

## PROLOGUE

The fresh scent of the thousands of eucalypts the Blue Mountains were famous for lingered upon the air as dust-speckled dawn sunlight was snaking its way across the timeworn timber boards of the one-bedder farmhouse Lucy Harrison had called home for almost seven months. Her job as cook at the roadhouse out the front paid the rent.

She knew eighteen was too young to have a baby. She also knew she should have thought of that when she'd fallen into the charismatic stockman's swag at the B&S ball, a virgin and more drunk than she'd realised, but clued in enough to lie to him, both about her age and the fact that she wasn't on the pill. It wasn't his fault she was in this predicament. She'd wanted him to want her, had spent half the night trying to woo him. If he didn't live thousands of miles away, she might have told him she was pregnant. In hindsight, she should have, but it was too late to harbour those kinds of regrets now. She'd made her decision and now she had to follow through with it. She just wished she had someone to hold her hand right now, to tell her everything

was going to be okay. But she was very much alone, and terrified of what lay ahead.

Hopefully, the ambulance she'd called would be arriving soon because the contractions were coming faster, detonating inside her like fireworks. With each wave of primal pain, a deep intrinsic need to protect her baby grew, to the point that she knew now she couldn't put the child up for adoption. Her innate need to raise this child was almost overwhelming, ridding her of all her worries about not being able to handle motherhood.

Caressing the mound of her belly, she took in deep lungfuls of air, vowing to make her baby girl her life's purpose. Her girl would know nothing like the hellhole she'd grown up in, with a drunkard father and an absent mother. Her baby deserved the best life she could give.

With the next swelling contraction seizing her, she bent forward and gripped the verandah railings so she didn't buckle beneath the pain. After eight months of pretending, of covering it up with oversized clothes, it was really happening – she was going to be a mum. A single parent.

One day she would move to the big smoke to be reunited with her best friend, Sally, and start a new life. But for now, this ramshackle house was her home, and would soon be her baby's home too.

One step at a time.

## CHAPTER

# 1

Melody Harrison hated the fact that today was her twenty-third birthday.

She didn't want anyone to say the word 'happy' to her. She wasn't happy, not in the slightest. Her mother was dying, her marriage was in ruins, she'd lost contact with her closest friends because of her insufferable husband and she was so bone-tired, she felt like curling into a ball and sleeping for a year. But she had to soldier on. One step at a time.

Finding a free seat amidst the chaos of commuters, she sank down and blinked back another onslaught of tears. Where had the strong, confident, happy young woman she'd been when she'd met Antonio four years ago gone? She'd give almost anything to find her again.

She was having a really hard time coming to terms with what the marriage counsellor had told her after their last session, on the quiet.

‘Even though he’s denying it, Antonio is a covert narcissist, Melody, and a very clever one. So don’t blame yourself for not seeing it earlier, or for his cheating. I know you’re hoping for a miracle, but he won’t change. They never do. Even when they say they will. It’s all a ploy to keep you tangled in their web. You can leave him, if that’s what you feel you want to do. You’re a strong woman. You can do this.’

Even though she’d lived through it, day in, day out, the words had been overwhelming in the moment. What was she meant to do with such information?

Once the fog had cleared, Melody had got to work. With a clinical diagnosis, she started researching on the web for countless hours. Now she was starting to very clearly understand the demise of her marriage ... and of her self-worth. The intense love bombing, the devaluing, the breadcrumbs of false ‘I’m sorry’s and ‘I promise to get help’s, blow after blow to her trust, the crushing heartbreak, confusion, self-doubt. Then, when she was at her lowest point, manipulating her to believe in him again.

Even the fact that he had declared his love so quickly, and they’d married within months, only for him to change tune the minute she moved in, going from ‘I love you’ to ‘I choose to love you because you’re hard to love’. Now she saw the pattern so very clearly.

Her heart had been crushed when she’d discovered that her husband wasn’t the big romantic at heart he’d led her to believe he was. As a young married woman, she’d still held on to her high hopes for a happily-ever-after, even though a big part of her had screamed to run for the hills. So she’d stayed in the hope the romantic man she’d met would resurface. And here she was, years later, still waiting.

Golden sunlight and engulfing darkness mingled as the Sydney metro train sped through a maze of graffitied tunnels intermittently broken up by flashes of wintery fog, banked-up traffic and high-rises. Turning up the bluegrass melody playing from her AirPods, she sighed wearily. If only the view was instead of the endless countryside in which she'd spent her childhood. Her days spent exploring the wilds of her backyard, the Blue Mountains, on foot or horseback had been filled with so much happiness. She and her mum had spoken about moving back there one day, if she ever unravelled herself from the clutches of Antonio and her beloved café, but then, in the blink of an eye, everything has changed. Her mum had been given the devastating diagnosis and everything in Melody's world had been tipped upside down and inside out. How was she meant to get through this? How could she come out the other side unbroken? The world was going to be a very lonely place without her mum to turn to.

She twisted her wedding band around her finger, and then, as she had many times the past couple of weeks, almost slipped it off. But as it wedged on her knuckle, she stopped herself. The thought of the mess that would follow if she asked for a divorce stopped her – she didn't have the strength for such turmoil right now, nor did she want the weight of it on her mother's already heavy heart. There were way bigger fish to fry in her turbulent life.

Melody was well aware that her focus needed to remain on her mum because as much as she didn't want to believe it, she knew they didn't have long left together. With that timely reminder, she found herself choking back sobs again. She'd made a promise to herself that she wasn't going to cry today, and a stickler for

never breaking a promise to herself or anyone else, she had to try and hold it together. She owed herself that much.

Feeling as if the weight of the world was upon her small shoulders, she breathed in deeply then sighed it away. She'd never taken so many desperate deep breaths in all her life. Having sardined herself between an elderly lady with her nose buried in a book and a clean-shaven man in a suit whose attention was held fast by the glow of his laptop, she felt safe enough to allow her heavy eyelids to drop. She recalled Aunt Sally's advice and did her best to envision lying on a white-sand beach, the rolling waves ebbing and flowing, seagulls floating on the gentle breeze above her. As nice as that fantasy was, it was tough to remain in such a beautiful place for long when her mother was living in a daily hell of pills and chemo and the spectre of imminent death.

With her heart squeezing tighter, she tried to ignore the almost unbearable weight of fear and heartache. How she was going to handle the next chapter of her life was beyond her comprehension, but her mother had taught her from a very young age that it's one step at a time. That's all she could do.

Opening her eyes, she realised they were almost at her station. Standing, she tossed her handbag over her shoulder and, reaching up on her tippy toes, steadied herself with an overhead handhold as the train screeched to a halt. With the morning rush hour at its peak, as soon as the door slid open, she was propelled forwards. Elbows out to protect herself, she squished out among a sea of commuters. Then, one foot after the other, she turned left and strode towards the stairs that led up and onto the street. Racing up the stairwell and into the mayhem of Sydney's CBD, she glanced skywards as another crack of thunder reverberated off the skyscrapers engulfing her. After weeks of tempestuous

weather, she yearned to feel the caress of sunlight against her skin. As if mimicking her tortured soul, the slate-grey sky was heaving with ominous black clouds aching to dump their heavy load. She sympathised with Mother Nature's need to unleash her vehemence, because she too felt like she was a pressure cooker about to explode. Or implode. She wasn't sure which would be worse.

The past three months had been her worst nightmare, and still, the worst was yet to come. She dared not focus on it right now. That would come in the dead of night, when she lay awake, staring at the ceiling through teary eyes.

Frenzied people brushed past her, almost all of them walking blind with their gazes glued to their phones. If she had a choice, she'd toss her mobile in the bin – in her opinion, it had taken away people's need to really connect, eye to eye, heart to heart, soul to soul. The only reason she had the damn thing was for important calls, and to keep up with the social media avenues she used to promote her gastronomic masterpieces, or food porn, as Marianna, her business partner and mother-in-law, liked to call it. Posing and taking selfies for all the world to see to then tally up how many likes she got was worse to her than cutting off a finger. There was more to life than what other people thought of her. As long as they felt her emotion in the food, that was all that mattered. She'd made a name for herself in foodie circles, and people came from far and wide to taste her culinary skills – ones she'd first learnt from her mum, then finessed in the years of her apprenticeship.

Antonio was well aware she was the reason their café was so successful – it was her only saving grace according to him. Whenever anyone asked what her secret was, she always said it

was the love she poured into everything she cooked, and she firmly believed that, because in the grand scheme of things, love was what made the world go round.

As if on cue, her phone chimed her message tone – *The Dukes of Hazzard* horn. Had her mother taken a turn for the worse? Her heart leaping into her throat, she yanked her phone from the depths of her handbag, relieved to see it wasn't a message from Aunt Sally – not her real aunt but her mother's best friend – but from Antonio.

*Hey, Lorenzo has called in sick and we're run off our feet. You were meant to be here already. Are you far away? See you soon?*

Melody quickly checked the time. She was barely running five minutes late. *Far out.* She gritted her teeth and groaned. No 'hope you're okay' or 'how is your mum?' No, even though she didn't really want to hear it but it was the principle that he'd clearly forgotten *again*, 'happy birthday'. Antonio Calabrese could be so damn selfish. The man she knew now was a far cry from the one she'd fallen for as an eighteen-year-old. Young love was so hopeful, so heedless. *So naïve.*

Strutting faster now, she shoved her mobile back into the seemingly endless pit of her handbag. Stuff him, she wasn't writing back. She was only minutes away and trying to walk and text would only slow her down anyway.

Her boots feeling as heavy as the eyelids she was fighting to keep open, she jiggled on the spot while waiting for a crossing to give the green go-ahead. After a sleepless night spent by her mother's bedside, she really didn't want to be doing this today, but she didn't have a choice. Her share in the café was the only thing keeping her sane, as if life could somehow continue on through the hardest of times. She needed the distraction of it to



ground her. As her beautiful mother would say, you got this, my darling.

But did she?

Her hurried footsteps echoing off the sidewalk, she took the corner, barely avoiding a head-on with an equally frazzled-looking man. She was about to apologise when he glared at her. Argh! Stuff him too. His fault as much as hers. She resisted giving him a piece of her mind as she stormed away. Whatever happened to common decency, compassion, empathy? To make matters worse, half a block from her workplace, the heavens opened up like god was emptying his bathtub. The rain lashed down by the bucketful, instantly soaking the ill-prepared through to the skin. People ran this way and that, hands and newspapers overhead, as if the water would somehow make them shrink. Her umbrella was swiftly overhead, and her somewhat rainproof jacket was pulled in tighter; Melody had always been taught to be prepared for anything. But she sure as hell hadn't been prepared for the devastating news delivered by the family doctor, and definitely wasn't ready to say her final goodbyes. No twenty-three-year-old should be. *Cancer is an absolute bitch.*

Reaching her destination, she breathed a sigh of relief. She'd made it – one hurdle down – and now she had to try to get through the day without crying or losing her already very thin patience with Antonio. Glancing to the stone plaque beautifully etched with *Café Amore*, she pulled her broly down and shook the droplets of water off. With floor-to-ceiling glass walls and a deck that was used in the summer months, the eatery had stellar views of Sydney Harbour and the iconic Opera House. Not that she got to enjoy the view much. Her place was at the back of house, pouring her passion into the dishes – cooking was her

way of escaping from everyday life, and boy oh boy, she needed that right now.

She heaved the door open, the tinkle of the bell lost amidst the chatter of the breakfast customers and the drone of traffic behind her. The scent of strong Italian coffee lingered, and she breathed it in – she couldn't wait to enjoy a double-shot latte. Making a beeline for the back, she avoided Antonio, weaving his way through the tables, collecting plates and schmoozing the clientele – he was a master at winning people over, especially women.

Tucking wisps of hair that had escaped her plait behind her ears, Melody headed into the heart of the hip eatery – the kitchen. A huge pot bubbled on the stove, the scent of her famous oxtail and pork-mince bolognese sending her tastebuds dancing, an impressive feat when she couldn't recall the last time she'd had an appetite. She and Marianna had spent countless hours perfecting the recipe, and now it was close to perfect. Grabbing the wooden spoon, she gave it a stir, the bubbles of rich tomato goodness still not dark enough in colour, nor thick enough – it would be another hour before it was ready to be cooled, the oxtail plucked from the bones, and then served over freshly made pasta for the lunch rush. She was in the mood to make pappardelle today. The thick egg pasta would be perfect slathered in the rich sauce and topped off with some freshly grated pecorino, possibly a little chilli oil, depending on the diner's palate.

'Thank god you're here, Melody.' Appearing out of nowhere, Antonio dumped a tray of dirty plates and cups into the sink then spun to face her – clearly they were extremely busy because he rarely got his hands dirty. 'Oh, man, you look like death

warmed up.’ He bustled over, leaning in to kiss her. ‘Did you get any sleep at all last night?’

‘Gee whizz, Antonio, don’t go sugar-coating anything, will you.’ Rolling her eyes at his lack of tact, Melody turned her cheek to his inbound lips, deflecting his kiss to somewhere more platonic. ‘Unless you count a couple of hours with your eyes closed as sleeping, no, I didn’t.’

Sighing, he rested against the bench, his dark eyes on hers. ‘So how is she?’

‘Not good, but you know Mum. She refuses to have me sitting at her bedside all day long, waiting for her to die.’ She half shrugged and smiled sadly. ‘Her words, not mine.’

Antonio shook his head. ‘I don’t know how you do it, sitting with her most of the night then coming in here six days a week.’

‘I do what I have to.’ The shattering image of Antonio lip-to-lip with some girl from his gym flashed through her mind and she blinked back the threat of tears. She wasn’t going to break down at work again. She’d done that too many times lately, and she’d made a promise to herself not to. Besides, he didn’t deserve any more of her heartbreak. ‘As you know.’ She shot him a look.

‘Come on, Melody. When are you going to stop being so pissed at me for my stuff-up?’

She and Antonio had been having this same conversation over and over since she’d caught him red-handed three weeks earlier, making out with some buxom blonde with lips bigger than hot-air balloons and boobs to match. It made her wonder how many times he hadn’t been caught. Melody was relieved of the need to reply as Marianna Calabrese bustled into the kitchen.

‘Oh bella!’ Marianna said in her sweet, singsong voice, thick with an Italian accent. ‘You made it, my precious daughter-in-law.’ Her long dark hair, threaded with streaks of grey and tied back into a tight ponytail, swung to land over her shoulder when she skidded to a stop. ‘And the happiest of birthdays to you, sweetheart. Your present is still on the way. It got held up in the post, but it’s coming.’

‘Thank you, Marianna. Sorry I’m a little late.’ Ignoring the panicked look on Antonio’s face, Melody unwound her scarf and dumped it, her jacket and her handbag into her staff locker. ‘I missed my first train by seconds and had to wait for the next one. Talk about frustrating.’

Wiping her hands on the starched-to-a-crisp red and white polka-dot apron tied around her generous hips, her megawatt smile radiating the genuine warmth she was renowned for, Marianna tutted as she closed the distance between them. ‘Shush now, there’s no apology needed.’ She cupped Melody’s cheeks, her big brown eyes filled with compassion. ‘Because you, tesoro mio, are a blessing to me, to my son, and to this kitchen. I appreciate you being here with everything you’re going through.’

Emotion lodged in Melody’s throat, making it impossible to reply. Instead, she smiled and nodded.

Marianna had always had Melody’s back, and if she knew her son had been making out with another woman – just like Antonio’s father had done so many years before, sending Marianna running all the way across the oceans to her family who had emigrated to Sydney – she’d lose it. That was why Melody had decided to keep her lips zipped. Marianna hated infidelity of any kind, and Melody didn’t want a rift between mother and son on her conscience right now.

With his mother bustling back out of the kitchen, Antonio cocked his head as if pondering something. Melody could almost hear his brain ticking from where she was standing, putting her apron on. What the hell was he scheming now?

‘What is it, Antonio?’ She kicked off her boots and pulled on her chef’s clogs.

‘I know what you’re thinking and no, I haven’t forgotten your birthday. I actually planned to get your favourite from that little Lebanese place tonight, so would you mind if I called over to Sally’s with it?’ He took a tentative step forward. ‘We can celebrate together with takeaway and a bottle of wine.’

‘It’s probably not the best idea.’ She took her spot at the bench, eyeing the array of fresh ingredients she’d had delivered from the markets first thing this morning – a daily ritual.

‘Please, Melody. It’s been almost a month and I don’t think I can say sorry any more than I already have.’ He stopped on the opposite side of the bench, tipping his head to catch her eyes. ‘Are you ever going to forgive me, pasticcino?’

‘Please don’t call me cupcake. You know I hate it.’ Sighing, she brought her weary gaze to his. ‘Honestly, Antonio, I don’t know if I can ever fully forgive you, and if I do, I’m not sure I’ll ever forget what you did.’

‘But I’ve told you, it meant nothing and—’

She held her hand up to stop his excuses – she’d heard enough of them. ‘I know, I know. It was just a stupid kiss, and she kissed you, not the other way around, yadda, yadda, yadda.’ She met his gaze, hers fierce now. ‘And like I’ve told you, it didn’t look like that to me.’

‘I know it didn’t.’ He regarded her like a wounded puppy. ‘I’ve gone and stuffed everything up, haven’t I?’

She offered a regretful smile. She almost wished that she could just magically forgive him. It would be simpler, easier. 'It's proving way tougher than I thought it would be, to forgive and forget, especially right now. All I want to do is focus on my mum.' Her hands went to her hips. 'You need to give me space, like I asked you to after our last marriage counselling session. You can't just push me to act like everything's going to be okay, because I honestly don't know if it will be.'

Antonio's mouth opened to say something, but then closed, as if he thought better of it. He regarded her for a few long moments, his gaze narrowing. 'I can't blame you, I suppose, but just know I'm here, waiting for you to love me again, like you should as my wife.'

'Mm-hmm,' was all she could muster for the raw anger rising in her throat.

Marianna's head popped through the doorway, a pen tucked above her ear. 'Antonio, we need you out here, pronto.'

'Coming.' Antonio turned and wandered back towards the hub of the café, his sway as cocky as ever.

His body language infuriated Melody, as did his expectation for her to believe his BS and simply get over it. Who did he think he was, making her feel bad for his selfishness? If she hadn't been his wife for four long years, she wondered if she'd have even tried to forgive him, or whether she'd have run for the hills the second she'd caught him – like his mother had from his father. And through it all, she had to admit to herself that she felt cold, almost cut off from feeling the emotion she usually would with such a betrayal, a by-product of what she was enduring with her mum. Numbness was way easier to handle than crying all the time.

Turning her attention to the vine-ripened tomatoes, purple garlic and bunches of basil, she decided to make some bruschetta topping, along with a Caprese salad. After that, the fresh pappardelle. The lunch rush would be upon her before she knew it, so she needed to get cracking.