

MANDY
MAGRO

*Savannah's
Secret*



CHAPTER

1

Far North Queensland

As the red-dirt roads finally gave way to bitumen, Ash Sullivan flicked his headlights to low-beam and turned off his spotlights. It had been a while since he'd had white lines leading the way, more accustomed to his tyres kicking up a trail of dust, and his excitement was building, knowing he was almost home.

He pressed the gizmo to squirt water over his dirty windscreen, the wipers creating a red arc that framed the progressively lush landscape. The farmhouses were becoming more frequent, and the livestock dotting the paddocks looked a lot healthier than those he'd been mustering. And instead of flat plains with trees few and far between, neatly lined rows of avocado, macadamia and mango trees hung heavy with the year's bounty, all backdropped by soaring mountain ranges.

Australia was a place of such sharp contrast, of land both foreboding and fertile, and Ash was proud to make a living by working amongst it all.

He tapped his thumbs against the steering wheel in time to one of his favourite tunes blaring from the speakers. Hank Williams' deep twangy voice helped to make the monotonous journey a little more bearable, as did the entire packet of Minties he'd devoured, along with two cans of Red Bull. Lord knew any distraction was welcome on the five-hour route he'd travelled more times than he could count over the past seven years. Saving every penny he could, he hoped to soon bring to fruition his dream of owning a chopper-mustering business so he didn't have to continue making a living in the saddle – his back was starting to pay the price of his being a stockman.

Now back where he could get good phone service, he needed to hear his girlfriend's sweet voice, but he wasn't about to let on he was arriving home a day early – he wanted to surprise her, in more ways than one.

'Hey Siri. Call Hannah.'

Siri did as asked. The phone rang through the speakers, two, three, four times, before going to voicemail. *'Hi, you've reached Hannah, I can't get to the phone right now, so please leave a message and I'll call you back soon.'*

'Hey, babe. Just calling to say I love you, and miss you,' he said with a huge smile on his dial before ending the call.

In the distance, the soft glow of his home town caught his eye. The tiny township was going to be a welcome change from the incessant flies and barren countryside of outback Australia. He fought the urge to slam the accelerator to the floor – he'd arrive in Atherton soon enough. After almost two months away,

mustering wild cattle and buffalo up the northern tip of Australia while evading crocs bigger than Ben-Hur, he couldn't wait to be back in civilisation, take his high school sweetheart into his arms and tell her how much he loved her.

Beyond the cab of his beat-up old LandCruiser, the velvet sky glimmered with countless stars, as if it too was celebrating what was about to happen. Although nervous, he was optimistic his proposal was going to be all he'd imagined it to be. He'd intended to pop the question the weekend of Hannah's sister's car accident, but had tucked the ring away. Hannah was mourning Heather, her sister, and it wasn't the time for a marriage proposal. Instead, he gave Hannah all the time and support she needed to begin to heal her broken heart. He'd been waiting for the right moment, and tonight felt like it had come. He prayed he was right.

Cruising along the quiet main street of Atherton, he saw a line of cars parked out front of the top pub – not unusual for nine o'clock on a Saturday night. He hoped Hannah wasn't in there, amongst the rowdy crowd – she loved to dance when there was a band playing. Not sounding like herself when he'd called first thing that morning, she'd said she was feeling run down, like she was possibly getting a flu, and had agreed she needed an early night. He was going to wake her with a kiss.

Passing their favourite café, then the butcher shop, Ash indicated and turned down their street. His hands were growing sweaty as he took a deep breath, running what he was going to say through his mind for what felt like the millionth time. He couldn't wait to give her the one-carat diamond engagement ring his late grandmother had left to him, her dying wish that he marry the love of his life and have a family together. He liked to believe

his dear Granny Fay was watching down from heaven because, with any luck, he was about to fulfil their shared aspiration.

Pulling up in his usual spot, he killed the engine and tapped his top pocket again to check the ring box was still there. He'd get his bags and swag out later. A spring in his step, he strode down the footpath and through the side gate, plucked a red rose from the garden and crept around to the back door. The spare key was where they always left it, beneath the old gumboot that was now home to the maidenhair fern he'd bought Hannah at the local market. She had a green thumb, unlike him.

Slipping his boots and socks off and the key into the lock, he quietly turned it and stepped inside. The house was dark and the timber floorboards were cool against his feet. He sighed. It was good to be home.

The tinkle of a bell sounded as Minx, their three-year-old cat, scurried into the room and leaped up onto the kitchen bench – a place she knew she shouldn't be. Ash chuckled, deciding not to reprimand her this time. It was nice to be eagerly welcomed home. The moggy meowed urgently, as if trying to tell him something important. Wishing he understood cat lingo, he scooped the rescued tabby up and cuddled her to him, noting with a wry smile that her bowl at his feet was overflowing with dried food. Hannah had always been a sucker for strays, bless her beautiful heart, and it appeared she was overfeeding Minx too. He grimaced at something wet and sticky on the cat's coat, and wiped his hand off on his jeans. God only knew what mischief the cat had been up to. He'd clean them both up as soon as he got to lay a kiss on his girl.

In the lounge room, the sheer curtains fluttering in the gentle breeze allowed just enough silvery moonlight to filter in so he

could see the dirty plates and cups littering the coffee table, with a half-empty pizza box and fully empty vodka bottle lying on the floor. Concern gripped him – it was very unlike Hannah to be so untidy. He tiptoed down the hallway, past the line of framed family photos, his ears honed. Their bedroom door was wide open, and the curtains still tied back on the windows. His heart sank at the piles of dirty clothes covering the floor, the tousled bed, and no Hannah. And the room stank of stale cigarettes. Striding over, he shoved the windows open to allow the fresh air in. An ashtray filled with stubbed-out rollies sat on the windowsill. When had Hannah started smoking? Had she been hiding it from him? And where in the hell was she? Maybe she'd gone against his advice and headed to the pub after all. He just hoped she didn't drink too much because he was sure as anything that a fight would ensue – he was worried about her, and she wasn't going to like his 'suffocating attention', as she'd put it.

Turning the bedside lamp on, he laid eyes on a curled-up ten-dollar note alongside specks of white powder. Dropping the rose, he snatched a little plastic bag from the dressing table, with traces of what he assumed was illicit drugs. It was then that he spotted the ensuite door ajar and heard water dripping. His held breath released a little. Maybe Hannah was enjoying one of her baths. She'd always liked him to run one for her at the end of a long day, and he'd always made sure to construct a mountain of bubbles for her to climb into.

With Minx still cradled in his arms, he stood, his heart in his throat – he was going to have to confront her about the mess and the drugs and the cigarettes, and he hated it. Tonight was meant to have gone so differently. He'd imagined her saying yes and then them making love all night long.

Ash cracked the ensuite door wider and, to his surprise, found the bathroom was pitch-black, with not even a flicker of a candle. ‘Hannah, are you in there?’

The ear-piercing silence sent a chill racing up his spine. Minx hissed, then growled. Something wasn’t right. Adrenaline jolted him, and with dread in his heart, he flipped the switch. The overhead fluorescent bulb flared to life and Minx leaped from his arms and scurried out the door.

Ash’s breath caught as the sight before him chilled him to the very core.

CHAPTER

2

Sydney – six years later

Head tilted back, Kayla Robinson blinked the eye drops in, waited for her vision to clear, then glided out of her top-floor office with clear views of almost every inch of the warehouse-style building. It was a typical Saturday night at Sydney's elite nightclub, Urban Underground, and the place was jam-packed to capacity. As usual, the queue outside was filled with people hopeful to bribe the ferocious-looking doormen so they could rub shoulders with the influential. Kayla knew their plight was hopeless – she made the rules. No matter how short their skirts or how big their muscles, if their name wasn't on the list, there was no entry – no ifs, buts or maybes. The bouncers knew if they broke that rule, they lost their job on the spot. Didn't stop people from trying to get in every night, though. They were painstakingly consistent, she had to give them that.

Stepping from the glass lift, she continued to survey the crowd, ignoring a wolf-whistle from one of the boozed-up patrons. One smooth stride after the other, she kept all of her senses alert. It was that particular time of the night when things could go awry in a heartbeat. Three-fifteen am – just under an hour until closing time – but she knew from years of experience that a lot could happen between now and then. Three years spent as a barmaid followed by seven years as the nightclub's manager, dealing in secrets, lies, underhanded business deals and stupid drunken behaviour from people who were meant to be level-headed CEOs, politicians and other high-flyers – she'd seen it all.

Ducking behind the black marble bar backdropped by a matching wall studded with crystal lights, Kayla made her way over to her flatmate, the only true friend she'd had in her twenty-seven years. 'How's it going, Jaz?'

Straightening from where she was stacking a tray of clean glasses into a fridge, Jasmine Fuller rolled her pretty blue eyes, groaning. 'My feet are killing me in these bloody heels, and I don't think I can bear another hip-hop tune, but I'm hanging in there.' A blender whirred to life beside them. 'How about you?' she said, a little louder. 'You got rid of your headache?'

'Yeah, the paracetamol you gave me did the trick, thanks, babe.' Kayla leaned in closer. 'I'm so exhausted. I seriously can't wait for my head to hit the pillow. I'm going to spend my days off catching up on sleep.'

'Ha! I can't wait to bite the pillow while Jimmy has his way with me.' As she flicked her long blonde ponytail over her shoulder, Jasmine's red-painted lips curled into a wicked smile.

Kayla frowned. In hindsight, employing Jasmine as the bar manager when she'd lost her day job hadn't been the best idea.

Their womanising boss, Jimmy Biloti, hadn't been able to keep his eyes, or hands, off her stunning best friend. 'I really wish you'd stay away from him, Jaz. He's trouble and you know it.'

'Yes, Mum,' Jasmine teased. 'But you know me. I just can't help myself when it comes to the bad boys.'

'Yes, I know you, very well,' Kayla said, shaking her head. She'd always had a liking for the bad boys too, but had learned it could be dangerous territory. 'And I also know how easily you fall for a man.' Four years older and decades more world-weary, Kayla couldn't help but want to protect Jasmine, who was like the sister she'd never had. They'd had each other's backs for six years, two runaways forged as best friends.

'I can't help that I love falling in love, unlike you, Little Miss Scaredy Pants.' Jasmine poked her tongue out, then grinned.

'I'm not scared. Just smart.' Folding her arms, Kayla arched a brow. 'You'll learn the hard way, again, when he goes and breaks your heart.'

'We'll see.' Jasmine kicked her heel up to her butt, fluttering her fake lashes. 'Because if you ask me, I reckon he's falling in lurve.'

'Pfft, whatever, Jaz,' Kayla replied. 'That man wouldn't know love if it punched him in the face.'

Kayla watched the ludicrously priced cocktails being passed across the bar as the skimpily-clad barmaids and barmen lured the crowd with their bottle-whirling antics. It was all about the show, and the patrons loved it.

Jasmine pouted. 'Well, maybe I'm the one who'll teach him.'

'Always the dreamer, my sweet friend. Never the realist.'

'We both know ...' Jasmine tossed her arm over Kayla's shoulder, and gave her a squeeze, '... that being the worrywart is

your job, babe. As well as being the old fart who goes home to a book instead of a man.’

‘A book is a lot safer, and much more satisfying.’

‘In your opinion,’ Jaz said playfully.

Exasperated, Kayla rolled her eyes to the glittery ceiling. ‘I’m off to the little girls’ room before I burst. I’ll catch you at home, if you make it there.’

‘Okies. I’ll text if I crash at Jimmy’s, so you know I’m safe and sound.’

Nodding, Kayla smiled softly. ‘I’d appreciate that, thanks.’ Lord only knew what Jasmine witnessed at Jimmy’s mansion – and she didn’t want to know because that way was safer for both of them.

Jasmine blew her a kiss. ‘Love you, K.’

Kayla smiled back at her friend. ‘Love you too, J.’

Veering behind red velvet curtains, Kayla took a shortcut to the bathroom to freshen up. From behind the hallway entirely made up of a one-way mirror, she watched the fragmented reality of the dance floor, where a mammoth disco ball rotated amidst strobe lights – she made a mental note to have it serviced that week. The sexy male and female cage dancers she hired every so often captivated the patrons with seductive moves worthy of a high-class strip joint. Up on the stage, the internationally acclaimed DJ had his fingers to vinyl, skilfully intertwining one song into another as the crowd held arms high and cried out for more. The Urban Underground was known as a place to bask in whatever distorted reality drugs or booze, or both, created and leave the stress of life behind.

Kayla was glad she wasn’t a person who needed that kind of escape. She’d learned long ago it was better to make do with the

life she was given, as challenging as it had been. A glass or two of wine to unwind, yes, but to get completely sloshed? No thanks. She needed to be in full control of her actions.

A group of women huddled at the full-length mirrors of the elaborate restroom, finding their best angles to take duck-faced selfies. Kayla surveyed them in bemusement. Washing her hands in the basin, she paused to check the eye drops hadn't smeared her mascara. Her olive skin did well to hide the sunburn she'd woken up to after falling asleep on Bondi Beach the day before, and her foundation helped to hide the dark rings beneath her vivid green eyes – she quite often wondered if they were inherited from her mother or father. She'd been left on the steps of a Tamworth church as a newborn, so it was a question that would never be answered. She smoothed out her long, silky, dark hair, shrugging the melancholy off – no use crying over spilled milk.

She knew the long hours were taking their toll, but she couldn't afford to take a holiday yet. Hopefully soon, though. Sighing, she imagined lounging on a beach in Barbados or Greece, or even glamping in the middle of a picturesque national park – as long as she didn't have to contend with spiders, snakes or rogue wildlife. She reapplied the red lipstick that matched her figure-hugging scarlet dress – Jimmy insisted she always dress to impress. Job done, she squared her shoulders and headed back outside, past the private rooms and towards the staff elevator. She'd do another walk of the floor just before closing time. Hot-blooded men gave her the eye, some very handsome ones at that, but she just wasn't interested. Try as some had over the years, she couldn't be bought. As a twenty-one-year-old, she'd stupidly allowed herself to fall head-over-heels for a man who'd known exactly how to charm her. When the rose-coloured glasses had

come off, she'd been burned. Badly. It had taken two and a half years for her to realise he was a player, and then another year to get over him. Additional heartache wasn't on her agenda. 'Once bitten, twice shy' rang loud and true in her world because nothing and nobody could be trusted.

The elevator door started to close, and Kayla's skyscraper heels clicked upon the bass-thumping floor as she dashed to make it. 'Can you hold the door please?' she called out, relieved when a heavily tattooed arm shot out and did just that.

Stepping inside, she wished she'd waited for the next lift. Two well-dressed men waited, the sides of their faces tattooed and their auras darker than the devil himself. Outwardly, she remained indifferent, avoiding eye contact, but with heightened vigilance. A member of an infamous crime cartel, Jimmy was known for his illegitimate business dealings; drugs and guns mainly. Although he'd been busted on a number of occasions, he'd never spent a day behind bars. It paid to know people in high places.

Watching the floor numbers climb, Kayla could feel the men's eyes upon her, and not in any respectful way. One of them said something in Italian, and although she couldn't speak the language fluently, she understood the basics of what he'd said – that he'd like to bang her into tomorrow. She offered a sideways glance, silently letting them know she wasn't impressed. The bigger one smirked, blatantly eyeing her up and down while he sucked air through his gold-rimmed teeth. She moved her gaze forwards again. Turning a blind eye was part of the job and, as with everything, she did it well. But right now, she was holding her tongue so damn hard, she might bite it clean off. The ding of

her floor was a godsend, though her skin crawled as she stepped past the smaller man and back to her office.

She stared out her tinted floor-to-ceiling window at the throng of partygoers on the strobe-lit dance floor below. It was a mass of sweaty, hopeful, horny twenty/thirty-somethings, and the odd desperate mid-life crises, breasts bouncing, chests pumping, hips gyrating – *look at me, this is what I look like when I have sex. Do you want me? Come on, take me.* After so many years in the nightclub industry, she was tiring of watching the facade. She was aching for a slower-paced existence, possibly one that required her to live during the day and have the luxury of sleeping at night. Deep down in her soul, she was craving something tangible, steadfast, *real*. She just didn't know what that was yet – or if she'd ever be lucky enough to find it.

Spotting a young woman being harassed by a bloke almost twice her size, she tapped her earpiece, alerting the hulk of a bouncer over the far side of the club. 'Hey Max, we've got ourselves another one. Three o'clock, near the bar, cropped black hair. He grabbed the woman's butt and has been slapped in the face for it, and he doesn't look happy.'

'On it, Miss Robinson,' Max replied, already barging his way through the crowd. In less than a minute, he was leading the guy out of the club, while the woman returned to her friends and her drink. Crisis averted.

Almost two hours later, with the club empty and the day's takings counted and in the safe, Kayla kicked off her heels and slipped on her flats with relief. She hooked her handbag over her shoulder, before groaning as she spotted the apple core and the half-eaten container of chicken larb in her bin beside the desk.

She couldn't leave it there, it would stink out her office. She was going to have to go out the long way to toss it in the industrial bin out back before heading to her car. *Damn it.*

In her own little world, she slipped out the fire door and headed down the dark laneway, checking the emails on her mobile. Even though it closed at midnight, the rich scent of the nearby Indian takeaway wafted, as did the stench of rubbish. A muffled scream snapped her to attention. She slowed, tiptoeing as she listened for any more sounds.

'Shut the hell up!' Jimmy's voice boomed, echoing. Kayla's heart raced at the sound of muffled whimpers.

She thought about running back to see if one of the hulking bouncers was still lurking about, but part of her needed to see what was happening. Maybe she could defuse the situation. Stopping short of the corner, she peeked around to see Jimmy with his back to her, looming over whoever was on their knees in front of him. Retreating further into the shadows, she sucked in a sharp breath as she bumped into the brick wall. Jimmy spun and stared in her direction, eyes wild, a gun in his hand, glinting. Kayla's mouth went dry, her heart hammering harder as she held her breath. His eyes narrowing, Jimmy turned his back again.

He hadn't seen her. She stifled a desperate inhale. She wished she could see who was in trouble, but the shadows were making it impossible for her to see. She needed to do something, but what? Run? Ring the police? Scream for Jimmy to stop? Drugs and under-the-table business deals were one thing, but she couldn't turn away from something like this. Hopefully, Jimmy was just showboating. Kayla thought quickly. She couldn't just stand here, cowering in the shadows. Hands trembling, she held

up her phone and, praying to god Jimmy didn't catch her, started to record.

'You should have kept your nose out of my business,' Jimmy growled. 'Now, you know too much and you've left me no choice.'

A woman's sobs resonated.

A thought struck and Kayla's panic rose.

Gunfire echoed down the dank laneway.

A body thumped to the ground, and Kayla's heart split right down the centre. Jimmy stood over his kill. Her cheek against the ground, Jasmine's lifeless eyes seemed to be staring straight at Kayla. Her vision blurring, Kayla bit back a sob and the urge to vomit. Knees buckling, she grabbed the wall to steady herself. She had to get out of here. Now. If Jimmy spotted her, he'd kill her too. And there was nobody to miss her. Just like there was nobody to miss Jasmine, except her. Turning, Kayla half ran, half stumbled back to the club, her breath catching and her thoughts scattered. She had to go to the police. Jimmy couldn't get away with this. She wouldn't let him.

* * *

Eight terrifying weeks later, in the dead of night, Kayla was ushered towards an unmarked police car from the safe house she'd been holed up in – the very one from which she'd given a video-link testimony while Jimmy Biloti had sat in a courtroom, glaring, as if ready to kill her too. For two gruelling months, she'd been cut off from the world, the police confiscating all means of technology – her phone, her laptop, even her iPad. She hadn't even been able to make or receive calls, not that she had anyone to call now Jasmine was gone.

And now, here she was, being forced to act like *she* was the criminal, sneaking around in the middle of the night to save herself. She couldn't believe this was happening. She wasn't ready to say goodbye to the bright lights of Sydney, to be sent to some hick town in god only knew where. She didn't want to start a new life with a totally different identity.

'This bit's always the hardest,' Detective Robert Hallow said as he coaxed her along by the elbow. 'Just try to see the positives. Your video evidence and testimony has put Biloti behind bars for a very long time and now, you get a fresh start.' He waved an arm towards the city lights in the distance. 'You get to leave all this crap behind you.'

'Let's just hope Jimmy doesn't find me, and I get to live to tell the tale, hey,' she replied dryly.

'You won't be telling anyone any tales, remember.' Detective Hallow eyed her cautiously. 'I wish I was getting a new start at life, away from this shithole. I almost envy you.'

Kayla knew he was trying to help, but she couldn't believe he was saying those things knowing full well she'd watched her best friend be murdered. 'Can you tell me where I'm going yet?' She glanced at the gun holstered at the detective's side, a blatant reminder of how dangerous this all was.

'Not exactly.' Detective Hallow lifted the boot and tossed her entire life's possessions – two chock-full suitcases other police had retrieved from her apartment – into it. 'But I can say it's somewhere very safe, where he can't get to you.' He slammed the boot shut and ushered her to the back door.

'Oh, come on, I need more than that,' she said, climbing into the back seat.

Detective Hallow dipped his head to look at her. 'I *can* tell you it's a long way from what you're used to here.' There was the faintest hint of an apology in his tone before he slammed the door shut and headed to the passenger seat.

His partner, Detective Luke Sinclair, was driving. 'Good to go?' Sinclair asked with a stern sideways glance.

'Roger that,' Detective Hallow replied. 'Keep your head down back there, Kayla, okay? Just to be on the safe side.'

'Yup, righto.' Chewing what was left of her fingernails, Kayla slunk down in her seat, pondering what was going to happen now. She was basically being banished from society for doing the right thing, the just thing. Then again, she'd do it all again in a heartbeat, because Jasmine had deserved justice.

Arriving at the airport, they drove past the usual drop-off point, to the back of buildings where a sign clearly stated *NO ENTRY*. After passing through two sets of huge gates, they stopped and Kayla was escorted from the car, along with her two suitcases, and introduced to a Samoan man who looked like The Rock's older, tougher brother.

Detective Sinclair barked, 'Make sure she gets on the bus at the other end, Wiremu.' Kayla thought he was probably trying to make himself appear bigger than his five-foot-nothing build. *Small man syndrome*.

Hands clasped in front of him, Wiremu nodded. 'Yes sir, will do.'

Detective Hallow gazed at Kayla like she was a troublesome child and put a hand on her shoulder. 'You can't come back here, Kayla, not ever, do you understand me? You'll be putting yourself in grave danger.'

She nodded, the heat of tears threatening to overcome her. She blinked them back.

‘You take care now,’ Detective Hallow said without conviction before turning on his heel and heading back to the waiting car.

Detective Sinclair didn’t even bother to bid her goodbye, let alone good luck.

‘I will,’ she muttered, her words being carried away by the sound of the aircraft taxiing behind her.

If only she were getting on one of the Boeing 747s to head off to Barbados or Greece. Instead, she was heading into the unknown. She didn’t even know what her new name was. *It’d better be a good one.*

With a smile too small for his chiselled face, Wiremu lifted her bags as if they were light as a feather and together, they wandered towards a waiting mail plane. The friendly pilot paused to greet her before going back to piling boxes and parcels on board. Only when she was almost inside did Kayla risk one last look at the bright lights of her old life. And it was then that her resolve broke and she sobbed for the death of her best friend, for all she’d been through, for all that she was about to lose, and for the fear of everything that was about to come.