

When Fate Decides (Challenge the Heart Book 1) By Tricia McGill

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Dedication

To all the women out there who dream of having a man like Jack in their lives, and to all those lucky enough to have one.

Chapter One

Liberated, serene, relaxed. All these feelings swirled inside Tessa as she sniffed one of the roses that lined the driveway leading to her home. She'd seldom felt so calm during the years of her marriage, that was certain.

Letting herself into the house, she relished the sense of enveloping peace. Leaning back against the closed door, she sighed. Tossing Velvet's leash onto the hallstand Tessa smiled as the spaniel ran to the kitchen for a drink of water.

Going through to the living room, she shrugged out of her windcheater, and with a great deal of satisfaction, dropped it on one of the soft beige leather chairs. Des wouldn't be pleased.

But Des wasn't here to nag her, was he?

No, since his death four months ago, life had taken on a pleasant hue. Her few real friends knew how relieved she was to be a widow. It was obscene how good she felt. Did those same friends guess at the occasional twinge of guilt she experienced at this blessed relief? Probably not.

Des had never taken the trouble to bother himself with her friends; and likewise there was no love lost between them and him. Alice, the closest, urged her often to leave, to pack up and turn her back on his bullying.

In the kitchen Tessa pulled off her walking shoes, and with a grunt of pleasure let them stay where they dropped. Velvet snuffled about and then came to sit at her feet. Absently she bent to stroke the spaniel's soft ears.

"Guess we ought to start thinking about preparing dinner, eh girl?" She wiggled her toes as the dog replied with a soft woof.

Most people would be horrified if they knew how happy she was to be her own woman at

last.

Her own woman.

An odd title, but in her case it signified exactly how she felt. After twenty-two years of marriage to a man who treated her like a doormat, she looked forward to a life of independence. She'd spent so many years trying to please Des, trying to be the kind of woman he seemed to want that it was going to be difficult changing.

But change she would. She sighed again. She'd done lots of sighing in the past few weeks. And a lot of smiling. Perhaps she was indecently wicked to be this happy so soon after being widowed. She'd tried hard to please her demanding husband. And in his eyes failed on every count.

She put the kettle on for a cup of tea. Her kitchen was well equipped. One thing could be said for being married to a successful man; her home contained everything required to make it comfortable. The furniture, updated often, had been purchased more to satisfy Des's ego than anything else. Des delighted in gloating over his possessions, and sadly she had been counted among them.

Even so, Tessa liked her home in the leafy Melbourne suburb of Caulfield. Des built the red brick two-storied home soon after their marriage, after knocking down his grandparents' house, which had been willed to him. Years ago, in his grandparent's time, the local horse trainers led their thoroughbred charges by the house on the way to their morning exercise session at the nearby racecourse, but the roads were too busy nowadays, and that halcyon era was long gone.

As she sipped her tea, Tessa ticked off items on her list of things to be done. The hairdressers would come first. Her hair showed the first signs of gray and, for some reason, Des hadn't wanted her to have it colored. He'd probably been worried she might attract the attention of other men. Hah! What a joke. No man in his right mind would give her a second look. Not with her ordinary figure, plain face, and mousy hair.

The phone interrupted her reverie.

"Hi Mum," her son said.

"Gary? What is it? I was just about to prepare dinner. Thought we'd have spaghetti bolognaise. What do you reckon?"

"Damn! My favorite. Sorry Mum, won't be there." He sounded as if he was in a hurry. "Jodie wants me to go to a friend's house to pick up some stupid giftware she ordered at a ridiculous selling party she went to."

"Are you sure she wants you to go with her, Gary?"

“Of course!” He obviously thought that was the stupidest question in the world. “We’ll grab a meal out. See you in the morning.”

Before Tessa could get a word out, he put the phone down. She grimaced as she replaced the receiver. Was he tagging along because he didn’t trust the girl out of his sight? Tessa sometimes worried about her son. Worried he was becoming too much like his father. Jodie, at eighteen, was a tad shy. And Gary tended to be domineering, a disaster for such a malleable girl. Jodie reminded Tessa of the innocent she was at the same age, and Gary was beginning to be too much like Des.

There was not a lot she could do about it, except keep reminding Jodie not to give in to him. But the poor girl was besotted, which was not good news when up against someone so forceful. Still, at twenty-one, Gary had time to change. Tessa worried that it might already be too late.

“Dinner, Velvet?” After opening a can of dog food and satisfying her pet’s needs, Tessa washed her hands and idly stood applying cream to them. As Velvet finished licking her dish, her ears pricked. The doorbell chimed, and she barked her way across the hall. “Not another salesman,” Tessa grumbled, as she followed the spaniel.

As Tessa pulled the door open, the words of rebuke died on her lips. It most definitely wasn’t a salesman. The man who stood there, smiling, was one she’d never expected to see again in her lifetime.

“Mrs Browning. I don’t know if you remember me,” he said. Oh, how she remembered him, and that rich voice of his. “The name’s Jack Delaney. I did some work here a few years back for your husband.” When she continued to stare at him in shock, he added, “We built the games room and extra toilet and shower room.” He shrugged. “Another guy and me were here for a month or so? You’ve probably forgotten me.”

Forgotten him?

If there was one person Tessa would never be likely to forget, it was him. His voice sounded deeper, but still held that same undercurrent of sensuality that caused her toes to curl.

“I know it’s not exactly the done thing to turn up like this on your doorstep, but I’d like to speak to you about your late husband’s business.”

“Mr. Delaney,” Tessa managed to get out. “Of course I remember you.” Good grief, she was blushing like a schoolgirl; she just knew it. “Please come in.” She stepped aside, ushering him into the spacious hallway.

“Jack, please. I recall you called me that when we met last time.”

Tessa did her best to pull herself together as he smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling.

She guessed he still laughed easily. There was no guile in his expression. This part of him hadn't changed.

"And you must call me Tessa. We don't stand on ceremony around here."

Not anymore. Des would have had a fit if one of his employees called her by her Christian name. But Des wasn't here. That thought sent a dart of pleasure through her that was definitely wicked.

He wore a very conventional dark suit, and looked as if he'd just stepped out of a board meeting. Tessa recalled vividly how he looked in faded denim shorts, navy blue singlet, and work boots, which was what he'd worn when working here. She recalled too how she'd discreetly spent many hours watching him. Watched his sweat-streaked torso and arms as he toiled beneath the sun. Heat enveloped her as if she was back there, avidly spying on him from her kitchen window.

This thought sent Tessa hurtling back to days in midsummer. Thirty-five that year, and already highly disillusioned with her marriage, the entry of a good-looking young man into her boring existence added some much-needed spice to the dreary days. Jack gave her something to dream about. Heaven knows she'd needed dreams to replace the awful emptiness an unhappy marriage enveloped her in.

She was wearing an ordinary pale pink sundress of washed-out cotton on the day he turned up, looking like an Adonis, rugged and overwhelming. Her hair probably looked a sight too—pulled back in a ponytail, if she remembered correctly. He was so handsome, fit, and full of youthful vitality, that she felt flustered, self-conscious and downright awkward in his presence.

Forgotten him?

It was likely he was forever imprinted on her brain. His brown eyes haunted many of her nighttime dreams, and daytime fantasies. Jack Delaney, of the black curly hair, muscular body, and easy charm, with the strength and power to make her weak with wanting.

If he was good-looking ten years ago, he was superb now. His hair had been tamed—the curls not quite so unruly, although he still wore it fairly long. It reached his shoulders, whereas it used to be halfway down his back. He seemed larger, broader. Not many men towered over Tessa, but he did. Her height was the bane of her life. Des was always scathing about it, probably because he couldn't look down his nose at her. Des liked people to feel beneath him. Had loved to talk down to people.

Eyes as dark as chocolate assessed her, and Tessa's skin quivered beneath their warm scrutiny. He'd always possessed the power to make every nerve ending come alive, and hadn't lost that power. It was unnerving to know he could still have this effect on her. Tessa wasn't

sure how to deal with this handsome fantasy from her past.

He held out a hand and she stared down at it, in the brief moment aware of his square-tipped fingers and clean nails. There was a dusting of black hairs on the back of his hand, and his white shirt cuff with its gold links contrasted vividly with skin darkened by long hours spent outside.

Tessa put her hand in his, every pulse going into overdrive as he gripped her fingers. It took an effort to drag her hand from his warm clasp. She was achingly aware that her skin was glowing, which had nothing to do with the heat in her house. A strange feeling she couldn't put a name to was taking her over. No other man ever aroused such a feeling. Not since this one, ten years ago.

"We'll go in here." Tessa walked towards the living room. The spaniel begged for attention by making a soft sound in her throat as she followed, her tail wagging exuberantly, and Tessa admonished, "Velvet, leave our guest alone."

"It's all right. So, you're Velvet are you?" He bent to stroke the dog's ears, grinning up at Tessa when Velvet licked his hand with enthusiasm.

Tessa felt unaccountably nervous. "She likes people," she said, then gesturing to the three-seater couch, added, "Please sit down."

When he was seated, she sat opposite on one of the matching chairs. Crossing her legs, she noticed his glance resting momentarily on her ankles, and touched a hand to the goose bumps on her nape. With an inner groan Tessa regretted her disheveled state—her grubby jeans, and bare feet. Good God, her hair must be a mess. She'd been working in the garden before taking Velvet for her daily walk.

But then she pulled herself up short. Idiot. What difference did it make if she looked all of her forty-five years? So what if she wore the grubbiest clothes she possessed? What was she thinking of? He must be a good fifteen years her junior. And, she recalled with a sinking heart, married, probably with half a dozen children by now. She remembered thinking then that he was far too young to be married and wondered if perhaps he'd been pressed into marrying because his wife was pregnant—often the cause of youthful marriages.

A vivid picture of a dark curly-haired boy with his father's soft eyes and cheeky grin came to mind, and something gave inside her.

Tessa swallowed. "Forgive me? Can I get you a drink?" She was up and turning to the cabinet at the side of the room as she spoke.

"A coffee will be fine." A roguish grin tugged at his mouth. "As I recall you make the best coffee in town." His soft chuckle sent wild sensations tingling through her. He looked

completely relaxed, while she felt like a schoolgirl hauled before the headmaster. Stop acting like a kid, she scolded, nodding before going through to the kitchen.

As she put the kettle on, a movement startled her, and she put a hand to her heart when she realized he'd followed her.

Just a few paces away, he stood studying her, his expression unreadable. "What happened to your cat?" he asked.

She was amazed he'd remembered the black kitten the children brought home. "It got run over about four years ago." Tessa pushed back her hair.

"You've hardly changed." She felt the heat running up her face again as he said this. "You're just as slim, and still have a lovely complexion."

Tessa stared at him. Struck speechless, she began to prepare the cups and saucers. A tremor in her fingers made the crockery rattle.

"I'm sorry. I've obviously overstepped the bounds of good manners." He'd moved further into the kitchen and now stood quite close, making her feel more unsettled. Those broad shoulders lifted in a small shrug. "I have a bad habit of being blunt. My best friends tell me it'll get me into trouble one day. I believe honesty is the best policy though, don't you?"

Tessa nearly dropped a cup and he reached to take it from her fingers, which only shook more. "Oh yes," she managed to get out, while he set the cup down. He then leaned back against the bench and folded his arms.

As the kettle began to boil she turned her back on him, hoping he hadn't spotted her stupidly blushing cheeks.

"How old are your children now?" he asked, as he turned to the fridge. He took out the milk as if he'd done it in her house a hundred times before.

Trying to sound normal, Tessa cleared her throat, before saying, "Gary's twenty one, and Laurel just turned sixteen." Despite her efforts it still came out huskily, and she could have kicked herself.

What was wrong with her? She was acting totally out of character. Des may have treated her like a doormat most of the time, and humiliated her in company, but she usually managed to carry on like a mature woman with strangers. Yet, in front of this man she felt as insecure as an adolescent. But then he wasn't exactly a stranger, was he? The starring character in so many of her past dreams, he was more like a lover, once well known.

"You still only have two?"

"Yes, Des didn't want any more." For a brief moment she dwelt in the past. Des didn't care one way or the other once he had his son, and was even more disinterested when Tessa

produced a daughter. Her darling Laurel helped to fill the aching void in her life. “What about you? Do you have any family?” Tessa picked up the tray and he followed her back to the living room.

He waited, a hand in his trouser pocket, until she sat, then sat too, unbuttoning his jacket. When Tessa glanced up, she saw his eyes had turned serious. “No, I never had any. My wife and I divorced.” He shrugged indifferently.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” It sounded mundane. And she knew it was a lie. An alien feeling flowered inside her, one she couldn’t put a name to—akin to anticipation.

“Don’t be.” He rubbed his jaw and looked away. “It was all over a long time ago. We were together only two years. Two painful years I might add. We were both too young to have enough sense to get up in the morning, let alone make a relationship work.”

Tessa shook her head. To her way of thinking he’d seemed to be very levelheaded, and certainly more mature than most twenty year olds. “And you never married again?”

“No.”

That anticipatory flutter returned.

“I haven’t met the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. Yet. And I won’t settle for anything but a lasting relationship next time.” He slanted a roguish grin her way again, and Tessa’s heart tilted.

“Milk? Sugar?” She held up the jug. “Do you still like your coffee sweet?” Tessa could have curled up in a heap. Fancy letting him know she remembered this about him.

“Milk please, but no sugar. I try to keep the sugar intake down now.” He patted his middle. “Have to watch the weight.”

Tessa disputed that. There was little wrong with his shape.

“You know my husband died.” Tessa nibbled at her lip as she passed his cup.

“Yes.” He hesitated a moment. “I’ve heard his business is about to go on the market. That’s what I want to speak to you about.”

Tessa tilted her head. “I can’t think how on earth you got such an idea. My son is running everything at the moment.”

She’d already had one flaming row with Gary over the business, despite what she told this man. It was obvious to everyone her son was incapable of running it single-handedly. When she offered to assist him, he’d looked at her as if she’d taken leave of her senses. And that look reminded her explicitly he was his father’s son. Too much like Des in many ways for comfort.

But she had to admit that she was just as much to blame for Gary being hotheaded and arrogant—she’d managed to spoil him. Too much affection had been showered on her children

to compensate for the lack of love from her husband. While Laurel had turned out sweet and caring from this surfeit of affection, Gary tended to be petulant and bullish at times. Definitely traits inherited from his father.

“The subject of selling hasn’t come up.” For a moment she stared at the wedding band on her finger as she turned it around. Why hadn’t she taken it off? She would do so soon. Momentarily she wondered how that thought had sprung into her mind.

“I see.” He didn’t seem about to pursue the subject. Tessa covertly watched him as he drank. Not only was Jack Delaney handsome, but also one of the nicest men she’d ever met. No, nice was too soft a word. He possessed the power to make her feel special—listening with interest to what must have been mundane comments.

Mind you, back then she hadn’t met many men in anything but a hostess capacity. Her arrogant husband always froze men out if they tried to get too close to her. Des liked to think of her as an appendage, nothing more. Later, he hadn’t really cared one way or the other. And she hadn’t met anyone after Jack who roused enough enthusiasm in her to consider any indiscretion.

Instinctively she knew, despite his strength, this man would always treat any woman he cared for with exquisite gentleness. That was a heady combination—strength and gentleness.

For the life of her, Tessa couldn’t remember what the other young man who worked alongside Jack looked like. Jack made her long for things way out of reach. Made her yearn for things she didn’t dare admit to anyone—hardly admitted to herself, except in the dead of night when no-one could see her eyes—eyes she knew grew dazed with the depth of her longing.

* * *

Jack sipped his coffee as he watched her over the rim of the cup. Fancy her remembering he liked lots of sweet stuff back then. It might be small and insignificant but was something in his favor. He remembered practically everything about her, from the certain way she had of looking at him, as if about to run and hide at any moment, to the soft curve of her mouth when she smiled.

And he hadn’t lied; she’d barely altered in ten years. He could hardly believe it. If anything she was more beautiful than the last time he saw her, with slightly exotic almond shaped eyes, dainty chin, patrician nose, skin begging a man’s touch, and amazing bone structure.

And still as unsure of herself. Christ, what had her mangy dog of a husband done? If she was his woman, she would be glorying in her femininity.

Her long legs drew his gaze as she crossed them. Lord, but they brought out the savage in him. This woman's ingrained elegance attracted him from the moment he set eyes on her ten years ago. In the jeans and sweater, he could see her figure was still as willowy, yet curved in all the right places. He'd always liked tall women, perhaps since he developed a crush on this particular one at the tender age of twenty.

What a contrast to the bitch he married. Sometimes he wondered if perhaps his marriage, never made in heaven, had started to go decidedly downhill once he met Tessa. No, it was a fact—held beside Mary, his greatest mistake, Tessa was a goddess.

Her eyes had held a wariness since he walked in, and she kept looking away every time he tried to hold her gaze. He liked the shyness she projected, had been endeared by it from the start, hoped it was still part of her make-up, not just something manufactured by his imagination. No doubt she was unaware of her attractiveness. And there was no doubt that she was unaware of his strange tug of the heartstrings just at the sight of her. God, but she brought out the romantic in him.

Jack recalled the first time he walked into her kitchen years ago as if it was yesterday. Des instructed him and Geoff to turn up at seven thirty and they arrived on the dot. Despite the early hour, she was up and about, unlike Mary who still snored beneath the blankets when he left her at home. Tessa was in the midst of preparing lunches for her two kids, and looking as fresh as a dew-kissed rosebud. With flustered confusion, she offered them a cup of coffee. It was the first of many she made them in the weeks they were here. Until this one he had now, he'd never tasted its like. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that she made it. It was likely he would drink hemlock and enjoy it if it was made by Tessa Browning's slender hand.

"What a shame."

What was a shame? Jack looked at her curiously. Deep in his reminiscences, he'd forgotten completely what they were discussing.

"Your marriage?" She gave a slight nod.

"Ah, that? Not really, we were unsuited." Boy, was that an understatement! "Mary found herself someone else, and I was glad it was all over."

That seemed to shock Tessa. What would she say, he wondered, if he told her she was possibly behind his indifference to Mary. The indifference that grew steadily while he worked in this house. Tessa always looked so fresh, regardless of the heat, and always treated him and Geoff as if they were important, not just two tradesmen working for her husband. He'd never met another woman like her, before or since. No other woman came near to stirring his senses. No other came close to bringing out every protective instinct, every lustful response.

“You came to discuss Des’s business,” she said, and Jack had to bring his thoughts back to the subject. “As I said, it’s not up for sale.” He got the feeling she wasn’t a hundred per cent sure about this.

“And is your son capable of carrying on? I heard he’s making a real hash of things.” Jack bit his lip, wishing he’d bitten his tongue. Damnation on his bluntness.

Her brows lifted at that, as she said sharply, “Who told you this?”

Right! He’d opened his big mouth and put his flat foot right in it.

“You know what the building game is like...Tessa. There’s not a lot goes unnoticed.” He shrugged. Like any large manufacturing industry there was a network of spies, forever passing on snippets of fact or fiction. “I don’t doubt that Gary will be capable in a few years, but as things are at this present moment you’ll start to lose orders if he doesn’t get his act together. I’m willing to let him work for me and I’m quite prepared to carry on where Des left off and give him every help and encouragement.”

Uncertainty clouded her hazel eyes. The dog was flopped at her feet, and she bent to stroke its ears. “Gary thinks he’s responsible enough to make a go of it on his own.” She didn’t sound positive.

“Of course he thinks he is. I remember when I was his age. I thought I knew it all.” Jack ran a palm over his nape. He hadn’t been handed a business on a plate though, and thus had to fight harder to succeed—having more to lose. “I’m prepared to pay the highest price. Think about it, Tessa. But I should warn you; you’ll have all the vultures on your back before long. I’d hate to see you get cheated.”

Her slender hands straightened the denim over her knees and he swallowed hard. The simple action set off all sorts of reactions. With a harsh intake of breath, he waited while she seemed to mull over his words.

Then, to his utter surprise and delight, she said, “I was going to do spaghetti bolognese for Gary’s dinner, and he’s not coming home. Would you stay and share it with me?”

Would he ever? “That’d be nice.”

Nice! Good God, it would be bloody marvelous. “Are you sure?”

“I wouldn’t have offered if I wasn’t.” She smiled, as with her wonderful grace, she stood and reached to take his empty cup. Roses. She still wore the same perfume. It wafted about him, making his head spin, his senses reel. “Another cup?”

“I’ll get it. You go ahead and do whatever you have to do with the spaghetti, and I’ll top up our cups.”

She was blushing again. Christ! If it happened too often he would fall apart. Could she be

such a delightful shade of pink all over? With a sharp silent reprimand, he told himself to keep it cool. If he wasn't careful he could frighten the life out of her.

"I'd rather not have another. But you go ahead and help yourself." She nodded as she picked up the tray.

Jack followed Tessa to the kitchen and, while she started to get a saucepan from the cupboard he refilled his cup, then leaned back against the counter to watch her.

"Am I in the way? Just tell me to go jump if I am." Could he be making her nervous? Was that a tremor in her fingers, or simply his own awareness playing tricks on him? She shook her head and, with an endearing little smile, carried on.

His gut clenched. "So, your daughter's sixteen. Is she a problem teenager?" Perhaps as stupid question but he desperately wanted to set her at ease. He loved the sound of her voice, and could listen to it all day. It was soft as a summer breeze, with a slight huskiness to it. Made a man think of forbidden things, like sultry nights of passion and sweat-sleeked bodies.

Her warm smile told him she adored her daughter. "Laurel a problem? Heavens, no—I couldn't wish for a better daughter."

Jack pulled his thoughts back to the mundane question he'd asked. "You must be one of the lucky ones. I have friends with teenagers who reckon they are a pain in the neck."

"I am lucky." She frowned as she said that. "Des was like your friends—inclined to look on girls as not worth the bother it takes to raise them." As if she regretted being so outspoken, she bit her lip before she turned her back on him.

Jack couldn't imagine dear old Des being the kind of father a girl would enjoy having. He was far too dogmatic and unbending. Too mean and nasty to have the sensibilities needed to rear a daughter.

"Laurel wants to be a nurse." Her smile had returned when she turned back to face him. "She'll be a good one too. Her dolls have been her patients since she was a toddler. Every one of them sported a bandage on one limb or other since she was old enough to wrap it." Pride shone from her eyes. "I think she'll probably want to go overseas to help the refugees or displaced people. She has a very compassionate nature."

"Is she as beautiful as her mother?" Damn! Now she'd gone all wary again, but her blush told him his revelation pleased her.

Laughing nervously she eyed him across the small space separating them. "Don't be daft."

"Daft to think anyone could be as lovely as you, you mean?" With a grin, he watched the peachy stain travel from her throat and up her face. God, she was endearing.

She gave a soft snort as she held a spoon aloft. "You should see about getting glasses."

“My eyesight is perfect.” Fascinated, he watched her movements. Yes, she was flustered for sure. “Surely Des told you how lovely you are. And there must have been many men over the years that commented on it. Unless they are the ones who needed glasses.”

She emptied a packet of spaghetti into boiling water as she protested, “I’m a past her prime mum and my hair’s going gray.”

Jack made a rude sound. “Rubbish! Past your prime? You have the face and figure of a twenty-year-old, Tessa. Your skin’s like silk, and I happen to like the touch of silver in your hair.” Would dearly like to see if her skin felt as soft as it promised to be. Itched to run his fingers through that sleek hair.

“How did we get onto this subject?” He couldn’t quite make out if she was embarrassed by his bluntness or pleased at his compliments.

“Well, mainly because I was commenting on your beauty and you were arguing with me.” Now he knew she was pleased with his observations—her flustered movements gave her away. Obviously he was right—she just wasn’t used to having someone tell her she was lovely. “How do you keep so slim?”

“I walk the dog every day as well as doing exercises. And I do Tai Chi regularly.”

“Really? I’ve always wanted to have a go at that? Where did you learn?” He watched as she stirred the pot. A delicious smell rose from the sauce she’d poured in.

Her eyes went wide. “I went to the local community center. You’re kidding me, right? I can’t see you doing anything so sedate.” A small sound of disbelief left her lips. “I would reckon karate would be more in your line.”

“Funny you should say that.” Jack nodded. “I did start learning after my marriage flopped. It was one way to get the anger out of my system.”

“Anger?” She stopped stirring to frown at him.

“Yes. Mary was a bitch of the first degree.” Another understatement. Bitch came nowhere near describing his ex-wife’s selfishness. “I spent the first year after our split wondering where I went wrong. Until it dawned on me I had nothing to do with the way she was.” For a moment he stared pensively down at the dog now snuggled in her basket. “I came from Adelaide. I don’t know if I told you.”

“Yes, you said your mum and dad lived there. Your father was a plumber, wasn’t he?”

“That’s right.” Jack was astounded she’d remembered so much of what he told her so long ago. “They both died within a couple of years of each other. Dad first, then Mum three years ago.”

“Oh, I am sorry.” She put placemats, condiments and cutlery on the table.

Jack shrugged. "Don't be. Mum didn't have much interest in life once dad had gone."

Her eyes turned wistful again. "It must be lovely to care so deeply for someone that you can't bear life without each other." As if realizing she'd disclosed too much, she turned her back on him and began to take dishes from the cupboard. "So, you came over from Adelaide and met your wife."

"Yes, and wasn't that just about the worst mistake I made in my life. I guess she saw me coming. A dope from the back-blocks. I thought she was glamorous and sexy, and let's face it, I was as green as grass. I soon found out what she was really like. She was showy and tacky, self-involved and lazy." He sighed. "Mary was only looking out for number one. She wouldn't have known how to share a life with someone. I pity the bloke she went off with."

"At least there were no children to complicate matters. It's always worse when kids are involved in a marriage breakdown." For a moment he thought she was about to disclose some deep dark secret, but as if pulling herself up, she went back to her cooking. "What if you don't meet this woman of your dreams, who will share a lifelong relationship with you? What then? Will it worry you not to have children?"

Jack turned away, plunging his hands into his pockets. Now here was a tricky subject.

When he turned back to her he said, "Life has a funny way of working itself out. What is meant to be, will be."

"That's true." She busied herself stirring the pot again.

The ringing of the phone saved him from making any more comments on the subject. Truth was, he would have liked kids once, but now wasn't so sure it bothered him one way or the other.

Now, wanting a certain woman, now talking animatedly to what he presumed, by the conversation, was her daughter, was as certain as day following night.

What would she do if he just came right out with it and declared his feelings?

Probably slap his face and tell him to get out and never darken her door again. Which was the last thing he wanted to do. Now that he was this close to her again, he would do whatever it took to have her welcome him into her life.

"This is an unforgettable love story that I didn't want to end and when it did, I wanted to start reading it again. Tessa is a wonderful heroine who has to regain her self-esteem and learn to love again. Jack is a man sure of what he wants and doesn't mind using everything in his power to get it." Reviewer: Hattie Boyd Word Museum