

A close-up of a woman with long blonde hair wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat. She is looking back over her right shoulder towards the camera. The background is a bright blue sky with soft white clouds.

Ten years ago she lost all  
that she loved. But now  
she's coming home...

# MANDY MAGRO

## THE *Wildwood* SISTERS



THE  
*Wildwood*  
SISTERS

MANDY  
MAGRO

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## THE WILDWOOD SISTERS

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## PROLOGUE

*Nine years ago*

*Opals Ridge, Far North Queensland*

Her laboured breath escaping her in short, painful gasps, the girl staggered through the engulfing darkness, the towering ghost gums she'd found so beautifully mesmerising in the daylight now seeming menacing and foreboding. With the frenzied drumbeat of her heart echoing in her ears, she frantically looked around, trying to decide which way to go, blindly following her first impulse. All around her the inhospitable landscape was eerily silent but for the scurries of night creatures.

Bile rose in her throat as she remembered his animal grunts and groans, relived the horrific sensation of his rough hands upon her, hands that had once been so gentle with their touch. He'd been playing her all along—the true reason for his infatuation now revealed in all its shocking truth. He'd never loved her. What a fool she had



been, thinking her secret was going to make things perfect. She never should have told him. She should never have done any of it.

The icy breeze ruffled the leaves of the towering native trees surrounding her, prickling her skin and making her shiver to the core. A bush stone-curlew called out from the looming shadows, the bird's eerie song only heightening her anxiety. She had always hated their sound, usually pulling her doona up and over her head when she heard their nocturnal calls. But tonight she wasn't tucked up safely in her bed at the homestead. Instead she was out in the dead of night, fighting for her life.

Stumbling over a fallen tree branch, she collapsed to the ground, the impact stealing the air from her lungs. She rolled onto her side, screaming silently, horrified by the knowledge that he was somewhere behind her, searching her out in the dark. It was at this very moment she begged God for her life.

## CHAPTER

# 1

*Present day*

*Melbourne*

Gazing across the table of the chic restaurant, Renee groaned inwardly. The softly lit room oozed romance, although she wasn't feeling the slightest bit amorous. Her date had not stopped talking about himself all evening—everything from how many hours he spent at the gym and how respected he was at his job as an accountant, to what brand of hair products he preferred to use—and it was driving her up the wall. She hadn't been able to get a word in edgeways and he hadn't shown one ounce of interest in who she was on the inside. She'd given up even trying to speak, instead smiling when necessary and nodding in agreement with everything he was saying. Whatever happened to the chivalrous men who opened doors and pulled out chairs and asked genuine questions so they could get to know you better? She drew in a breath and

refrained from rolling her eyes. She'd made it through entree and main course—only dessert to go. Thank God.

As if on cue the waiter arrived at their table with two plates of sweet deliciousness and Renee had to stop herself from cheering. Not long now and she could get out of this restaurant and crawl into her warm and cosy bed—alone. Her mobile phone chiming in her bag stopped her from devouring her first mouthful of chocolate and macadamia tart. She pulled it out, her heart landing in her throat when she spotted the caller ID. It was close to ten so what would her pa be doing calling at this hour of the night?

She looked to her date and forced a smile. 'Excuse me, I have to take this.'

The bloke across from her nodded and started flicking through his phone before she'd even had a chance to answer hers.

'Hi, Pa, is everything okay?'

'Hi, Renee. Not really, love. Your nan has had a heart attack... but don't panic, she's going to be okay.'

Renee sucked in a sharp breath as tears prickled her eyes. She held them back, though, not wanting comfort from her date. 'Oh my God, Pa, where is she now?'

'She's recovering in the cardiac unit at the Opals Ridge hospital. The doctors are monitoring her very closely.'

'That's good. I'll try to organise a flight for tomorrow.'

'Oh Renee, no need to do that. You know how we feel about you coming back here after that letter. We don't want to risk losing you like we lost Scarlet. I think it would be best if you just stay where you are and I promise I'll keep you updated.'

Renee felt as dubious about returning to Opals Ridge as her pa did. And there was very good reason to, but this changed everything. 'I have to see her, Pa. I wouldn't forgive myself if...'

Her pa cut her off. ‘That’s not going to happen. Trust me. She’s going to be alright.’

‘I don’t know, Pa. I just really feel like I need to see her.’

‘It’s late, Renee. I don’t want you making a rash decision to come back here right now. I’ll talk to you in the morning, okay?’

‘Okay,’ was all Renee could say, her throat so tight she could barely take a decent breath.

‘Love you, Missy-Moo.’

‘Love you too, Pa. And please tell Nan I love her too.’

It was just past midnight. Renee stood in front of her bathroom mirror, defeated, deflated and miserable. Peeling the spaghetti straps from her shoulders, her Swarovski-studded Louis Vuitton dress slid effortlessly from her body. Tia was certainly right, she had lost weight—the pressure of her job and the countless hours she spent doing it were taking a toll. Black rings circled her eyes, eyes that were bloodshot and glassy from crying—she hadn’t been able to hold in the tears after she’d got off the phone to her pa, and mascara stained her cheeks from where they had fallen like a river.

As she’d predicted, her date had begged to come inside with her but she had declined, saying she was way too tired for company—besides, what kind of man would still press for sex after the heartbreaking phone call she’d received less than an hour ago?

The lack of depth of these city blokes was driving her round the bend. She’d always dreamt of finding the kind of love that would make her heart race and her toes curl, while leaving her blissfully breathless—the type of love she’d felt so briefly, yet poignantly, once before—but the last few guys she’d dated were making her doubt her faith in a happily ever after.

With her pa's words swirling around in her mind, her tears began to fall once more, her deep sobs breaking the silence of her one bedroom apartment.

Her beautiful nan, the woman that had always been there for her, now needed *her* to be there, and so did her pa. He had tried to reassure her that Nan was going to be okay, but Renee was finding it hard to believe him. What if he was just saying that to stop her coming home? What if she didn't go back and Nan died before she got to tell her to her face how much she loved her? Life could be really cruel—after what she had been through in her lifetime she knew just how damn cruel it could be. She couldn't bear the thought of losing her nan, not now, not ever. She needed to find the courage to return to Wildwood Acres, but even after nine years of being away, the note she'd found on her windscreen—the one that had made her skip town so suddenly—still haunted her, and the thought of the nightmares starting all over again overwhelmed her.

Smacking her open palm down on the marble vanity, she swore loudly. She was tired of letting fear run her life, and fed up with forever feeling as though she was treading dangerous waters with her lips just above the surface.

Pa was nearing seventy. With his long-time sidekick Mick recovering from a freak accident, and Nan in hospital, she knew he could use an extra hand around the place, be it in the saddle or around the homestead. Not that Stanley Wildwood was going to admit that to her. His fears about her returning home overshadowed any desire for her to ever go back.

*But I have to.*

Renee closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, turning back the clock in her mind to the days when her future seemed full of endless possibilities. She had spent the first seventeen years of her life at Wildwood Acres and there were many happy memories of her and



her twin sister, Scarlet, growing up on the property, memories she had locked away after that devastating night almost ten years ago. It was about time she allowed herself to reminisce. Smiling sadly, she hugged her arms around herself as if trying to stop herself blowing away.

The world had been an enchanted place with Scarlet beside her, her sister always seeing everything through rose-coloured glasses. It had been one of her many beautiful qualities, one Renee treasured now more than ever.

*Those who don't believe in magic will never find it, Reni.*

*Yes, sis, but those who live in an airy-fairy world will never be able to find their chosen reality because they're not living in the real world...*

*Oh come on, Reni, you have to learn to open your mind and trust in fate. Otherwise your life will be really boring.*

*I like boring. It means I know what's around the corner.*

*You're a stick in the mud.*

*No I'm not. I'm just a realist, that's all. There's no mud stuck on me.*

*Oh ha ha.*

Even though they were born only minutes apart, Renee had always felt like the older sister—which technically she was as she had emerged from the birth canal first. But not being there to protect Scarlet from whatever had happened left her feeling guilty as hell.

With her turbulent emotions bringing back painful memories of that fateful night—the one that had changed all of their lives forever and left her with a gaping hole in her heart—Renee tried to focus on the handful of facts they knew for sure. Scarlet's bedroom window had been found wide open in the dead of winter, strange for someone who detested being out in the cold. The fact that her handbag and wallet were still there let them know she hadn't intended on going very far. Police had discovered blood deep in the

woodlands that backed onto Wildwood Acres, and a week later, it was confirmed to be Scarlet's, meaning she was either very badly hurt or dead—Renee had known instinctively it was the latter.

But other than these few things there was nothing; no suspects, no fresh leads, no more evidence, and most devastating of all, no body to lay to rest. It couldn't remain this way. She'd been obsessed with finding Scarlet's killer back then, and she hadn't been afraid to say so—which had got her into a fair bit of hot water. Her desperation and lack of sleep had made her mind a muddled mess. She'd been way out of line, but there was still one person in particular she doubted was telling the truth. If only she'd had more time to do her own investigating, but the note left on her windscreen had changed everything. Now nine years later she was still none the wiser as to who had taken Scarlet from them, and neither were the police.

How was she ever going to free herself from the guilt, from the ache that scratched away at her soul every waking day? Finding Scarlet's killer and bringing him to justice would be a damn good start, and she'd yearned to do this every waking day for nine long years. But how?

Determination flooded her as ideas bloomed like buds in the spring. Maybe just being back where it had all happened and being able to view it all through fresh, more mature eyes, she might be lucky enough to finally unravel the truth. Maybe... She stared at her reflection, imagining it was her twin sister staring back at her. Reaching out, she stroked the mirror with her fingertips, smiling sadly, wishing with everything she had that Scarlet was still alive. Right now she'd do anything to be able to hold her hand or hear her voice. Just remembering Scarlet's addictive laughter gave her a little boost of courage. Renee's blood boiled as she thought about the killer still roaming free and the tremendous amount of strain that knowledge had put on her nan and pa over the years, as well as

herself. The only reprieve she got from her deep-set heartache was that her dear sister was now with their mum and dad in heaven. If only angels could talk, she wondered what they'd tell her.

Over the past nine years she had tried to ignore her desperate aching need to find answers, but if she was to be brutally honest with herself, it was eating her from the inside out. And as much as the idea terrified her, she had to go back to Wildwood Acres. Because no matter how hard she tried to leave it all behind, the memories always shadowed her. Sometimes she would gain a comfortable lead in her daily life—lulled into believing she had put a comfortable distance between that night and the present day—but the fear of death always closed the gap. In the end, no matter how hard she tried to hide from it, that awful night always found her. And she was tired of running. It was time she put her demons to bed.

Dashing for the toilet, Renee fell to her knees, her stomach heaving. The thought of her twin sister's remains discarded like garbage, combined with the news of her beautiful nan, and the anxiety of going back was suddenly all too much.

At first, her dear nan, Pearl Wildwood, had told people she was sure Scarlet had just had some kind of freak accident and was still alive somewhere—maybe suffering from amnesia. She had forced herself to believe it, because the alternative was unthinkable, but as time passed and after the police confirmed the blood was Scarlet's, Nan finally came to understand that she was gone forever. Her pa, Stanley, being a realist, suspected all along that Scarlet had met with some sort of foul play.

Sadly, Renee had thought like her pa. She had felt the air go out of her very own lungs, as if someone had punched her in the stomach, the second Scarlet would have taken her very last breath, the intense sensation dragging her from a vivid nightmare where Scarlet was covered in blood and screaming for help. Her

grandparents hadn't wanted to acknowledge the fact she had sensed something so horrifying.

And that same nightmare had haunted her every single night thereafter, for six agonising months, until she had hastily driven away from Wildwood Acres and the township of Opals Ridge in her beat-up old Suzuki Sierra. One morning she had found a note under the windscreen wiper of her car, telling her she was going to be killed next. After informing the police, her nan and pa had packed her bags and had sent her on her way, with strict orders to keep driving until she got to her aunt Fay's place in Melbourne—it would be over their dead bodies that they would allow this monster to hurt another of their grandchildren. She hadn't had the chance to say goodbye to anyone—not even to the boy who had stolen her heart. She still thought about him often, and wondered if he was married now, if he had children, and most importantly of all, if he had forgiven her for the way she left him. Meanwhile, the police, once again, came up with no leads from the note, and eventually came to the conclusion that it must have been a prank. The case went cold.

Walking with conviction from the bathroom, her long black silk robe floating out behind her and with her Blue Russian cat, Kat, hot on her heels, Renee went to her linen cupboard and began pulling out towels, sheets and tablecloths, tossing it all in chaotic fashion at her feet. Kat dodged the flying linen missiles—quickly deciding it was safer up on the white leather couch in the lounge room.

After emptying virtually the entire cupboard, Renee finally spotted it, buried deep at the back: the hand-carved box that had remained padlocked for nine long years. Her psychologist was right; now was as good a time as any to begin the final part of her journey into healing. She had procrastinated long enough. It was time she

faced her anxieties so she could find a way to move forward. The call from her pa had been the kick up the butt she had needed. She believed she was ready to take the bull by the horns, hopefully...

The timber glory box now finally in her hands, Renee strode into the lounge room and placed it down on the floor, staring at it as she chewed her bottom lip. In need of a few moments to calm her racing heart, she gave a purring Kat a gentle stroke while admiring the view she had of the Melbourne skyline from her top-floor apartment. The city lights shone like beacons in the night, stealing the limelight from the seemingly invisible stars in the sky. It was as though the city itself was a living thing, pulsing with life twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

Unlike country life, the hustle and bustle never stopped here. It was tiring and invigorating all rolled into one. There were many parts of city living she just adored, such as her view of the pretty metropolitan hub, the wonderful fresh food markets, and being able to catch up with her amazing girlfriends at the trendy cafes and bars, but there were also some things she'd never got used to, no matter how hard she tried, like the fast-paced lifestyle, the constant noise and the dreary winters. Whenever the season turned cold, the country girl she had buried deep within her all those years ago screamed to get out. As the saying went, you can take the girl out of the country but you can never take the country out of the girl. Although, she had grown to love the glitz and glamour of life in a place like Melbourne. Here, everything was at her fingertips and there was a multitude of events to choose from every single weekend. If only she could split herself in two...

Heading off to her bedroom to recover the key from her bedside drawer, and then grabbing a bottle of red wine and a glass from the kitchen, she returned and flopped herself down on the plush



sheepskin rug in front of the couch. After pouring a glass of the red, she gulped the entirety of it down while staring at the box with wide eyes. How was she going to react to what was in there?

Kat took the opportunity to rub herself against the back of Renee's head. The feline's company calmed her a little. Kat had been her loyal companion ever since she had found her wandering the streets as a starving scruffy kitten four years ago. And she was certainly a puss unto her own. Kat ate her food with her paws, quite often had lengthy conversations with her in indecipherable cat lingo, and sat and watched the telly whenever it was on. Renee swore she was almost human. She couldn't imagine her life without her.

The glass now empty, Renee grabbed the key, brushed the dust from the timber top her father had so painstakingly carved for her for Christmas all those years ago, took a deep breath, and then began unlocking the box with quivering hands. Flicking open the lid, her heart broke when she spotted a small stack of photos with a rubber band around them. The top one was a picture of her and Scarlet with their mum and dad on their tenth birthday, the four of them with a five-metre python wrapped around their shoulders.

They'd spent the day at Cairns Tropical Zoo and Renee felt like it was only yesterday that she and Scarlet had been hand feeding the kangaroos, cuddling koalas and nursing baby crocodiles—it had been like a day at Disneyland for them. One day later, a horrendous car accident had stolen both her parents' lives—the bull her father had hit on the blind corner of the highway would have been impossible to see before it was too late. But here they were all so happy, their smiles outshining the sun, all of them without a care in the world. Little had they known the following day was going to change all of that, forever.

Renee began to look through the photos, smiling at one of her and her best friend from high school, Hayley Gregory. The pair of them were dressed in stonewash denim jeans and matching jackets. Good Lord, the fashion had been atrocious back then.

Continuing on through the pack, the next one made her heart squeeze tight. She was sitting bareback on her very first horse with her arms wrapped tightly around her dad's waist, her gappy five-year-old grin as enormous as her dad's. She smiled sadly as she ran a finger over her father's youthful face.

Throughout her early childhood years, he had been both her and Scarlet's hero. His passion for life and obsession with cattle and horses had been addictive. He had taught her so much in the short time she'd had with him on this earth, her undying love for horses all thanks to him. And her mum had been the typical country housewife, cooking, tending to the homestead and loving her girls and husband with everything she had. Renee closed her eyes and allowed the memories to flood her mind—she could still smell her mum's rose-scented perfume and feel her tender kisses on her cheeks. Why did God have to call them, and Scarlet, home so early? She missed them all so much.

Gently placing the photo in her lap as if it were made of the frailest glass, Renee finally got to the bottom of the pile—the last one making her belly do a backflip. Dylan Anderson's handsome chiselled face smiled back at her from where he was lying in the golden sunlight, the way his hands were tucked beneath his head making his muscular arms prominent. Her entire body tingled with the memory of his touch. With his dark hair and rugged looks, he really was the sexiest man she'd ever laid eyes on. And the intense look in his blue eyes, it swept her back to a time and place where love meant everything. She'd been the one who had taken the photo, and she recalled moments before this she and Dylan had

been lying in the grass in each other's arms, cuddling and kissing for hours. Those were the days—if only she could get them back.

Placing the photographs down on the floor beside her, she slowly began to empty the box. She pulled out old birthday and Christmas cards, knick-knacks she and Scarlet had collected on their many adventures out on Wildwood Acres—including a lump of golden rock that they had at the time thought was a nugget of gold—high school yearbooks and snapshots of their years spent in Opals Ridge. Everything she touched sent waves of bittersweet emotions rushing through her.

When she pulled out a silver chain with a split heart pendant on it she broke down and wept. Scarlet had bought her this for her fourteenth birthday present, as a symbol of the way they were tied together through their twin bond. They both wore a half, and when put together the pendant read 'Sisters'. She'd taken it off a few months after Scarlet's disappearance, unable to bear the pain it brought every time she looked at it. But now she unclasped the latch, lifted the chain to her neck and fastened it, her desire to wear it once again outweighing the sadness. Bringing her fingers to the pendant, she pressed it against her chest, feeling a closeness to Scarlet that she hadn't experienced in many years.

Choking back sobs, she reached the bottom of the glory box, where some of her most treasured items had been kept buried—her diary, which matched the one of Scarlet's they'd never been able to find, along with a Queensland State of Origin scarf Scarlet had bought her for her sixteenth birthday present. Unknowingly, Renee had gone and bought the exact same thing for her sister—she and Scarlet had often unintentionally bought the same things for each other, like perfumes, CDs and books, their connection one that many identical twins shared—the only difference being that she had plaited the tassels on Scarlet's scarf before giving it to her. It had

been their little thing—both of them always plaiting each other's hair while they had watched telly. Their whole family had been State of Origin addicts, their voices having enough decibels to carry for miles as they'd screamed encouragement at the mighty Maroons on the telly. Those were the good old days.

Renee smiled softly as more buried memories began to rise to the surface. Scarlet had been in the habit of wearing her scarf to bed every night, and she had apparently been wearing it when she'd disappeared as they'd never been able to find it since.

She hugged hers to her chest, deep in thought, her heart aching. Who had Scarlet met with that night? She remembered Billy Burton, Scarlet's boyfriend at the time she'd gone missing. Billy had always been a keen hunter, guns and knives his absolute passion, and his pride had been badly hurt when he and Scarlet had had a very public fight at a party the week before she'd disappeared. He used to always make Renee's skin crawl and she found it hard to understand what her sister saw in him. But like chalk and cheese, she and Scarlet had had very different ideas about what was attractive in a man. Billy swore black and blue he'd had nothing to do with Scarlet's disappearance, and had put forward a believable alibi—that he was home all night with his family. His parents had firmly backed him up, but wouldn't most parents protect their child, no matter what?

Renee had her doubts about him, and she had made the fact well-known around Opals Ridge. She still felt justified in doing so although she was very sorry about the unjustified accusations she'd made about a few others. She hadn't been in a very good state of mind at the time, desperately wanting to find who had taken her sister from her, and everyone had been a suspect.

She shook her head sadly. Nothing about that night added up—then or now—and it still infuriated her that the investigating police

had met with dead ends every which way they had turned. Nearly ten years had passed, and Scarlet was now just another missing girl. She sighed despairingly. It was time she shone some light on the shadows of her past. Then she might be able to finally put it all behind her and move forward; for her sake, her grandparents', and for Scarlet's.



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