



MANDY
MAGRO

Home Sweet Home



PROLOGUE

‘I love you, so much, my gorgeous wife.’ Zachary’s voice was a soft whisper. His English accent was still strong, even though he’d called Australia home for almost half his life. Her heart buoyant, Sienna Lewis met the eyes of the man who had been by her side for twelve beautiful years.

‘I love you too, Zach, with all my heart.’ Resting her head back, she hummed softly to the Adam Brand song playing on the radio—it wasn’t often she heard country music in the big smoke of Brisbane. But then again, it had been a week filled with wonderful surprises, so what was one more? Life couldn’t get much better. Squished up beside her in the taxi, Zach was looking at her with nothing but love in his eyes. Smiling from her soul, she brushed a kiss over his cheek as she cuddled their daughter to her other side. All their dreams were about to come true. Finally, after countless emails and mountains of stress, their loan had been approved—they were soon to be proud owners of a twenty-acre property on the outskirts of Port Douglas in Far

North Queensland. And after trying for what had felt like forever, they were going to be parents again. The home pregnancy test had been positive, and Sienna's doctor had confirmed it. They couldn't be happier.

The impromptu dinner at their favourite Italian restaurant had been a wonderful way to celebrate the news they'd prayed to hear. Pleasantly exhausted, she rested her head on Zack's shoulder. The taxi driver manoeuvred through the traffic, a little too fast for her liking, but given the tetchy mood he appeared to be in, she wasn't about to ask the man to slow down. Fingers entwined with her husband's on one side, and her seven-year-old daughter's on the other, she begrudgingly untwined them when her phone's message tone chimed from the depths of her handbag on the floor of the taxi. She unclipped her seatbelt to reach her bag, but Zach beat her to it. With a grin, he dug out her phone and passed it to her, and taking it from his hand, she glanced down to read the message from her cousin Kirra. It was one of congratulations, with a line of emojis beneath.

Her gaze was torn from the screen when the car swerved. Sudden brightness had her glancing to her left to see headlights careering straight for them. A sharp breath caught in her throat. Instinctively, she turned to Zara ... went to reach for her, to protect her. A long moment passed. Metal struck and crushed. Glass shattered. Suddenly, she was lurching through midair, her body jarring with crushing impact as her skin shredded against the bitumen. Something landed beside her. She tried to call out, but words refused to form. She fought to blink away the haziness blurring her vision, but before she could focus, the mayhem and noise, the wail of distant sirens, swirled, echoed and then stopped, as she tumbled into suffocating blackness.

CHAPTER 1

Fortitude Valley, Brisbane

Her heart heavy, Sienna read the cheery saying printed on the coffee mug in her hand. *Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift.* She hated the saying, especially today. Today was her thirtieth birthday—the age she'd envisioned she'd have all that she longed for, all that she needed. It was hard to accept that, in a split second, those dreams had been turned upside down. That she'd lost both her husband and their unborn baby, that fateful day, and her life was never going to be the same again. She knew she should be grateful for the fact that she and Zara still had their lives. But it was a tough task. The passing of time had taught her many things—how the deep ache of loss didn't seem to lessen, how the bottomless pit of loneliness only intensified, how the grip of fear in the dark of night stole her breath as she tried to make herself believe she wasn't failing as a mother because

she was drowning in her heartache. She wondered if there was a heaven, and if there was, had their unborn baby gone with Zach there, that fateful night? She could already feel Zach becoming more and more a part of her past, and not her future.

The worn tiles were so cold upon her bare feet that for the umpteenth time she considered grabbing her slippers, but once again found herself distracted. The warmth from the bright sunlight pouring through the window and flooding the room sent a skitter of goosebumps all over her. Closing her eyes to block out her dreary view of the neighbouring apartment block, she allowed herself the luxury of envisaging herself standing on the property she was meant to be calling home—a seemingly never-ending paddock, with nothing and nobody to be seen for miles, the earthy scent of the land she so longed to own encompassing her. Since she was a little girl, she'd wanted this. She longed to go back to her roots. With Zach by her side, becoming a country dweller once more had once seemed a reachable dream, but now it was a fantasy. One she needed to find a way to let go of.

The heavy clomps of the neighbour above traipsing across the ceiling were soon followed by the clanging of pipes as whoever it was turned on the taps. Down the hall, a door slammed and a dog yapped, and in the unit beside hers someone flushed the toilet. There was no such thing as serenity around these parts. Not ever. Even at night, someone somewhere was embracing being a night owl. Begrudgingly brought back to reality, Sienna skolloed the last of her coffee, long gone cold. She was forever thankful for caffeine, it somehow got her over the hump, and got her through. Insomnia was a right bitch, and so was the constant fatigue she battled throughout each and every day, until she next face-planted her bed, only to find herself staring at the ceiling

as she begged God for mercy. She now knew exactly how many times her ceiling fan spun in an hour, and she also knew just how loud she could scream into her pillow without disturbing her slumbering nine-year-old daughter, who was, quite often, cuddled up beside her.

Her weary gaze travelled over the kitchen, pausing on the tea towel her beloved aunty had given her for Christmas two years ago, which read *another day, another dollar*. Sienna rolled her eyes—her life in a damn nutshell. As she rubbed her temples a familiar tune caught her attention. Needing a distraction, she turned the radio up and hummed to one of her all-time favourites. Johnny and June's unmistakable honky-tonk voices resonated around the tiny kitchen of the one-and-a-half-bedder, the lyrics to 'Time's a Wastin' warming her heart, but at the same time, squeezing it painfully tight. It had been one of Zach's favourites too.

The shrill ring of her mobile phone echoed through the lyrics. Quickly retrieving her mobile from the bench right before the call went to message bank, she smiled at the caller ID before clamping the phone between her ear and shoulder, as she busied herself unstacking the dishwasher.

'Good morning Doc Carter.' Sienna did her best to sound chirpy for the one and only person in this entire world who'd stuck by her side, through thick and thin, ever since they'd hugged it out as seven-year-olds the day of Sienna's parents' funeral.

'Morning See-bee,' Kirra croaked back. 'So, how are you feeling, finally turning twenty-one?'

Sienna reached up on her tippy toes to place a bowl in the overhead cupboard. 'Ha, yeah right, I wish, cuz. Same old, really, I'm running around like a chook with my head cut off, as usual.' She grabbed the cutlery basket out, and aimed to unpack it

without too much noise. 'You're up bright and early for someone who's just worked the graveyard shift,' she said.

'Indeed I am, and all for a good cause, I tell you.' Kirra yawned noisily.

Sienna rested against the sink for a moment. 'Oh, and just what might that be?'

'Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear See-bee ...' Kirra drew in a breath. '... Happy birthday to you!' She sang it at the top of her lungs, way out of tune.

As heavy as her heart was, Sienna couldn't help but laugh—Kirra always had a knack of being able to cheer her up. 'You really should consider giving up your job at the hospital to perform on stage, cuz.'

'Oh, trust me, I've thought about it, but the world isn't ready for me just yet.' Kirra laughed out loud, the sound of a spoon clanking soon followed by the slurping of what Sienna knew would be a super-strong coffee—black, no sugar. 'So, you've finally gone and made it to your dirty thirties, hon. It's about time you caught up with me.'

'Ha, yeah, not too sure about the dirty bit, but I definitely feel and look thirty, and then some.'

'Oh, codswallop.'

'True story, I'm afraid.' Sienna sighed and resumed the chore. 'Only yesterday, one of the interns guessed my age in the tearoom, and he thought I was thirty-six-ish.'

Kirra sucked in a sharp breath. 'Ouch.'

'Yeah, tell me about it. I so wanted to give him the finger, but refrained ...' She smirked, remembering having to sit on her hand to stop herself. '... Only just, mind you.'

‘Oh hon, stop being so hard on yourself all the time. You’ve been through hell and back, much more than most people have to cope with in a lifetime, and you still look not a day older than twenty-five.’

‘You’re such a liar, Missus Carter, but I love you anyway,’ Sienna said.

‘Oh no I’m not, and just for the record, I love you too.’ A loud meow in the background halted Kirra’s chatter. ‘Hang on a sec, I better let old Grumblebum out before he rebels and poos on my sheepskin rug, again.’

Sienna gasped, half-laughing, ‘He did *not*.’

‘Oh yes he did,’ Kirra replied, not amused in the slightest. ‘Gavin almost skinned him alive.’

The dishwasher empty, Sienna began stacking the dirty breakfast dishes in. ‘Oh, crap.’

‘Yeah, literally,’ Kirra shot back.

Sienna chuckled. ‘Why doesn’t Grumblebum just go out the cat door that Gavin put in?’

‘Because he’s getting a little senile in his old age, and has apparently forgotten how to use the darn thing.’ Kirra half-chuckled now, and then the squeak of the flyscreen door swiftly followed the slap of it closing. ‘Where were we, oh that’s right, you were agreeing to Gavin and me taking you out tonight for your birthday.’

‘Oh, thanks babe, but ... I can’t.’ Sienna fought to find an excuse other than the fact that she had Zara to think about, to avoid explaining she would rather slum it on her couch in her favourite pyjamas with a tub of salted caramel and macadamia ice cream then have to dress up and socialise.

‘And why the heck not, See-bee?’

Buying time, Sienna replied, ‘Because I have a child, remember?’ The thought of being the third wheel with the newlyweds didn’t appeal to her, not that she was about to tell Kirra that—her cousin deserved to be as ridiculously happy as she was.

‘I knew you’d try and use Zara as an excuse, so I’ve already organised a babysitter.’

‘I’m not just leaving Zara with just anyone ...’

‘Hold your horses.’ Kirra cut her off. ‘Mum said she’d gladly hang at your place for the night and you know how much Zara loves her Great-aunt Fay.’

‘Oh, that’s a long drive for her, coming all the way from the other side of the city, in peak traffic, just to babysit.’ Sienna knew it would take her aunty a good part of an hour to get from door to door.

‘She’s coming into the city for an appointment this afternoon, so it’s no biggie. And I’m sure she’ll want to see you for your birthday, too. So it kills two birds with the one stone for Mum.’

Kirra had always been good at talking Sienna round to her way of thinking. As much as she wanted to, Sienna couldn’t argue with her reasoning, but she had to think of something quick smart to get herself out of this. ‘I’m going to be too tired after work to go anywhere ...’ She lifted a leg and assessed it. ‘And I haven’t shaved for an eternity, and don’t know if I’ll have time to get rid of the Amazon jungle before tonight.’ Sienna knew she sounded pathetic.

‘Sienna Lewis, you’re coming out for dinner whether you like it, or not.’ Kirra’s firm tone spoke of just how much she wasn’t going to take no for an answer. ‘So get ready, Little Miss

Hairy-legs, because we're swinging by at seven to pick you up. Mum will be there at six. And make sure you wear something with a little bit of pizzazz, and *not* your usual old sandals.'

Sienna frowned. 'What's wrong with my choice of footwear?'

'They're something Granny Joy would have worn, God rest her soul.'

Sienna grimaced at the thought. 'Argh, okay then, I'll be ready.' She shook her head. 'And I'll wear heels, *little ones*, just for you.'

'Good.'

'Great,' Sienna shot back, with a smile. 'So where are you two lovebirds taking me?'

'I thought we'd go to your fave, Oishii Sushi, and then stop off for a couple of drinks at the Twilight Bar. So dress to impress, you sexy minx.'

'I can't remember the last time I dressed up, or put on going-out make-up ... I might have forgotten how to.'

'Exactly why you need to get out, my darling cousin.' Kirra's tone grew earnest. She drew in a slow and steady breath. 'It's been almost eighteen months now, Sienna—you're allowed to move on and have a life, and eventually find love again. You know that, right?'

'That's what you and Aunty Fay keep saying, but it's easier said than done.' Sniffing back a familiar onslaught of tears, Sienna touched the half of a heart that dangled from her gold necklace—the other half buried with Zach.

'One step at a time,' Kirra said gently.

'Yeah.'

Silence hung for a few moments, until another flamboyant meow broke it.

‘Right then, looks like Grumblebum has done his deed, checked out the neighbourhood, and now wants back in. I’ve got to get my arse in the shower. I’ve got an appointment at ten.’

Sienna smiled. ‘Okay, have a good day, and I’ll see you tonight.’

‘Oh, before you go hon, I forgot to mention, we have a friend coming along for dinner too.’

Sienna’s heart came to an almighty stop. ‘Oh, really, a female, or male, *friend*?’ She recalled the last time Kirra had tried to set her up on a blind date—it had been an absolute disaster.

‘It’s a he. And, *he* is very charming and handsome, by the way.’

‘Oh Kirra, I really don’t want to feel like I have to maintain small talk with some bloke I don’t know.’

‘You don’t have to do anything of the sort,’ Kirra snapped, but puffed out a breath. ‘Don’t stress, okay. It’s not a date, Sienna. I just didn’t want you to feel like the third wheel.’

Sienna had to be thankful Kirra knew her so well. ‘Okay, as long as it’s not a set-up.’

‘It’s not, I promise.’

Sienna slung the tea towel from her shoulder and back over the oven door handle. ‘So what’s your friend’s name?’

‘Mason.’

‘Does Mason have a last name?’

‘Yes, of course he does.’

‘Well ...’ Sienna paused, waited, huffed. ‘What is it then?’

‘I don’t know it,’ Kirra said, a little hesitantly.

Sienna tipped her head. ‘I thought you said he was a friend.’

‘He is, well ... sort of.’

‘Kirra.’ It was Sienna’s turn to sound snippy.

‘Look, just trust me. He’s a lovely bloke, who’s down here from Far North Queensland, escorting his terminally ill neighbour.

All he does is sit by the old guy's bedside all day long, patiently listening to him harp on about all the bad things in life. I take my stethoscope off to Mason for putting up with it all. The patient, Max Boswell, is a very opinionated old man, who never has a good word to say about anything, or anyone.'

Sienna half-shrugged. 'Well, he is terminally ill, so you can't really blame the old fella for being so down.'

'Oh trust me, See-bee, Max is a pessimist from way back. I honestly don't know how Mason stays so calm with him.'

'Out of love, I'd say,' Sienna said softly.

'Yeah, and sheer grit,' Kirra replied, chuckling.

'So where does Mason joining us for dinner come into it ...?' Sienna was starting to lose her patience, and the will to go along tonight.

'I felt sorry for him, especially with him not knowing anyone here, so I asked him to join us, for dinner, drinks and a laugh. The poor guy needs a break from the hospital and the four walls of his hotel room.'

Sienna knew Kirra's kindness all too well, so instead of arguing, she sighed and surrendered to the idea. 'If you think Mason's a nice bloke, then he must be. I just hope he knows I'm not a pity party, nor am I wanting a boyfriend anytime soon.'

'Calm down, he's a country bloke, with a generous heart, so I'm sure you'll find him the gentleman, See-bee.'

Sienna's brows shot up. 'We'll see, my dear cousin, won't we?'

'Yes, we will. Anyhoos, must run, catch you later.'

'Yup, bye Kirra.'

The call ended, Sienna tossed her mobile phone into her handbag. Today was meant to be a day of celebration, but waking up a widowed thirty-year-old with no hope of ever fulfilling her

dreams was not something she wanted to rejoice in. Bless Kirra for trying.

Sienna shoved the last of her cold Vegemite toast into her mouth and she glared at the growing pile of bills beneath the pretty butterfly paperweight Granny Joy had given her a few years back. She wished she could set a match to the offending envelopes, pack up her and Zara's belongings, and flee to the country, far away from the chaos and bright lights of the city, but fat chance of that ever happening. She hadn't been able to stay in the rental home she, Zach and Zara had called home on her barista's wage, and even though she now had a better-paying job, and had downgraded to a tiny apartment, she felt as if she was forever chasing her tail. No matter how thrifty she was, budgeting to the very cent, how she was meant to keep on making ends meet on just one wage was beyond her. She and Zack had never thought about life insurance. Why would they? They were young. He wasn't meant to die.

Glancing at her watch, she groaned. She hated living her life by the damn thing—it was so very different to the way she desired to live. It was time to get her daughter to school. Time to fight traffic to get to her shift at the hospital on time. Time to fight through another dreary day. So many days she felt lost in time. Time was meant to have healed her shattered heart, that's what everyone said as they tried to comfort her. It hadn't. All time had done was teach her, cruelly, that she had to find a way to live with her crushing grief. She wished she could rewind time, and go back to that night, and not get into that damn taxi. But time ticked on regardless.

Sienna heaved a sigh as she tugged her waist-length, chaotic blonde curls into a somewhat controlled bun. Flicking off the

light then wandering down the hallway, she deliberately avoided her gaze meeting with the framed photograph of Zach—she didn't want to allow herself to mourn him today. That was something she could do in the privacy of her bedroom, in the dark, at some ungodly hour when she should be sleeping. Five hundred and seventeen days of waking up without him by her side had taken a toll, but she had no other choice but to keep on going. Their beautiful daughter, having lost her father so tragically, deserved a mother who was somewhat together—at least on the surface—to help get her through it all. If only she could give Zara the life they'd always dreamed of, away from the never-ending hustle and bustle of the city, the life that she had once lived herself, as a child. It had been one of the best times of her life. She wanted that for her beautiful girl, more than anything.

She skidded to a stop in her socks, and popped her head into her daughter's bedroom. 'Are you almost ready to go, sweetheart? I'm going to be late for my shift at the rate we're going this morning.'

Zara looked up from the novel she was engrossed in, her unruly blonde curls spilling around her pretty freckle-dusted face. 'I'll be two minutes, Mum. I just need to brush my teeth and go to the loo.' She popped a bookmark in between the pages and leaped from the bed.

'No worries, just make sure you don't get sidetracked, and you spit that bubble gum out before you try and put a brush into your mouth, okay?' Sienna smirked, recalling the incident that had left both of them in stitches as they'd tried to pluck a wad of gum from Zara's electric toothbrush.

'I will, Mum, geez. Anyone would think I'm a silly billy.' Readjusting her glasses, Zara grinned cheekily then blew a huge

bubble with her gum until it popped. She peeled bits of it from her lips, shoving it back into her mouth. ‘Told you I could get it bigger than you did yesterday.’

Mightily impressed, Sienna nodded. ‘You most definitely did. You almost blew out the window with the size of it.’ She chuckled, and folded her arms. ‘Now come on, get those chompers nice and clean, and we’ll head off.’

Pausing by her mum, Zara wrapped her lanky arms around Sienna’s waist, and squeezed tight. ‘You’re the bestest mum ever. I love you so, so, sooooo much.’

Her heart welling for her kind-hearted girl, Sienna hugged her close. ‘And you, Zara Lewis, are the bestest daughter any mum could wish for. I love you to the moon and back, and beyond.’

Zara smiled up at her, staring at her through eyes that were the sky-blue of Zach’s. ‘We rock, huh.’

Recalling how Zach used to say that every time he demanded a group hug, which was often, Sienna swallowed down a lump of emotion. ‘We sure do, sweetheart.’ She brushed a quick kiss over Zara’s cheek. ‘And thanks again, for making me breakfast and for my pretty painting of the sunflower. It’s the greatest birthday present, ever.’

‘You’re welcome, Mum.’ Zara’s smile faltered. ‘I’m sorry I couldn’t go and buy you a real sunflower, though.’

Sienna kneeled to meet her daughter’s eyes, bringing her hand gently to her cheek. ‘Oh baby, I’d rather have something you made, it makes it all the more special. And this way, I get to keep the sunflower forever.’

Hope sprung back to Zara’s face. ‘You promise you love it?’

Sienna nodded. 'I cross my heart.' She gave Zara's hand a gentle squeeze. 'Now off you go, or we're going to be really late.'

'Okay, Mum.' Zara skipped off towards the bathroom. Sienna watched her disappear, thanking the powers that be for the unconditional love of her beautiful girl. It was what got her out of bed in the mornings and made her every day worthwhile.



CHAPTER 2

St Vincent's Private Hospital, Brisbane

Inside the tiny hospital room, the strident sound of a nearby ambulance siren cut through the air.

'The melanoma has advanced to his lymph nodes, lungs, liver and bones.' The solemn-faced doctor offered a sympathetic half-smile as he placed a hand upon Mason King's shoulder. 'I really wish I could give you better news, Mr King, but I really doubt he'll be going home. This time round ...' He allowed the sentence to tail off as he regarded Mason.

Hands shoved deep into his jeans pockets, Mason nodded, his head spinning. He couldn't believe what he was hearing, didn't want to believe it. 'So there's absolutely nothing you can do for him?' He glanced to where Max was slipping in and out of sleep. Once a big, burly man, Max Boswell now looked so small, so weak, and so uncharacteristically vulnerable.

‘Other than make him comfortable and give him morphine for the pain, I’m afraid not.’ The doctor took a breath and shook his head slightly. ‘By leaving his diabetes untreated for so long, on top of the cancer, he didn’t give himself much of a chance. His organs are shutting down, very quickly.’ He looked to where Max was sleeping. ‘It’s amazing he stayed out of hospital so long. He would have been in pain for quite a while.’

‘Yeah, he’s as tough as they come, old Max.’ Mason half-chuckled, although all he wanted to do was find a private place and break down. ‘He’s always hated doctors, refused to ever go to one. I basically dragged him down here kicking and screaming when our local doctor gave him the news. I was hoping there’d be a way to give him more time, but looks like there’s not.’

‘Don’t beat yourself up, Mr King, you’ve done all you can.’ The doctor tipped his head, sighed. ‘Can’t drag a horse to water, as they say.’ The buzzer clipped to his pocket chirped. ‘I’m wanted, I’ll be back a bit later to check in on him.’

‘Okay, thanks doc.’ Mason watched him disappear out the door. Incoherent mumbles made him spin back to face Max. He rushed to his bedside. ‘I’m here for you buddy.’ Steeling himself, he gave Max’s hand a gentle squeeze. ‘Anything you need, you just let me know, okay?’

His eyelids flickering open momentarily, Max acknowledged Mason before quickly drifting back to his drug-induced sleep.

Numb, angry, worried, frustrated, exhausted—Mason was all this rolled into one, and then some. He felt so much, yet at the same time, he was so helpless, and at the mercy of God. This was the third time in his life that he’d experienced losing someone very dear to him. And there was nothing he could do to stop it. First his mum, then his wife, and now, Max.

Feeling as if the walls were closing in on him, Mason strode over to the barred window, and imagined what it would be like to shove it open and breathe in fresh air—not that fresh air was likely smack bang in the middle of the city. A cattleman through and through, Mason was a man accustomed to the wide-open spaces of his Far North Queensland property, Green Valley Acres, where the air was untainted, the views were endless, and the everyday sounds were the contented bellows of his grass-fed Angus cattle, the trickle of the creek that sliced through the lush countryside, the clip clop of his horse's hooves, and the whisper of a southerly wind. Unaccustomed to spending his days cooped up inside, Mason could only imagine how his dear mate Max felt. Generally strong and able-bodied, despite pushing eighty years old, upon now being told he was without a hope of ever returning to the man he once was, Max had given up and was slipping away fast—too fast for the likes of Mason.

Mason fought away the emotions threatening to overcome him. He had to remain strong for Max, no matter what. There'd be time for grieving after his mate was gone. There'd been no time for preparation. No time to gather the strength he was going to need to deal with all of this. When Mason had suddenly realised just how sick Max was, there had been no time for unfinished business, or to tie up loose ends. At the very least, he was going to have time for a goodbye, however much it was one he didn't want to say. If Max really wasn't coming home, then the foundations he'd believed in, had relied upon, had all but crumbled, and now he was left in the midst of ruins, with nobody who cared enough about Max to turn to. Although the sun still rose and set, everything felt distorted, out of tempo. His world had changed. Forever. And that was a mighty long time to miss someone—as he knew, all too well.

Less than four months ago, he'd felt somewhat in control of his life, as if everything and anything was possible again, as long as he worked hard for it. But now he was at the mercy of fate yet again—the blows it kept dealing him were brutal. What had he ever done, to deserve such devastating news, over, and over, and over again? How much more *could* he take? When would it end? All of this, coupled with the possible heart-rending repercussions from his jet-skiing accident that he wasn't yet ready to have confirmed. Maybe he was destined to live a life of suffering, to then die a lonely man. Almost like Max.

If only he could click his fingers, and stop Max from slipping through death's door. But God had other plans. Mason could only pray they were ones that would eventually allow him a reprieve. He desperately needed some light at the end of his long dark tunnel.

Slumping down on the end of the hospital bed, Mason dropped his head in his hands, quickly becoming aware of the ruthless ache in his neck. Come to think of it, every inch of him throbbed with pain. He should never have agreed to going out for dinner tonight. The last thing he felt like doing was socialising, but Dr Carter had been very persuasive. How was he meant to hold up his end of a conversation with the doctor and her husband, and her cousin, when all he wanted to do was sleep? Even though the doc had assured him it wasn't a set-up, he just hoped her cousin wasn't on another page, because he wasn't interested in the slightest in wooing a woman. His broken heart just wasn't ready to be exposed again.

Feeling weary, he took several deep breaths and rose to his feet. Taking a few steps away from the bed, he squinted into the bright Brisbane sunshine as he tugged the curtains closed, and

then slumped down into his foldout-armchair bed, desperate for a bit of sleep. It had been a long five days since he'd called around to Whispering Willows Homestead for a cuppa, only to discover Max unconscious on the kitchen floor. Recalling it drove the dagger lodged in his heart even deeper. Max was like the dad his own father had never been—could never be. Mason was well aware he owed so much of the man he'd become to Max. Max had given him so many of the skills he'd needed for raising healthy grass-fed Angus cattle, that these days were sought out by the surrounding Cairns and Tablelands restaurants. All thanks to Max's advice and support, Mason had tapped into a niche market, and was building on that success, yet his father, with his close-minded, dogged, insensitive attitudes, still mocked him. Lionel King believed in quantity over quality of beef. The fact that his father hated Max was no secret, and vice versa. Neither man had seen eye to eye. Ever.

Rubbing his face, Mason brought his bleary gaze back to Max and the painful knot that had been squeezing his heart tightened even more. Max's eyes were still closed, his limbs skeletal and still, and his breath came in short, shallow gasps. Like this, he was less than half the man he'd once been. Mason knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Max wouldn't be coming home with him alive. And so did Max. Already, the man was bossing him around with funeral plans, and reminding Mason he didn't want to be made a fuss of, or, if it came to it, kept alive, under any circumstances. Forever a tyrant—the man would never change. A smile tugging at his lips, he recalled how most of his primary school friends had been terrified of Max—after all the stories that were circulated about Whispering Willows Homestead being haunted, and the scary old man that lived there, how could

he blame them. And Max had always liked the whispers, because it stopped people from trespassing.

The television that hung from the ceiling was on, but switched to mute. Mason dragged his gaze from Max's ashen face and stared at the bright Australian show. The well-known drama was a blur of almost uncanny normalcy. He snatched the remote from the bedside table and flicked it off. He didn't need the reminder that life was continuing on regardless. In his challenging reality, trapped in these four walls with death staring him in the face, every sight and smell was assaulting, while everything felt so surreal—he was in a strange limbo, where things that used to be of such vital importance no longer mattered. With this realisation, Mason allowed his heavy eyelids to drop shut, and soon after he felt himself slip into the space between wakefulness and sleep. Moments later exhaustion dragged him under.

* * *

Skidding into work fifteen minutes after her shift had started, Sienna found herself face-to-face with her short-tempered boss. 'Hey Shirley, I'm so sorry I'm late, but the traffic was atrocious.' Ignoring Shirley's furrowed brows, she shoved her handbag into the locker and slammed the door shut. 'And the roadworks, my goodness, don't even get me started.'

'Yes, I've heard every excuse under the sun over the twenty-seven years I've been here, Sienna, so save your breath and just make sure you write down the exact time you arrived, so you're not overpaid.' Shirley folded her arms, her gaze steely. 'And for future reference, with the traffic and roadworks, maybe you should do the smart thing, and try and leave home a little earlier,

so you get here on time. Okay?’ Her pink-painted lips pressed into a firm line.

‘Yes, you’re right, of course.’ Recalling all the times she’d stayed back to help wind everything up for the day, without pay, to prove her worth as an employee in a very sought-out position, Sienna gritted her teeth and smiled through her urge to tell Shirley where to go. ‘It won’t happen again.’

‘I hope not, Sienna. Consider this a warning, because next time, I won’t be so understanding.’ Shirley turned back to her desk and with the sharp click of a pen scribbled something into a notepad. ‘Betty has called in sick for the rest of the week, so I need you up on floors five and six until she returns. Seeing as you’re so late, I’ve already sent Jasmine off to do your floor, and hers.’

Sienna hated floor six, the one people went to when they were knocking on death’s door, and Shirley Bennet knew it.

‘Oh, okay, Shirley,’ she muttered, while steeling herself for the sadness that always overcame her when she worked there. *Happy birthday to me*, she silently thought while cursing the ground Shirley walked upon.

Quickly stocking her trolley up with cleaning products, and tossing in her packed lunch, Sienna made her way through the stifling laundry room with its mammoth dryers, and towards the service elevator. Stepping in, and dragging the trolley behind her, she pressed floor six—keen to get it over and done with. It felt like an eternity until the lift ground to a squeaky halt. Taking a deep breath, she wheeled her trolley out, parked it off the side of the long hallway, and started her day’s work. Over the next four hours, as if on autopilot, she vacuumed, scrubbed and mopped her way through rooms, moving around pale-faced

patients and overburdened loved ones, through the coffee-scented staff room and the nurse station where she knew everyone by name, and eventually down to the end of the squeaky-floored hallway, where she was overdue to take her break. Deciding to finish off the last room before she granted herself half an hour of peaceful bliss in the tearoom, so she could start the second half of her shift on a much nicer floor—the maternity ward—she kept on going.

Stepping into the dimly lit room, Sienna's gaze was instantly drawn to the broad-shouldered hunk of man asleep in the foldout armchair. A black Akubra was upended on the table beside him. His long jeans-clad legs were crossed at the ankles, his R.M. William boots well worn, and his chiselled face enticingly handsome. A casual T-shirt pulled taut across his chest, the short sleeves revealing tattoos on both arms. Then there were his hands, so big and strong and capable, ones she almost let herself imagine upon her. She should have looked away at this point, but couldn't as she found herself captivated by all that was him. Stockmen were her absolute weakness—there was just something so raw, earthy and mysterious about them. Even in rest, he looked powerful and muscular, and so effortlessly masculine she was sure as hell he'd have women falling at his boots. She couldn't help but wonder what colour his eyes were, and how it would feel if he opened them to look at her. There was a slight tug on her heart. She shook her head, feeling ridiculous. Forcing her feet to move, she went to her trolley. Thrusting her mop into her bucket, she squeezed it out and got back to work, as quietly as she could.

'Oh, hey.' A deep husky voice came from the armchair and wrapped around her.

She glanced over her shoulder. Dark eyes captured hers, and held them—the depth within held her spellbound. ‘Hi.’ She almost stumbled as she turned to him—thankful for the tight grasp she had on the mop handle.

He rubbed his face. ‘Sorry, I must have crashed, I’ll get out of your way.’

She liked his smile. It was warm and genuine. ‘All good, you stay right where you are, otherwise you’re going to walk boot marks all over my clean floor.’ She deliberately dragged her gaze to the mop, now swishing upon the floor. The tingling sensation in her belly was the first clue something was different about this man. The second was the increasing speed of her pulse as she met his eyes again.

‘Fair enough, completely agree.’ His features flickered with interest and his dimple-clad smile wavered between warm and cheeky. ‘I hope I wasn’t snoring, or dribbling, or both.’ He sat up straighter, his smile widening.

‘You’ll never know, and I’ll never tell,’ she replied on a whim, shocking herself with her playfulness with a man she knew nothing about. His amused expression showed how much he liked the banter. ‘Do you mind if I open the curtains a little, so I can see what I’m doing?’ She needed to do something, anything but stand here staring at him.

‘Of course, go for it.’ He waved a hand towards where a sliver of sunlight peeked through the gap.

She pulled open the curtains, feeling his gaze on her the entire time. As golden sunlight filled the room, an unfamiliar sensation swirled in her stomach. At first it felt a little like butterflies, but quickly turned into heat, as if a fire had been lit inside of her. It was the same feeling she’d felt so long ago, when she’d first laid

eyes upon Zach across a packed dance floor at a nightclub. She'd just turned eighteen. He was celebrating his twenty-first.

'Sienna?' There was a questioning lilt in the man's voice as he sat forwards.

'Yes?' she replied, cautiously, as she tried to figure out if she knew him from somewhere. He appeared to be staring at her breasts, and she felt exposed, annoyed, insulted. Her hand moving over the tiny hint of her cleavage peeking out from her button-up blouse, she was about to put this man in his place when she followed his gaze to where her nametag was pinned, and instead had to fight from slapping her forehead.

From the shamefaced glance, she knew that he knew exactly what she'd been thinking. 'I'm apparently joining you for dinner tonight.' She wondered what he meant, while fighting the obvious blush that had risen like wildfire to her cheeks.

'You are?' Her head spun, his presence making her a little giddy. Or maybe she was just hungry. Or thirsty. Or both.

He stood up, unfolding his towering frame in a way that made her both aroused, and a little intimidated. He looked to the floor, assessing if it had dried, then took a few steps towards her. He held out his hand. 'I'm Mason King, it's nice to meet you.'

As she craned her neck to look into his eyes, his big hand folded over her tiny one, sending a flash of heat up her arm. A little shudder went through her, and she bit her bottom lip to try and rein in her gasp. 'Likewise.'

His hand dropped back to his side. 'Oh, and happy birthday.' He smiled as he regarded her confused expression. 'Your cousin, Dr Carter, told me it was today, which is why we're all going out to dinner.'

‘Oh, of course she did, and thank you.’ She was tripping over her words, as if her tongue was tied. What in the heck was this man doing to her?

‘So how does it feel, turning twenty-one?’ His mouth turned upward in a soul-stealing smile.

‘Yeah, right,’ she replied, weirdly comfortable bantering with this stranger, a very handsome one at that.

‘What’s all the bloody hullabaloo about?’ A croaky voice came from the bed.

‘Sienna ...’ Mason waved an arm towards the voice. ‘... I’d like you to meet my incredibly obnoxious neighbour, and long-time pal, Max Boswell.’

Max nodded in her general direction. ‘Hello there, girlie.’

Realising she was still staring at the enthralling hunk of man in front of her, she snapped to. Remembering her manners, she blinked and focused on the elderly man. ‘Hi Max, it’s nice to meet you.’

Mumbling something, Max turned to the table and looked to where a glass stood with a straw. ‘Can you get a man a drink before he dies of thirst, Mason, or are you too preoccupied to care?’

‘Forever the gentleman, aren’t you Max?’ Mason said with a playful tone.

Max grunted and groaned a little as he tried to sit up. Mason hurried to his aid. ‘Here, old fella, let me help you.’

‘Bout time,’ Max shot back, grumbling a short ‘thanks’ once he was settled with his back against three pillows. ‘She’s a looker,’ he added. ‘You should ask her out on a date.’

‘Your eyesight’s still good then,’ Mason replied, tactfully.

‘At least something still works,’ Max replied dryly.

The barest glint of a smile tugged at Sienna’s lips as she packed up her bucket and mop. ‘I’m all done in here, so I’ll leave you two blokes to it.’ She allowed the smile to surface as she met Mason’s kind eyes again. ‘See you tonight.’

‘That, you most certainly will.’ Mason’s genuinely warm grin had the power to buckle knees. ‘Bye, Sienna.’

‘What did I miss?’ Max was looking from one to the other, his eyes wide.

‘I’ll fill you in.’ Mason sat on the edge of the bed.

Sienna couldn’t believe it when she unsuccessfully tried to exit the room—straight into the wall instead of through the open doorway. That’d teach her for not watching where she was going. Her cheeks burning bright, she felt two sets of eyes upon her. Without looking back, she hurried out of the room, sure she was the colour of beetroot. Even so, she glided down the hallway as if she’d just stepped upon a cloud. She pondered her fluke meeting with the very dashing Mason King as she wandered towards the lift, the squeak of her trolley’s wheels for once not aggravating her. Never had the sixth floor been so wonderful.