



*Change of Season*

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## *Chapter One*

Louise stuck her head out of the kitchen door and yelled, ‘Mum! Dad’s on the phone from New York!’ then vanished again.

Rosalind Stevenson put down the trowel and walked slowly indoors, rubbing the worst of the dirt off her hands. ‘Hello? Paul?’

‘There you are at last! Hon, it’s good news. I’m coming home to Western Australia on Tuesday.’

As he rattled off the flight time, she scribbled it down automatically, then couldn’t help asking, ‘How long will you be staying this time, Paul?’ He’d been gone nearly six months, dealing with first one crisis then another in the big multinational company for which he worked. And he wasn’t the best of correspondents, sending occasional brief emails or making quick phone calls, which usually got interrupted.

He didn’t even notice the irony. ‘About two weeks. I’m not sure yet which day I fly back. I’ve got some exciting

news and – oh, hell, there’s another call on the line. Look, I’ll see you on Tuesday. We’ll talk then.’

‘Paul, wait—’ She stood for ages with the receiver buzzing in her ear before she set it carefully down and went back to finish the weeding. The garden was as good a place as any to do some serious thinking.

Tuesday was three days away. She had until then to decide whether to leave her husband of twenty-four years or not. And she was no nearer to knowing what she wanted than she had been a month ago when she had finally admitted to herself that since Paul’s big promotion a couple of years ago, their marriage had been virtually non-existent.

The following Tuesday Rosalind stood in Perth Airport and watched Paul wheel his luggage through from customs. For a moment he seemed like a stranger, a tall, attractive man whose middle years sat lightly on him – hair still dark, lean cheeks, hazel eyes and neat nose.

Then he clipped her up in a big hug and as her body remembered how it felt to be loved by him, something inside her softened – just a little.

After kissing her, he held her at arm’s length to study her face. ‘You look good, hon. I like the jaw-length hair.’

Outside in the fresh air he stopped to stare round. ‘I always remember Western Australia like this, clear and sunny. I’ll be able to get a good tan before I go back.’

At home he looked round the house as if he’d never seen it before. ‘You’ve got excellent taste in furnishings. I really like the way you’ve done up the living room.’

She'd consulted him and sent him a photo, so knew he was sweetening her up. But for what?

She didn't say anything, just smiled and went through into the kitchen to get them each a coffee. She heard him stroll round the rest of the ground floor.

'I'm in here. I love these white leather sofas.'

She took the coffee in to him and sat down to pour. 'You said you had some exciting news, Paul. What is it?'

She'd rather get the revelation over with. His ideas of good and hers didn't always coincide. He'd been excited by his promotion to chairman's international rover, troubleshooting for the company anywhere in the world where help was needed, but she'd known immediately what it would mean and had had difficulty hiding her dismay. She'd been right, too. Since then she'd seen less and less of him.

He sipped his coffee, looking at her over the rim of the mug. 'Big changes in the offing, hon. Looks like we'll be able to spend more time together.'

That surprised her. 'You're getting a posting to Australia again?'

'Hell, no! I've moved to the international scene and that's where I intend to stay.'

She watched him put the coffee mug down and study her. It was an effort to keep a calm expression on her face as she waited for the explanation, which she was already sure she wouldn't like.

After a pause during which he sat chewing the corner of his lip, he came out with it. 'I'm going to be based in England for the next six months instead of wandering the world troubleshooting for the chairman – *and* they've

arranged for you to live over there with me.’ Then he went back to sipping his coffee, keeping a wary eye on her.

She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. *Think before you speak, Rosalind*, she reminded herself, a strategy she’d decided on yesterday. She’d always refused to move around with him and a good thing too, or their children would have had no stability in their lives or education.

Until he joined the giant multinational, Marrill Marr, ten years ago, none of Paul’s jobs had lasted more than a year or two anyway, some less. Since then the company had dominated his life – and hers too. He’d made several in-house ‘career moves’ during those years, each to a different part of the world. And now this.

She realised he was looking at her impatiently, waiting for a response. ‘But I don’t want to go and live in England.’

His voice was low and persuasive. ‘Just think about it, hon. The kids have all left home now and—’

‘Louise hasn’t left yet.’

He rolled his eyes. ‘She’s about to go to university, isn’t she? Which means she’s grown up, like Jenny and Tim. Besides, I’m sure your mother would have her for a few months. Lou’s seventeen now, past the awkward stage.’

Which showed how much he knew about his children, Rosalind thought mutinously.

‘Face it, hon. We’re free to live where we please at long last.’

‘I live where I please now. Western Australia’s a great place – and it’s my home.’

He closed his eyes for a moment, sighing as if she’d said something unreasonable. ‘Don’t you *ever* fancy a change?’

‘No, not really. I enjoy my life here.’ Which was no

longer true. She'd felt very lonely during the past year or two. Her children had their own friends and interests nowadays and didn't seem to need her, and she was neither fish nor fowl when it came to a social life – married but without a visible husband.

'Look, Ros, I really do need to live a little closer to the action. And you might actually enjoy going back to the country where you were born.'

'I was only two when my parents migrated to Australia. I don't remember anything at all about England. I'd be as much a foreigner there as you are – more.'

'And yet when you write to your sole surviving relative in the UK, you keep promising the old witch you'll go and visit her one day.'

'Well, I will – one day. Just for a holiday. And Aunt Sophie is *not* a witch. She—'

He didn't even try to hide his impatience. 'Quite frankly, you're stuck in a rut here, Ros, and you need to do something about it. You and that little group of friends who all went to school together, not to mention that damned embroidery of yours. In this day and age – embroidery! What a hobby for a modern woman!'

She didn't rise to that old bait. Her embroidery wasn't a hobby but an abiding passion, and she considered raised stumpwork an art form. She was good at it, too, had won several prizes for her embroidered pictures. But for some reason she'd never been able to fathom, Paul hated her doing it.

His next words were etched in acid. 'I don't want to quarrel, but it's time to tell it as it is. You and I *need* some time together, Ros. We're growing apart. Do you want our

marriage to go on like this? Or to end? I don't. Think of it as a change of season, a natural part of life. It might even be fun.'

Another silence, then his tone changed. 'Now, how about thinking it over while you make me one of those wonderful gourmet meals. You know I never eat much on the plane.'

That she could do for him, at least.

As she stood up, her attention was caught by her own reflection in the glass tabletop and she stared down in surprise at what it showed. Pastel colours, all of them. Ash-blond hair, pale pink T-shirt, softly patterned skirt. She didn't look her age, not nearly old enough to have a twenty-two-year-old daughter, but she did look faded and indecisive – and that shocked her.

They walked through to the kitchen together and Paul perched on a stool to chat as she worked, telling her what the chairman had said and how her clever husband had turned a disaster into a profitable deal for the company, thus earning himself a nice fat bonus.

Her thoughts zigzagged all over the place as she put together a salad and nodded occasionally to keep Paul talking. What she kept coming back to – reluctantly, very reluctantly indeed – was that she really ought to give his suggestion serious consideration. The sight of him, the feel of his arms round her had made her feel – well, *married* again.

But the most telling reason of all was: *he* wanted to put things right between them. That mattered very much to her, because it had begun to seem as if he didn't care.

No, she decided as she served the meal, she didn't want their marriage to end – of course she didn't! – but he'd been the one to go away. And oh, she didn't want to live

in England, either! She had a suspicion that if she agreed to go, she might not find it easy to come back again.

He was right, damn him, though she wasn't going to admit that yet. Something had to change if they were to stay together.

But why did it always have to be her who made the changes?

The following morning Louise got up late, deliberately waiting till her father went out to the golf club before she left her bedroom. Taking a quick shower, she left her hair to dry naturally. It was dark and wavy like her father's, but she was thinking of having her head shaved to a stubble and perhaps getting a gold stud in her nose. Now that she didn't have to conform to stupid school rules, she could have more fun with her appearance. And she had good enough features to get away with it.

Opening the bedroom door she cocked an ear, but there were no noises from below. Her parents didn't realise how much you could overhear from the upstairs landing of an open plan house like this – which could be very useful sometimes. If her mother did go to live in England, maybe Louise would be able to share a flat with her friend Sandy when she went to uni, instead of living at home. She was definitely not going to live at Gran's. Her grandmother's ideas of what was right and wrong were even more out of date than her mother's.

Going back inside her room, she put on a CD and lay back to enjoy the pure heaven of not having to study or worry about exams.

There was a knock on the door and her mother peered in. ‘Darling, you promised to clear up your bedroom today. And will you please turn that music down?’ She didn’t wait for an answer.

Louise scowled. Why shouldn’t she have an untidy room if she wanted to? It was her room, wasn’t it? The music throbbed through her, making her feel achy inside her belly. Sexy, she decided. She felt sexy. And she wasn’t going to wait much longer to do it, either. Virginity wasn’t a treasure nowadays and everyone else in her group had had sex. Of course, she hadn’t admitted that *she* hadn’t, but she felt left out of the discussions sometimes. Reading about sex in books wasn’t the same. She wanted to *know* how it felt to have an orgasm.

Ten minutes later her mother stormed back in, switched off the CD player and yelled, ‘Get this pigsty cleared up! I’m putting on some washing in five minutes. If your stuff isn’t in the basket by then, you can deal with it yourself.’ She waited, hands on hips.

Louise sighed and rolled off the bed. ‘I’m supposed to be on holiday.’

‘Five minutes.’

When her mother had left, Louise made a quick phone call then stuffed a few necessities into her tote bag, muttering under her breath. She wasn’t clearing anything up today. She was going round to Sandy’s where there was no one to nag you, in the daytime, at least.

Creeping down the stairs, she held her breath as she crossed the open space near the kitchen. Her mother was sitting there, a mug of coffee cradled in her hands, her back to the world and her shoulders slumped.

*What's wrong with her?* Louise wondered. *Give me half a chance to go to England and I'm off, outta here, bye bye folks, see ya when I see ya.*

Giggling softly she made her escape, closing the side door quietly behind her. The washing would be done for her when she returned. It always was.

But that evening when she got back, she found her room hadn't been touched. That really threw her. Her mother must be more upset than she'd realised about the trip to England.

She looked round and grimaced before starting to tidy up. She'd get online later. If her father saw the mess in here, he'd hit the roof, and he could be a real bastard if you pushed him too far. She wanted him to think her grown-up enough to be left on her own. Oh, yes.

A few streets away, Liz Foxen was also worrying. She could recognise the signs because she'd seen it all before: Bill looking happy and alert, whistling as he did the gardening, giving long explanations every time he left the house. For a clever man, he was remarkably obtuse about other people. It was right what they said about university lecturers – out of touch with the real world. Too busy playing academic politics. Or screwing one another. Or both.

Who was it this time? Some young tart of a student or a new colleague? There had been one or two changes in the lecturing staff this year.

'I'm fed up with it!' she yelled suddenly, slapping the flat of her hand on the table. This time she wasn't going to take Bill's infidelity lying down, or rather – she paused as an idea

slammed into her mind – perhaps she was. ‘What’s sauce for the goose . . .’ she murmured.

Just then the phone rang.

‘Oh, Liz!’ The voice was hesitant, tearful.

‘Hi, Rosalind.’ Clutching the telephone receiver in one hand, Liz studied herself in the hall mirror as she listened to her friend. She kept in good trim, didn’t she? Worked out at the gym, ate sensibly, dressed smartly. So why did he go after other women?

‘Liz, can you come over?’

‘Trouble?’

‘Mm-hmm.’

Liz sighed. She didn’t need someone else’s woes on top of her own, but Rosalind had been her best friend since school. ‘Put the kettle on, then. But no cake!’

Getting up from the telephone nook, Rosalind made her way to the rear of the house. Her slippered feet made no sound on the tiled floor and she shivered suddenly. It was as if she had no real existence, as if only a ghost had drifted past. A pastel-coloured ghost, at that. Feeling hollow and insubstantial, she filled the kettle and got out the mugs, then went over to touch the vivid green curls of the parsley leaves in her herb pot and stare blindly out of the window.

Before the kettle boiled she heard Liz’s car.

The two women embraced and, as usual, Rosalind felt too tall and well-fleshed next to her friend. ‘You look great! I love that outfit. It’s new, isn’t it?’

Liz twirled round, showing off. ‘Yes. I was trying it on when you rang. Do you think the skirt needs taking up a fraction?’

Rosalind took a step backwards, studied her friend's outline and shook her head decisively. 'No. Don't touch it. It's perfect as it is. Coffee or tea?'

'Coffee.'

When they went into the living room, Liz kicked off her shoes and tucked her feet up underneath her on the couch. 'What's the matter, then? Tell all.'

'Paul wants us to spend the spring and summer in England and – I don't want to go.'

'Well, you've got plenty of time to think about it. What's the panic today?'

'Northern hemisphere spring, not Australian. I'd have to leave within the month.' Rosalind took a sip of her coffee, then stared down at it bleakly. Little ripples were running to and fro across the surface – just like the apprehension shivering in her belly.

Liz took a sip, made an appreciative murmur and sipped again before she spoke. 'I can't see what the problem is.'

'For a start, it's Louise's first year at university. How can I possibly leave her?'

Liz refrained from saying that lately Rosalind hadn't been getting on with her younger daughter and they'd probably both be happier apart. 'You were there when Tim went to uni. It didn't make much difference, did it? He still bombed out. Where is he now?'

'In America. He's travelling round, working on the sly to pay for it. He emails now and then from an Internet café, and he rang me last month.' She took another slurp of coffee. 'Anyway, a daughter's different. I was there for Jenny and she needed my help.' Though there had been some anxious

times, because Jenny wasn't a top student and had found the business course Paul had insisted on really hard going. 'And anyway, I *want* to be there for Louise.'

Liz leant forward. 'You're making excuses, Rosalind Stevenson.'

'Well, the truth is, I don't want to go to England at all. And – and before he came back I was thinking of asking Paul for a divorce.'

Liz choked on a mouthful of coffee. 'You can't mean that! Not *you!*'

'I don't know what I mean, but I have been wondering about our marriage. Only, Paul seems to be – well, making more effort. He says we need time together and he's right.'

All of a sudden Liz was fed up of humouring her friend. 'It's time you thought of him. You've always put the children first before.'

'I haven't.'

'You have, you know!' Her voice softened. 'You might even enjoy staying in England for a few months. You should be thankful Paul wants to spend some quality time together. I'd swap places with you any day, believe me.'

Her voice had such a vicious edge Rosalind realised something was wrong. 'Not – trouble with Bill again?'

Liz nodded, lips tight and bloodless.

'You shouldn't put up with it.'

'I'm not going to this time.'

'You mean – you're going to leave him?'

'Heavens, no! I'm still fond of the old bugger – too fond for my own good. I just got to thinking of giving him a taste of his own medicine for a change. See how he likes that. It's

simply a question of finding someone I fancy and diving into the nearest bed.'

'You shouldn't joke about something so important.'

'Who's joking?'

The bitterness in her voice worried Rosalind, but Liz didn't mean what she'd said, of course she didn't.

After her friend had left, Rosalind wandered out into the garden. She sighed as she nipped off a few dead leaves. Perhaps something would turn up to prevent her having to go to England. Paul was always changing his plans and rushing off to deal with an emergency for the chairman.

*Oh, please, let something turn up!* she prayed.

That evening their elder daughter, Jenny, popped in unexpectedly. 'Hi, Mum! Louise not around?'

'She and Sandy have gone to the movies.'

'Good. I need to talk to you both.' She opened her mouth to speak, then burst into noisy, gulping sobs.

Rosalind hurried across to hug her till she'd calmed down, not saying anything, simply waiting for an explanation.

Jenny finished mopping her eyes. It was her mother she looked at as she said, 'It's Michael. I've left him.'

Paul leant forward. 'Is he the guy I met last time I was home? Well, it's about time you came to your senses. He's a real no-hoper, that one, and I was against you moving in with him, if you remember.'

'What's happened?' Rosalind asked, frowning at him. No need to sound so triumphant when the girl was hurting.

'He's been unfaithful to me and – and he's not even sorry about it!' What's more, when Jenny had confronted him,

he'd hit her, though she wasn't going to tell her parents that. She'd known then that the relationship was over. Irrevocably. She wasn't into being thumped. 'The split's been brewing for a while, I guess. Could I stay here? I can't go back. I've got my things in the car.'

Paul gave her one of his icy looks. 'You can't stay for long. The house is going to be closed down. Your mother's coming to live in England with me for a few months.'

Rosalind felt annoyed. She hadn't actually agreed to go yet and he knew it.

'I could look after the place for you,' Jenny volunteered. 'It'd be safer to have someone living here.'

Paul gave a scornful laugh. 'No way. I haven't forgotten the last time you looked after it. That party of yours cost me over a thousand dollars in redecoration, as well as upsetting all the neighbours.'

'But what am I going to *do*? I don't have enough money to pay the bond on a flat of my own.' She began to sob again.

Rosalind put her arm round Jenny's shoulders. 'I'm not turning my daughter away, Paul.'

'I didn't say I wouldn't *help*. And of course she can stay with us till we find her a flat. I'll even pay the bond. But after that, we're closing the house down and we're off on our second honeymoon.'

Jenny smiled at them through her tears. 'That's so sweet. *Second honeymoon*. I'm always glad you two are still together. Nearly everyone else's parents are divorced.'

'No chance of that as long as your mother behaves herself.' Paul grinned across the table.

‘And as long as you behave yourself, too, Paul Stevenson,’ Rosalind retorted.

‘Don’t I always?’

Jenny laughed. ‘You do when you’re at home, Dad. We don’t know what you get up to when you’re overseas.’

He stiffened. ‘I work far too hard to misbehave, believe me, young lady. Even if I were that way inclined, which I’m not.’

They both stared at him in amazement, his tone was so sharp.

‘She was only joking,’ Rosalind protested.

‘Well, it’s the kind of joke I can do without, thank you very much.’

After the silence had gone on for a bit too long, Rosalind said, ‘How about I get us all a drink, then we can discuss what to do?’

Later, when Jenny had taken up residence in the guest suite, Paul sat down beside his wife on the bed and put his arm round her shoulders. ‘Feeling better about the trip now? You *are* coming, aren’t you?’

‘I suppose so.’ She’d made up her mind to give it a try, because she really did want to put their marriage to rights. That was the main reason. She wasn’t going to tell him that, of course.

He nibbled her ear. ‘What am I going to do with you, woman?’ As her breathing deepened, he took her in his arms and kissed her. His hands knew all her body’s weaknesses, as hers knew his.

And then, of course, she forgot everything else, for he was a superb lover, always had been. Their reunions were

fantastic. She missed the sex greatly when he was away. He must do, too, because he was a passionate man.

Maybe they did need a change – and she loved the idea of a second honeymoon.

Four days later the chairman's personal assistant rang from England. Rosalind handed the phone to Paul feeling faintly anxious. The PA only rang in emergencies. She went to sit in the kitchen because Paul hated people listening in on his business conversations.

After a few minutes a shadow fell across her. She looked up and her heart sank. He was looking excited and alert. She knew that expression of old.

He perched on the edge of the chair next to hers. 'Darling, I'm sorry, but I have to get back to London straight away. They've booked me a seat on the six o'clock plane. *Big crisis.*'

'But you've been home less than a week!'

He shrugged. 'That's how things go in this job, and it's exactly why I want you over there with me.'

'That means I'll have to travel to England alone!'

Breath rasped impatiently in his throat. 'I think you'll be able to find your way to the airport from here, and I'll be there to meet you in London.'

'Promise me you'll meet me. *Promise!*'

'I promise faithfully. Now, come and help me pack, eh? Good thing we found that flat for Jenny, isn't it? And I've been talking to your mother. She's agreed to have Louise.'

'She didn't tell me!'

'I asked her to let me do that.' He held her at arm's length and stared at her with mock sternness. 'So you have

no excuse for trying to wriggle out of this trip, my girl.’

‘I’ve said I’ll come, haven’t I?’

He nodded and let her go. ‘I’m rather looking forward to having a wife around. Dinner parties, regular sex, theatres and restaurants. We’ll have a great time.’

When she got back from taking Paul to the airport, Rosalind took out her embroidery things and set up the smaller spare bedroom as her workshop again. She always put everything away when he came home to avoid arguments and snide remarks. The routine of arranging her things usually helped her settle down after he’d left – though this time she’d only be here for a couple more weeks herself.

The embroidery worked its usual magic and even when Jenny rang up to complain that the new flat was noisy and Michael was still pestering her to get back together, Rosalind didn’t let it worry her. She spoke soothingly and claimed a pan on the stove so that she could end the conversation quickly.

When Paul went away, she always needed a few hours of peace to reorient her life. Everything was so different without him. And this time she had a lot to think about. She’d agreed to spend the spring and summer in England and wouldn’t go back on her word.

But next time someone had to compromise about what they were doing with their lives, it wouldn’t be her, she was quite determined about that.