

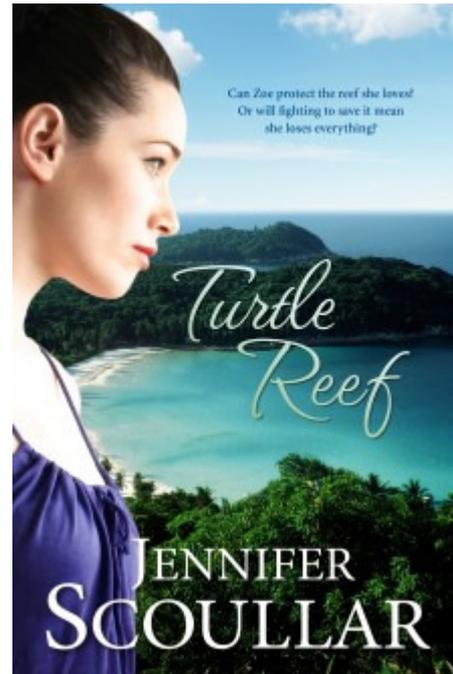
# Turtle Reef

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## Extract

### Chapter 1

Zoe sat up in bed and opened her eyes, rubbing sleep from them like a child. Aching head, parched throat, queasy stomach. Just how much had she drunk last night? She groaned. A lot. Still, it had been worth it. Without a large dose of Dutch courage, she would never have found the stamina to give her loser boyfriend his marching orders. Zoe sank back in bed and pulled the pillow over her head. A wave of relief helped wash away the hangover. She'd actually done it. Had she been cruel? No, not cruel, more like direct. But what choice did she have? After all, last night was the third time she'd tried to tell Hugo they were through. He was just so damned persistent, like a human limpet.



Zoe contemplated trying to go back to sleep, but it was too late, her mind was already busy. Why did she always have such bad luck with men? Her mother said it was because she was impulsive and jumped in too quickly. 'The silly notion of love at first sight has a lot to answer for,' she'd say. 'There's no such thing. Look at your father and me. Dating for a year before getting engaged, and then another year before the wedding. That's why our marriage lasts, because we took the time to get to know each other.' Zoe would just screw up her nose. She wore her heart on her sleeve, that's just the way she was. But she had to admit that her system wasn't working out. Not at all.

People had warned her that Hugo was egotistical and far too sure of himself, but she hadn't listened. Zoe took people at face value, and always gave them the benefit of the doubt. It wasn't in her nature to be cynical or suspicious, and she liked that about herself. Her friends saw it differently. They said she was trusting to a fault, gullible even. They said she was naive and no judge of character. Zoe didn't agree with their broad assessment, but this time her friends had been right.

The last six weeks with Hugo, for all its dysfunction, was the closest thing to a relationship that she'd had for a long time. Zoe liked to look on the bright side of things, but even she had to admit that before him she'd had a string of the most appalling, dead-end dates imaginable. She wasn't blameless, of course. She could be recklessly honest at times, speak her mind without thinking, screw things up, but still . . . What about the guy who talked about himself for so long that she set the stopwatch on her phone, just out of curiosity? Thirty-three minutes straight – no opportunity for her to say something tactless with that one. Then there was the guy whose interests were lifted word for word from her Facebook profile. He liked the exact same movies, same books, same bands. It had given her the creeps. There was the cheap date who proudly admitted he complained about the food to get their meals for free. Weirdest of all was the one where the man's wife had joined them halfway through dinner to explain she was dying of cancer, and wanted to set her husband up with a nice girl before she gave up the ghost.

Zoe checked her phone, half-expecting a message from her now ex-boyfriend. No texts, no calls. What a relief. She hauled herself from bed and stood for a while at the window. People down on the street were hurrying like ants, this way and that, on their way to work. An anonymous throng that she was too often a part of. She felt empty, hollow. This wasn't how she'd imagined her life would be.

She glanced at the clock; almost nine o'clock. A sudden sick feeling hit her, until she remembered it was Monday, her day off. How she hated working at that library. When she'd finished her honours degree in zoology at Sydney Uni last year, she'd hoped to work for Parks and Wildlife or perhaps as a research assistant with the CSIRO. She'd even applied to the Australian Antarctic Division. With a major in marine mammals, she

might have scored a job on the Weddell Seal Project or, better yet, researching the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary. But here it was, end of August, and she hadn't even made a second-round interview. So Zoe was stuck working at the university library. Not even in the zoology department. She could have handled being surrounded by biology books all day. But no, she'd been moved during her first week to the dead-dull engineering faculty. Technical journals and pimply first-years hitting on her. Yuck.

Zoe wandered away from the window towards the kitchen. She craved a greasy breakfast, but the contents of the fridge were disappointing and anyway, she didn't much like cooking. The Macca's down the road seemed a better option. Zoe went back to the bedroom, catching sight of herself in the mirror as she pulled on jeans. Her tangled brown hair already looked oily, although she'd washed it yesterday. For years she'd wondered how it would look short, really short. Perhaps today was the day to find out? She paused, frowning at the spare tyre around her stomach and the generous curve of her hips. Her tall frame could usually carry a little extra weight without it showing. But six weeks with foodie Hugo had tipped the balance too far. And he worked out at the local gym, so that was no longer an option. Not that she went there much anyway. Her stomach rumbled. God, could she ever go a bacon and egg muffin. The diet would start tomorrow.

Zoe rubbed a hand over her face. What she really wanted was to get away. From this dingy flat, where she wasn't even allowed to have a cat for company. From the library, from her dreadful dates, from the Macca's round the corner. Swear off men, get right out of Sydney and make a fresh start. The phone rang from somewhere in the bedclothes. She fumbled about for it, in two minds whether to answer or not. What if it was Hugo, or the library asking her to work today? No, she didn't recognise the number.

'Hello? Yes, this is Zoe King.'

'Hi Zoe. I'm Bridget Macalister, director of the Reef Centre at Kiawa.'

It took Zoe a few seconds to place the caller. She'd applied for a position at the regional Queensland marine park months ago. The pay on offer had been modest as she remembered, little more than a keeper's salary, but Zoe was more than willing to start at the bottom, and had said so. When she hadn't heard back, she'd assumed that was that.

'Congratulations,' said Bridget. 'You've got the job.'