

A story of family secrets and finding
one's true place in the world.

Di
MORRISSEY

The
Winter
Sea

esampler
*chapters 1
and 4*



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I



The Aeolian Islands, off the coast of Italy, 1906

THE OCEAN UNFURLED IN a glassy curve as the boy leaned over the side of the boat, seeking his reflection in the mirrored surface of the wave's underbelly. For an instant Giuseppe d'Aquino thought he saw the face of an old man staring directly at him. It was somehow familiar with its popping pale blue eyes, fat lips and bulging cheeks; the expression was questioning, with a slight air of disappointment.

With a sudden surge, the foaming wave doubled in size and slammed against the wooden *barca*, pushing the little fishing boat sideways. The face disappeared into the splintering water and a hand quickly grabbed the boy by the back of his shirt.

'Giuseppe! You must be careful.' His father's admonishment was nearly ripped away in the mounting wind

as he pushed the boy under the small shelter in the bow of the boat. The covered space had just enough room to stow some food and water, as well as a lantern.

‘Lie down. The rain is coming, but it will soon pass.’

Despite the sea swell and the pelting sheets of grey rain that blotted the sky, the small boat ploughed on. It rode to the crest of a wave before crashing down into a trough, and then climbing another wall of water rising ahead of them.

The boy lay curled, his face buried in his arms, breathing in the salty fishy smell he knew so well. He imagined he could see through the hull of his father’s boat, down through the churning ocean, down to the sea floor where the deep-ocean creatures lived. He knew about many of the fish that swam beneath them. His father had taught him about those that skimmed just below the surface, moving fast and furiously; and the fish that liked to cruise midway between the surface and the bottom, greedily eyeing the bouncing fishing lures; and those fish that lay in wait – camouflaged in crevices, weeds and sand – on the sea bed.

He heard his father curse as the small craft, after being momentarily airborne, slammed into a wave, its wooden hull shuddering. Giuseppe remembered the time when the men had returned to the dock swearing and shouting. The villagers had waited in fear on the seafront as news of an accident at sea, the loss of a man overboard, spread among them. Uncle Salvatore had drowned during a storm, swept overboard too swiftly for any rescue.

In spite of the dangers of the sea and the men of the village who had been lost to it, Giuseppe knew that the sea was his present and his future, as it had been for his father and his grandfather and his great-grandfather. The people of their island village lived with and for and by the sea. No one asked for or expected more than what had gone before and what had always been.

Lying in the bottom of the fishing boat, waiting for the scudding rain to clear and the sea to calm, Giuseppe felt grown up. He was ten years old and at last his father had brought him out to hunt the bluefin tuna. He lay still and quiet as the storm blew itself out and the clouds rolled away to reveal the twilight sky, studded with glowing evening stars. His father nodded towards him, and Giuseppe sat quietly as the other fishermen, his two older brothers and his Uncle Rocco, continued to row further out into the Mediterranean Sea. Their island, just one of the scattering of Aeolian Islands off Sicily, receded from sight as darkness fell.

Giuseppe could no longer see any of the other boats that had set out with them, but he could hear the men who manned them shout to each other across the water, their voices tinged with eagerness and excitement. No matter how many times they had already faced the challenge of catching one of the great kings of the sea, the thrill as well as the danger of the hunt was always there.

His father said to him, ‘Now we must find our bait so that we can lure a *tonno*.’

Giuseppe knew that the bait his father was after were small silvery fish, which were attracted to the boat when the fishermen shone their lanterns on the surface of the ocean. He had no idea how his father knew where to find them, but he did, and the nets were quickly lowered over the side to catch the tiny fish.

‘Careful, careful,’ shouted his father as the fishermen began to raise their nets. But the men didn’t need to be told. They knew that if the delicate fish were not netted gently, they would panic and try to escape through the net, and quickly die in a shower of sparkling scales. So the small fish were carefully placed into specially made baskets that were tied to the side of the boat, just below the water line.

After the fish were settled, the men tried to grab a few hours sleep curled in the bottom of the boat. They'd need all their strength for the morning, when they would travel west in search of the powerful bluefin tuna. Uncomfortable as they were, they slept well, dreaming of the fight ahead.

Before daylight, Giuseppe's father woke them and they all shared a meagre breakfast of bread and cheese. As the first streaks of light glowed across the sky, they began to row.

'Keep your eyes peeled, my son,' Giuseppe's father said. 'Watch for sea birds. In the mornings the big *tonno* likes to laze in the water near the surface, so that he can bake in the sun after a night catching fish. The sea birds will see his fin and go to investigate. When we see those birds, we will investigate too.'

Giuseppe's eyes scanned the horizon until they hurt, but he could see nothing. Suddenly one of his brothers shouted, 'Look, over there,' and pointed to the north.

Giuseppe still could see nothing. The oarsmen began rowing hard in the direction his brother had pointed and at last Giuseppe saw several sea birds diving into the water.

'I can see the birds,' he cried excitedly.

'Quiet,' his father hissed. 'If there are *tonno* there, we don't want to startle them.'

As their little boat drew closer to the diving sea birds the men saw that there was indeed a school of tuna. A boat could take only one fish, which could weigh up to five hundred kilos. The fishermen needed to select a suitable catch and detach it quietly from the school before the rest of the tuna were startled and dived deep into the sea, beyond their reach.

As the men pulled the heavy wooden boat towards a huge fish, one of Giuseppe's brothers took up a position beside one of the baskets of bait fish. Everything now

depended on his precision and accuracy. His task was to attract the tuna to the boat by throwing some of the little fish into the water. Judging just how many little fish were needed to make the tuna interested in coming close enough to the boat so that the harpooner could strike was a skill. There would be only one chance.

The little silvery fish flashed in the sunlight as they were released. When the tuna saw them darting free it rushed and grabbed them. A few more fish were thrown to the tuna, bringing it closer to the boat. Then Giuseppe's brother took one of the bait fish out of the basket and squeezed out its eyes before throwing it into the sea. As the sightless little fish hit the water, it was confused and, rather than swimming away, it began to swim in circles beside the boat. Quietly the rowers brought their oars into the boat. Full of confidence and lured by the bait, the tuna lunged towards the blinded fish, almost bumping the boat in its eagerness. Holding his breath in excitement, Giuseppe realised that this was the moment they could catch the *tonno*.

He watched as his eldest brother stood in the bow of the boat holding a harpoon, which they called a *traffena*. It was a fearsome weapon, somewhat like a farming fork except that it had seven prongs, each with a barb at the end. With the confidence and skill gained through years of practice, the young fisherman braced his legs and then hurled the harpoon at the tuna, aiming at the vulnerable spot at the back of its head where the spinal cord met the brain. Hitting anywhere else on the fish was useless, for the tuna was well protected and the harpoon would not be effective. Giuseppe's brother had told him this many times for he was proud of his ability as a harpooner; their father had trained him well.

The aim was true. Giuseppe found it hard not to shout with excitement. Although everyone else was elated,

they remained tense and watchful as the fish still had to be landed.

The wounded tuna dived deep, desperately trying to escape its attackers, and the attached harpoon line raced through the water. Because the fishermen knew that a tuna could dive to great depths, the line attached to the *traffena*, made of the finest Italian hemp, was three hundred metres long. But this tuna did not dive very deep at all, perhaps only half that distance. Giuseppe's brother placed his hand on the line to judge how much weight would have to be applied in order to bring the fish to the surface and gradually he began to haul it towards the boat. He pulled slowly, working out how much fight was left in the big fish. Sometimes a tuna tested and tricked the man with the line, swimming slowly upwards, before spinning and turning to dive deeper, catching the fisherman unawares. They all knew there was no point in hurrying. Time was on their side and they didn't want to lose the catch now.

After a while, Giuseppe's brother spoke to his father. 'He is getting tired. It won't be long.'

But the great fish was not yet ready to give up. It made one last desperate lunge and, as it neared the fishing boat, Giuseppe glimpsed its flashing, distressed eyes.

'It is nearly finished,' said his brother. 'He is weakening.'

The sun was high now and as Giuseppe peered over the side of the boat, he could see the *tonno's* glittering silver-blue skin, small golden pectoral fins along its spine shining in the sunlight.

As they hauled the huge fish in closer to the boat, Uncle Carlo made a final *coppo* – death strike – spearing the fish with a second *traffena* to ensure that the magnificent fighter was truly dead. Only then was the tuna carefully brought to their boat and tied along side.

Now it was time to celebrate. Giuseppe's father shouted across to another boat in the distance to tell them

of their good fortune. Someone from that boat shouted back that they, too, had had good luck.

When they returned to the village with their catch there would be celebrations to acknowledge the prowess of the fishermen. Giuseppe was proud he had been part of the hunt. He longed for the day when he would be the one standing in the bow, *traffena* poised, ready to strike, pitting his skill against the sleek, powerful kings of the sea.

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Giuseppe was a shy teenager, brown skinned, barefoot, with laughing eyes and a mischievous grin that showed his neat white teeth. On market day the village girls clustered around the stalls, flirted with him behind their mothers' backs. He was strong and looked older than his fifteen years. Older girls teased him and watched him as he sat on his father's boat mending nets, or moved nimbly around the dock where fish and shellfish were laid out for sale on wet wooden tables and in cane baskets. But his father kept a wary eye on him and warned Giuseppe about straying into the alleys and lanes tucked between the little stone houses where young women called cheekily to him from windows and doorways, some threatening to empty their chamber pots into the alley.

Giuseppe had felt very proud when he began to work with his father. Not only was he doing a man's job, he was contributing to the livelihood of his family. In a very poor region of Italy, their island was one of the poorest, not that Giuseppe was aware of how deprived his family was. Their small home sheltered them, and his mother and grandmother always had food on the table even if, at times, it was very simple fare. Everyone was expected to pull their weight.

Their island was dry and rocky. It was set among a group of active volcanic islands off the coast of Sicily,

which included Mt Stromboli. It had no natural water source so could not produce much food. The villagers relied on the treasures from the sea. They collected water from the roofs when it rained and stored it in barrels but there was not enough water to grow much in the way of crops. They grew tomatoes and eggplants in tubs and hand watered them. Fig and olive trees survived in the hills. Wheat could not be grown on the island, so it was infrequently imported from the mainland, and bread was baked only once a month. At the end of four weeks it was dry and hard. Giuseppe's grandmother was often heard to mutter, 'No water, but plenty of earthquakes. What was God thinking when he made this island?'

Like the other young boys on the island, Giuseppe had received very little schooling. The nuns had taught him his letters and his numbers, but since he had become a productive family member there was no more time for such luxuries. Still, he was pleased that he had received even this rudimentary schooling. His parents had not bothered sending his sisters to school at all. They thought it was better for them to stay at home to help their mother, and get married as soon as possible, then start their own families. Giuseppe had only two sisters, and he was quite fond of them. He sometimes thought of his other three sisters and one brother who had failed to survive childhood. All the families he knew had lost young children to disease or malnutrition and this seemed, to Giuseppe, to be the normal state of things.

One morning Giuseppe was helping his father salt some fish, ignoring the teasing calls of the village girls, when he noticed Alfonso the shepherd, who lived in the hills, leading his donkey cart onto the dock. On the cart sat his daughter, her eyes averted and her face screened by a curtain of curls.

Giuseppe was surprised to see the shepherd speaking with his father.

‘Son, put those salted fish into Alfonso’s cart,’ his father directed. ‘I need to discuss a matter of business.’

Giuseppe moved slowly, taking his time to settle the fish into the back of the cart, while trying to see the young girl’s face. But the girl didn’t speak to or look at him. He walked to the donkey and fondled its ears as the two men talked seriously. Eventually his father went to his boat and took out an old anchor, which he then put in the back of Alfonso’s cart with the fish.

‘I am sure that I will be able to do something with the anchor. I understand your idea,’ said Alfonso. Then, pushing his woollen hat back on his head, he spoke to the girl. She leaned down and lifted a cloth bag from beneath her feet and held it out for Giuseppe. For a moment he felt the touch of her fingers and caught a swift glimpse of her eyes, which reminded him of the blue-black waters of the sea before a storm. He clutched the soft bag, recognising the lanoline smell of freshly shorn wool, and tried to think of something to say to her. But before a word could come out, Alfonso had climbed onto the seat beside his daughter and the cart moved away, clanking over the cobblestones. As the donkey trotted away, Giuseppe watched the breeze lift the long dark curls that spilled over the shawl around the girl’s shoulders.

‘Take the wool to your mother,’ directed his father. ‘She is expecting it.’

It was many months before Giuseppe saw the girl again. Then it was winter and crystals of ice glittered on the stony ground as Giuseppe and his father climbed slowly up the rugged hill path leading to the small farm where Alfonso lived. One of Giuseppe’s sisters was to be married and a wedding feast was planned, so his father had come to buy a small goat for the celebrations. The villagers could rarely afford to purchase meat, so buying a goat to eat was a special occasion.

Giuseppe was grateful for the thick sweater he wore, spun and knitted by his mother from the wool his father had bought from Alfonso. As they reached the shepherd's small home, they were greeted by Alfonso standing by a low stone wall. Giuseppe's father explained what he wanted and the three of them walked out into a field where the goats and sheep grazed on winter stubble.

Alfonso turned towards his hut and called, 'Angelica, bring me a rope.'

Almost at once the young girl, who had so captivated Giuseppe with her curls, came hurrying out of the hut carrying a short rope, which she gave to her father. He selected one of the goats and tied the rope around its neck.

Giuseppe felt overwhelmed by her proximity but could think of nothing clever to say. He only asked, 'Are you sad that this goat is going to be killed?'

She shrugged. 'My father chose it for you. Do you care about the fish you catch and kill?'

Giuseppe answered, 'Sometimes, yes. The big fish are very beautiful. Strong fighters. Have you ever been on a boat?'

She shook her head. 'No. I like the hills. And the company of sheep, not fish.' She paused then added, 'The wool, it looks nice. Your mother is very clever.' She hurried away, her curls bouncing, feet flying.

Before Giuseppe and his father left, the two men went to the back of Alfonso's hut. Giuseppe followed them and, to his surprise, he saw that Alfonso had constructed a simple blacksmith's forge there. From the back of the forge, the shepherd brought out a small anchor to show Giuseppe's father.

'It is not finished. It still needs adjusting,' explained Alfonso. 'But the swivel head, designed to release if the anchor snags, works.' His normally dour expression creased into a smile. 'I followed your instructions.'

After his father had examined the anchor, Giuseppe looked at it. He could see how the release bar would stop the anchor from being lost on the sea floor or on the reefs. Giuseppe was proud of the way his father was always thinking of ideas to improve his equipment to make it more efficient and reliable.

‘This is a great invention. You must come out on our boat to see it working,’ suggested Giuseppe’s father.

‘We are not sea people,’ said the shepherd.

Giuseppe glanced around the barren karsts rising from the steep hills and thought how desolate the wind-swept landscape looked; he guessed that Angelica and her father would feel as uncomfortable at sea as he did here.

Giuseppe and his father walked back home, leading the goat. When they came to the ridge that stood above the village Giuseppe looked down at the familiar sights of the little port below. He could see the narrow alleyways and steep steps where houses, festooned with poles of washing, stood cheek by jowl, so close that one could almost reach across to rap on the window of the house opposite. He could see his own small house where his family lived in two rooms and where the ceiling was always hung with fishing nets. A broader cobbled street circled the village. It ran along the harbour front, where crab pots were piled high and men squatted to gossip as they mended their nets. Small fishing boats were tied to the iron bollards along the stone sea wall. At one end of the wall on the steps worn down by centuries of seamen’s feet, young boys sat and fished. It was from these steps that each year the priest would bless the fishing fleet. Past the sea wall lay a pebbled beach, where upturned dinghies and small wooden boats were tied above the high-water mark. Near them a deep-water channel ran into the open sea beyond the arms of the cove. This small village was

his home and as he walked with his father towards his family's house, he felt happy with his little world.

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The wedding of Giuseppe's sister was an occasion for much festivity. The young girl was marrying a village boy, whom she had known all her life. Families on the island always intermarried. It was expected; the island was their world, where else was there to go? Giuseppe's father was pleased with the alliance, for his daughter's future husband came from another prominent fishing family. Everyone on the island believed that the only defence against poverty was family, so he had ensured that his daughter married into a hardworking and respected one.

The couple walked to the church in their best clothes. The priest stood among the incense and statues and blessed their marriage. Afterwards was the great feast. The goat had been slaughtered and was roasting on a spit over the coals, basted frequently with olive oil and rosemary. All the guests were waiting eagerly for it to be ready.

Giuseppe's mother Emilia and her daughters had spent days preparing food, which was amazingly inventive considering the small variety of ingredients available on the island. There was sardine pasta with raisins and pine nuts; pasta with eggplant; couscous and pasta with swordfish, which was especially appreciated, for although the fishermen might catch swordfish, the fish was far too valuable for the families on the island to eat and were always sold. The feast would end with cannoli, fried pastry stuffed with ricotta cheese and honeyed figs. Giuseppe's father had imported wine in a hog's head for the event since the island could not produce grapes in any quantity. Although the wedding was extravagant by the standards of the village, it was always the custom for the father of the bride to put on such a feast for it showed not just the standing of the family

in the little port, but also the importance of its patriarch, and Giuseppe's father was determined to show that he was a very noteworthy man.

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One Sunday, several months after the wedding, Giuseppe's mother asked him to take some salted fish to Alfonso in the hills to exchange for some wool and some goats' cheese.

Giuseppe felt shy approaching the farm where Alfonso lived with his daughter. But when Alfonso saw him trudging up the hill he greeted Giuseppe cheerfully and led him into the kitchen, calling to his daughter to bring him some water.

The stone cottage was small, but dark and cool. A large fuel stove that provided heat in winter sat in one corner. Giuseppe had noticed a mud-brick oven outside the cottage where Alfonso cooked in summer. A wooden table and chairs sat in the middle of the room and a spinning wheel stood in a corner. But what really caught Giuseppe's attention was a shelf on one of the walls, stacked high with books. There looked to be about twenty and he stared at them in astonishment.

Alfonso caught his expression and reached for a book that had an illustration of a pirate glued onto its cover. 'Can you read, boy?'

Giuseppe nodded. 'I know my letters and I can read numbers.'

'That's not reading. Have you read a book?'

'No,' Giuseppe said quietly.

'Would you like to?' asked Alfonso.

Giuseppe wasn't sure. His parents respected those few people on the island who were fully literate, but the d'Aquinos thought that there was little need for their family to acquire the same skills. What use would they be for fishermen?

Slowly Giuseppe nodded.

Angelica, who had returned with the water, gave him an encouraging smile. 'My father thinks that everyone should read books,' she said.

'Can you read those books?' asked Giuseppe with a faint challenge in his voice.

'Of course. I have read all of them,' said Angelica.

Giuseppe was taken aback but Alfonso laughed.

'That is not quite true, Angelica, but if you like, Giuseppe, you may come here and read any of my books. I could help you.'

So once a week, on Sundays after church, Giuseppe made the journey up into the hills to read with Alfonso.

'What do you want to read books for? We own no books, you will never be able to afford to buy books,' said one of his brothers.

Giuseppe shrugged. 'It might be useful one day.'

'You just want to hang around his daughter,' said another brother.

Giuseppe glared and stomped away. But the remark was partly true.

Angelica intrigued him. Giuseppe knew that she roamed with the sheep and goats and seemed as much a creature of the hills as they. Occasionally he came across her perched on an ancient stone wall watching the animals. He was self-conscious, afraid to speak to her for any length of time, aware that he might displease her father while she, who had seemed so shy the first time he met her at the dock, appeared at ease and chatted to him freely about his life on the fishing boats and in the village. Giuseppe realised that, although they were about the same age, her knowledge about most things, except fishing, made her seem much older than he was. He knew that his mother would never speak to his father with the same confidence and composure as she did with him.

Eventually one day he asked her, ‘Why are you able to talk like this? You seem to know so much about everything.’

She gave a short laugh. ‘I might live a quiet life away from the town, but I read books and I speak with my father. He is a clever man and tells me many stories.’

Giuseppe couldn’t imagine having long conversations with his own father. His father made pronouncements and all the family agreed with him. Giuseppe said defensively, ‘My father teaches me to fish. It takes many years to learn. You don’t need books to learn how to read the wind and clouds, to understand what the colours of the sea mean, to watch the birds to see the movement of the schools of fish, or to notice the clues that show where the big fish are feeding.’

Angelica jumped down from the wall. ‘That may be true, but my father can teach you many other things. I will come and listen to you read some time.’

And so, occasionally, Angelica would appear at her father’s door and listen to Giuseppe as he read, trying not to stumble over the words.

Within a year Giuseppe’s reading skills had vastly improved and Alfonso decided that it was time for him to borrow books rather than continuing to read aloud. Giuseppe’s visits to the farm became less frequent, but he still found time to climb into the hills to talk to Alfonso. Alfonso had lived away from the island. He had travelled, and was better educated than almost anyone else in the village. Giuseppe had no idea why Alfonso had left the island but he knew that he had returned when Angelica’s mother had died. Giuseppe loved to hear the stories of the time that the shepherd had spent in the north of Italy. Alfonso talked about Italy’s history and politics, and the country’s future, and Giuseppe concentrated as he listened to the shepherd.

Giuseppe tried to imagine the scenes of cities with streets crowded with people, shops filled with clothes and exotic food and furniture that was shining and new. Alfonso loved to speak of the theatres, music halls, opera houses and cinema houses showing silent films. He even tried to explain to Giuseppe about the motor cars he had seen, but Giuseppe found it hard to grasp such a concept. It was a world that Giuseppe could hardly believe, it was so far removed from the simple village where he'd been born and had always lived. Now Giuseppe even started to wonder about the authority of the elderly priest, who was considered to be the wisest and best educated man on the island, but whose horizons and experiences seemed severely limited when compared to those of Alfonso. Not that Giuseppe voiced these thoughts aloud. Nevertheless, talking with Alfonso, Giuseppe found himself increasingly curious about life beyond the confines of his village. If he couldn't visit the places Alfonso had been to, he could at least read about them, and dream.

'Giuseppe,' said Alfonso one day as the two sat at the shepherd's table, 'you know that Italy is quite a new country, only about fifty years old?' Alfonso often liked to raise subjects that he suspected Giuseppe knew little about and Giuseppe liked to listen and learn.

'But that can't be true,' replied Giuseppe. 'I know that it must be old because there are lots of ruins on our island. Some of them must be older than fifty years.'

Alfonso smiled. 'Of course they are. For centuries many different people have lived on this island – Greeks, Romans, Moors and Christians – and they all left a legacy of their time here through the buildings they made. No, what I am saying is that before 1861 Italy was made up of a lot of independent states – Sicily, Piedmont, Naples, Calabria and so on – but they became united as one country under Victor Emmanuel II.'

‘But Father, you have told me that the country is not united,’ said Angelica as she joined them at the table. ‘You said that the people don’t feel like Italians at all.’

‘You are right. I have travelled throughout this land and I have found that it is full of divisions. People are loyal first to their village, then to their region and finally, if they think of it at all, they are loyal to Italy.’

‘My father says that when he travelled to the north of Italy, the people there could barely understand him.’

‘Why was that?’ asked Giuseppe, who thought that it would be impossible not to understand the clear-speaking Alfonso. ‘I never have any trouble understanding what you say.’

‘Thank you, Giuseppe. No, what Angelica means is that our dialect here in the south is so different from the way they speak in the north that we are virtually speaking a different language.’

‘So the north is really different from here?’

‘Places like Turin have very modern ideas. There is even a factory there that makes Fiat motor cars. Some in the north look down on people from the south and think that they are ill-educated peasants.’

Giuseppe looked embarrassed because he knew that this was true of his family.

‘Cheer up, Giuseppe, not all the people of the north are as advanced as the people of Turin. I worked for a while in Venice. It is a mighty sea port, but it struggles with modernity, just as we do in the south. Ten-year-old children work such long hours in the glass factories that they fall asleep beside the ovens. Venice is a very unhealthy city and many people there die from tuberculosis and malaria.’

‘But the people in the north don’t suffer the hardships that we do here. Tell us again about the earthquake in Messina,’ said Angelica.

‘I’ve told you that story many times over, though I suppose I can tell it once more – but only quickly. We have work to do and Giuseppe must get home before it is dark,’ said Alfonso as he settled back into his chair.

‘I was not in Messina when the earthquake occurred, Giuseppe, but I went there only a few weeks later and I saw the terrible destruction. Before the earthquake, Messina was a thriving port city, then disaster struck one morning in December 1908. In thirty seconds, one hundred thousand people perished and all the buildings in the city were destroyed. At first the government did not believe what had happened and they did very little to help, although the king visited the site. Now the government is supposed to be rebuilding the city, but everyone knows that such reconstruction just presents an opportunity for some people to make a lot of money through graft, fraud and embezzlement.’

‘That is terrible,’ said Giuseppe. ‘Why don’t the people do something?’

‘When Sicily first became part of a united Italy, Sicilians were very excited. They thought that the government would help them rise out of poverty, but instead they were burdened with heavy taxes and conscripted into the army. Because of the mountainous terrain in Sicily and lack of government interest, policing was poor and violent gangs developed.’

‘Mafiosi,’ said Giuseppe, for everyone knew of these gang members’ stranglehold on power in Sicily and on the nearby islands.

‘Most Sicilians are very accepting of the natural disasters that occur in this region. They think that there is nothing that can be done about them. But they are very disillusioned by the government in Rome and don’t like the unrestrained violence at home, so many of them emigrate.’

‘They go to America, don’t they, Father?’

‘Yes, thousands of Sicilians leave every year, knowing that they will make a better life for themselves there.’

‘A cousin of my brother-in-law’s went and wrote back to say that he owns two suits,’ said Giuseppe, looking down at his ill-fitting trousers that had already been worn by two of his brothers. ‘I think he is lying as I don’t see how that is possible.’

‘It might be,’ said Angelica. ‘I would like to go and find out.’ She looked at Giuseppe. ‘What about you?’

‘Me?’ He shook his head. ‘I will never have a chance to leave the island.’

‘Don’t be so sure, Giuseppe,’ said Alfonso. ‘Life can be unpredictable.’

The Italian Front, 1917

The small army tents were barely discernible, as they clung to the rocks that gave little protection against the sleeting rain. Inside their miserably cold dugouts and dripping canvas caves, the men hunched over damp cigarettes, dissecting the rumours and speculating about what could be happening on the front.

Italy had entered the Great War in May 1915, joining the Allies. Austria, to Italy’s north-east, was convinced that if it attacked Italy along the Alps that divided the two countries, it would overthrow the Italian army. The Italians knew that if the Austrians were allowed to move down from their high vantage point in the mountains and spill out onto the plains below, the Italian army would not be able to contain them. So far eleven battles had been fought between the two armies, but although the Italians had contained the Austrians the enemy remained in the high mountains, an ever-present threat.

The weather closed in over the Julian Alps where the Isonzo River cut through the steep, rocky valley and

swept southwards. Giuseppe d'Aquino huddled into his worn army great coat as the shower turned to a down-pour. From the chill in the wind he knew snow was falling on the upper peaks. Although he was only twenty-one years old, after months of fighting he felt like a seasoned veteran. Around him were soldiers of many ages, drawn from the countryside, their faces and hands weathered from farming. Initially they were united in their efforts to attack the Austrians, but now they were increasingly discontented. The men felt abandoned in their alpine hellhole near the small town of Caporetto, pawns in a game that, for many, had sapped their respect and will to fight for their country.

He listened quietly, for perhaps the hundredth time, to the endless complaints of his fellow soldiers.

'General Cadorna, what does he know?' asked a corporal. 'He is forever getting rid of officers.'

'Everyone knows that if they do not immediately succeed in battle, then he fires them. We've had five battalion commanders in the last few months, not that the last three were any good,' responded his friend.

'Hah,' said the corporal. 'Would you want to lead men into battle if you knew that failure meant dismissal? Better to be cautious than sorry.'

'Well, if you don't fight properly, you don't win.'

Giuseppe had heard this argument before. The first time he was shocked. He had assumed that the educated officers would know what they were doing, but now as the fighting wore on it was clear that this was not the case. I've changed, he thought to himself. Once I would never have questioned a man so clearly superior to myself, but now I cannot accept that such people know everything.

'Of course, General Capello is different,' continued the corporal. Everyone nodded, for they all had great confidence in their area commander who always favoured

offensive action. ‘But I heard a rumour that he is ill and has been sent to Padua to recover.’

The other soldiers looked horrified by this information. They were to go into battle the next day.

‘It might not be true,’ said the corporal. ‘Anyway, even if he is well, how can he fight properly with this equipment? It’s rubbish.’

No one argued with this. Italy simply did not have the industrial capability to switch quickly to war-time production and so what weapons the soldiers had were inadequate.

‘It’s the fault of those socialists in Turin. I heard from my brother that they are deliberately sabotaging the factories because they don’t want to be in this war. Well, what about us? We’re in the thick of it and there’s never enough ammunition,’ said another soldier, whose speech clearly identified him as a northerner.

‘And we don’t have enough artillery,’ said the corporal’s friend.

‘I have also heard,’ said the corporal, who seemed to have an unlimited source of gossip, ‘that those socialists have now been sent up here to help with the fighting.’

There was immediate outrage.

‘What good will they be?’

‘Are they being punished, or are we?’

‘We won’t be able to trust those socialists. They won’t fight.’

Although all these complaints were very real and easily justified, Giuseppe knew that the biggest sense of injustice among the soldiers stemmed from the army command’s total neglect of them. No one was interested in their welfare or morale. Between battles there was no attempt to provide the men with any leisure activities, let alone allow them home on furlough, so they had nothing to do but play cards and worry about their families. Who

would protect them and make sure that they had enough to eat?

As the men continued to complain, the unit sergeant rose to his feet. He was a small, wiry man, well respected by his men.

‘Best you all get a good night’s sleep now. We’ll be attacking in the morning, but those Austrians won’t worry us, will they?’

‘No, Sergeant Tommasi,’ said the men as they settled themselves into their cold, damp dugouts. As far as they were concerned, the Austrians were inferior soldiers. Giuseppe always felt safe near the sergeant, who was a good leader in battle and knew what to do to stop his men from being killed.

The enemy bombardment started early the next morning and lasted for two hours, but the Italians were used to enemy fire and they stayed safe in their dugouts. But then, everything changed. The bombardment was fiercer than anything they had experienced before and their meagre shelters were quickly destroyed. Suddenly, Giuseppe found that he couldn’t breathe. He clutched at his throat.

‘Mustard gas,’ yelled Sergeant Tommasi to his men, and put his gas mask over his face.

Giuseppe felt paralysed, but the sergeant thrust a gas mask into his hands and did the same with many of the other men. But for some it was too late and they fell, writhing on the ground in agony, the poisonous gas destroying their lungs. Grabbing his rifle Giuseppe followed Tommasi. It was obvious that all their defences were broken; the enemy army came pouring towards them but they were ready to take them on. Then suddenly the Italians realised that these men charging towards them were not Austrian soldiers at all. They were wearing German uniforms!

Everyone believed the Germans were vastly superior fighters to the Austrians and now their belief was proved

true. The Germans moved rapidly down towards the valley, opening up the Italian line. Italian morale plummeted. They could fight the Austrians, but against the Germans they felt powerless. By nightfall thousands of Italians had given themselves up as prisoners. Their war was over.

Tommasi, however, was prepared to take on the Germans. He and his unit fought hard all the next day, but it was clear that they were no match for the superior German tactics and equipment.

As darkness fell, the corporal finally said what they had all been thinking. 'Should we surrender to the Germans? We can't beat them.'

'Do you want to spend the rest of the war as a prisoner or do you want to go home?' Tommasi asked what remained of his unit. Many of the men were wounded. They were tired and demoralised.

'Home,' whispered Giuseppe. The other men silently nodded their heads in agreement.

'All right, then,' said Tommasi. 'Home it is.'

Led by Sergeant Tommasi, Giuseppe and the remains of the unit picked their way along a narrow path. At times Giuseppe struggled to keep up, for the soles of his boots had now given way and sharp stones jabbed his feet. He gave a cry of pain and stopped, leaning on his rifle. The other men sat at the side of the path, sheltered by tall trees, and watched Sergeant Tommasi pull off Giuseppe's boot to examine his bloodied foot. The combination of a rag, some dry grass and a tattered sock was the best repair Sergeant Tommasi could manage before he told them all to move forward.

Suddenly the corporal grabbed Giuseppe's rifle and flung it into the trees, and then did the same with his own.

'*Pbhht!*' He pursed his lips. 'We don't need these anymore.'

He gestured to the other men to do the same. After their initial surprise, they quickly followed suit.

Ignoring the pain in his foot and with the aid of a stick, Giuseppe plodded down the valley road, joining an increasing flow of other soldiers who had also decided that war was no longer for them.

Civilians, fleeing the advancing enemy with their possessions in carts and barrows, competed for road space with the retreating soldiers. Italian reinforcements, sent forward in an attempt to retrieve the situation, found it impossible to get through. But the retreat remained leisurely and orderly, as though the troops had all the time in the world to reclaim their own piece of sanity and peace by the fire-side of home. The men helped themselves to food and drink as they passed through deserted villages. When they passed an officer, Sergeant Tommasi insisted that the men salute, which they did. Some officers, though surprised, returned the salute, others shouted at them, ordering them to return to the battle. But the men just kept marching south. At one stage, a staff car drove towards them and the men drew to the side of the road to let it pass. They recognised the hated General Cadorna in the back seat and, unbidden, they drew themselves up to attention and saluted as the car went by.

Giuseppe marched on, listening to Tommasi insist that what they were doing was no disgrace. How much better would it be for their families that they should return to them, rather than be prisoners of the Germans?

‘After all, it has been the simple soldiers who have been let down by the army command, not the other way around,’ said Sergeant Tommasi.

And this is the same government that let down the people of Messina, thought Giuseppe to himself. It does not care for ordinary people at all. And what will happen to them now? Then he remembered what Alfonso had said about America. Maybe he should go there, too, away

from this country with so little to offer. Perhaps he could talk Angelica into going with him. The idea put a spring into his step. He could not wait to get back to his island so that he could talk to them both.

*

But when Giuseppe eventually returned to the island, tragedy awaited him. His father had terrible news. In Giuseppe's absence, Angelica had died.

'How? What happened?' he asked, distraught.

His father shook his head. 'It was sudden. There was no treatment. It was God's will. Will you go and see Alfonso?'

Giuseppe walked the familiar track across the hillside and a fierce wind slowed his steps and echoed the cries in his heart. The stone cottage seemed to crouch low against the wind and for the first time he was not impatient to reach it. Alfonso saw him coming and stood waiting for him outside the hut, a lone figure silhouetted against the grey sky.

Alfonso remained still, waiting until Giuseppe reached him before moving, lifting his shoulders in a gesture of helpless bewilderment. The younger man ached as he saw the deep pain etched on Alfonso's face and swiftly embraced him.

'My daughter is gone. She was the light of my life,' said Alfonso, his voice choking in grief.

Giuseppe nodded mutely, too sad to speak.

'Angelica, my angel . . .' Tears formed in Alfonso's eyes. 'She was a wild, free bird. Few could have tamed her.' He paused. 'She called your name . . . at the end.' He couldn't speak further and turned away.

Together they walked to the cottage, the haven Giuseppe had often thought about often during the cold, harsh and dangerous times at the front. How he had longed for the wise companionship of Alfonso, the joy

of discovering a world through the pages of books, and, always, the presence of Angelica. And he had allowed himself to dream, to plan, to think that one day he would make a new and different life with her in America.

Giuseppe and Alfonso sat in their usual places. Giuseppe's eyes were inevitably drawn to the little window where, so often, he had glimpsed Angelica, curls bouncing as she ran, hurrying the goats and sheep down from the high ground to the cottage so that she could spend time with him.

Alfonso now seemed a man drained of energy and enthusiasm. It was as though his very essence had evaporated. He told Giuseppe that Angelica had cut her leg and it had become infected; no one knew how to stop the infection and in the end it had killed her.

Giuseppe knew that for Alfonso, no one could replace Angelica's company, with her keen intelligence and teasing sense of humour, but just the same, he offered to visit Alfonso regularly. To his surprise, Alfonso rejected his offer.

'No! You must make a new life for yourself. I have nothing more to give you.' Then the shepherd turned and walked away, back into his hut.

*

Even when the war came to an end, life on the island remained hard. Some of the fishermen who had served in the army returned to the sea. Others lay buried on the battlefields. Poverty on the island was worse than before, as some of the boats that had been requisitioned for the war effort were never returned. The islanders wondered what the whole point of the war had been. They had certainly got nothing from it.

But discontent was not confined to the island. It had spread throughout the country. In spite of the subsequent resounding victory at Vittorio Veneto, the humiliation of

Caporetto continued to bring shame on the men who'd been there. The crumbs given to Italy at the Versailles peace settlement were regarded as insulting. Half a million Italians dead, a ravaged countryside, a poor economy, high unemployment and inflation, and the disrespect of their allies were all there was to show for Italy's war efforts. Moreover, increasing disillusionment with the weak government had led to growing unrest across the country with strikes and clashes between different political factions. Politically motivated street fights, even murders, were becoming common events in the cities.

Giuseppe felt restless and wished Angelica was there to discuss these matters with him. Nor did he have Alfonso to talk to because, since her death, the shepherd had retreated from all society, drinking grappa and disappearing for long solitary walks in the hills, and refusing to speak to anyone.

One evening at the kitchen table, after his mother and grandmother had dished up potatoes roasted with garlic and olives and tomato passata made from the few tomatoes they had grown, Giuseppe put down his fork and said quietly, 'There is no future here for me. I want to leave. There is a big world beyond this island and I want to try my luck. I have been thinking about this for some time now.'

'You have listened to Alfonso too much,' said his father.

'No one is making a decent living here,' insisted Giuseppe.

'Our great-grandfather, our grandfather and our father have managed here on this island,' said his oldest brother as he dipped his spoon into his dish. 'Our family is strong. We will survive.' The other men around the table nodded their heads in furious agreement.

Then, to everyone's surprise, Giuseppe's grandmother Celestina spoke up for him. 'The people who have gone away from here are doing better than us,' she said. 'This island, it's drier than a stone. We can hardly grow our own

vegetables. Soon we will be eating rocks. We buy water when our tanks run dry. Fancy buying water! What a way to live! We have nothing. One day I asked the butcher for some old bones for soup and he laughed at me and told me to go to the cemetery for them!’ She shook her head. ‘And as for that shrivelled prune of a milk man!’ Celestina made a rude gesture with her hand and Giuseppe tried not to laugh. His father and brothers kept their heads down, as his mother joined the old woman in speaking her mind.

‘Yes, he is watering down the goats’ milk!’ she agreed. ‘Sometimes I think that things will never get better.’

‘Will you go to America?’ asked grandmother Celestina. She pursed her lips. ‘That is where everyone goes.’

‘But what would you do in America? You only know how to fish,’ asked one of his brothers.

‘Your brother-in-law’s relatives work in factories in America. They make good money. Where would his family be without the money they send back home?’ said Celestina before she added pointedly, ‘We could do with some of that.’

‘How can we afford to send Giuseppe to America?’ demanded his father.

‘You don’t even have a pair of shoes,’ scoffed one of his brothers.

‘He has his old army boots,’ said his mother. ‘They can be repaired.’

Grandmother Celestina spoke again. ‘We all need to put everything we have kept under the bed towards his fare. Giuseppe has broad shoulders. He will go to America and work hard and make good money. He will send back his money to repay us, and then he will come back and choose a wife.’ She scraped the last of the potato onto Giuseppe’s plate and they all turned to look at Giuseppe’s father, who slowly nodded his head in agreement, and so the matter was decided.

4



South coast, New South Wales, 2011

IT WAS NOT A day to fall in love with Whitby Point.

The sea thrashed angrily onto the empty beach, flinging waves up against the rocky cliffs, and gnawed hungrily at the sloping dunes that protected the small lagoon lying behind the beach. Sea birds huddled at the edge of the lagoon, taking refuge from the howling winter wind.

A lone figure, bent against the wind, fists pushed deep into the pockets of her jacket, walked along the path that skirted the deserted caravan park and camping ground. A change in wind direction blew back the hood of her jacket and her curling hair burst from the restraint of its hair clip.

The woman lifted her head to the smarting sting of sea spray, and changed her mind about walking past the

cliff into the small township and harbour. She turned and made her way back around the bend to Pelican Cove, where three isolated cabins were hidden. Despite being spoiled for choice at this time of year, she'd chosen to rent one of these older cabins from a real estate agent in the town because of its seclusion.

The cabins on either side of hers were empty, and their small porches were carpeted with decaying vegetation – feathery needles and twigs from the trees. Their drawn blinds gave them an air of hunched defensiveness; the setting looked nothing like a sunny summer holiday escape. Cassandra Holloway had arrived in Whitby Point a few days ago and, while she could visualise how this place would look in the height of summer, its wintry setting suited her bleak mood.

As she approached the cabins, she saw a car parked by the side of the small dirt road that ran beside her cabin. A man, probably in his sixties, well built and fit and wearing overalls, got out of it as she approached.

‘Mrs Holloway? I’m Geoff Spring, the repairman. The real estate agent sent me. A problem with the kitchen, is it?’

‘Yes, the stove isn’t working. I thought the gas bottle was empty but it’s not, so I have no idea what’s wrong.’

‘No stove makes cooking tricky. These places are getting old. Built in the eighties and haven’t been touched since, except for a lick of paint.’ He grabbed his toolbox and followed her as she unlocked the front door.

‘If it wasn’t for the weather I’d use the barbecue. I’m getting a bit tired of meals in a frypan. But I can still boil the kettle. Tea or coffee?’

‘You don’t have to do that. But if you’re making tea . . . Where’s the gas bottle? I’ll just check that first.’

Finding that it was indeed full he turned his attention to the stove. He fiddled with the knobs, peered into

the oven and jiggled the gas line at the back of it. Fifteen minutes later, with the stove fixed, Cassie poured the tea into their cups as they sat at the kitchen table.

‘Nice view out there across the lagoon to the ocean between the dunes. Summertime this place is jam-packed. A lot of families have been coming here forever. Book the same spot in the caravan park year after year. It’s a bit off the beaten track but for those in the know, it’s paradise. This is an odd time of year to come here.’ Geoff gave Cassie an enquiring look.

‘I wanted a break and the peace and quiet suits me.’

‘I don’t suppose you’re staying long, but if anything else goes wrong, all you have to do is tell the office and I’ll be right back out.’

‘Thanks, but I’m hoping there won’t be any other faults.’

‘Righto. If you want to know anything the office can always help you out, or you can give me a ring. I’ve been here a good number of years now, I know what’s what and who’s who. Anyway, you probably won’t need help because this town is so small, you’ll know every inch of it in a day!’

‘How long have you been here?’ asked Cassie.

‘About twenty years. Usual story – my wife and I came on holidays and fell in love with the place. Quit a boring job in Newcastle and started doing handyman work and gardening. I like working outdoors. We lived in a caravan before I built our house. You should come back when it starts to warm up.’

‘I don’t know. I’ve only been here a few days but I’m enjoying the cool weather and solitude.’

‘You warm enough? Have you got enough wood for the pot-bellied stove and the barbecue? I know the office supplies some, but it’s rubbish. I can bring you round some better stuff. I’ve got a big stash of seasoned wood and a bundle of old fence posts.’

‘That’s kind of you. I’d like that very much. Could you bring it by tonight so I can have a nice fire in the pot-bellied stove?’ asked Cassie, getting up and putting the milk away in the old refrigerator.

Geoff drained his cup. ‘No worries. You sure you’re okay out here on your own with no phone or TV?’ ‘Course you could rent a telly, there’s a connection they put in last year. But you’ll have problems with mobile phone coverage out here.’

‘Yes, so I discovered. But I found that if I walk out to the edge of the lagoon there’s a spot where it works. I don’t think I want a TV. For the moment I’m enjoying re-discovering the radio and the joys of a good book. But thanks for asking.’

Geoff nodded and took his cup to the sink, rinsed it and pulled a card from his pocket and left it on the bench before he walked out of the little cabin and closed the door behind him.

Cassie watched him get into his car, touched that he was concerned about her being there on her own. She hadn’t felt lonely or at all nervous staying among the whispering she-oaks. Right now she preferred not having people around. And she liked the idea of some good firewood. The little cabin would be cosier with a fire burning in the pot-bellied stove.

How very different it all was from the apartment she’d just left behind in Sydney. The slick, modern building that was only a short walk from the law firm where she and her husband had worked, seemed to be on a different planet from where she stood now.

Over the last few days she had tried not to think too much about the disaster that had happened in her marriage, but, now she’d opened that door, there was no closing it as the trickle of memories and emotions swiftly became a flood. She took a deep breath, picked up her

pashmina, wound it around her shoulders, walked out onto the little porch, sank into the unravelling wicker chair and stared at the lagoon where the wind was whipping up small foaming waves.

She saw now that the apartment had symbolised her relationship with Hal. It was always about him and what he wanted. She'd argued with him about their first home. She hadn't wanted to live right in the city, she would rather have gone somewhere like Manly, where she'd grown up in a rambling cliff-top house overlooking the ocean.

'I don't want an apartment in the city. The city is cold. Canyons of city blocks, like beehives with tinted windows and little worker bees slaving away inside them.'

Hal Holloway had merely laughed. 'That's us, babe. Worker bees. If you want to get ahead in a law firm, you have to be prepared to work long hours, so you won't want a long commute at the end of the day.'

And he'd been right. They could walk to their office in Phillip Street. But Cassie missed having a garden like the wild sprawling one that her mother tended, as it battled the salt air. Although, as Hal pointed out, she didn't have far to walk to beautiful Hyde Park to enjoy one of the best green spaces in Sydney, even if she had to share it with hundreds of others.

'If you're so keen to have a garden why don't you grow herbs in a pot or something?' he suggested.

So Cassie, who loved to cook, made plans to grow herbs and even tomatoes and salad vegetables on their balcony, but she never seemed to find the time. Indeed, both of them were so busy that they usually ate dinner in one of the restaurants they passed on their way home.

Even on the weekends they didn't just hang out at home. Most Friday nights they went to a bar after work with colleagues, though occasionally Cassie met up with

girlfriends when the macho shop talk and egocentric company of the men at her law firm became too irritating. Hal always worked on Saturdays, and often she would also use the weekend to try and stay on top of her very big workload too. Sunday morning was set aside for breakfast with friends, usually from their law firm, and afterwards Hal routinely popped back into the office to sort out what needed to be done in the coming week.

‘Hal, I wish we could socialise with people we don’t work with. Most of the men in the office drive me nuts, they are so aggressive. Can’t we spend time with people who are less ambitious?’

‘Cassie, you know that male lawyers are always in fight mode. Other lawyers have wives who aren’t involved in law and they don’t get it, which is why I’m glad you’re part of my world.’

When Cassie first met Hal, she was convinced they were right for each other, that they shared the same goals and dreams. Cassie was a bright girl at school and, because there was an expectation that clever girls went on to do either law or medicine at university, she chose to study law. She met Hal almost straight away as he was in the same year as she was and their paths crossed in class. He was hard to miss – exceedingly handsome, an athlete, articulate and ambitious. He was from a well-to-do family from the leafy, expensive suburb of St Ives. His father was the CEO of a finance corporation. Initially Hal had assumed that Cassie’s family business was little more than a fish and chip shop, but when he learned from other students that it was, in fact, the well-known Seven Seas restaurant in Manly, he dropped in with some of his friends and surprised her when she was working there one Sunday. He soon became a regular and he also sought out her company at the university and then they began going out together. A year later they moved in together.

Cassie was impressed by Hal's plans. He told her that the law was the bedrock of a civil society and that although he would initially work his way into a top-level position in an important legal firm, what he really wanted to do was to become a judge. As a judge, he told her, he could make justice really effective.

After university they had both got jobs at the same law firm. Cassie remembered how excited she was when she thought that they would be working together, but it didn't turn out that way. Hal was successful as a criminal defence lawyer and had become more senior while Cassie continued to work in the litigation department. He put in longer and longer hours at work, spending a lot of time with his team. Sometimes, if he was involved with a particularly stressful and tiring case, he'd come home slightly drunk after unwinding with his work mates. At first Cassie commented on his behaviour, but after he snapped and told her that she should know what tremendous pressure he was under, she began to sense that they were moving in different directions.

When Cassie reminded him about his ambition to become a judge, Hal dismissed the idea.

'Don't be silly, Cassie,' he told her. 'Being a judge is too isolating, and it doesn't pay well enough. I can make much more as a partner in a top law firm.'

Now when Cassie spoke of truth and justice, human rights, legal aid, minorities or social issues, subjects about which they had once both been passionate, he became scathing.

'That stuff won't pay the bills or maintain our lifestyle,' Hal sneered.

Then Cassie began to have her own issues to deal with in the firm.

She was shocked when Bronwyn, one of the few senior female lawyers and her supervisor, had called her into her

office and told her that before she'd hand back Cassie's most recent report, Cassie would have to give her a neck massage. At first Cassie thought Bronwyn was joking, but then she realised the woman was serious. She was actually going to withhold Cassie's work until her neck had been massaged. Cassie started to comply but realised that massaging her supervisor's neck was not right so she stopped and excused herself. Ever since, relations between Cassie and Bronwyn had been very strained. When Cassie asked Hal whether she should say anything to the HR officer, he'd scoffed at her.

'And who are they going to back? A senior lawyer or junior you? Get real, Cassie.'

Other instances that occurred in the office really annoyed Cassie because they smacked of double standards. It seemed that whenever a female lawyer wanted to sit down and discuss something with her boss, she was seen as flirtatious or sycophantic, whereas when one of the men in the office did the same thing, he was admired for being ambitious.

Hal laughed at her observations and told her she was being oversensitive. It was the way it was in all big law firms. Women needed to either go along with it or opt out.

'That's ridiculous,' argued Cassie. 'Why should women go along with it? Why do big law firms maintain an outdated and, frankly, outrageous system that only functions at the behest of male participation? If a woman can see a different and better way of doing things, it's not even considered. Why should we be expected to operate within the parameters of the established ways of doing things if those ways are inefficient and sexist?'

'If you can't stand the heat . . .' Hal shrugged.

'Hal, women do get out of the kitchen,' said Cassie. 'They start their own firms, or work in smaller firms

where they're really valued and are much happier and more successful.'

'Your choice, babe. No one is stopping you. But you might find it tougher than you think. Are you going to work your bum off and take a pay cut just to make a point? Is that what you want?'

Cassie never seemed able to win an argument with Hal, but she did find one sympathetic ear at the firm: Marjorie Oldham, who'd worked as PA to a senior partner for years. She listened to Cassie's comments and nodded, agreeing with her that the old-style law firms were having trouble adjusting to new attitudes and work programs, and the need to be more flexible regarding their employees. But, as she said gently to Cassie, 'The majority of women who work in large law firms like this are extremely ambitious, just like the men. The last thing they want is a sign on their backs announcing, "I'm a working mum". So they'll work harder, put in longer hours, work for less, just to prove that they are as capable as their male counterparts. Cassie, if your ambition is different, if you aren't prepared to give up everything else to get ahead, then my advice is get another life. Take your pay packet and walk out the door.'

'Easier said than done,' said Cassie. 'As Hal has pointed out to me on many occasions, where else would I be able to get such good pay? Jobs paying what mine does are not easy to come by.'

'But are you saving anything? What's your and Hal's long-term plan? Time can escape, you know.'

'That's true. We vaguely talk about starting a family. I'd like to have children. But there's no actual plan,' said Cassie.

'How long have you been married?' asked Marjorie.

'Five years,' admitted Cassie. 'I married Hal when I was twenty-seven.'

‘Then make plans. If you don’t, he won’t. That’s all I can suggest.’

Cassie thanked Marjorie and started to think about her and Hal’s life. For one thing, she decided, they had to be a bit more practical about money. They both earned really good salaries but they also spent money without thinking. They ate out nearly every night because it was convenient. Hal only ever bought the best, whether it was a car or a coffee maker. They travelled. On long weekends they flew to lavish resorts on the Great Barrier Reef or to the snowfields. They went to Europe every two years for two or three weeks and stayed at the very best hotels. Hal’s suits and shirts were bespoke and he spent a small fortune on trendy casual gear. He was always generous to Cassie and gave her expensive jewellery each Christmas and birthday. They had their own bank accounts and never asked each other what they’d spent. But Cassie knew that if her account was anything to go by, most of his salary would have been frittered away like hers.

Now, looking back over all that had happened, Cassie wondered at what point Hal had lost interest in her. If she was honest, their sex life had become infrequent and mundane. They were both always tired to the point of exhaustion.

Hal had begun to spend even more time with his work colleagues, nearly every weeknight and also weekends. He always had an excuse for not being around. Cassie had thought that maybe Marjorie was right. Maybe she and Hal should have started a family. She had tried to imagine Hal being a father. What sort of an example would he set? Would he give up working late at night and on weekends for his family? She had doubted it.

The more deeply she had considered her future the more she found herself withdrawing. She did her work,

although she had to admit that her passion for the law was waning. Hal was absorbed in his cases, the details of which he no longer shared with her, and their conversation shrank to the trivia of daily life.

Then Hal started being nice to her. It was only small things but because it was so unusual for him to give her a smile or a compliment, she assumed that, like her, he was reassessing their future. Perhaps it was the right time to start discussing a baby after all.

How naive she'd been.

One of the worst parts of finding out about Hal and Kellie was the realisation that others in the office were beginning to avoid her or were giving her odd glances. She'd noticed smirks and conversations stopped when she approached. One morning she got to work to find a yellow post-it note stuck to her computer with a scrawled message: 'Watch your husband and a certain someone.'

Suddenly everything made sense. A swift kaleidoscope of images flashed through her mind. She knew instantly who the woman was: Kellie Leslie, an elegant and sassy newcomer from a rival law firm. She was so blatantly ambitious that Cassie had commented to Hal about it. But Hal had seen things differently. 'Well, whatever it takes. Got to give her credit for being up-front. She's bright and good company. She's probably been targeted by jealous women all her life.'

Cassie had rolled her eyes.

One Friday evening when they were having drinks after work, Cassie had watched with distaste as Kellie traded dirty jokes with her male colleagues and revealed office confidences. When she told Hal that she thought Kellie's behaviour was unprofessional, she was surprised when he told her not to be so stuffy. He thought Kellie was a breath of fresh air.

After she found the post-it note, Cassie confronted Hal. Of course he denied that he was having an affair.

But when Cassie told Marjorie Oldham her suspicions, Marjorie said, 'Leave it with me and I'll make a few enquiries.'

'It's like a TV soapie. I just can't believe it.' Cassie was in shock.

From that moment there had been an inevitable unravelling.

When Marjorie confirmed the rumours, Cassie confronted Hal again and he made a reluctant admission and promised that the affair was over. He even agreed to counselling. But Cassie wondered if she really wanted her marriage to continue. She wasn't sure that she really wanted to stay on in the law firm either. It would be too humiliating to go on working there after all that had happened. Cassie was in turmoil, so she rang her mother.

'Of course you can come and stay with me. Stay as long as you like. I'll enjoy the company,' her mother Jenny had answered when Cassie told her that she was planning on leaving the law firm and moving out of the apartment while she thought things over. 'But are you sure that you want to walk away from your job? After all, you've done nothing wrong. Surely Hal should be the one leaving.'

'As if, Mum. Hal is the golden-haired boy of the firm. All this has made me realise that Hal is not who I thought he was at all. It's not just this affair either. We are moving in such different directions. I'm not sure that I want to stay married to him anymore. I suppose I should fight for the marriage, but at the moment I can't. I need space and time away from him.'

'But Cassie, if that's the way you feel, why don't you at least stay in the apartment and ask Hal to leave?'

‘I suppose I could, but honestly, I’ve never liked the place. It’s always felt more like a hotel room than home. Your place feels like home to me.’

So Cassie had moved over to Manly, taking only a few possessions.

‘Why so few?’ asked her mother.

‘I suppose I could have taken more. Hal wouldn’t have put up much opposition but when I looked around the place, I realised that most of the things in it had been chosen by Hal, and I don’t really like them that much. Hal liked to buy things that he could show off to guests. I like more sentimental things, photos, old books, pretty vases. You know my taste.’

‘I certainly do,’ replied her mother. ‘There are boxes of your taste packed in the garage.’

‘I know. Hal hated my stuff. Said it didn’t suit the ambience of our place. Well, when I get a place of my own I’ll unpack my things and enjoy them.’

‘Any plans in that direction?’

‘Mum, if you can put up with me, I wouldn’t mind staying here for a little bit while I get used to the idea of being single again.’

Cassie stayed with her mother and continued to see the counsellor until she was absolutely sure that the marriage was over. Hal seemed to be indifferent. But Cassie was not sure what to do about her own future. The law now held little appeal, but she didn’t know what else she could do. Her mother suggested that they take a holiday together and, while Cassie thought a break was a good idea, she decided that she wanted time on her own to think through her future.

‘Where would you go?’ her mother asked. ‘The snow?’

‘Oh, Mum, I’m not in the mood for après ski. I don’t know. Maybe somewhere not too far away, but quiet. I couldn’t cope with lots of people.’

‘Your father always said that the south coast was lovely at this time of year. A bit wild, but beautiful in its own way. He told me that he went to Whitby Point as a boy and always promised to take me, but we never seemed to find the time. The restaurant business was pretty full on. Anyway, you could give it a go. It’s only a few hours drive, and it’s the off season, so accommodation won’t cost much. When you get back, you might have a better idea of what it is you want to do. I never saw you and a high-powered law firm as a happy fit.’

‘Mum, I have no regrets about slogging away to get a law degree. I did like the job when I started but I want to rethink where I’m going and I need a blank canvas, to clear the decks and clear my mind.’

‘I understand,’ said her mother.

*

When a ray of watery sunshine broke through the clouds Cassie got up from the old chair and shook her head to clear it. Enough, she told herself. Let it go. It’s over.

She was finding that her feelings for Hal were evaporating along with the hurt and the humiliation. She knew they had not been on the same wave length for ages and she wondered how they’d lasted as long as they had. Suddenly she had a sense of freedom, of being able to take deep breaths and move at her own pace in her own space away from the hothouse world of the law firm.

The weather looked fine enough for her to walk into the little town. Now the rain was clearing she had time to get there and back before evening closed in. She took a light backpack so that she could buy some milk, a newspaper and something fresh to eat.

Whitby Point was a small town with just a main street and several side streets, some of which led up the hill to small apartment complexes, old-style holiday houses and

a few newer cottages, all of which seemed to be holiday rentals awaiting summer visitors. Some of the little shops and cafés were closed for the winter.

As she strolled around Cassie felt very much at home. How nice it was to have time on her hands and no commitments. She browsed in the newsagency and bought a magazine as well as a paper.

‘Could you keep a paper for me each day, please?’ she asked the newsagent.

‘Sure, what’s your name?’

‘Cassie Holloway.’

‘How long do you want it for, Cassie?’

‘I’m not sure. Let’s say two weeks.’

‘You on holidays here? Sorry the weather’s not the best.’

‘It’s okay. I’m enjoying it.’

‘We deliver around town. Where are you staying?’

‘Out at Pelican Cove. If that’s too far for deliveries, not to worry. The walk into town does me good.’

‘You on your own?’ The newsagent looked concerned and Cassie hoped there hadn’t been some criminal on the loose in the area.

‘No, I have plenty of company,’ she said with a laugh, thinking of her books, magazines and music.

‘Good-o, then. See you tomorrow.’

She continued down towards the harbour front, noticing the small library tucked beside a coffee shop advertising its abbreviated winter opening hours. She hadn’t spotted a bookstore so she was glad there was a library. The street nearest the seafront contained some lovely old homes. The harbour had been updated recently by the look of things and Cassie wondered if that was for the benefit of the tourists. The fish co-op at the main jetty was a smart building with a gift shop and an attached restaurant shrouded in plastic blinds. She

went into the fish shop and cast an eye over the beds of shaved ice holding that day's catch.

A friendly woman with a big smile greeted her. 'What are you after, luv?'

'What's fresh and local?' asked Cassie.

'Ummn. Not a lot. Weather's been so bad. Leather-jackets, some small bream. Calamari. The prawns aren't local, they're frozen, from Thailand.'

'I'd rather not buy imported stuff,' said Cassie quickly.

'We prefer to buy and sell Australian seafood, but we can't always keep up with the demand, especially in the summer. Anyway, the boss has found one prawn farm in Thailand that is very, very clean and ecologically sustainable. He went over and checked it out before we agreed to buy their prawns.'

'I see,' said Cassie. 'Well, I'll take the squid. Quick and easy to cook.' Cassie handed over her money and stowed the small parcel of squid in her backpack.

'Enjoy.'

'I will. Thanks.'

She walked beside the sea wall and a little park and past an old boatshed where the main jetty had been extended to be part of a small marina. A few trawlers were moored there as well as some leisure boats. The park had a children's playground at one end beside a small stretch of sandy beach. At the other end of the harbour, up against the cliff, she could see an old-fashioned rock pool cut into the flat rocks, with wooden benches running along one side and a little change shed. The high tide was washing across the pool, and beyond the headland she could hear the roar of the ocean swell. She turned and walked back towards her cabin.

Despite being alone she took pleasure in rugging up in her jacket and walking for an hour or more along the

deserted blustery beach. She enjoyed listening to music with a glass of wine, or reading, or just dozing, curled on the old, roomy, cushioned lounge. Simple pleasures indeed, she told her mother when she had reception on her mobile phone.

‘You’re not lonely, are you?’ Jenny asked. ‘How long are you staying down there? You can’t stay there forever.’

‘I’m not thinking about anything for the moment, Mum. This is R and R, remember.’

‘Of course. I’m glad you’re liking it. Have you met any nice people?’ asked Jenny.

‘A lovely man, Geoff Spring. In his sixties, the local handyman. He’s bringing me some firewood,’ said Cassie.

‘Oh, I see. Not the jetset then?’ said Jenny.

‘I’m sure there are a few locals at the pub on Friday night but I’m not about to go to find out. I’m fine, Mum, really I am.’

‘If you’re sure. Well, since you’re fine, I’ve decided to go off for a holiday to climb Mount Kinabalu in Borneo,’ Jenny told her daughter.

‘Some holiday! And you’re worried about me,’ said Cassie, laughing. ‘Who are you going with?’

‘That group of experienced walkers I’ve travelled with before. I’ve told you about them. I’ll be fine and I won’t be gone long,’ replied Jenny.

‘Take care, enjoy yourself and try to phone me when you can. Love you, Mum.’

*

Late that afternoon Geoff appeared with a load of wood, which he stacked on the side of the little porch. He presented Cassie with a plastic plate covered in aluminium foil. Cassie peeled back the foil and smiled.

‘Whiting. What lovely fat ones too. Thank you. Did you catch them?’

‘Certainly did. Just off the beach. Thought as I was coming this way with the wood, I’d bring the rod for a bit of a fish, seeing as there’s a break in the weather.’ He glanced skywards. ‘Not going to last though, so batten down the hatches. I’ve only cleaned the fish. Do you want me to fillet them?’

‘I can do that, thanks, Geoff. I really appreciate this. How often do you fish?’ Cassie asked.

‘As often as I can, without the tourists around. The weather might be cold but the fishing is great. Have you ever been fishing?’

‘Sure have, Geoff. I know a lot about fish. As a matter of fact, I practically grew up around the Sydney fish markets. I loved going there with my dad.’ She smiled. ‘My parents owned a fish restaurant. Dad started a little fish and chip shop and it grew into a seafood restaurant. It was really popular.’

‘Whereabouts in Sydney was your parents’ place? I might have been there.’

‘Manly. Right on the Corso. It was called the Seven Seas.’

Geoff looked at Cassie in surprise. ‘I know it! Anyone who’s been to Manly knows it. Lovely place. Great food! Well, imagine that.’ He looked impressed. ‘I reckon you could teach me a thing or two about cooking fish.’

‘I wouldn’t say that. The only time I worked in the restaurant I was a waitress. Dad died some time back and Mum eventually sold the Seven Seas. But Whitby Point seems to be the place to fish.’ Cassie was genuinely enthused.

‘You bet. This place was once a really important part of the fishing industry. Started by the Italians. Some of them are still around but the place is nothing like it used to be. No, in its heyday, Whitby Point was a thriving fishing town. I remember one time a big bluefin tuna fetched sixty thousand dollars. Sent to Japan of course.’

‘What happened to the fishing industry?’ asked Cassie.

‘Lots of things. Overfishing, too many cheap imports, ocean temperature’s changed, government regulations, you name it, but it’s hurt a lot of local people, which is why we rely so much on tourism now.’

‘That’s such a pity,’ said Cassie. ‘Geoff, would you like a drink? I have red wine or white wine. No beer, I’m afraid. I can always put the kettle on if you’d prefer a cuppa. I’ll just put these fish away.’

‘Well, a glass of red wine never goes astray.’ He sat on the top step of the porch as Cassie went inside and returned with two glasses of wine.

‘Cheers. You settling in all right?’

‘Feel like I’ve lived here for ages. Bit cold for swimming, though.’

‘The water’s always a bit cool here on the south coast, but I like the ocean a bit crisp on a hot day. There’re a couple of old fellas here who swim in the rock pool all year round.’

Cassie laughed. ‘To each his own. Tell me, I’ve been meaning to ask someone, how come this is named Whitby Point? Who was Mr Whitby?’

‘Can’t say who the original bloke was, but Captain Cook named the place when he sailed up the east coast. This little inlet must have reminded him of the fishing town of Whitby in Yorkshire where he learned his seamanship.’

‘Interesting. I suppose you never forget the place you come from,’ mused Cassie. ‘What about you, Geoff? Where was home originally?’

‘Not that far from here, the other side of Wollongong, Stanwell Park. Lovely spot, but my family moved up to Newcastle when I was pretty little, though we always went back in the holidays to camp there. You from Sydney? A lot of city people come down here over the summer holidays. Not many around at present. Can I ask why you

chose this time of year? Not that there's anything wrong with that.'

Suddenly Cassie wanted to tell someone about her problems and Geoff seemed such a kind man. 'I'm trying to deal with my marriage. Well, actually I'm over it. I'm more adjusting to what to do with myself after I get the divorce. I've also just quit my corporate job and now I'm wondering what I'm going to do next. I always thought I knew what career I wanted, and now I've found that what I was doing was wrong for me. So I'm down here by myself, so that I can have some space to think.'

Geoff nodded. 'It's a bit of a lost art, just thinking and taking it slow and easy. I think people get fearful about all kinds of things and feel that the minute they stop whatever it is that they're doing, their lives are no longer meaningful, productive or fulfilling, when, in fact, it's a great challenge to go slow.' He pointed at Cassie's wristwatch. 'What appointments do you have down here?'

Cassie thought a moment, took off her watch and pushed it into her pocket. 'You're right,' she said, laughing.

'Savour time, don't rush. Fishing makes a clock stop.'

'That's so true. I'd forgotten.'

'By the way, how're you going to cook the fish? In batter with some chips?'

'No way,' said Cassie, laughing. 'I'm just going to toss the fillets in a bit of flour and fry them lightly in butter, put some fresh parsley and a squeeze of lemon juice on top and serve them with a green salad.'

'Makes me hungry. I'd better be off and help the wife rustle up dinner.'

'Sounds good, Geoff,' said Cassie. 'And I'll take your advice. You said that there were Italians in Whitby Point; is there a good Italian restaurant here? I might eat out one night, for a change.'

‘Not these days, but the Indian restaurant is really good. I can recommend that.’ He glanced at the sky again. ‘Cassie, latch things down tonight, I reckon a southerly is going to blow up.’ He pointed to a thin layer of clouds accumulating over the hill. ‘Thanks for the drink.’

As he left, Cassie suddenly called out to him. ‘I know this might sound out of left field, but I was wondering if next time you go fishing, I could come along, too? It’d be great to fish again. I can pick up a line or a rod in town.’

His face lit up. ‘A girl who wants to fish! Well that’s a treat. I’ve got plenty of spares. I’ll give you a shout next time it’s looking good.’

*

Cassie felt happy after her casual chat with the gentle Geoff. He had listened to her, made no demands and held no expectations, and he had given her some very good advice. Her time was now indeed her own.

Simple as her meal was, Cassie enjoyed the time she spent preparing it. She set a place at the table for herself with care. In the gathering gloom she foraged in the scrub behind the cabin for some gum leaves and flowering wattle, and used a glass as a vase. She lit the pot-bellied stove, savoured another glass of red wine and, as the day dimmed, she didn’t turn on the radio or her iPod but lingered over her food. She’d decided to leave the squid for another day and eat Geoff’s fish, and she was pleased that she had for she hadn’t tasted such good fish for a long time. Not since her mother had sold the restaurant. She wasn’t sure if it was because the fish was so fresh, or because it was a gift from Geoff Spring who radiated kindness, or because she had cooked it with care and pleasure, or whether it was a combination of all these factors. For the first time in a long while she felt at peace, with herself and with the world. She couldn’t quite analyse how or

why she felt the way she did, but Cassie sensed that she had reached some kind of milestone.

Geoff was right. That evening a windstorm and rain battered the windows and threatened to lift the roof off the little cabin. Or so it seemed to Cassie as she went to bed by candlelight since the power had gone off.

She was awakened by a crack and a crash and she realised that a tree branch had come down near the cabin. She heard a thump on the little porch, the window rattled and there was a distant flash of lightning. Cassie listened carefully as the noise on the porch continued. She had a vision of a strange man stumbling around outside. She put her head under the doona and for the first time a small knot of fright tightened in her chest.

Nevertheless, eventually she slept and when she opened her eyes she discovered a grey dawn outside. The rain and wind had gone but it was cold. She poked the remains of the fire and put some twigs on the glowing embers, watching with satisfaction as they caught alight.

She boiled some water for a cup of tea and then, holding her mug, with the doona trailing over her shoulders, she opened the door to see what the wild weather had done.

The porch was sodden, scattered with leaves and twigs. As she took a step there was a bang and the old chair tipped up, making her jump with shock. At the far end of the little porch stood a shivering, skinny dog. Cassie moved forward and it lay down, cowering in fright, its chin on its paws. She put her mug down and walked slowly forward holding out her hands for the dog to sniff. The dog squirmed forward on its belly to smell her outstretched hands and then it licked them.

‘Oh you poor, pathetic creature,’ she murmured. She stroked its head and slowly ran her hand along its flanks. Its ribs were clearly visible through its matted hair. It looked to be a young dog, a black and tan kelpie crossed with

something with long hair. It had a kelpie's face and intelligent brown eyes, and a kelpie's body shape but the fur was thicker with black markings against the brown. When Cassie stood up the dog shrank away from her once more.

It took a little while to cajole the dog to come indoors but, bribed with soft words and a bit of toast, he slunk inside. Cassie put a bowl of water down for him and looked for something more to feed him. He quickly devoured a bowl of cereal and milk.

She dressed and cleaned up inside the cabin and swept the porch while the exhausted dog slept in front of the fire. It wore no collar and seemed in such poor condition that she thought it must be a stray. Cassie wondered if it had accidentally fallen from a ute or a truck, or whether it had been deliberately dumped.

When the sun came out Cassie decided to walk into town for the paper and debated whether she should leave the dog indoors as it was still soundly asleep. Instead she pulled out an old beach towel and coaxed him onto the wicker chair on the porch where she left him munching some Anzac biscuits.

As she reached the road the lady from the fish co-op drove past and gave her a big wave. Then the boy who worked in the garage where she'd got her petrol drove past and gave her a grin and a thumbs up. Cassie was impressed by the friendliness of the locals, but when another car passed her and signalled at something behind her, Cassie looked around. Trotting after her was the dog. He stopped when she stopped.

'Oh, no. You were supposed to stay at home!'

The dog cocked his head and gave a tentative shake of his feathery tail. Then he sat and waited.

Cassie turned away and started to walk briskly. When she looked over her shoulder, the dog was keeping pace, maintaining the same distance between them. She stopped;

it stopped. Finally she said to it, 'Listen, if you're going to walk with me, you don't have to be ten metres behind. Come here, and keep up.'

She snapped her fingers and the dog eagerly leapt forward. As she set off again it trotted just behind her right heel. 'So you do know a thing or two. I wonder where your owners are. What am I going to do with you?' she said, glancing down at the dog, who gave her a happy look.

At the newsagency she told the dog to sit and wait and it promptly sat at the entrance and didn't move, but watched her intently as she went to the counter for her paper.

'You got yourself a dog, Cassie?' said the newsagent, peering at the doorway. 'Had it on a diet, eh? Skinny little thing.'

'It arrived on my porch during the storm last night. And you're right, it is skinny. No collar and no idea who it belongs to. What do you suggest I do with it?'

'It sure looks like a stray. I've never seen it round here. Maybe it's got a microchip. You could take it to the vet and get it checked out. He might have a missing dog sheet for the area.'

'That's a good idea. Where's the vet?'

*

'Phew, getting a workout this morning,' said Cassie as she caught her breath at the top of the hill and looked for the address of the veterinary practice that the newsagent had given her. The dog wagged his tail. He didn't look at all out of breath.

The vet's practice was in an old-fashioned rambling bungalow with a wrap-around verandah and spectacular views. Spread out below was the harbour. Cassie could see the main wharf with the fish co-op, the boatshed and an old trawler in the slips as well as the breakwater with its bar opening to the ocean. Beneath the headland was

the rock pool. In the other direction, she could see rolling green paddocks. If she walked around to the side of the house, Cassie thought she'd probably see unbroken miles of the southern beach.

She went in the door marked 'Reception', the dog following obediently. Once inside, however, his tail drooped and he looked nervously around at the other waiting people; a woman with a hissing cat in a carry box and another, more elderly woman, holding a very tiny terrier.

The girl at the desk took her details and nodded as Cassie explained that the dog wasn't hers but she wondered if it had a microchip implant that would give its owner's details so she could return it.

As they waited their turn, the dog sat by her chair pressed against her leg, intently watching the comings and goings.

'Dr Phillips will see you now.' The receptionist smiled and pointed to the examination room. Cassie stood up and walked over to it, and the dog followed.

Dr Phillips looked to be in his late thirties with tousled dark brown hair, friendly eyes, an easygoing manner and a two-day growth on his chin. Cassie couldn't help smiling at the smock he wore. It certainly wasn't the businesslike plain cotton jacket usually favoured by dentists, hospital staff and vets. This vet's top was made from a cheerful blue print covered in prancing pink flamingoes.

'Hi, I'm Michael Phillips.'

'Cassie Holloway. I do like your top.' She couldn't let it pass unmentioned.

'Ah, yes. A gift from a local high school student who came here to do some work experience. Now, who's this?' He squatted down so that he was eye to eye with the dog who was cowering close to Cassie.

'That's just it, I have no idea. It's a stray who wandered in last night during the storm.'

Gently the vet held out his hand and let the dog sniff it. He stroked the dog and ran his hands around the dog's head and the back of his neck. 'No collar and very undernourished. C'mon, matey, let's have a good look at you.' Before the dog could react, he scooped it up, put it on top of the examining table and ran his hands expertly over its body and legs.

The dog never took his eyes off Cassie, as though looking for reassurance.

Cassie patted his head. 'It's all right, old boy. Dr Phillips is a friend.'

'He's decided you're a friend, that's for sure,' said the vet. 'He seems in pretty good condition except he's so thin, and there's a bit of a bump on his hip. I think he's either taken a fall or been hit by something. It doesn't seem too serious, so I don't think it's worth the expense of an X-ray. Let's see if he's got a microchip. No, I can't feel one.'

'I was hoping there'd be one. I hate to think of someone pining for him. I wonder if he fell off the back of a ute or a truck and he's trying to walk home to his family in Melbourne or somewhere,' said Cassie.

The vet chuckled. 'I don't think so. His paws aren't worn as though he's spent a lot of time walking. But he's not a dog I recognise. Young dog, about two years old, I'd say. A kelpie cross, good working dog. Not microchipped.'

'He seems to know a few things. Or he's just smart,' said Cassie. 'I'd look after him for a bit. But . . .'

'I know. You don't want to get attached if the owner turns up,' said the vet. 'I'd keep him here, but it wouldn't be any fun for him.' He rubbed the dog's ear and the dog relaxed.

'I'm down at the cabins by the lagoon. I don't know if they allow dogs but as I'm the only one there so I guess I could look after him . . .'

'Yes, Pelican Cove. How long are you staying?'

Cassie paused. 'I'm not sure. I'm taking a sort of break here.'

Michael Phillips stroked the dog's back. 'You chose a good place, good time of year. The winter here is a well-kept secret.'

Cassie nodded. 'It's lovely. So he seems healthy enough?'

'I'll give you some worm tablets. Buy him some tucker and give him a decent brush. Take him for a run on the beach, he'll be as happy as Larry, I'd say. Perhaps you could put an ad in the local paper to try to find the owner. Call me if you have any problems. Just play it day by day.'

'Just the way I'm living my life,' said Cassie breezily.

'Nothing wrong with that. And this is the right place to do it.' He lifted the dog down, opened the door and walked with her to the front desk.

'You have a great view from up here,' said Cassie.

'Yes. When I was a kid, I used to love watching the fishing fleet heading out to sea at night. Most of the boats are gone now.'

'You're a local then?' said Cassie.

'This was my grandfather's home. Okay, no charge for today,' he said to the receptionist. 'Leave your number with my receptionist and if anyone comes looking for a dog of this description, we'll give you a call,' he told Cassie.

'Thank you,' said Cassie.

'I think he'd better thank you,' said Michael Phillips as he patted the dog. Then he smiled at Cassie, nodded goodbye and picked up the file for the next client.

'Well, I guess you passed,' said Cassie to the dog, who followed her outside with his tail arched, pointing skywards.

*

Cassie put an ad in the local paper, thinking that if it brought no response she'd put up some handwritten posters around town, though she figured in such a small place anyone missing a dog would look in the paper or call the vet anyway. She had no idea what she would do with a dog, so she was determined not to become attached to him.

She told him firmly, 'I'll look after you while you're here. But I'm not going to bond with you and have you take off one day when your owner turns up on the doorstep. Of course, they must have been pretty sloppy people to lose you in the first place. Or did you run away? Are you on the lam, kid? What mischief did you get up to, eh?' As she spoke to the dog, she was pleased to hear her own voice in the small cabin.

The dog listened attentively, head cocked to one side, giving an occasional encouraging shake of his tail. At the word 'mischief', he lay on the floor, looking contrite.

Cassie couldn't help laughing. 'What an actor you are!'

She'd given him some food, including a bone, which he chewed on the porch. He gave it his full attention, equal to that of a school examination paper. At sunset they went to the lagoon and she threw sticks for him to retrieve. Then they went for a brisk walk along the beach before returning to the cabin as darkness fell. She put his dinner on the porch next to his water dish while she lit the fire and started cooking her meal. It felt good to have someone else to do things for and to share the evening with.

'No more lounging around and reading all day. I expect you'll want to get up and get going in the morning,' she said cheerfully, as the satiated dog licked and cleaned his paws before settling down in front of the fire, scraping the old beach towel into a sort of nest for himself.

'I suppose you think that's your place,' said Cassie.

She ate her dinner. Then read more of her book, had another glass of wine and then, feeling drowsy, took the dog for a quick walk before bed.

After brushing her teeth she put another log on the fire. The dog, curled on the old towel, took no notice.

Cassie snuggled into bed feeling more contented than she had in a long time. She felt relaxed. The disturbed and emotional nights of the past year were over. She felt she was doing the right thing, ending her marriage, quitting her job, and changing her life. The emotions of those long, dark nights when she'd cried herself to sleep were still a little painful to recall, but they were behind her now. For the first time in a long time she had utterly no commitments, except for this dog.

Cassie slept soundly, undisturbed by the high winds and intermittent rain. She did vaguely register a sudden thump on the bed as the dog jumped up and wiggled his way up beside her. Half asleep, she reached out and patted his head. It was comforting to know the dog was there. He made her feel safe and not alone anymore. With a sigh, the dog curled up on the doona and slept.

Still dozy in the morning, she leaned over and stroked the dog, who began to nuzzle her hand. Cassie jumped out of bed.

'Don't you try and con me. Outside, Mr Dog. Do what you have to do. The day has begun.'

As the dog sniffed the wet grass, Cassie looked at the brilliant sunrise and felt invigorated.

'I'm so glad I'm here. I wish I could stay. I have a whole life ahead of me. But what am I going to do with myself?'

The dog took no notice so she went inside and made herself a pot of tea and toast. All the while her mind was churning. After feeling that her life was going nowhere, Cassie felt as if a switch had been turned on. She was full of energy and enthusiasm. She couldn't remember feeling

this happy in a long, long time. She wanted to make plans. She felt ready to get going. She needed a project.

The dog scratched at the screen door to come inside.

She laughed and opened it. 'I guess you're my project for the moment. Come in, you smart thing.'

He sat neatly, feet together, tail curled, and watched her chew every mouthful of toast.

Cassie shifted in her seat so she couldn't see his pleading eyes.

While it would be months or even longer before the divorce was final, and the apartment would have to be sold and money divided, Cassie knew she was now in a better place than she had been. She had regrets but she knew that the years with Hal, and working in the law firm, had not all been wasted.

She carried her plate to the sink and the dog's eyes followed her. She picked up the last tiny bit of toast crust and stood in front of him. He didn't move though his nose twitched.

'C'mon. Sit up.'

He cocked his head and looked a bit confused, but quickly he understood what she wanted. Sitting on his haunches he lifted his front paws. Cassie held the toast tantalisingly close to his snout.

'Take it gently, mister. Slowly, like a gentleman.'

The dog delicately took the morsel.

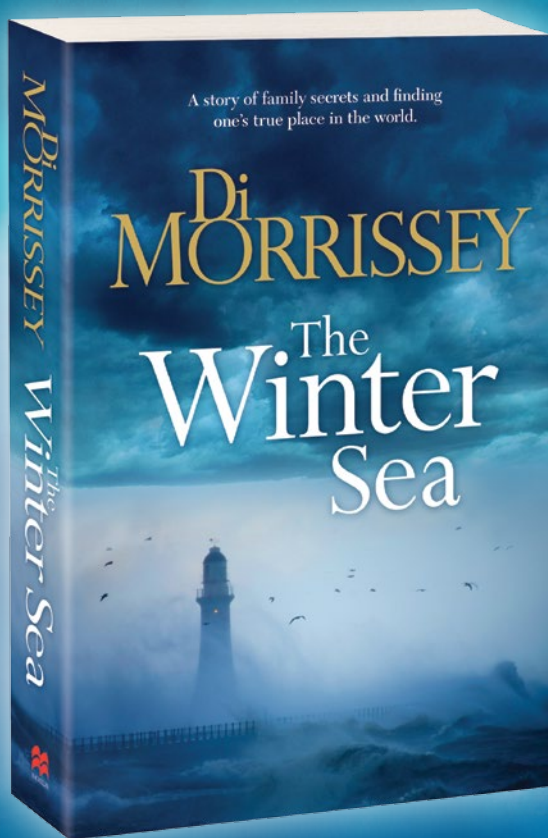
Cassie clapped her hands. 'Excellent. Good dog.'

The dog now bounced exuberantly, happy he'd pleased her, and looked around for more toast.

'No more. I'm getting dressed and I think we'll go for a drive and explore the district. I have a good feeling about today.'

The dog wagged his tail, happy to go along with whatever she planned.

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