

Surprises *(Vicki Stevens)*



Sally is puzzled. Christmas this year doesn't seem to be quite turning out as planned. They've been driving for over twenty minutes and are now turning onto a familiar dirt road. 'You're taking me to your place for Christmas lunch? I thought you were taking me somewhere special.'

Jack squints, 'I am. All the restaurants were booked out. Anyway, this will be much better.'

The ute slows, and they enter the property through a set of open rusty gates. The weathered farmhouse comes into view.

'You hungry?' Jack asks, pulling the car up near the front porch.

'Starving.'

'Good.' He opens the car door.

'Wait,' she calls, 'I haven't met all your family yet, and they may not want—'

But Jack has already leapt out and is taking the porch steps two at a time.

Sally wonders if she should follow, then decides to wait and see if she is actually welcome. Minutes pass. The screen door bangs.

Jack races down the stairs with a cloth bundle in his arms. Placing it in the back of the ute, he climbs behind the wheel.

'What's in the bundle?' she asks.

'I raided the kitchen.'

'Didn't anyone see you?'

'Nope. They're all still at church.'

He starts the motor and steers the car around the side of the house. They follow a well-worn track past a healthy vegetable garden, then through a wide gate.

'Where does this lead?'

Jack grins.. 'To the best picnic spot around.'

They bump along the dusty corrugation and crest a rise. Below them lays a vast apple orchard edged by a creek. They drive down, and then alongside rows of budding trees, until coming to a stop in a shaded clearing. Jack steps out and retrieves the bundle from the back. Sally follows closely behind as he chooses a perfect spot under a large apple tree. Untying the huge knot, he spreads out a checked tablecloth to reveal an assortment of tasty goods.

'Voila! Madame, Christmas lunch is served.'

'Oh, this is wonderful.' Sally kneels and inspects the food. Roast chicken, baked ham, a watermelon and feta cheese salad, potatoes cooked in their jackets, pesto pasta, scones, home made jam, and best of all a huge wedge of plum pudding. 'A real feast', she cries, dipping a

finger into the jar of jam.

There was way more, but I was in a hurry. 'Oh!' he slaps his forehead, and rushes back to the ute, returning with two brown glass bottles. 'Almost forgot the bubbly!'

'Glasses?' Sally frowns.

'Sorry.' He gives a shrug and sits on the grass. Uncorking a bottle with his teeth, he takes a swig, and then passes the bottle on.

Sally puts it to her lips and takes a gulp, and then another, until the wine is finished. 'Yum. Not bad. Spicy and fruity with a tantalizing spritz.'

'Geez, I didn't know you were an alcho.'

She drops the empty bottle, and slaps his arm. 'I'm not, you fool.' Then hiccups loudly. 'Just feeling ... festive.'

A warm breeze picks up, brushes over them. She stands and suddenly takes off through the apple grove. The light winds swishes through leafy branches causing blossoms to drift down like colourful snowflakes. She reaches out and captures them in the palms of her hands. They are as soft as feathers. She follows the wave of air to collect more.

Jack hears footsteps from behind, and feels a surprising coolness on his skin. Sally stands over him, she is smiling and showering him with petals. Her cheeks are either flushed from the wine or the sun ... or both, and her beauty is almost unbearable. He wonders if she'll follow him to Queensland. They've only been out a couple of times, and he hasn't even had the courage to kiss her. But he has to get away. Away from this hick town. Away from the bloody freezing Tasmanian climate. Away from his family.

She plonks herself down in front of him. There are apple blossoms caught in her hair. He reaches out, removes them one by one, and hands her the petals. Normally this would be the moment when a guy would take a girl in his arms and plant a kiss on her. But Sally's expression is peculiar. Her eyes search his, and she seems bewildered. Scared even. *Maybe this is not what she wants from him. Maybe she just wants to be friends.* He looks away disappointed. Instantly, his shoulders are seized, and his mouth is assaulted by lips, soft and urgent. He doesn't hold back, and discovers that her mouth tastes of strawberry jam and red wine.

Sally finally releases him, and he catches his breath. 'Hey ... I was going to do that.'

'Well why ... didn't you?' She pants, her chest rising with each intake of air. 'I couldn't wait ... any longer.'

'I was trying to be a gentleman.'

'Well maybe a gentleman isn't what I want on this special day.'

Then she pushes him backwards onto the grass and sits over him. Her hands slide under his shirt, move over his chest. Her fingers are light and teasing.

He blinks hard. 'Geez you're a surprise. Are you sure this isn't just the wine spurring you on?'

'Of course not. Don't you want your Christmas present?'

'My present?'

She nods, and undoes the buttons of her blouse, revealing a mixture of satin and lace and smooth, round flesh. 'Me ... all of me. That's my present to you. Jack.' Then bending down, she slips her tongue into his mouth.

Christmas this year hasn't quite turned out as planned. But Jack isn't complaining.