

One

March, Near Cairns, Australia

“Mom! Hurry up,” Lori Reese urged, sounding more like a six--year--old than a young woman in her sophomore year of college. “We don’t want to be late!”

At the sound of her daughter’s voice, Sarah Reese rolled over in bed, buried her face in the thick, downy pillow, and contemplated taking up bank robbery in order to afford a return trip to this resort. She and Lori were nearing the end of their two--week all--expenses--paid Australian vacation, and the experience had given her a tantalizing taste of traveling in the lap of luxury.

“Ten more minutes.” This bed was heaven.

“It’s already six--fifteen.”

Their ride to the marina was scheduled to arrive at seven o’clock, and getting ready would take fifteen minutes, tops. She didn’t need to hurry. “Five more minutes.”

Indulgent frustration laced Lori’s voice. “When exactly did we switch roles? I think it must have been the first day of the trip, when you spent half of that interminable plane ride flirting with the man across the aisle.”

Sarah grinned into her pillow, then lazily rolled her head and looked at her daughter. Her heart melted with a potent combination of love and pride. Lori was a sophomore majoring in biomedical science at Texas A&M University and making excellent progress toward her goal of earning admission to A&M’s College of Veterinary Medicine. She’d worked hard to work ahead and cleared an extra ten days of spring break with her professors. At twenty, she was taller than her mother by seven inches—-a fact she loved to tease five--foot--nothing Sarah about at every opportunity. She had Sarah’s high cheekbones and dark hair, and her grandmother Ellen’s sweet smile. Her eyes were a beautiful blend of shades of green. Sarah’s late father had called them mountain eyes, because her eyes were a mountainside of aspen and fir and piñon and cottonwood.

Sarah didn’t see the mountains when she looked at Lori’s eyes. She saw Cam Murphy. Her daughter had her father’s eyes. She had Cam’s height and Cam’s eyes—-two distinctive characteristics that provided Sarah an unwelcome reminder of the man she’d just as soon forget.

“I wasn’t flirting with the guy across the aisle. I was just being friendly. He was the one doing all the flirting.”

“Yeah, right.” Lori’s eyes gleamed with amusement as they made an exaggerated roll. “Okay, here’s the deal. I’m going to wander over to the lobby and get two cups of coffee. If you’re not out of bed by the time I come back, I’ll drink both of them.”

Sarah scowled and grumbled, “Obviously I didn’t spank you enough when you were little.”

Lori laughed, and a moment later, Sarah heard the door to their suite softly close. She gave a wistful sigh, rolled onto her back, and sat up. Her reluctance to rise had more to do with the fact that today was the last day of their dream--of--a--lifetime vacation than with fatigue.

They'd had an absolutely, positively wonderful trip, seeing enough of the country to make them feel like they'd gotten a taste of Australia but not so much that they felt rushed. The past three nights they'd spent here at a magnificent resort on the Coral Sea, and today they'd ice their vacation cake with a catamaran trip out to the Great Barrier Reef.

Sarah stretched as she gazed out through glass--pane French doors, past the veranda, with its private spa tub, and across the golden-sand beach toward the turquoise sea. She crossed to the doors and pushed them open, then took time to count her blessings. This trip had been the grand prize in a contest sponsored by Angel's Rest, the healing center and spa owned by her friend Celeste Blessing in the little Rocky Mountain town where they lived. Back home in Eternity Springs, snow covered the ground, and the day they'd left, the thermometer flirted with zero degrees. As the seaside breeze softly stirred, Sarah murmured, "I still can't believe I'm here."

She'd dreamed of visiting Australia since childhood. Back in high school, she and Cam had stretched out on a quilt up at their favorite make--out spot, Lover's Leap, and planned how they'd backpack across Europe, explore the pyramids of Egypt, and dive the Great Barrier Reef. When life took a pair of unexpected turns their junior year, youthful dreams had faded in the face of stark, cold reality.

She wished one of those realities would hurry back with the coffee.

Sarah turned away from the breathtaking view and headed into the bathroom. When she emerged showered and dressed ten minutes later, she spied Lori seated outside on the veranda. Two cups of coffee and two huge cinnamon rolls waited on the small table between the chairs.

"You are both wonderful and wicked, my child," Sarah told her daughter as she took her seat. "I'll gain two pounds just looking at that roll."

"Nah, we have a strenuous day ahead of us. We need the calories. Besides, you need to check out the competition. You might want to tweak your recipe for the cinnamon rolls you make for the Mocha Moose."

Sarah sipped her coffee and raised her brows in disdain. "My cinnamon roll recipe doesn't need to be tweaked, thank you very much."

Lori tilted her head, considering, then said, "Okay, you're right. It's impossible to improve on perfection."

Sarah operated Eternity Springs's only grocery store, the Trading Post, established by her great--grandfather and run by family members ever since, but she supplemented her income by baking breads and desserts for a number of the businesses in town. She knew her way around a cake of

yeast. She dipped her head in regal acceptance of her daughter's compliment, then tore off a piece of roll and popped it into her mouth. Sweet flavor exploded on her tongue. "Yum, this is good. Could use a tiny bit more vanilla, though, I think."

The two women shared a grin, then polished off their breakfast. Moments later, tote bags stuffed with necessities of a day on the water in hand, they exited their suite. Seeing that the tour company van had yet to arrive, Sarah lamented, "I could have had my ten minutes, after all."

"Oh, stop it. I'm too excited to listen to you whine. Aren't you excited?"

"Yes, I'm excited." Sarah threaded her arm through Lori's and squeezed. She was excited. The tour's itinerary sounded divine. First, the catamaran would sail to a cay famous for its protected sandy lagoon, gorgeous beach, and migratory bird population. Then while Sarah snorkeled—she'd never learned to dive—Lori, who'd earned her certification while away at college, would join other tour members in a drift dive along the reef. Following a gourmet lunch and some beach time, they'd sail to the Outer Barrier Reef for more snorkeling for Sarah and a wall dive for Lori.

Diving the Great Barrier Reef. Wow. As a passenger van sporting the Adventures in Paradise Tours logo pulled into the resort's circular drive, Sarah couldn't help but think of Cam. She seldom allowed her mind to go there, but today, as their daughter was about to fulfill one of those Lover's Leap dreams, she couldn't hold back the memories.

Cameron Daniel Murphy. In so many ways, he'd been born a troubled soul. His mother had been a Cava-naugh, the darling daughter of the town's leading family until she'd rebelled against her parents by marrying the town scoundrel, Brian Murphy. They'd disowned her, disinherited her, moved away from Eternity Springs, and died in a plane crash shortly before Cassie gave birth to Cam.

Cassie and Brian Murphy had struggled to make ends meet, and when Cassie showed up a time or two with bruises on her face, it set tongues wagging, but no one stepped in to help. Cassie died when Cam was eight years old, and Brian Murphy surrendered to alcoholism like his father had before him. It surprised no one. After all, he was a Murphy.

Cam had never stood a chance in Eternity Springs. For as long as Sarah could remember, Eternity Springs had waited with bated breath for the Murphy curse to show itself in Cam. They didn't have to wait very long. Cam first ran afoul of the law when he spray-painted threats on the courthouse wall when he was nine, and for the next few years, he was in trouble more often than he was out of it.

But my, oh, my, he'd done it for her—long before she even knew what "it" was. As a young man he'd been as wild and beautiful as the cougars that prowled the surrounding forests. In the end, he'd proved to be much more dangerous.

Their relationship had begun innocently enough when Cam had come to her rescue up on Murphy Mountain. On a Saturday in the spring of their freshman year, while on a camping trip

with kids from church, a mix--up in car assignments and an afternoon nap in the sunshine had left Sarah stranded. While she hiked down the mountain, Cam drove past on his motorcycle. When he stopped and offered to help, she hesitated. He was too young to have his driver's license, and she knew her parents would kill her if she rode with him—especially on a motorcycle. But her feet hurt and the forbidden thrill beckoned. They'd taken the long way home.

Cam Murphy had charmed her that afternoon, and the relationship that developed between the two teenagers over the next year had remained a secret pleasure. To this day, most people in Eternity Springs believed the lie about Lori's paternity that she'd told to protect her precious child's shoulders from bearing the weight of "Murphy bad blood."

Yet Sarah had loved Cam Murphy with every fiber of her foolish, teenaged soul. She'd had to grow up in order to put her love for him behind her. His rejection and the reality of a dependent child had made it easier to accomplish.

The van braked to a stop in front of them, shaking Sarah from her reverie. The driver's door opened, and a young man with sun--streaked hair, suntanned skin, and a bruised and swollen black eye exited the shuttle with a spring in his step. "G'day, ladies," he said in that wonderful Aussie drawl. "Reese, party of two, for Adventures in Paradise Tours?"

"That's us," Lori confirmed. Her eyes widened and she winced when she got a good look at his injury. "Wow. I bet that hurts."

The boy flashed a grin. "Not much. I've had worse. M'name's Devin, and I'm your transportation to the marina and the Bliss. Hop on in, and I'll introduce you to our other guests."

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