicker we check the fence the sooner-."

His remainder of his words was blown away in the wind.

Trent forced Naomi to stop every few minutes. He taught her what to look for when she tugged on the fence wire. Naomi studied the landscape, watching the wind sweeping across the dust dry topsoil at full tilt. The few weeds managing to survive in the dry conditions were bending, almost touching the ground. The airborne soil stung her face, burying grains of clay in her hair. A large drop of rain fell on the bridge of her nose.

Naomi looked to the heavens. A drop of water hit between her eyes. "Trent, it's starting to rain."

He looked skywards, grabbing her hand "We've no time to waste."

Naomi felt tired walking in the gale force wind and wanted to pull her hand away from Trent's strong grip. Hearing the reverberating throb of the windmill whirring around she decided Trent could drag her along. The water being pumped up out of the ground looked to have already half filled the dam. The wind started to wobble the wire fence creating a high-pitched howl. Naomi looked back at the shrinking house through slits. She spat dirt. Cupping a hand around her mouth, she yelled over the noise of the wind.

"I think the storm's going to beat us to the finish line. Do you want to stop to check the rest of the fence tomorrow?"

"No," Trent yelled back. "We can check the wire fence while we jog."

Naomi watched his shrinking form. "Easy for you to say," she groaned, starting to trot.

The wind lashed her jeans, forcing her to walk time and again. In seconds, she could barely make out Trent's image through the swirling dust. She watched him stop, pull at the fence before running off again. Naomi stumbled over a weed, falling face first into the dirt. She groped for the fence and grimaced in pain. She felt warm red liquid trickling along her arm. Staggering to her feet, she looked up hoping Trent saw her fall. Swirling dust is the only thing she could see.

Double lightning bolts lit the sky.

"The sun's long gone," Naomi mumbled, starting to count the seconds waiting for the thunder. "Three. The storm is only three or so kilometers away."

Naomi watched lightning split the sky above her head. Again the thunder boomed. She hugged the ground when the next round of lightning hit a dead tree about forty metres from the windmill.

“Two kilometers,” she rasped, counting the seconds again.

Naomi felt defeated. She knelt in the middle of the dry outback paddock and started to cry. Her tears created dirty streaks over her cheeks. Slowly she lifted her head, searching the land. Through her tears, half closed eyes, rain and dust, Naomi called for her knight in shiny armor.

“Trent, please come back.”

In the fading light, the only thing she could see was dirt being blown through the air and the only thing she heard happened to be the wind lashing harder against her shirt. Dust stung every part of her exposed skin. Naomi tilted her head back so she could look at the ink coloured clouds. Was it her imagination or did the thunder sound unbelievably louder. She felt so exhausted she couldn't be sure. Forked lightning again brightened the sky. The desert landscape resembled a picture out of a disaster movie. The dry dust covered land looked to be fast turning into mud.

“Welcome to the desert,” she mumbled. Dirt instantly filled her mouth. Her hair flapped behind her like a flag in a storm. Puddles of water were starting to flow together to form small creeks which were gaining momentum as the rain changed to a torrential downpour.

Forked lightning and thunderclaps rolled together. Naomi lifted her hand. She saw blood pouring from the second hole in her arm. A piece of barbed wire had broken off and found a new home in her skin. She yanked the rusty metal splinter out, throwing it to the ground just as Lightning split a tree in half fifty metres to her right. Using her arms she covered her head as the tree crashed to the ground. The heavens rumbled; the earth shook under her feet.

Staggering onwards Naomi felt determined to catch Trent to give him a round of verbal diarrhea. She fumed at each step she took. A single question haunted her mind.

‘Why did he abandon her?’

Naomi could barely see through the torrent of rain. She groped for the wire fence hoping her arms might help her feet to move.

At last, her fingers felt the corner fence post. She quickly changed direction. The wind no longer brushed against her face. Instead, it pushed her sideways away from the fence, towards the huge dam in the middle of the landscape. No matter which way she looked at it if she clung to the fence the dam shouldn't be a problem.

“I'd certainly drown if I fell into the water,” she mumbled, her body convulsing at the thought.

Naomi pulled her hair from her mouth, pressing on. The small victory of changing directions gave her a renewed confidence. She groaned heavily trying to pick up her slow pace.

She'd only walked twenty-seven small steps before she started to feel tired again. Naomi stopped to wipe the blood from her fingers, managing to scrunch her last tissue over the cut. Over the sound of the wind, she thought she heard a familiar noise. Shielding her eyes using bloody hands she scanned the land searching for what made the noise. The dust was gone, made heavy by the rain. At the edge of her vision, she spied a small light. It seemed to be

heading her way. She tried to walk towards it. The mud under her feet made stepping almost impossible.

“This is worse than ice-skating,” she groaned.

Naomi felt beyond exhaustion. Any warm feelings she felt for Trent were reversed to total anger over being abandoned. Standing in the rain half bent, bleeding from her hand, she started to cry again.

The light came steadily closer. It seemed relentless in its quest to run her down. Naomi squared her shoulders. Her dust caked eyelids strained to stay open, forcing her to squint. Though exhausted from head to feet, she stared at the light. It travelled at speed a metre off the ground. She gave a rock near her foot a cursory glance. Stooping, she picked it up. Her long wet fingers curled around its jagged surface. Taking careful aim Naomi hurled the rock through the air. When she heard a thud she frantically searched for another.

The small bouncing light never waived from its path.

Naomi’s long hair flapped wet muddy strands in her eyes. Her new jeans and shirt were soaked.

The next rock she unearthed felt heavier. She lifted her arm, concentrating on the perfect throw, waiting patiently for the light to come closer.

The light eventually came to a stop a few metres from her. Naomi dropped the rock at her feet. The familiar chug, chug, chug glued a weary smile to her face. She felt too tired to know whether to scream, shout, or kiss Trent. Standing in the middle of a storm, soaked to the skin looking at a grinning man on a motorbike was too good to refuse. Her verbal diarrhea could wait for later.

“I believe I’m going your way, care for a lift, Miss?”

Naomi swung her leg over the seat, grabbing Trent around the waist. Through his rain-soaked shirt she could feel his washboard abs. She hugged him tighter.

The bike fishtailed along the fence line, back to the house. At full throttle Trent steered the bike into the huge steel shed, stopping at the last second. He killed the light and flicked the bike’s ignition switch to the off position.

For a long moment, Naomi remained frozen on the back of the bike listening to the wind and the rain. Lightning and the thunder eventually melted her hands away from Trent’s waist. Slowly she stepped down from the bike.

“Come on, let’s get inside the house. I’ll put the kettle on,” insisted Trent, producing a large brass key.

They traipsed mud into the small back room not much bigger than a toilet cubicle. Trent closed the outer door blocking out the storm.

For a few seconds, the silence sounded uncomfortable.

Simultaneously Trent opened the inner door and stepped out of his muddy boots. He turned his head, holding out his hand.

“Surrender your runners so we can go inside.”

Naomi slipped out of her runners, handing them over. Trent placed them upside down on two waist-high poles, in the rain.

“Don’t worry about them it won’t be long before they’re clean. I call the vertical poles the bush washing machine.”

Naomi didn't argue the point. She felt relieved to finally have the extra weight off her aching legs.

Inside the house, she stood shocked at the neatness. No dust, no draft, no water on the floor.

"Nothing except the best for the Stanton folk out here," remarked Trent. "I know the house looks bad on the outside. I've worked hard to make it livable."

"You?" questioned Naomi, sending him a puzzled look.

"Yes, my brother and I have worked in this place for six months. You should have seen it before we started. What a mess. My brother helped where he could."

"What about the broken window, the decayed front step?"

"My brother fell through the window when the step broke last week. He fell off the ladder fixing the gutter too. He's okay. It's the reason why the glass is in the plane. I wanted to fix the window before we sold the place." He gave Naomi a stern glance. "Our financial problems are not your concern."

Naomi watched Trent walk to the window to gaze out at the storm. Eventually, he spun on his toes. He walked across the room and entered the kitchen. In seconds, Naomi heard a generator start up.

"Country living," she mumbled. Slowly she walked around soaking her mind in the room's décor. "What there is of it; a couple of wooden chairs and a half-broken wooden coffee table. The mantelpiece over the fireplace has definitely seen better days, though the brick chimney still looks in mint condition."

Outside, the wind kept up its howling. Naomi looked through the window, spying her luggage sitting in the rain. She squealed.

Trent came running. "What's wrong?"

"My dry clothes are in the bag. I must have dropped it when we were unloading the plane."

Trent sprinted out into the rain to rescue the wet bags. Back inside the room he said confidently.

"It's okay. I'll start a fire to dry some of your clothes."

"Thank you."

He trotted back into the kitchen. When he returned he carried two steaming mugs of coffee. He sat Naomi in a chair, ordering her to rest.

"Where were you? Why did you have to leave me alone in the rain?"

"I thought the best thing to do was to sprint along the fence line back to the house. I knew where you were. I also knew you'd be safe until I returned. I apologize. If I didn't insist you walk the fence line you'd be drier than powder."

Trent took off his soaking muddy wet shirt, walked to the front door, pulling it open. In a slick move, he flung it outside on top of another wooden pole.

Naomi's anger melted the moment her eyes feasted on his upper muscular torso.

"Let me guess, the poles are your only means of washing?"

"You've guessed it in one."

Leaving the room Trent started to hum. On his return, he had an Esky in tow. After opening the plastic lid he reached in and grabbed two bottles of beer.

“Care to have one?”

Naomi raised her hand. “No thanks.”

Noticing her bloody hand, Trent reached out, turning her arm over.

“It looks bad. I’ll fetch the first aid kit to do-a-bush patch up job.”

Grinning at his caring expression Naomi pushed deep into the chair. Every muscle in her body ached. Somehow she must make sure Trent never found out how exhausted she felt. No matter what, she must keep up.

Naomi closed her eyes, falling asleep in seconds.

CHAPTER TEN

NAOMI PARTLY opened her right eye. For a long time, she stared at the flickering fire. She could feel the warmth of the flames on her face. Slowly she opened her left eye. Tilting her head she looked around the semi-lit room. Shadows danced on the walls. Naomi swept the blanket from off her chin and started to replay the entire day. The office where she met Trent, the plane trip, the storm, the fence and a photo flash of Trent’s muscular body brought a smile to her lips. Lying on the worn out couch she felt alone and vulnerable. Slowly the fog in her mind lifted, revealing her hero washed and dressed her wounded hand.

Naomi stood. The blanket cascaded off her naked shoulders. The white bandage wrapped expertly around her arm showed no evidence of blood. Gently massaging her stiff neck using her un-banded hand, she started to move her stiff muscles.

Gathering up the blanket, Naomi reached out for the arm of the sofa to support her weight. Even after steadying herself she could feel her body still swaying. It felt the same as when her father took her on their only fishing trip. The feeling of being seasick took hours to subside.

A man entered the room carrying three wooden logs. He seemed oblivious to the fact Naomi’s gaze watched his every move. He walked across the room, dropped two short logs into a metal bucket then threw the third log on the fire. The man stood and nodded at the flames. The moment he turned his back on the floating embers he stared directly at Naomi.

“Who are you?”

“Whoa, little lady, don’t be too startled.”

Naomi wrapped the blanket tighter around her. “Where’s Trent?”

“He’s outside. I’m Henry, Roy Davey’s son,” he answered, reaching out his hand.

“I’m Naomi Fitzgerald,” she indicated, shaking the man’s hand.

“You’re from the big smoke, ain’t ya?”

Naomi nodded. “Where are you from?”

“I came from across the road. We’re neighbours, Trent and me.”

“If we aren’t at the Oasis, where are we?”

“You’re spot on. This ain’t the Oasis, girlie.”

“Naomi,” she barked.

Henry sent her a blank look.

“My name is Naomi.”

“Yeah, right,” blurted the man. “This is the old Peterson place. You sure are a pretty woman. Love the colour of ya skin.”

Trent walked into the room carrying a mug of freshly made hot coffee. Placing it in Naomi’s hand he glared at Henry.

“You didn’t wake my guest?”

“I stayed quieter than a fox closing in on the chickens. I’ll be gettin’ some more firewood.”

“Trent, where are my clothes?” whispered Naomi, the moment Henry left the room.

He pointed to a pile of material in the corner. “Do you remember the storm?”

“Yes of course.”

“Do you remember falling asleep and me grabbing you a before you hit the floor?”

“No.”

“Don’t feel embarrassed, I was the perfect gentleman. I suggested you take off your wet clothes. I also mentioned you should wrap the blanket you’re wearing around you.”

“Thank you.”

Trent walked over to the pile of dry clothes, throwing them at Naomi.

“I hope Henry didn’t come on too strong? He’s in the market for a wife.”

“What about you?”

“Sure, if the right lady ever came across my path.”

“Do you want to tell me more about yourself?”

“No.”

“Why not; why are you so secretive? Have you killed someone?”

“Nothing so drastic,” replied Trent.

“You can at least tell me why you insist on having a length of coiled rope hanging from your belt?”

“I’m not sure you need to know,” hinted Trent, squaring himself to Naomi.

“I think I have the right.”

Trent used his hand to casually wave the question away.

Naomi felt as though she’d walked into the middle of a tug of war where her brain was yelling to put the brakes on. Her heart ordered her to go get him before he slips away. After all the tugging, she knew nothing of the man. His history, what he liked in a woman, disliked. The vow she made to Kaite rang warning bells inside her head. She wanted to reach inside her mind to throw them to the wind. Thinking of how much hurt Brandt caused her Naomi started trembling inside the blanket. In a heartbeat, she decided her brain will win, for now.

“You don’t strike me to be a typical Jillaroo,” mumbled Trent, throwing another log on the fire.

“I’m sure of the fact Mr. Stanton’s son is not just a pilot,”

“Are you sure?” replied Naomi. She watched the embers from the dry four-inch wide log floated upwards. In a few moments, the tiny sparks had been sucked up the chimney and were gone.

“A typical pilot wouldn’t land in the middle of nowhere just to check a wire fence. Maybe I’ll throw myself at Henry.”

Trent raised his hands. “I have to confess I’d treat you a thousand times more loving than he.”

Naomi wrapped her arms even tighter around the blanket. Her heart pounded inside her chest. The drumming was telling her to jump at the man. She so wanted desperately to follow what her heart ordered. Unless she threw herself at Trent how else could she show him how she felt? If she came on too strong would he still be interested? Her body erupted in goose bumps, comparing Trent’s loving, caring nature to Brandt’s deceitfulness. Though they’d only known each other for several hours, she needn’t condemn him of any wrongdoing. A sudden awareness surged to every part of her body. Maybe they were soul mates if there was such a thing. Naomi started to enter foreign territory and decided to leave it there.

“Tell me how you’d treat a woman compared to Henry?”

“I’d wine, dine and treat her respectfully.”

“What about dancing?”

Trent made a deep-throated chuckle. The noise seemed to startle Naomi so he quickly changed the subject. “I believe it’ll stop raining soon.”

“I hope so,” mumbled Naomi. “Where did you say we are?”

“We actually landed at the Oasis.”

Naomi pushed her back deeper into the old dull red couch.

“I asked you earlier is this the Oasis; you told me no. You lied. Henry also informed me this is the Peterson’s place.”

“Not exactly,” blurted Trent.

She fixed her stare on the man. The light from the fire showed off his broad shoulders and deep chest. His damp jeans started to steam. Feeling angry she unknowingly gave a slight grin.

“I saw you smile.”

“I didn’t,” sighed Naomi, watching Trent’s chest rise.

“I’m the middle son of Mr. Stanton who owns the Oasis and surrounding area. Fifty kilometers north of this place is the actual Oasis. The surrounding area is five hundred square kilometers. The size of the Oasis is forty thousand square acres, or should I say, the Oasis is the shape of a football field.”

“An oval?” shrieked Naomi.

He nodded.

Naomi scrunched her nose. “There’s nothing out here except storms, dust, and Henry. He also mentioned he’s your neighbour.”

“Yes, he’s our closest neighbour. He lives one hour south of this house. The Oasis is the second most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“What’s the first?” questioned Naomi.

Trent chuckled before leaving the room.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

NAOMI QUICKLY dressed in dry warm blue jeans and a black collar shirt. She slipped her feet into new white runners and walked into the kitchen.

Trent smiled the moment she entered the room. "Now you look the part of a Jillaroo." She faced him feeling slightly embarrassed.

"The way you look right now could easily melt any man," advised Trent.

"What about the one I'm facing?"

"You sure do. I'll go rustle up some grub."

Naomi's eyebrows angled to a point, wrinkling her brow. "Grub?" she questioned.

"If you want to fit in out here you have to call food, grub."

"You don't strike me as a man who knows his way around a kitchen."

"If you're trying to find out if I can cook, I'd rate myself less than average."

"Maybe I should give you some lessons. Sit at the table and watch what I do."

Trent watched Naomi dart around the room, from the stove to the pantry then back to the cupboard several times. She looked up at his bewildered face, giggling.

"How did you know what food to bring if you're not really good at cooking?"

"I was given a shopping list. I placed everything in the plane before you arrived."

"Who made the list?"

"Gaile," replied Trent.

"Who's Gaile?"

"Do I hear a hint of jealousy in your voice?"

"No, why should there be? We're not an item."

"In that case, I don't have to tell you who Gaile is."

"Another secret," mumbled Naomi.

An older man walked into the kitchen, announcing his arrival by saying. "I can smell food cookin'."

Naomi studied the man. His long silver hair matched his beard. His torn jeans and muddy boots were, she thought a typical outback look. His blue button up shirt barely covered his massive beer gut.

"Roy Davey, I wondered when you'd show your face." Trent reached out his hand.

The man's cold hardened expression didn't alter the whole time he was in the room.

"Trent, forget the handshake, I'm not in a good mood. I won't stay long. I have a message for your father."

"This is Naomi," mentioned Trent, open palming a hand towards her.

"Nice to meet you, Miss."

"It's good to hear polite words."

"I can tell you're a city gal," he blurted, nodding sharply.

"How?" questioned Naomi.

"You smell like city folk."

"I'm sorry I don't stink like a cow."

"I say what I mean."

"What's the message?" asked Trent, folding his arms.

"The bank has made an offer to buy me place. It's too good to refuse."

"I thought you said you'd never sell."

"I'm not selling. The bank's given me seven days to walk off me land."

Naomi studied the man from over the stirring of a boiling pot. His face showed no emotion, informing Trent of the terrible news. 'Steel on the outside, a blubbering mess on the inside,' she thought.

"I'm sorry to hear the news," said Trent.

"If you want to buy me land, think up a good offer. Maybe we'll do a deal. The contest is between you and the bank."

"Six months ago dad might have jumped at the chance for another 2000 acres; not now."

"Why? I've offered you me land on a silver plate."

"It's the Tax office. They want to take our land too."

Naomi's brow wrinkled when she heard Trent's confession. Her mind steamed harder than the contents of the boiling pot she'd been stirring. She wanted to know more. Up to date the only thing she knew about outback people; they believed land to be the most precious thing in the world. To make them sell seemed un-comprehensible.

"Anyways," continued Davey. "Henry's in the truck. We got to get going. We saw you landing the plane real fast. We came over to find out if you were okay. I'm pleased you're safe. This storm's a real kicker."

"Thanks for showing you care."

"I must confess I didn't want to come over; me Mrs. ordered me."

Trent nodded. Even though they sounded like they hated each other neither one seemed willing to be the first to back down so the other could have a niche.

'Both stubborn as each other,' thought Naomi. She wondered if something bad happened would either come running. The moment things returned to normal again she felt convinced they'd revert back to disliking each other.

Davey studied Naomi from head to feet. He used his elbow to dig Trent in the ribs. "She's a bit of all right for a city gal. I don't usually give out any advice especially to you or your father. If I were you I'd do everything I could to keep her by my side. Look after this one."

"Thanks. I'll keep the advice under my hat."

"One more thing before I leave. I have to tell you Henry bumped the lid off the large box. When I walked past, it looked empty."

"It's okay, I'll find Charlie later. He won't have gone too far."

Davey waved goodbye before running out into the rain.

Naomi thrust the plate of bacon and eggs at Trent. They both sat and ate hungrily. She watched the man watching her. She just couldn't put her finger on the reason why she felt drawn to the man.

"The meal tasted great," confessed Trent.

“I’m pleased you like it.” She watched him take his empty plate to the sink and start to wash it. ‘I’m going to find out the answers to my questions, Trent Stanton, if it’s the last thing I do,’ she thought inwardly.

Naomi’s thoughts tumbled over and over in her mind as she scraped the last morsel of food from her plate. Hunching her shoulders, she said with a sigh.

“Three o’clock in the afternoon and the sun looks as though it’s about to break through the clouds.”

Trent nodded in agreement.

“You didn’t look at the sky. Are you going to take my word for it?”

“I don’t need to believe you, I can tell.”

“How?” quizzed Naomi.

“The wind has dropped.”

Moments later the sun broke through the clouds. The water in the dam started to sparkle in the warming rays. Trent finished the dishes then walked across the room to the window to study the sky. He let a low whistle slip.

Naomi looked down his arm, following his gaze. She looked puzzled.

“What are you staring at?”

“The dam hasn’t been this full in years. Care for a swim?”

“No thanks,” answered Naomi, politely.

“Come on. A nice swim will do you the world of good.” He grabbed Naomi by the waist, lifting her into the air. “It’s going to be a stinker for the remainder of the day. You city girls need to unwind. The best medicine is swimming, outback style.”

Naomi kicked him in the shin. “Trent, no!” she shrieked.

“Do you always get your own way, city girl?”

She shook her fist at his face. “Not always. I just want to be treated like a lady. Now put me down.”

“I understand,” whispered Trent, allowing Naomi’s feet to touch the floor.

Naomi placed her arm over the country boy’s shoulder. “I’m sorry for snapping. It has nothing to do with you, it’s me.”

“That’s a relief. I thought.”

“What?” Naomi asked. She leaned towards Trent, hoping not to miss even a single letter of a whispered confession.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Naomi bit her bottom lip, eyeballing the man. It’s another secret to add to her ever-increasing questions. Shaking her head she looked directly into his eyes.

“If you walk me to the dam, I’ll try my hardest to swim.”

“Try? What’s there to try about?”

“Not everyone can swim.”

Trent focused on Naomi’s frightened green eyes. “Are you trying to tell me you can’t swim?”

She lowered her gaze, focusing on the wood grain in the floorboards. She wanted to find a crack in a board so she could disappear.

“Yes.” Her voice sounded weak at best.

“I’m sorry for embarrassing you. I didn’t know.”

“I keep it a secret. Kaite, my best friend is the only one who knows.”

“I promise I’ll never tell your secret to anyone.”

“There’s one more thing, I didn’t bring a bathing suit.”

“Due to the fact you can’t swim?” finished Trent. He reached and dragged her in close.

“Yes.” Naomi buried her head in his chest. She stood listening to the rhythm of his heart.

It suddenly quickened.

“Come on, I have the perfect solution.” He led Naomi to a black overnight bag, unzipped the top and drove his hand deep inside.

Naomi’s giggles broke into laughter when he turned the bag upside down. She watched amused as Trent sifted through one pair of blue jeans, three shirts, one white, one black, one wet muddy shirt and a blue open-neck shirt.

“I’ll wear the blue one,” suggested Naomi.

“Are you sure? Why don’t you wear a dry one?”

“Trent, the blue button up shirt is the only one long enough to cover. Besides, why wet another shirt?”

“I’ll meet you at the dam,” he quipped, walking off.

Naomi trotted down the hallway to the bathroom. She stood in front of the mirror and slipped into the wet shirt. The material felt cold and hung heavy from her shoulders. She pushed her feet into her damp runners and set off towards the dam.

The outback man is right, she surmised. Inside an hour, the humidity will be stifling. She caught a glimpse of Trent half way to the dam. Naomi quickly settled into a comfortable running style to catch up.

“What on earth are you wearing?”

“A black towel,” chuckled Trent.

“Are you wearing anything else?”

“Nothing,” he replied seriously.

Naomi swallowed her excitement at the uncertainty of what might transpire over the next hour. Reaching out she took hold of his hand. She watched him walking next to her using a sideways stare. Her heart pounded inside her chest. The closer they got to the dam the hotter she felt.

Trent didn’t bother to stop to sum up the cold water. He threw his towel at a fence post and dived in. Naomi stood gob-smacked as her eyes feasted again on his ice cream cone shaped body. He surfaced near the middle of the dam, waving, beckoning her in. Naomi walked to the water’s edge. Stepping out of her runners her bare feet sunk into the mud. Trent dived. When he surfaced he grabbed her ankles. Naomi squealed and flopped down into the mud.

“There’s nothing more invigorating than a cold mud bath,” growled Naomi, sarcastically.

“Come on in.”

“The mud feels horrible.”

Trent marched out of the water. He picked her up in an effortless sweep of an arm, carrying her into the water. He patiently showed Naomi freestyle then watched, showing genuine interest as she slowly increased her strokes.

“Naomi, I want to discuss the bet we made back at the airport.”

“I’m listening. What’s on your mind?”

“I want to call the bet null and void.”

“Is this a new way of winning?”

Trent looked directly into her eyes. His easy-going expression quickly faded.

“You win by default. At the first opportunity, I’ll give you that dance.”

Naomi went to shake his hand. “I’ll agree to your demands if you tell me more about yourself.”

Trent lifted his arms as if he had finally surrendered. “Okay, what do you want to know?”

“Why do you carry the rope clipped to your belt and I want to know why your family is about to lose the Oasis?”

“You are an extremely nosy person, Miss Fitzgerald.”

“I sure am.”

“I’ll spill the beans after you kiss me.”

Naomi shook her head suspiciously. She needed to keep her mind in check if she wanted to discover what actually made this country man tick. She couldn’t afford to make a mistake.

“You play a good game of poker,” taunted Trent.

“I have been known to.”

The man slipped back into waist deep water. “Come in, I won’t bite.”

“I feel safer back here.”

“Okay. I’ll have you know you forced me into it. I have a great idea, how about we get dressed so we can talk in a more comfortable place. You look a little on the cold side.” Trent swam to the edge of the dam. He walked up the muddy bank in full view.

Naomi lost her breath, watching the naked man wrap the towel around his narrow waist, marching off towards the house. She instinctively followed.

Trent looked already clean and wearing shorts by the time Naomi closed in on the crude, effective outside shower. Two wine barrels were in a tree above head height. A twist of the wooden plug on the bottom of the barrel saw clean water flowing.

Naomi scrunched her nose. “Where’s the privacy?”

Trent glared at her. “If you want a shower, this is it.”

“I’ll use the one inside the house.”

Trent grabbed her by the arm to stop her from walking off.

“Let me go,” she insisted.

Trent pulled Naomi in close, tightening his grip.

“You’re hurting me.”

Naomi felt his breath brushing her cheeks. She could tell he wasn’t happy at having to tell his story. She shouldn’t expect him to say anything about his private life. She felt disappointed at pushing the point.

The moment Trent relaxed his grip Naomi stepped back, glad to have space between them.

“Oh, no you don’t city girl, nothing ever gets away from me,” boasted Trent.

“You’re a tease.”

Trent pulled her in close again. This time, Naomi leaned into the pull. Her action made them fall towards the mud. She heard a squelch. Trent groaned when his back hit the ground. Naomi came down hard on his chest. Both looked lovingly at the other. Trent blushed at seeing Naomi's reddening face. Instead of pushing her off, Trent wrapped his arms around her. She felt imprisoned. Her brain started yelling to slap his smiling face while her heart seemed to be saying something totally different. She tossed into the mix her two opposite ideas.

Her heart won.

Naomi stopped struggling. She brought her hands forward, folding her arms across his chest.

"Is this where I apologize for being huffy and running off?"

"It's a good start," Naomi whispered.

"I'm at your mercy," complained Trent. "You have me a shackled prisoner."

"A big strong man like you, don't make me laugh."

"See I can't move," informed Trent, trying to wriggle his way out from underneath Naomi.

"You could easily throw me off using one hand."

"Yes I could quite easily accomplish the task," advised Trent.

"I dare you to try."

"I don't want to show off."

Snuggling in closer Naomi chuckled. Trent's skin felt hard from his bulging taut muscles. On a sigh, she closed her eyes. She felt at home, snuggling close to a man who has too many secrets. For the first time in her life, she felt safe in a man's arms. Unexpected her vow to Kaite surfaced making her frown at the thought. Why did she vow such a childish thing? She tried to block out the words by cuddling Trent harder.

"Are you comfortable?"

Naomi nodded and hid her grin.

"Your skin feels cool. Are you cold?" asked Trent.

"No."

"If you've told me the truth you must be thinking something?"

Naomi lifted her head off Trent's chest. "You're right. I've been thinking about the secrets which are locked inside your head."

"I hate torture. I'll confess."

"Start talking big boy." Naomi smiled at his pouting lip.

"I carry the rope on my belt because I'm a rodeo champion."

Naomi arched her back. Her eyes widened at the confession.

"Henry is my opposition. He's never won against me. His father hates my family because of it. A few years ago I approached my father, suggesting I should throw the next annual championship just so they might start to like each other. He refused the offer. We agreed if Roy Davey couldn't come to accept the fact his son might always be second it is bad luck."

Trent let a grin slip.

"What's the look for?"

"Father said the Davey's needed to suck it up."

"The annual championships, when are they?"

“It’s the bush bash in the nearest town from here. It’s fast approaching.”

“Shouldn’t you be practicing?”

“I don’t need to practice. If I find a stray cow or I see a fence post or a city girl, I use my rope.”

“You’d rope a city girl?”

“Only the pretty ones,” replied Trent.

“How many pretty ones have you seen?”

“Only one,” he whispered.

Naomi portrayed a hurt expression.

“Only you,” he added.

“Thanks for the compliment.”

“It’s no trouble to say. I’ve said before, you’re easy on the eyes.”

“I feel bad your father and Henry’s father refuse to talk.”

“I can’t change the fact.”

“I’m on your father’s side,” stated Naomi.

“I’m sure he’ll love to hear that.”

“You have a humble family.”

“The good book says we should be.”

“Are you religious folk too?”

“Of course,” replied Trent. “The only problem in my life is the girl I once liked.”

“Your ex-flame,” cut in Naomi.

“Yes.”

She immediately felt pangs of jealousy over the girl she’d never met.

“She’s Henry’s sister. She lives twenty kilometers from the Oasis.”

“She’s not Gaile?”

“No, Gaile is my brother’s wife, though she’s a bit of alright. I must add you’re one hundred times prettier than her.”

Naomi’s cheeks instantly turned a bright red colour.

“Tell me about the Oasis?” she asked.

“The government wants our land. They’ve always wanted our land ever since they gave it to my family for free. When they discovered how fertile the land was they wanted it back. My great grandfather refused. He didn’t make things easy for us by telling them there’s gold in the ground. The land is perfect for cows, nothing else.”

“How did he obtain the land for free?”

“We have to get going. Father is expecting us.”

Trent pushed Naomi off him and looked ready to jump to his feet.

Naomi couldn’t decide whether she felt disappointed or not, seeing how he didn’t answer her question. She respected his decision not to say. Changing tact she continued.

“Why don’t you write to the government telling them firmly, no, you can’t have the land?”

“We tried. They advised us we owe them fifty thousand dollars in back taxes. Pay up or get out.”

“Borrow from the bank. When they have what they want you’ll be surprised how quick they’ll leave you alone.”

“We did try that idea. They informed us we owed them a further three thousand dollars. We again borrowed the money. Twelve months later they said we owed them ten thousand. They won’t stop until we’re off the land. The government is doing the same to Davey’s farm.”

“I’m sorry for prying,” whispered Naomi.

“It’s okay. Unless you know how to find fifty thousand bucks in two weeks we’re off the land, heading to who knows where.”

Naomi almost choked at hearing the words. She leaned forward, kissing his forehead. She got to her feet and hovered over the man squatting on the ground.

“Come on, I’ve work to do.” In a military, voice she blurted, “On your feet Mr. Trent Stanton.”

“What’s wrong? You’ve jumped up like our Jack Russell pups.”

“Come on. We have to get to the Oasis. I have to talk to your father.”

“You can’t wait to meet my family?”

“Trent, don’t take my news the wrong way. I work for the tax office. I might be able to help.”

“My father’s a proud man. He won’t take any form of help, especially from a woman.”

“He’s going to have to, whether he wants to or not.”

“If you can help it would be a Godsend. Come on, it’s time to head for home.”

“The first thing I have to do is get clean. I also need to go to the lady’s room,” called Naomi, walking off towards the house. She looked over her shoulder at Trent. “Where’s the ladies toilet?”

“It’s around back, near the wood shed. Be careful of the spiders.”

Naomi gave a casual wave. Walking around the corner of the house, she glanced at the motorbike. It looked almost a pile of dry mud. She walked behind the wood shed and found a wooden structure. It appeared to be two metres tall and no more than one metre squared.

“The bush toilet,” she mumbled. “It’s worse than the bush shower.” She opened the door, viewing the room. “Trent calls it an outhouse. I call it a broken down cabinet. A one metre squared box with a bent nail for a doorknob. At least there are four walls and a door.” She screwed her nose up at the angle of the door. “I doubt if this place has ever been cleaned.”

Naomi entered, studying the wooden seat. “I can’t see any spiders,” she mumbled.

Feeling something slide across her water soaked runners. She looked down at the hardened wet dirt. She didn’t know whether to scream or cry.

Trent’s frantic voice rose above the low throb of the plane’s twin engines. His tone belonged to a person who sounded petrified.

“Naomi, before you enter the outhouse there’s something I forgot to mention, something extremely important.”

Trent took a short cut by clambering over the woodpile. He called again more urgent. Naomi could plainly hear the panic in his voice. She started tapping her foot on the ground, waiting for him to arrive.

He sprinted up to the outhouse, rope in hand. Stopping to study the scene, he dropped the rope, looking puzzled at seeing an empty makeshift toilet. His eyes darted back and forth.

Naomi watched him scratch his head while walking around. Eventually, he saw her watching him.

“Excuse me,” she said, stepping calmly into the open.

Trent stood facing the city chic. His eyes were wider than golf balls. His face had drained of colour.

“Have you seen a ghost?” asked Naomi. “Or are you trembling due to the fact you have lost something about two metres long which slithers across the ground?”

Trent’s shoulders slumped. His face flushed red. “Yes.”

“I believe this might be the living creature you stowed in the large box,” quizzed Naomi, thrusting the python at him.

“I forgot to let you know about Charlie. When you were asleep I brought him inside the house. I thought you might be scared if I mentioned the snake. Sorry.”

“I love snakes, especially Pythons. My flatmate owns a female,” confessed Naomi.

“Flat-mate?” asked Trent.

“Could it be you’re slightly jealous?”

“Maybe a little,” he confessed.

“Her name is Kaite.”

Trent took possession of the snake, draping it across his shoulders.

“How on earth did Charlie escape the house?”

“Henry bumped the lid off the box. Charlie knows his way around here. He must have found a crack in the floor. I kind of hoped he’d show before you both met.”

Naomi took the snake back to give him a cuddle. “He’s a beautiful specimen. Where did you find him?”

“When my family bought this place six months ago we discovered him coiled up in the laundry. He never went far from the house. Probably curious about the noise we were making. By the time my brother and I got this place looking okay he seemed to want to be around us. I couldn’t leave him, so I decided to adopt the snake. I named him Charlie.”

“Trent, do you have any more secrets?”

“A few,” he whispered. Grinning, he picked up the length of rope, clipping it back onto his belt.

“I’m impressed at the way you can wind a rope.”

“I’m not a rodeo champ by accident.”

“Trent, starting now, I’m going to derive a plan to make you confess every one of your secrets. You’re about to tell me everything,” Naomi snarled inwardly.

“How handy are you at using the rope?”

“Care for a demonstration?”

“Sure.”

Pointing to a fence post-Trent unbuckled the rope. In a slick move, he swung the loop in circles several times above his head. At the precise moment, he let the noose go then closed his eyes. The large noose flew through the air, landing over the fence post.

“Not bad for a stationary object,” Naomi taunted.

Trent re-wound the rope, clipping it to his belt. “Don’t move.”

Naomi watched him march in the direction of the house. Jumping on the motorbike he easily kicked started it. At speed, he came roaring back. Trent completed a few doughnuts in the dirt. Wearing a proud look he stood on the seat while the bike roared towards the fence post. One foot worked the throttle of the bike the other foot looked firmly planted into the seat. He gave Naomi a wink. Unclipping the rope he started rotating the noose above his head. In seconds, he sent the rope sailing through the air. The noose landed in the exact center of the fence post. Trent jumped off the bike, landing feet first in the mud.

"I'm impressed," clapped Naomi. "You should enter your tricks into the rodeos."

"I don't have to they just expect me to turn up. Come on, enough fun it's time to go."

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE PLANE ascended steadily in the dying wind, leveling off at one hundred and thirty-seven feet.

"Soon you'll see the full view of the Oasis," hinted Trent.

"I'm looking forward to seeing it."

A shiver shot through Naomi's body. Could the feeling mean she'd already started to fall in love? She felt tempted to lean sideways to kiss Trent and wrap her arms around him. Inwardly, she gave a stern warning to herself. Find out what made him tick. Don't fall in love with someone who seemed to have a lot of secrets.

The plane changed direction, banking slightly. Naomi dug her hands into the seat to stop from leaning against Trent. She waited patiently for the plane to level before talking.

"You do realize having too many secrets is bad for you? It could be the reason why you're still single."

"Maybe," answered Trent.

To Naomi finding out the answers to her questions seemed harder than digging a deep hole in the hardened clay using a kid's plastic hand shovel.

Noting the concentration etched on Trent's face, Naomi looked away to focus on the desert landscape. She spied a pack of kangaroos basking in the sun and a herd of cows eating near a small dam. She counted twenty-seven before they slipped from view.

The next scene to catch her attention was the slow turning windmills scattered about the landscape. They snaked in an endless line before them. Each one appeared to be anchored to the side of a dam a kilometer apart.

Strange Naomi thought. 'I wonder if there's an underground river feeding the dams.' She cupped a hand above her eyes to form a shield so she could follow the line of dams to the edge of her vision before following them back to the Peterson's house. She felt satisfied at discovering the desert's secret. Glancing at Trent she wondered if he knew about the underground river.

"Can I ask you something?"

"I'll answer your question to the best of my ability." Trent gave the plane's instruments one long look before giving her his undivided attention. "You sure are the most beautiful sight out here," he whispered.

Naomi wasn't prepared for the statement. To prevent her cheeks from reddening she pretended not to hear what he said.

"How did you get an education?"

"Your question is easy to answer. Education came through the school of the air. I came top of my class."

"My teacher spoke about the system when I was in sixth grade. I'm not totally convinced learning over the radio is a good thing."

"It mightn't be. Out in the middle of Australia, there's no other way of learning."

"What about school friends?"

"Friends were few. The voices of the other kids were great. We sent photos of ourselves to each other so we could have a visual idea who the voice belonged to."

"I reckon it'll be difficult to fall in love out here in the middle of nowhere," Naomi hinted. She sat watching him from the corner of her eye waiting to see his reaction.

Trent looked out his side of the window. "Three months after turning sixteen I thought I had fallen in love. She lived one-hundred and three kilometers from the Oasis."

Naomi looked out the plane's window, raising an eyebrow.

"I snuck out of our house one Friday night after dinner. I rode a motorbike to her house in the dark. I woke her before the rooster crowed."

"Surely you got into a lot of trouble."

"Some. Karen's father didn't take too kindly to my presence. He was shocked when he found out I'd ridden across the outback on a dirt bike in the dark. He let me stay the whole day. Sun up the next day he fuelled my bike before sending me on my way."

"What did your father say?"

"My father suggested I don't do it again."

"What about the girl?"

"After I left for home she never talked to me again."

"It's a shame."

"No, it's a good thing. If anything else happened I might never have met you."

Naomi didn't know where to look. She felt happy he quoted such a nice statement. It had been a long time since someone said anything positive about her.

Trent reached for Naomi's hand. Raising it to his lips he kissed her knuckles. The move sent a shiver into the middle of Naomi's back. Instead of dispersing the feeling lingered.

"If I must compare you to the beauty of the Oasis, you'd win every time. The Oasis is the second most beautiful thing out here. There is no comparison between you and the Oasis."

Naomi certainly didn't expect such a solid statement. When she spoke her voice sounded weak. "Are there any more secrets you'd like to share?"

Trent fell silent. He guided the plane downwards, leveling off at seventy-nine feet. Naomi spied an old deserted house. In places the fencing was missing, blown down by other storms. A large metal gate lay in the mud.

Several minutes ticked off before Trent uttered another word.

“Naomi, if you look ahead the Oasis is about to come into view.”

“You want to talk now?” She looked sideways into his eyes willing him to open his mouth to tell everything.

“I only talk when I have something important I want to say.”

“You told me the same thing a while ago.”

“Yes, I know I did.”

Naomi returned her gaze to the desert below. “It’s fantastic,” she whispered. “The area does take your breath away. It’s unbelievable. How is it all possible?” Slowly she returned her gaze back to Trent’s smiling face. She wanted to test the man of his honesty and finally discovered a way. “You never did explain the details to me on how your father found the place?”

“I have already mentioned my father didn’t discover the Oasis. My great grandfather stumbled across it by accident.”

Naomi felt impressed at Trent’s honesty and seemingly endless patience. She sat next to him wondering what it might take before he actually lost his cool.

“How the Oasis was formed, no one knows,” continued Trent. “I’ve searched the internet for answers. I’ve asked the school of the air. No one has an answer to my question. Some say a large meteorite hit the earth millions of years ago which left the oval shaped crater. Others have said a river formed the Oasis. Every time it rains the river leading into the Oasis cascades over the side. The water falls one hundred feet to the river below. The main entry point is the waterfall. Don’t ever be in the water when she’s flowing. Even though the water’s not deep, I do rescue several cows every year from the river.”

“Using your trusty rope?” cut in Naomi.

Trent nodded

“No wonder you carry it on your belt.”

The plane circled the giant sized oval in the ground before diving down the waterfall skimming the tree tops.

“You can see why we always have plenty of water and green grass. Now you understand why the area is perfect for cows.”

Naomi studied the entire fertile land. The grass looked a rich dark green. An abundance of cows freely roamed. She estimated there was at least a thousand head. Focusing on the river, her gaze traced it till the water disappeared underground.

The plane roared from one end of the river to the other, banked then headed up river again.

“You have four houses close together,” said Naomi.

“Mine is the newest looking one. I moved in three weeks ago. Everyone has to build our own. It is father’s rules. My parents and my older sister live in the two-storey mansion. Next house in line is my eldest brother’s and his wife. Mine’s on the end.”

“The Oasis is a beautiful place,” remarked Naomi. “I can see why you don’t want to leave. I still can’t understand how you can compare its beauty to me. The Oasis is in a field of its own.”

Trent gave her a sideways glance. For a moment, their eyes locked. Naomi felt an arc of electricity shoot between them. They smiled at each other simultaneously. A new question flashed into Naomi's mind. Did he actually build the house for her?

Trent turned his head away to look out of the windscreen.

Naomi copied his move, disappointed the moment had ended so abruptly.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TRENT PREPARED to land the plane by lining up a dirt path which ran along the entire length of the fast flowing river. The usual whine of the engines slowed. The ground came up quickly.

"Where does the water go?" asked Naomi, watching the river flow towards a cliff face.

"It pours into an underground tunnel. In the dry season about four years ago, I dived into the cave and followed the waist deep water for half an hour before giving up. Through research, I found a map. It showed me the river ended at the sea near Darwin."

The plane landed gracefully, coming to a stop next to the river. The moment Trent cut the engines he opened the door. The wind came from the north. The sun felt warm against Naomi's skin.

"Every dam between here and the house we landed at has tapped into the underground river," quoted Naomi.

"You catch on quick," replied Trent.

"You haven't explained in detail how your family came across this place."

"Didn't I?"

"No. You avoided details of my question by changing the plane's course one degree."

"You're a very observant young lady."

"I'm curious."

"Also intelligent," added Trent. "I love a woman who is intelligent."

'One for me,' Naomi thought.

"Discovering the Oasis had been a massive coincidence. My great grandfather's best mate Tom conned him into selling everything he owned back in England. Free land in Australia he'd reported. They came out together dragging their families with them. When they reached Australia they were laughed out of the small wooden governor's shack. Unperturbed by the set back my great grandfather conned the government of the time into giving him anything he discovered right here. The rest speaks for itself."

"Fantastic family history!" exclaimed Naomi.

"I've confessed too much. Don't forget you're suppose to be here for work." Trent unbuckled his seat belt and stepped down from the plane. "Whatever you do, stay away from the river. She's moving the fastest I've ever seen after the recent storm."

Naomi focused on a group of riders who were approaching the plane. She guessed they came from the main house. Each one of the group was riding a magnificent looking horse. The group resembled characters straight out of a western movie. She undid her seat belt and stepped down from the plane.

“The posse has arrived,” she said, pointing.

Trent sent her a thunderstorm expression.

“I’m only kidding.”

Naomi watched each rider pull back on the reins of their horse before stepping onto the ground. The boots of each rider sank slightly in the softened mud.

“Welcome home,” chorused the riders in unison.

Naomi paid special attention to a tall man wearing a cowboy hat, blue jeans and a plain pale blue button up shirt. The man’s stomach looked relatively flat for his age. He took off his large hat, outstretching his hand. His thick grey head of hair looked tidy. His broad shoulders were square; his posture, straight. He stood military style waiting to shake hands.

Trent shook his hand. Politely he palmed his free hand towards his companion.

“Father, this is the single package I informed you about, Miss Naomi Fitzgerald; Mr. Earl Stanton.”

“We meet at last. Sir, it’s urgent we talk.”

Stanton faced Naomi, revealing a picture of the Oasis tattooed on his forearm.

“I have some reservations about hiring a young lady from the city,” he growled. “I did expect at least one bloke.”

“Father, I explained Naomi is the only person.”

Stanton grunted. Reaching out, he shook Naomi’s hand.

“Earl, help the young lady to feel welcome.”

Naomi searched for the friendly voice. It came from the mouth of a tall thin middle-aged woman who held the reins of a brown mare.

“I’m Mrs. Margaret Stanton,” she announced, stepping forward. “My husband only looks mean. When you get to know him you’ll find he’s nothing more than a giant teddy bear.”

Earl Stanton’s chuckle quickly changed into a full belly laugh.

“Glad you could come. I need all the help I can get.”

The remainder of the group rushed to Naomi’s side. Trent introduced each one of his family members in turn.

“Pleased to meet you,” said a man stepping forward. His grin widened; his blue eyes seemed to flash.

‘You have to be Trent’s older brother,’ Naomi thought. ‘Your build is similar and you wear the same style clothing as his father, except for the black singlet.’

“Enough greetings,” bellowed Stanton. “We’ve work to do. Son, we’ll see you at the house for dinner.”

Trent nodded as the group moved to mount their horses.

“Mr. Stanton, I must talk to you,” called Naomi, watching the group start to ride off.

Disappointed at being ignored Naomi faced the one remaining rider.

“I’m Mitch, Trent’s younger brother. I’ll be twenty-five next week.”

“Pleased to meet you,” replied Naomi.

Mitch let the reins of his horse drop so he could reach out his hand. He grabbed Naomi's wrist, bending down to kiss her knuckles.

"Hey," yelled Trent.

"I can tell he's been hanging around you," laughed Naomi. She felt deeply touched by the fuss. Trent's sudden outburst tickled her to the core.

Charlie lifted the lid of the box and slithered out of the plane. He made his way towards the last remaining horse, curling around its foreleg. The horse jerked his head around the moment it felt the snake. Charlie lifted his head. The horse reared up, accidentally bumping Naomi towards the river. She rolled her ankle in the soft mud and landed on her back in waist deep water. She shivered from the sudden cold. Almost instantly she felt the water start to suck her down. Trying desperately to stand in the fast moving current, Naomi knew the river already held her firmly in its grip. If she didn't stand immediately the river will sweep her off towards the cave mouth. Using every ounce of strength she could gather to stand, Naomi only managed to push her hands into the air. To stay calm she tried to remember the swimming style Trent taught her. She immediately attempted a few feeble strokes.

Trent whirled around the moment he heard the splash. Naomi suddenly surfaced, gasping for air. She locked her gaze on Trent's horror-stricken face. Before she could yell a word the water swirled around her, pulling her down for the second time.

'I feel incredibly calm,' she thought. 'Maybe this is what people go through when they were about to die.'

The washing machine style river started her in a tumble spin. Naomi locked her elbows. The act momentarily stopped her tumbles. Her feet scraped the hard ground. She winced in pain as her ankle rolled again. Naomi's head broke the surface. She didn't waste a second, quickly gulping a life-saving breath before the water again swallowed her whole.

'Trent, where are you. I need you to use the rope,' Naomi screamed inside her head. 'I must be dreaming. I fell asleep lying on my bed. Yes, this is a dream. In a few seconds, I'll wake to find myself wrapped up in the bed linen.'

Naomi's head broke the surface again. She managed to take another deep breath. A short sharp scream followed. Looking upstream she saw Trent running.

"This is no dream," she mumbled. Lifting her arm towards her hero, she yelled. "Trent, save me. Use your rope."

"I'm coming," Trent bellowed. "Hold your arm up."

Naomi did what he said. She watched him unclip the rope from his belt and start the rope circling above his head. The gap between them quickly grew wider. She saw him gather the rope, re-clipping it back onto his belt.

The water covered Naomi's face, slipping her from view.

'What's his idea? So much for my cowboy hero,' Naomi screamed inwardly. She moved her thoughts from Trent to Kaite. She felt sad she didn't get the chance to make a phone call to her to find out what she might be doing. Naomi felt proud at knowing the fact she'd probably be getting ready to go out and have a good time at a nightclub.

Returning her thoughts back to her dilemma, Naomi could feel her body start to go numb from the cold. Her lungs started to ache. She tried to think how long she could hold her breath. The only time she ever tried she failed to get past ten seconds. At realizing she might have

been holding her breath for eight seconds Naomi started to panic. Surely she could hold her breath for at least fifteen seconds. Naomi exhaled a small amount of air hoping the act might help to stop the ache in her lungs. It didn't. Her left shoulder dug into the hard ground. In seconds, excruciating pain shot throughout her body. Life as she knew it began to slip away.

Naomi barely felt the tug. She opened her eyes, looking down at her right leg. She felt disappointed her new jeans were finished, ripped open from the knee down to her ankle. Her hip had scraped against a rock, ripping her pocket away, exposing her thigh. Her eyes widened when she felt the edge of the whirlpool.

'The cave entrance must be close,' she reasoned.

Panic set in. Naomi commenced rotating her arms in a desperate freestyle swim. Ascending to the surface proved to be difficult. She wanted to kick herself for not heeding her mother's warning about learning to swim. She closed her eyes thinking the end must be seconds away. Trent's face flashed into her mind. Why didn't he bother to rescue her? Did he lie about everything? The spark she felt for him must have been fake. She made up her mind he must be just the pilot. He'd successfully strung her along just like the other men who had entered her life over the years. She felt sad no one ever discovered the perfect gift. After her death she imagined Trent standing in the middle of the local pub laughing, having a joke at her expense. Kaite did warn her to stay in the city. Now she could kick herself for not listening.

Naomi pushed Trent's reoccurring face from her mind. Her parents and Kaite's image were the ones she wanted to remember at the time of her death. Feeling something hard around her waist, she lifted her hand in attempt to remove it. Everything around her started to go black. Her head broke the surface. She opened her eyes. Her chest automatically heaved life-saving oxygen. The object of concern was firmly wrapped around her waist. Looking down she saw tanned skin. Naomi coughed out water and managed to look up.

"G'day. I thought I'd join you for a swim. If you'd given me more notice I'd have taken off my boots."

"Trent!" coughed Naomi. She could hardly believe it. If she had died why was he in her thoughts? "What are you doing?"

"Don't you want to be rescued?"

"Does this mean I'm not dead?"

"Not even close. Have you forgotten what I told you earlier? Nothing gets away from me."

Oxygen flowed quickly through Naomi's body. Her faculties surged. She raised her arms, hugging Trent's neck.

"Whatever happens don't let go. This whirlpool ends up inside the underground tunnel I told you about."

"How are you going to save us both? I can feel the water starting to suck us down."

Trent grinned. "Plan B."

She gave him a pacified look, deciding to let the man do his stuff.

Trent unclipped his rope and tied one end around both of them as they were dragged to the bottom. The moment his feet touched the ground he crouched. In one massive show of strength, he pushed off, propelling them both upwards.

They broke surface.

Naomi slipped from his shoulders clinging onto his belt buckle using white knuckles. Trent sent the rope sailing through the air, snagging a steel hook 25mm in diameter which someone thoughtfully rammed into the side of the vertical wall of the Oasis. The rope tightened. They hung suspended up to their waist in white surging water which threatened to suck them down to the bottom and sweep them to their deaths.

Naomi looked down at the whirlpool. She saw hard ground at the center of the vortex. She clung to Trent's brass belt buckle using every ounce of strength she could muster. She shuddered at the thought of being sucked down into the cave, her lifeless body bouncing underwater for hours, maybe even weeks before it could be found at the beach. Looking up into Trent's azure coloured eyes, she noted their sparkle made him look jovial.

"Why are you so happy?" she asked.

"I saved your life."

Naomi frowned, trying to climb. "I hate to be a party crasher. I have some sad news. The water seems to be rising."

"No, it's not, your slipping. Hold on."

Naomi watched Trent monkey climb up the rope bringing her up out of the water.

"Now it's your turn to help," groaned Trent. "I need you to reach out for the hooked steel rod above your head. Once you have a firm grip you have to let me go."

"I can't. I'm too weak from the cold."

"Yes, you can. The cavalry is almost here."

Naomi glanced upstream, spying the small group of riders galloping up to the mouth of the cave. Mr. Stanton led the charge. Naomi reached for the steel hook and curled her fingers around the cold metal. In a brave attempt, she tried to lift her body free of the water.

"There's no need to climb," chuckled Trent. "Help is at hand."

A lassoed rope fell over Naomi's head. Hanging by one hand, she managed to push her torso through the rope. It quickly tightened. In seconds, she'd been pulled free of the water.

"Mr. Stanton, you have to save Trent," Naomi urged, collapsing into his arms.

"He can look after himself," he mumbled.

Stanton placed Naomi gently on the ground next to the river. She opened her mouth to yell at him. Her scream didn't leave her throat. Two hands grabbed her around the waist, heaving her to a standing position.

"Are you okay?"

Naomi looked into Trent's eyes. They were full of genuine concern.

"Yes, I'll be fine. Thank you for rescuing me. How did you escape the water?"

"I swung myself free."

Mr. Stanton let out a loud belly laugh. The noise sent the group into chuckles.

Naomi's blue face changed to anger red. "Stop laughing at me," she ordered.

Mr. Stanton raised his hand into the air. The group instantly fell silent.

"Are you positive you're okay?" Stanton asked.

Naomi gave a slow nod.

"To set the record straight none of us will ever laugh at you. On behalf of my family, we are overjoyed you are safe."

"Here, here," chorused the group.

"I apologize for flying off the handle. I'm just a little embarrassed."

"Don't be. Come on back to the house, we'll have a coffee and scones," instructed an elderly lady from the back of the pack. "I'll find you a soft towel. Some dry clothes too."

"She's my Grandmother," whispered Trent. "She always has freshly baked scones ready to eat."

Naomi studied the faces of the small group. "Thanks to each one of you for coming to my rescue and being so hospitable." When she focused on Stanton's face, she could tell he didn't look at all pleased.

"Girlie, what kind of foolish stunt did you think you were trying to pull? Trent talked me into giving you the job. I trust my son. I think he and I are going to have words later. I need a Jackaroo for two weeks, not a two-bit girl from the city masquerading as a bloke."

Margaret stepped up, placing a hand on her husband's shoulder. She said in a whisper. "Earl, give the young woman a chance."

"No. I'll go so far as to say I'm happy she's okay."

Naomi put her hands on her hips, glaring at Stanton. Trent shook his head, waving her away from the group. Naomi moved off, focusing on Stanton. She surmised he looked to be a man of good character, not how he appeared; tough on the outside. She watched him point towards her a few times before slapping Trent on the shoulder. Naomi didn't know what to make of the whole scene.

When Trent beckoned Naomi over she quickly marched towards the group. Standing next to Trent, studying his stone-faced expression, her smile could easily melt an ice cube on a cold day.

Mr. Stanton put his hands on his hips, clearing his throat.

'Obviously, he's getting ready to say something important,' thought Naomi.

"Listen, girlie, I'm looking for a Jackaroo, not some two-bit city girl trying to look like a bloke. This I've already mentioned. Trent should not have talked me into allowing him to bring you here. I'm not sure what you've got in mind. I know you'd never pass for a bloke, you're too shapely."

Naomi folded her arms. "The first thing I want to say to you Mr. Stanton is; don't ever call me girlie again."

"What if I do?"

"I punched the lights out of the last bloke who said it."

Stanton cleared his throat again by coughing into his hand.

"Secondly; I thought being a Jillaroo might be what I needed."

"Is there a third?"

"Yes. I'm not a two-bit girl from the city wanting to look like a bloke."

"Trent told me how you handled Charlie the first time you met him. Any young lady who isn't afraid to handle a two-metre python snake and has the nerve to stand up to me gets my vote. Welcome to the Oasis." He grinned and shook her hand to seal his comment.

Naomi's eyes sparkled. "Does this mean I have the job?"

"It sure does," said Margaret Stanton. "The first thing the job requires you to do is to change into dry clothes. The second part is for you to eat a hot meal."

Naomi faced Trent. "Am I cooking or are you?"

Margaret Stanton said, "I'll do the cooking. Come on, Grandma already has a head start."
Naomi saw the old woman riding off towards the house. "By the look of things, I think we should hurry."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TRENT GAVE Naomi the five cent tour of the large mansion, ending at the bedroom. Before walking to the door he showed her the location of the soft towel cupboard and the bathroom.

"Do you want me to wash your back?" he asked.

"I can manage."

Trent backed out of the room, closing the solid wooden door behind him.

Naomi soaked her mind in the grandeur of the small exquisite room. Its marble floor, gold tap fittings and the miniature chandelier hanging from the high ceiling looked beautiful.

"Everything in its rightful place," she half whispered, stepping out of her wet clothes. She piled them in a corner before standing under the gold plated shower rose. She stared at the torrent of water falling on her face. 'Amazing,' she thought. 'Who'd ever dream of a place like this?'

The feeling of the piping hot water rejuvenated Naomi's strength. The hours since meeting Trent started to replay over in her mind. She crumbled to the floor of the shower, sobbing quietly.

"This hot shower beats the cold fast flowing river," she mumbled when her crying finally subsided. "I sure am a lucky girl. I could've ended up thousands of miles from the Oasis."

Feeling totally hypnotized by the warm shower water hitting in the exact center of her head, Naomi failed to hear the knock or the bathroom door opening.

"Hello, city girl. Can you hear me?" called Trent.

From the doorway, he could barely see through the fog created by the hot water billowing up from behind the opaque plastic shower curtain. He reached through the gap in the curtain, quickly turning off both taps.

Naomi squealed.

Trent retreated back to the door before calling again.

"I'm not finished yet."

"You've been in the shower so long I thought you drowned."

Naomi pushed her head into her hands. "Go away," she sobbed.

Trent threw a towel over the shower rail. "Please, get dressed, dinner is ready."

"Give me one minute."

"I'll be waiting to escort you to the table," advised Trent. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Why were you sobbing?"

Naomi felt too distraught to know where to start.

"Explain it after dinner." Trent back stepped, closing the door in his wake.

After hearing the bathroom door click shut, Naomi whispered. "You are indeed a gentleman, Trent Stanton."

Naomi rummaged through the pile of dry clothes he had dropped onto the vanity. She was still brushing her hair when she heard a knock.

"Miss Fitzgerald, two minutes has elapsed, it's time for dinner."

"I'm ready."

Naomi slipped her feet into black boots. Faded blue jeans covered her legs and a green collar shirt hung from her shoulders. She roughly tied her hair into a ponytail. The moment she opened the door she saw Trent give her a sharp nod. She watched him bounding down the stairs. He stood on the first step leaning against the balustrade looking up; a casual expression plastered on his face. He smiled at Naomi when she started down. Trent held out his arm ready to escort her to the dining room table.

The Stanton family watched Trent pull the chair back, waiting patiently for Naomi to sit on the red gum seat.

"Sorry about the clothes," whispered Trent. "They're the only things I could find at short notice. I want to add, you look absolutely perfect."

Naomi's cheeks took on the look of a dull crimson colour. Inwardly she felt a little embarrassed at all the fuss.

Mr. Stanton's wife walked into the room carrying a long pink dressing gown. "Here you are, wear this over your baggy clothes. My son is considerate. He has no idea about women's fashion. I've placed your wet clothes in the machine. The minute they're washed I'll place them in the drier. They should be ready to wear in about three hours."

"Thank you."

After Mr. Stanton said a short thankful prayer everyone dug into the meal.

Throughout dinner, Mr. Stanton kept an eye on Naomi and hardly spoke a word at the table.

After finishing her roast dinner Margaret Stanton threw her napkin on the table. She stood glaring at her husband.

"This silence has to stop," she spat. "Earl, you have to let the Oasis go. Stop trying to keep her. It's beyond saving. You know there's nothing you can do. Those cows have to be gone."

Earl stood eyeballing his wife. "If you'll excuse me, I'll be in the study." He turned his back on the group and walked down the hall.

Margaret Stanton clenched her fingers and punched the air.

"One of these days I'll give Earl a jab in the nose."

Naomi swallowed her mouthful of food. Looking directly at Mrs. Stanton she spoke seriously.

"I need to talk to your husband in private. I believe I might be able to help."

"Forget your idea," confessed Trent. "It's too late." He stood, walked to the front door and stepped outside onto the verandah.

Naomi's shoulders drooped in despair. She quickly decided on a different tact by directing her questions at Earl Stanton's wife. Surely she could make some headway by having her on the same side.

"Why are you getting rid of so many cows? If it's about leaving the land there must be a way to stay."

Mrs. Stanton started to sob. "There isn't. Trent's right, it's too late."

"It's never too late. I always try to look on the positive side of things. I believe there's a solution to any problem. It's urgent I speak to Mr. Stanton."

"There is no good solution," croaked Margaret Stanton.

"There has to be."

"After I explain what happened in detail, you'll understand why it's too late."

Naomi listened to the story, memorizing every word. The moment Margaret finished the tale Naomi walked across the floor. Stepping onto the verandah she looked for Trent. She found him leaning on the railing at the darkest part of the house. Naomi walked slowly up behind him. The smell of tobacco filled the stagnant air.

"It's such a beautiful clear night. The stars look magnificent. You couldn't count them if you tried," she whispered from over his right shoulder. "The crescent moon reminds me of a giant banana hanging low in the sky."

"It sure does."

"Your mum told me everything. I'm so sorry."

Trent studied the sky, ignoring the statement. "The stars are nice tonight," he whispered.

"You're making small talk."

"I know."

"The Oasis is certainly a beautiful place."

"After the two weeks are up I suppose you'll be back in the city."

"Yes, at my desk complaining at the lack of help from the office tribe." Naomi let go of a nervous chuckle. "I suppose Brandt's fox-like features will see him sniffing about."

"Foxes are sly animals," reported Trent. "They sneak around in the dark hoping to find an easy victim."

"He's sly alright. The man fooled, pegged and branded me in one foul swoop."

Trent faced Naomi. "No one should take advantage of a deer."

"What are you talking about?"

Trent answered her question by reaching out to pat an escaping curl. Naomi felt her knees give way. She groped for the handrail the moment a shiver ran down her back. To disguise her feelings she closed her eyes and tilted her head upwards towards her hero. Trent lowered his. Naomi wanted the scene to last forever. She wanted to kiss the lips of this handsome outback man like she never kissed a bloke before. She wanted him to take her in his arms. She wanted him to whisk her away to fantasyland. She opened her eyes in time to see Trent leaning closer. She wanted to live at the Oasis. She wanted an uncomplicated life.

Naomi's thoughts started to mingle into one massive mess. She looked directly into Trent's eyes. His warm breath swept her cheeks. He smelt fantastic. His aftershave easily made her fall into a trance.

A muffled noise at the bottom of the verandah made Trent look up.

Naomi looked away.

The scene quickly evaporated into the air then it was gone.

Trent and Naomi spotted a long furry tail belonging to a fox. The animal glanced at the house, its eyes shining in the lights of the verandah.

"It's heading for the chicken pen," blurted Trent.

"I suppose you have to go."

"Why?"

"To protect the chickens," sighed Naomi.

"Nothing can get to the chickens. The chook pen has a two-metre deep wall of metal sheeting buried around the perimeter. The chickens will be fine. Besides, the young chick right here is more precious. She needs looking after. She's new to the Oasis. Four-day old chicks are gorgeous. They can't compare to you, Naomi Fitzgerald."

Naomi's eyes glistened. Tears formed in her eyes. Her cheeks flushed bright red. Trent wrapped her in his arms, looking at her through his azure coloured eyes. She never thought blue eyes could be so enticing.

Again they both leaned forward at the same time. Their lips were almost touching. Naomi could feel his warm breath once more brushing her cheeks. She knew in her spirit something wonderful had already started. This man who lives in the middle of nowhere seemed wonderful. She felt the pangs of love pull at her heart again. The only thing she needed to do was to allow them to invade her world. If she did how could it work? Trent is a man who is different from anyone she'd ever known. He's the silent type who kept everything inside. She is a city girl, an office worker. Mr. Stanton certainly won't approve. Naomi quickly decided their love could never be.

Naomi broke free of Trent's masculine arms.

"What happened?"

He sounded hurt. What had she done? She tried to make sense of her decision. Maybe her destiny lay somewhere else, the city perhaps or maybe she'd grown stubborn over the years.

Naomi moved away, using her hands to cover her face. "I'm sorry." She marched to the opposite end of the verandah. Leaning against the railing she watched Trent looking into the darkness. She saw him glance her way. In seconds, he started walking towards her.

Naomi moved her focus to her feet. She wanted to escape the confrontation. How could she ever manage to explain her innermost thoughts?

Trent's footsteps kept coming. Naomi's heart wanted them to. The thoughts inside her head said the opposite. She turned her back to look out over the landscape.

Trent came up behind her, putting his hands on her shoulders. She let him massage the crook of her neck and allowed him to wrap his arms around her waist as he stepped in close. She wanted so much to be a part of his life. She wanted to be a country girl, living at the Oasis. How could Trent believe this could be any more than a two-week fling? After all, they lived in separate worlds. Maybe the Oasis isn't meant to be. Deep down Naomi felt it might be time to move on. Perhaps one day she'd write every one of her thoughts on paper. In her twilight years, she could read about Trent and the Oasis and what might have been.

"What have you been thinking?" whispered Trent.

"The cows," answered Naomi trying not to sound too corny.

"I can't see anything from here."

Trent pulled at Naomi's hair tie, allowing her hair to fall. Lifting his hand he gently moved a handful away from her neck.

Naomi closed her eyes so she could concentrate on what he might do next.

The man nibbled at her ear then at her neck.

'Forget the washing machine full of thoughts,' she decided inwardly. 'If the Oasis went down she wanted every moment to count.' Naomi turned around in his arms, facing the cowboy. She thrust her head upwards.

Naomi heard the front door open. Someone stepped onto the verandah. Both looked up. They saw a match being struck. The smell of tobacco filled the air.

"Nice night," called the voice, keeping his head turned so he couldn't see the couple in a firm embrace.

"Dad," called Trent, sounding shocked at being discovered.

Naomi backed away, her eyes widening in horror.

"If you have a moment for the job interview, Miss Fitzgerald, I think we should conduct it now."

Naomi stood, straightening her long thick dressing gown. "I'm not really dressed for an interview." Flicking her hair behind her ears she sent him a doubtful look.

Mr. Stanton waved a stubby hand in the air. "It's an informal interview." He stooped pulling his boots from his feet.

Trent laughed. Mr. Stanton chuckled. Naomi giggled.

Stanton walked over. "I'm not that bad. Call me Earl. I have to confess I do need an extra pair of hands."

"Your wife told me the whole story," cut in Naomi, watching for his angry expression. It never eventuated.

Earl grunted, exhaling a cloud of smoke into the night sky.

"How good are you at riding a motorbike or a horse?"

"I have, to be honest. I'm not an expert at either. I'm a fast learner."

"It's a good start. It'll be Trent's job to teach you. There might come a time when you need at least some experience at both. In 48 hours the first of many trucks will arrive. In four days all the cattle will be gone. In two weeks we'll fly out of here for the last time."

"Maybe there's a way I could help you save this place."

"No, there is no other way. The government wants my land. The land they'll get."

"It doesn't seem fair."

"Lass, life isn't fair. My great-grandfather would turn in his grave if he knew the reason why we're leaving this place. The government introduced a land tax five years ago to get me off the land. I am a stubborn man. I'm happy I gave them a run for their money."

"Why does the government think this particular piece of land is so important?"

"They reckon there's oil or gold under our feet."

Naomi's face turned anger red. "The government can't force you to leave."

"They can. Unless I give them fifty thousand dollars in the next forty-eight hours, the sheriff will be here to evict us."

"Do you love this place?" asked Naomi.

"I'd expect that sort of question from a city girl."

Naomi rolled her eyes, repeating the question.

"Love it," chorused the two men.

"Have you made every tax deduction you can?"

"I don't accept charity," growled Earl.

"It's not charity," Naomi exploded. "It's the law."

"I don't claim deductions. Don't seem right."

"For how many years?" Naomi probed.

"My entire life," blurted Earl.

Naomi brightened. "You've entered my world. I'm a tax agent. Lead me to your account books. Let me see what the weather brings."

"No way, my office is off limits to everyone except my family."

Naomi stamped her foot on the verandah. "You're a stubborn man alright Earl Stanton."

He glared, pointing his finger at her. "Nobody talks to me that way, not even a city girl trying to pass as a bloke for a two week holiday."

"I'm trying to help you save this place."

"I don't need city folk help. They got me into this mess in the first place. I don't trust your kind. Nobody sticks their nose in my books." Turning sharply he walked back inside the house.

"The way I see it you have no choice. You either let me help or you'll lose this lovely place," called Naomi. By the time she'd finished talking Earl Stanton had slammed the door shut.

"How sure are you I have the job?" asked Naomi, looking at Trent.

"Positive." He took her by the hand. "Come, I want to show you something."

"I don't have time. I need to convince your father I can help."

Trent nodded at his mother who witnessed the entire scene from the window. The moment Trent led Naomi by the hand down the verandah steps Margaret Stanton moved away from the window.

"Trent, what about the cows, won't we bump into any?"

"No. Years ago the whole family pitched in to make a cattle grid which encircles the house. It's a moat which doesn't need water. The cattle can't get a firm footing so they can't jump it. The grid is made up of fifty-millimeter wide metal rollers. Each roller has been laid parallel over a ditch about a metre wide."

"What a perfectly natural way to stop cows from straying where you don't want them."

"Exactly," said Trent. "For a city girl, you do catch on quick."

"Where are you taking me? You whisked me away from the house so fast I have yet to stake my case on how I can help save the Oasis."

"You'll get your chance. Before the night turns old there's a place I want to show you. It's a place where we won't be disturbed by anyone."

Walking through the dark, Naomi watched a large wooden two storey shed come into view. In the dull moonlight, its structure looked to be expertly maintained. Trent slid the door open, escorting his guest to the stairs. He carried her effortlessly to the top, lifting the small

trap door in the floor and easily carried her to the window. Trent grabbed a set of keys hanging from a nail then unlatched the long wooden shutters.

“This is a view worth coming for,” boasted Trent. He opened the wooden storm shutters and stepped out onto a small narrow balcony. “In daylight hours, you can see one-hundred and eighty degrees of the Oasis from right where you’re standing. On the other side of the barn, you can see the other side of the Oasis.”

Naomi stepped next to Trent, looking skywards. The view took her breath away.

“The stars are beautiful,” she managed to whisper. “They’re so clear. There’s no possible way you can count them.”

“Three thousand one hundred and five, to be exact,” insisted Trent.

Naomi’s eyebrows angled to a point. “Don’t tell me you’ve counted them?”

His grin stretched wider. “No, I’m kidding.”

Naomi giggled. “I’ve never seen a more beautiful sight,” she whispered looking at the stars.

“I have.”

“Where?” she asked. “Surely you’re kidding again.”

“I’m looking at her,” hinted Trent.

Naomi didn’t remove her gaze from the view. Her cheeks reddened. Her whole body tingled at hearing his words. ‘How on earth could the love between them germinate into anything more than a feeling?’ The question overlapped again and again inside her mind.

Trent stepped back. He held out his hand. “Care to dance?”

“There’s no music.”

“What if there is?”

“I’d think you were forfeiting the bet we made which means I’d win by default.”

“I’m not concerned over the bet. I planned for you to win all along.”

Trent pushed a button on the key ring. At first, nothing happened. His hand gently took Naomi by the chin. He lifted her head so they could look into each other’s eyes. He bowed gracefully.

“What are you up to Trent Stanton?”

A soft romantic melody started to play from a speaker above their heads. The tune seemed to hover in the still night air. Naomi found herself slowly slipping into a hypnotic trance. Trent stepped close to his dance partner. In silence, they started a slow waltz on the balcony under the countless stars.

Naomi felt she’d died and gone to heaven. Her mind closed the question on how everything could fit together or even work between her and Trent.

She felt so light on her feet she thought she might be floating. Every road Naomi looked down in her mind led to love. She didn’t try to hinder the idea. They were waltzing in the middle of Australia, in a barn full of hay, a place where she never expected to find happiness let alone love. She wanted the dance to last forever.

When the song ended the two dancers didn’t notice. They swayed in time to the beating of Naomi’s heart. She lifted her head to gaze into Trent’s eyes. They were wet just like hers. He bent his head. Naomi stood on her toes. For the first time, their lips lightly touched. She

leaned closer making their lips weld together. Electricity arced between them. The couple stopped swaying, locked in a long passionate romantic kiss.

The spark of love quickly roared into a raging fire.

Trent's hand easily undid the dressing gown. Naomi felt it fall to her feet.

"Excuse me," whispered a voice so soft the two lovebirds nearly missed the interruption. "Sorry for disturbing the moment."

Trent looked sideways towards the trap door. Naomi squealed, sprinting to the edge of the balcony to hide.

"Mother," remarked Trent. He didn't sound upset or surprised.

"Your father sent me to find you. He has an urgent message."

"How did you know we'd be here?"

"Where else could my son take a young lady for some privacy?"

"I'm glad Earl didn't come here," whispered Naomi, swiping the dressing gown from the floor.

"Believe me, I almost didn't convince him to stay in the house."

"Thanks," said Trent.

"So much for a place where we won't be disturbed," mumbled Naomi, raising her eyebrows.

"Earl told me he didn't have a choice. He needs your help," quoted Margaret.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MARGARET STANTON led the way back to the house. The moment they entered she showed Naomi the study.

Along one wall Naomi saw computer paper stacked neatly at least half a metre high in ten different piles. A wooden three draw filing cabinet sat in one corner. The cabinet looked like it hadn't been opened in years. Except for the paper piles, the room felt cozy.

"The office seems to be a nice place to sit and reflect," blurted Naomi waving her hand in the air. "Dare I say the whole of the Oasis seems a nice place to sit and reflect? Maybe that's the trouble. Everyone's too relaxed. The great Australian saying, 'she'll be right. Tomorrow is another day,' is too frivolous a saying." She walked to the desk, turning her nose up. "Please tell me the piles of papers are in year order."

Earl Stanton stepped away from the window, glaring at his wife. He looked sideways at Naomi.

"They sure are."

"You just saved me six months of work," advised Naomi on a sigh.

The man wore a doubtful expression. His brow formed deep concerned wrinkles.

"I'll have you know my wife and I disagree on her idea I should allow you the privilege of snooping about my paperwork."

"I thought your wife said it'll be okay?"

"Please, let me finish. She gave me a piece of her mind. She helped to convince me to see the light of day. Perhaps you were the miracle I've been praying for?"

"I'll do my best."

"I suppose a thank you is in order. If there's anything I can do to help please feel free to let me know?" The big man strolled across the room to stand next to his son.

"Both you and Trent can leave me alone. You have helped enough."

"Come on you two," insisted Margaret Stanton. "Let's leave the young lady to her work." She ushered Trent and her husband out of the room, clicking the door shut.

"You know I don't like anyone poking their nose in my study let alone the books," grumbled Stanton staring nervously at his wife.

"Darling, you agreed you don't have much of a choice." Margaret took hold of her husband's arm. Holding him tight she dragged him away from the room. "She'll be right."

Naomi marched across the floor to the door. She was in time to hear the group walk away. A muffled conversation coming from the dining room forced her to open the door a tad to steal a cursory glance. The hall looked clear. Naomi closed the study door and strolled across the room to sit in the huge leather chair.

"I believe this chair may be a tax deduction," she mumbled. After searching the antique mahogany desk for paper and pen, Naomi gazed around the room noting there were books from floor to ceiling. She walked across the room to take a closer look. "Someone's stacked these books in alphabetical order," she whispered, running her fingers horizontally across the spine of at least two hundred books. "A place for everything; and everything in its rightful place," she stated. Grinning, she sat back at the desk.

Naomi worked tirelessly through the night. At 2:00am Trent opened the door.

"Can I get you anything?" he whispered.

Naomi looked up. "A large mug of hot coffee will be lovely."

Trent disappeared. In minutes, he returned carrying a mug of hot brew.

"Thank you, now please leave."

At 3:00am Trent again stuck his head through the open door.

"Coffee?" he whispered tentatively.

Naomi grinned. "Thank you."

She kept glancing at the clock waiting for Trent's return. To help pass the time she stood, walked to the window, pulling open the heavy gold crested drapes. She could barely see the barn where she and Trent had slowly waltzed to the soft melody.

Exhaling heavily, Naomi wrapped her arms around her waist, the music still playing in her mind. Starting to hum she closed her eyes. Her imagination easily took her back to the barn where Trent asked her to dance. She started to sway, lost in her imagination.

"Do we have a future together?" she questioned.

"I hope so."

The reply broke through Naomi's fantasy, making her jolt. She opened her eyes when an arm slipped around her waist. She twisted around, looking directly into Trent's eyes. The expression on his face made her knees buckle. Her heart pounded against her rib cage. She took a step back in a desperate bid to regain control.

Trent stepped forward.

“Stay away,” she warned.

“Please, don’t stop what you were thinking.”

“I don’t know what you mean?” Naomi brushed past him on her way back to the desk.

Trent grabbed her arm, sweeping her in close. He kissed her passionately.

Even if Naomi could, she didn’t pull away. She wanted Trent and groped for his shoulders when he lifted her in his arms.

“If you keep this up I won’t want you to leave,” she taunted hurriedly between breaths.

“I don’t want to go.”

“You have to. I’m not finished going through the books.”

Trent turned her around so he could massage her neck.

“You have magic hands,” Naomi whispered.

Trent bent his head so he could kiss the back of her neck.

“Don’t.” Naomi’s protest sounded mild at best.

“Why not?” asked Trent.

“I’ll force you to stay.”

“Good. How’s everything looking?”

“Fine,” she answered, walking back to the chair. “I’ve only gone back one year. Already I’ve found twelve thousand dollars.”

“How?” asked Trent.

“The fuel for the plane is a good place to begin. There’s also the depreciation amount. How long have you owned the plane?”

“Two years.”

“What did you use before?”

“We ran two choppers.”

“Do you still have the helicopters?”

“Yes.”

“Are they in good working condition?”

“Of course, we use them all the time.”

“Does your father have a sore back?”

“No.”

“Does he spend a lot of time sitting at the desk working?”

“Does it matter?” asked Trent.

“It does if you want to save the Oasis. The comfortable chair might be a tax deduction.”

“My whole family does what they can.”

“Forget it. Not worth the hassle.”

Trent flicked through the seven hundred standard size papers sitting neatly on the desktop. He let out a low whistle.

“Tell me you don’t have to work through each of those pages.”

“I sure do.” Naomi chuckled at his shocked expression. “It won’t take long.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

Naomi dug her nose out of a fuel bill. “You’re doing everything you can.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“Yes, you are. You’re here in the same room as me.”

Trent watched her sort through page after page. Naomi glanced up every so often to make sure he didn’t fall asleep.

The cowboy watched her closely, observing anything she did.

Every time Naomi stretched he’d walk around the desk to massage her shoulders.

Whenever a rogue page accidentally fell to the floor Trent sprinted to pick it up.

After the second rub of her ankle, Naomi started to play games to make him work harder by stepping on the paper.

“Love games using a piece of paper,” chuckled Trent.

Naomi scrunched a page and threw it. She laughed when it hit him in the nose. Trent sprinted across the room to her chair, wrestling her to the floor. Almost immediately the tackle ended in a passionate kiss.

“I heard a noise, is everything okay?” asked Earl Stanton, barging into the room.

“Yes, everything’s fine,” yelled Trent, jumping to a standing position.

Stanton shook his head before closing the door, leaving the two chuckling.

By 4:00am Naomi threw her pen down. She stood and stretched her cramped muscles. Walking to the window to look out into the darkness at nothing, in particular, Trent got out of his chair to be by her side.

“I’d love a cup of coffee,” she whispered.

He ran for the study door before she finished her sentence. Naomi giggled at her sudden power.

By 4:45am Naomi reached for the phone to dial her home.

“Hello,” croaked a voice on the seventh ring.

“Kaite, sorry to wake you, I have an urgent task for you to complete.”

Her best friend groped for the bedside clock. “Naomi, do you know what time it is?”

“Of course, I do.”

“The numbers on my alarm clock are a blur. If I may add, the sun’s not up yet. Why the urgent call? Couldn’t it wait till the rooster made a noise?”

“I wanted to beat the rooster. Though I thought I heard it crow five minutes ago.”

“You’re not making any sense. Call me back later.”

“Kaite, wake up. I need your help. I’ve also got news for you.”

Naomi’s flatmate struggled to a sitting position. “Do you know what time I got to bed this morning?”

“Knowing you; probably five minutes before I rang.”

“Almost correct,” grumbled Kaite. “Twelve minutes ago.”

“Sorry, my timing was slightly off. I thought you might have just got home.”

“You made a lousy guess.”

“Kaite, are you awake yet?”

“Yes I’m awake,” she replied in a voice which sounded asleep.

“I met this wonderful bloke.”

“Good for you. Now can I go back to bed?”

“No.”

“Please.”

“Kaite, Trent has a handsome brother a tad younger than you.”

“Who’s Trent?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Ok, I’m fully awake. I’m listening.”

By the time Naomi relayed to Kaite the general idea about Trent, his brother Mitch and the Oasis, her best friend started doing seat drops on the edge of the bed.

“I haven’t mentioned the best part,” hinted Naomi.

“Tell me more,” begged Kaite.

“What would you say if I can con Earl Stanton into flying you out here to the Oasis in a helicopter?”

“I’d say yes. Will he do it?”

“I’m certain of it. Even if you and Mitch don’t hit it off the short holiday will do you the world of good. Wear something comfortable. You need to ride a horse.”

Kaite screamed in excitement. “I’ve never kissed a cowboy before.”

“There’s one thing you have to do before I can commence my idea. I need you to go into my briefcase to find the tax sheet.”

“The one Brandt gave you to keep safe?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t have your combination to the briefcase.”

“5541.”

“You want me to burn it?”

“I want you to fax it to me.”

“You’re going to send it to Brandt’s clients to get him into trouble? Great plan Naomi, he’s going to be pissed.”

“Kaite, please, this is important. I’ll text you the phone number to where I am. After you’ve faxed the form put it back exactly where you found it.”

“Okay, I’ll do it even though I don’t understand what you’re up to.”

“After you’ve done it, pack a small suitcase. Wait by the phone for a call from Earl Stanton.”

Kaite replaced the phone on its hook and bounded across the room. She found the briefcase, punched in the code then made her way to the fax machine. She waited impatiently for the fax machine to deliver the message, replaced the paper in the briefcase and went back to bed.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE MOON quickly disappeared to the opposite side of the world. The sun started to shine on a brand new day when Naomi finally dug her nose from the computer screen and looked over the top of the monitor. She watched Trent sneaking into the room and putting two

coffee mugs on the desk before settling himself down in a leather recliner. Gazing into the eyes of the man Naomi knew she'd fallen in love. Trent flashed a warm smile, making her knees go to jelly. Naomi marveled again at his handsome tanned face, his boyish looks. She sighed heavily before returning her attention to the computer.

"I didn't know if I should talk," quipped Trent.

Naomi giggled, hunching further over the computer keyboard. She giggled again when the fax machine whirled to life.

"Be a darling, fetch the faxed paper."

Trent walked over to a small table by the window. He watched the paper being spat out, grabbing it before it fell to the floor.

"The name on this paper isn't Earl Stanton."

Naomi collected the paper from his hand. "It soon will be."

Trent watched her erase the name and the numbers on the sheet, replacing them with the name Stanton and lots of numbers.

Finally, Naomi walked over to the fax machine, punching the numbers for the tax office. She stood smiling, watching the paper disappear before reappearing. She relayed in an authoritative voice, "done."

Trent stepped in for a kiss.

Naomi gave him a peck on the cheek before walking back to the desk. She stacked the papers neatly, slipping them into individual manila folders.

"Where's my proper kiss?" asked Trent, his voice sounding hurt.

"Not yet. Once I've stored these papers in the old cabinet I can relax."

Grabbing the piles of folders, Naomi knelt on the floor, opening the bottom drawer too far. The draw fell onto the slate tiles revealing more papers.

"Those old papers must have fallen at the back of the draw years ago," announced Trent marching over.

Naomi scooped up the yellowing pile. Walking over to the desk she placed the wrinkled papers in a neat pile, ironing each one flat using the palm of her hand.

"This first paper is a legal document from the year 1898."

Trent bent forward over the paper. "It says here in the middle of the page the government of the Northern Territory will freely give to the Stanton name all that is found out in the middle of the desert. It goes on to say the Oasis has been freely given to the Stanton family." He looked up grinning. "It's great news."

Naomi dropped her gaze and read the remainder of the legal document.

"The name of the governor of the time I can't read however the stamp is official. The last part is hard to decipher. I think it reads. Free from any form of tax is awarded to the Stanton family and the land named 'The Oasis' for the valuable, unselfish act the Stanton's gave during world war one. The Stanton's have gone above their duty. For this reason, we the government will not charge a tax of any sort or description to the Stanton family for the next three hundred years."

Trent and Naomi looked at each other in silence. Trent eventually was the first to respond to the news. He reached out, hugging Naomi. Picking her up, he carried her to the outside swing. A rooster crowed. A fox darted past them on its journey home.

In the warming sun, the love bird's kissed. Naomi felt happier than she ever dreamed. She certainly wasn't going to be the first to disturb their romantic moment.

Earl Stanton stepped out onto the verandah. He stretched in the early morning air. Studying the area he gave a sharp nod. He waved at a blue heeler. Stanton stood watching the dog chase the black bull away from the cattle grid.

Trent surfaced, grinning.

"Nice morning," called Earl. "I can feel it in me bones this will be a good day."

His son looked puzzled. "How did you know?"

"Naomi visited me at around four this morning. I'd been pacing the floor waiting to hear news on the fate of the Oasis. You should have seen her face when I spoke from the shadows. I swear her feet left the floor." He gave a quiet chuckle. "She told you the news?"

"Yes," answered Trent.

"Miss Naomi Genius, not only did you save the Oasis. We have enough money left over to buy Davey's farm and his five hundred head of cattle. I've been on the blower already to seal the deal. He told me to take the cows whenever I'm ready. He's also agreed to sell me his land."

"You've been after the farm for ten years. Why does he want to sell to us now? He doesn't like us," said Trent.

"He doesn't care who gives him the money. He just doesn't want the government to get their hands on his land."

Trent nodded.

"I offered him a job at the Oasis," added Stanton.

"Dad, what about Naomi, she should have the vacancy?"

"I've offered her a special job."

Trent swept a puzzled look between Naomi and his father. "What have you cooked up between you?"

"I offered your father a deal he couldn't refuse." Naomi raised her eyebrows, her face breaking out into a widening grin.

Stanton replied walking over to the swing.

"It's true. I've employed Naomi to be our official tax accountant."

"What about the Jillaroo job?" Trent asked.

"I don't think so. Naomi's figure is too shapely."

Naomi's face flushed red with embarrassment.

Earl pointed his finger at his son. "Trent, if you upset this young woman in any way you and I will have words. Get the picture?"

Trent sent his father the famous Stanton nod.

"Excuse me, Sir," interrupted Naomi.

"Please, call me Earl."

"You haven't heard the best news."

"What could be better than what you've told me?" He winked. "Let me guess. You two want to get married."

Margaret stepped onto the verandah in time to hear the word married. She clasped her hands together, sprinting over to be by her husband's side.

“Mum, Dad, it’s not what the news is about,” blurted Trent, quickly.

“If it’s not the news, I think you should inform me?” said Earl.

Naomi showed him the official government form. Stanton held it in trembling hands. He read it at least twice before saying a word and breaking out into a dance, stirring up the drying ground.

“What’s the news?” asked Margaret, reaching out for the yellow page.

Earl handed her the letter, continuing to dance. After reading the handwritten note, Margaret joined her husband, Trent, and Naomi in a group dance.

“Not only did you save the Oasis by finding the fifty thousand dollars, you found the letter. It’s been missing for the past ten years. The government won’t accept what I’ve been trying to tell them. They reckon I’m so desperate to save my land I made up the rumour of a land tax pardon. I can now go to the government, demanding they pay me two hundred thousand dollars they’ve taken off me in back taxes over the years to sweep me from this land.” Earl danced towards the house consumed in the excitement. He disappeared into the house only to march back to the swing carrying four plates of bacon and eggs. “Great job, Naomi,” he admitted. “Come, everyone sit on a swing. Let’s eat breakfast together.”

“Thanks, Earl,” chirped Naomi. “Are you going to tell the remainder of your family?”

“I sure will the moment they arrive here for breakfast. Till then this moment belongs to us four. How do you feel about a small roundup? I don’t want Davey to suddenly change his mind.”

Naomi’s eyes sparkled at thinking about the upcoming cattle muster. “Sounds like a job a city girl can’t turn her nose up at.”

When the small group had finished breakfast Earl collected the bacon scraps.

“Watch what happens when I clap my hands,” Trent said.

Naomi’s eyes widened when she heard thud after thud along the polished verandah boards. Before she could turn to see what made the commotion six blue heeler dogs were swirling around Trent. Twelve excited eyes glanced at Naomi.

“Sit,” commanded Trent.

Earl stood, staring at the dogs. They scampered from Trent’s side, jumping for the bacon.

“Down the lot of you,” Stanton growled.

Six backsides hit the deck.

“Well trained dogs,” laughed Naomi.

“Don’t be fooled over their shenanigans. They do exactly what they’re trained to do,” explained Earl.

“Especially when they’re about to eat a small meal of bacon,” added Trent.

“What are they trained for?”

“They round up cattle.”

Naomi’s expression portrayed a woman who looked full of doubt.

“I’ll prove it,” boasted Trent.

Earl looked over, grinning at Naomi’s disbelief.

Trent whistled twice. Six dogs stood, giving him their full attention. He gave three sharp whistles making the dogs sit as one. Trent grinned mischievously.

“If I give four sharp whistles they attack.” He stuck three fingers in his mouth.

Naomi tried to swallow the lump in her throat as she counted each of his four whistles. The dogs turned their heads and stared at her. Naomi stepped back. The dogs ran towards her. She screamed, climbing the swing. Twenty-four paws came running at full tilt, surrounding Trent. He and Earl fell onto a swing laughing uncontrollably.

“Trent, you tricked me,” growled Naomi. “I’m not amused.”

Earl and Trent instantly ceased laughing. His next whistle saw the dogs run off. Trent scooped Naomi into his arms to kiss her anger away.

“Sorry, I played a bush joke. The dogs wouldn’t hurt Charlie let alone attack. They were confused over the four whistles. The dogs probably thought they’d get more bacon to eat.”

Using a casual swipe of her hand, Naomi slapped Trent’s face. Leaning in she kissed his cheek.

Earl came strolling up, clearing his throat. “Come on you two, we have a job to do. By the time we arrive at Davey’s farm, I mean, my farm, it’ll be midmorning.”

Inside twenty minutes Trent’s brothers were fetched, the horses were saddled and the motorbikes were fuelled. Trent gave a sharp whistle. The dogs sprinted back. Telling the good news to his brothers they roared, throwing their wide-brimmed hats high into the air. The dogs chorused by barking.

Naomi watched Trent’s family kiss each other goodbye. They followed Earl in pairs towards a narrow path which led to the vertical wall, surrounding the Oasis.

By the time the group reached the base of the vertical cliff Naomi felt comfortable on the back of a black horse. His name was Ben. Trent rode a fit ex-racehorse. Its nickname was Tiger. Glancing at the sky, Naomi saw the clouds moving at speed above their heads, disappearing over the wall.

The trail leading to the top looked narrow. Not a weed could be seen. For the first few minutes, Naomi kept her stare locked on the cliff face, too frightened to look at the shrinking base. She felt amazed at how easily her horse could stay in the middle of the sheep track. She surmised it had completed ascending and descending the wall many times. Eventually, she summoned enough will power to glance at the aerial view of the Oasis. The scene from the plane didn’t give the oval shaped hole in the ground justice. She wanted to stop her horse just to stare at the serenity and the actual size of the place. The vivid colours in the walls from the top to the base of the Oasis were captivating. Naomi even spied a rainbow stretching the width of the oval shaped canyon.

“I did mention to you this place is magnificent,” declared Trent, from behind.

Naomi swiveled on her saddle, grinning at the man staring at her. He’d unclipped his rope and looked more than ready to use it.

“What’s wrong?”

“I have the rope ready just in case someone falls off the side.”

A warm feeling flowed through Naomi’s body from her feet to her head. Trent, her knight in shining armor, seemed almost faultless. The only thing lacking was the perfect gift. She faced the way they were travelling, pondering if he could ever discover it. She allowed her shoulders to slump. Inwardly she contemplated the question.

‘Did she really need him to discover the perfect gift?’

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE ASCENT of the almost vertical wall of the Oasis took fifteen minutes. At the top, the riders dismounted. They grouped together for a hot coffee while the horses and the dogs took a well-earned rest.

"The coffee smells nice," chirped Naomi, holding her mug out.

Trent immediately filled it.

The temperature felt as though it had dropped causing Naomi to shiver. For warmth, she wrapped her fingers tight around the mug of hot brew.

"It's the coldest before the dawn. As yet the temperature has failed to increase," explained Trent. Lifting his gaze skywards he quickly added. "It'll be raining soon."

"How can you tell?"

"We call Trent the walking weatherman," declared Earl.

"Is he ever wrong?"

"Let me think," moaned Stanton. "He probably has been a couple of times. When, I can't remember."

"Out here the temperature can plummet up to seven degrees in minutes," advised Mitch.

Naomi shivered again. Lifting the mug to her lips, she swallowed a mouthful of coffee. For a few seconds, she relished in the warmth of the liquid sliding down her throat.

Trent stared closely at the horizon. His gaze seemed to be fixed on a group of small clouds floating towards them.

"Don't tell me, the clouds talk to you," giggled Naomi, digging Trent in the ribs.

"No, they don't actually talk. I have to stress it is going to rain real soon."

Naomi tilted her head to study the sky. "They look like harmless fluffy white clouds to me."

"Don't be fooled. I predict it's going to rain in two hours, the same as yesterday."

Earl stood. "Boys, mount up. It's time to go."

Stanton's family packed everything, mounting their horses inside two minutes.

A small derelict cottage came into view after thirty minutes of riding. Beyond the cottage, Naomi saw five hundred skinny head of cattle grazing on what they could find growing in the dust. She immediately felt sorry for the beasts.

"We came for them," confessed Trent, pointing to the cattle.

A man and a woman, both about Trent's age, stepped out of the cottage. The young man held a .22 rifle in his right hand. When he recognized the faces in the group he pointed the rifle at the ground.

Earl dismounted his horse and strolled towards the house.

"Trent, what's the meaning of the posse?" questioned the woman, placing her fists on her hips. "Earl Stanton, stop right where you are, you know you're not welcome here."

"Dad, let me handle this," called Trent.

His father nodded before walking back to his horse.

"Mary-Lou, we need to have a short talk. The clock's ticking."

"You betcha it's ticking," snarled Mary-Lou.

"I'll make the explanation short. The storm is on her way."

"You have five seconds to tell me the reason for your visit. If you don't there's going to be a bullet in your head."

"Are you still holding a grudge? It's been years."

"Sure am."

Naomi frowned. "This woman is your ex-girlfriend?"

Trent slowly nodded.

Mary-Lou sniffed the air, pointing a long slender finger at Naomi. The wind suddenly blew up, ruffling the countrywoman's long blonde hair. She brushed it to one side letting the wind take charge.

"You smell like a city chic. Take my advice, turn around go back where you came from. You don't belong out here."

"How can you be so sure I'm from the city?"

"You have the word 'city' written on your pretty little face." She gave a sarcastic smirk. "City girls can't cut it out here."

"Mary-Lou, enough," growled Trent. "Where's Roy? We've come for the cows."

"Over my dead body," she hissed.

"I hope it won't come to that."

"Always the gentleman, Eh, Trent?" taunted Mary-Lou spitting on the ground. "Pop, get your ass out here."

Roy came staggering out of the cottage, leaning his drunken frame against a wooden verandah post. "Mary-Lou, shut up and get in the house. These fine people are here for the cows."

"You got a copy of the legal papers?"

"There aren't any. It's a gentlemen's agreement," boasted Roy.

"A what?" Mary-Lou snorted.

"It's been agreed the Stanton's will take the cows, the house and the land for a dollar."

"Never," Mary-Lou screamed. "I won't allow it." She snatched the rifle from Henry and pointed it at Trent.

"Put the rifle down," yelled Roy. "They have to take the cows before it's too late. The trucks the bank has hired will be here tomorrow morning. They're going to sell this place from under me for whatever they can unless everything is settled between us right now. I'd rather sell to the Stanton's than have the bank take everything."

Sobbing, Mary-Lou sank to her knees. "Where are we to go?"

"We've received a couple of good offers for work," confessed Roy.

Naomi walked over, placing her arm around Mary-Lou. She stood, giving her a mighty push. Trent scooped Naomi up in his arms before she hit the dirt.

"Nice catch," jeered Mary-Lou. "I remember you doing the same thing for me once." She turned her back on the group and sprinted into the house.

"Thanks," said Naomi.

“The pleasure is definitely mine,” replied Trent.

“You should go talk to Mary-Lou.”

“Are you sure?”

“I trust you,” replied Naomi.

Trent gave her a gentle pat on the arm before marching inside the house.

“Mary-Lou, where are you?”

He searched the house, stopping at a closed bedroom door. He knocked like a gentleman should.

“Enter,” whimpered a sobbing voice.

Trent opened the door. Leaning against the door frame he appeared to be refusing to enter the room.

“Do you love the city girl?” questioned Mary-Lou.

“Her name’s Naomi. Yes, I do.”

“Does this mean there’s no, us?”

Trent rolled his eyes. “There has never been anything between us. Not since you called our relationship off when we were both sixteen.”

“Do you call it nothing when you came from the Oasis to see me for breakfast before my father made us move to this place?”

“I have to admit I did love you more than life.”

Mary-Lou stood square to Trent. She held her arms open. “Come here. Give me a kiss.”

“I don’t think so,” jeered Trent, shaking his head.

“I’ve regretted not running after you from the moment you left.”

“It’s been a long time. I’ve grown up.”

“I won’t give up on us until you say I do at the altar. You have to make a choice. It’s the city girl or me?”

Trent turned his back on Mary-Lou. Marching out of the house he never looked back.

Naomi noticed his deliberate walk. His speed didn’t falter from the door of the house to his horse.

Mary-Lou leaned out of her window, yelling. “Trent, darling, make your mind up. It’s me or her?”

“Dad, it’s time to go. The storm has almost arrived. Let’s get these cows home before the downpour.”

Before whistling for the dogs to follow, Trent smiled lovingly at Naomi, tipping his wide-brimmed hat. The group turned their backs on the house, trotting off towards the herd.

Naomi copied what the group did and brought up the rear.

The dogs ran around barking at the cattle, helping to gather the herd in close. The cows mooed, the dogs barked, Trent, his brothers, and their father waved their wide-brimmed hats in the air, shouting. Naomi heard the occasional whip crack. Trent grinned at the new Jillaroo as she took up her position on the left flank.

Naomi glanced at the sky. She saw the black clouds bearing down on the group. She looked for Trent who returned a sharp nod. She faked a grin, amazed at his calmness. She saw him wave a hand in the air. The she heard another whip crack.

The cows were on the move.

For a few minutes, Naomi looked lost in the fantasy world of a western movie. Boasting a grin she felt a sudden power over the half-starved beasts.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THROUGH THE swirling dust the cows were slowly pushed along towards the Oasis. Naomi heard Trent whistle. The dogs barked faster at the lead cow. Their pace slowly increased. Naomi let go of a huge sigh. At last, they were heading for the Oasis at a reasonable speed.

A cow strayed from the 500 head, making a beeline for her horse. In the distance, Naomi heard the scream of a motorbike. One of the dogs barked. The cow bumped into her horse, flinging Naomi sideways. Somehow she managed to hang onto the saddle using a tight grip. She'd almost corrected the precarious angle she suddenly found herself in when the strengthening wind flew dust into her eyes. She screamed at the stinging sensation. She almost surrendered her body to the dirt when she felt something push her upright so she could sit high in the saddle. Finally wiping the dust from her eyes, Naomi she saw Mary-Lou's weathered face.

Trent finally burst through the herd, his rope at the ready.

"You should keep an eye on the city chick," spat Mary-Lou. Revving the bike's motor she'd been swallowed by the dust in seconds.

"I'd almost made it here," whimpered Trent, re-clipping the rope back onto his belt.

"I know," replied Naomi. "If I can make a suggestion, I'm more of an expert on a bike."

Seeing Mitch close, Trent whistled.

Standing on the seat of the bike he momentarily split the herd of cattle, followed by a quick doughnut in the dirt. When the bike dropped to idle he grinned at Naomi's serious expression.

"Mitch, I need you and Naomi to swap. She's having a bit of trouble staying on the horse in this wind. If we want to beat the storm, we have to pick up a lot more pace. We can't be slowed for anything."

"Sure, it's not a problem."

The leather saddle squeaked when Naomi slid to the ground.

Trent saw lightning fork across the sky. The familiar clap of thunder soon followed.

Mitch gave a sharp nod. Trotting off, he wore a knowing expression on his face. Naomi couldn't comprehend the silent communication each member of the Stanton family seemed to have mastered. She secretly wondered if she could eventually master the silent nod too.

"Go," Naomi whispered to Trent. "Just like you I've been looking at the sky. Even though I'm no expert, I think the rain is ready to fall."

Trent motioned a sharp nod. He gave his horse a slight kick. Feeling the first rain drop fall, Naomi heard his whip crack. The noise seemed to make the cows double their walking speed.

Overhead, the sky darkened further. The wind gusts quickly intensified. Naomi shielded her eyes from the stinging sand. The wind swung from a tail wind to a head wind in a matter of seconds when they changed to a more direct approach to the Oasis.

The dust grew thicker at each tick of the clock. Naomi caught a glimpse of Mitch at the front of the herd before she lost sight of him through the swirling dust. Even the cows seemed to be agitated at having to walk head first into the wind.

Naomi jumped on the motorbike, twisting the accelerator throttle. Whenever a cow strayed from the path she'd smack its rump. Each beast she smacked seemed to get the message to stay in line.

The minutes quickly ticked off. The approaching storm seemed relentless in trying to scatter the skittish herd of cows.

Eventually, Naomi felt her strength starting to wane. Time and again she wondered how much further? Half an hour after they picked up the herd she needed to fight the idea they might be going in the wrong direction.

A figure on a horse loomed out of the dust.

Trent looked down, yelling over the wind.

"We have about five minutes before the storm hits. At roughly the same time we'll be starting our descent into the Oasis."

Seeing Mitch galloping up Naomi nodded. When Mitch pulled alongside his brother, both men portrayed a different look. Mitch glanced Naomi's way, gave her a quick sharp nod before galloping off.

"What was meant by the nod?" asked Naomi.

"Mitch suggested we try to sprint the cows down into the Oasis. I told him if we pull off the stunt and only lose no more than ten cows it will be a miracle. Don't get me wrong, we don't want to lose a single cow if we can help it. I wouldn't want an animal to fall to its death when the Oasis is so close."

"You got a whole conversation from a look?"

"Not really," chuckled Trent. "We've done this sort of thing too many times to count."

"Quit stalling; get these cows moving," yelled Mary-Lou, roaring up on her bike.

Trent faced her trying to explain the situation. Mary-Lou snorted before riding off into the wind.

"She'll be okay," advised Trent, looking at Naomi's wrinkled brow. "She needs some time alone. At least the cows listen to her whining."

"Where do you want me?" asked Naomi muffling a laugh.

"I want you first down the path. When it rains I want you safely on the ground, standing on the covered cattle-grid counting the cows when they walk past."

Naomi roared off to join Mitch at the head of the herd. She loved every minute of suddenly feeling important. Brandt never made her feel important. He'd been a total loser. Feeling a warmth creep through her body, Naomi never dreamt of being out in the middle of Australia, riding a motorbike down a steep narrow dirt path that leads into the belly of a

possible ancient meteorite site could be so thrilling. She grinned at the thought of fitting in. Deep down she prayed Trent might seriously consider asking her to marry him. She'd given into her heart. Now she wanted to stay right next to the cowboy who called himself Trent Stanton.

Naomi slowly slid down the entire steep descent. When finally reaching the bottom she felt a deep sense of relief. Stopping her bike next to the covered cattle-grid, she switched the motor off and studied the sky.

Above the Oasis Trent also studied the sky. He cupped a hand around his mouth, yelling over the increasing wind. "Dad, if I can make a suggestion."

Earl Stanton made his horse trot over to his son.

"We have to get these cows down the cliff face right now. It did cross my mind to get them back exactly where we found them. I think we'll lose the whole herd if we try. The idea Mitch has is sound. He reckons we should send the cows down in pairs."

Stanton nodded. "You're right. Being so close to the Oasis, if we don't risk the cows going down the track two at a time we might lose the whole herd. Let's do it. Time is at an end."

Trent whistled for the dogs to keep the cattle moving while his brothers forced the cows to double up by poking their ribs. Looking annoyed at being prodded the cows came together to start their descent into the Oasis.

Naomi roamed her stare between the cows and the sky. The clouds looked angry. At any moment they threatened to burst, dumping a torrent of water.

"If only the rain would hold off a little longer," she mumbled.

The cows walked across the covered cattle-grid in pairs before fanning out to eat the luscious green grass. By the time, three hundred and fifty-seven cows were safely down the heavens opened. The raindrops were huge, landing heavily at Naomi's feet. Overhead the Lightning slashed the sky. The deep rumble of thunder made her cringe.

"I hate thunderstorms," she mumbled, lifting the collar of her button up shirt.

The rain started falling in torrents. Naomi's black eyelashes felt heavy when water glued the dust to the ends. Each strand of her hair dripped water. In seconds, her clothes were wet through.

Mitch followed a dog down the cliff face making the cattle ahead a little nervous. One of the bulls lost his footing, slipping perilously close to the edge. Naomi held her breath, watching the four hundred pound beast struggle to gain a good foothold.

"Four hundred and seventy-one," reported Naomi, when the bull finally walked over the cattle-grid. She wanted to reach out to hug its large neck. When the bull looked her in the eyes Naomi decided the idea might make him more irate.

Looking up the cliff face, Naomi shielded her eyes from the rain using her hands. "Mitch, why have the rest of the cattle stopped?"

"They're probably starting to get a little agro. I reckon Trent has slowed them down. Dad's leading the rest single file. If you study the track it's looking too slippery for two cows at a time. Up to now we've done really well. Not one beast has fallen."

Naomi felt sick to the stomach at the idea of seeing a single cow falling to its death.

Mitch gave her a wide grin. "Don't worry. She'll be right."

Naomi raised an eyebrow at the comment. She could do nothing except wait patiently for the remainder of the herd to walk past her.

The rain poured down the path turning it into a water slide. The fast flowing river looked to have risen substantially covering the mouth of the tunnel. To Naomi, the river seemed far worse than when she fell into it the first time. She grimaced at the thought of falling in again.

Lightning and thunder rolled together across the sky. The storm seemed to be hovering, determined to wash the Oasis from the Australian map.

“I’ve counted four hundred and ninety-nine cows. We only lost one,” reported Naomi, facing Earl Stanton. Glancing about the landscape, she looked directly at Mitch. “Where is Trent?”

“Everyone is here,” replied Earl Stanton. “He must have gone ahead; everyone back to the house.”

The group rode off in the direction of the mansion, scattering the newly formed congregation as they slowly mixed with the original herd.

Naomi hesitated long enough to decide Trent must still be on the plateau above the Oasis. She revved her motorbike to screaming pitch and tore up the narrow slippery trail. She surfaced from out of the crater to find the countryside awash. The rain resembled a wall of grey. Naomi blinked rapidly to help disperse the growing number of water droplets clinging to her eyelashes.

“What a transformation,” she moaned.

In several places lightning split the dark sky. Thunder shook the ground under her feet. Squinting, Naomi studied the surrounding water covered desert. Two shapes were standing in the rain at the edge of her sight. They came together and fell to the ground. She gunned the bike’s throttle fully open, roaring towards them. Mud sprayed out behind her in a thick sludge. The flooding plain forced her to do doughnuts in the mud in an attempt to keep the bike moving forward.

“Stop,” she yelled. “Please stop.”

Both men were wrestling in the mud. They couldn’t hear her feeble attempts to make them quit. Dropping the bike in the mud Naomi ran towards them. She saw Henry pushing Trent’s head further into a puddle trying to drown her hero. Naomi screamed. She curled her fingers into tight fists, ready to king-hit Henry. Raising her fists high in the air she waited for the perfect time to strike.

Trent pushed hard against the ground, managing to fling Henry off. He unclipped his rope, lassoing Henry when he sprinted at Trent for the final onslaught. He stumbled over the tightening rope about his ankles, hitting the mud face first.

“What’s going on?” screamed Naomi.

“My mate Henry wanted the cows back,” said Trent. “When I tried to explain the sale in more detail he didn’t want to listen. I even told him he’d be given fifty dollars for each cow.”

Henry sat in a puddle of water, glaring up at Trent.

A motorbike came roaring up. Mary-Lou jumped off and ran towards her brother. Twelve large steps from the bike she stumbled in a pothole full of water and sprawled face first into a shallow puddle. Before she came to a stop she had slipped into unconsciousness.

Trent sprinted over, dragging her onto the mud flat.

“Will she be okay?” asked Naomi.

“I hope so.” Trent pushed wet muddy hair from her face.

The cold drops of rain falling heavily onto Mary-Lou’s face were enough to bring her back. She opened her eyes, screaming.

“My ankle,” she sobbed.

“Her ankle is broken,” blurted Naomi, noting the precarious angle her boot lay at.

Pulling his mobile phone from his pocket, Trent dialed the Oasis. A quick sharp conversation followed. Slipping the phone back into his pocket, he reassured both girls help was on the way.

Trent and Naomi squatted over Mary-Lou to stop the rain from hitting her face. Naomi felt like a schoolgirl again. The second the teacher turned his back, the kids could talk using their own developed silent signals. Trent and his family appeared to have developed a unique one of their own.

Mary-Lou watched Trent and Naomi. Between sobs she shook her head, pouting. For the first time, her eyes sparkled. Nodding at the two lovebirds, they didn’t see her widening smile. They certainly didn’t hear her giggles.

The reverberating throbs of a helicopter flying slowly across the now inland sea burst through the downpour. The wind from the rotors swirled the rain.

“The helicopter is giving us a cold shower,” shrieked Naomi, watching the craft’s wheels sink into the mud.

“More like having your body peppered by hail,” reported Trent.

He picked up Mary-Lou and carried her over to the helicopter. Naomi helped to strap her into the seat then talked to Earl Stanton while Trent helped Henry in and closed the door.

The helicopter’s rotors spun at breakneck speed, lifting the craft into the air.

“What did you whisper to my father?” asked Trent.

Naomi put her arms around his waist, hugging him tight. “Can’t I have at least one secret?”

After watching the helicopter vanish into the rain, Naomi faced her cowboy.

“I thought something awful happened to you.”

“She’ll be right,” he answered.

“How can you always say; ‘she’ll be right?’”

“Henry and I were only having a friendly wrestle. Besides, I always look on the positive side of everything.”

Naomi reached up to give Trent a friendly slap on the shoulder. “You sound just like your brother.”

“No way, he sounds exactly like me.”

“I have some good news. I finished counting the cows. Only one has been lost.”

Trent reached out to reel Naomi in.

‘This time, the moment won’t be interrupted,’ thought Naomi.

Something hard bumped the pair, forcing them to fall into the mud. Trent cushioned Naomi’s fall and glared up at the beast. It blinked before lowering its head.

“He’s number five hundred,” blurted Trent. He stood to scratch behind the young bull’s ears. Watching him walk off, Trent said seriously.

“He won’t go far. He’s just looking for something to eat. I saw him wander off from the main herd. Henry jumped me before I could go find him.”

“You told me it was a friendly wrestle?”

“Eventually,” replied Trent.

The two stood in the rain in a tight embrace looking into the eyes of the other. Trent reached for Naomi’s chin. In a slick move, their lips were locked. To Naomi, they were standing in a bubble full of warm sunshine and not in the middle of a storm.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE NEXT day the sun rose in a cloudless sky. The rain had disappeared overnight. Naomi stretched in the warming rays of a new day. A few shallow isolated puddles of water were left; the only evidence of the previous day’s storm. Trent stepped out onto the verandah, a floorboard creaking under his weight.

Naomi turned to face him. She felt pleased to have greeted the sun before the cowboy.

“Just because you were up early you somehow think it’s a victory.”

“Yes I do,” Naomi replied. “I wanted to see the sunrise. You’re right it sure is beautiful out here.” Squaring herself to Trent she looked directly into his eyes. “What are you hiding behind your back?”

“Two steaming plates of bacon and eggs on perfectly toasted brown bread,” he announced bringing the plates to the front.

“How did you get things ready so fast? I saw you asleep on the couch when I walked past. I felt proud of myself for being awake before you.”

“I have to confess I did have some help. Mum heard you walking down the stairs. She thought she should wake me. Together we made breakfast.”

“What a cheat.”

Naomi took the plate. She felt as though time had travelled backwards overnight, helping her to arrive at a school camp. She believed if she pinched herself she might wake from her dream.

“For a city girl, you did a great job yesterday. I didn’t know you could ride a dirt bike. You were a natural.”

“Thank you for the compliment. My brother taught me how to ride. He refused to hear the word no. He even bought me lessons just so we could ride together.”

“I’d love to meet the man.”

“My brother and a mate were sitting in the back of a car when it ran off the road. I sold both bikes after he died. I never rode again till yesterday. I have to admit, I did enjoy the experience, though I’ve never ridden in a storm before.”

“Sorry to hear of the news.”

“It’s been many years since that day. Even though the pain has gone I still think of him.” Naomi smiled as she sat to eat breakfast.

“After breakfast and you feel up to it, we can go for a ride to survey the herd.”

“I’d love to,” replied Naomi.

The moment Trent and Naomi finished the last mouthful of their breakfast, Earl came trotting up on a black mare. He held onto the saddle using one hand, the other, he held the reins of another two horses.

“Who’d like to go for a ride to check on the new arrivals?”

Walking over, Naomi felt excited. Trent helped her onto the saddle of a brown chestnut. The horse instantly pricked its ears backwards waiting for a command.

“I thought you might want to know I picked up the extra package you asked me to get after dropping Mary-Lou at the hospital,” whispered Earl.

“Thank you.” Naomi’s eyes sparkled. She lifted her backside off the saddle looking about the area.

“The package is asleep,” whispered Earl. “Mitch is pacing the floor waiting for her to wake. You city people are all the same. It must be the clean air.”

Naomi looked at Trent’s puzzled expression. “It’s part of my secret,” she said.

“Are you going to share it?”

“I’ll tell you when the time is right.” She gave her horse a light kick, taking off in a trot.

Trent watched her go before galloping to catch up.

“We have to check the herd,” Naomi said to Trent when he drew level. She felt full of pride knowing she finally had her own little secret.

Trent chuckled and led the way to a small rise about a twelve-minute ride on horseback from the mansion. The hill looked high enough to watch the entire herd grazing.

“They look none the worse for wear after their wet ordeal,” gushed Naomi.

“They’ve settled in very nicely. I’m positive it won’t be too long before they put on weight again.”

Naomi’s gaze scoured the huge property. Heat from the drying land gave her goose bumps. She visualized staying to live out the rest of her life in such an overwhelming place. She allowed her mind to float back to the city; back to the busy streets of Melbourne, the endless cafés, shops and restaurants, the nightlife and the street people. She exhaled heavily. The sights of Melbourne were indeed wonderful. She paused on the thought, pondering which one seemed more appealing; busy Melbourne or the splendor and magic of the Oasis. The two were locked together for only a heartbeat. The Oasis already won. Besides, Trent lived here.

Naomi’s bottom lip pouted. She stared at the ground, sighing quietly so her cowboy hero didn’t know. ‘What will Kaite think? The city held her in its vice-like grip. The Oasis didn’t. Kaite seemed to be hooked more on the nightlife than her. If only, out here in the middle of the desert, Kaite might be inspired to stay. If not, she’d have to decide between the two. In her heart, she already decided which one must win.’

Two horses approaching from the house brought Naomi back to reality. Earl waved, looking excited.

Naomi faced the riders, grinning at the sight of one of the figures.

“Kaite,” she squealed. Jumping from her horse she started running.

Trent sprinted after her.

They ran side by side down the undulating side of the hill while Earl Stanton remained on guard. He resembled a King on his hill.

Kaite sat on the saddle of a white horse looking like a professional rider. She pulled hard on the reins. When the horse came to a complete stop she slid off the brown leather saddle. Mitch leapt from his horse. His arms were wide, ready to catch her if she fell.

"I take it you've met Mitch," puffed Naomi, between breaths.

"I sure have. He sat next to me waiting for the exact moment I woke. Before I could say a word, he left. When the handsome cowboy came back he carried a plate full of bacon and eggs."

"You two are definitely from the same pod," giggled Naomi, glancing sideways at Trent.

"We sure are."

"This is an amazing place. It takes your breath away," blurted Kaite, turning in circles.

"It sure does. This wonderful man standing next to me is Trent. He's the one I talked to you about. Mitch is Trent's brother."

Kaite shook his hand. Mitch stared at his brother, beckoning him to follow. The girls watched the two walk up on top of the low hill to have a talk. Earl trotted off to inspect a pregnant cow.

"Naomi, I love this place," yelped Kaite.

"It sure is amazing. I have to decide whether to stay here or have Trent take me back home. The jillaroo job is only for two weeks."

"The way you were talking I thought you were going to stay."

"I'd love to. I'm not convinced Trent wants me in his life."

"Naomi, don't take this the wrong way. I want us to stay the best of friends forever. Don't be a fool. You're too hung up on the idea the bloke has to give you the perfect gift. If Trent is half the man Mitch is, he's the catch of the century. Blokes like these two don't fall from the sky every day."

"You're already in love with Mitch?"

Kaite slipped a giggle.

"How can you be so quick?"

"Unlike you, I believe in love at first sight. The more I know, the more I want."

"Is there such a thing as love at first sight?" questioned Naomi.

"You better believe there is. Surely you loved Trent the moment you laid eyes on the man. Though I have to admit Mitch is the better looker."

"You think?"

Both girls started to giggle. Naomi shifted her attention, starting to look for the two men.

"Something's wrong," whispered Naomi, sprinting for the hill.

When the girls reached the top they spied the two men on the other side, locked in a wrestling duel.

Both girls sprinted down the hill yelling to stop the fight.

Trent looked up. Mitch saw his chance and quickly pushed his brother flat on his back.

"What's this?" yelled Naomi.

Mitch rolled over starting to laugh.

“We were having a friendly wrestle,” confessed Trent, jumping to his feet.

“Friendly wrestle my arse,” screamed Naomi.

“Honest truth. The rodeo is today. Mitch wanted to show me a few moves he thought up. He wanted to prove he’s the wrestling champ of the outback.”

“I will be one day,” he blurted.

“One day you probably will be.”

“What’s the Goss about a rodeo?” quizzed Kaite.

CHAPTER TWENTY

EXACTLY THIRTY minutes flying time from the Oasis the helicopter hovered above the treetops that surrounded the rodeo. Still sitting snug in her seat Naomi watched the many families bustling through the main gate. Each individual wore an excited look.

Groups of people were walking about the dust-covered ground totally oblivious to the new arrivals. They were too busy unloading horses, cows, sheep and music equipment from the many trucks.

Naomi looked towards the boulevard of amusement rides. They were placed parallel to each other in a long line not far from the main oval. Men started to gather in front of the shooting gallery while the young ladies watched on. Each wore the same expectant look of receiving a prize from their husbands or boyfriends.

Naomi still wore a smile when the helicopter slowly descended. At the same time, the wheels touched terra firma the reverberating throb of the rotors slowed then fell silent. Trent, Naomi, Mitch, and Kaite squeezed out of the helicopter, marching towards the main arena.

The smell of sawdust and horse sweat hung heavy over the entire grounds.

The rodeo crowd appeared to be swelling by the minute. The sandy oval three hundred kilometers from Brisbane resembled a hive of activity.

“Brother, we’ll catch you up later,” hinted Mitch. “Kaite and I are off to the lover’s ride.”

Trent nodded before escorting Naomi arm in arm towards a white marquee. He signed his name on a white sheet of paper clipped to a board sitting on a large tree stump. He then quickly checked the time he was expected to win the rodeo.

“Half an hour to kick off,” Trent advised looking sideways at Naomi. “Can I take you down side-show alley?”

Naomi gave a brief nod. She grinned and squeezed his arm. To get to side show alley, they walked past the novelty rides.

“The start of the boulevard is for the kids,” Trent teased. “I’ll take you to where the cowboys show what they’re made of.”

They turned the corner at the end of the alley and walked towards the adult games.

“Hey Trent,” yelled a man. He lifted a fat cigar and shoved it back into his mouth.

Naomi looked for the voice. She found a man with a big stomach leaning over a table.

“Give a bloke a break, keep on walkin’. Every time you stop to play me dart game you almost send me broke.”

Grinning, Trent helped Naomi over a puddle of water by lifting her gently into the air.

“Show off,” moaned the man.

“Andy, it’s good to see you. How goes?” asked Trent.

Both men grabbed each other’s hand. In a show of strength, they shook hands in the air. The stranger’s arm started to tremble, trying to win the air hand wrestle. Eventually, he conceded defeat.

“You win,” puffed Andy. Pulling his hand free he started to massage his shoulder. “I swear one of these days you’ll push me arm right off.”

“Naomi this is Andrew. We call him Andy. Don’t be shocked at how he talks or his appearance. Under his external frame, he’s a good bloke. If you want something this is the man to see.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Naomi, displaying a doubtful expression.

“Hey, Trent, where did ya dig this doll up from? If I were to guess, this one’s a city chick?”

“She sure is.”

“Are you gonna marry this one?”

Trent stared at the man through narrow slits, whispering. “I have to discover her idea of the perfect gift.”

Andy raised his hands attempting to change the subject.

“It sure is good to see you again old boy. Going for another win? This year will make it five in a row. It’ll be an outback rodeo record if you win.”

“I’ll win.”

“You’re a bit cocky,” said Naomi.

“Little lady, he’ll win for sure,” hinted Andy.

“I’ll warm up by trying the hammer game,” blurted Trent.

“I don’t think so,” snorted Andy. “The last time ya swung the hammer ya broke the bell at the top. You cost me a small fortune in lost revenue. If ya want to stay friends move your arse away from me darts and hammer game.” Noticing Naomi pouting, he lowered his gaze so he could kick at a clump of dirt. “Okay, Trent you have one shot, for the little lady. Do me a favour; hit the rubber stop using half strength.”

Trent picked up the long-handled hammer. Placing it on his shoulder he walked over to the game. By the time, he started to focus on what he expected to happen a crowd of people at least ten deep were standing a short distance away. All wore the same excited expression.

“Don’t you be bothered by the amount of people watching Naomi from the city; the big gorilla always attracts a crowd.”

Gripping the handle at the very end, Trent arched his back. The head of the long-handled hammer touched the ground.

“Here we go again,” mumbled Andy. “This is how he’s broken me game three years runnin.’ To relax before his bull ride he throws a perfect game of darts. Every year it’s the same thing.” He closed his eyes. “I can’t watch. This is too painful.”

Trent's stare zeroed in on the rubber stop at the base of the machine. His face looked serious. In one massive show of strength, he brought the hammer over his head, striking the rubber hard. The weight at the base of the game flew upwards like a rocket towards the bell at the top. Everyone around heard a mighty bang. When the weight fell back to the rubber boot at ground level the machine lights came crashing down after the bell.

"Thanks, Trent," hissed Andy. "You've busted me machine yet again. Next year I'm gonna fix the weight to the ground. I'll have fun seeing you try and fail."

Trent grinned, picking out a large stuffed dog.

Naomi proudly placed it under her arm. She reached out to squeeze his bicep.

"Keep walking along this lane and I'll pay Andy for the machine," whispered Trent in Naomi's ear. The moment she strolled off Trent slipped the man a pile of rolled up fifty-dollar notes. "This should cover the costs of a few years worth of damage."

"Thanks, mate. If there's anythin' ya need let me know." Andy gave Trent a friendly slap on the cheek. "If you want my advice, hog tie the little lady to make sure she won't get away." He raised his bushy eyebrows to cement his comments.

"As a matter of interest maybe you can help me. You're an all-knowing bloke. You've been around Australia."

"Many times over the years," interrupted Andy. He looked over Trent's shoulder and spied Naomi looking at the 'throw the ring at the bottles game.' "You want a second opinion of the city chick?"

"I don't need anyone to tell me she's the most gorgeous woman who has ever walked this earth," advised Trent.

"You haven't seen a picture of me wife."

"You don't have a wife."

"I dream about the perfect woman every night. What's your question?"

"Naomi talks about this so called, 'perfect gift.' Have you any idea what it could be?"

"Buddy, you need to get out more often. Go to the city, the big smoke. Go mingle. Smell the nightlife."

"It's not the answer I hoped to hear."

"Let me give you some advice from a bloke who knows."

Trent turned his head and saw Naomi walking their way. "Get to the point, she's almost here."

Andy lowered his voice to a decibel above a whisper. Trent nodded as Naomi interrupted.

"What are you two conversing?"

"Andy was giving me some advice."

"I hope I've put your mind at ease?"

"Yes and thanks mate. I owe you one."

"One what?" asked Naomi.

"I'll tell you later," whispered Trent, giving Naomi a wink.

'Another secret,' thought Naomi. The word doubt flashed into her mind. No matter how hard she tried to sweep the letters away, they stayed. Her mind needed to convince her heart there couldn't be a future with Trent if he kept up the secrets. Even though the Oasis looked

magnificent her thoughts started to drift back to the city, beckoning her to return. She needed to find Kaite to let her know she made a bad call in tricking her into coming. They needed to quickly leave.

Trent led the way to the main arena where a large bull was being prepared. Several men gave Trent a friendly slap on the shoulder when he walked past.

"I have to get ready," advised Trent, looking Naomi in the eyes. He leaned forward, kissing her on the lips. "I won't be long."

"I'll be here when you return holding the trophy. There's only one thing I want to say. Be careful."

Naomi climbed the rugged wooden fence framing the small sand covered arena. Even though she felt convinced this will be her last day, she certainly didn't want to see Trent hurt. She nodded at the cowboy, determining in her mind he'd always be a good friend. Maybe they could stay in touch via the Internet. They could even make the occasional phone call. She smiled awkwardly, cherishing the thought.

Trent nodded before trotting over to the bull cage and disappearing among the sea of faces.

Naomi watched the proceedings. The air felt electric. She could hardly control the excitement welling up inside her. Slowly her thoughts drifted back to Kaite. Did she make the right decision in forcing her to come? Naomi felt more confused than ever. The mixed signals Trent sent added to her confusion, tearing her between the city and out here yet again. In her heart she knew staying was the best thing. The secrets Trent kept locked inside his head happened to be the reason for her doubts.

On the other side of the arena, a few helicopters landed. Naomi focused on the first craft which touched down. Its rotor blades seemed to whirl for a lot longer than the others. Two men and a woman stepped down onto the ground. They stood staring at the country folk. One man from the group signaled the others to stay. Naomi saw him march towards the games. She struggled to swallow her anxiety and jumped from the fence. She watched the man switch directions before making a beeline for the patch of dirt she stood on. Naomi moved away, mingling amongst the crowd.

"Look what the storm blew in," growled a voice on her left.

Naomi whirled around to face the man.

"Whatever you do don't turn to jelly."

"Brandt, what are you doing here?"

"I tracked you down by keeping an eye on Kaite. I knew she'd eventually lead me to you. Enough chit chat, let's go for a walk."

"No. I'm staying right here," blurted Naomi, defying his order.

Brandt pulled a snub nose handgun from his pocket, thrusting the end into Naomi's ribs.

"You won't shoot me here. There are too many witnesses."

"I'm not stupid, Naomi darling. Kaite is here somewhere. We'll find her together. Be warned I'll shoot her if you don't do exactly what I tell you. In fact, look who is coming. What a coincidence. Now I know where Kaite is, tell me, where's the boyfriend." Pushing his gun harder against Naomi's ribs, he snarled. "Don't tell me, let me guess. He's not any run of the mill cowboy. He has to be a hero for you to take any interest. Let me see if I can spot him. I

spy a man sitting on the back of a rather large bull. He has to be the hero. If you don't want to see a bullet in his head or Kaite's, I suggest you come quietly."

Naomi's shoulders sagged in agreement.

"Good girl. You were always an easy puppet. Now start walking."

Naomi's mind churned over dozens of ideas, trying to derive at a suitable solution to stop Brandt's obsession over her. If she couldn't find a way, she knew he'd never stop.

"I'll come peacefully if you'll allow me to watch Trent?"

"So I'm right. The cowboy sitting on the large bull's back is the one. I guess I can wait a few more minutes. Besides it might be fun seeing a man getting trampled by a raging bull."

Trent signaled the Judge to start. His face changed to stone. A buzzer sounded. The gate opened. The bull tore out of the starting stall. No matter how hard the bull bucked, twisted and turned, Trent stayed seated on his back. When a buzzer sounded, Trent's grin couldn't have been any wider. Not only did he win the trophy, he'd beaten the record he set the previous year. He jumped from the tiring bull, waving to the cheering crowd. He didn't even look to have broken out in a sweat.

While Trent made his way to the winner's circle, Brandt pulled Naomi off the side railing, forcing her to walk towards the helicopter.

Trent spotted them walking away from the fence and quickly started to shadow them.

"Whatever you do, don't take me down sideshow alley," ordered Naomi.

Brandt snickered. "You've been watching too many movies girl. You want us to skirt around the trouble spot. I'm not stupid. The boulevard of games is the way you want us to go. Sideshow alley is the safe way. Now turn down here. No one puts one over on me." Brandt leaned close to Naomi's ear. "Not even you, my little puppet."

"What do you want?"

"I thought you were a smart girl. All those wins in the courtroom and you never figured me out. What a loser."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Keep moving. Don't try anything stupid. The next bullet in my gun has your name on it."

Naomi bravely stopped. For her hesitation, she received a shove in the shoulder blade.

"My little puppet, I'll let you in on a little secret. In my pocket I have a tax form you will fill out. Once you've done it the curtain will come down on your life."

"I won't do it."

"If you resist the boyfriend cops it. I'll slightly modify what I've said. The bullet before yours has his name on it. There's one for Kaite, the cowboy and you."

"What do you hope to achieve by using a single tax form?"

"It will do plenty. Over the course of the coming years, bogus names will be written on the top of each form, signed by you. Inside six years I'll have about ten million dollars in the bank so I can live the high life somewhere in the Bahamas."

"Greed, it's the only thing you wanted me for?"

"I'm impressed, you are a smart girl. Our conversation has been terminated. Keep moving."

Walking close to Andy and his broken machine, Naomi looked the big man in the eyes. While he stared back, she threw Andy a short sharp nod, hoping he'd understand her plight.

The man didn't appear to respond and quickly went about his business fixing his machine.

Questions tore through Naomi's mind. Did Andy actually see her nod? If so, why didn't he understand her plight? Why didn't he respond? She lowered her gaze to the ground and kept walking.

The big man waited for the pair to complete their funeral march past his seat and turn left towards the open paddock before downing his tools and start to follow.

"Walk to the nearest helicopter. I have a pilot ready to take us up to an altitude of one hundred and fifty metres."

"How do you know he's still waiting?" quizzed Naomi.

"I pay people to do exactly what I say."

"What happens when we arrive at your prescribed height?"

Brandt's face changed to concrete. "We'll both find out how good you can fly?"

"If the pilot of the helicopter is Earl Stanton he won't let you commit murder," spat Naomi.

"Calling your boss by their first name is beyond you. The middle of nowhere has taken the city air out of your veins. My little puppet, Naomi Fitzgerald, you're a city girl. You will die a city girl."

Naomi stared at the mirror maze. Two dark distorted shapes were following. She felt positive one must be Andy, the other, Trent's. She received a second shove in the shoulder blade for slowing.

"Stop stalling," snorted Brandt.

Closing in on the stunt show set, Naomi grinned when she saw a man climbing the ladder to the balcony of a makeshift hotel. Seconds later she spied a big man step from a doorway. Naomi punched Brandt's wrist, sending the snub nose handgun into the dusty ground. She backed stepped when his hand came up to slap her face. Andy stepped closer. Brandt turned to face Andy.

"So this is the hero, a three hundred pound blob of lard."

"Fella, I'm only two hundred and twenty pounds. I'm no hero. I see myself as Naomi's big brother."

A shadow dashed to Andy's side. "Thanks, big fella. I can take it from here."

"Another hero has arrived. If you want a piece of me, come and get it."

"Be careful Mitch, he knows Judo," screamed Naomi from a doorway on the opposite side of the street.

"I know a few Japanese too. Nice people the lot."

Mitch stepped forward, pulling the first punch. Brandt kicked out, sending his opponent into the mud. Mitch quickly stood and readied himself for the next round.

A sharp whistle came from Trent. Everyone stopped to watch him complete a dive through the window of the fake saloon, complete a tumble roll in the dirt and stand to full height, facing Brandt.

"Three heroes onto one," he spat. "I think it's fair."

Trent unbuckled his rope.

“You’re going to tie me up so you can pulverize me into the ground?”

“I can tell you are a man who won’t talk this through. I also know you won’t relent.”

Trent deliberately gave Mitch his rope before marching over.

“Have the first punch,” taunted Brandt. “Hero, here’s the only warning I’m going to give. Make it a good one. If I get up, you won’t.”

Brandt let go of a sharp laugh. He gave a fast kick, followed by a punch. Trent blocked them both. Before Brandt hit the ground Trent had successfully broken his opponent’s jaw and tied him up, using his own belt.

“You might be great at Judo,” mentioned Trent. “I’m a champion rodeo rider. I’m the fastest hog tier in Australia.”

Andy moved closer, slapping Trent on the back. “What can I say? I’ve fifty bucks on you today. You better win or I’ll chase your arse all over Australia for your hide.”

“Your winnings are already in the bag, big fella.”

Mitch collected Kaite from Andy’s small office before joining Naomi and Trent.

“The local sheriff is on his way over,” announced Mitch. “I found him walking around when the city bloke wanted to fight.”

The friendly cop marched up to the group and handcuffed Brandt, forcing him to his feet.

“My right-hand man has tracked the other two. One is a hired pilot. He has no idea what transpired here. The female, it turns out, is Brandt’s girlfriend, or should I say, and I quote from her mouth, ‘ex-girlfriend!’” The cop shook Trent’s hand, shoving Brandt in the shoulder to signal he needed to walk towards the police car.

“Is everyone okay?” yelled Earl Stanton sprinting down the boulevard towards the group. He abruptly stopped when he saw everyone laughing. “You kids are all jokers.” Casually swatting his hand in the air he walked off to watch the under fifteen’s bull riding event.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

NAOMI SLIPPED her arm around the waist of her hero. “Thanks for coming to my rescue.”

“Not a problem. City blokes think, suburban. Out here in the middle of Australia, a man has to think differently.”

“What would you do if Brandt came from the country?”

“I’d still win. The only difference being the fight might have lasted a bit longer.” Trent grinned at Naomi’s startled expression. “I’ve one more ride,” he added.

“I thought when you won the ride on the bull the day was over,” stated Naomi.

“The day has only just started to warm up,” replied Trent.

“He wins every event he enters each year, don’t you brother?” said Mitch. “Mark my words, one of these days I’m going to beat you. I’m not far behind you in the bull ride.”

Trent slapped his brother on the shoulder. "You need to be a little stronger before you can give me a run for the money."

Mitch scooped Kaite into his arms, grinning at her surprised expression.

"My wrestling match is in fifteen minutes. Do you think I'll win?" probed Mitch.

"Yes I do," replied Trent.

"You two are typical brothers," giggled Naomi.

"We'll catch up when I'm holding the wrestling trophy." Mitch wore a wide grin the whole time he carried Kaite to the sign-in tent.

Trent placed his hands on Naomi's hips. After kissing her he gave a scolded look. "This time, don't run off."

"I'm not going anywhere!" she exclaimed.

"You said the same thing half an hour ago."

"This time, I mean it."

Naomi climbed the fence ready to watch the next contest. Trent jumped, clinging to the top railing. Leaning gently against her shoulder he pointed to a fit looking man wearing an oversized wide brimmed hat. He sat heavy on a white thoroughbred horse. Both looked a little anxious.

"He's my opposition," explained Trent. "He's an expert at roping a cow, quick too. He warned me a month ago I should be practicing. He informed me today I'm going to lose."

The man stared at Trent before tipping the brim of his hat. Trent did the same. Naomi surmised the gesture to be only a friendly bush rivalry signal.

A buzzer sounded. The crowd roared. The contest last no longer than eight seconds.

"That was one quick contest," yelled Naomi over the cheers and clapping of the crowd.

"To remain champ I have to rope a cow and hog tie it in seven seconds," confessed Trent.

"It sounds impossible."

"It's in the bag."

Trent jumped from the fence, marched across the arena and waved to the cheering crowd. He blew Naomi a kiss before climbing onto his horse. While waiting for the start he patted the horse's neck. He leaned forward whispering something in its ear. He sat straight and glanced at Naomi.

Trent sent the Judge who held the car horn the nod. The moment the crowd hushed the man pushed a green button. The wooden gates swung open. The cow sprinted off for freedom. Trent and his horse came up from behind. Unclipping the rope, Trent started swinging the loop above his head in a second and a half. Trent downed the cow, hog-tying it in a clean six and a half seconds.

Naomi stared at the timekeeper who stood shaking his head in disbelief.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he called slowly through the megaphone. "Today you have witnessed history in the making. Trent Stanton has shattered the time he set last year. He has again shown everyone here today why he's still champion. Put your hands together for Trent and a new record."

The crowd cheered which included a standing ovation. A Mexican wave erupted, circling the arena three times before being subdued.

The man Trent defeated walked over, extending his arm. They clasped each other's hands making the handshake look to be a little strained. Both stared at each other in the eyes. Neither of the men seemed to want to be the first to look away.

"Congratulations on a fine ride."

"Thanks, Tom," said Trent.

"Here's a friendly warning, wait for next year."

"I'm looking forward to it."

A second Mexican wave started up, moving around the fenced arena, interrupting the standoff. Both men looked at the crowd at the same time. There were hoots, cheers, yelling and clapping.

Tom spat in the sawdust. "Don't forget what I told you."

Trent gave him a sharp nod. He stood his ground watching Tom walk off, dusting the bottom of his boots as he went.

An official marched to the center of the oval, tapping a microphone with his left hand.

"Everyone, please, a little quiet," he called raising a hand into the air.

A whisper quiet quickly descended on the oval.

"I want to take this opportunity to congratulate Trent Stanton on a wonderful exhibition today. Everyone, please give this champion another round of applause as he comes to collect his trophy."

Mitch slipped Trent a small box before he started to walk towards the middle of the arena. Trent waved to the onlookers who immediately cheered louder.

"Speech, speech, speech," chorused the crowd.

Trent accepted the microphone and pushed his hand into the air. A young girl in tight blue jeans and a white singlet walked over to present the huge trophy of a gold plated cow mounted on a mahogany coloured board. She gave Trent a kiss on the cheek.

"Congratulations. When you're ready to take me on a date give me a call."

"Lucky gal," yelled a middle-aged woman standing next to Naomi and Kaite.

Naomi sent her an icy stare.

The woman leaned sideways. "Lucky girl who corners Trent," she whispered. "If he doesn't hurry up and choose a wife, I'm going to insist he picks me even if it's a shotgun wedding." She stuck her hand out for an outback handshake. "Name's Vie. It's short for Violetta."

"Naomi," she replied, taking the woman's hand.

Kaite leaned close, whispering in Naomi's ear. "What I've seen of the outback, I've decided to leave the city. This is where I want to spend the remainder of my life."

Naomi grinned at feeling the heavy burden magically lift from off her shoulders. Maybe, just maybe her fantasies might come true after all. Only one hurdle remained and she doubted whether Trent could ever discover what she thought the perfect gift is. How could he, out here in the middle of Australia where education is low? Again she tried to decide on what to do.

"Kaite, what do you really think of Mitch?"

"He's a hunk and a half. He sure knows how to push the right buttons."

"Have you talked to Mitch about wanting to stay?"

Kaite pushed the sides of her hair up using her hands. "What do you think?"

“He asked you to marry him?” quizzed Naomi, her gaze zeroing in on the diamond ring she wore on the finger of her left hand.

“You bet he did.”

“When?” questioned Naomi.

“He asked me before we stood on the hill looking at the cows.”

“So now I know the meaning of the wrestle?”

“Yes. Mitch explained to Trent what he’d planned. They were both excited. Their little brotherly talk ended in a family wrestle.”

“Congratulations. You deserve it. Mitch is a good bloke.”

Naomi sighed heavily before turning her attention back to the arena so she could feast her eyes on Trent.

“I’d like to name a few people who need thanking,” bellowed Trent through the microphone. “First, I want to thank the organizers of today and to everyone who has made this annual day spectacular. Twenty years is no mean feat. I love to make a special mention of a wonderful lady. I’ve explained to her I don’t waste words. For the first time, I need to say what’s on my mind. Everyone, please give a warm welcome to the most wonderful lady I know. Naomi Fitzgerald, please come out.”

Naomi’s face flushed bright red. Her eyes widened in fear.

Vie leaned sideways. “I believe Trent’s calling you little darlin’, get out there.”

“How did you guess?”

“I didn’t, you just told me. Besides, you’re a pretty little thing. Take no offence when I say you smell like a city chick.”

Naomi frowned, smelling her clothes.

“Don’t worry about the smell. One day the country air has a way of changing the smell of city folk. I know what I’m talking about.”

“If what you say is true, the only way you’d know is if you came from the city. To me, you look like you’ve never been there.”

Vie gave Naomi a sharp nod and a wink. “Trent’s a waitin’.”

“Thank you for being so friendly.” Naomi clasped both hands on the top of the wooden railing, heaving her body up and over the fence. Slowly she climbed down the other side. She found Vie smiling at her.

“You’ll change,” she whispered. “A few years out here, no one will ever know you came from the city.”

Naomi pushed her head through the gap in the wooden railings. “How long since you’ve seen the city?”

“A wonderful twenty years.”

Naomi straightened her clothes. Keeping her gaze glued on Trent she started walking.

“Slow and steady,” she mumbled under her breath. “I certainly don’t want to embarrass myself further by falling face first into the sawdust.”

The crowd cheered her on. Naomi suddenly felt a warm feeling shoot through her body from her feet to the top of her head. Naomi felt more special than ever before. She lifted her hand to wave at the crowd which made them cheer louder.

Trent put his arm around Naomi's waist before speaking into the microphone. Three hundred people listened to his every word.

"Naomi, I know we haven't known each other long," he started.

"What are you up to?" she whispered, appearing slightly puzzled.

"Keep it moving," yelled Earl Stanton from somewhere over Naomi's left shoulder.

Looking at the crowd, Trent continued. "Andy thanks for the information big fella on this so called, 'perfect gift.' I have to disagree on your theory it has to be a puppy."

The crowd immediately roared laughing.

Naomi whispered a nervous giggle. Had this cowboy actually discovered what she called the perfect gift?

"Please don't say," she managed to mumble. "It's not important."

Trent either didn't hear her or he ignored what she attempted to say.

"Naomi Fitzgerald, I believe I have discovered the meaning of the perfect gift."

She opened her mouth to whisper the word 'don't.' Not even a squeak developed.

"The, ' means the man. The word gift represents something small; important in a girl's life."

"Go Trent."

The yell deep amongst the sea of onlookers sent the crowd into a whispered frenzy. The whole gathering glared at Andy to keep quiet.

Trent placed the microphone under his arm. Downing his left knee, he looked up into Naomi's eyes. He reached out, taking hold of her left hand. Using his free hand he produced a small red box.

The entire crowd fell quiet. Even the cows stopped moving.

"Naomi, there is only one thing missing in my life. My dreams will be made into reality if you'd please seriously consider accepting my proposal to be my wife." He slowly stood. "Before you answer, I believe there are two words yet to be discovered."

Naomi started to tremble. Her knees turned from jelly to water. She couldn't understand why she didn't crumble to the ground. She wanted to feel Trent's magic rope tighten about her waist so she could be pulled into his strong safe arms.

Trent's voice broke through her fuzzy thoughts.

"The middle word of the secret line means you are looking for a man who will surrender his whole heart to just one woman. Naomi, if you'd accept my proposal of marriage my whole heart belongs to you."

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

THE PRIEST looked up at the small congregation. Naomi stood square to Trent at the altar. Her silk and lace wedding dress looked picture-perfect. The atmosphere in the church felt electrifying.

Naomi gave Kaite a satisfied look. Glancing about the small beautiful old chapel, built decades earlier in one corner of the Oasis, Naomi looked out of the small plain glass window at the blue sky. Her eyes widened in disbelief when she saw a leaf fall from the large apple tree. She squealed. Tears streamed down Naomi's face as she ran past the astonished family members on her way out into the warm sunlight. She sprinted to where the leaf floated to the ground. Sobbing, Naomi knelt on the carpet style grass.

Trent raced to her side. "Naomi, what's happened?" his voice sounding hurt.

"I can't marry you. I'm so sorry." She lowered her head further to the ground, sobbing uncontrollably. Her whole body trembled underneath her wedding dress.

"I don't understand. I thought you and I were the happiest couple on the planet? You said those words to me only last night when we walked in the dark holding hands while watching the moon slowly rise."

"I am, at least I thought I was."

"Naomi, please look at me. Whatever has caused you this pain you're going through I'm here to help?"

"I saw a falling leaf. It's a bad omen from years ago. Now it has happened again."

Trent gently cupped Naomi's chin to lift her head. He kissed her forehead, looking at her water soaked eyes. He didn't joke or say anything to put her down. Instead, his words were honey smooth. "A leaf falling off a tree signals it is autumn. In America, they call it the fall. A falling leaf has no other significance than to help the tree to grow."

Naomi slowly relayed the story of Bill and his bigamist ways and how much he deeply hurt her. Every autumn, no matter how hard she tried to forget the haunting thoughts of her disastrous wedding day, the vivid painful memories came flooding back. She'd been totally devastated by his lies. His deceitfulness caused her heart to be ripped in two.

Trent lifted his bride off the ground, showing her the Oasis.

"This is your home now. You belong here. This might be the first day of a new season. It also signals a new life for the both of us. I will be by your side every day for the remainder of our lives. You have no need to fear anything from your past. Come, let us start our journey."

"Thank you for your kind thoughtful words," whispered Naomi.

Trent placed her gently on her feet. He stooped to pick up two leaves from the ground. He handed one to Naomi, the other he held.

"When I look at these leaves, I see a brand new season is not far away. I know winter will be first, but spring is just around the corner."

Naomi turned the brown leaf over in her hand.

"See," whispered Trent. "It's only a leaf. It came from the tree you're standing next to. It decomposes which helps the tree to grow." He scrunched the dry leaf in his hand and let the flakes fall to the ground.

He nodded.

Naomi scrunched her leaf, opened her hand, watching the flakes she created fall about her feet.

"From this moment forth, I Naomi will never let the bad memories of years gone by upset me again."

Trent swept Naomi off her feet, kissing his bride.

“Take me back into the church, it’s time we were married.”

The wedding ceremony successfully came to the finale. The priest who’d been flown out to the Oasis for the special occasion seemed pleased.

Trent looked longingly at Naomi. His eyes weren’t hiding the inner man anymore.

“You’re the most beautiful person I’ve ever met. I promise to love and cherish you from this moment forward. Even after death I will love you.”

“I Naomi will love and cherish you till the day I die and beyond.”

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” said the priest.

He radiated a proud look as Trent and Naomi kissed for the first time since being married.

To the cheering of the small group Trent escorted Naomi from the small cottage style church in one corner of the Oasis to the lush green lawn where a white marquee was set up ready for the wedding reception. Every flower appeared to be in full colour. The sun quickly warmed the air. The sparkling river slowed to a crawl. It looked inviting even to Naomi. After the wedding photos were completed, the background of the Oasis could not have looked any more spectacular.

In the trees, the birds were singing their love song. Naomi felt a brand new life being laid out before her, one she only ever dreamt of. She felt a warm tingling sensation travel throughout her body. In a strange way, she wanted her life to speed along so she could read about her exciting adventures she had with Trent by her side. Naomi grinned at the years which were to come. She turned her back on the crowd of single women and got ready to throw the bridal bouquet high over her shoulders.

Kaite leapt through the air, grabbing the bouquet of flowers in full flight, before being flung to the ground by a disappointed group of eager ladies of various ages. She stood triumphant facing Mitch. He sprinted to her side, scooped her up one handed and carried her to a vacant chair.

“Trent, does the scene remind you of anything?” asked Naomi, laughing.

He scooped her up, white-laced wedding dress, train and all.

“I’ve taught my brother everything I know.”

“It seems another wedding is blowing in from the north sooner than expected,” chirped Naomi.

“It’ll have to wait until we get back from our honeymoon.”

“You haven’t let a syllable of a single word escape your mouth on where you intend to take me,” scolded Naomi. “You really should say.”

“It’s a big surprise,” said Trent. “After all, I need to have a least one secret left.”

EPILOGUE

JAKE GENTLY closed the leather bound book. He stared at his sister through water soaked eyes. The old man who resembled a street bum opened the door to the tiny room. He walked in, stone-faced, straight and tall. A tightly coiled length of rope hung from his huge brass belt buckle. The tall slender woman gripped his arm. Her smile seemed warm, friendly and looked natural like a country girl was expected to have. Anyone could tell the couple definitely belonged together. The woman sent her daughter a short silent nod.

Bernice, sitting at the mahogany desk next to Jake, stood.

Jake seemed reluctant to stand. Bernice saw to it he did.

"Mother," he whimpered in a ghostly whisper. "I thought you were dead. I saw you lying in the coffin. I came here today to give my last respects. Why the fake funeral? If you wanted to talk, you could have rung me. You didn't have to go through such an exuberant hoax."

Trent escorted Naomi quickly across the grey carpet. They both squared themselves to their son.

"I suppose you're expecting an apology from us for forcing you to come here under false pretenses," chimed Naomi.

"It'll be a good start."

"I'm not at liberty to give one," gushed Naomi. Her voice still sounded warm, yet she spoke in a firm tone. "The funeral just happened to be a ploy to convince you, Jake dear, you should come home."

"Son, you know I don't talk unless I have something to say."

"Father, speak your mind. I know I've never listened to a single word you have said in the past, however, after reading the leather bound book on you and mother's life, I fully regret my decision. I've been a fool every day since I turned my back on you and the Oasis and headed for the city."

"Say no more," urged Trent, lifting his hand in the air. "What's done has been swept away by the river that flows into the underground tunnel back at the Oasis. You need to make a choice about your future. A wise decision is preferred."

"The bible explains about the prodigal son. He left, wised up and went home. I feel the same way," whispered Jake, interrupting.

"On behalf of your mother, I thank you for reading her memoirs."

"I never knew the turmoil you and she went through."

"Now you do."

"I need to thank you for conceiving this plan to persuade our son to come home," said Naomi, giving Trent a kiss on the cheek.

"Naomi, I only thought up the idea. If you didn't lie motionless in the coffin, Jake might never have read the book." Turning to face Bernice he continued. "I need to thank you for putting so many important memories down in writing."

"Dad, Mum, it had been worth every hour just to see my brother one more time."

"I didn't know mum could ever be so dedicated to the Oasis or to our father. What a transformation. I'd never have picked her for a city chick," quizzed Jake turning his head to stare at his sister.

The group chuckled, slapping each other on the shoulder.

“You should have stuck around,” snarled Bernice. “There are many stories more amazing than what you’ve just read that make up the life of Mr. Trent Stanton and his wife, ‘our mother,’ I have yet to write.”

“I thought if I stayed out there in the middle of Australia I’d be bored. I longed for the city, the people, the bright lights, and the nightlife,” confessed Jake.

“I never did have a boring day in my entire life,” advised Bernice. “As for the city and the night life, I’ve tasted it. I came sprinting back to the safety of the Oasis.”

“I never dreamt the city isn’t what I thought it would be,” whispered Jake, starting to pull at the edge of the leather bound book.

“You should have asked me about the city. There’s no comparison between it and the Oasis. One has a fast pace which can have an exciting life, however at every corner there is danger. The other has a relaxed peaceful life, which is adventurous yet safe,” stated Naomi.

“Son, let’s go home,” whispered Trent.

“Only if we go to live at the Oasis so I can hear more stories,” stammered Jake, sliding the leather bound book off the table. Holding it tight against his chest, he walked towards the door. He turned to face the group, giving a sharp nod. “Coming?”

Dear reader,

thank you for reading my novel ‘I know your secret.’ 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.

Mark Stewart

Email: mark_stewart777@hotmail.com

Mathew Lang

Mark Stewart is an inspirational author.
The transformation from when I started to edit his work until
now has been amazing. His hard work and dedication have
helped him to write more professionally.
Mark is undeniably the one to watch.

Rosemary Cantala

Mark Stewart is an acclaimed author.
He loves to write fiction right across the board from romance adventure
to crime and onwards to science fiction and children's books.
His fast paced novels will keep you on the edge of your seat from the first word to the last.
Mark lives in Melbourne Australia and tries to
keep to the Aussie lingo and customs.

Other novels I have written in the way of romance are:

Kiss on the bridge.
Kiss on the bridge two.
Kiss on the bridge three.

Don't tell my secret.
201 May Street
Emerald Hill
A perfect Summer's day

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 Thee.

Planet X91 series

Crime novels: Fire Games/ publish America. Heart of a spider and I know your secret.

Children: A Troglan knows and Luke's cubby house. Malcolm's cubby house.
Smashwords has various short stories.

Below is the opening page of my novels:

Synopsis: [Don't tell my secret](#). available free from www.obooko.com

How far will you go to keep a secret?

A mysterious woman enters author James Buxton's world at the same time he meets Mia. When the woman tells him she wants to write her last novel he jumps at the chance. Then she says he can have the royalties. She dictates, he types about Lilly who lives in the 1940's and her struggles to survive. Lilly and Suzie vow to take their unspeakable deed to the grave.

Synopsis: [Kiss on the bridge](#). Adventure romance: available free from www.obooko.com

How would you react if a tall handsome stranger came up to you on new-years-eve and asked for a kiss?

Kiss on the bridge is set in the year 1974. Cyclone Tracy made land fall in Darwin on 25th December 1974 at 9:55am desecrating Darwin. After Tracy had swept the state there was nothing left except this story? Out of the ruins love sparked and mushroomed between Anneli and Wade. They were destined to meet and tell their story for decades to come.

Kiss on the bridge two: Set in Australia in 1977. Meredith wakes in a coffin. She has no idea her hero is on the way. They meet and fall in love, but will the emotion be strong enough to keep them together?

Synopsis: Legendary Blue Diamond. Adventure romance. Available April 10th 2012

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 that the diamond was no larger than a single carrot. Lately there have been whispers that the deep blue coloured diamond was reported to be in excess of nine carrots 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 whereabouts. He took the knowledge of its existence to his grave. Of late a possible theory has been circulating that 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 www.obooko.com

"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 www.obooko.com.

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.

If you enjoyed reading The Perfect Gift, please leave a star-rating and some feedback on the author's obooko.com [download page](#).

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