

## Seacloud

Kate Lance (2007)

The young hospital volunteer smiles as she puts the flowers on the bedside cabinet. I think she's pleased for me. Probably she's noticed the complete absence of a proud papa – or anyone else – at visiting times.

'And some cards, too.' She looks at Emma, asleep on my lap after feeding. 'Poor little thing,' she says. 'But looking so much better now she's out of the incubator. And you'll have plenty of support from, you know – the agencies.'

She waits a moment, curious. 'Aren't you going to look at the cards?'

'Later,' I say.

She puts them beside the flowers and wheels the trolley to the next bed. Emma opens her slate blue eyes. She considers me for a moment, then her eyelids slowly flutter down again. I sigh. You certainly are a poor little thing. Three weeks premature and your mother all by herself, trying to cope. And floundering.

I close my eyes and breathe the fragrance of Emma's wispy dark hair. The me of a year ago could never have dreamt of this moment and this small exquisite being.

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Standing outside my Nan's little house I'm staring at the mess in dismay. Newspapers and rubbish bags and empty bottles clutter the veranda. The peeling woodwork is damaged, the dirty glass in the door cracked. It could not have seemed less like the 'Roselea' of its tarnished nameplate.

Nan had rented it out once she moved to the retirement village, but she'd been too busy with the Dogs' Home and trekking holidays to care what the tenants got up to. Now it had been bequeathed to me after she'd died suddenly, climbing one of the smaller Himalayan peaks.

'Just a *hillock* really, darling,' she'd said before leaving for India. But hillock or not, it was too much for her. I still can't believe she's gone.

I carefully climb the worn front steps to the door and open it. Unpleasant odours hit me: old cooking oil, stale tobacco, rotten vegetables. In the kitchen the rubbish somehow manages to look even worse than it smells, while the bedrooms contain broken chairs and stained mattresses. Outside the back door, long grass rustles and something horrible is blocking the drain.

I look around in disbelief, remembering afternoon teas in the rose garden, dreamy meditation music on the tape deck (Nan had been a bit of a hippie) and lying snuggled in the spare bed under an eiderdown, listening to rain on the roof. It was

Nan who'd taught me how to knit and paint my fingernails and use a hammer and look after a veggie patch.

Oh, Zac, I think. This one won't be easy.

Despite my years of experience tarting up properties I can't imagine where we'll start with this one. I run a small business doing pre-sales styling. We furnish places with sleek grey furniture, too many pillows, colour-matched throws, vases holding one perfect branch. You know the look: stripped back. Urban. Aspirational. Sometimes I wonder why people don't get sick of it, but maybe it helps them ignore the cracks and mould and lack of parking.

Nan's little house would be good news for Zac's agency, because stocks are low at the moment. When I'd told him my plans to modernise the inheritance and sell it he'd jumped up and hugged me, saying, 'You angel!'

Selling would be good for me too. I don't need another place, my stylish townhouse is fine. Though I have to admit sometimes it seemed a little dull, especially when Zac's not there, all blond hair and gorgeous smile.

He has none of the usual agent's slickness. He's good to his staff and kind to kids. In fact, my sweet lover has only one drawback: a wife. But everyone knows the marriage is unhappy. He wants a baby, he told me, but Fiona doesn't.

Sometimes he gently strokes my belly. Once he'd looked at me and said quietly, 'Sophie, do you think – perhaps one day – we could have a child together? It'd mean the world to me.'

I'd heard Fiona had some kind of breakdown but was better now, on anti-depressants. Soon, Zac says, soon she'll be well enough for him to leave.

Oh darling. Yes, how I want to have your baby.

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'There, Soph,' Josh says, flicking the switch on and off. 'You've got power again. I'll tidy up the circuit box and we'll be done. So do you want to talk to my carpenter mate?'

I don't feel much like it. I've talked to more tradies in the last few weeks than ever before in my life. But the rubbish is finally gone, the drains unblocked and the rotten carpet out, so at least I've made some progress.

Josh was my boyfriend at school and, despite him running off with a girl goth at the Year Twelve formal, we've stayed mates. He lives with my best friend Nikki now.

'Ben's a good guy,' Josh says, 'a real craftsman. He'd fix up that wood out the front, no worries.'

'But I'm not sure I want to go to that trouble. Maybe a stripped-back, city look ...'

It's puzzling. For the first time in years I'm not certain what to do. I'd never designed for such an old house before, with all that ornate plaster and high ceilings

and fancy fretwork.

'Well, have a chat, see what he says. He can come over at five.' Josh grabs his tool box, waves and leaves.

Later that day, when Josh's friend Ben comes up the veranda steps, he looks vaguely familiar. He gazes at me with an equally puzzled air. After a few rounds of 'Do I know you from ...' we establish he's Nikki's older brother, and bloody Josh didn't even think to mention it!

I'd only ever met him once or twice. He'd gone away on some maritime apprenticeship when Nikki and I were still in Year Eight. I vaguely recall a shy, spotty boy, but now his skin is tanned and his shoulders broad, although he still has that same quiet look.

I show him the broken timberwork on the veranda and he traces it with his hands.

'Lovely stuff. Not much like that around any more,' he says.

'But wouldn't it be much easier to just get rid of it? Put in a glass balustrade with clean lines –'

I trail off as he looks at me from under his brows.

'This sort of thing's regarded as ... desirable by some,' Ben says dryly. 'It'd be worth mending. Worth it financially, I mean.'

'I'm not so sure. Contemporary sells a lot better than adorable.'

'Adorable?' He looks pained. 'It doesn't have to be *adorable*. Or quaint. Or cute.' He takes a deep breath. 'This is a solid old house with a genuine history, a place in the world. You should treat it with respect.'

I'm not sure whether to feel irritated, confused or condescended to, and it probably shows. He gazes at me then says calmly, 'The council won't let you do anything radical to the front of the house, anyway. I'll give you a quote. It won't be too hard to fix and it would look ... *right*.'

I can see he wants to do it. He might be a smug bastard but I suddenly feel Nan would also have wanted it mended. I mentally shrug. Well, if it adds to the resale value, why not?

'If I decide to go ahead, when could you start?' I say.

'I'm away on a tow for the next three days but then I'm free.'

'Oh?' I say coolly. 'Thought you were just a plain old chippie nowadays.'

'No. I skipper a tugboat. We work on contract, mainly in Asia, so when life's quiet I do carpentry instead.'

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Ben starts the following week. He doesn't say much but he does a lot. A few days later, when he's showing me a section on the veranda he's just finished, Josh hoons up in his lime-green ute.

'Laura's back!' he says happily.

'Laura?' I say. 'Haven't seen her for ages. How is she?'

'Come to the pub tonight, find out for yourself – drinks at five in the lounge. You too, mate, *you'd* remember Laura!'

He drives off, engine revving, and I notice Ben has the look of someone who remembers Laura very well indeed.

Later that afternoon I throw a pile of swatches down on the kitchen bench and rub my eyes. It's driving me crazy. I just can't use any of the styling schemes I've found so easy before. Everything I'd normally use makes the place look cold and empty, denying the gentle memories of Nan in every room.

The house needs a softer, more mellow style, something I simply haven't the slightest feeling for. I don't know what to do, so the pub seems like a good idea.

When I walk into the lounge, Laura, her hair in blonde waves, is laughing and looking as amazing as ever. Josh and Nikki are already there with Ben, the carpenter slash tugmaster, and a tiny fair boy sits wide-eyed on the couch beside Laura.

We exclaim and kiss and hug and order drinks in the usual flurry.

'So I'm back to stay!' says Laura. 'Had enough of boring old Sydney, and it's great for my parents to see more of Ethan, too.'

The little boy looks at me shyly and smiles.

Laura says, 'It's better this way. It ended with his dad ages ago.'

Josh takes the child's hand with his own big work-scarred ones and shakes it.

'Don't you worry about anything, little fella,' he says. 'We'll give you the best role models ever. Thump the drums, bond in the bush, release the inner savage. What do you reckon?' He cracks up at his own wit and looks adoringly at Laura.

Laura always has that effect on men and Nikki rolls her eyes. She says to me, 'Soph, thanks for giving my roving sea-dog of a brother a job. At least it'll keep him here in the country for a while.'

'Oh, have you been away a lot?' Laura says (purrs).

'Mostly Hong Kong, Singapore. Lot of tugboat work there. But our Mum's not well. Thought I should come home for a while.'

Little Ethan scrambles up and stands solemnly in front of Ben. 'Tugboats?' he says.

'Tugboats. Want to know what they're called?'

Laura's blue eyes linger on Ben's dark head bent towards the child, reciting silly names. Done deal, I thought. Poor guy hasn't a chance.

We have a funny, wild night catching up on each other's lives. Laura shares some gossip from her modelling career, Nikki and Josh debate the merits of various bands, I mention my problems with Nan's daunting legacy, and even Ben opens up about the hassles of being at sea for weeks on end.

But that prospect apparently doesn't concern Laura too much, as she gazes

thoughtfully at the sight of Ethan asleep against Ben's shoulder.

'How's your gorgeous Zac going?' Nikki asks later as we're getting ready to go.

'Oh, *great*. Business is slow – lack of stock this time of year – but plenty of demand if he had the properties to sell. He's pretty happy about my house.'

I sigh, swamped with longing for Zac.

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'One upside to slow business, honey. Gives me more time with you,' Zac murmurs and nibbles my shoulder. He raises himself on one elbow, tucks a long curl of my hair behind one ear and smiles when it springs back.

'My house'll be ready fairly soon and you'll have to get busy then,' I say, running my fingers over his gym-toned chest.

'Taking a while, though, isn't it?'

'Oh, the floor's pretty good now and the bathroom updated. The kitchen's okay too.' I frown a little. 'But the painters are due tomorrow and I just can't get the colours sorted. Maybe Ben can suggest something.'

'Yeah,' says Zac. 'I was going to say, his woodwork's a bit – I don't know – over the top, maybe? Gingerbread's not really our corporate style.'

'This house is different, Zac,' I say. 'I'll work it out.'

'I know you will, gorgeous. Too bloody important to screw up.'

'Hey, I've never screwed up before,' I say, mock-indignantly.

'And that's why I love you,' he says, and tickles me. When we stop laughing we hold each other close until it's time for him to go home. Again.

\*

'So what about Hyacinth Dusk on the south wall and Antique Chili around the units,' says the painter helpfully. He dabs a little deep purple on the kitchen wall. It looks pretty grim beside the splotches of Moody Puce, Blue-Green Algae and a shade of orange whose name I can't recall, but Toxic Waste wouldn't surprise me.

'Look,' I say desperately, 'Why don't you go and have coffee down the road and I'll have a think about it. Leave the colour cards.'

After he's gone I sit in a chair with my head in my hands and groan. I look up to see Ben leaning against the doorway, eyebrows raised.

'Oh *hell*,' I say. 'Every single bloody shade is wrong.'

He gazes around the room. 'Well, you don't want dark paint in here for a start, it's too small. Try something pale, off-white, it'd look great with the timber floors.'

'But you've *got* to have a dramatic feature wall,' I say. 'Everyone expects it nowadays.'

'Would your Nan have wanted a feature wall?'

I laugh at the idea of Nan in a kitchen with Moody Puce. Or Toxic Waste.

'No, of course not! She had colourful curtains, chintzy things, blue and green and coral. When the sunlight came through they were so pretty.'

My eyes fill with tears, remembering Nan turning to me with a comforting cup of tea, the day I sat miserably at the table telling her Josh had dumped me for a goth.

'But nobody wants that kind of stuff any more.' I wipe my eyes and sigh. 'All they want is grey and cool, and nowhere to put books or flowers or teacups.'

After a moment Ben says, 'What was she like, your Nan?'

'Oh, she climbed mountains and helped stray dogs. And grew roses and sweet-peas. I miss her terribly.'

'Well, do it the way she'd have wanted.'

'Then no-one but me will like it!'

'Yeah.'

'But I've got to *sell* it, Zac's relying on me.'

Ben looks at me calmly. 'Well, if you've got to flog it to support your boyfriend's business, think of it this way. If you like it, others will too. Perhaps not Zac –'

'But he knows what sells.'

'To people like him and his friends. Not necessarily everyone.'

Ben picks up a colour card and points to a soft off-white.

'There, Seacloud. That'd work.'

'Suppose it's a mere coincidence that's a salty sort of name?' I say.

He smiles.

\*

I call my parents, retired and living thousands of kilometres away.

'Mum, those linen curtains of Nan's – do you still have them?'

'We stored everything at the local lockup, so they're in one of the boxes, packed with her china and bits and pieces.'

'Can I have them?'

'Of course, darling. Take what you want. I'll message you the storage code.'

'Are those big velvety armchairs there too?'

Dad says, 'They certainly are, but that stuff won't work in your slick townhouse, my girl, far too old-fashioned.'

'Oh, not for me, Dad. I'll use them to do up Nan's house for the sale.'

'Hmm. Something of a departure for your buddy Zac's agency,' says Dad. 'Do they even handle little places like that?'

'Of course!'

But I wonder. That morning I'd started talking it over with Zac but didn't get very

far. Laura came into the agency wearing a racy little number, looking for somewhere to rent. Zac immediately started joking about mate's rates and arranging to take her to see some flats.

While he was on the phone, Laura turned to me and said, 'Would you mind asking Ben to drop by my parent's place later today? The fence needs fixing and Ethan'd love to see him.' She smiled, her lipstick a bit much. Subtlety's never been her strong point, but then I guess it doesn't have to be.

\*

Weeks of hard work pass. A few times Laura brings Ethan over to 'help' and I'd hear Ben's calm voice as he shows him how to do some small task. Nikki and I plant roses, apricot and pink, along the front border, and Nikki polishes the brass nameplate that says Roselea. We wax the floors till they glow like honey and cover them with a few old Persian rugs from the storage, all reds and golds, until finally, just before Christmas the house is done.

I invite everyone around to celebrate. Ben is already there, finishing off a last coat of paint on a railing. I come out to the veranda with glasses and a bottle of bubbly.

'That's beautiful,' I say, and pour us drinks. Curved arcs of wood soften the lines of the posts, and curl into flourishes. All well-protected by layers of enamel paint: Seacloud, of course.

'Good for another hundred years, I reckon,' says Ben, and we clink glasses.

'Thanks to you,' I say. 'I'm so glad you talked me into it.'

'Talked you into it? What, you weren't all that enthusiastic?' he says innocently.

I laugh. 'Might have had a doubt or two. Or twenty.'

'Ah, but wise Nans the world over know what's best.'

'Mine certainly did,' I say.

'And mine. She always said I should work in the local port, not all over Asia. Lately I've been realising how right she was.'

'Are there even tugboats here?'

He stares at me, surprised. 'Don't you ever go down to the waterfront and watch the ships being brought in and out of the harbour?'

'Um, no,' I say, a little shamefaced. 'Should I?'

He nods, smiling a little. 'Maybe you should.'

'I don't know what to look for. Aren't tugs adorable little boats with big chimneys?'

He takes a deep breath. 'Tugs are incredibly powerful, *stunningly* responsive vessels for safely manoeuvring ships a thousand times heavier, the sort you don't want getting themselves into scary, expensive, life-threatening trouble. And they have funnels, not chimneys.'

'Ah. The word "adorable" is a bit of a sore point, isn't it?'

Ben bursts out laughing. 'For ships or houses, certainly.'

The lime green ute pulls up with a roar. 'Woo-woo!' says Josh, jumping out. 'Looks amazing, what do you reckon, Nik?'

'Hey, tell my blisters about it,' says Nikki.

An expensive rumble grows louder in the street and Zac's sports car arrives. Laura is beside him in the front seat, all brown legs and bare shoulders.

Ben's smile fades as he looks at them.

'Hello everyone! We've been checking out flats,' she says, tip-tapped up the steps in stilettoed sandals. 'There's this *amazing* one I'm hoping to get.'

'Great,' I say. 'Well, we're all here now. Have some bubbly and come and see what we've done. Lovely Roselea is revealed at last!'

Zac murmurs, 'Congrats, honey,' and gives me a quick hug as I pour more drinks. When we go inside, the evening sun through the stained-glass door throws amber and emerald glimmers along the golden floorboards.

Nikki did half the work on the place, but she loyally admires everything as if she's never seen it before, while Josh flicks switches on and off, saying 'Great circuits,' with a proprietorial air.

'Very nice,' says Zac carefully. 'Tidy job.' I beam like a proud parent.

The house isn't cluttered but has enough furniture to be comfortable, and Nan's curtains looked perfect against the light-filled walls. We wander from room to room chatting, then after a time gather in the calm lounge, with its fireplace and velvet armchairs, and Persian rugs that echo the ornate ceiling plasterwork.

'Bloody beautiful stuff, mate,' says Josh, running his fingers over the lines of the intricate mantelpiece Ben repaired.

Laura looks around the room. Her perfect nose wrinkles ever so slightly.

'But it's a bit, sort of, *quaint* isn't it?'

Nikki's glass stops halfway to her lips. There's a silence.

'In the nicest possible way, of course,' Laura says.

Zac, behind her, looks uncertain. I've never seen him like that before.

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I watch him doze beside me in the afternoon light. I think how beautiful he is, with his long eyelashes and blond hair. He stretches and gives me a dazzling smile.

'Come here, sweetheart.' He draws my head down to his shoulder. 'We've got a bit of a problem. I've been going over the books and the accountant doesn't want us to put much into advertising for a while. That means fewer big campaigns.'

'Till when?'

'Mid-next year, probably.'

'But what about Roselea?'



'Well, we've got to be realistic. It's not the sort of place worth putting big money into. It's not our style and we've spent years building up our urban image. I've got a gut feeling it won't get a good result, Sophie.'

His shoulder doesn't feel as comfortable as it usually does.

'I'm sure it'd appeal to some –'

'Not to the people who really *matter*. Honey, you know how vicious the competition is. If we don't stick to our hard-edge styling we'll just look like any ordinary agency.'

'You mean there's not enough grey concrete for your mates?' I can't stop myself.

He frowns. 'I mean my agency doesn't want to risk its reputation pushing granny's cosy cottage. We'd be a laughing-stock.'

I lean up on one elbow, feeling a twinge of anxiety.

'We've just been offered a contract for that big city development and it's going to take all our resources.' He glances away. 'But a different sort of agency could do a far better job for you, anyway. There'll be a guy at the party tonight who'd be great. I'll introduce you.'

'Party? Oh, the Christmas party, almost forgot.'

I'm confused. Zac is right, really. His agency never normally handles little places like mine. I suddenly feel ashamed I've put him in a such difficult position.

'That sounds amazing,' I say. 'I'd be happy to meet him.'

Zac calls me darling and we kiss and murmur endearments, then he leaves.

Later, when I'm showering and getting ready for the party, I realise something wonderful, something that will change *everything*.

I smile. I'll have some great news for my lover this evening.

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The annual agency Christmas party is a big, brassy affair with staff, clients, contractors, rivals, politicians and just about anyone else who matters in the suburb. And their partners too, of course.

I carefully keep my distance from Zac's wife Fiona, who stands beside him greeting people as they arrive. I can't help noticing how good she looks in her designer outfit. But the rest of us aren't too shabby either. Nikki's dress is crimson, her dark hair in a pony-tail, while I'm wearing soft green silk that flatters my eyes.

We're drinking and laughing and Josh is telling us one of his long, outrageous jokes: then Laura arrives. Ben looks at her. Zac looks at her. Every damned man in the room looks at her. I guess lipstick-pink satin slashed to the navel on a blonde will do that.

After a few moments the buzz starts up again in the room. In the end it's a great party, the band is cool, the dancing fun, everyone's in a happy mood. Turns out Ben is a surprisingly good mover, while Josh is just his usual funny, crazy self.

I even have a few moments in a slow dance with Zac, but don't have time to tell him

my wonderful news. He has to talk to a bunch of agents, all mobiles and stilettoed girlfriends, Laura too. As always, she's taken centre stage.

Little Ethan and other kids are romping through the crowd and there's even a baby staring over his mother's shoulder. I'm pulling faces at him and the darling is smiling back at me, then his mother says to the woman she's talking to, 'Would you mind taking him for a minute? I'm dying for the loo.'

She hands the baby over and dashes away. The woman cradles him with a laugh and kisses his nose. She lifts her head and our eyes meet.

With shock I realise it's Fiona. The smile leaves her face.

'I thought you didn't like –' I stop, horrified at myself.

'Didn't like children, you mean?' she says evenly. 'Is that what he told you? It's a good line but no, it was always Zac's choice. I'd have loved a baby.'

She looks at me with contempt then turns away.

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The music screeches, the lights stabs. I feel cold and hot and sick and stupid. Very, very stupid. Somehow I find my bag and get to the door. It doesn't surprise me to see Zac's hand discreetly stroking Laura's hip. That's exactly how we'd started too.

I stumble down the stairs. Ben catches my arm just before I lose my footing.

'I'm *leaving*,' I say unsteadily. 'I don't *like* it here –'

'I don't like it much either. I'll drive you home.'

I think of my empty townhouse, full of memories of Zac.

'No. I'm going to my Nan's place. Look, I can get there by myself –'

He ignores me and walks beside me quietly as I totter around the block to Roselea.

The hall light glows golden, the kitchen feels calm and once I'm inside I'm suddenly relieved beyond words to be there. By now Ben knows where everything is, so he puts the kettle on and gets out the tea and milk.

I sit at the table, dazed. After a few moments a thought penetrates my brain.

'I'm so sorry, Ben,' I say. 'It's not just me who's hurt. I know she matters to you too.'

'Who?'

'Laura.'

'*Laura?*'

'I thought you two –?'

'God, no. I couldn't stand the way she was always coming on to your boyfriend. Didn't you notice?'

'No,' I say, and wrap my hands around my belly and sob.

\*

I sigh. It's been the hardest time of my life, having a baby alone. Such a responsibility and no one to lean on. But I'm coping and I can't pretend to be surprised. I knew what I'd be taking on, having a child by a man who wouldn't be around.

But I didn't sell Roselea. Nan's haven is my home now, the place where Emma will grow up. And I never did get a chance to tell Zac my wonderful news: as I was getting ready that evening I'd suddenly realised I'd be much happier if I simply kept Roselea for myself, and let him auction my townhouse instead.

I sold the townhouse anyway (through a different agency) and made a nice bundle. Zac's wife Fiona divorced him and is doing very well, though I hear he's not doing quite so well without her.

I feel a stirring on my lap and come back to the present. Emma is stretching her legs, her lips curled in a fleeting smile. 'Little one,' I murmur. It's been a pretty hard time, but I thought at least my friends and family could be here to help. No such luck! I tear open the envelopes the volunteer left me.

The first is a garish postcard saying 'Greetings from Fiji'. *Having a wonderful time but looking forward to being home in time for the big event! Nikki and Josh.*

Then there's a baby card from Mum. *Darling, we're both finally over this rotten flu and will fly in as soon as we can. Can't wait to see little Emma.*

And finally a card in a familiar scrawl. *So sorry she came early, love, and I couldn't be with you. But the Singapore job is done now and I'll soon be back.*

There's a movement at the door and I look up. Ben's home at last! He comes to the bedside and sits, his arms around me.

'Some great news,' he says. 'Got that job, master of a local tugboat. So I'll be here now for both of you.'

He gazes at sleeping Emma. With her dark hair she's the image of him. He touches her tiny hand, which flexes and grasps his finger.

He swallows and clears his throat. 'She'll have to start out as a deckhand, of course. Can't have any favouritism on board, even for the skipper's girl.'

'I thought she was going to restore old houses and climb Everest.'

'That too,' he says, and kisses me.

I snuggle into his shoulder. 'What's the name of your new boat?'

He smiles. 'Seacloud.'