

Food for *Love*



C. FONSECA

Prologue

IN SECOND POSITION, WITH THE French rider only fifteen seconds ahead and only dead-flat tarmac left to ride, Jess knew she had a good chance to win: her body soared with adrenaline, and she could almost taste victory.

The one hundred and fifty-three-kilometre course had had multiple sections of bone-jarring cobblestones. She'd ridden her bike as hard as possible to smash the three steep artificial climbs and gained a favourable place in the lead group. But now, the canal city of Hoogeveen, where the Ronde van Drenthe race began and ended, was finally in sight.

She hoped her team had made the right decision. Holding her back until now—picking up the workload for Jess so that she'd have fresh legs for these last three kilometres was a risky move. There was only a one-minute gap between the breakaway group up front and the approaching main field of riders. A team in that bunched-together group could still propel their lead sprint rider for a surprise dash to the finish line.

It's time. Jess pumped her legs hard. They rotated rhythmically—almost effortlessly, as though powered by an unknown source. No pain.

"Go for it, Jess," Bruce yelled from the support vehicle.

No time for thinking. Jess was flying. Nerves like steel.

It was within her reach. Jess would move up, overtake the lead rider, and win the race. There were only seconds between their wheels as they approached the final sprint. She could do this. For herself, and for her team.

But then, before Jess could fully comprehend what was happening ahead, the lead rider's bicycle kicked out from under her and wobbled, and she headed towards the barrier.

“Watch out!” A warning blast in Jess’s earpiece from the team car came too late as the riderless bicycle flew in the opposite direction, across the road—towards Jess.

In a flash, things became chaotic. A loud roar erupted from the crowd on the sidelines.

As the mangled bicycle bounced across the road, Jess swerved, zigzagged, and desperately attempted to stop her slide, powerless to do anything but just hold on. Her bicycle shuddered when the missile clipped her front wheel, and she sailed head first over the handlebars. *Oh hell.*

As Jess somersaulted into the air, she heard the *whoosh* of riders passing, then metal scraping on the ground, and then came the smell of burning rubber.

She lay in a crumpled heap. Her leg stuck out at an awkward angle—entangled in the bicycle wheel. Her shoulder hurt like hell, and there was a strange numbness spreading down her arm.

“Don’t move.”

On her back, staring up at the sky—thick, grey clouds pressing down—Jess heard footsteps running towards her. She tried to lift her head.

A hand rested lightly on her upper chest. “Stay still, Jess.” She recognised the voice of Bridget, the team doctor.

Jess clenched her teeth. She was in pain—but she really wanted to win this. *Get back on the bike. The finish is so close. Move, Jess.* “I’m okay,” she murmured.

“Sure. Sure, you are,” Bridget said. “Lie still so I can check you out.” She began to cut away at Jess’s skin suit.

“Medic. Stretcher. Move, *please*,” one of the paramedics shouted.

Jess attempted to roll onto her side and straighten her leg. It would be easier if she could lift her arm. *Damn, it hurts.*

“Lie still,” Bridget repeated. “Jess, it’s okay. We’ve got you.”

Jess grimaced when she glimpsed her twisted leg through the tattered remains of the red, blue, and white racing shorts. It finally dawned upon her that she was in trouble.

She saw the dream of a win fade as blood from a large gash near her knee covered her leg and spread on the asphalt beneath her, and her vision blurred.

Chapter 1

London, England.

“TEN MORE MINUTES, AND WE’RE done,” said Cassie Jones, the rehab centre’s lead physiotherapist.

As far as Jess was concerned, she was done half an hour ago. Ten minutes was an eternity. The once simple, painless act of pumping her legs on the stationary bicycle now felt like hours of climbing the steepest course in the Alps.

Finally, Cassie moved beside her to indicate the session was over, and she slowed to a stop. Jess pushed her sodden hair from her eyes and wiped her forehead with the back of her sleeve. She glanced down at the hand that rested on her thigh, avoiding eye contact with Cassie. “You are right. I am so done.” Jess sighed. It had been another gruelling afternoon session of physical therapy, stretching, and exercise.

Cassie moved even closer and dragged her hand from Jess’s thigh down to the hem of her shorts. She traced the thin, raised line across her bare knee and gave her a slow smile. “You’re doing way better than we expected. It won’t be long before you’re back out there, collecting another bunch of medals.”

“Sure.” Jess slid off the exercise machine and walked haltingly across the room. She reached for the towel and mopped at her face and neck. As the nagging pull of self-doubt and worry gnawed at her stomach, Jess doubled over, leaning heavily on the balance bar. How long would it be before she was back to her old self? Before she got back to racing, got back her rhythm, and regained her full strength? What if she didn’t?

Jess pushed herself upright and pulled the towel over her head. She wasn’t ready to face the possibility of never being able to race again.

“Hey, are you okay?” Cassie snaked her arm around Jess’s shoulder. “You’ll feel better after you’ve had a shower. Then, since you are my last client today, you could join me down at the Rose and Crown for a drink or two. How about it, Jess? You deserve it.”

A protein smoothie in front of the television had seemed like a good option, but it was Friday night, and Cassie was high-spirited and a lot of fun away from the rehab clinic. She glanced up into the woman’s eager hazel eyes.

Jess shook her head and stepped back, out of Cassie’s embrace. “Hmm... sorry. I really am done. You’ve worn me out.”

“Oh. That’s my fault.” Cassie frowned. “Serves me right, then. Maybe some other time?”

“Maybe,” Jess said. “Tonight’s not a good night for me anyway. My sponsors arranged an appearance at South Ham Ladies’ College tomorrow, and I haven’t yet prepared my presentation.”

“No problem, Jess. That is perfectly understandable. Another time. Good luck with your preparations.” She smiled and backed away. “You do like to cut things fine.”

Jess collected her gear and dragged herself to the locker room. *What is wrong with me?* It was Friday night, and she had just turned down a date. Her social life was in the doldrums, and she couldn’t seem to pull herself out of this negative space. She sighed. This wouldn’t have happened a few months ago.

But the truth was Jess knew that after a couple of drinks, she’d end up blubbering on Cassie’s shoulder, recounting the devastating news about Ben’s recent death. She didn’t need that. Anyway, it wouldn’t be a good idea to start something with her physiotherapist.

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Jess hated public speaking, but being here wasn’t just about maintaining a favourable image or giving supporters a return for their investment. It was about giving back. She put down her notes and lowered her gaze to the auditorium across the sea of young faces.

Today, she was addressing three hundred teenage girls about herself and her career. *Well, what’s left of it.* Jess’s passion and commitment to the sport

was her driving force, encouraging women to get active and make cycling part of their lives.

Nearing the end of her presentation, Jess drew a bolstering breath. “I’m taking a break in my pro cycling career because of the injuries I sustained in the Netherlands.” She didn’t have to recount the details of the crash or the extent of her injuries—that would be pointless and unnecessarily distressing for her audience. She clutched the podium tightly and forced herself to focus on the students.

She tried to ignore the restless movements of some of the girls who clearly had more important things on their minds. Jess couldn’t expect everyone to be engrossed in her talk. Overall, though, they were curious about her life as an elite cyclist. She answered their questions and incorporated a short account of the list of races she had won—her Palmarès—and about some of the famous, colourful characters she’d met on the international circuit.

“Enough about me,” Jess said. “I’m here today to tell you about a nationwide scheme. Un-Chained is an organisation that encourages girls and women of all fitness levels to participate in the joy of cycling.” When Jess glanced around the room, she noticed the intense look from a young student in the front row. She sat bolt upright in the chair and her lips set in a straight line. *Too thin*, Jess thought. Did she suffer from lack of self-esteem and anxiety as Jess had at her age?

“Cycling is an incredible sport,” Jess continued. “You can do it on your own—you can do it with a group of friends. It’s great for fitness. It gives you the physical preparation, emotional strength, and mental toughness through life to deal with the unexpected. Do it just for fun or take it further. Competitive cycling can take you all around the world. Participating in one of Un-Chained’s activities is an opportunity to make new friends, experience an amazing sense of freedom, and build your self-confidence.” Jess pointed to the table by the main entrance of the auditorium. “Please, help yourself to the information packs outlining our programmes. Registration forms are inside.”

“You have all been wonderfully attentive.” Jess smiled. “Thank you so much for inviting me to your school today. Good luck. You never know—I may see some of you on the circuit one day. You’ll have to catch me if you can.” Jess gave a slight bow at the waist to a hall full of giggling girls.

She collected her notes as the students rose to their feet and showed their appreciation with polite applause. They filed out of the hall, and Jess noticed the girl who'd earlier drawn her attention pick up one of the information packs and tuck it under her arm.

Jess glanced down at her watch. "Okay, I did it," she told herself. Even if she'd managed to reach only one person today, it was worth the effort. The appearance had gone better than she'd hoped, and Doctor Waters would be pleased. Her rehabilitation psychologist encouraged Jess to stay connected with the cycling community and continue her volunteer work while she recuperated. Today was another step in the right direction.

Heels clicked authoritatively on the wooden stage. The dean was fast approaching with her hand outstretched. Dressed in a smart navy business suit, with her platinum hair pulled into a daring topknot bun, her every move spoke of strength and assuredness.

"Thank you, Ms Harris. It was a real pleasure. The girls will benefit greatly from your knowledge and experience." Her eyes danced with interest as she glanced over Jess from head to toe. "And humour."

"It's been *my* pleasure, Dean Holcombe."

"Please call me Kathryn."

"Thank you, Kathryn," Jess replied. Uncomfortable under the dean's scrutinising gaze, Jess shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She'd dressed in a classic white button-down shirt and tailored black linen suit to present as professional and capable, but as Jess stood in front of the dean, she was back at school and fourteen years old again.

"If you're free later this evening, would you care to join me for dinner?" Kathryn asked. Her imposing voice pulled Jess from her thoughts. Had the dean truly invited her out for dinner?

Jess cleared her throat. "I'm sorry. That would have been lovely, but I have an engagement this evening."

Kathryn smoothed her skirt with one hand. She didn't quite manage to hide her disappointment. "Never mind. Perhaps another time. It's been a pleasure to finally meet you."

"Thank you for the invitation, and for the opportunity to address your students. I hope I've sparked their interest in cycling."

Kathryn arched an eyebrow. "I'm sure you've sparked their interest," she said.

Jess reached behind the podium to collect her trench coat and briefcase as she surreptitiously looked towards the nearest exit. She'd raced at the elite level for over six years, and despite her manager's official announcement about the respite in her professional career, reporters still followed her about, hoping for a snapshot that showed her in some vulnerable or compromising position.

As Jess made her way to the door, she looked back at Kathryn, who was still watching her. Jess nodded and smiled once again before she left the building. If she hadn't made plans for an early supper with Jonathan, maybe she would have accepted the dean's invitation.

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Thankfully, the spacious ground-floor bar was still relatively empty, and Jess easily located Jonathan seated at a table for two at the back of the room.

When he noticed Jess, Jonathan stood up and moved towards her. "Here you are at last."

She smiled, comforted to see his welcoming face. "I am sorry I'm late." She unbuckled her trench coat, slipped it off her shoulders, and threw it over the back of the chair that he pulled out for her. "You look so different without your beard." Jess leaned forward and ran her fingers along his angular jaw line. "What made you finally shave it off? You've had it for years."

Jonathan rubbed his chin. "Maxine. She gave me an ultimatum. Either I cover the beard when I'm near Rupert or shave it off. It was giving him a rash."

"Well, it suits you. You look handsome. Who'd have thought becoming a father would shave a few years off you?"

"Thank you." With a low chuckle, Jonathan drew Jess into his arms, and she held on tightly, enjoying the strength of her friend's embrace. "How are you?"

Jess released him. "I feel so lost," she said, and settled into the chair. "I still can't get my head around what's happened. I can't believe Ben's gone." She stared down at her hands to avoid the look of sympathy she saw crossing Jonathan's face. "God, I literally have no family left now."

"You have us, Jess. Me and Maxine," he said.

Jess looked up and held his gaze.

“Wine?” Jonathan didn’t wait for her response. He poured it into a glass and placed it in front of her.

“Just what I need.” Jess gulped a generous mouthful. Anything to relax the jittery, sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“Do you mind if we stay down here and have something light?” He glanced around the casual dining space. “I did snag us a table in the restaurant upstairs for later, just in case you preferred a more substantial meal.” He raised his eyebrows. “On second thought, what was I thinking?”

Jess shook her head. “It’s been quite a long day, and I’m tired.” She swept her hair to one side and massaged the base of her neck. “Here would suit me fine.”

They’d agreed to meet for supper at The Wells, in Hampstead, near Jess’s apartment that bordered the rugged heath with its acres of woodland as well as cycling and running tracks. But by far, the best feature of the hilltop flat was the outstanding views over London—on a clear day.

“Good. I could use an early night myself.” He stifled a yawn and excused himself for it. “Maxine was exhausted last night. I was on pick-up-and-deliver-Rupert-for-feeding duty.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I almost forgot about your lecture this afternoon with the young *ladies* at South Hampstead. How did it go?”

She peered over the top of the menu and cleared her throat.

“I tried to answer the questions as honestly as I could without giving too many details about the crash.” Jess sighed. “I *hate* public speaking.”

“Even though you naturally command attention.” Jonathan sat back in his chair and gave her a long, appreciative gaze. “Even Maxine has remarked on it.”

Jess glanced at the menu again before tossing it aside. “Actually, the dean asked me out to dinner tonight.”

“And, yet, here you are with me, a boring old man with nothing to entertain you with except baby pictures.” He smirked.

She made as if to smack him from across the table. “You *browbeat* me into this meeting.” But she couldn’t keep up the pretend scowl for long. “Jonathan, you can show me all the pictures of Rupert you want.”

“Are you trying to avoid dealing with Ben’s estate?” he asked. “I know it’s a difficult time, but we have to talk about it. You can’t put it off any longer.”

She shut her eyes and rubbed her forehead with closed knuckles.

“There is no way around it. You do realise going to Australia to meet with your brother’s executor and the lawyers is the sensible option. How long has it been since you were there?”

“I was eleven when I left. Haven’t ever been back, apart from a brief stopover in Sydney a few years ago on my way to the New Zealand championships.”

“It will be a shock, going back after all this time.”

With a long, slow draught from her glass, she swallowed past the knot of emotion lodged in her throat. “What choice do I have?”

“You will fly in to Melbourne,” he said. “The legal firm will have a driver pick you up at the airport, and they’ll arrange a hotel in the city for the night. The appointment with Ben’s solicitor can be the following afternoon. That gives you a chance to recover from the long flight.”

He’s right. It is manageable. There’s no excuse for not going.

“Do you have any friends in Melbourne?” He glanced up at her, then reached into his leather satchel and removed the papers he had brought with him. He searched through them. “How far away is the restaurant? Ah, what’s it called again?”

“It’s named Ailie.” Jess raised her eyebrows. “I looked it up. It means *light of the sun*. The restaurant is on the Bellarine Peninsula, seventy minutes’ drive from the city, so not exactly close. I’ve kept in contact with a few cyclists on the international circuit, and some of them may be in Melbourne, but I doubt I will have time to connect with anyone.”

“So, you will go.” Jonathan refilled her glass. “Do you have someone to look after your apartment? Do you need me to keep an eye on anything?”

“My next-door neighbour”—Jess tapped his hand gently—“but thanks for asking.”

He leaned across the table and squeezed her forearm in a comforting gesture. “Have you heard anything about Ben’s memorial service?”

Jess looked at him in the eye. “Do you think it was wrong of me to not go?” she asked quietly.

“No, sweetheart. Well, you were out of hospital, so perhaps you could have gone. It was the shock, I think. You weren’t ready. It would have been too much on your own.”

“I just couldn’t go to the memorial service.” Jess exhaled deeply. “But I will go now. You are right. He was my brother, and I owe him that much.” She spoke carefully to conceal the depth of her sorrow.

“This business of his investment in the restaurant is unclear. The paperwork you sent me sheds no light on their arrangement, and his will was never updated when the restaurant was registered four years ago. I dare say you will find out more when you get there. Considering your estranged relationship with him, it is odd that you’re the only beneficiary. Do you know anything about Lillian McAllister, the owner of the restaurant?”

“She’s a chef. I need to do some more research before I go.”

“Okay. Maybe Lillian was also his girlfriend?”

“No, she wasn’t. At the time of the accident, Ben was travelling with his girlfriend.” Jess lowered her gaze. “She was the other victim when the jet ski flipped.”

“Oh. That’s horrible, Jess,” he said. “I suppose it could take a while to get everything sorted. Prepare yourself for a longer stay, if necessary.”

“If I must.” She sighed. “Apart from my volunteer work...I haven’t decided what’s next.”

“Early days yet. What’s the latest from the specialist about your long-term prognosis?”

“We’re hopeful. Depending on how long I’m in Australia, I’ll find a gym so I can keep up my strength training and continue with my rehab programme. Whether I get back to elite level—or not—is up to me. It might have been my second-last year on the circuit anyway. The accident may have just brought it forward.” The weight of declaring that to another person sat heavily on her chest.

“Seriously?” Jonathan shook his head. “But you’re only twenty-nine.”

“The average age of the competitive cyclist is creeping down. I could continue for a few more years, but given the limited amount of time you can push your body in this sport, not much longer, certainly not at that level. It’s just not sustainable.”

“But Jess, cycling has been your life—your passion.”

“Yes,” she whispered. Adjusting to the world outside competitive cycling would be incomprehensible, to put it mildly. “I would miss the buzz. I already miss my teammates.” She tapped her fingers on the table. “But after my time in rehab, I’ve had some thoughts about putting my degree to use.” She looked up to gauge Jonathan’s reaction.

“Are you thinking of *working* as a physiotherapist?”

“Maybe.”

“Do you even have experience doing that? I mean—other than the occasional volunteering at the children’s physio clinic?”

“I’ve only had limited experience,” she admitted.

“I know you love volunteering at that place, but—” Jonathan looked up. “Jess, your real love is racing. How are you going to cope with this forced hiatus?”

She shrugged. “I don’t have a choice. I could rush back in and chance an early return, but I face a higher risk of permanent damage and *never* being able to race.” Jess placed a hand over her glass as Jonathan attempted to refill it with wine. “Thanks, but two glasses is my limit these days.”

“All right, all right. I’m sorry I went on about it.” He tucked into his hearty meal of burger, chips, and mound of coleslaw. Pointing his fork at her plate of salad, he said, “You need to eat more. No wonder you’re built like a reed. A baby bird could out-eat you.”

“Hah,” she said. “Just for that...” Jess leaned across the table and stole one of Jonathan’s chips.

He pushed a few more of the fried potatoes to the edge of his plate, within her reach. “Seriously, take all you want. Between sitting all day at work and watching over Rupert at night, I certainly don’t need the extra calories.” He paused. “By the way, Ashley sent me a copy of your contract. It says they’ve agreed to put it on hold, but when you return from Australia, team management expects you to keep in the public eye as an athletic goodwill ambassador to keep your sponsors happy. You’ll do volunteer work like the physiotherapy clinic, only a lot more of it.”

It could be worse, she thought. Better than rushing back into racing before she was ready. “What about my company endorsements? I don’t want the funds I’m raising for all those charities to dry up.”

“Ashley is negotiating the individual endorsements,” he said. “We’ll see. But if your contract with the team is suspended, unfortunately that

salary—no matter how meagre—stops. It's a good thing you don't rely on it to live, Jess."

"Well, thanks to you and my inheritance money you look after." She smiled. "I'm fortunate to have you as my accountant."

"Thank you. And as your accountant, I'll need copies of any additional paperwork once you see Ben's lawyers in Melbourne."

"Yes," she said. "I'll e-mail you anything new."

He tapped at one of the papers in his hands. "What about this Lillian McAllister?" he asked. "I didn't get a chance to look her up. Do you think you need to worry about her? What *was* the nature of her and Ben's relationship?"

"I don't know. Jonathan, you are asking a lot of questions." She stretched her neck to ease her tight muscles. "Obviously close enough friends for him to have loaned money for her business. I guess she will have to pay it out." She tilted her head at him, then sighed. "Unless I decide to go into the restaurant business."

He almost choked on his last piece of potato. "Really, Jess? Think about it: you and food—not exactly a match made in heaven. You hardly ever cook, or even eat anything. I've seen the inside of your refrigerator. As your accountant and your friend, I strongly advise you not to call me in a month and tell me you've become a restaurant owner. Get it settled as soon as possible."

He was absolutely spot on. She knew a little about sports nutrition, but naught about the restaurant business.

No. For now, she had to take one thing at a time. One day at a time.

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Jess checked the time and shifted around in the oversized leather armchair. "I get tired of the press asking me how I'm progressing and not knowing the answer. The specialist hasn't given me a set date when I can return to racing." Jess leaned forward and scrubbed at her forehead. "There are good and bad days. Sometimes I feel useless. I lie awake at night and can barely crawl out of bed in the morning. But on the days I ride, I feel better."

Doctor Waters tapped the pen on the side of her notepad, crossed her legs, and pulled her skirt over her knees. "Will you have access to a bicycle in Australia?"

“I am going to buy one. There’s no way I’d feel comfortable on a borrowed bicycle,” she said. “A girl can never have too many of them, and I’ve learned that I get pleasure and joy from cycling, just for the sake of it.”

Doctor Waters looked at Jess over her black-framed glasses. “I’m pleased for you. You’ve made great strides.”

“Thanks to you, I’ve accepted that moving on is a work in progress, not a quick fix.” With Doctor Waters’ help, Jess had avoided sinking into severe depression. She had resisted seeing her at first, because her physical rehab regime was so intense, but confusion and despair led Jess to make the first appointment. She found Doctor Waters to be non-judgemental and positive in her practice, and she was helping Jess manage her anxiety while her body mended. This was her only way forward, because Jess never wanted to revisit the dark times when, for a short time as a desperate twelve-year-old, she’d succumbed to self-harm. She clutched her right thigh automatically, then quickly smoothed her hands over her sweater to hide her action from the therapist.

Jess stared out the fourth-floor London office window to avoid meeting the doctor’s perceptive gaze.

“You are a strong and resilient woman, Jess,” Doctor Waters said. “No longer the twelve-year-old you remember.” After a brief pause, she continued with, “Autumn has come early to London, and the plane trees in Kensington Park are beginning to turn golden brown. The view is one of the main reasons I have this office.”

“Strange to think it is spring in the southern hemisphere,” Jess said.

The psychologist smiled. “You’re going *home* to Australia.”

Jess turned to her. *Home*—what did that mean? Everything was silent, save the tick-tock of a large antique clock on the sturdy wooden mantle. Jess crossed her arms tightly in front of her chest.

“You’ve made huge positive changes in the last few months.” Doctor Waters walked with Jess and pulled the door open. “I will see you when you return.” She briefly squeezed Jess’s shoulder, smiled, and retreated into her office.

Jess thought about the doctor’s choice of words, calling Australia home. Without her mother or her brother there, how could it be home? Wasn’t home family? But home was also a sense of place—perhaps Doctor Waters was right.

Chapter 2

Bellarine Peninsula, Southern Victoria, Australia.

USUALLY, HER MORNING RUN HELPED lighten her thoughts, but today Lili McAllister's legs were heavy under the weight of her worries.

Her heart beat strong and steady beneath her hand. The five-kilometre run to the foreshore, with its gradual incline up and over the sand dunes, had worked her calf and thigh muscles hard, and it was still another ten minutes to Portarlington, where she'd told herself she would turn back. So much for this run helping her get her act together.

Stop wallowing in your own grief, she told herself as she watched the sun rising above the treeline to the east. Its warm rays were like fingers caressing her skin. *Time to focus on your own family, Lillian McAllister. And your staff.*

Lili had done a Google search of Jessica Harris after she'd received information from Ben's lawyer, and her name alone had given Lili countless web links to troll—though most of the hits seemed to be speculation and idle gossip. Still, Ben's sister was clearly a celebrity, and an alluring one: half-British and half-Indian, with sultry dark eyes and a graceful, athletic figure that had placed her in *Sports Magazine's* list of most beautiful sportswomen. She featured heavily in online and print media social pages too.

Obviously, a prima donna. She had the potential to make Lili's life difficult. Just thinking about her soon-to-be houseguest made her queasy.

She took a deep breath, turned back onto the gravel path that wound through the reserve, and jogged towards the small coastal township. She'd grab a quick coffee and check her mailbox at the local post office before she ran the track home.

An hour later, after her shower, Lili drove the outer farm road to Ailie. She stopped the Subaru on top of the rise and rolled down the window to scan the undulating verdant farmland across to her restaurant—where it stood with its solid red-brick base and high glass windows that reflected the surrounding gardens and tall gum trees. She looked past Ailie to the valley of grapevines, down to the shimmering blue of Port Phillip Bay and the You Yang hills in the distance. Lili sighed deeply. They'd worked so hard to create Ailie, and now it defined her. This was *hers*. She was suddenly overcome by fierce protectiveness.

She entered through the main door and spied her staff clustered around the bar counter. She ducked into her office, threw her keys and wallet into her desk drawer, and headed into the dining room.

“Hi, everyone,” Lili greeted. She manoeuvred through the group and stopped beside Alex, who wrapped her arms around her and gave her a quick hug.

“Here we go. The first staff meeting for the spring season. Are you ready for this?” asked Alex.

“Ready as I'll ever be.” Lili shrugged and turned to the small group. “Please, take a seat.” She waited while most of her team settled into their chairs, while a few chose to stand and lean against the bar.

“I'm right here.” Alex squeezed her forearm, and Lili appreciated the reassuring gesture from her sous-chef.

Lili raised her hand, and the chatter around her ceased. “Thank you.” She squinted in surprise at the sight of her father, standing with his arms crossed in front of his chest, at the back of the room. She acknowledged him with raised eyebrows before continuing to address her staff. “It's great to see you all.” Lili buried her hands deep into the pockets of her trousers. “We were on annual leave when we received the news about Ben, and I appreciated all the phone calls and e-mails I got from you reaching out. Thanks to those who were able to make it to the memorial service.”

Owen reached into his pocket, pulled out a handkerchief, and dabbed his eyes. The front-of-house manager had been recruited by Ben, and they'd shared a weird passion for early Hitchcock movies.

Lili offered him a sad smile and took a deep breath. “Ben was my mentor, and he helped me build this business. Ailie has a lot to live up

to.” She looked towards the Trip Advisor Certificate of Excellence and the *Gourmet Traveller* award that graced the restaurant wall above the bar.

Alex stepped closer and placed her arm around Lili’s shoulders.

“We have a great team, and I’m very proud of all of you.” She leaned into Alex, taking comfort. “Let’s make Ben proud.”

Josh, their second-year apprentice chef, held his glass of water aloft. “To Ben.”

“To Ben,” the others repeated, and waited silently for Lili to continue.

“You’ve seen the new rosters. Please let Alex know if there are any problems.” Lili smiled and turned to Owen. “Now comes the fun part. I’ll hand you over to Owen, who will take us through the main reason we are all here, to brush up on the latest hygiene and safety handling procedures.”

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Later that afternoon, after the staff left, Lili made her way to the garden where she took a seat on the shaded terrace. She turned at the sound of footsteps to accept a steaming cup of chai tea Alex handed to her. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” Alex said. “I heard from Haley this morning. She promised she’d be back by the time we opened.”

“That’s good news, but it’s disappointing she won’t be here for the staff party.”

“Did you know she broke up with Grace? According to Haley, they had a huge disagreement on the first day of their cycling trip in South Australia.”

Lili rolled her eyes. “So, she’s single again.”

“I don’t imagine that will last long.” Alex smirked. “You know Haley: she’s young, and in the end her number-one priority in a relationship is to have fun. I honestly don’t think she gets serious about any of her girlfriends. Anyway, how do you think the meeting went?” She sat down beside Lili on the garden bench. “You were great.”

“Yeah, thanks. No point worrying everyone.” Lili pushed her hand through her newly cropped hair. She was still getting used to the short, layered haircut. She’d needed a change, and her hairdresser convinced her the new look would be a confidence booster. As a chef, wash and wear was unquestionably a sensible choice.

Alex blew the heat from the top of her cup, releasing the spicy aromas of star anise, cinnamon, and ginger into the air. “Hmm...this is an excellent blend. It goes well with the new organic honey you brought in.”

“It does. It’s beautifully silky and toffee flavoured.” Lili sipped the soothing tea, glad of the change of subject. “I have an idea for a bush honey panna cotta accompanied with star anise-infused fruit or berries. It came from Mei’s mum, Huan. She told me she’s been making a Chinese egg-custard tart flavoured with star anise. I thought the aniseed flavour would add a delicate layer to the dessert.”

“I’m all for it. Sounds amazing,” Alex said. “It’s a bugger about the money you owed Ben. I guess you owe it to his sister now.”

“The agreement was made between friends. Ben was so generous and never put a time limit on repaying him. He believed the restaurant would be a success and he’d eventually get his money back.”

“He had great faith in you.”

Lili sighed. “There’s no way I can pay it in a lump sum.”

“Have you spoken to the bank?”

“Not yet.” Lili put down her empty cup and angled herself over the raised garden bed to thin out the weeds that threatened to suffocate the horseradish plants’ young, crinkled leaves. “I have a big enough mortgage already.”

“Let’s hope you can come to an agreement with Ben’s sister. You’ve worked so hard, and things are on the up.” Alex knelt beside Lili, picked up a short-handled cultivator hoe, and broke clumps of rich, dark soil with steady movements. “I’m sorry I can’t help. I would if I could. We are still so tied down with Tash’s student loans, and we’d like to buy a house in the next few years.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I would never expect you to lend me the money.” Lili nudged Alex in the ribs. “But thanks.”

Alex put down the hand tool. “How are you doing?”

“I’m okay.”

“I mean it, Lili. How are you doing, really?”

“There’s a huge gap in all our lives that nothing will replace.” Lili rolled her shoulders as if to shrug off her sorrow. “Even though lately he spent less time here and more time travelling, it’s hard to imagine *never* seeing him again. Ben was a part of our lives.”

“I miss him too,” Alex said. “Damn it, I miss that cheeky grin and his offbeat humour.” She wrapped her arms around Lili tightly and then released her. “Is Ru still asking a lot of questions?”

“Not so much. The service helped, though. Sometimes, she picks up the memorial card and stares at his picture. But I don’t know if she understands the finality...of death.” The informal gathering on the beach had been simple yet significant, and had given Lili, her daughter, and Ben’s friends a tangible way to express their grief.

“Will you tell her about Ben’s sister—that she has an aunt?”

“She’s only four years old. I guess with me being an only child, she’s never known a *real* aunt or uncle,” Lili said. “If Jessica Harris is only here for a short time—if she just breezes in and out of Ru’s life—Ru won’t understand. I’ve decided to wait until I’ve met Jessica, and then I’ll figure out how to tell her. There’s been so much to deal with, so much to do.”

Lili took a deep breath and was energised by the earthiness and the hint of salt in the air. She dusted soil from her hands. She never tired of being in the edible oasis that Ben and her mother had helped her establish. “I have a few more things to take care of in the office before I go. Why don’t you head home now?”

Alex nodded. “I’ll go soon. When do you expect *her* to arrive?”

Lili shrugged her shoulders. “I got a call from Ben’s lawyer. She should get here either today or tomorrow.”

“Are you okay with her staying at your place?”

“I don’t think I have a choice. Mum and Dad don’t have the space at the cottage.” Lili tossed the bunch of weeds to the side. “Mum’s a darling. She’s already prepared the guest room. Anyhow, this way I can keep an eye on her.”

“Do you think that’s necessary?” Alex grabbed her jacket from the back of the bench. “You’ll be sharing the house until who knows when with someone you don’t know.”

“It will be fine,” Lili said, trying to convince herself more than Alex. “I just hope she doesn’t stay long. The lawyer thought she’d want to take care of things quickly and return to London in a week or two.”

Alex fished into her pockets, searching for her car keys. “So, how much do you know about her?”

“Not much. Although I did Google her.”

Alex raised an eyebrow. “And?” She glanced down at her watch. “Oh damn, I have to rush home. Ring me later.” She headed for the gate. “Tash has to attend some function at the hospital, and I’m going to be late—once again.” She blew Lili a kiss. “Good luck!” she called as she disappeared through the courtyard gate.

“Thanks, bye.” Lili waved, picked up the hand trowel, and dug it into the ground with force. “I need it.”

Ben’s sister had made the front-page news before and after her accident. Maybe the tabloids had painted a distorted view about the cyclist in describing her grand lifestyle. But what if some of it was true? Lili leaned forward to yank a bunch of nettle weed from the pebbled path.

“Ben,” she said to the sky, “I have a feeling your sister is going to be as much of a challenge for me as she was for you.”

Chapter 3

“WHAT THE HELL?” JESS’S SMALL yellow rental car jerked to a squelchy stop on the muddy road. “Well, this is just bloody marvellous.”

She turned her head and looked back to where she’d come from. The incline gave her a panoramic view of the ocean and the rolling hills in the distance. But she sure as hell wasn’t going anywhere.

She’d followed the GPS directions, hadn’t she? Jess was one hundred per cent sure that the instructions were to turn left. There’d been no sign on the roadside, so she’d relied on the car’s fancy electronic device. That was a mistake: the gravel road had turned into a dirt track. She never had much luck with the bloody things.

The rental, a Mini Cooper convertible, was a lot of fun to drive. The car yard had even delivered on their promise to make available an ingenious rear-mounted bike carrier, on which she had secured her newly purchased carbon bike. With the top down, the wind in her hair, and the warmth of the sun on her skin, it had been all systems go.

Until this happened. Jess pushed open the door and stepped outside the car. Her right foot sank into thick sludge. *All systems stop.*

Jess groaned and kicked what was visible of the front wheel. She should have opted for a four-wheel drive. Looking down at her shoes, she was thankful that her black leather boots were only partially immersed in the sticky brown goo. She scanned the paddocks around her. There was not a human to be seen, just a few cows grazing in a distant field.

She crouched low, checked the half-submerged black rubber tyre, and thumped the side of the car with her fist. Her boot slipped as she lost her balance. Using the exterior mirror, she worked herself into an upright position, only to have her boot slip out from beneath her again. She fell back

against the side of the car. Her once-pristine white knee-length Bermuda shorts were streaked with brown clay.

“*Fuck,*” she yelled, kicking the tyre. “Honestly.” She kicked harder. “*Ouch!*”

“Darling, I really don’t think that’s going to solve your problem,” a voice called out.

Jess snapped her head up and turned. She hadn’t heard anyone approach.

The new arrival scratched his ginger hair, dismounted his horse, and stood a few feet away from her. A medium-sized black-and-white dog ran between them, stopped beside the man, and sat at attention.

“Good girl, Rhona. Stay.” He tipped his hat to Jess and placed it back on his head. “G’day.” The large hat shielded his eyes from the sun, partially hiding them.

Jess shaded her face with her hand and tilted her head to see under the wide brim. “Hello.” She wiped her muddy hands on her ruined shorts.

“Got yourself in a bit of a mess, eh?” He slowly circled the car, a bemused expression on his face. “You are bogged.” The dog followed close behind him.

Jess looked on in surprise. Well, that was stating the obvious.

The rugged giant hunched over to inspect the tyre. “Oh, she’s stuck, all right.” He stood up to his full height and laughed. “Not to worry, love. We’ll be able to get her out for you.” He pointed to her bicycle on the back of the car. “Nice wheels.”

“Thank you. That’s really kind of you.” Jess reached into the car for her map. Rhona barked, approached her, and nuzzled her hand.

“Rhona, come,” he called, and the dog immediately returned to his side.

“I’m lost,” she said. “If you could just point me in the right direction?” She felt a gentle nudge at her back. Now what?

The horse nudged Jess’s shoulder and whickered softly. She couldn’t help but reach out and stroke its beautiful grey coat.

Her rescuer chuckled as the horse pushed into her shoulder again. He grabbed the reins. “Leave the lady alone, Dora.”

Jess pulled her mobile phone out of her pocket. “I do have an address,” she said. “I’m looking for Faodail.” She pronounced the property’s name phonetically and glanced at the farmer.

He smiled. "Scott McAllister at your service. You have arrived at your destination, Faodail Farm."

Jess met his gaze. "I have?"

"You are Jessica Harris, Ben's sister?"

"Yes, I am."

The mare nuzzled her hip. Jess frowned. "Did you say *Scott McAllister*? Are you related to Lillian McAllister?"

"That's right, love. I am her father, Scott. And these two scruffy creatures are Dora and Rhona. This is Faodail Farm," he repeated, and gestured widely across the rolling paddocks.

She detected pride in his voice, edged with a touch of sadness.

Scott turned back to Jess. "I'm so sorry about your brother. Ben was a good man. We all miss him a lot." He touched his hand to the rim of his hat in what appeared to be a sign of respect. "You look like him," he said. "Mind you, he didn't have your proper British accent."

She cast her eyes to the ground. The painful knowledge that this farmer, a stranger, knew her brother better than she did, cut through her like a knife.

Jess must have appeared uncomfortable, because when she looked up, Scott had turned his attention to the car.

"It's unlikely that anyone will come by, but just in case, I'd lock up. I'll get you to the house first and come back for the car." He pointed to her bicycle. "I guess we'd better take that fancy bike of yours."

She couldn't see any sign of a farmhouse. "Is it far?" She passed him the map. "Can you show me here where I went wrong? I shouldn't have relied on the GPS."

He chuckled. "Useless things. Ah, I see what you've done. You've come off the main road and onto the old stock road. It's a common mistake." He pointed on the map. "We are here. Our cottage is near the main entrance, off McAllister Lane, the road you should have taken. You'll be staying here." He indicated to a spot further up the lane.

"Won't I be staying at the farm?"

"Yes, you will. My wife Helen and I live in the cottage. Helen thought you'd be more comfortable staying at the hilltop with Lili."

"The hilltop? That's very kind, but I don't want to cause her any trouble," she said.

“No trouble. Lili’s place is modern and spread out. There’s loads of room for a visitor, with great views over the bay. Helen’s set up the guest wing for you. We thought you would appreciate a bit of privacy.”

“What about Ben’s house? Can I stay there?”

“Ahh...” He looked sheepish. “Your brother loved to do three things. One was to cook, which he was bloody good at—excuse the language.” He squinted in the bright sunlight and adjusted his hat. “Two, he loved to travel, and he did every chance he could. And three, he was a keen surfer. Ben shared the house with a mate near 13th Beach, about a half hour’s drive away. It’s not really a place you’d want to stay, though.” He raised his eyebrows. “There’s not much room.”

“Oh, okay.” Lillian’s house did seem the better option. If it got awkward, she would take herself to a hotel.

“I think I’d better get you to Lili’s. She won’t be back for a bit, but Helen should be there.” He peered at her boots. “You can have a shower, change out of those clothes.”

Jess glanced at the disabled car. She didn’t like to leave it there in the mud.

“Don’t worry, it will be fine. I’ll come back with some help and bring the car to you.”

“Thank you. If you set me in the right direction, I’ll walk the bicycle—”

Scott laughed and slapped at his knees, while Rhona barked excitedly and ran around in circles.

“What did I say?”

He gently seized hold of Dora’s shiny mane and held her steady. “The house is a half-kilometre trek across the paddock.” He pointed to Jess’s shoes. “We don’t want you falling down a rabbit hole or into a pile of cow dung, do we? Are you accustomed to horses?”

“What are you suggesting?” She pushed the sunglasses onto her head to hold back her windswept hair. It had been a long time since she’d been on a horse, but Dora looked like a Clydesdale—thankfully sturdy, and hopefully a reasonably comfortable mount. “I have ridden, years ago.”

“Okay, then. I’ll adjust the stirrups for you,” he said. “Do you need a hand up? Dora’s slightly taller than an average horse.”

“No, I’ll be fine, thank you. What about my bicycle?”

“No problem. I’ll walk it to the house.” He loosened the fastenings on the back of the car and lifted the carbon bicycle high into the air with one hand. “It’s as light as a feather.”

She stepped towards the horse, put her foot in the stirrup, and hoisted herself onto Dora’s back. The mare shifted under her, and Jess repositioned herself in the saddle. She gritted her teeth, careful to hide her discomfort. Dora was at least sixteen hands tall, maybe more, and rather wide to sit astride comfortably.

As if in sympathy, Dora lifted her head and neighed gently.

“Steady, girl,” Scott said.

“Yes, steady girl,” Jess murmured. She never imagined she would arrive at the farm on the back of a draught horse.

Dora trotted along, and Jess began to enjoy the gentle rhythmic sway from her elevated perch. Scott walked beside her with the bicycle resting easily on his shoulder. Rhona trotted ahead, leading the way. Jess was content to listen to Scott chatter about Faodail Farm and his family.

“Ru’s going to wonder whose flash bicycle this is. She’s been pestering her mother for a bike since her last birthday,” he said cheerily. “If she doesn’t try to get onto it herself—she’s only four, you know—we’ll be right. Although Ru is plucky...she may try.”

Did she miss something? Who was *Ru*? Jess looked down at Scott, who spoke so fast his accent made the ends of his words sometimes indistinguishable. It had been a long time since she’d been back to Australia. She’d have to pay better attention.

It was a good thing there wasn’t another soul in sight. Jess imagined she looked ridiculous, sitting perched on top of this large creature, wearing filthy Bermuda shorts and ankle boots, being transported across the paddock. They passed under the welcoming wrought iron Faodail sign and through the gate, and followed a red dirt road flanked by a white post and rail fence. An English-styled garden bordered a picturesque timber home painted green, with a wide front veranda.

“That’s our cottage,” Scott said.

They continued along the road that curved around a stand of tall eucalyptus trees and then climbed gradually upwards before levelling at the top of the rise.

“That’s where you’ll be staying.” He pointed to the crescent-shaped, single-storey timber house that seemed to float on the hilltop.

“It’s very modern,” Jess said, surprised.

“Lili helped with the design,” he said in a proud manner. They stopped near a slate-tiled carport at the bottom of a flight of stairs that led up to the house. He held on to Dora, and Jess dismounted carefully but misjudged the distance and winced as her leg took her full weight.

“Are you okay, Jessica?”

“Yes, thank you.” She stretched her back. “It’s been a while.”

“Since you’ve been on a draught horse?”

“Since I was on a horse of any kind.” She stroked the gentle mare and gazed up at the black timber-clad house. “It’s quite unique...and the views must be lovely from up here.”

Movement on the upper level caught her attention, and a small child appeared on the sun deck.

“That’s not Grandpa riding Dora. Who is it, Gran?” The piercing high-pitched tones of the child’s voice drifted down. “Look, Grandpa has a *bicycle*.”

“Hello, my little pumpkin.” Scott placed Jess’s bicycle against a low stone wall, then secured Dora to a post. He turned to Jess. “Come on, then. I’d better introduce you to the family. Then you can get cleaned up.”

He strode ahead, mounting the stairs two at a time, and Jess followed him up to the landing.

The little girl, clothed only in bright-pink pyjama bottoms, scampered towards Scott.

A woman appeared with a matching pyjama top in her hand. “Ru, come back here. Your mum will be home soon. Let’s get you dressed. What are you looking at?” she exclaimed, breathlessly. “Well, I’ll be...”

“Hello, love,” Scott greeted.

“Grandpa, Grandpa,” Ru repeated, holding out her hands to Scott. She bounced up and down, and the soles of her red slippers tapped on the floorboards.

He scooped his granddaughter into his arms and held her against his chest.

“And why is my husband grinning like an old fool?” the woman asked, placing one hand on her hip.

Jess stepped around Scott. There was no way she could hide her mud-streaked clothes and boots, so she didn't try.

"Jessica, this is my wife, Helen. And this little devil is our granddaughter, Ru." He ruffled the girl's hair. "Helen, may I introduce Jessica Harris."

"It's lovely to meet you, Jessica, but what on earth happened to you?"

"Unfortunately, I took a wrong turn, and my car is stuck on the stock road," Jess said. "I am fortunate that Scott and Dora arrived to save me."

Helen turned to her husband. "Take Jack with you when you pull it out. I saw him down in the orchard."

"I'm on to it, Helen."

Jess studied the couple as he leaned forward to kiss Helen's cheek. She was her husband's complete opposite. While he was broad shouldered and rugged, her features were petite and fine boned. Her shoulder length, ash-blond hair, flecked with grey, framed her face. She smiled and held out her hand to Jess.

"Welcome."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs McAllister." Jess took Helen's hand in a firm handshake and let it go.

"It's Helen, please."

"Thank you, Helen." Jess met her direct gaze.

"Oh my, you look so much like your brother." Helen pulled Jessica into a firm embrace. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

Jess froze, uncomfortable with the sudden physical contact. After a few seconds, she slowly extricated herself from Helen's arms and stepped back.

"Who are you?" asked Ru in a tiny voice as she leaned out of her grandfather's arms and tugged at Jess's sleeve.

Jess gazed into a pair of sparkling caramel-brown eyes. "Hello. I'm Jess."

"And I am Ru McAllister. How old are you?"

"Ru, mind your manners." Helen shook her head.

Scott lowered his granddaughter to the ground. "Listen to your gran, pumpkin."

Helen coaxed the bright pyjama top over Ru's unruly head of curls. "Jessica is our guest. You know better."

Ru pointed to Jess's clothes. "But Gran, look, she's covered in mud. When I get dirty, you make me have a bath. Let's help her take a bath," she said in a very matter-of-fact tone.

Scott snorted. “On that note, Helen, I’ll leave you to sort this. I’ll take Dora to the stables. We have a car to rescue.” He cleared his throat. “Jessica, I leave you in good hands. The girls can show you around. We’ll be about an hour. I’ll lock your bike safely in the garage.”

“I’m so sorry. I’ve caused a lot of trouble.” Jess sighed. What a way to arrive—not exactly a good first impression.

“It’s no trouble at all,” he said.

“I’ll find you some clothes to change into.” Helen smiled at Jess. “You’re taller than Lili, but I’m sure there’s something in her wardrobe that will fit you.”

“Come on, Jess.” Ru tugged on her hand. “I’ll show you to your room. I helped Gran make the bed, and we put clean towels in your bathroom and everything. Mama said you were staying in the guest room. Her room and mine are way over on the other side of the house.” She waved her arms above her head. “Will she mind if *Jess* wears her clothes?” Ru asked her grandmother.

“Darling, this is Jessica,” Helen corrected.

“Jess is fine. In fact, I prefer Jess.” She looked down at Ru, who held her hand tightly as they stood at the entrance of the house. She bent to remove her soiled boots with one hand.

“Jess,” Ru said with a mischievous grin that accentuated her cute dimples. “You can borrow Mama’s clothes.”

“Thank you, Ru.”

Just inside the entranceway, Helen stopped and said, “The house is shaped like a boomerang. It’s easy to make your way around.” They moved forward into what Jess guessed was the sitting room, with a corner freestanding wood stove and dark-polished floors covered with a geometric rug in shades of grey. “It’s divided into three spaces. The living areas, home office and kitchen are in the centre, with the master suite and Ru’s bedroom at one end. The guest rooms are at the other end.”

Floor-to-ceiling windows showed a rear sundeck that overlooked rows of distant grapevines and glimpses of the ocean beyond. Jess lingered a moment to take in the view. “This is lovely,” she murmured.

“Your room is right through here.”

She followed Helen and Ru into a generously sized bedroom which enjoyed the same outlook and shared balcony.

Ru released Jess's hand and threw herself onto the large bed, bouncing dangerously close to the edge.

"Miss McAllister, off immediately," said Helen, firmly. She scooped Ru into her arms and placed her onto the wooden floor. "The bathroom is through here." Helen rolled open the barn-like door, revealing a modern bathroom and a soaking tub.

"Thank you." Jess stifled a yawn, but Helen caught it.

"We'll leave you in peace and let you clean up."

Jess glanced at her watch. Five thirty-five. "I'm sorry. I didn't get much sleep last night. Guess I'm still on London time. It will be great to have a quick bath, if you don't mind?" This time she didn't try to hide her yawn.

"You must be exhausted. Please make yourself at home. There's a dressing gown in the wardrobe. I'll find you something to wear and leave it on the bed." As if sensing Jess's discomfort, Helen added, "There's no one else here. Relax and enjoy your bath. When you finish, make your way to the kitchen. I'll have a snack ready."

The announcement was a relief; she'd have space to herself at last. Ru's presence—and everyone making a fuss over her—was overwhelming.

Ru also yawned, and Helen took her hand. "Come on, sweetie, let's get dinner and then it's your bedtime."

"Bye, Jess." Ru smiled tiredly and waved, allowing herself to be towed through the doorway.

Jess sighed as the door clicked behind Helen and Ru. She welcomed the thought of a hot bath and twisted her hair into a loose knot.

She reached into the wardrobe for the white towelling robe and held it to her face. Helen had thought of everything. It was thick and soft, and promised comfort after a couple of wearying days.

Fifteen minutes later, she rested back against the curved porcelain tub and surveyed the room. Someone had good taste. It was eclectically modern—uncluttered, stylish. Jess hadn't known what to expect when she'd first heard the word *farm*, but she found herself pleasantly surprised. She bent her knees up and submerged herself into the gloriously hot water. Her aches and pains eased as a pleasant tiredness enveloped her.

The information she'd foraged on Lillian McAllister before leaving London had given her a surfeit of facts about the chef's professional life but very little about her *personal* life. Given that Lillian—*Lili*, apparently—had

ended up back home, Jess wondered why she had served her apprenticeship in Sydney, not Melbourne. Perhaps it made sense because she'd finished at the top of her class from a Sydney culinary institute.

The online photo she'd seen of a beaming Ben and Lillian from years ago, posing together for an article about a programme pairing experienced chefs with female apprentices, had clutched at Jess's heart. Ben had looked so happy. Lillian had too. And no wonder: she was primed to be head chef in a prestigious Sydney waterfront restaurant—so why leave it all? When Jess had been doing her research on Lillian, the fact that a year or so later Ailie had opened its doors on the Bellarine Peninsula had seemed an odd little mystery.

But it seemed obvious to Jess now what had brought Lillian home. She'd fallen pregnant. Ru's mellow-brown skin and dark, curly hair set her apart from her fair-skinned mother and grandparents. Jess's mind flashed back to the online photograph of Lili and Ben. Was it possible that they had been a couple once, and Ru was Ben's child? She shook her head. *No way.*

He would have told her, three years ago when he'd made that surprise appearance after her race in Spain. She recalled how she'd lost the race, was in a grumpy mood, and made little time for him. But despite her behaviour, surely he would have told her if he'd become a father.

The hot bath made her drowsy, and she could no longer focus on any particular thought. She flicked the tap, adding more hot water to the tub. The sun was setting, the sky turning pink. She gazed dreamily out the window. The clouds, broad on the bottom and fluffy on top, were outlined with silver.

When the water started to cool again, Jess pulled the bath plug and reached for her towel. She was incredibly tempted to slip between the sheets of the large, comfortable-looking bed, but that would be impolite. Maybe she could rest for ten or fifteen minutes—just a short nap on top of the bedclothes. Jess fell backwards on the quilt and closed her eyes. “Hmm, that feels so good,” she said aloud.

A while later, Jess woke on the bed, dressed in a bath robe with no memory of how that had happened. She glanced around, disoriented by the unfamiliar surroundings.

Oh, I'm at the farm. She yawned and stretched, thankful the sleep had alleviated the stiffness in her shoulders and lower back. Helen had invited

her to the kitchen for a snack. Damn, how long had she been asleep? She snatched the loose drawstring pants and black T-shirt that Helen had left on the bed and dressed quickly. Jess shook out her tangled bed hair and caught sight of herself in the mirror. Her eyes were red and edged by shadows despite the long soak and nap. She steadied the slight tremor in her hand. “It’s nothing. I’m just tired,” she murmured to herself.

The borrowed top, emblazoned on the front with bold white text—*Guess my super power*—fit tight across her shoulders and everywhere else. She looked in the mirror to read the back of the T-shirt. *Yes, CHEF*. Jess raised her eyebrows. The sooner she got into her own clothes the better.

If she had a choice, she wouldn’t leave the room until tomorrow. After a full night in that heavenly bed, she would be much more prepared to face—whatever. But she did want her luggage; she’d have to go and find it.

Jess left the safety of her room and stopped at the end of the hallway to gaze through the large window. The sun dipped behind the horizon, and a hint of sea mist had settled over the treeline, amongst the neat rows of vines that surrounded the McAllister property. There might be time to sample the local wine during her stay. Jess had been amazed by at least half a dozen signs for wineries along the highway between Geelong and the farm.

The sky was painted a dusky blue and streaked with pink and violet. Quite different from a week ago when she’d watched the dipping orange sun mirrored in London’s shimmering city buildings from her flat’s terrace. Jess sighed and reluctantly made her way towards the kitchen where an increasingly loud and discordant metallic rapping echoed down the hallway. *What on earth?*

A woman stood at the stove, facing away from Jess. Large over-ear headphones perched atop her cropped blondish hair. This *must* be Lillian. Dressed in checked cotton trousers, charcoal singlet, and bare feet, she moved to music only she could hear.

Blame it on her drowsiness, or just the gentle sway of the body in front of her—Jess stood mesmerised. Lillian held a long-handled spoon in one hand and a metal whisk in the other, and used the utensils like a pair of drumsticks, beating out a rhythm on a group of pots and the stainless-steel benchtop. She stopped her drumming abruptly and turned a half circle to face Jess.

“Oops—” The utensils clattered to the floor.

“Sorry.” Lili tugged the headphones off her head and placed them on the kitchen bench. She stared at the stranger who was yet familiar, thanks to her previous Googling. “Jessica?”

“Lillian?”

“Lili. I prefer Lili.”

“Okay. And I prefer Jess,” she said.

Jess stared at Lili, her eyes dark and broody. Her arms were crossed tightly in front of her chest. The borrowed T-shirt was stretched across Jess’s shoulders, and the cotton drawstring pants came to just above her muscled calves. The tabloids didn’t do her justice. She was even more beautiful in real life.

“Sorry I scared you.” Jess lowered her gaze, then picked the fallen utensils up off the floor and extended them helplessly toward Lili. “Where do I—”

“Here, let me.” Lili grabbed the utensils—perhaps more aggressively than she’d intended—and threw them in the sink, where they clattered loudly.

“I did call out,” Jess said, after the silence between them had obviously become too much. “I wasn’t sure if Helen was still here.” She tilted her head to one side, then gestured to her clothes. “Not exactly my size. I hope you don’t mind? Your mother was kind enough to lend me something to wear.”

Jess seemed to be struggling either with tiredness or perhaps embarrassment. “I’m Ben’s sister,” she said unnecessarily, then turned red. “Of course, you already know that.”

God, she did look like Ben. Lili stared, unable to think of what to say. Jess had the same lustrous dark-brown hair, large, expressive eyes, and high cheekbones. She pinched the bridge of her nose in that familiar nervous habit, just like her brother. But dressed in Lili’s clothes, with a bewildered look on her face, Jess appeared to have none of Ben’s cheerful, carefree disposition.

Lili took a slow breath. “You have my deepest sympathy, Jess. I am so sorry,” she said. “If there is anything I can do to help, please let me know.” She ran some water over the utensils in the sink. “I should apologise. I didn’t hear you come into the kitchen. I use headphones so I don’t disturb Ru.”

“No problem. Do you know where my luggage would be?”

“Yes. Dad left your things by the front door.” Lili pointed to the leather suitcase, matching carry-on, and two duty-free bags. “Would you like a hand?”

“No, thank you. What about my bicycle and car? I didn’t get a chance to ask where they’d been parked.”

“Dad’s locked them both in the garage, safe and sound.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you sure I can’t help you with your bags?”

Jess shook her head. “I’ll manage.”

“Okay then.” Lili hesitated. The woman looked ready to drop, but if she didn’t want her help, she wouldn’t push. “You must be hungry. Can I get you something? I’ve made some vegetarian laksa, I was about to serve—” Lili lifted another bowl from the shelf.

“I’m not hungry. After a decent night’s sleep, I may feel more human.”

“How about something to drink?” Lili offered. “A local apple cider or glass of wine?”

Jess stifled a yawn and muttered, “Goodnight, Lillian...Lili. I’m beat. Can we talk in the morning?” She moved towards her pile of luggage. “It’s been a long day. If you don’t mind, I’ll head back to bed.”

Lili nodded. “You’ll be able to hear the ocean if you leave the window open. It may help you sleep.”

“I do hope so. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, see you in the morning,” she said, watching Jess skilfully juggle the numerous bags under both arms and walk towards her room.

Lili sipped her drink. Its fresh apple sweetness didn’t taste right after her brief encounter with taciturn Jess. *Guess I could have handled that a little bit better. She does hold control over your financial future, Lili.* She set aside the bottle and reached for her bowl of soup. Maybe she should have coaxed her more into sharing a meal. She decided to leave a note on the kitchen table telling Jess to help herself to fresh fruit, biscuits, or anything in the fridge.

It wasn’t much, but it was all Lili could think to do right now to reach out to her stand-offish and reticent houseguest. If Jessica Harris was like this when they’d only just met, what was she going to be like when it came time to sort out their awkward financial situation?

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PLEASE PURCHASE

FOOD FOR LOVE

BY C. FONSECA

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