

SOMEONE SPECIAL BONUS CHAPTER

Romy was sitting in the garden. Her bottle of beer was on the deck beside her and she was munching idly on some pistachio nuts which she'd found in the cupboard earlier. A scarlet robin, perched on the back of one of the outdoor chairs, was watching her. She was watching him too. She liked sharing the garden with the birds. It was restful.

Romy was making the most of the restful moment because until now the day had been hectic. It had been the final one of the latest dig she'd been involved in, a previously undiscovered graveyard just outside Sydney, and everybody had tried to cram a week's work into a few hours. It had been a successful project and she'd enjoyed working on it. Even though she was going to be involved in the post-ex work, she was always sad when they left a site. Interesting though it was, of course, it hadn't been half as exciting as the last excavation she'd been involved in - three months in Argentina's spectacular Triassic Park where she was searching for dinosaur fossils - but it had been fun all the same.

She hadn't originally planned on going to Argentina at all. After Keith had turned up in Ireland and kissed her (she still shivered whenever she remembered their first kiss as a couple rather than as friends) she'd shelved her plans to volunteer on an exotic dig. But Keith had been insistent. Dolan Component Manufacturers had given her money to indulge her passion and that's what she should do.

'What about my passion for you?' she'd asked. 'I want to indulge in that every single day. It's more important, surely, than my passion for old bones and fossils.'

He'd laughed at her and slid his hands beneath the thin fabric of the white cotton T-shirt she'd been wearing. They hadn't talked about digs for quite some time after that. But when they did he pointed out to her that she was getting a great opportunity and that she should take it.

'Because, Ro,' he'd said gently, 'if you don't go you'll regret it forever and you might even start to resent me because of it.'

'I will never, ever resent you,' she told him earnestly. 'In fact I'll never feel anything but mad desire for you.'

'Hey, excellent.' His blue eyes twinkled at her. 'Cos that's exactly how I feel about you too. But it's just a few months, Romy. We've been apart for much longer than that. You can hack it. So can I.'

Well, of course she could hack it, she knew that. But the question was did she want to? Did she want to spend more time away from him than was absolutely necessary? Did she want to be in a different country, on a different continent from him, ever again? Because the truth was that ever since the kiss she'd realised just how much Keith meant to her and she didn't want anything to keep them apart.

However, he had a point. The dig, in an area known as The Valley of the Moon, sounded great. And although she truly didn't want to leave him she knew he was right when he said she might one day resent it. She was well aware of how old resentments could suddenly come back at you.

So she'd gone, and in the end she'd really enjoyed herself in Argentina. The excavations had been some of the most interesting she'd ever worked on and she knew that she'd gained lots of valuable experience. She'd made some good friends too and renewed acquaintances with some old ones, like Mai, who'd also worked on the Wicklow dig with her. It had been fun and worthwhile and the time had actually raced by. Besides, she'd talked to Keith every day, usually early morning his time when he was always bright and cheerful (she was constantly amazed at his ability to be cheerful in the morning. She wasn't at her best then herself). But even when he'd just got out of bed he would smile and her and tell her that he loved her and he always, always kissed her image on the screen before he signed off.

And then when she'd finally arrived back in Sydney and walked expectantly into the arrivals hall he'd been standing there waiting for her with a bunch of red roses in his arms.

'You sap,' she'd said cheerfully after she'd kissed him for real and taken them from her. 'You shouldn't bring me flowers. You know I think they're a terrible waste of money.'

'But they're lovely,' he said. 'And it's nice to do it sometimes.'

'I know.' She kissed him again. 'And thanks, Keith, for being so great and understanding and so romantic too.'

He'd made a face at her then because both of them had always told each other that they weren't romantic. They were too sensible to be romantic, Romy had once declared. Besides, they dug up ancient bones. It wasn't conducive to romance.

Still, she had to admit that she liked Keith's romantic moments. She was still as much in love with him as ever.

She took another sip from her beer.

The burning question, of course, was – was he still in love with her?

The thought had started to niggle at her over the last few weeks when, unaccountably, he'd suddenly become a little bit distant. She'd started to wonder whether he really wanted her back with him at all. Most of the time he was as warm and loving as ever. But there was absolutely no doubt that he was spending more time than usual away from the house that they shared together, and that he would occasionally disappear into the attic room to do what he described as 'admin work' on his computer and tell her not to join him as she often did (curling up on the bean-bag in the corner) because he needed to concentrate. Romy knew that Keith was doing more and more government advice work and that this necessitated him writing scarily long reports on Australia's archaeological heritage but she resented how much time he was spending upstairs with the door firmly shut.

I can't expect it to be at a high point forever, she reminded herself now as she watched the robin hop closer to the deck in the hope of a pistachio nut. We're good together. We can't share every single thing. And just because he isn't home now, when the sun's starting to go down, doesn't mean he won't be soon. And it doesn't mean that he's preferring to be with some of his mates than me. Does it?

She drained her beer, scattered a few nuts for the robin and then went inside.

She opened her laptop and checked her emails. Her mother usually sent one a day, usually with a joke or cartoon, saying that she hoped everything was going well. At first Romy thought that Veronica was just trying to make a point with daily emails, reminding her that she thought about her just as much as her other children; but now Romy was used to them and if she didn't get one would text Veronica to check that everything was all right.

She kept in touch more with her sister Kathryn these days too. Kathryn was doing well in her job in New York and no longer worried about her ex-husband Adam Palmer. Adam had been found guilty of assault on Kathryn and although he was now back in the States he was living in Seattle and far enough away for Kathryn to have stopped looking over her shoulder every time she stepped out of her apartment door.

Romy had always kept in touch with her Dad, so emails from Dermot were nothing new. But the occasional ones from Giselle certainly were. They were full of news about Mimi and Nina, her baby sister. (Giselle had confided in Romy that it had taken her a long time to get used to calling the new arrival by her proper name. She'd had a nickname for her before, she'd said. Which didn't at all suit her once she'd been born.)

Even though she was once again thousands of miles away from her family she felt close to them and what they were doing. She only wished she felt as close to Keith who was living in the same house as her.

He arrived back an hour later, tired and a little bit cranky. Things hadn't gone as well as he'd hoped with the government officials he'd been meeting that day. He was getting fed up with bureaucracy. He wished that he could get back to the simpler things, he said.

She looked at him anxiously. Did simpler things mean life without her? She was astonished that she couldn't actually ask him the question. She'd always been able to talk to him about anything before. But this time she was afraid to ask because she was afraid of what he might say.

The weather in Sydney was getting hotter by the day but the latest emails from Ireland showed a picture of Dublin blanketed in soft white snow.

'It's the heaviest snowfall in years,' Veronica wrote. 'Giselle called over with the two girls yesterday and Dermot had to come and bring them home because the conditions were so bad she was afraid to drive herself.'

Romy snorted at that. Giselle drove a 4x4 for heaven's sake! A bit of Irish snow should be nothing to her. But she did like to play the helpless card from time to time and Darragh liked to give in to her so she supposed it wasn't surprising. And then she opened an email from Kathryn which showed a 5 ft snow drift against a fire hydrant outside her apartment building. Kathryn had walked to work in her Ugg boots. Which was so typical of her high-achieving half-sister. Sometimes, Romy thought as she pushed her damp hair from perspiring forehead, being on the other side of the world meant you were living a totally different life. She realised that she was hankering for a bit of cold weather. She'd always loved snow as a child although there'd never been that much of it. But

she remembered once building a scrawny snowman with Kathryn's help from a fairly minor snowfall one January. Actually, it had been a snow-woman. They'd dressed her in one of Veronica's frothy hats, draped her black pearls around its neck and stuck her favourite red stilettos underneath. Veronica had freaked. And blamed Romy, which was all right really because it had been her idea, after all.

'We're going out on Saturday night,' Keith told her that evening when they were both (for a change) sitting in the garden.

'Are we?' Romy looked at him enquiringly. 'Why? Where?'

'Out to dinner,' he said. 'Somewhere nice.'

'Any particular reason?' she asked.

'Do we need one?'

'We don't go somewhere nice without one,' she said.

Keith frowned slightly. 'Have we become that predictable?'

'Yes. But I don't mind.' She smiled suddenly. 'It's not like we're party animals after all.'

'All the same,' said Keith. 'I don't like to think that we've become the sort of people who spend all night in front of the telly.'

'We don't,' protested Romy. 'We spend it in the garden. Which is lovely.'

'Is it?'

And Romy worried once again that life with her wasn't as exciting as Keith had once wanted it to be. And she wondered if taking her somewhere nice wasn't his way of breaking it to her gently that it was all over between them. Although,

she told herself later that night as she lay awake beside him in their double bed and not on the other side of the wall as she'd done a year ago, if Keith truly wanted to break it off with me he'd do it without any fuss. He wouldn't cushion the blow by bringing me out for an expensive dinner first.

They went to the restaurant at Sydney Harbour, where he'd taken her the night before she went back to Ireland to look after Veronica. She'd been full of fear that night, not wanting to go home and not wanting to see the family she'd found it so difficult to love. But the events of the summer had changed everything and now she was glad that she'd gone. Keith had been totally supportive then too, just as he'd been supportive about Argentina. Keith was her cheerleader and he encouraged her about everything. He loved her. He did. Really.

She had to know.

She stopped suddenly outside the front door of the restaurant.

'What?' He frowned.

'Is everything all right?' she asked.

'Pardon?'

'Everything. Is it all right?'

'What on earth are you talking about?' Keith looked completely flummoxed by her question.

'It's just that lately...well, things have been different between us,' she said.

'How?' asked Keith.

'I'm not sure,' she told him. 'It's like – I get the feeling that maybe you're not as happy as you were. And I wonder if you think that maybe we...well, we were great as friends but it's not quite working the way you thought it would.'

'Why would I think that?' he asked.

'You don't...you don't notice me as much,' she said after a pause. 'You don't send me as many jokey texts as you used to.' She smiled wryly. 'You don't bring me flowers anymore.'

'Huh?' Keith's expression was one of astonishment. 'You told me not to bother with flowers. You asked me to stop texting you while you were on the dig. And of course I notice you. How can I not? You're right there in the house with me.'

She sighed. 'Maybe I'm being silly.'

'Yes,' said Keith firmly. 'You are.'

He ushered her inside the building and towards the lifts which would take them to the restaurant with its breath-taking views of the harbour.

Romy looked at herself in the smoked glass mirror of the lifts. When he'd told her he was taking her to the restaurant she'd panicked about what to wear because although she tried not to be the total slob she'd been when he first knew her she still wasn't good at dressing up. But because she'd been nervous about tonight she'd decided to buy herself a new dress. If he was going to give her some bad news she wanted to be at her best when he did it. The dress was maroon threaded with gold and it showed off her curvy figure to perfection.

She'd had her hair done too and so now it framed her face instead of obscuring it as it so often did. She hadn't bothered with new shoes, though. She was wearing her only high heeled pair which made her ankles ache.

The lift doors opened and she stepped outside.

'Good evening sir,' said the maitre d'. 'Do you have a reservation?'

'Yes,' said Keith. 'Party of twelve.'

'Twelve!' Romy turned to him in astonishment. 'This isn't a dinner just for the two of us?'

'No,' said Keith. 'I wanted it to be more fun than that.'

His words were like a crushing blow. He couldn't have fun with her on his own any more. He needed other people for that to happen. She swallowed the lump in her throat. It had been good while it lasted, she thought as she walked beside him towards the furthest corner of the restaurant. But clearly enough was enough. She didn't want to stay with him if he wasn't happy.

'Here you are sir.' The maitre d' waved towards the table in the corner. They were the first to arrive.

She sat down beside him and looked at the other empty seats. She was too upset even to ask who else was coming along.

The waiter came to the table and asked if they wanted a drink while they were waiting for the rest of the guests.

'I've ordered,' said Keith who, Romy saw, was now looking very tense.

The wine waiter nodded and walked away but Romy frowned.

'What about me?' she said. 'I haven't ordered.'

'I know.' Keith's voice was edgy. 'I've ordered for both of us.'

'You've what?'

He never did that. He never did things on her behalf or made her feel as though he didn't respect her own choices. Admittedly ordering a drink wasn't a big deal. It was the principle of it though.

'I'm making a bit of a mess of this,' said Keith. 'I thought I should do something very different and not at all us but I've just realised that I should've stuck with what we know.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake, Keith,' said Romy. 'You're freaking me out here. Just as you've done for the last month.'

'Yeah, sorry,' he said. 'I was so busy organising stuff but now....sorry.'

Sorry? She felt her lip tremble. Why was he sorry? What had he been organising? What was wrong with him?

The wine waiter returned with a bottle in a silver bucket. It took Romy a moment to realise that it was a bottle of champagne.

'Are you ready for me to open it now, sir?'

'Give us a minute, mate,' said Keith. 'I'm fluffing my lines here.'

The waiter smothered a laugh and stood to one side, his back to them.

'What on earth is going on?' demanded Romy.

Keith looked at her and gave her a half-smile.

'Like I said, I wanted to do something different,' he said. 'We talked about it and we joked about it and you said you were really chilled about it but when it came to it I didn't want it to be a chilled thing. I wanted you to remember it.'

'Remember what?' she asked.

'Well...'. He put his hand inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a small square box. And when Romy saw it she suddenly realised what he was doing.

'Romy Kilkenny,' he asked as he opened it. 'I love you. Will you marry me?'

The ring was a simple solitaire diamond on a narrow white-gold band. She stared at it as it glinted under the lights of the restaurant.

'Well?' asked Keith anxiously when she didn't say a word.

'Oh. My. God.' She looked at him her eyes glistening with tears. 'Oh, Keith – I didn't realise...how did I not...I thought...well, not that it matters...I was so worried and I...'

'Romy!' He stopped her by grabbing her by the hand. 'Will you?'

'Will I?' she whispered. 'Of course I will! What kind of fool do you take me for?'

And she let him take the ring out of the box and slide it onto her finger while the wine water popped the champagne and began to fill their glasses.

He began to fill the other glasses too and Romy looked questioningly at Keith.

Then, suddenly, the guests appeared and Romy gasped. Because, unbelievably, Dermot and Larissa, Darragh and Giselle, Veronica and Kathryn as well as Keith's parents and his sister and her husband were standing around the table and congratulating them.

'It took me forever to get them all here at the same time,' said Keith. 'But I wanted it to be a family thing.'

And Romy, as she beamed at them all in astonished delight, knew that Keith was and would always be her family. He was the most important person in the world to her.

And he was her very own Someone Special.