

THE CAVES

The shimmering surface of the water merged into a nondescript blue-grey at the horizon. Far below, waves lace-edged the sand, the beach deserted now as the last family trudged up the steep path to escape the midday heat. The silence was broken from time to time by a seagull's screech, a lone seagull; its companions sheltering elsewhere from the intense heat.

Beneath the tree, the shadow grew shorter and Melissa eased her body back against the trunk, avoiding the sun's direct heat for a little longer. Her eyes were red and puffy. She had stopped crying now, but the ache was still there; her mind had difficulty focussing as she tried to think over the events of the last few years, hoping to find a clue to her future, some hope that would give her the interest and impetus to keep going somewhere, somehow.

Three years ago her future had looked secure. She had left school to help her parents with the roadhouse. A little general store it had been when her parents had purchased it five years previously, but as the tourist area of Jason Harbour developed further south, the increased traffic past the door provided a steady flow of customers. Business was so good in fact that Melissa's father had thrown off his conservative shackles, spent his entire savings and more on rebuilding. The little general store was transformed into a flourishing roadhouse; the size tripled to include a licensed restaurant where meals were served twenty four hours a day. New staff were employed. The store now included a wide range of magazines, newspapers and paperbacks and an additional area displayed an assortment of souvenirs and paintings by local artists.

Melissa had been at primary school when her parents had bought the general store. A shy, ten year old she was at the time who found it difficult to make friends at her new school. She spent hours alone on the beach, building sandcastles with intricate drawbridges and moats, exploring the rock pools with their treasure troves of marine life, searching the shore for unusual shells. Her parents were comfortable with her being on the beach alone as long as she stayed on the shore and out of the water.

As a teenager, the beach continued to be her refuge. She especially loved the autumn days when the clouds stood still and the sea shimmered in the last of the summer's heat; the

winter storms when the waves pounded the shore, lashed the rocks and showered spray. She found that the environment also focussed her concentration. A sheltered sand dune provided her with an effective study area when the time came for exam revision or when creativity was needed for school projects. One year her older cousins came to stay over the Christmas holidays. Both confident swimmers, they helped her improve her swimming techniques, took her snorkelling and scuba diving, encouraged her to help out at the roadhouse. Her cousins pleaded to help in the kitchen and Melissa joined in. There were always sandwiches and snacks to prepare, the dishwasher to be stacked or unpacked, benches to be cleared, rubbish to be taken out. As she became more confident she helped with the meals and served customers.

She had originally planned to enrol in a hospitality course after finishing secondary school but had deferred for a year to help out at the roadhouse. Although her parents had objected at the time, anxious for her to continue her education and very aware that most of her friends would be living in the city, they appreciated her help and enjoyed her company. Besides, the experience she gained at the roadhouse would enable her to find work more easily in either the hospitality or retail sector at a later date. From time to time she considered leaving to find a job in the city but although she was now quite confident working at the roadhouse, the idea of actually applying for a position was quite daunting. She was happy with her work, very close to both her parents and still loved the beach. And so her work at the roadhouse continued.

Melissa loved her work. A steady stream of tourists and truck drivers dropped by from early in the morning until late at night. Some rushed in for petrol or a drink, most came for a meal. Coaches disgorged their loads of tourists several times during the day: pensioners delighting in their bus trips, teenagers anxious to move on to their own transport but enjoying their time away from adult supervision, young mothers with small children. There were always interesting people to meet and the challenge of satisfying a huge variety of demands in a short space of time. Melissa continued to serve customers and assist with food preparation but as business expanded, she became more involved with purchasing and organising exhibitions with local artists.

After leaving school, she had kept in touch with school friends. They often dropped into the roadhouse for a cup of coffee and a chat. But inevitably they drifted away from the area to

start university courses or to find work in the city and although emails were enthusiastically exchanged for a while, correspondence gradually tapered off.

Then tragedy struck. Melissa's parents were killed in a horrific car accident. Heart broken, inconsolable, she left the staff to look after the business and refused to see anyone. Her aunt had flown from interstate to organise the funeral and to look into the sale of the roadhouse.

"You must come home with me, dear," she had said after the funeral. "There is nothing here for you now,"

In a daze, Melissa found herself wandering along the beach. It was here that she had always solved her problems. The sound of the waves and the sea breeze seemed to clear her head, relieve the pain, give her inspiration. As she walked along the sand she realised how important it was to stay here. She became increasingly confident that she could cope, she would not leave this place she loved so deeply. The heartbreak of losing her parents would always be with her but she was sure they would have encouraged her to stay, to continue her work at the roadhouse.

Her aunt had been horrified at her decision.

"Melissa, you can't stay here by yourself! You're far too young to run a business! And it's too dangerous to live out here alone!"

Melissa was determined. Although her father had managed the business, Melissa had worked fulltime for the past three years and had often taken over the management when her parents were away. She was familiar with financial and staff issues, the best wholesalers and the regular tour companies. She knew several women who had previously taken over the cooking when her mother had been away and at least two casual workers had recently asked for extra hours. She explained all this to her aunt who reluctantly contacted the real estate agent to cancel the sale and went home.

The roadhouse continued to thrive. To her surprise, Melissa was an efficient, capable business woman. She worked tirelessly, constantly introduced new stock, improved procedures and was receptive to staff requests. She introduced processes to streamline services when large busloads arrived. Many of the groups were pensioners and she took time to sit and talk to them, asked about food preferences and adjusted the menus

accordingly. She introduced more local produce into the meals and encouraged local producers to sell through the roadhouse. Small jars of honey, jams and chutneys were particularly popular with the tourists.

Although she worked extremely hard, she had employed excellent staff and was happy to take at least one day off each week to catch up on personal matters or just relax. Loneliness was sometimes a problem. There were always people around of course. Often the same people would return year after year for their annual holidays at Jason Harbour and always dropped in for their meal at the roadhouse. But there was never a lasting friendship, never a sympathetic ear to share a problem or something special.

And then came the freeway. Jason Harbour had now developed from a sleepy fishing village into a major tourist centre. The old road that wound around the coast from the city could no longer cope with the volume of traffic that streamed south every weekend and increasingly during the week. And so the freeway was built. It cut a swathe through the country side further inland, ignoring magnificent coastal scenery, erasing hills, filling valleys and reducing travel time by half.

The sound of traffic could still be heard at the roadhouse, but it was a kilometre further inland. Melisa tried everything in her power to entice customers back. She spent a fortune on signs, strategically placed along the freeway offering reduced prices, increased menus, discounted petrol. But the traffic streamed relentlessly southward, her beckoning passed unnoticed compared to the magnetism of the freeway and Jason Harbour.

Business subsided and bills loomed. She reluctantly dismissed her staff, reduced her stock and shortened the menu. She was now running the roadhouse completely alone. Although the tourist buses no longer called, there was still the occasional tourist or truckie dropping in for petrol or a meal. It was important to open early in the morning and close late at night or she would lose the few customers she had left. The amount of time phoning for orders actually increased as the salesmen had stopped calling, although the volume of orders decreased dramatically. Food preparation was reduced to sandwich making and a range of microwaved snacks but even with such drastic cuts, there was still insufficient money for outstanding bills.

“I’m sorry Miss Morgan. A loan is completely out of the question.”

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The bank manager was sympathetic but adamant.

“Only \$10,000. Just to meet urgent commitments. Surely the roadhouse is sufficient collateral?”

“Miss Morgan, the roadhouse is no longer a viable proposition.”

And so the roadhouse must be sold. A Mr Roberts had rung this morning, less than a week after she had arranged for the sale. He sounded quite interested in buying the property and was to arrive the next morning.

The sun was directly overhead now and the searing heat penetrated beneath the tree. There was no breeze to clear the head, no waves for inspiration. Even the beach had deserted her this time. Perhaps in the coolness of the caves she could think more clearly. She stumbled up the hillside, pushing through the gorse bushes, scrambling over the rocks. Memories flooded back as she approached the caves.

She remembered the first time she had found them, how she had followed her dog up the hillside when she was a small child, her wonder and delight as she crawled beneath the rock ledge and found herself standing in the wonderland of shapes and coolness. There was a track worn to them now and Melissa was horrified at the vandalism that had occurred since her last visit. Smashed beer bottles littered the ground and obscenities defaced the walls. The extreme hardness of the larger stalagmites ensured their survival but many of the more delicate stalactites had been broken. She uttered a silent prayer that the main cave had escaped damage but without a torch, she had no way of checking.

Melissa slumped down on the ground at the entrance. A slight breeze had sprang up, lace edging the sea and sending wisps of cloud across the sky. How many times she had sat here in the past, how many more in the future would there be if the roadhouse was sold. She felt so confused about the sale. According to both the bank manager and the estate agent, the roadhouse was no longer viable. They had both expressed concern that she may not be able to sell it at all, let alone at the price she was asking. And then the phone call from Mr Roberts. Yes he was definitely interested. Yes, he was considering her price. She found it difficult to understand. Perhaps he was unaware of the exact location, perhaps he was a smooth talking salesman out to take advantage of her vulnerable position.

It was just after 10 o'clock when the doorbell rang.

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“Miss Morgan?”

“Yes. You must be Mr Roberts. Do come in.”

He was younger than she had expected. Medium height, deeply tanned with rather unruly blond hair.

“What would you like to see first?” she asked. “Cash books, stocklists? The recent figures aren’t exactly encouraging I’m afraid, the freeway,” she hesitated, embarrassed.

Mr Roberts shared her embarrassment. He coughed, said awkwardly:

“I don’t think you understand. I’m not really interested in the roadhouse.”

“But yesterday on the phone,” She was indignant, confused. “You sounded interested. You thought my price was fair!”

“Yes, yes, but it’s not the roadhouse, it’s the land.”

Melissa gestured helplessly.

“The land! But it’s only limestone! There’s virtually no arable land at all!”

This was ridiculous. She didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“Well, it’s not really the land, it’s the caves.” He paused, then laughed. “I’m sorry, I’m not making myself clear. I’m really interested in the caves. You’ve seen them of course?”

“Actually I was there yesterday. I’m afraid the local hooligans are using them as a meeting place.”

“Oh no. Has the cathedral been damaged?”

She was surprised at his concern.

“You mean the second cave?”

“No, the underground chamber, the biggest one.”

“But there are only two caves.”

His relief was obvious.

“Come on. It’s time you saw the cathedral!”

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As they walked to the caves, Mark Roberts explained further. His parents had owned the little general store before Melissa's family had bought it. He had known about the caves as long as he could remember but as far as he was aware, he alone knew of the existence of the underground chamber. When his family sold the store, he had blocked the entrance of the main cave, confident that one day he would return.

When they entered the first cave he was visibly distressed by the damage but was anxious to reach the cathedral. He flicked on his torch as they moved towards the back tunnel and through to the second cave. Fortunately there was only minor damage here and he was overjoyed to find the entrance to the main chamber still blocked by the rocks placed in position so many years before.

It took several hours to move the rocks aside, even with the equipment they had brought with them.

"Be careful," he warned. "It's very slippery."

Melissa shivered at the sudden drop of temperature as she followed him into the darkness then gasped in disbelief as Mark's torch swept around the chamber. Walls glistened and distorted into weird and wonderful shapes. In one area, gigantic stalactites descended in a row like a huge pipe organ. A myriad of delicate stalactites sprang into view, shimmering, sparkling, changing colour as the torchlight swept past. The magnificent variety of rock formations, the incredible spaciousness of the chamber, the eerie silence punctuated by the constant drip, drip, drip into an unseen pool far below was awesome, unreal. She stood motionless, transfixed, intoxicated by the atmosphere.

"I can understand why you call it the cathedral. It's breathtaking!!"

"It certainly changed my life. I'd always been interested in rocks as a kid, but it was seeing this that inspired me to study geology."

He stopped suddenly.

"You're still interested in selling now that we've seen this?"

"Of course. We had an agreement."

They walked silently back to the house. The excitement of the past few hours, Mark's jubilation in finding the cathedral undamaged, the ethereal beauty of the caves had

completely overshadowed her own problems. As they passed the tree where she had been sitting the day before, the reality of the situation became apparent. The contract provided for a month's settlement. With all the outstanding financial commitments, there would be very little profit from the sale. She would have to find a job, somewhere to live, clear out all of her personal belongings. There were still things in her parents' room, all the contents of her father's shed.

Contract signed, Mark outlined his plans for the caves. He was optimistic, confident. Now that Jason Harbour was an established tourist centre, there would be many people prepared to make the short detour from the freeway to visit the caves. They were the only ones in this area and although there would be considerable expense involved preparing them for public viewing, future expenses would be minimal.

"Is there any chance you could stay on for a while?"

She looked up, startled.

"It'll take me a while to organise the caves," he explained. "There's so much to do – lighting, steps, safety rails. I'll need someone experienced to look after the roadhouse and to organise tours.

If you could possibly stay on for a month or two to help, to train someone else for the job? I'd pay you a good salary of course."

"Won't you need the living quarters at the roadhouse?"

"No. I have a caravan. I'd rather live close to the caves while I do the initial work and later build a house."

His face was radiant.

"I used to dream about this when I was a kid! A house built of limestone, nestling into the hillside with a view across the sea."

They stood silently watching a pelican. It dived suddenly for a fish.

"Lunch!" laughed Melissa. "Now that's an idea. Can I interest you in lunch, Mr Roberts? We have business to discuss!"