

The Next Season

(sample chapter)



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The Next Season

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Sometimes going home is the hardest thing you can do...and sometimes the hardest thing turns out to be the best.

When Zoe Bennett's boyfriend cheats on her, leaving her homeless, jobless and practically broke, she returns to the only place she's ever felt safe and at home – Wildwood Point. She hopes to heal her heart and find a job to get herself back on her feet – but she has forgotten how small Wildwood Point is.

Until a couple of months ago Shaun Elliot's life was sweet – a job he loved and big plans for the future. Until, that is, his long-time girlfriend turned down his romantic New Year's Eve marriage proposal in front of all their family and friends. Angry, hurt and feeling like he is the laughing stock of small town Wildwood Point, Shaun has sworn off relationships while he works out what to do with himself and his life.

The last thing he needs is to find his high school sweetheart stranded on the side of the road. She broke his heart when she left him seven years ago, but he's never been the type to ignore someone who needs help...



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One

Welcome To Wildwood Point—population 1899

Zoe Bennett slowed her hot pink Kingswood station wagon and sighed as she read the sign at the edge of the only town she'd ever felt truly at home. Just another kilometre or so and she could stop panicking. It felt like she'd been holding her breath for the last twenty minutes. She eyed the flashing fuel light on the dashboard and offered up a silent plea to a God she didn't believe existed, driving more sedately than she usually did in a mission to conserve petrol.

She'd used her last fifty dollars to fill up in Mandurah. Well, not quite her last. There was about ten dollars' worth of loose change in the bottom of her handbag but she planned to use that to buy a beer at The Wildwood Tavern. After all she'd been through, she needed that beer. She'd drink it in celebration of new beginnings. Zoe had started afresh in Wildwood Point once before, so she could do it again.

Her eyes flashed from one side of the road to the other, drinking in the familiar and comforting surroundings of forest on one side and ocean on the other. Despite her dire last few months, she could smell hope in the air. Okay, so maybe that was the salty sea breeze, but to Zoe that *was* hope. So many of her happy memories had taken place here, in this little tourist town on the south west coast of Australia. Many of them in the waves. There was a reason board riders flocked to this region—it had some of the best swells in the world—and she'd been lucky enough to learn to surf in them.

She glanced in her rear-view mirror at the love of her life. 'You okay there, Josie? Not long to go.' Her surfboard took up most of the back of the car but she wouldn't go anywhere without it. Maybe one day she'd get a roof rack for it. That would be the practical thing to do; then again, she'd never been the most practical of people.

Lost in thought, trying to flood herself with happiness and hope (power of positive thinking and all), it actually came as a shock when her car shuddered. Reacting quickly, she turned the wheel towards the side of the road and only just made it to the gravel shoulder before the engine conked out completely.

'Well. Shit.' Zoe laid her head against the steering wheel and took a deep breath, determined not to cry. It wasn't like this was the worst thing that had ever happened to her. Lust for a beer had been her downfall. If only she'd spent those last few coins on a few extra litres of petrol.

She'd been head over steering wheel all of ten seconds when she heard another vehicle pull up behind her. A car door slammed and she wiped her eyes, taking another glance in the rear-view mirror to scope out the figure loping towards her.

Definitely a guy. Tall and tanned, wearing board shorts and a t-shirt (pretty much uniform in these parts). That was the extent of the detail she could identify as he was also wearing sunnies and a cap. So, when he arrived at her car and stooped to look in through her window, she wasn't prepared for the jolt of recognition that hit her hard in the chest. Or was it the heart?

'Shaun? Shaun Elliot?'

'Zoe?' He sounded equally shocked as he popped his sunglasses atop his cap, showcasing his dark, sparkling eyes and the smile lines around them. He wasn't smiling now. His mouth hung open in astonishment, revealing two rows of the sexiest teeth on the planet. Her mind immediately transported her back to when she'd been a smitten seventeen year old and that mouth had first claimed hers. Heat flared in her cheeks and awareness skittered down her spine. Was it a good or bad omen that the first person she'd run into was the guy she'd lost her virginity to? If Shaun was cute back then, now he positively dripped with sex appeal from his dark chocolate mop of curls right down to the toes, which peeped out of his Havaianas. All she could think about was reaching out and running a finger over his razor stubble.

Realising she was practically drooling, she snapped her lower lip back up to meet her upper, smiled and then said, 'Hi. How are you?'

It wasn't much of a greeting after the history they shared and all the time they'd been apart, but she was too bamboozled to think of anything better. *Stupid*. She should have known when she'd decided to return to Wildwood that the chances of running into Shaun were high. His family had lived here for generations and owned a renowned furniture gallery in town. She hadn't kept tabs on him or anything, but occasionally Sandee—her surrogate mum—sent her copies of *The Wildwood Whisperer* and once in a while the Elliots got a mention, so she'd known he still called this small coastal town home.

'I'm...okay.' He rubbed the side of his totally delicious jaw. 'Wow, it's really you. Is this a fleeting visit? Have you come to see Sandee or are you—'

'I'm not sure,' she interrupted with a shrug. 'You know me. Never was good at staying in one spot for too long, but I missed this place. Thought it was time for a little catch up.'

He nodded, and then glanced towards her the front of her Kingswood. 'Is there something wrong with your car?'

Zoe sighed and shook her head. 'Not exactly. I've... This is so embarrassing. I've run out of petrol.' She should have been used to mortification by now, but that didn't mean she wanted to look stupid in front of Shaun.

He chuckled and then straightened up. 'Let me give you a lift to the servo then.'

She bit her lip, hesitating a moment. It wasn't the idea of being in the confined space of Shaun's car that panicked her but rather what he would think when they got to the service station and she could barely afford a container to put petrol in, never mind the fuel itself. 'Thanks, but I can walk,' she said, trying to inject fake chirpiness into her voice. She wondered how long she could leave her car on the side of the road before someone reported it as dumped.

He raised an eyebrow. 'And let word get back to my mother that I left a damsel on the side of the road in distress? I don't think so.'

She threw him a glare. 'Hey, I'm not a damsel!'

'But you are in distress?'

Oh boy, if he only knew how much.

‘Fine.’ She tried to smile her resignation, tugged her keys out of the ignition, grabbed her handbag off the passenger seat and undid her seatbelt. If anyone had to rescue her it may as well be Shaun. His easiness on the eye was an unexpected light in what could possibly be the darkest period in her life. And that was saying something.

He opened the door and held it for her as she climbed out. Shaun had always been a gentleman; it was one of the many things she’d found so appealing about him. As a teen who’d been tossed about from one foster home to the next, Zoe hadn’t experienced much chivalry, and it had set him apart from the other boys their age who’d only been interested in one thing but couldn’t be arsed putting in any effort to get it. She was glad to see he hadn’t changed.

Shaun waited as she locked Jemima and then they traipsed across the gravel to his ute. He opened the door for her again and she slid into the passenger seat, stealing another sweet glance down his broad torso as she did so. Yes, he was most definitely hotter than ever.

When he sat in the driver’s seat beside her and started the ute, he asked, ‘Does Sandee know you’re coming or is this a surprise?’

She buckled her seatbelt and held her handbag tightly on her lap, not trusting herself to look at him again. ‘Um... I mentioned the possibility of a visit when we talked a few weeks back, but in the end it happened rather quickly.’ The mess with Jasper, which included losing her job and being turfed out of their house...well, that had forced her hand.

‘She’ll be stoked to see you,’ Shaun said, seemingly oblivious to her discomfort as his long fingers caressed the steering wheel. Looking at his hands had her memory once again rewinding to the distant past. A time when nothing had seemed more pressing than having those fingers running riot over her body. She shivered at the recollection, while inwardly telling herself not to get sentimental over first love.

‘Is the air con too cold?’ Shaun asked.

‘No.’ She swallowed and shook her head, her spine tingling at the knowledge he’d noticed such a tiny thing. ‘I...’ Her voice drifted off. What should she say? That her shivers had nothing to do with the weather and everything to do with the way sitting so close to him made her feel after so long.

On the one hand it was nice to feel *anything*, after the bitter end to her two-year relationship (the longest she’d ever managed to hold down), but right now men and sex were low priorities. There were more important things to get straight before she even contemplated either of them again.

Sitting up straight, she made an attempt to direct the conversation away from herself. ‘So, what have you been up to in the last few years? Still surfing? Married? Kids?’ She feared her voice caught on the word ‘married’ but it was a reasonable question. Even years ago, Shaun had made no secret of the fact that he couldn’t wait to settle down and have a family. She supposed it was the result of coming from large, happy family himself—something she knew jack shit about.

Shaun swallowed and gripped the steering wheel tightly at Zoe's questions. He'd been so lost in the surprise of seeing her again after all these years, at trying not to look sideways and stare, at trying to ignore the alluring scent of some kind of floral goodness emanating from her, that what was a pretty run-of-the-mill enquiry felt as if it had come out of nowhere. It would be easy to give her the short answers—'yes', 'no' and 'no'—but if she hung around Wildwood Point more than a few hours, she'd hear his whole sorry story soon enough.

Almost two months had gone by since New Years Eve, when he'd embarrassed himself in front of his family and half the town, but nothing much had happened since to take the focus away from him. Even his future brother-in-law, Matt, buying a chocolate shop for his sister, Hannah, had only caused a temporary distraction.

The question was, did he want to be the one to tell Zoe, or would it be better if he let her learn it behind whispered hands in the supermarket or at the post office?

'I surf every morning,' he said, buying himself a little time. A voice inside him said it didn't really matter what she thought of him anymore, but he found it did. Something had shifted inside him when he'd made eye contact with her on the side of the road only minutes ago. 'Or if the waves aren't playing, I run and swim. But yes, I still spend as much time as possible on the beach.' Hoping to deflect the conversation away from himself, he added, 'I noticed you brought your board.'

'Of course. There are two things in my life I can't live without—Josie and Jemima.'

His lips twisted at that. 'I'm guessing one of those is your surfboard?'

'Yep. Josie's my board and Jemima's my car.' She sighed sadly. 'I hope they'll be okay on the side of the road.'

The anguish in her voice touched his heart, and the fact she gave names to inanimate objects only added to her quirky appeal. Zoe had always been different from the other girls they'd gone to school with. A free spirit, his mum had called her. Amazing, he'd thought. 'They'll be fine,' he said, 'in fact...'

He turned his ute into the Gull Service Station that had marked one end of the main street of town since long before either of them were born. That was one thing about living in a small town—it never took long to get from A to B, which in this case meant little time for catching up, or awkward confessions. It had been nice while it lasted but he shouldn't kid himself that Zoe was anything more to him than a girl he'd once had a thing for.

'Oh, that was fast.' She stared ahead at the petrol bowsers and he swore a look of fear flashed across her face. Then she bit her lip, unzipped the bag on her lap and scrounged around inside.

He parked and then frowned as he watched her count out a bunch of coins into one hand as if they amounted to her life savings. Little beads of perspiration appeared on her forehead and, if he weren't mistaken, she looked as though she was trying not to cry.

'Zoe?'

She reluctantly looked up and met his gaze, searching his eyes with her sky-blue ones. 'Yes?'

'What are you doing?' he asked.

He saw her swallow as an overly bright smile appeared on her tanned face. 'We're here to buy petrol, aren't we?' Her shoulders went back and her chin came up as she defensively said, 'I'm working out how much I can afford.'

His heart squeezed and his eyebrows shot upwards before he had the good sense to tame them. At a guess, the assorted coins might add up to about ten bucks. If she were lucky. He truly had no idea what to say without sounding insulting. Finally, he decided on, 'How about I buy you some petrol as a welcome home gift? And you can use my jerry can. It's in the back.'

'I...I can't ask you to do that.'

'You didn't ask me, I offered. It's what friends do.' Not that they'd been friends for a long time; she'd kinda broken his teenage heart when she'd left.

But they were adults now.

'Well, okay...but I'll pay you back.' She blinked and refreshed her smile. 'It won't be long. I lost my cards you see, so couldn't get any money out, but it should all be sorted soon. And then maybe I can buy you a beer or—'

'Relax.' She was talking so fast, it was making his head spin. 'Let's just get the petrol and go from there, hey?'

What he really needed was to get away from her before he started asking questions again. She hadn't looked him in the eye when she said she'd lost her cards, and most people got angry—not tearful—in such a situation. His gut told him there was more to it, but he didn't want to get involved. Not with her, not with anyone. Melissa had soured him on women for the foreseeable future.

'Okay.' She gave him a grateful smile and put her hand on the door handle. They climbed out of the ute together and he grabbed the jerry can from the back tray. This wasn't the first time he'd rescued someone from the side of the road.

As they crossed to an available petrol bowser, Zoe flicked the golden hair that hung down almost to her butt over her shoulder and attempted small talk. 'So, what's the goss round these parts? Anything exciting happened lately I should know about?'

Not looking at her, he unscrewed the lid of the jerry can and grabbed the handle from the bowser, shoving it into the container with an unnecessary amount of force. The word *goss* made the hairs on the back of his neck stand upright. He supposed he should be happy she'd been distracted from asking direct questions about his life, but where local gossip was concerned he'd been the star of the show lately. And he hated it.

Melissa's public rejection had sidelined and wounded him, but maybe even worse than all that were the looks of pity he still got whenever he walked down the street. He'd become a bit of a hermit since New Year, which had likely only added fuel to the fire. He'd even contemplated leaving Wildwood Point, but quite aside from the fact he'd be letting the family business down, he couldn't imagine living anywhere where he didn't have the ocean on his doorstep. Then there was Eeyore to think about. His Neapolitan mastiff wasn't the kind of dog you could take travelling.

'Shaun?'

As the petrol spilled over the rim onto his fingers, he realised he'd been standing there staring off into space and hadn't answered Zoe's question. Shit, did she think him crazy? Or rude?

'Sorry.' He shook his head and offered an apologetic grin as he put down the jerry can and replaced the petrol handle in its cradle. Bending to screw on the lid, he said, 'I'm a little distracted, got a bit on my mind.'

She returned his apology with a carefree shrug. 'That's okay. I know how that feels.'

He wiped his hands on his shorts and then picked up the now full jerry can. 'You want to wait in the ute while I pay for this?'

'Okay, but let me take that.' She tried to grab the can from him but he shook his head and started towards the store. He didn't look back but he heard a door open and slam shut and he imagined Zoe sliding her luscious long legs into the cabin. In many ways she looked exactly the same as she had when she'd left—her hair was still that sunburnt caramel colour, but it was longer and looked as if she took more care with it now. Back when they were kids she thought more about the next wave than hair care. She still had legs—hell, a whole body—that would drive any man crazy.

'Is that who I think it is?' asked Hewie, the service station owner, as Shaun stepped inside and approached the counter. Hewie's sun-weathered face was pressed up against the glass as he peered towards where Zoe was now sitting in Shaun's ute.

Shaun lifted a shoulder as he put the can on the floor and dug his wallet out of his pocket. 'That depends who you think it is.'

Hewie turned to look at him, his bushy grey eyebrows almost joining together as he frowned. 'Stop being a smartarse. What's Zoe Bennett doing back in town?'

'Beats me,' he said, slapping his credit card down on the counter.

Hewie looked at the card but didn't pick it up. 'Didn't you two have a thing together once?'

'Memory like an elephant, haven't you, Hew? You considered joining the CWA?' Shaun pretended he didn't feel a pang in his heart at the mention of what he and Zoe had once shared. He might have been young, but he'd been head over heels for that girl. One of local hero Sandee's strays; he'd felt an overwhelming urge to look after her, to give her the kind of home she truly deserved. But just like Melissa, she'd had other ideas entirely.

Hewie scowled and snatched up the card. 'Cheque, savings or credit?'

'Credit.' The quicker he got out of here, away from Hewie and Zoe, the better.

Hewie did his stuff and then shoved the EFTPOS machine towards Shaun, who punched in his PIN number, slid his card back into his wallet and then picked up the jerry can.

'You tell Zoe I said hi,' Hewie ordered as Shaun turned to go. Then, much to his annoyance, he added, 'And if you have any brains above all that brawn, you'll forget about Melissa and pick up with Zoe where you left off.' He nodded out the window towards

Shaun's ute. 'From what I see, time has been more than kind to that girl. And besides, best way to make one woman jealous is to hook up with another.'

This time it was Shaun's turn to scowl as he stormed out the store without another word to Hewie. The servo owner would have been better suited as landlord of The Wildwood Tavern, where after a few drinks most people would be happy to pamper his love of gossip or accept unsolicited advice. But his suggestion made Shaun's hands fist.

Go out with one woman to try and make another one jealous. Did he think they were *still* in high school?