



Will fate give them
another chance, or
will his secret tear
them apart?

MANDY MAGRO

Bluegrass Bend

'A compelling romance that speaks to the heart of the Australian country.'
— The Sunny Cowgirls

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Mandy Magro

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PROLOGUE

Ivy Tucker manoeuvred through the drunken patrons of the popular Parramatta pub, making sure to smile at those who acknowledged her – it was all because of their cheers that she'd won the open mic night. The cool night air stung her eyes and cheeks as she stepped outside. She looped her scarf around her neck, part of her wanting to turn right around and head back into the warmth, but the crowd was becoming a little too boisterous. After a few uninvited arse grabs, two drinks spilt down her top and one particularly forceful bloke not wanting to take no for an answer, she knew it was time to head back to her aunts' friend's house. It had been a long day and she was dying to climb into the comfort of the warm, cosy bed in Pastor John's spare room.

Pulling her jacket tighter, she dragged her scarf up higher, the melodic thump of the music fading with each hurried footstep she took away from the pub. She wanted to get where she was going, and fast. Being accustomed to the relative safety of living in the

small town of Bluegrass Bend, her aunts, May and Alice, had drummed into her the dangers of a young woman walking the city streets alone. She'd promised them she wouldn't be stupid enough to do such a thing, and now look what she was doing. She felt terrible going against their advice as well as feeling very naive for doing so, but it wasn't like she had much choice tonight.

Turning down a side street, she whistled a tune to try to keep her overactive mind from running off on a tangent. But the tune couldn't drown out the fact her footsteps echoed around her, nor that there was no traffic. She felt like she was in a ghost town. Goose bumps prickled her flesh. She stopped whistling. She walked faster. Damn all those stupid horror films she'd watched under duress with her friends as teenagers – half the time with one eye squeezed shut. Images of a flesh-eating Hannibal Lecter or a razor-fingered Freddy Krueger jumping out from one of the many shadows taunted her as she power walked like there was no tomorrow. She wished for a clear night sky, the glow of the moonlight unobscured by dense cloud. It hadn't been so daunting in the daylight with the hustle and bustle of everyday life but now all the shops were closed it was empty and lifeless and the darkness was making her imagination run wild – to the point where she thought she was being followed.

Halting mid-step, she sharpened her hearing as she spun around, her heart smashing against her chest like a boxer's fists. Her eyes darted from one side of the street to the other as she assessed her surroundings. Other than a stray dog rummaging through upturned garbage bins – which she dared not approach even though part of her wanted to take it home and love it like there was no tomorrow – there was nobody there. So, after a few more seconds of surveying her surroundings, and feeling confident she wasn't being followed, she laughed nervously at her overactive imagination, her breath escaping from her trembling lips in misty puffs, and shook her head.

Turning the last corner that led down to her car, the bright yellow glow of streetlights gradually faded away. The light of the one and only streetlight in the backstreet was barely enough for her to see a metre in front of her as it wearily flickered. She groaned. Trust her luck to park in the one street with a faulty light. Feeling extremely alone with the life of the pub now a fair distance behind her, and nothing but darkness in front of her, she picked up her pace to almost a jog – grateful that she'd worn her comfy boots, even as she cursed under her breath for parking so far away, all to avoid the high parking costs out the front of the pub. Now she wished she hadn't been so careful about her money. She would have paid a hundred bucks to already be within the safety of her car.

Only a little more to go ...

The rushed clomp of her boots on the concrete echoed around the street, and the shadows seemed to loom out of every nook and cranny as though reaching for her. She wished she could close her eyes like she had as a child when something scared her, but with her clumsiness she'd probably run straight into a wall and knock herself out cold.

Finally reaching her car, she blipped it unlocked and a comforting sense of safety washed over her. She felt ridiculous for frightening herself so badly as she glanced at her watch glowing in the darkness. It was nearing one in the morning ... where had the time gone? Her body was weary but she was still on a high, the night turning out to be better than she'd expected. Who'd have thought she'd win the open mic night? She couldn't wait to call her aunts in the morning to tell them the good news. Opening her boot, she carefully placed her guitar case in.

A crunch of shoes on gravel pulled her attention behind her. Spinning around, she squinted into the darkness, the strobe effect of the streetlight not aiding her as her eyes tried to adjust. But her

ears were working perfectly and after hearing something moving near the industrial bin only metres from her she knew she wasn't imagining things anymore. Something just didn't feel right. She hoped the stray dog had followed her, but her instincts were telling her otherwise. The hair stood up on the back of her neck as fear froze her to the spot. She gripped the edge of the boot with sweaty hands.

'Hello?' she called out, her voice shaky. It was more of a question than a greeting.

Silence met her.

'Is anyone there?'

Still nothing.

'Please, if there is, show yourself.'

A tall silhouette stepped out of the shadows, one hand in his jeans pocket and the other tucked behind him. His strides were long and deliberate, and he remained unnervingly silent. The fractured light gave her a flicker of his features and she recognised him straight away. Dread filled her as he gave her a smile that made her stomach turn. She had to get into her car – now. Because this time, she knew he wasn't going to take no for an answer. Step by tiny step she began to ease around the side of the car so she could jump in the back door and lock it, but he dashed towards her and blocked her path, wedging her between himself and the corner of her open boot.

She screamed for someone to help her.

The man slammed his free hand over her mouth, bringing his face millimetres from her own. He reeked of alcohol but seemed to have regained some sense of balance after being thrown out of the pub a few hours ago. There was a hollowness in his eyes that freaked her out even more than his drunkenness, like he didn't possess a soul.

'You scream like that again and I'll have to hurt you good and proper. Got it?' His voice was spine-chillingly low.

Ivy nodded, heavy tears beginning to slide down her cheeks. She barely dared to breathe.

‘Good girl.’ He bent his head to sniff her neck and hair slowly. ‘So, let’s start afresh, hey?’ He raised his malevolent eyes to meet hers. ‘I know you knocked me back at the pub, and got your friend behind the bar to chuck me out, but I’m guessing you’re just shy and you need a little bit of coaxing, like most of you sheilas do.’ He took her hand, kissing the back of it.

Ivy felt a wave of nausea wash over her. She wanted to wrench her hand back but knew if she did, there’d be dire consequences.

Stopping at her elbow, he gave her wrist a firm yank, making her wince. ‘So, because I’m such a nice guy, I’ll give you another chance.’ He smiled repulsively. ‘Would you like to have some fun with me?’

Afraid to speak, Ivy shook her head, instinctively turning her face away. She was trembling all over and as much as she fought to gain control of her body, it only got worse.

The man gripped her jaw and forced her eyes back to his. He produced a knife from behind his back, pressing the tip into her cheek as his lips curled into a malicious grin. ‘Does this change your mind at all? ’Cause it sure as hell would make me rethink a bad decision.’

Ivy’s legs threatened to give way. ‘Please, don’t hurt me. I’ll give you everything I have.’

The twenty-centimetre knife glimmered as he pulled it back, disgust contorting his features. ‘I don’t want your money, you stupid fucking woman. I want you – all of you.’ He gripped her face tighter, leant in closer. The feel of his torso against her made her want to vomit. ‘That pretty voice of yours got me so fired up that if I don’t get a piece of you tonight I’m gonna go insane.’ He brought the knife back up to her cheek and pressed the blade into

her skin, laughing when she cried out in pain. ‘You and me are going to have us some fun and you’re going to do everything I fucking tell you to do – got it?’

Who the fuck did this man think he was? Adrenaline coursed through Ivy, making her want to fight for her dignity, and her life, as her sense of self-preservation finally outweighed her fear. ‘No, I *don’t* like it, and I won’t be letting you touch an inch of me.’

‘Yeah, we’ll see about that then, won’t we?’ He pushed her backwards, shoving her into the boot.

Ivy turned her face from him, cheek resting against her guitar case.

Climbing roughly on top of her, he slammed his knees into her hips, pinning her down. She scratched, kicked, bit, punched, screamed – anything but lie there willingly – but fighting only spurred him on. He laughed sadistically as he finally got a secure hold on her, the knife now pressed against her throat.

‘You’re a feisty little one. I like that.’ He pushed his pelvis against hers. ‘Can you feel how much I want you?’

Ivy spat in his face.

Wrong move.

He wiped her saliva away with the back of his hand, eyes seething. ‘You little bitch. You’re gonna be real sorry you just did that.’ He ripped open her jacket and then sliced at her shirt, the blade of the knife not only cutting through the material like butter, but also her flesh, all the way from the top of her pelvis to her rib cage. The pain was like fire entering her blood. She screamed in agony as the man laughed.

‘Oops, well, that was a little bit of a misjudgement by me. Let’s hope you don’t bleed to death before I have my way with you.’ He shifted his weight to get at his jeans, exposing the damaged flesh on her stomach and chest to the icy night air, the shock like an open flame against her wound.

‘What the fuck do you think you’re doing?’ another man’s voice said as heavy footsteps rushed towards them.

Her attacker’s hand went to her neck as he covered her mouth with his other hand, the knife hitting Ivy’s hip as he dropped it. His grip made it almost impossible for her to breathe. She gasped for air, unable to move with the man’s whole weight on top of her. She could feel her legs going numb, and the throbbing across her stomach was excruciating. Blood dripped from her wound and she felt as though her life was draining from her. Was this how she was going to die? Was her body going to be found dumped in some dirty, dingy street? Her aunts would never get over the heartache.

‘Don’t come any closer, or I’ll fucking kill her!’ her assailant thundered.

The footsteps halted and a few heavy breaths followed. ‘Just calm the fuck down, man, and think about what you’re doing. You don’t want to spend the rest of your life in prison because of some drunken mistake, do you?’

Ivy thought she could hear the man still taking cautious steps towards them, but she couldn’t be sure. Everything around her spun as she began to lose consciousness.

‘Listen here, *man*, if I were you, I’d do the smart thing and just fuck off, this has nothing to do with you. There’s no need to be acting like some fucking hero ... the little lady and I have come to an agreement.’

Ivy’s saviour laughed mockingly. ‘That’s where you’re wrong – this has everything to do with me. So, let her fucking go or I’m gonna break both your arms and legs before you’ve even had a chance to wave that knife in my face.’

Ivy tried to make out her rescuer by rolling her eyes as far sideways as they’d go, but with the angle she was at, as well as the

lack of oxygen, it was impossible. He sounded so big and strong. How she wished he'd rip this monster off her.

'Please, help me,' she cried out instinctively, the words muffled by the hand across her mouth.

'Shut your fucking mouth, you whore.' Squeezing her throat even tighter, her attacker finally stole her ability to breathe. She clawed at his arm in a panic, wheezing as his weight forced out what air was left in her lungs. Somehow she scratched the hand across her mouth deeply enough to draw blood. Her abductor swore.

Hope filled her. She could smell the other man's aftershave now – it was heady and spicy. He was so close that she could almost reach out and touch him. He was about to save her. Or at least try to. Maybe she was going to live. Or maybe they were both about to die.

'You take another step and I'll –'

'You'll what? Bash me to death?' Her saviour sighed heavily. 'You're just another fucking coward who takes advantage of vulnerable women. So why don't you man the fuck up and take it out on me, hey? Let's see if you got any balls or if you're all talk and no action.'

Ivy felt her attacker's grip loosen as he turned to confront her saviour. 'You scrawny piece of shit. *Fuck off.*'

The newcomer took another step towards the boot. 'Looks like I'm going to *have* to teach you a lesson for attacking a woman.'

The man roared as he leapt off Ivy and out of the boot, pushing her head into the car's side. Ivy cried out as she felt her head smash against the edge of something solid, and then just as she heard a guttural sound – could it really be coming from her own lips? – her entire world went black.

CHAPTER

1

*Healing Hills, Bluegrass Bend,
New South Wales*

Screaming out as she woke, Ivy sat bolt upright, her heart in her throat. She tried to swallow but her mouth felt drier than the Simpson Desert. Sweat covered her. She kicked her tangled sheet off. Sobs escaped her as the adrenaline rush began to calm. Even after eight years, the nightmare was still the same, an exact replica of that horrific night. It made her feel as though she was right back there, being attacked by a sadist. She took a few moments to remind herself that it was just a dream; there was no-one standing beside her bed, waiting to slice her open with a knife or beat her to death with their bare hands. There was no threat of being raped. She was in the homestead, her safe haven, tucked up in bed with her aunts asleep just down the hall and her beloved eight-year-old Dalmatian, Bo, downstairs.

With the darkness of the night pressing in on her Ivy reached for her bedside lamp, quivering hands fumbling with the switch. She needed a well-lit room as much as she needed oxygen right now, and a drink of water wouldn't go astray either. Warm light flooded her bedroom, providing a sense of safety now that she could confirm there was nobody hiding in the shadows. It upset her that she couldn't seem to get past the horror of it all, no matter how much she wanted to. Grabbing her glass of water from the bedside table, she took a few big gulps, recalling her progress since it had all happened. It had certainly been a long hard road, and she'd come a long way, thanks to her aunts' support and her own work alongside their healing horses. But she was still trying to find her way back to her music.

With nausea swirling in her belly, she squeezed the soft feathery pillow she was already clutching as the tears that had soaked her lashes began rolling down her cheeks once more. She took a few deep, calming breaths. It had been ages since her last nightmare, and she wondered what had brought it back. Maybe it was all the stress she'd been under since finding out they might lose Healing Hills to the bank? Her heart squeezed even tighter with the thought. She groaned despairingly. She was over life being so hard. Over trying to heal the gaping hole in her heart the loss of her music had left. And completely over men after what her now ex-boyfriend, Malcolm Miller, had done to her two weeks ago. Finding him in bed with another man was beyond anything she could have ever imagined happening in her ongoing disastrous love life. It had shocked her to the very core. He was the kind of bloke every girl dreamed of – kind, good looking, strong, hardworking; she thought she was on a winning streak with him. Hell, she'd even imagined marrying him and having his children. How wrong she had been – yet again. She'd spent three days in her daggiest pyjamas holed up in her bedroom,

torturing herself by watching her favourite rom-coms, and devouring tubs of Connoisseur cookies and cream ice cream – the entire time wondering what was wrong with her. What the hell was she doing so wrong to turn a straight man gay? Her aunts had eventually lost their patience and dragged her from the bedroom, screwing their noses up as they'd begged her to shower and eat something decent.

Rolling onto her side so she could snuggle further into her pillow Ivy grimaced as she recalled the gobsmacking encounter. It was as though she'd stepped straight into a scene in *Brokeback Mountain*. A shamefaced Malcolm had apologised profusely while desperately trying to gather the sheets to cover himself, and his extremely red-faced lover, and it was at this moment she'd hightailed it out of his bedroom. She hadn't seen or spoken to him since, and had no desire to – it had been quite obvious it was well and truly over between them. Apart from the shock and heartbreak of it all, it was Malcolm's secrecy that hurt her the most. Relationships were meant to be built on trust – she hated secrecy and believed if you didn't have trust, you didn't have anything. Once a man blew it, it was impossible for her to ever have faith in him again. Damn Malcolm for proving once more that men couldn't be trusted. They were all the bloody same. Why did it keep happening to her? What had she ever done to deserve it? And how much more heartbreak could a girl take before she gave up on having a relationship altogether? Maybe she should become a nun, devote herself to God so men were forever out of her life's equation. She chuckled at the thought. Yeah, right, as if that would ever happen when she was twenty-five and in her sexual prime. But damn love and all it stood for, because, in her expert opinion, it was overrated. Her mum had been right. All men did was cause heartache – Ivy's cheating father had proved that when he'd run off with a barmaid, never to be seen or heard from again. It had shattered her beautiful mum's heart and made her think death was easier than life. Ivy fought

back the anguish that always had the power to crumble her into tiny pieces – even after sixteen years; she missed her kind-hearted, bohemian-spirited mum each and every day.

Completely shattered, she looked over at her bedside clock and grumbled under her breath. It was two in the morning and she needed sleep. Taking the last gulp of water from her glass she switched off her bedside lamp and threw the pillow she'd been clutching over her face. The anger the nightmare had evoked, along with the recollection of what Malcolm had done and the memory of playing music with her beautiful mother, inspired Ivy to make a firm promise that she would do everything in her power to overcome her fear of playing her guitar again. She'd already come so far, she thought, as her mind turned once more to that evening so long ago.

It was four years before she'd been able to sleep with the light off, her fear of the dark after being attacked beyond anything she'd ever felt as a child. On that fateful night, she'd learnt that bad men were real and that bad things didn't necessarily happen to someone else. Warren Young, the son of a bitch who'd attacked her, had stolen so much – her dignity, the innocent fearlessness she'd grown up with and the opportunity to make a go of her music. She shook her head, hating his name being in it. Warren had lost his own life that night and, as much as she loathed him, that saddened her, but it had been out of her hands. Over the years she'd come to accept there was nothing she could have done to make things any different, nor could her rescuer – he'd been defending his life, and hers, after she'd blacked out, or so she'd been told. Thank goodness he'd gotten her to the hospital as fast as he had, or she would be long gone from this life. Even though her recollections were hazy and she'd spent two days in an induced coma, she would never forget the fear of having a knife blade pressed up against her flesh, of seeing her life flash before her eyes, and of feeling her life seep

out of the wound in her stomach. If only she'd had the chance to personally thank her rescuer, but he'd dropped her at the hospital and fled, for good reason. The police had later told her his name, but that had meant nothing. Being underage at the time of the crime and at the firm requests of her aunts to the police, she'd been kept out of the investigation after her statement. And why would the cops bother questioning her again when she couldn't give them any useful information or identify any mug shots? She'd never heard of Byron McWilliams, but she did find out which prison he'd gone to and had sent him a thank you letter. Byron never responded.

Among all the horrid recollections there was also a lot to be thankful for. And she knew, thanks to her training as a counsellor and her aunts' positive way of thinking, she had to keep a firm grip on the good things if she was ever going to get past this. Byron McWilliams had risked his life to save hers, and had already spent years in prison because of it, with a few more to go. She wondered what he'd do once he got out. After ignoring her letter she doubted he'd try to find her. And to be honest, she couldn't blame him. They all needed to get on with their lives. There was nothing to gain from reliving the past. She couldn't let that night steal her future any longer. It was time she climbed back into the saddle and somehow, some way, grabbed hold of the reins.

Racing down the stairs and through the sun-dappled kitchen, Ivy skidded to a stop to give her aunt Alice a kiss on the cheek, smiling at her bright pink polka-dotted pyjamas and matching fluffy slippers.

'Morning.' Alice graced her with one of her loving smiles as she tucked her long copper hair behind her ears. 'Did you have a good night's sleep love?'

Ivy shrugged. 'Not the best – but that's to be expected with everything going on.' She grabbed a grape from the fruit bowl on the bench and tossed it into her mouth.

'Yes, you do have a lot on your plate, my dear.' Alice reached out and cupped her face, her sandalwood perfume drifting. 'Just make sure you take time out to destress, okay?'

'I am, which is why I'm forcing myself to go for a jog this morning. It always makes me feel better.'

'That's good, love.' Alice watched her for a few more seconds before turning her attention back to the bowl she was stirring on the sink. 'Anything that can make you feel better is a good thing.'

Getting a whiff of something delicious, Ivy almost drooled. 'What's that glorious smell?'

'I'm baking some honey and oat bars.' Alice turned and opened the oven, peeking inside. 'And it looks like they're almost ready. Would you like one before you go for your jog?'

'No, thanks – it'll give me a stitch. But I'll be sure to have one when I get back.'

A groan drew their attention. Aunt May shuffled in, her pyjamas askew and her shoulder-length salt-and-pepper hair dishevelled. 'Morning all,' she said in passing as she made a beeline for the kettle. Ivy giggled. May always needed her morning cuppa before she could function properly.

'Morning Aunt May.' Ivy grabbed another couple of grapes. 'Right, I'm off, catch you in an hour or so.'

'Okay love,' May and Alice replied in unison.

With her well-worn Nikes pounding the winding dirt roads of Healing Hills and her earphones blasting one of her favourite country bands of all time, The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Ivy allowed her mind to go where it needed to. Jogging was a form of meditation to her, and she quite often solved things that were troubling her while out exercising.

Her mind decided it wanted to think about how she and Malcolm should have been celebrating her graduation as a counsellor after three long years of online study, but nope, life was throwing curve balls left, right and centre. She sighed. Although she'd only done what her aunts had encouraged her to by gaining a degree in her dream profession, she couldn't help but feel it was partly her fault they were in huge financial trouble. Her uni fees alone had cost close to eight thousand dollars a year. Little had she known her aunts had re-mortgaged the property to pay for them, among other things, including a hefty tax bill after forgetting to do their tax returns for the past couple of years. It was only after opening a letter from the bank by accident last week that she had finally discovered the truth. She'd then gone over the books with a fine-tooth comb, and discovered Healing Hills' running costs were heavily outweighing their income. She should have insisted May and Alice let her handle the bookwork years earlier, but out of respect for their wishes in leaving the business side of things to them, she hadn't. Hindsight could be an absolute bitch.

She and her aunts needed to do something, and soon. Times were undeniably tough – tough enough for their longstanding bank manager, Gerald Fromstein, to send May and Alice a gentle letter of warning saying that if they didn't catch up on the mortgage payments, he'd have no option but to allow the big wigs from the city branch to issue them a foreclosure letter. And there was no way Ivy was going to allow that to happen. Ever. This was her family home, as it had been for generations, and it was over her dead body that some toffee-nosed suit-wearer was going to waltz in here and take it from them like it meant nothing – because to her, and her aunts, and the people who came here for healing sessions with the horses, Healing Hills was everything.

But she had a solution – a good one. A mixture of excitement and apprehension washed over her. She was going to renovate the

cottage her mother had left to her and sell it. Not an easy task, but certainly doable if Gerald agreed to loan the capital needed for the renovation. The money from the sale would most certainly get them out of their financial strife. And although it broke her heart to sell the home she'd spent the first nine years of her life in along with the many memories she had of her and her mum within its walls, Ivy honestly couldn't see any other way around it. She just hoped Alice and May would accept her offer of selling the cottage and pocket of land adjoining Healing Hills without too much fuss, because she wasn't going to take no for an answer.

Rolling her eyes at her seemingly on-going bad luck of late, she tried to keep her focus on the here and now – her motto of living in the moment something that had gotten her through the hardest of times. All around her the dawn fog shrouded the sweeping landscape in a thick white veil, the quietness a little eerie. The songs of the bellbirds would normally be filling the air around her, but this morning they were quiet and she couldn't blame the birds for their lack of effort – she could barely see a metre in front of her. She was a little crazy being out here on a morning like this – but desperate times called for desperate measures. She slowed her pace. After the heavy downpour last night the ground was muddy beneath her feet, and it was an achievement in itself to miss the water-filled potholes – some big enough to swallow a small dog whole. But, true to her usual form, she found one. She tried ungracefully to remain upright, her arms flailing as she struggled to regain her footing. She was sure Bo, running beside her, would be amused. And why not – if she were watching herself right now she'd probably be hooting with laughter.

Now her joggers were soaked through, it was icy cold, the sun nowhere to be seen behind the thick blanket of grey clouds, and she was fed up with everything. This morning jog was not lifting her

mood as it should. If she was five years old, she'd probably chuck a tantrum, but she was a big girl now with big girl problems and she needed to pull on her big girl boots to deal with it all. Being an adult could really suck sometimes.

Ignoring her burning desire to give up and crawl under a rock, Ivy continued to jog with the grace of a sack of wet cement. The mist gradually cleared enough for her to glance down at Bo legging it beside her – she'd named him after one of her favourite characters of all time, Bo Duke from *The Dukes of Hazard* – and smiled at the loyal pooch, grateful for his steadfast company. Much like herself, it did him good to come for a jog. Bo was renowned for digging crater-sized holes in her aunts' treasured backyard if she dared leave him alone for an entire day. He was always up for fun, and while his stamina and endless energy were challenging at times, his goofiness gave her endless smiles, and his unconditional devotion gave her a certain kind of comfort that only a dog could give – something she especially needed right now. He truly was her best friend, and was the only male in her life she'd ever been able to properly trust and rely on. Giving Bo a quick pat on the head, she turned her attention back to the road.

Pushing onwards even though all she wanted was to climb beneath her warm feather doona again and go back to sleep, Ivy headed for the creek that flowed down from the surrounding mountains and passed through Healing Hills. Crystal clear and icy cold, it was moving a little faster today due to the rain. The water rushed over boulders in its haste to reach the bottom of the valley. Slowing, and then stopping, she bent down and cupped her hands, relishing the water as she tipped it into her parched mouth. Bo followed suit and furiously lapped at the water before flopping himself into the creek as he chased floating twigs. Ivy smiled, amazed at his resistance to the cold. But there was no time to sit here and wallow – she had a

healing session booked in with two troubled teenagers and she wasn't about to let them down by not doing the best she could for them.

Standing, she whistled to Bo and he bounded out of the creek, shaking the droplets from his spotty coat before happily joining her once again. Crossing the rickety little bridge that spanned the creek, Ivy began jogging up the steepest part of the hill. With her breath escaping her in little white clouds and her calf muscles burning from the exertion, she turned a bend to head up the home straight. She gave everything she had for the last few hundred metres, gratitude for the beautiful land she called home filling her. Beside her Bo matched her pace with fortitude, his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth. Ivy loved this part of the seven-hundred-acre property, the summit giving her a magnificent panoramic view of Healing Hills in all its glory. Beyond the grand two-storey homestead her family had lived in for four generations, rolling green fields gave way to a labyrinth of woodlands, plateaus, gorges and scribbly gum trees, all of it goosebump-worthy, the vast expanse of untainted countryside jaw dropping to say the least. And the air up here, it was just so pure. She was a blessed woman to be able to call this her home. And her home she was determined it would remain.

Reaching the business sign hanging from the timber railing that read: HEALING HILLS, ALICE, MAY AND IVY TUCKER, HEALING WITH HORSES, she slowed and bent over at the waist, breathing the mountain air in deeply before her usual routine of warm-down stretches.

Legs folded beneath her as she sat in the shade of a towering jacaranda tree, Ivy smiled at the two teenagers enjoying their afternoon tea of homemade carrot cake and herbal tea, revelling

in how far they'd both come. Imposing yet gentle, perceptive yet non-judgemental, the healing horses had silently helped both Max Jacobs and Michelle Harrison gain essential insights into their inner demons and innate strengths, in turn giving them the drive needed to work through what was needed, and they'd come along in leaps and bounds because of it. Contrary to what many believed, people's problems didn't always need to be talked about, mulled over and dissected – and that was the beauty of healing horses. One of the other huge benefits of equine healing for teens was it encouraged them to focus on the well-being of another while realising their moods and anxieties affected all around them, including animals – they needed to stay calm and focused while riding or they'd risk falling off or spooking the horse and they needed gentle movements and temperaments when working on the ground with the horses too. Ivy made very certain to push these facts home before anyone who came for the healing sessions stepped foot into the healing arena. The safety of both the horses and the clients was imperative.

'So, Max. Pastor John tells me you've gotten yourself a job as an apprentice mechanic,' Ivy said before taking a sip of her peppermint tea.

Max nodded proudly as he swallowed his mouthful of cake. 'I sure have.' He held up his hands, the kind of grease that refuses to wash off embedded in his palms. 'And I got me some dirty hands to prove it.'

Ivy laughed. 'Good for you.' She gave him the thumbs up. 'I told you you'd get your dream job if you believed you were worthy of it, and look at you now.'

Max flipped his cap back from the front of his head and smiled shyly. 'Yup, and it's all thanks to you and the horses.'

'No, not really, Max. We've guided you, but you're the one who's chosen to find the courage to move forwards. So a big hurrah to you.'

Max's eyebrows scrunched together. After a few seconds he shrugged and revealed his teeth with a huge smile. 'I reckon it's thanks to all of us then.'

Ivy turned to Michelle. 'So how are things looking for the photography course?'

The girl jiggled on the spot. 'Really good – I start next week.' She reached out and touched Ivy's arm. 'Thank you so much for helping me organise it.'

'My pleasure.' She gave Michelle's hand a squeeze. 'And how was your AA meeting last week?'

Michelle popped the last of her cake into her mouth, talking between chewing. 'Great – I even got up and talked this time.'

Ivy clapped her hands. 'Wonderful. Good on you. I'm so very proud of you both.'

Max and Michelle looked at each other and grinned, their deep connection making Ivy wonder if there was a bit of a romance bubbling, but it wasn't her place to ask: she was here to give them hope, and a sense of security in life, and to help them find the strength within to get past their addictions and anxieties. So, with cake and herbal teas consumed, it was time to move on.

'Now, I'd like you both to close your eyes and sit in quiet contemplation for a few minutes. Have a think about how far you've come in the past eight weeks, how much better you feel about your lives and what you've achieved, before we move on to the next part of the session.'

'With the horses?' Michelle said, grinning.

Ivy nodded. 'Yup.'

'Yes,' Max said as he fist pumped the air.

'But only after a few minutes of meditation.'

Max and Michelle both squeezed their eyes shut. Ivy couldn't help but smile at their enthusiasm. After first being afraid of the

horses, Ivy loved how both teenagers were now eager to spend time with their equine mates. The two had evolved from hating the world and everyone in it, to beginning to believe in themselves and others – and they'd both been off the drink and drugs for almost two months now. They still had a bit to go, but along with her and Pastor John's help back in Sydney, they were getting there, together. The very thought warmed her heart. It was gratifying to know she was making a difference to people's lives, and somehow giving back to the universe. Her work was what gave her the strength to get through her own inner turmoils, and to have faith everything was eventually going to be all right. Seeing how other people fought their battles to reach their full potential inspired her, and always had. She'd been watching May and Alice do healing sessions ever since she could walk, and her dream had always been to do the same. She'd been living that dream for the past five years – firstly as an offsider for Alice and May, and now as a group leader herself, thanks to her degree.

After ten minutes, Ivy softly and calmly asked Max and Michelle to open their eyes.

'So today,' she said, once they were back in the present moment, 'we're going to have our very first reiki session with the horses. Sound good?'

Michelle's green eyes glittered. 'Wow, really. Horses can do that?'

Max looked confused. 'What the heck is reiki? Sounds like some kind of karate.'

Michelle jumped in to answer. 'It's like a massage, but without all the touching. I haven't tried it, but I've always wanted to. I've watched documentaries on it, and it looks amazing.'

With Max still staring at her with a knitted brow, Ivy elaborated on Michelle's description. 'Yes, that's right. It's where the horses lend their hearts and souls to us, taking us on a deeper journey of

self-discovery. They can remove emotional blockages just by being near you, or sometimes by touching you with their muzzles, chin, lips or forehead. It may sound a little strange now, but you just wait until you experience it.'

'Uh huh.' Max cocked his head to the side. 'Do I have to tell them anything?'

Ivy shook her head. 'Nope. All you have to do is lie on a massage table and the horses do all the work.'

Max's worried look finally gave way to a smile. 'Sounds pretty good to me.'

After Michelle and Max had removed their shoes and climbed onto the massage tables set up in the shade at the side of the roundyard, Ivy placed a hand on Max's and Michelle's legs. 'All I ask of you both is to close your eyes and allow the horses to do as they need. You might feel different sensations, like tingling, twitching, or a rumbling belly, and you might feel nothing but peace, but either way, it's all good and all part of your personal journey. Just trust in the horses, okay?'

Max and Michelle agreed and closed their eyes. Ivy walked over to the edge of the roundyard and opened the gate wide, allowing the horses to choose if they wanted to join them or not. Out of the eight horses in the paddock, five did. Ivy stood back to let them pass her, breathing in their beautiful horsey scent. Three went to Michelle and two to Max. The horses by Michelle's side began to gently rub their muzzles up and down her back. The two with Max decided to lay their heads on his shoulders, one on each side. They did this for fifteen minutes, only shifting to the opposite cheek, until Ivy asked both Max and Michelle to roll over onto their backs.

'I feel really warm,' Michelle mumbled dreamily.

Ivy placed her hand on Michelle's arm. 'That's normal. It's your energy shifting and dispersing. Just go with it.'

‘Okay,’ Michelle replied distractedly as the horses mingled by her side once more.

Max rubbed his eyes, yawning. ‘Is it normal to feel so heavy and tired?’

‘Yes, that’s your body’s way of healing itself from emotional blockages.’

‘I’m really liking this,’ Max said faintly as his eyes slipped shut and the two horses that had chosen him got back to work.

One horse stood at Max’s feet and the other gently pushed its muzzle into Max’s chest. From experience, Ivy knew this was the horses’ way of channelling energy through whoever they were doing the healing work on – kind of like they were flushing Max of any toxins. It was always mind-blowing to watch. Horses were such magnificent creatures, with a unique way of helping people open their hearts. She knew all too well from her own experience with them – after her mother’s death and when she was attacked – that when you really looked and listened through the lens of your heart, you could open the doorway to a world of feeling, allowing you the insight to work through your inner dilemmas. And the horses, in such a gentle yet powerful way, helped people do this by bonding with them in a way no human could, making her job as a counsellor so much more fulfilling.

The second part of the session lasted for almost half an hour, until the horses stepped back from the table. Three of them rolled in the dirt as a way to rid themselves of the energy they’d taken on, while the other two did the same by shaking themselves. Ivy marvelled at their intelligence, and also at their giving and loving natures. Dogs may have been said to be a man’s best friend, but in her mind horses were humankind’s graceful saviours. If only more people knew of, and put faith in, horses’ healing powers, she believed there would be a lot less suffering in the world.

Giving Max and Michelle some time to come back to reality, Ivy then asked them to slowly sit up as she handed them each a bottle of water.

‘How are you both feeling?’

As always, Michelle spoke first. ‘I feel weird, in a good way. A bit light-headed, like I’m free of gravity or something.’

Max stretched his arms in the air and yawned widely. ‘I second that.’ He shook his head, his eyes full of wonder. ‘I don’t know how else to put it except – that was fucking amazeballs.’

Michelle giggled. ‘I completely agree.’

Ivy laughed with them as she stretched her arms wide and pulled them into a group hug. Within seconds Michelle began to sob in her arms, and Ivy felt Max’s arms tighten protectively around them all. This was a moment Ivy had been expecting.

‘I’m sorry,’ Michelle mumbled, sniffing. ‘That just kind of came out of nowhere.’

‘It’s okay,’ Ivy whispered, as she stroked Michelle’s hair. ‘This is a good thing. You’re releasing emotional blockages that the horses have moved.’

Michelle nodded softly.

‘You’ll be okay, Michelle,’ Max said quietly. ‘I’ll make sure of it.’

Ivy’s heart swelled. Max and Michelle had been at their very lowest when they’d first come here and yet they were giving it all they had to make life better – and that took so much courage. This, right here, was why she had to save Healing Hills.

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