Someone Special

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Extract

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Chapter 1

On the night before she was due to travel back to Ireland, Romy Kilkenny went to dinner in a stylish restaurant overlooking Sydney Harbour. The restaurant was the current in-place to eat in the city, but its astronomical price tag as well as its lengthy waiting list for tables meant that it was normally out of her reach. Romy's usual haunt when she ate out was the rather less glamorous and significantly less pricey pizzeria at the end of her road. She liked the checked tablecloths and Chianti bottles as candle-holders, and that the staff welcomed her warmly as a regular customer. Right now – despite the spectacular views of the illuminated Harbour Bridge and Opera House from the curved picture window; and despite the carefully designed mood lighting, elegant place settings and amazing floral arrangements of the restaurant interior – she was rather wishing that they'd gone to the pizzeria after all. She wouldn't have felt so bad about not enjoying herself if they'd been having the two-for-the-price-of-one pepperoni and double-cheese special at Luigi's.

She'd wanted to have a good time tonight. Keith had gone to an enormous amount of trouble to ensure that the evening would be memorable and he'd had to pull in a huge favour to get a prized table by the window. But even as Romy gazed unseeingly at the leatherbound menu she was thinking that they should simply have stayed at the Opera Bar where they'd previously downed a couple of beers, crushed between a raucous hen party and a group of muscular rugby players who were hell bent on having a good time. Caught up in the midst of the fun-loving crowd she wouldn't have had any time to feel sorry for herself. She probably would've drunk too much beer, had a laugh and then tottered home on her impossibly high-heeled shoes which Keith had seen for the first time ever that night. He'd been startled by the sight of her in them, not having previously thought of her as the kind of girl who wore glamorous footwear and more used to seeing her in either desert boots or flip-flops. (The Australians called them thongs. She'd been taken aback at Keith talking about her lovely thongs when he meant flip-flops. It had, she told him, almost moved their relationship on to a whole new level.) He really had been stunned by her one and only pair of high heels, which brought her up to the approximate level of his shoulder. She was averagely tall at five foot four (and, as her father had once told her, sturdily built), but Keith was a towering hunk of a guy who made her appear small and fragile beside him. It was one of the reasons she liked being seen with him.

She'd been laughing and joking in the Opera Bar, trying

really hard to be cheerful and carefree, but now – surrounded by whispering waiters and overwhelmed by the sheer elegance of her surroundings – she felt suddenly deflated, knowing that in twenty-four hours she'd be on her way home and knowing too that even though it was home she didn't want to be there when Keith was here. And she wondered why it suddenly mattered to her, because they'd said goodbye to each other before and she'd never felt like this about it.

She was dreading going home. Not just because of leaving Australia and leaving Keith. But because she was going home to be with her family. And in the last few years, as she'd worked her way around the world, she'd hardly spared them a thought. Which, she reckoned, was probably just how they wanted it. It was certainly how *she* wanted it. As far as Darragh and Kathryn and Veronica were concerned (especially, ironically enough, as far as Veronica was concerned), the more time they spent apart the better.

While they waited for their food to arrive, Keith (oblivious to her mood and always in sunny humour himself) chatted about his plans for the following week. He was going to the Gold Coast and meeting up with some of their friends there for a few days of scuba-diving, water-skiing and surfing. She'd expected to go with them and was disappointed at missing out on the trip. He was filling her in on the schedule and she knew that he wanted her to feel included so she told him as sincerely as she could that it sounded great. But at the same time she couldn't help wondering whether Keith (or indeed any of them),

caught up in the sparkling blue ocean waters and the beach-front lifestyle, would even notice that she wasn't there.

She poked at her roasted barramundi, not hungry even though it had become her favourite fish in the world and was the expensive restaurant's signature dish. Then she rested her fork on her plate and stared out of the window.

'Don't you like it?' Keith looked at her in consternation and she picked up her fork again quickly.

'It's fabulous,' she said as she dug it into the fish once more. 'I was just . . . you know . . . thinking.'

He nodded in understanding. 'I know it's difficult for you,' he said. 'We'll all miss you when you go back. *I'll* miss you, you know that. But it might not be for long and . . . well, what choice do you have?'

'None,' she said, although part of her was thinking that of course she had a choice. Saying no was a perfectly acceptable choice, wasn't it? She could have told them that it was impossible to come home right now, that she'd been offered an extension to her contract (which was true) and that she needed to accept it for the sake of her job (which wasn't really true and which they would have known was just an excuse). Or she could have said that she'd met someone important to her and that it was impossible to leave him (not true either, even if she was having unaccustomed feelings for Keith tonight, wanting to throw her arms around him and beg him to ask her to stay). She told herself that these thoughts were generated by her unhappiness at leaving Australia, not her unhappiness at leaving Keith. But she was having them

all the same. She could have even told them the absolute truth and said that she didn't care what the emergency was, that there was nothing on earth that would drag her home.

But of course if she said that they'd simply think she was being selfish. And she was certain that they thought of her as selfish already – the girl who had swanned (she just *knew* they would use the word swanned whenever they talked about her) around the world for the past four years, not even telling them until the very last minute on the few occasions when she'd come home at all and then not bothering to meet up half the time but spending it with her father instead. Veronica herself might not think she was selfish, of course. Her mother would understand only too well why she didn't want to come home because Romy had made her feelings very clear about it in the past. But now circumstances had changed and Romy had been surprised when she learned that Veronica had agreed that her return would be the best solution all round. All the same, being in the same house as her mother again would be . . . challenging. To say the least! She took a slug of Sauvignon blanc (about three times as expensive as Luigi's so, she told herself, she should savour it, not chug it back), then played with her food again.

Ask me to stay, she thought, as she nibbled at the fish (truly gorgeous, how on earth could she not feel hungry?) and glanced at Keith through her long, dark eyelashes. Ask me! Tell me you love me and you don't want me to go and I'll ring them now and say that I've changed my mind and hang the consequences.

She swallowed the flakes of fish, thankful that Keith couldn't read her mind. Wanting him to tell her he loved her was a ridiculous notion. He didn't love her and she didn't love him either, but that hadn't stopped her mind going into overdrive with the notion. It had been her middle-of-the-night alternative for the last few days when she'd lain in her single bed, separated from him by a plasterboard wall, and tried to come up with reasons for not going home. She'd wondered why it was that he'd never once, in all the years she'd known him, shown the slightest bit of interest in her. And why it was that she'd never before thought of him as the kind of guy she'd like to spend the rest of her life with either. She'd only started thinking like this since she'd got the phone call and she knew that she was clutching at straws in her efforts to find reasons not to leave. In the clarity of daylight she didn't want Keith to fall in love with her and she didn't want to fall in love with him either because that would mean losing one of her best friends, and she'd seen *When Harry Met Sally* so she knew that letting other feelings in ruined male–female friendships. And she really didn't want to ruin her friendship with Keith. (She conceded that Harry and Sally eventually got it together at the end of the movie. But she bet that they would've split up again later.)

Anyhow, there'd been no chance of ruining her friendship with Keith because there was no chance of him or, indeed, of anyone else falling madly in love with her and begging her not to go home lest it break his heart. There hadn't been anyone in her life for ages. So no broken

hearts at her departure. Anyway a broken heart still wouldn't have been enough to get her off the hook.

Keith looked up and saw her staring at him and she blushed. He grinned at her and she smiled back before swallowing a forkful of fish. He was, as usual, being sensible about it all whereas she was being buffeted around by her unreliable emotions. It wasn't all that unusual; in their circle she was known as the emotional one – hot-headed and fiery-tempered but (she hoped) usually good-natured and cheery too. It was bugging her, though, that she couldn't find the good nature and cheer tonight no matter how hard she tried.

She wondered whether she'd fallen in love with him unknown to herself but she was pretty sure that was impossible. Her relationship with Keith was comfortable and easy and one of the constants in her life. Love, if she'd read all the novels and magazines correctly, was the complete opposite of how she felt with him. It was about being on edge all the time; waiting for a phone call, unable to eat or sleep for thinking about the object of your desire, wanting to kiss them and hold them and touch them . . . love was those things, not the sort of relationship she had with Keith where they sat in the back garden with a couple of tinnies and shared news about the day.

Their kind of companionship would only turn into love if mind-blowing sex was an option. And there had never been the option of mind-blowing sex (it probably wouldn't have been mind-blowing. It probably would have been damp-squib sex, which she didn't want to have with Keith – or anyone). So she was cool about it, no worries, but it

was just that tonight it would have been nice to have something more. To be with someone who did love her, who truly would be heartbroken and who would definitely have begged her not to leave.

Although they were in Australia together (and he was a genuine Sydneysider) she'd actually met Keith Barrett in Ireland. On her very first dig, in fact, outside Galway, when she'd been new to everything and excited about what she was doing and terrified of getting it wrong. She'd stood in the empty field and thought about what might be lying under the soil and she'd told herself that she was as qualified an archaeologist as anyone else there even though, quite honestly, she'd just felt like a kid let out of school for the day despite the fact that lots of people on the dig were nearly as young as her. She was wearing her hi-vis jacket and her pristine new boots (bright pink and trimmed with fake pink fur – her dad had bought them as a joke but she'd decided to wear them anyway, although two days later, after it had rained, they were the same muddy colour as everyone else's) and she was ready to get going on the site, which was close to a proposed new motorway and which was being excavated to see what historical significance it might have.

It wasn't a particularly big site or a particularly big project but she'd loved every minute of it, even the back-breaking actual digging of the damp Irish soil (very few people realised how physically demanding archaeology could be!). She'd been overcome with excitement when she'd found her first skeleton and identified it as a young woman – finding the pelvis early on had been fortunate;

a woman's pelvis was, unsurprisingly, different from a man's – and she'd called Keith, the supervisor, to show him.

'Hey, cool. Well done.' This was Keith's second dig in Ireland; he enjoyed working in the country because his grandfather was Irish and because he liked the idea of being somewhere so small after the vast expanses of Australia.

Thanks to the rampant development all over the country there was plenty of archaeological work and there were lots of non-Irish people on the digs. Keith's main interest was in maritime archaeology, although – as Romy said to him one afternoon as torrential rain had again filled the ditches and the dig had turned into a mudbath – Ireland was doing its best to give him a genuine underwater experience.

He'd been great to work with but after the digging had been done and Romy had been assigned to do some post-excavation work, Keith had headed off to an underwater site in the Baltic Sea. Romy had been sorry to see him go because she'd got on well with him, but she hadn't been heartbroken. After all, he was just a friend. Besides, she'd had a boyfriend then, although like most of her relationships it was short-lived and they'd split up soon afterwards. Nevertheless she kept in touch with Keith because, as with so many of the friends she'd made on her first dig, she'd added him to her email list and every so often he sent her a message which wasn't copied to the hundreds on his list and she sent him ones that weren't copied to the hundreds on hers. There was nothing special

about their emails to each other but she liked the fact that, among their gang of archaeological friends and students, they had a connection, a deeper friendship. She valued that because she didn't really have many close friends. She'd lost touch with most of the people she'd known growing up, except Colleen Rafferty, who'd studied archaeology too before she'd been forced to change her plans abruptly. Romy kept in touch with Colleen because Colleen knew more about her than anyone else in the world. But by now she was probably closer to Keith.

After finishing the post-ex work on the Galway site she'd volunteered to work on a site in Arizona for the experience of a very different sort of dig and then she'd gone to Lisbon, where she bumped into a lot of people who had worked on the Galway dig, including Keith. After that she'd spent a few months doing more post-ex work in Egypt, which had been fascinating, and in Eastern Europe, which had been completely different (more like Ireland, she'd thought, what with the medieval burials and Bronze Age artefacts, so different from the Egyptian treasures). Keith had popped up in Eastern Europe too, although only for a short while, and that time she'd been really sorry to see him go because for some reason that had been the loneliest dig for her. Eventually she'd come to Australia. Not because of Keith, although she knew that he'd returned home himself. But because there had been an opportunity to do some work on a more recent site, an unearthing of a previously unknown convict settlement outside Sydney. Romy liked the idea of urban archaeology and she also liked the idea of spending a few

months in the southern hemisphere. So she'd emailed Keith, who was now working in a private maritime archaeology company, and told him to break out the barbie, she was on her way.

Romy had been stunned to see that he had cut his hair (in Ireland and in Romania he'd worn it in a thick ponytail, but now it was short and styled and made him look a million times more handsome) and that he'd changed his ancient Levis and bedraggled T-shirt look for designer jeans and snow-white tees. He still wore a small stud in his right ear but, she told him, he'd gone all grown-up. He laughed at that and said that he was doing a lot of liaison work with various government bodies and he liked to look professional. All the same when they went for drinks at a harbourside bar the night after she'd arrived, she was relieved to find that he was still the same, easy-going Keith. Even if he had started to take life a bit more seriously.

'I'm right.' She'd looked at him gloomily. 'You've turned into an adult.'

'Maybe a little bit,' he said as he reached out and ruffled her long dark hair, which he used to do on the site in Ireland and which always drove her nuts. 'You know what it's like usually – roaming around the place, never staying anywhere for more than a few months, living in terrible conditions . . . So I'm doing more research and consultancy stuff and less digging and diving and it's working out fine for me.'

'I like digging and I'm perfectly grown-up myself, thanks very much.'

He laughed. 'You know what I mean. There's only so many times I can dive a wreck. Only so many times you can dig a ditch. It's not like being Indiana Jones, after all.'

She grinned at him. 'Did you ever think it would be?'

'I guess.' He smiled. 'I guess everyone wants to be a hero.'

She snorted with laughter. 'That'll be the day!'

However, he did turn out to be her hero when the girl she was house-sharing with suddenly asked her to leave because she wanted her boyfriend to move in instead. Keith offered to let her stay with him and she'd jumped at the opportunity. His house was small but cute and close to the beach, which was its biggest selling point. She moved in one Friday evening and by Sunday felt as though she'd been there for ever.

The rest of the gang – all involved in some way or another in archaeological or heritage work – accepted that they were sharing the house but not a bed, even though once or twice Marnie Jones had asked her whether anything had happened between them.

'Of course not!' Romy had looked at her in disgust. 'It would be like sleeping with my brother.' And then they'd both laughed because everyone had heard about Romy's brother or (more accurately, and although she didn't generally use the term) her half-brother, who, as far as she was concerned, was hell on earth.

Sometimes she wondered if she thought of Keith as the brother she'd never had. But if that was the case then Colleen would be the sister she'd never had and she didn't think of Colleen as a sister. The problem, Romy admitted

to herself, was that she never knew exactly how she should feel about anyone. My emotional development, she told them all one day when they were sitting on Bondi Beach and chilling out, was stunted at birth. And they'd laughed and told her that she was fine emotionally except when she'd had too much beer.

But tonight . . . tonight she hadn't had too much beer (not even that much wine really) and she knew that mentally she was all over the place because she just had no idea how she was supposed to feel about leaving her best friend and going home, or how she was supposed to feel about seeing her family again. And she had no idea how they felt either, other than relief at the fact that they'd managed to get her to return at all, thus solving the problem of who would look after Veronica.

And it seemed totally unfair that just because the word 'family' was used, she was supposed to be (and, in fact, was) overwhelmed by guilt and feel obliged to leave everything she had here behind her simply to fulfil some ridiculous sense of duty to someone who probably didn't really want it anyway.

Every time she thought of that, she snorted under her breath. A sense of duty! To them! To Veronica! It was actually laughable. It really was.

And yet she couldn't get away from it. Even Keith had been definite about it. You had to help out when it was family. And when she'd told him that she didn't really get on terribly well with anyone in her family, he'd looked uncomprehendingly at her (after all, he had a great relationship with his parents) and said that it was

up to her to get on with them and it was all a matter of attitude.

The way she looked at it, the best way to get on with her family was to keep some distance between them. It had worked for the last four years. But maybe she'd feel differently when she went home. The only trouble was, she couldn't quite believe it.

Going home had been the last thing on her mind when her mobile had rung a couple of days earlier. She'd been sitting at the computer entering details of the bones they'd found on the site (Romy specialised in forensic archaeology, which rather disgusted Veronica – the idea, her mother said, of digging up old bones and studying them was utterly revolting) when the phone had vibrated on her desk.

She'd let the call go to her message minder because she was too absorbed in what she was doing to talk to anyone. This was because the notes she'd been looking at had been about the skeleton of the young woman which she'd uncovered at the site. She'd seen the bones straight away and had gone over to look at them. And then she'd gently brushed the earth away and realised that she was looking at a young woman and – poignantly – a young woman who'd been pregnant at the time of her death, because there was also the skeleton of a foetus inside her.

Whenever she unearthed bones, Romy always thought about the living person they had once been. And seeing the bones of a young woman in the convict colony had

been surprising. Seeing that she was pregnant had been distressing. She knew that mostly she could put her emotions on hold when she looked at them, but she'd cried that day for the woman she'd never known and the child that had never been born and had told herself how lucky she was to have the life she had, even if she sometimes asked herself if she'd been altogether right in some of the decisions she'd made.

She was still wondering about the dead girl and her unborn baby when she went home that night. Keith was out at rugby practice and so she cracked open a beer and sat outside gazing into the tangle of garden behind the house where hot roseberries fought for space alongside slender green bamboo grasses. And then she started wondering – as she always did when she was on her own for any length of time – about the people who had lived in this house before them and who'd lived on this land before the house had been built, and she wondered what it was about her that made her think of the past more often than the present.

And then she remembered her missed phone call.

She put the bottle of beer on the deck and retrieved her phone from her bag. Then she dialled her voicemail and listened to the message which had been left for her.

'It's me.' She recognised the voice of her brother (half-brother, she reminded herself, the pompous half!) Darragh. 'Listen, we need you to stop faffing around the place and get back home for a while. Mum's going into hospital soon for surgery on her back. You know – or maybe you don't, because you're not exactly good at

keeping in touch, are you – that she's been in pain for a while and that it's been getting worse. Well, they want to operate on her. She's going to need help. Ring me.'

She'd replayed the message a few times. No how are you? from Darragh. No questions about her job or her life or anything about her. It was a command to come home. So damn typical of him, of course. Thinking that he was in charge of everything. Thinking he was in charge of her! She felt tendrils of anger wrap themselves around her. He'd always had the power to make her angry. They all did really. Darragh. Kathryn. And, of course, Veronica herself.

She wondered whether she should have picked up a hint from Veronica about the state of her back, but thinking hard about it, she didn't think her mother had made a big deal about it. She'd moaned about a bit of backache in her emails and on the very rare occasions on which they'd spoken to each other, but then Veronica's normal conversations with her were always one long moan. It usually began with the hypochondriacal whinge about her migraine headaches or an unspecified virus or some kind of ache or pain. (Whatever it was, it was forgotten the next time they talked.) Then Veronica would move on to her more general moan, which usually included Romy herself – the sulkiest girl on the planet; and her father – if he'd given Veronica half the attention he was giving his new wife, maybe they'd never have got divorced; and being on her own – nobody really cared, did they, that she was in that big house all by herself?

Romy usually managed to stop herself saying that

Veronica was the healthiest woman she'd ever known; that she was never on her own and that she had hundreds of friends and a brilliant social life, because she knew that saying so would only cause a row and she didn't want to row with her mother any more. She liked to think that she'd grown out of rowing with Veronica, that she was mature enough to put their differences behind her (even if she was perfectly right in thinking that all those differences were Veronica's fault!). Anyhow, rowing was futile; all that happened was that guilts and grievances got revisited all over again and opened up old wounds, and what was the point in that? It was easier to just stay away and keep the conversations brief. So when Veronica started moaning at her she'd simply say that if she was in pain she should take ibuprofen and if the house was too big for her she should sell it and buy an apartment. Veronica would then call her heartless because, she'd say, her whole life was in that house and Romy knew it. Whatever else, she couldn't sell it.

A whole kaleidoscope of memories and emotions flooded through Romy's head as she contemplated Darragh's message. She couldn't ignore it but she had to build up her mental reserves to return it. And so eventually she dialled his number even though it was early morning in Ireland and an awkward time to call. But she was sure that he'd be up and about already. Darragh was a businessman. He described himself as an entrepreneur, although Romy didn't think it was a totally accurate description. After all, she reasoned, entrepreneurs were supposed to be the kind of people who set up businesses

and took risks. Darragh had inherited his business and she didn't think he'd ever taken a risk in his life. Nevertheless he saw himself as the second-generation entrepreneurial Dolan.

'What's this about Mum?' she asked when he answered the phone. 'And why do I have to come home?'

'You took your sweet time about getting back to me.' His irritation was clear, even over the miles. 'I was beginning to think you were ignoring me.'

'I was working,' she told him. 'I couldn't answer the phone straight away.'

She certainly wasn't going to tell him that she hadn't been bothered about answering it. Darragh wouldn't understand that. He was always on the phone himself, talking to clients, to employees, to suppliers . . . He was incapable of letting a phone ring for more than two seconds without answering it.

'Up to your armpits in muck?' he asked.

'Sort of.'

'You're nuts.' He said it in a matter-of-fact way. 'You'll never make your fortune at that lark.'

'I'm not in it for the money,' she said. 'Look, I'm really busy at the moment and I don't—'

'I thought you said you had a three-month contract?'

'Yes, but—'

'And it's up now, isn't it?'

'Almost, but—'

'Which makes it perfect timing,' said Darragh. 'You can't hide away from your responsibilities for ever, you know. Mum needs you.'

'She doesn't need me,' objected Romy. 'Mum never needs anyone, and if she did I'm probably the last person she'd choose.'

'Romy, you're going to have to take that chip off your shoulder at some point.' Darragh sounded impatient. 'She needs someone and that someone has to be you.'

'Why, exactly?'

'Like I said, she's having surgery on her back. Something to do with her discs; I'm not entirely sure, to be honest. You know how I hate that sort of stuff and so does she, so she's fairly typically vague about it. All the same, it's the only option for her. The last couple of months she's been finding it more and more difficult to get around.'

'Oh come on!' Romy couldn't get to grips with the idea of Veronica having difficulty in getting around anywhere. If anything, keeping her in one spot was more of an issue. (Perhaps, she thought in sudden amusement, that was something they had in common. She wasn't good at being in one place either.) 'You can't tell me that Mum is laid up at home! I can't see her sitting there with her feet up while her friends go socialising without her. And if she has a bad back it's probably from dirty dancing somewhere!'

'Don't be so facetious. Dr Jacobs laid it on the line for her. Surgery or a wheelchair.'

'You're not serious!' Romy couldn't help being shocked. The image of her mother in a wheelchair was an impossible one. She felt a stab of guilt at having been so dismissive.

'Hopefully it's avoidable,' said Darragh. 'Apparently it's a fairly straightforward procedure but she's going to be in a lot of pain for a while as well as needing someone to help her around the house because she'll be pretty limited in what she can do afterwards. She'll need someone with her until she recovers.'

'How long will that take?'

'A minimum of a month. But realistically, given what she's having done, it could be more.'

Romy shook her head even though she knew he couldn't see her. 'Look, I'm sorry this has happened. Hopefully she'll get over it quickly. But Darragh, I can't come home for that long. She wouldn't want me anyhow. You know she wouldn't. I'm sure she'd think I'd only make things worse. And the fact is that I have the opportunity to work in Melbourne as a supervisor on another dig when we're finished here. It would mean a hell of a lot to me because it's a promotion and it's about time I got the recognition. Besides, I can't afford to give up work. I haven't exactly got the Dolan bank balance, you know.'

'You won't spend money living with Veronica,' said Darragh dismissively. 'But I'm sure we can organise an allowance. And as far as your job is concerned, isn't everything you do contracted and short-term? I'm sure you'll have no problem getting back into the swing of your mud-digging again.'

She ignored the slight to her career. 'This is my chance to get on,' she told him. 'It's important to me. Like I said, it's a promotion.'

'And promotion is more important than your mother's health?'

Romy sighed. Of course it wasn't, but as far as she was concerned Veronica, as well as Darragh and Kathryn, weren't part of her life any more. She didn't see why he needed to drag her back across the world when there were other people nearby to look after their mother.

'Why can't Giselle help out?' she asked. 'She and Mum are best buddies, aren't they?'

'For heaven's sake! Giselle and I have enough to be doing. Mimi is three, in case you'd forgotten. She's a handful in her own right.'

'Yeah, but Mum loves her and—'

'And Giselle's pregnant again,' interrupted Darragh. 'So she can't spend that much time at Mum's. I'm at work. It has to be you.'

'Well, how about Kathryn?'

'Now you *are* joking!' Darragh snorted. 'She really *does* have a career! And a husband! You can't possibly expect her to come home indefinitely and leave both of them, can you?'

Romy had always known that asking Kathryn, six years Darragh's junior and five years older than her, would be a waste of time. Kathryn should have been the real entrepreneur in the family. These days she lived and worked in the States and had too many ties there to allow her to come home. Romy was vague about the exact nature of Kathryn's current job, which had something to do with financial fraud but which brought in a telephone-number salary, thus making her – at least in Darragh's

eyes – immeasurably more successful than Romy would ever be. Darragh judged everyone on how much money they earned which was why Romy was so low down in the pecking order and why she was the obvious choice to abandon everything and come home to look after Veronica (even if Veronica wouldn't be exactly thrilled by the prospect). Nevertheless, Kathryn would still have been a much better choice than her for the task, Romy knew. Kathryn, cool and unflappable, could cope with Veronica. Romy, passionate and quick-tempered (and with the chip on her shoulder that Darragh knew was there although he didn't know what had caused it), just couldn't.

'What's wrong with home help?' she asked desperately.

There was a silence at the end of the line and she winced.

'Do you really want me to tell our mother that you suggested paying for help?' demanded Darragh. 'When she expected that you'd be coming home anyway? You did say, didn't you, that you'd be back after Australia?'

'I said that I'd be back in Europe. I was thinking of Lisbon again. But as I explained to you, I've been asked to stay here and I have commitments and . . . and a boyfriend.' She crossed her fingers because, of course, Keith wasn't a boyfriend but hell, she was thousands of miles away and Darragh couldn't see her blush.

'A boyfriend!' He snorted. 'You won't come home because of a boyfriend?'

'Would you leave Giselle?' she demanded.

'Giselle is my wife. It's totally different and you know

that. You haven't been home in over a year and now, when we need you, you're too bloody selfish to come and you're using some beach bum as an excuse.'

'It's not that!' cried Romy.

'What then?'

She couldn't give him an answer to that, of course. There were a million reasons why she didn't want to go home and none of them were simply that she didn't care. But if she looked at it objectively she could see why he thought she was being selfish. And Veronica was her mother after all, wasn't she? No matter how crap she'd been at that.

'It's not that I don't want to help out,' she said as reasonably as she could. 'But it seems crazy to come home just for a few weeks . . .'

'We don't know how long it will be yet. Mum will need constant care after the operation.'

'Oh, you know Mum,' said Romy lightly. 'I bet she'll be up and about and going to her salsa class in no time.'

'For crying out loud, Romy, this is a serious operation. And she's not as young as she used to be. It'll take her some time to recover. I'm sure she won't want to have you fluttering around for any longer than necessary either, but she'll need someone. You're *so* self-centred it's hard to believe sometimes.'

'I'm not!' Romy cried. 'And you know what Mum's like about her age. She might be in her sixties but absolutely nobody would guess that she was over forty! She'd freak out if she thought you were telling me that I have to come home because she's old.'

'That's not what I said,' Darragh told her impatiently. 'Now are you going to behave in a reasonable manner or are you just going to be incredibly selfish about it as usual?'

Romy bit back the retort that was on the tip of her tongue. She was fed up with Darragh assuming that she was selfish.

'Of course I'll come if it's totally necessary,' she said. 'If there really is no other choice. And if Veronica herself is OK about it. Because, Darragh, she might not want me in the house.'

'Oh, don't be utterly ridiculous,' said Darragh. 'I know you and her spark off each other something shocking, but blood is thicker than water when it comes down to it and she'd rather have you than anyone else.'

'Are you sure about that?' asked Romy. 'I mean, have you actually spoken to her?'

'Yes,' said Darragh.

'Oh.' Romy was surprised.

'And so you can take time out from drifting around grubby sites and spend some quality time with your family. It might even do you good.'

'Great, thanks,' she said. 'I'm so glad you still think of me as the loser among you all.'

'It's obviously in the genes,' said Darragh. 'Me and Kathryn take after our father. You take after yours.'

Romy could feel herself clench and unclench her fist. She was tempted to hang up now and let Darragh think what he liked. How dare he imply that Dermot was any less worthy than Tom just because Dermot's driving force hadn't been making money, like Tom's had.

'Oh look, I'm sorry.' It was Darragh who broke the silence and his apology surprised Romy. 'That wasn't fair.'

'No,' she said shakily. 'It wasn't.'

His voice took on a persuasive tone. 'Look, Ro, it probably won't be for that long. A couple of months at the most. Then you can return to the outback and Giselle and I will keep an eye on Mum. To be honest with you, if it wasn't for the fact that me and Kathryn have responsibilities of our own, I wouldn't have asked you.'

'It's not . . .' She swallowed. 'You're right. I'm the young, free and single one in the family. I'm the one who should look after her until she's back on her feet. But it just seems so weird that I'm being told to give up everything and come back. I have this opportunity here . . . I was hoping . . .' She swallowed again. 'I guess there'll be others.'

'Sure there will,' said Darragh dismissively.

There was an awkward silence which Romy couldn't sustain.

'I suppose . . . congratulations on the baby,' she said eventually.

'Obviously if it wasn't for being pregnant Giselle would have been only too happy to look after Mum,' said Darragh. 'I can't believe you didn't know she was expecting. I'm sure Mum must have mentioned it to you.'

'Possibly,' admitted Romy.

'You're hopeless, you know that, don't you?'

'I've agreed to help,' she said. 'Don't start getting at me again.'

'OK, OK. When are you coming home?'

'When does she go into hospital?'

'Two weeks.'

'Before that, I guess.'

'Great. Let me know your flight details.'

'Sure.'

They disconnected and she stayed sitting in the chair staring into the garden. She was still sitting there when Keith eventually came home from his rugby practice and asked her why she was all alone in the dark.